

DEATH IN A CELL

"It's a fearsome sight to stand helplessly by and watch your world come crumbling down around you. I know because the very axes on which I've suspended my own little orb have been quite thoroughly severed and now, I find myself like a hamstrung little Atlas struggling to support the whole weight alone and unassisted. What has been for me a serene and peaceful little sphere full of delights and seasoned with pleasant moments has, in such a short time, become a dull leaden globe in whose gloomy atmosphere only grief and disallusionment hold sway."

So began the letter that I happened to notice lying on Jack's desk several weeks ago. It was rather ungentlemanly of me, I'll admit, but I felt an uncontrollable urge to read it further, and I did. There seemed to be a note of urgency, the wild recklessness of unrestrained imagination pervading the letter; and I thought that if Jack had worked himself into such a state of frenzy over this matter, whatever it was, it certainly must be something about which his room-mate should know. I said "room-mate"; Cell-mate" would actually be more correct, for Jack and I are, yes, convicts. Just why we happen to be in this sorry state doesn't really matter, but four years ago, (or was it five?—I wouldn't torture myself by consulting a calendar—even if I had one) anyway, a few years ago, Lady Luck elected that we should become cell-mates here at the Provincial Penitentiary, and ultimately, fast friends. Quite early in our association, in an effort to dispell some of that gloomy atmosphere of prison routine, we agreed to call ourselves "room-mates" instead of "cell-mates", even though our "room" was divided by a row of iron bars, which seemed to be mingled with everything we saw or ate or talked about, and this will account for my earlier lapse.

Jack, as I had grown to know him, was about as phlegmatic as they come. Nothing could move him from his nonchalant way of life, nothing that is except the thought of his family who were fretfully awaiting his release. Jack had been given a mere five year term by a kind-hearted judge for this, his first brush with the law, and unlike myself who have no hope for eventual release short of the governor's pardon, he kept an account of each passing day, and wrote often to his wife, ceaselessly inquiring after the health and well being of his two small children. If a topic of conversation could be worn like a sock, the topic of his beloved family would have been in tatters long ago on pass-

ing to and fro through the crude iron bars that separated us. So, when Jack started feverishly scrawling over some borrowed writing paper one day, I suspected that in all probability he was writing to his wife, so I questioned him about it. His curt half-mumbled replies to mind my own business whetted my curiosity considerably so that after three days of this sort of treatment, I could stand it no longer.

I chose an afternoon when Jack seemed to be sleeping soundly on his cot, and managed with the aid of a contraband coat hanger to fish the sheets of paper from his desk onto the floor where I could reach them through the bars. The last piece to fall turned out to be a rather plain looking envelope that I had not seen there before. Thinking that it might shed some light on the subject, I opened it first, and then took in a sudden breath. The letter was from Jack's wife alright, but its contents were very unusual. She was writing, she said, to tell Jack that she was leaving him, that she and the children had taken all of the neighbors' mockery that they could stand, and that she was going to try for a fresh start in some other part of the country. Then I turned, not completely dryeyed I must confess, to the answer that Jack was in the process of penning. "It's a fearsome sight...." he began, and I read on breathlessly, moved to the very depths by the forcefulness of his words and his powerful phraseology. ".... Only yesterday the warden informed me that he was going to suspend the remainder of my sentence as of the end of this month out of appreciation for my cooperation in some rather distasteful medical tests....", he went on, something of which I didn't even know. Further on, the letter ended rather abruptly, not finished really, but left as though he intended to add more to it.

Flushed and thoroughly ashamed with myself for having dared to intrude on a human soul so ruthlessly laid bare by the rude hand of sorrow, I attached the sheets of paper to the end of the coat hanger and successfully dropped them once again on Jack's desk, and then retreated to the shelter of my own cot.

To say that this unfortunate incident left Jack completely breathless would be the grossest of understatement, for when the jailer passed out the tins of supper that night, he found Jack dead, a ragged and tear-stained photo pressed to his cold cheek; a willing sacrifice under the sword of sorrow for the happiness of his beloved wife and children.

— CHOYA —