

The Heart Of A Criminal

BY CHARLES M. SKINNER.

The convict was young, shabby, smooth faced, and the mark of the tenement was upon him. Warden Nickerson threw over the prisoner the authoritative look of the practiced reader of human nature. It was not a look of severity, but was sharp and searching.

"This is Crimmins?" asked the warden. "Sit down, Crimmins."

The prisoner glanced at the warden in surprise, but he obeyed.

"So this is your third term."

"Yes."

"Bad! Still we hope it will be the last one. Let me see, were you ever up for burglary?"

"No, sir, I never did any stealing."

"It was a stabbing scrape wasn't it?"

And there was a flash in the eye again.

"I cut Casey in self defense, so help me. A man don't get no show when he's done time once."

"But you didn't have to quarrel with Casey in the first place, I imagine."

Crimmins was silent again. He seemed to settle back into a kind of spiritual repose.

"What did you work at in Trenton?"

"I done stone cutting most of the time."

"Did you like it?"

"I'd never do it again."

"Oh, come. You'd have to do it if we insisted, you know. There's only one boss here—not a thousand. We couldn't keep hand here at all with a thousand bosses. You know you will have to work. You'll be healthier and happier for it."

"Happier?"

"Yes, happier. And when you go out you'll have a trade."

"I expect to work, but I don't want no more stone cutting."

"What do you want to do?"

"I got a kid brother that's learnin' electricity. I'd like to know something about that I guess."

"That's a good thing to know about, too. Now, see here, Crimmins. They tell me you've been disobedient in Trenton. Don't be that here. Suppose you try to look at it in another way—a way you may not have thought about before. Suppose you say to yourself, I'm here because I haven't learned to watch myself, as other folks do so this is a good place to learn. I came up in a tough part of a tough town, and toughness doesn't pay. It keeps a man in trouble. I didn't have schooling enough when I was a kid, but I'm not too old to learn. I'm only—how much? Twenty-three? So I'm going to school here, and I'm going to get into the habit of working, and when people do their best for me, I'm not going to do my worst for them. For you wouldn't do that, anyway, Crimmins."

"Sure not, Nobody would."

"Ah, you don't know everybody. You want to be an electrician," he continued. "Well we need a man of that sort; but you will have to begin at the beginning and learn to run an engine, and before you run an engine, you will have to understand fires and boilers. So I am going to have you for a fireman, at first. It will be hard work, but remember, you will be learning all the time. And from the minute you begin, just keep in mind where you are going to land."

"Yes, sir," answered Crimmins, in a dazed manner.

"You know we have a library here, and you can draw any book you like. You can read every night till ten. If there's anything that wants explanation just ask me or the librarian."

"Thank you, sir."

"Poor devil!" muttered the warden, as Crimmins passed out

at the door in a keeper's charge, to become for a time thenceforth No. 718, and a coal shoveler.

One evening, as the convicts were returning to their cells from the shop, a heavy nail dropped from an upper gallery almost on the head of the most harsh and hated keeper, who was watching he tail of the procession in corridor below. The spike, which weighed half a pound, broke the visor of his cap and fell with a clang to the floor.

The warden arrived presently, and as soon as the men were locked in for night, and the count had been made, he mounted to the upper tier and questioned the prisoners as to the dropping or throwing of the spike. Some of them appeared absolutely ignorant of the occurrence; some had heard the clink of the iron against the flagstones; none admitted that they saw the missile thrown.

The warden arrived at the door of Crimmins' cell.

"Do you know anything about this Crimmins?" he asked.

The convict looked steadily at him, but was silent.

"See here, my lad. You didn't throw that piece of iron?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know who did?"

Crimmins was silent again.

"This isn't what I thought of you. If you didn't throw that you must tell me who did. If Quigley had been struck on the head with that spike it might have killed him."

Still the prisoner kept silent.

"Answer me."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"Then you'll have to take the consequences. You are not going to compel me to chain you to the door?"

The young man turned his head and gazed at the wall of his cell.

I don't want to punish you more, Crimmins, but it rests with you whether you will be a good inmate or a bad one."

Crimmins was obdurate. The warden sighed heavily, and left the gallery. In a few moments Crimmins was standing at his cell door, his hands thrust between the bars and fastened to gether outside with handcuffs. He submitted quietly to this operation. In this fix, one can merely shift his weight from one foot to the other, but can not sit or change position. It is an awful monotony; an awful strain. Crimmins never spoke; never groaned.

The next morning he was asked if he would talk, but he only shook his head.

Warden Nickerson realized that while he might prolong this punishment till he killed or crazed the convict if he wished, nothing would come of it, and that the best thing to do would be to start the fellow on new work and forget what happened.

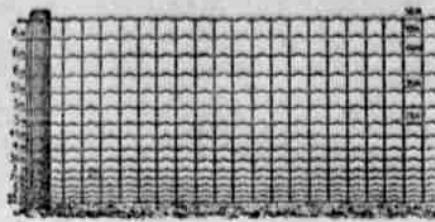
They were repairing the roof of the main building one afternoon, and the plumbers had left their little turnaces burning in the wind. Sparks fell out, and in a few minutes there was a blaze.

As soon as the fire on the roof was discovered, ladders were lifted into position to give access to one of the skylights, these ladders resting, none too securely, on the upper platform 50 feet above the stone floor of the corridor.

The warden was in the building directly. He sprinted up the flights of steps to the top row as a boy, climbed one of the ladders, and with his coat tried to beat out the flame that was slowly eating into the wood of the roof. Despite him, the fire gained. The smoke of the old, dry wood with its many coats of paint was suffocating. He worked desperately at first, then feebly. After some minutes he clung, helpless, to the rungs of the ladder. A gust of smoke enveloped him. His hold relaxed; he slipped, fell—into a pair of stout arms that reached

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J. C. TANNER

up from the ladder just behind. Other men; keepers and trustees, gained the roof, and after a hard fight succeeded in putting out the flames. The warden, overcome by heat and smoke, had been carried to the upper tier and placed on the gallery floor. He breathed for a little while with difficulty, yet did not seem to have wholly lost his senses. Finally he looked about.

"Where is Crimmins?" he asked.

"He's on the roof, with the keepers, sir," answered one of the trustees.

"Send him up to me in the office, as soon as you've straightened up here." And the warden, rising weakly to his feet, staggered down from the gallery. Presently Crimmins appeared in charge of a keeper.

"Crimmins," said the warden, rising and taking the hand of the prisoner. A lump seemed to rise in his throat and he got no farther.

"I know what you were going to say, sir," answered the convict. "You haven't any call to say it. What I did anyone would do."

"Crimmins," the warden said, clearing his throat, which still burned with the smoke, "you saved my life just now. I'm going to cross off all the marks against you, and put you back where you were before you broke the rules. You'll stay on the books as a man who has earned his commutation. You'll have your job on the engine again, and the library privileges, and the rest."

"Thank you, sir."

"And now tell me why you broke the rules? It was such an easy matter to speak."

"It is now, sir, but it wasn't then."

"And why now?"

"Because Thompson, that I threw the spike, served out his time yesterday, and is safe out of the state."

"And he kept his mouth shut, and let you be punished?"

"If there was any way of telling him to keep still, I'd have told him."

"Why?"

"He was good to my mother the last time I was in prison."

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