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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Jacket \(Star-Rover\)](#)

[Jack London](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 7

So here was my predicament: I knew that within myself was a Golconda of memories of other lives, yet I was unable to do more than flit like a madman through those memories. I had my Golconda but could not mine it.

I remembered the case of Stainton Moses, the clergyman who had been possessed by the personalities of St. Hippolytus, Plotinus, Athenodorus, and of that friend of Erasmus named Grocyn. And when I considered the experiments of Colonel de Rochas, which I had read in tyro fashion in other and busier days, I was convinced that Stainton Moses had, in previous lives, been those personalities that on occasion seemed to possess him. In truth, they were he, they were the links of the chain of recurrence.

But more especially did I dwell upon the experiments of Colonel de Rochas. By means of suitable hypnotic subjects he claimed that he had penetrated backwards through time to the ancestors of his subjects. Thus, the case of Josephine which he describes. She was eighteen years old and she lived at Voiron, in the department of the Isere. Under hypnotism Colonel de Rochas sent her adventuring back through her adolescence, her girlhood, her childhood, breast- infancy, and the silent dark of her mother's womb, and, still back, through the silence and the dark of the time when she, Josephine, was not yet born, to the light and life of a previous living, when she had been a churlish, suspicious, and embittered old man, by name Jean-Claude Bourdon, who had served his time in the Seventh Artillery at Besancon, and who died at the age of seventy, long bedridden. YES, and did not Colonel de Rochas in turn hypnotize this shade of Jean-Claude Bourdon, so that he adventured farther back into time, through infancy and birth and the dark of the unborn, until he found again light and life when, as a wicked old woman, he had been Philomene Carteron?

But try as I would with my bright bit of straw in the ooze of light into solitary, I failed to achieve any such definiteness of previous personality. I became convinced, through the failure of my experiments, that only through death could I clearly and coherently resurrect the memories of my previous selves.

But the tides of life ran strong in me. I, Darrell Standing, was so strongly disinclined to die that I refused to let Warden Atherton and Captain Jamie kill me. I was always so innately urged to live that sometimes I think that is why I am still here, eating and sleeping, thinking and dreaming, writing this narrative of my various me's, and awaiting the incontestable rope that will put an ephemeral period in my long-linked existence.

And then came death in life. I learned the trick, Ed Morrell taught it me, as you shall see. It began through Warden Atherton and Captain Jamie. They must have experienced a recrudescence of panic at thought of the dynamite they believed hidden. They came to me in my dark cell, and they told me plainly that they would jacket me to death if I did not confess where the dynamite was hidden. And they assured me that they would do it officially without any hurt to their own official skins. My death would appear on the prison register as due to natural causes.

Oh, dear, cotton-wool citizen, please believe me when I tell you that men are killed in prisons to-day as they have always been killed since the first prisons were built by men.

I well knew the terror, the agony, and the danger of the jacket. Oh, the men spirit-broken by the jacket! I have seen them. And I have seen men crippled for life by the jacket. I have seen men, strong men, men so strong that their physical stamina resisted all attacks of prison tuberculosis, after a prolonged bout with the jacket, their resistance broken down, fade away, and die of tuberculosis within six months. There was Slant-Eyed Wilson, with an unguessed weak heart of fear, who died in the jacket within the first hour while the unconvinced inefficient of a prison doctor looked on and smiled. And I have seen a man confess, after half an hour in the jacket, truths and fictions that cost him years of credits.

I had had my own experiences. At the present moment half a thousand scars mark my body. They go to the scaffold with me. Did I live a hundred years to come those same scars in the end would go to the grave with me.

Perhaps, dear citizen who permits and pays his hang-dogs to lace the jacket for you--perhaps you are unacquainted with the jacket. Let me describe, it, so that you will understand the method by which I achieved death in life, became a temporary master of time and space, and vaulted the prison walls to rove among the stars.

Have you ever seen canvas tarpaulins or rubber blankets with brass eyelets set in along the edges? Then imagine a piece of stout canvas, some four and one-half feet in length, with large and heavy brass eyelets running down both edges. The width of this canvas is never the full girth of the human body it is to surround. The width is also irregular--broadest at the shoulders, next broadest at the hips, and narrowest at the waist.

The jacket is spread on the floor. The man who is to be punished, or who is to be tortured for confession, is told to lie face- downward on the flat canvas. If he refuses, he is man-handled. After that he lays himself down with a will, which is the will of the hang-dogs, which is your will, dear citizen, who feeds and fees the hang-dogs for doing this thing for you.

The man lies face-downward. The edges of the jacket are brought as nearly together as possible along the centre of the man's back. Then a rope, on the principle of a shoe-lace, is run through the eyelets, and on the principle of a shoe-lacing the man is laced in the canvas. Only he is laced more severely than any person ever laces his shoe. They call it "cinching" in prison lingo. On occasion, when the guards are cruel and vindictive, or when the command has come down from above, in order to insure the severity of the lacing the guards press with their feet into the man's back as they draw the lacing tight.

Have you ever laced your shoe too tightly, and, after half an hour, experienced that excruciating pain across the instep of the obstructed circulation? And do you remember that after a few minutes of such pain you simply could not walk another step and had to untie the shoe-lace and ease the pressure? Very well. Then try to imagine your whole body so laced, only much more tightly, and that the squeeze, instead of being merely on the instep of one foot, is on your entire trunk, compressing to the seeming of death your heart, your lungs, and all the rest of your vital and essential organs.

I remember the first time they gave me the jacket down in the dungeons. It was at the beginning of my incorrigibility, shortly after my entrance to prison, when I was weaving my loom-task of a hundred yards a day in the jute-mill and finishing two hours ahead of the average day. Yes, and my jute-sacking was far above the average demanded. I was sent to the jacket that first time, according to the prison books, because of "skips" and "breaks" in the cloth, in short, because my work was defective. Of course this was ridiculous. In truth, I was sent to the jacket because I, a new convict, a master of efficiency, a trained expert in the elimination of waste motion, had

ected to tell the stupid head weaver a few things he did not know about his business. And the head weaver, with Captain Jamie present, had me called to the table where atrocious weaving, such as could never have gone through my loom, was exhibited against me. Three times was I thus called to the table. The third calling meant punishment according to the loom- room rules. My punishment was twenty-four hours in the jacket.

They took me down into the dungeons. I was ordered to lie face- downward on the canvas spread flat upon the floor. I refused. One of the guards, Morrison, gulleeted me with his thumbs. Mobins, the dungeon trusty, a convict himself, struck me repeatedly with his fists. In the end I lay down as directed. And, because of the struggle I had vexed them with, they laced me extra tight. Then they rolled me over like a log upon my back.

It did not seem so bad at first. When they closed my door, with clang and clash of levered boltage, and left me in the utter dark, it was eleven o'clock in the morning. For a few minutes I was aware merely of an uncomfortable constriction which I fondly believed would ease as I grew accustomed to it. On the contrary, my heart began to thump and my lungs seemed unable to draw sufficient air for my blood. This sense of suffocation was terrorizing, and every thump of the heart threatened to burst my already bursting lungs.

After what seemed hours, and after what, out of my countless succeeding experiences in the jacket I can now fairly conclude to have been not more than half-an-hour, I began to cry out, to yell, to scream, to howl, in a very madness of dying. The trouble was the pain that had arisen in my heart. It was a sharp, definite pain, similar to that of pleurisy, except that it stabbed hotly through the heart itself.

To die is not a difficult thing, but to die in such slow and horrible fashion was maddening. Like a trapped beast of the wild, I experienced ecstasies of fear, and yelled and howled until I realized that such vocal exercise merely stabbed my heart more hotly and at the same time consumed much of the little air in my lungs.

I gave over and lay quiet for a long time--an eternity it seemed then, though now I am confident that it could have been no longer than a quarter of an hour. I grew dizzy with semi-asphyxiation, and my heart thumped until it seemed surely it would burst the canvas that bound me. Again I lost control of myself and set up a mad howling for help.

In the midst of this I heard a voice from the next dungeon.

"Shut up," it shouted, though only faintly it percolated to me. "Shut up. You make me tired."

"I'm dying," I cried out.

"Pound your ear and forget it," was the reply.

"But I AM dying," I insisted.

"Then why worry?" came the voice. "You'll be dead pretty quick an' out of it. Go ahead and croak, but don't make so much noise about it. You're interruptin' my beauty sleep."

So angered was I by this callous indifference that I recovered self- control and was guilty of no more than smothered groans. This endured an endless time--possibly ten minutes; and then a tingling numbness set up in all my body. It was like pins and needles, and for as long as it hurt like pins and needles I kept my head. But when the prickling of the multitudinous darts ceased to hurt and only the numbness remained and continued verging into greater numbness I once more grew frightened.

"How am I goin' to get a wink of sleep?" my neighbour, complained. "I ain't any more happy than you. My jacket's just as tight as yourn, an' I want to sleep an' forget it."

"How long have you been in?" I asked, thinking him a new-comer compared to the centuries I had already suffered.

"Since day before yesterday," was his answer.

"I mean in the jacket," I amended.

"Since day before yesterday, brother."

"My God!" I screamed.

"Yes, brother, fifty straight hours, an' you don't hear me raisin' a roar about it. They cinched me with their feet in my back. I am some tight, believe ME. You ain't the only one that's got troubles. You ain't ben in an hour yet."

"I've been in hours and hours," I protested.

"Brother, you may think so, but it don't make it so. I'm just tellin' you you ain't ben in an hour. I heard 'm lacin' you."

The thing was incredible. Already, in less than an hour, I had died a thousand deaths. And yet this neighbour, balanced and equable, calm-voiced and almost beneficent despite the harshness of his first remarks, had been in the jacket fifty hours!

"How much longer are they going to keep you in?" I asked.

"The Lord only knows. Captain Jamie is real peeved with me, an' he won't let me out until I'm about croakin'. Now, brother, I'm going to give you the tip. The only way is to shut your face an' forget it. Yellin' an' hollerin' don't win you no money in this joint. An' the way to forget is to forget. Just get to rememberin' every girl you ever knew. That'll cat up hours for you. Mebbe you'll feel yourself gettin' woozy. Well, get woozy. You can't beat that for killin' time. An' when the girls won't hold you, get to thinkin' of the fellows you got it in for, an' what you'd do to 'em if you got a chance, an' what you're goin' to do to 'em when you get that same chance."

That man was Philadelphia Red. Because of prior conviction he was serving fifty years for highway robbery committed on the streets of Alameda. He had already served a dozen of his years at the time he talked to me in the jacket, and that was seven years ago. He was one of the forty lifers who were double-crossed by Cecil Winwood. For that offence Philadelphia Red lost his credits. He is middle- aged now, and he is still in San Quentin. If he survives he will be an old man when they let him out.

I lived through my twenty-four hours, and I have never been the same man since. Oh, I don't mean physically, although next morning, when they unlaced me, I was semi-paralyzed and in such a state of collapse that the guards had to kick me in the ribs to make me crawl to my feet. But I was a changed man mentally, morally. The brute physical torture of it was humiliation and affront to my spirit and to my sense of justice. Such discipline does not sweeten a man. I emerged from that first jacketing filled with a bitterness and a passionate hatred that has only increased through the years. My God--when I think of the things men have done to me! Twenty-four hours in the

jacket! Little I thought that morning when they kicked me to my feet that the time would come when twenty-four hours in the jacket meant nothing; when a hundred hours in the jacket found me smiling when they released me; when two hundred and forty hours in the jacket found the same smile on my lips.

Yes, two hundred and forty hours. Dear cotton-woolly citizen, do you know what that means? It means ten days and ten nights in the jacket. Of course, such things are not done anywhere in the Christian world nineteen hundred years after Christ. I don't ask you to believe me. I don't believe it myself. I merely know that it was done to me in San Quentin, and that I lived to laugh at them and to compel them to get rid of me by swinging me off because I bloodied a guard's nose.

I write these lines to-day in the Year of Our Lord 1913, and to-day, in the Year of Our Lord 1913, men are lying in the jacket in the dungeons of San Quentin.

I shall never forget, as long as further living and further lives be vouchsafed me, my parting from Philadelphia Red that morning. He had then been seventy-four hours in the jacket.

"Well, brother, you're still alive an' kickin'," he called to me, as I was totteringly dragged from my cell into the corridor of dungeons.

"Shut up, you, Red," the sergeant snarled at him.

"Forget it," was the retort.

"I'll get you yet, Red," the sergeant threatened.

"Think so?" Philadelphia Red queried sweetly, ere his tones turned to savageness. "Why, you old stiff, you couldn't get nothin'. You couldn't get a free lunch, much less the job you've got now, if it wasn't for your brother's pull. An' I guess we all ain't mistaken on the stink of the place where your brother's pull comes from."

It was admirable--the spirit of man rising above its extremity, fearless of the hurt any brute of the system could inflict.

"Well, so long, brother," Philadelphia Red next called to me. "So long. Be good, an' love the Warden. An' if you see 'em, just tell 'em that you saw me but that you didn't see me saw."

The sergeant was red with rage, and, by the receipt of various kicks and blows, I paid for Red's pleasantry.