

O. HENRY AND AL. JENNINGS

(Continued from last week.)
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

It was the end of the struggle. The pulsing, clamorous silence that holds the tongue while thoughts shout from mind to mind was between us. Porter seemed exhausted by the defeat. The joy in his promotion was dissipated. He became more aloof than ever. "What a terrible isolation there is in this prison life," he said after a pause that weighed like a stone upon us. "We are forgotten by the friends we left in the world and we are used by the friends we claim here."

and child. I did not know then that he had reached his home after our separation in Texas to find his wife dying. Nor did I know that the \$3000 had given him a measure of independence in those last sad months before his trial and conviction. In all our intimacy at prison, Porter never once alluded to his family affairs. Not once did he speak of the child who was ever in his thoughts. Billy and I sent out innumerable letters to the little Margaret. Only once did Porter slip a word. It was that time when a story had been refused. He was disappointed, he said, for he

wanted to send a present to a little friend.

Way to Escape To Keep Silent.

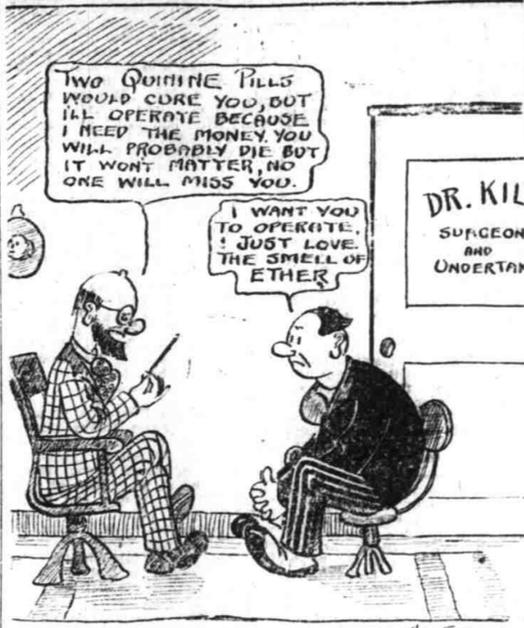
"We may not be forgotten by the folks on the outside," I offered. "Forgotten or despised, what difference does it make? I left money there. They were powerful. They should have won a pardon for me." He looked at me with a troubled suspense. "Al, do you think I am guilty?" "No, Bill, I'd bank on you any day."

"Thanks. I've got one friend anyway. I'm glad they let me alone. I do not wish to be indebted to anyone. I am the master of my own fate. If I bungled my course and got myself here, then all right. When I get out I will be under an obligation to none."

Convicts Slaves To Prison Rogues.

After that there were many glasses of wine—many fingers of whiskey—many long conversations after the 9 o'clock lights were out. Porter gave in, vanquished, but the surrender nagged at him like an ugly worm biting incessantly at his heart. He tried to keep the bids secret; he fought to give the contract to the lowest bidder. He would be asked to show the bids. He was a mere piece of

THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPEN



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furniture in the office. He had to do as he was told and without question.

"The dirty scoundrels," he would say to me. "Pay no attention to it," I would advise. "Honesty is not the best policy in prison. Don't let it worry you."

"Of course I will not worry over it. We are nothing but slaves to their rogues." Even so, Porter and I had tremendous power in letting out the contracts. The wealthy thieves who profited at the expense of the state and two helpless convicts sent us cases of the choicest wines. They sent us cigars and canned delicacies, as tokens of their esteem. We kept the contraband in the postoffice and many a stolen feast Billy and Porter and I enjoyed.

Carrion Delivered As Prime Beef.

I had nothing to do with the letting of the contracts, but the acceptance of the supplies was within the province of the warden's office. I knew the horrible starvation forced on the men in the main dining room. The memory of my first meal there with the maggots floating in the stew and the flies drowned in the molasses filled me with nausea every time I passed the kitchen.

I made up my mind for one thing * * * if towering prices were paid for meat, I would at least insist that the supply brought to the prison be wholesome.

"You can do that," Porter said. "The warden will hear you out on it. We can have that much satisfaction, anyway."

When the first consignment came under the new contract, I went down to look at it. Prepared as I was for cheap substitutes, I was not ready for the shocking spectacle before me as the rotten stuff was shouldered out of the wagon.

"Put it back," I yelled. Breathless and fighting mad I reached the warden's office. "They're unloading a lot of stinking, tainted meat down at the butcher shop. Flies wouldn't crawl in it, it's so rotten. It's an outrage. We've given the highest price ever quoted on the face of the earth for meat and they've brought us in a load of carrion. What shall I do about it?"

Butchers Taught to Send Fair Grade.

The warden turned a white, startled face toward me. "What's this, what's this?" his voice sounded seared and faint to me. He started pacing the floor.

"It's a shame, warden, the men are being starved. The beans are so old and withered and only famished men would besmire themselves with that meat. We could at least require common wholesomeness."

"That's right, yes, that's right. You say the meat is absolutely tainted? Send it back. Write to them and tell them we demand good fare."

I made the letter strong enough to ring true. I informed the wholesalers that the Ohio Penitentiary paid first class prices. It demanded first class produce. The meat we got after that was coarse but it was fresh and clean.

I used this one authorization from the warden again and again to send back stuff. The contractors came to realize that the prison was no longer a garbage can for their spoiled supplies. They found it cheaper to send in a medium grade in the beginning.

What to Do on Leaving Prison.

"You've come to see there are worse things in the world, Bill, than an ex-convict," I suggested to Porter when I told him about the tainted meat. "When you get out will you brazen out their prejudice or will you keep to your old resolution?"

Porter had about four months more to serve. We kept a calendar and every night we would strike off another day. It is a melancholy thing to feel the separation coming daily nearer—a separation that will be as final and unpromising as death. We talked indifferently, almost flippantly at this time because we were so deeply touched.

"I have not changed. I will keep my word. What would you

do, Colonel, if you should get out?"

"I will walk up to the first man I see on the street and I will say to him, 'I'm an ex-con—just got out of the pen. If you don't like it, go to hell.' (I did that very thing some years later.)"

Porter burst out laughing. It was the first time I had ever heard him laugh outright. It seemed to come bubbling and singing up from his throat like a rich, sonorous tone.

"I would give a great deal for your arrogant independence. I wonder if I will regret my plan?" I don't believe he ever did, even on the black day in New York when he all but admitted he could endure the suspense no longer. (Continued next week.)

DOG-GONE IT!

John D. Wells, author of "Rhymes of Our Home Folks," does not mind a joke on himself.

"It is difficult to remember all the children of one's own pen," he explained. "I've written a verse a day for 15 years and oftentimes a forgotten one comes home to child. Not long ago my little daughter Annette came home from school reciting a bit of verse."

"Did your teacher waste your time memorizing that verse?" I asked.

"Yes, father."

"Well, it's doggerel; it has neither rhyme nor reason, and you may tell your teacher your father said so."

The next evening at dinner my little daughter said:

"I told my teacher what you said, father—that my rhyme was doggerel."

"Well," I asked, "what did she say?"

"She said, 'Your father ought to know. He wrote it.'"

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