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Chapter 9

One thing of great value I learned in the long, pain-weary hours of waking--namely, the mastery of the body by the mind. I learned to suffer passively, as, undoubtedly, all men have learned who have passed through the post-graduate courses of strait-jacketing. Oh, it is no easy trick to keep the brain in such serene repose that it is quite oblivious to the throbbing, exquisite complaint of some tortured nerve.

And it was this very mastery of the flesh by the spirit which I so acquired that enabled me easily to practise the secret Ed Morrell told to me.

"Think it is curtains?" Ed Morrell rapped to me one night.

I had just been released from one hundred hours, and I was weaker than I had ever been before. So weak was I that though my whole body was one mass of bruise and misery, nevertheless I scarcely was aware that I had a body.

"It looks like curtains," I rapped back. "They will get me if they keep it up much longer."

"Don't let them," he advised. "There is a way. I learned it myself, down in the dungeons, when Massie and I got ours good and plenty. I pulled through. But Massie croaked. If I hadn't learned the trick, I'd have croaked along with him. You've got to be pretty weak first, before you try it. If you try it when you are strong, you make a failure of it, and then that queers you for ever after. I made the mistake of telling Jake the trick when he was strong. Of course, he could not pull it off, and in the times since when he did need it, it was too late, for his first failure had queered it. He won't even believe it now. He thinks I am kidding him. Ain't that right, Jake?"

And from cell thirteen Jake rapped back, "Don't swallow it, Darrell. It's a sure fairy story."

"Go on and tell me," I rapped to Morrell.

"That is why I waited for you to get real weak," he continued. "Now you need it, and I am going to tell you. It's up to you. If you have got the will you can do it. I've done it three times, and I know."

"Well, what is it?" I rapped eagerly.

"The trick is to die in the jacket, to will yourself to die. I know you don't get me yet, but wait. You know how you get numb in the jacket--how your arm or your leg goes to sleep. Now you can't help that, but you can take it for the idea and improve on it. Don't wait for your legs or anything to go to sleep. You lie on your back as comfortable as you can get, and you begin to use your will.

"And this is the idea you must think to yourself, and that you must believe all the time you're thinking it. If you don't believe, then there's nothing to it. The thing you must think and believe is that your body is one thing and your spirit is another thing. You are you, and your body is something else that don't amount to shucks. Your body don't count. You're the boss. You don't need any body. And thinking and believing all this you proceed to prove it by using your will. You make your body die.

"You begin with the toes, one at a time. You make your toes die. You will them to die. And if you've got the belief and the will your toes will die. That is the big job--to start the dying. Once you've got the first toe dead, the rest is easy, for you don't have to do any more believing. You know. Then you put all your will into making the rest of the body die. I tell you, Darrell, I know. I've done it three times.

"Once you get the dying started, it goes right along. And the funny thing is that you are all there all the time. Because your toes are dead don't make you in the least bit dead. By-and-by your legs are dead to the knees, and then to the thighs, and you are just the same as you always were. It is your body that is dropping out of the game a chunk at a time. And you are just you, the same you were before you began."

"And then what happens?" I queried.

"Well, when your body is all dead, and you are all there yet, you just skin out and leave your body. And when you leave your body you leave the cell. Stone walls and iron doors are to hold bodies in. They can't hold the spirit in. You see, you have proved it. You are spirit outside of your body. You can look at your body from outside of it. I tell you I know because I have done it three times--looked at my body lying there with me outside of it."

"Ha! ha! ha!" Jake Oppenheimer rapped his laughter thirteen cells away.

"You see, that's Jake's trouble," Morrell went on. "He can't believe. That one time he tried it he was too strong and failed. And now he thinks I am kidding."

"When you die you are dead, and dead men stay dead," Oppenheimer retorted.

"I tell you I've been dead three times," Morrell argued.

"And lived to tell us about it," Oppenheimer jeered.

"But don't forget one thing, Darrell," Morrell rapped to me. "The thing is ticklish. You have a feeling all the time that you are taking liberties. I can't explain it, but I always had a feeling if I was away when they came and let my body out of the jacket that I couldn't get back into my body again. I mean that my body would be dead for keeps. And I didn't want it to be dead. I didn't want to give Captain Jamie and the rest that satisfaction. But I tell you, Darrell, if you can turn the trick you can laugh at the Warden. Once you make your body die that way it don't matter whether they keep you in the jacket a month on end. You don't suffer none, and your body don't suffer. You know there are cases of people who have slept a whole year at a time. That's the way it will be with your body. It just stays there in the jacket, not hurting or anything, just waiting for you to come back.

"You try it. I am giving you the straight steer."

"And if he don't come back?" Oppenheimer, asked.

"Then the laugh will be on him, I guess, Jake," Morrell answered. "Unless, maybe, it will be on us for sticking round this old dump when we could get away that easy."

And here the conversation ended, for Pie-Face Jones, waking crustily from stolen slumber, threatened Morrell and Oppenheimer with a report next morning that would mean the jacket for them. Me he did not threaten, for he knew I was doomed for the jacket anyway.

I lay long there in the silence, forgetting the misery of my body while I considered this proposition Morrell had advanced. Already, as I have explained, by mechanical self-hypnosis I had sought to penetrate back through time to my previous selves. That I had partly succeeded I knew; but all that I had experienced was a fluttering of apparitions that merged erratically and were without continuity.

But Morrell's method was so patently the reverse of my method of self-hypnosis that I was fascinated. By my method, my consciousness went first of all. By his method, consciousness persisted last of all, and, when the body was quite gone, passed into stages so sublimated that it left the body, left the prison of San Quentin, and journeyed afar, and was still consciousness.

It was worth a trial, anyway, I concluded. And, despite the sceptical attitude of the scientist that was mine, I believed. I had no doubt I could do what Morrell said he had done three times. Perhaps this faith that so easily possessed me was due to my extreme debility. Perhaps I was not strong enough to be sceptical. This was the hypothesis already suggested by Morrell. It was a conclusion of pure empiricism, and I, too, as you shall see, demonstrated it empirically.