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Chapter 5

It was very lonely, at first, in solitary, and the hours were long. Time was marked by the regular changing of the guards, and by the alternation of day and night. Day was only a little light, but it was better than the all-dark of the night. In solitary the day was an ooze, a slimy seepage of light from the bright outer world.

Never was the light strong enough to read by. Besides, there was nothing to read. One could only lie and think and think. And I was a lifer, and it seemed certain, if I did not do a miracle, make thirty-five pounds of dynamite out of nothing, that all the years of my life would be spent in the silent dark.

My bed was a thin and rotten tick of straw spread on the cell floor. One thin and filthy blanket constituted the covering. There was no chair, no table--nothing but the tick of straw and the thin, aged blanket. I was ever a short sleeper and ever a busy-brained man. In solitary one grows sick of oneself in his thoughts, and the only way to escape oneself is to sleep. For years I had averaged five hours' sleep a night. I now cultivated sleep. I made a science of it. I became able to sleep ten hours, then twelve hours, and, at last, as high as fourteen and fifteen hours out of the twenty-four. But beyond that I could not go, and, perforce, was compelled to lie awake and think and think. And that way, for an active-brained man, lay madness.

I sought devices to enable me mechanically to abide my waking hours. I squared and cubed long series of numbers, and by concentration and will carried on most astonishing geometric progressions. I even dallied with the squaring of the circle . . . until I found myself beginning to believe that that possibility could be accomplished. Whereupon, realizing that there, too, lay madness, I forwent the squaring of the circle, although I assure you it required a considerable sacrifice on my part, for the mental exercise involved was a splendid time-killer.

By sheer visualization under my eyelids I constructed chess-boards and played both sides of long games through to checkmate. But when I had become expert at this visualized game of memory the exercise palled on me. Exercise it was, for there could be no real contest when the same player played both sides. I tried, and tried vainly, to split my personality into two personalities and to pit one against the other. But ever I remained the one player, with no planned ruse or strategy on one side that the other side did not immediately apprehend.

And time was very heavy and very long. I played games with flies, with ordinary houseflies that oozed into solitary as did the dim gray light; and learned that they possessed a sense of play. For instance, lying on the cell floor, I established an arbitrary and imaginary line along the wall some three feet above the floor. When they rested on the wall above this line they were left in peace. The instant they lighted on the wall below the line I tried to catch them. I was careful never to hurt them, and, in time, they knew as precisely as did I where ran the imaginary line. When they desired to play, they lighted below the line, and often for an hour at a time a single fly would engage in the sport. When it grew tired, it would come to rest on the safe territory above.

Of the dozen or more flies that lived with me, there was only one who did not care for the game. He refused steadfastly to play, and, having learned the penalty of alighting below the line, very carefully avoided the unsafe territory. That fly was a sullen, disgruntled creature. As the convicts would say, it had a "grouch" against the world. He never played with the other flies either. He was strong and healthy, too; for I studied him long to find out. His indisposition for play was temperamental, not physical.

Believe me, I knew all my flies. It was surprising to me the multitude of differences I distinguished between them. Oh, each was distinctly an individual--not merely in size and markings, strength, and speed of flight, and in the manner and fancy of flight and play, of dodge and dart, of wheel and swiftly repeat or wheel and reverse, of touch and go on the danger wall, or of feint the touch and alight elsewhere within the zone. They were likewise sharply differentiated in the minutest shades of mentality and temperament.

I knew the nervous ones, the phlegmatic ones. There was a little undersized one that would fly into real rages, sometimes with me, sometimes with its fellows. Have you ever seen a colt or a calf throw up its heels and dash madly about the pasture from sheer excess of vitality and spirits? Well, there was one fly--the keenest player of them all, by the way--who, when it had alighted three or four times in rapid succession on my taboo wall and succeeded each time in eluding the velvet-careful swoop of my hand, would grow so excited and jubilant that it would dart around and around my head at top speed, wheeling, veering, reversing, and always keeping within the limits of the narrow circle in which it celebrated its triumph over me.

Why, I could tell well in advance when any particular fly was making up its mind to begin to play. There are a thousand details in this one matter alone that I shall not bore you with, although these details did serve to keep me from being bored too utterly during that first period in solitary. But one thing I must tell you. To me it is most memorable--the time when the one with a grouch, who never played, alighted in a moment of absent-mindedness within the taboo precinct and was immediately captured in my hand. Do you know, he sulked for an hour afterward.

And the hours were very long in solitary; nor could I sleep them all away; nor could I while them away with house-flies, no matter how intelligent. For house-flies are house-flies, and I was a man, with a man's brain; and my brain was trained and active, stuffed with culture and science, and always geared to a high tension of eagerness to do. And there was nothing to do, and my thoughts ran abominably on in vain speculations. There was my pentose and methyl-pentose determination in grapes and wines to which I had devoted my last summer vacation at the Asti Vineyards. I had all but completed the series of experiments. Was anybody else going on with it, I wondered; and if so, with what success?

You see, the world was dead to me. No news of it filtered in. The history of science was making fast, and I was interested in a thousand subjects. Why, there was my theory of the hydrolysis of casein by trypsin, which Professor Walters had been carrying out in his laboratory. Also, Professor Schleimer had similarly been collaborating with me in the detection of phytosterol in mixtures of animal and vegetable fats. The work surely was going on, but with what results? The very thought of all this activity just beyond the prison walls and in which I could take no part, of which I was never even to hear, was maddening. And in the meantime I lay there on my cell floor and played games with house-flies.

And yet all was not silence in solitary. Early in my confinement I used to hear, at irregular intervals, faint, low tappings. From farther away I also heard fainter and lower tappings. Continually these tappings were interrupted by the snarling of the guard. On occasion, when the tapping went on too persistently, extra guards were summoned, and I knew by the sounds that men were being strait-jacketed.

The matter was easy of explanation. I had known, as every prisoner in San Quentin knew, that the two men in solitary were Ed Morrell and Jake Oppenheimer. And I knew

that these were the two men who tapped knuckle-talk to each other and were punished for so doing.

That the code they used was simple I had not the slightest doubt, yet I devoted many hours to a vain effort to work it out. Heaven knows--it had to be simple, yet I could not make head nor tail of it. And simple it proved to be, when I learned it; and simplest of all proved the trick they employed which had so baffled me. Not only each day did they change the point in the alphabet where the code initialled, but they changed it every conversation, and, often, in the midst of a conversation.

Thus, there came a day when I caught the code at the right initial, listened to two clear sentences of conversation, and, the next time they talked, failed to understand a word. But that first time!

"Say--Ed--what--would--you--give--right--now--for--brown--papers--and--a--sack--of--Bull--Durham!" asked the one who tapped from farther away.

I nearly cried out in my joy. Here was communication! Here was companionship! I listened eagerly, and the nearer tapping, which I guessed must be Ed Morrell's, replied:

"I--would--do--twenty--hours--strait--in--the--jacket--for--a--five--cent--sack--"

Then came the snarling interruption of the guard: "Cut that out, Morrell!"

It may be thought by the layman that the worst has been done to men sentenced to solitary for life, and therefore that a mere guard has no way of compelling obedience to his order to cease tapping.

But the jacket remains. Starvation remains. Thirst remains. Man-handling remains. Truly, a man pent in a narrow cell is very helpless.

So the tapping ceased, and that night, when it was next resumed, I was all at sea again. By pre-arrangement they had changed the initial letter of the code. But I had caught the clue, and, in the matter of several days, occurred again the same initialment I had understood. I did not wait on courtesy.

"Hello," I tapped

"Hello, stranger," Morrell tapped back; and, from Oppenheimer, "Welcome to our city."

They were curious to know who I was, how long I was condemned to solitary, and why I had been so condemned. But all this I put to the side in order first to learn their system of changing the code initial. After I had this clear, we talked. It was a great day, for the two lifers had become three, although they accepted me only on probation. As they told me long after, they feared I might be a stool placed there to work a frame-up on them. It had been done before, to Oppenheimer, and he had paid dearly for the confidence he reposed in Warden Atherton's tool.

To my surprise--yes, to my elation be it said--both my fellow-prisoners knew me through my record as an incorrigible. Even into the living grave Oppenheimer had occupied for ten years had my fame, or notoriety, rather, penetrated.

I had much to tell them of prison happenings and of the outside world. The conspiracy to escape of the forty lifers, the search for the alleged dynamite, and all the treacherous frame-up of Cecil Winwood was news to them. As they told me, news did occasionally dribble into solitary by way of the guards, but they had had nothing for a couple of months. The present guards on duty in solitary were a particularly bad and vindictive set.

Again and again that day we were cursed for our knuckle talking by whatever guard was on. But we could not refrain. The two of the living dead had become three, and we had so much to say, while the manner of saying it was exasperatingly slow and I was not so proficient as they at the knuckle game.

"Wait till Pie-Face comes on to-night," Morrell rapped to me. "He sleeps most of his watch, and we can talk a streak."

How we did talk that night! Sleep was farthest from our eyes. Pie-Face Jones was a mean and bitter man, despite his fatness; but we blessed that fatness because it persuaded stolen snatches of slumber. Nevertheless our incessant tapping bothered his sleep and irritated him so that he reprimanded us repeatedly. And by the other night guards we were roundly cursed. In the morning all reported much tapping during the night, and we paid for our little holiday; for, at nine, came Captain Jamie with several guards to lace us into the torment of the jacket. Until nine the following morning, for twenty-four straight hours, laced and helpless on the floor, without food or water, we paid the price for speech.

Oh, our guards were brutes! And under their treatment we had to harden to brutes in order to live. Hard work makes calloused hands. Hard guards make hard prisoners. We continued to talk, and, on occasion, to be jacketed for punishment. Night was the best time, and, when substitute guards chanced to be on, we often talked through a whole shift.

Night and day were one with us who lived in the dark. We could sleep any time, we could knuckle-talk only on occasion. We told one another much of the history of our lives, and for long hours Morrell and I have lain silently, while steadily, with faint, far taps, Oppenheimer slowly spelled out his life-story, from the early years in a San Francisco slum, through his gang-training, through his initiation into all that was vicious, when as a lad of fourteen he served as night messenger in the red light district, through his first detected infraction of the laws, and on and on through thefts and robberies to the treachery of a comrade and to red slayings inside prison walls.

They called Jake Oppenheimer the "Human Tiger." Some cub reporter coined the phrase that will long outlive the man to whom it was applied. And yet I ever found in Jake Oppenheimer all the cardinal traits of right humanness. He was faithful and loyal. I know of the times he has taken punishment in preference to informing on a comrade. He was brave. He was patient. He was capable of self-sacrifice--I could tell a story of this, but shall not take the time. And justice, with him, was a passion. The prison-killings done by him were due entirely to this extreme sense of justice. And he had a splendid mind. A life-time in prison, ten years of it in solitary, had not dimmed his brain.

Morrell, ever a true comrade, too had a splendid brain. In fact, and I who am about to die have the right to say it without incurring the charge of immodesty, the three best minds in San Quentin from the Warden down were the three that rotted there together in solitary. And here at the end of my days, reviewing all that I have known of life, I am compelled to the conclusion that strong minds are never docile. The stupid men, the fearful men, the men ungifted with passionate rightness and fearless championship--these are the men who make model prisoners. I thank all gods that Jake Oppenheimer, Ed Morrell, and I were not model prisoners.