

O. HENRY AND AL. JENNINGS

(Continued from last week)

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A desk and a chair inside the rattling of the prison drug store—the five wards of the hospital grouped around that store and in those wards from 50 to 200 patients racked with all manner of disease. The quiet of the night disturbed with the groans of broken men, the coughs of the wasted, the frightened gasp of the dying. The night nurse paddling from ward to ward and every once in a while returning to the drug store with the crude information—another "con" has croaked. Then, down the corridors the rattle of the wheelbarrow and the negro life-terminer bumping the "stiff" into the dead house. A desk and a chair settled in the raw heart of chill depression!

There at that desk, night after night, sat Bill Porter. And in the grisly atmosphere of prison death and prison brutality there bubbled up the mellow smile of his genius—the smile born of heartache, of shame, of humiliation—the smile that has sent its ripple of faith and understanding to the hearts of men and women everywhere.

When it first caught Billy Raider and me, we cried setting right. I think it was the proudest moment in O. Henry's life. He had come into the prison post-office on a Friday afternoon. It was just about a fortnight after I had offered to read him my memoirs.

Bill Porter Makes Two Convicts Weep.

"Colonel, would you mind granting me an audience," he said in the bantering formality of his way. "I'd appreciate the opinion of a fellow struggler. I have a little scrap here. I'd like to read it to you and Billy."

Porter was usually so reticent.

usually the listener while others talked, that one felt a warm surge of pleasure whenever he showed a disposition for confidence. Billy and I swerved about, eager for his reading.

Porter sat on a high stool near the desk and carefully drew from his pocket a roll of brown papers. He had written in a big, generous hand and there was scarcely a scratch or an erasure on a single sheet.

From the moment that Porter's rich, low, hesitant voice began there was breathless suspense until suddenly Billy Raider gulped and Porter looked up as one aroused from a dream. Raider grinned and jabbed his maimed hand into his eye.

"Damn you, Porter, I never did it in my life before. By God, I didn't know what a tear looked like."

It was a funny thing to see two train robbers blubbering over the simple story.

Perhaps the convict is over-sentimental, but the queer twist in Porter's story just mused that he sneak into the heart with a kind of overflowing warmth.

Convicts Acclaim Porter a Genius.

Chaparral. With the fervor of hero worshippers, Raider and I acknowledged Bill Porter, the genius.

Rejection of Story Cause of Spasm.

We decided to send the story to the Black Cat. There was in the prison at this time a cultured Frenchman, a banker from New Orleans. Through his sister, Porter's stories, bearing the New Orleans address, were sent to the editor.

When "The Christmas Chaparral" was sent out, Billy and I could hardly wait for the weeks to go by. We were sure it would be accepted at once. At least \$75 was the price we thought it ought to bring. It came back.

Years later I peddled my own story from editor to editor. Never did I feel the angry spasm of disappointment that seized me when Porter's great story was rejected.

I knew that he, too, was filled with a bitter regret. He had counted on the money. He wanted to send a little present to his daughter, Margaret. Now she would have to wait. It cut him to the quick, this failure of his, as a father.

But he said very little when Billy handed him the package. We were so incensed against the publishers we wanted him to blacklist them in the future.

"Colonel, the day may come when I can decline publication—at present I don't seem to have the deciding voice."

Porter Made Head Of Exclusive Club.

best in Bill Porter. He was king of that exclusive club.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Porter met me at the door of the construction office and with elaborate burlesque paid tribute to my accomplishments. "Here is a financier worthy to sit with the elect. The colonel kills with a deft equanimity equalled only by the finesse of Louisa in seasoning the gravy."

Louisa was the nickname given to the French gentleman sent to the Ohio penitentiary on a charge of embezzlement. He was dapper, swarthy, mannered like a prince—the chief clerk in the construction office and the man responsible for the magic kitchenette concealed behind the walls of the office.

Louisa was official chef of the "Recluse Club." He turned out mince pies and roast beef that would have made the eyes of Dives bulge with envy. He measured to the grain all his ingredients and he followed minutely the instructions in a big cook book.

If the prison had suddenly been changed into paradise it would have seemed no more miraculous than the scene in this improvised banquet room. A fairy table, decorated with wild flowers and set for six, was simply laden with all manner of delicacies—olives, radishes, sugar, cream, white bread, lettuce, tomatoes.

Banker Sits at Convict's Banquet.

In an armchair sat the little, round banker from New Orleans—the one who had accosted me the day I transferred myself to the cell in bankers' row. He was such a sputtery, rasp-voiced, punctilious trifle, Porter could not abide him. Billy Raider was also sitting in comfortable grandeur. These two were exempt from labor—Billy because he could not walk alone; Carnot because he was old and lousy as a fat, spoiled baby.

Porter Most Dreads Thought of Stigma.

Dinner Is Served Announces Cook.

Porter Presents Rules of Club.

Porter had drafted the rules of the club. A copy lay at each place with the little funny cartoons he made of us. Funny little scenes were scrawled under the figures. Every Sunday we had different place cards.

Porter's raillery was boundless. Raider and I were the only ones who acknowledged ourselves guilty. Louisa, Porter, Ikey and old Carnot were all victims of circumstances. They were touchy about their pasts. And so the cartoonist drew them as cherubs, friars, lilies without stain and the dewdrops glistening on their white sheafs.

Not one of those men, and they were Porter's equal at least in social position, dared to take liberties with him. I think they held him in a sort of awe. His dignity was invulnerable. Old Carnot would have liked the same respect. He never got it. Billy Raider never tired of puncturing his self-esteem. But Billy would have died rather than wound Bill Porter.

Old Carnot did not want anyone even to mention the fact that he was in the penitentiary. He would bluster and sputter when any one spoke of him as an ex-convict. Every Sunday there was an argument about it. Raider, just for the impish love of teasing the old man, would open it.

Now, Mr. Carnot," he would say, "my esteemed friend, Bill Porter, and I propose to found a union of ex-convicts as soon as we are discharged. We wish you to join."

Carnot would get red, clamp his teeth together and rustle in his chair.

What's up?

"They've got Big Joe tied up ready for the wheelbarrow and he isn't dead."

"Come over and see." I went in with him. Big Joe was lying in his cot, his feet tied together, a handkerchief over his eyes.

"The damn hellions know it," Porter hissed. "I told him. They'd like to bury us all alive. Damn them. I'll get them yet."

He turned his back and rushed off. I went back to the cot where the Indian's body lay.

off. I went back to the cot where the Indian's body lay.

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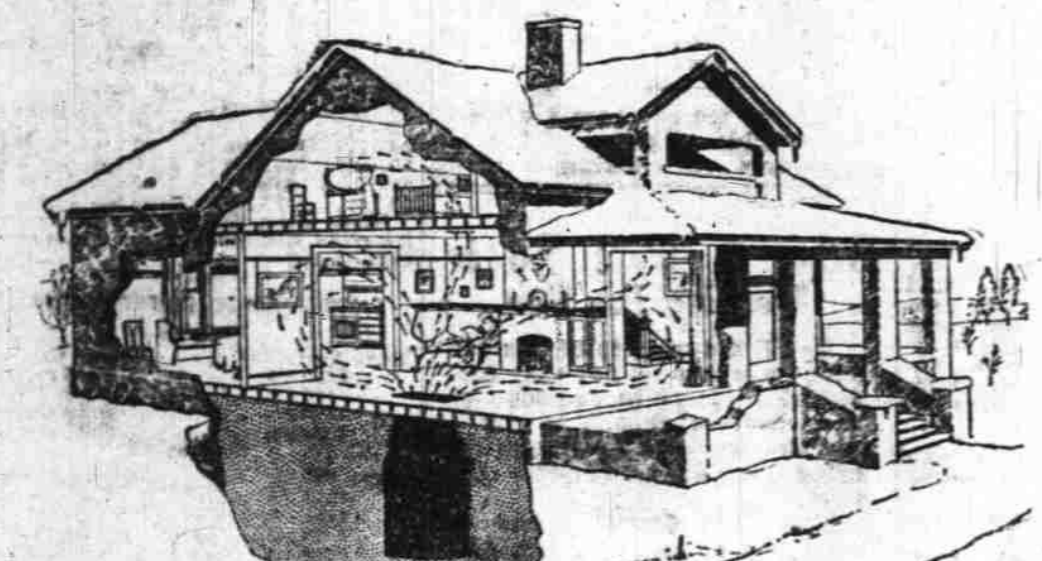
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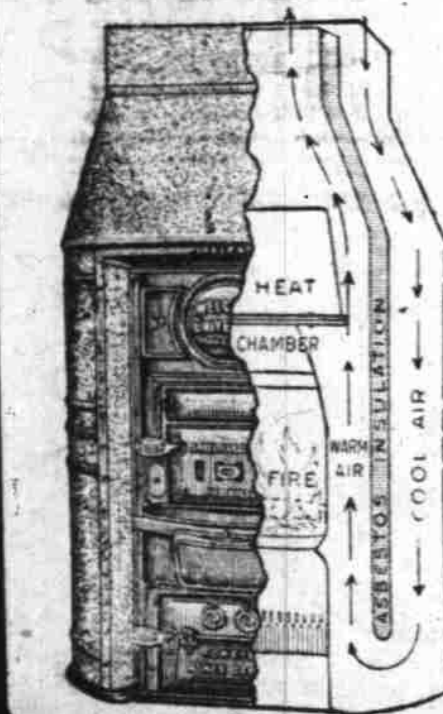
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