Thirty Days in Prison

Letters written while "Doing Time" in the Essex County Jail, Newark, N. J.

I—The First Day

By Louis C. Fraina

IT is a clear, sharp day. The streets seem more inviting than usual, the sun warmer and more cheery, the people more interesting and companionable. I linger as I walk, flushed with a feeling of sensuous pleasure—linger, to snatch a few more precious moments to get the thrill of these familiar things; for when you are to be deprived of the streets and its people, of the sun and the wind, of the old familiar world, often terrible but always fascinating—even if only for thirty days—they assume a more intimate character, their personality floods your being. And, through it all, I glimpse the great struggle. . . .

But time and the law are implacable; the streets and the people, the wind and the sun, liberty and all the joy of life, are of scant importance in the rigor of their onward sweep. And if the law considers these simple but fundamental things of life in its cold calculations, it is only in the sense that, by depriving you of them, your spirit will break and you will prostrate yourself in humble reverence to the terror of the Law. . . . But I hasten, regretfully; and, ten minutes late, I enter the squat, ugly building that is the terrible abode of a very terrible Thing. In this building are the Federal Courts, and many ugly crimes. The place is musty and drab; and drab and musty is the Law, a blotchy, senile old man, consumed with hatred of life and beauty and all that is free. Senile and malignant, but possessing a brutal power.

It is a furtive place, too. It seems not to have the courage to revolt against its crimes and the criminal system it represents; but in its furtive aspect there lurks a sense of shame ashamed of itself. It harbors many a dark secret, many an injustice. Persons flit lurkingly in the corridors—friends anxious for the fate of someone, compacently important lawyers trading in freedom (and haggling about the price), conspiring either against the Law or against the liberty of persons: the lawyer is under no reverential illusions about the majesty of this Thing, the Law. A sinister murmur ladens the air; it is cold, stuffy, spiritually unclean. I have a feeling of vomit.

My lawyer and I go through some dull, routine commonplaces; a dead clerk reads some papers, and informs us that instead of being committed to the Mercer County Penitentiary, I am to make Essex County Jail my abode; — there is a frightful, leisurely quality in all this routtine that is to deprive me of my liberty. Then a strong arm man escorts me to the detention room—it is 10.30, and my imprisonment has started.

The detention room, with a ponderous iron gate and a high window barred with iron, fronts upon the park. There is the pretentious but commonplace City Hall, as commonplace and pretentious as His Honor the Mayor and the idea it represents; there are the trees, more human than the Thing that has scores in its grip. . . . In the room are a number of prisoners awaiting trial—mostly boys: one is very nervous, another cloaks apprehension in an irritating swagger; still another is fearfully stolid.

The place is familiar—I was here the day after my arrest, waiting for bail—Ralph Cheyney and myself. A guard had informed us: "Once in here, it's all up with you." "But what about being innocent until you're proven guilty?" I asked. "You don't really get the benefit of the doubt." . . . Our company then was varied—a pimp, a thief, three sellers of cocaine, a soldier arrested for being drunk, and a smuggler. My memory recalls an interesting incident. A friend of Ralph's was arguing earnestly, just beyond the gate, with the Assistant District Attorney prosecuting our case. This fellow was syphilitic, with a bad limp, a crooked smile and evasive eyes—markedly proud of himself. The girl was trying to convince him that, as political offenders, we were not really criminals: it was unjust to arrest us. With his crooked smile, the A. D. A. beckoned us to the gate; and through the iron bars, earnestly, even solemnly, he told us:

"I sympathize with these unfortunates [indicating with his finger the pimp, the sellers of cocaine, and the others.] They are ignorant, they do not know; and I would do all I can to help them. But you are different, worse. You are educated, and understand; you are out to wreck law and order; you are dangerous. I cannot sympathize with you."

And Ralph answered, ironically:

"Thank you. I don't think we are particularly desirous of your sympathy. In fact, we are grateful not to receive it." . . .

There is a stir beyond the gate; it opens ponderously, and Ralph and I greet each other; I greet his father. . . . Time passes. . . . About 12.30 a deputy marshall comes for us. Ralph and I are handcuffed to each other—my right wrist to his left wrist; but in spite of this, I am happy to be out on the streets again (a few persons look curiously at us, but all are bent upon their own affairs) and feel the free touch of the air. After we are on board the tunnel train to Jersey, the marshal takes off the bracelets; at which Ralph's father, who accompanies us, brightens considerably. There is a random conversation between Ralph, the marshall and myself, about this and that; the marshall seems interested in the labor unrest (he was formerly a railway worker and an active member of the union) — "big strikes are coming; they are necessary, considering the high cost of living; the trusts must be broken."

We are in Newark. I ask the marshall whether he will allow us to have lunch in a restaurant before turning us over to the jail officials; he hesitates a moment, then graciously consents. I eat heartily, with a feeling of intense pleasure—for thirty days I can't choose my own food: a small matter, ordinarily, but now it looms importantly, as a phase of one's liberty.

We approach the jail—a rather small building, with trees on two sides, very rural in appearance. The iron bars on the windows, and the wall—yes, it *is* a prison; but I think of the horrible mills in our squalid Jersey and Massachusetts mill towns—dirty, barred, with an aspect of being determined to crush all the life in you—this jail is much more inviting than the mills. The mill, and not the jail, is the final indictment of the final enormity of our social system. . . . The sun shines and the wind blows: it feels good to live. But in *there* is not life, only a perversion of life. As we wait at the big iron gate, waiting for it to open and admit us, I wonder what reception will be ours; and I think of the Tombs. The day after my arrest (bail not having arrived in time) I was committed for the night to the Tombs. The guard who took me there, anxious to get away, would not waste five minutes that I might purchase a few sandwiches, having had nothing to eat since breakfast, and it being too late for "eats" at the Tombs. The man at the desk was a fine old gentleman, with pinkish cheeks and beautiful white hair—the sort of a man little children would snuggle to and call gran'daddy. When he heard that I was arrested for being against the war and conscription, his mouth spewed forth a stream of filth:

"You God-damned son of a bitch! I'd like to blow your arse off—all you dirty bastards!" . . .

The gate opens; we enter. There is a surprising sense of cleanliness about the place; no bawling and no profanity. The proceedings are perfunctory; some papers are looked over; a guard goes through my pockets.

"Got a knife?"

"No."

I am given a slip of paper with the number 43 on it—that's my cell; another guard takes charge of me; and I proceed into the heart of the jail.

The place is dim; and there is a murmur of voices—a sort of murmer of ants in the gloom. It is clean, but oppressive. Everything is vague and indefinite—except the iron bars, which are here and there, there and here. As we ascend the iron stairs to the tier I am assigned to, faces stare at me curiously. I have no impression of men—just faces; no impression of locality—just iron bars. . . . An iron gate swings open, slowly and ponderously, with a racking noise, worked by a triple mechanism. Through the bars I see a number of persons, some seated around a table.

"Forty-three," yells the guard.

My cell is of iron—iron floors, iron walls and an iron gate. In one corner is the wash-basin; right next to it is the urinal; at one side, a cot. I must live in this for thirty days and thirty nights—I who yearn for large spaces—the spaces of the soul and of the earth; I, who love movement and beauty.

Disgust overwhelms me—disgust and hatred. Then I smile—they think that *this* can alter a man's opinions!

I walk out into the tier—there are twelve cells on the tier. Five of the inmates are playing poker. They stare at me, curiously and covertly; they seem to have a feeling that I am not one of them.

"How long, brother?" asks one of them.

"Thirty days."

"Hell, that's only sleeping time," cry out two of them.

The game proceeds and I watch them. They play earnestly, although the stakes are small—two cents limit. They often quarrel with each other, not seriously. Their conversation is heavy with frequent repetitions of bitch and pimp, whore and bastard, and vile expressions and images which our hypocritical society tolerates — and encourages — in life, but expurgates in literature.

I make a suggestion that I play. They hesitate—a stranger, what sort of fellow is he I insist, and they acquiesce. There is a damper on the conversation for a time; but it revives again in all its picturesque obscenity. As we play, I learn who they are. One is a pimp; another a pickpocket; the third a Conscientious Objector and Socialist; the fourth a draft dodger, and the fifth a thief. Then there is a maker of illicit whiskey, a man who sold liquor to a soldier and sailor, and a fellow who beat up his sweetheart when he found her walking with another man: he claims he was drunk, and doesn't look vicious.

I am now one of them. There are no class divisions. The rebel plays poker with the thief; the traffiker in a woman's body associates with the jealous sweetheart. We are all alike—all criminals. This is democracy.

Up from the tiers below wells a strident noise, expressing the vitality of scores of men caged in small spaces. It is interesting, and not provoking: but will it remain interesting? The feel of the place is oppressive, stultifying. There is a big, stout animal fellow, who sold liquor to the soldier and sailor. He is restless, walking up and down the tier, up and down, like a caged animal. The bars and the small spaces fret and limit him. He quivers, with the quiver of an animal who wants to roam and run in the wide, open spaces. He has a fixed smile on his red face, and obscenity oozes out of his mouth when he speaks of jail.

My mind is only very slightly on the poker game; I am acquiring impressions. My mates speak to me about the food served by the jail. They feel very strongly about it.

"In the morning they give you a cup of piss that they call coffee—no sugar and no milk; and a hunk of bread."

"They might give us some oatmeal."

"In the afternoon they give you a pot of beans, or peas, or soup, and another hunk of bread Once a week they give you a small piece of meat."

"I wouldn't feed the meat to my dog."

"What do you get for supper?" I ask.

They laugh, mockingly. "Nothing for supper — eats only twice a day and they're rotten."

I must have looked rather apprehensive for one of the boys tells me that I can buy food three times a day; also cigarettes and newspapers.

'It's a damn fine jail if you've got money," says the big fat fellow, savagely: he has no money and seems to have no friends. . . .

"All in!"

It is eight o'clock and the shout signals us to retitre. We all scamper to our cells. There are shouts all over the place as the inmates rush to their cells, and the iron mechanism locks us in.

Noise flares up in the tiers below; beyond me are the iron bars of my cell, then the iron bars of my tier, and then the iron bars of the windows beyond. Soon the first day will end in the first night. What then?

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