

# Two Years

By EMMETT GOWEN

I ONCE tried to write this story as fiction, to pretend that the events of it never really happened, but I could do nothing with it that way. Short stories have to be plotted, and I could not make the literal truth shape itself to fit a plot. In conventional fiction of one sort, I should have married the colonel's daughter and lived happily ever after, or in fiction to suit another taste, the young man should have gone through with his intention of hanging himself from the ceiling bars of his cell by a noose made from his belt.

I have decided to tell the facts. I may blush at the facts, but that is all right. It takes an effort of will to say that, although I did prepare the noose and fasten one end to the top of the cell, I did not have what it would take to accept voluntarily the physical discomforts of hanging. It is even harder to say that Elizabeth Hall, for whom I wanted to make the gesture of supreme abnegation, had no reason, beyond the fact that she would have had a normal distaste for actual tragedy, to care whether I hung myself or not.

And now, as they say, go on with the story.

I was a nineteen-year-old private in the Marines when I got involved in the trouble which was to result in my being court-martialled and sentenced to five years (subsequently reduced to three) in the Naval Prison at Parris Island. As nineteen will, I had come to consider myself a devil of a fellow, an adventurer escaped from the pages of swashbuckling fiction. I had been around. I had deserted the hill farm in Tennessee at six-

teen, and made my own way for a year as a house-painter, lineman's helper, truck-driver. I had been, for nearly two years, a Marine, sea-going and land-lubbing. I had fought in skirmishes with Haitian bandits and had received the scar of a *machete*. I had once been drunk in St. Croix for a month on the marvelous rum for which the island is famous. I had fought over West Indian beauties. I had won an expert-rifleman medal, a swimming championship, had been put up for promotion to sergeant and was then within an inch of growing to six feet tall, all of which seemed of great importance. I was young enough to think that such things made me experienced and hard-boiled, capable of subduing my destiny with knuckled fists. Naturally, I was ripe for getting into trouble.

The opportunity soon came.

The enlisted personnel of the Marine detachment at Charleston, S. C., where I was sent for discharge toward the end of my enlistment, was having unofficial difficulties with the police. The cops were "riding" us, arresting Marines upon any pretext at all. They made it a practical impossibility for a Marine to enjoy the amusement facilities of the town without getting locked up in the police station. Hostility grew. One night a Marine was caught doing a little quiet love-making in a vacant lot. The Marine got shot up rather badly.

We decided to teach the policemen a lesson. The plan resolved itself into one to raid the police-station, take command and lock the cops up in their own cells. This we set out to do.

In the planning of that project I had

no part beyond being one of those who were willing to go along. It was not until about twenty of us were in the station-house, with the night police force cowering and trembling before our rifles, that I took any active part. At this stage I became conspicuous by declaring that all this was going to get us into trouble with the commanding officer, unless we hurried back to the barracks before we were missed. This subsequently enabled the police to identify me as being a leader in the prank.

Eight of us went to the brig. We were kept there two months, awaiting a court martial and its outcome. We were not worried, for we felt certain that we would be acquitted. We were in high spirits when we were led out in front of the detachment to receive the verdict. The formalities entailed a parade, and then we were marched, under guard, out in front of ranks standing at attention. In spite of our handcuffs, I think we enjoyed being in the limelight.

I tried to guess from the face of the Officer of the Day what our fate would be. His face was expressionless. He reminded me of a man playing poker, the way he looked blank and held up a sheaf of papers, like a hand of cards, in front of him. He stood with his heels together, his field hat tilted a little over his right eye, his boots and the butt of his automatic catching a gleam of spring sunshine. He came to my name first.

"Gowen, Samuel Emmett, private first class."

"Here, sir."

He began to read and my spirits sank into my leggings.

"Found guilty and sentenced to five years . . ." He read on in a droning sing-song. . . .

I remember that I wanted to cry, and, like a child, I began to long for my mother. I tried to grin, like the devil-may-care fellow that I fancied I was, but

when I forced my facial muscles there was a peculiar reaction in my stomach. I nearly vomited.

That sickening sensation was to stay with me for weeks, like something gnawing in my belly.

At nineteen a blow like that is too much. It was for me, because I was caught without any philosophical self-sufficiency to protect me from the shock of the sentence. In one moment, all my hopes were lost, all my conceits taken away.

Looking back on it I think that what happened to me, psychologically, was that all my thought processes were shattered, my habits of character disconnected. Hitherto, I had held an all's-right conception of life and now the refutation of everything was being practised on my own person. Disillusionments, which must come in every intelligent life, should come gradually, a few at a time, and not all at once like that. That way it was horrible, terrifying, nightmarish.

The sense of nightmare passed gradually, after I had been taken to the prison, and had begun to adapt myself to a grotesque new world—a world locked, iron-barred, gun-guarded. I got used to hobnailed shoes and learned to ignore the constant itching of the rough wool of the prison garb. I choked down, with equal indifference, the prison food and the stupid insults of the guards. I learned to enjoy, as a luxury, any cigarette stub I could surreptitiously garner from the gutter when out with laboring gangs. . . . In prison men learn to forget misery, and some even seem to become comparatively happy, like men who sing in trenches because their guts have not yet been blown out. I soon got used to everything except the sense of terror which I always had when I was locked up in a cell at night.

First there was a phase of defensive

indifference and then I had a period of foolish hope. Like all other prisoners, I refused to believe that I would serve the full term of my sentence. I chose to believe that the miracle would happen and that almost any day would bring the order for my release. A minor miracle did come to pass, for the gods in Washington decreed that five years was too severe a sentence for my offense. They made it three. It meant that, with perfect conduct and with the luck not to get a single blemish on my prison record, I could get one-third "good time," and, therefore, the time I would serve stood at two years. Without the miracle I could not get out under that time. Yet I refused to believe that I would stay in prison so long. The miracle *would* happen. I knew it. When I doubted it, the gnawing started again at the pit of my stomach.

My hope, even though it was foolish and futile, had the effect of lifting me out of despair. I was waiting. I regained the ability to be interested in the passing days. I sought after such prizes as a package of cigarettes or a chocolate bar; I strained after neatness by folding my trousers under my mattress at night, so they would look pressed in the morning. I ate rough food with relish and slept well. If I slept with my mouth open and a cockroach crawled in, as often happened, I spat it out and went back to sleep. I conceived an ambition—to shine as a model prisoner and be made a trusty.

One night Ritchie, who was president of the Mutual Welfare League and also a Jimmylegs (a trusty with authority over other prisoners), came into Number Two Brig with a list of names. The bell clanged for attention. I was in the washroom scrubbing my underwear in a bucket. My name was called out, along with the others on the list.

"You guys stand by at the door," Ritchie ordered.

After a while the sentry turned his key in the lock and let us out. Always before, there had been guards with shotguns to escort us. Now there were none.

"Go to the Main Brig," Ritchie said.

It seemed strange to walk that short distance from Number Two Brig to the Main Brig without a guard. It made the floodlights seem festive. There was a sweet taste to the air that blew in from the sea over the marshes at night. It was good to sniff it without fear of offending a Leatherneck sentry.

We were let into the Main Brig and taken to the Mutual Welfare League office. The officers of the league were there. The warden, a Marine Corps first sergeant, sat in a chair tilted against the wall.

"The warden wants to talk to you guys," Ritchie said.

The warden did not like to talk. "You tell 'em, Ritchie," he said.

"Okay, warden," Ritchie said. He began making us a speech.

"You birds have all been here long enough to know what the Mutual Welfare League stands for. It makes things easier for us. We gotta thank it that we got the honor system in this jail. We're damned lucky we got it, and we're lucky we got a warden that believes in it, and tries to make things easier for us . . ."

Ritchie spoke at length, with much indirect flattery for the warden. Then he had us hold up our right hands and swear an oath not to attempt escape.

While this was going on, I became aware that Kraus, who had been sentenced with me, was trying to get my eye. In the middle of the oath, he gave me a surreptitious wink. That wink said, as plainly as words:

"They're making us trusties and now we can get away."

I tried to look innocent.

We went back to the tailor-shop to have the insignia of trusties (a white star

in a circle) sewed on our sleeves. Kraus nudged me and whispered:

"A good swimmer could get to the mainland."

"Careful. Some stool-pigeon might hear you." I was nervous.

"It's not over two miles when the tide is low," Kraus said.

My job as a trusty was to serve as house orderly for Colonel Hall, the commanding officer of the Marine detachment on the island. I was allowed out of the prison from daylight until dark, although I had to report at the guard-room twice during the day. The work was easy, after having been on a laboring gang unloading from barges an endless supply of cement. I polished boots with hot-eyed resentment, but with an awareness that they were not as heavy as cement sacks. I trembled with rage when the colonel's cook, a St. Helena negress, lorded it over me, but I liked her simple-hearted kindness when she handed out dainties from the colonel's table.

I think my young manhood was affronted worst of all when I was asked to take Mrs. Hall's snippy little lap-dog out for an airing, but when Elizabeth came along one day I felt differently about it. After that, I looked forward to taking the dog out, and I was happy whenever Elizabeth came out, too.

Elizabeth was the older of the colonel's two daughters. She was sixteen, and at that age she was full-figured and pretty. It is hard to describe her looks beyond saying that most of the blonde, blue-eyed girls on magazine covers seem to have been drawn from her, and many of those type-beauties, to this day, give me a start of recognition. Her very femininity was, somehow, a marvellous phenomenon; for at nineteen one may be oversensitized to sex, and, besides, I lived in the womanless world of prison. The sound of her voice invariably sent

the prickle of a thrill through me; to walk beside her, leading the dog, was an experience that made my knees feel weak.

I think my breathless adoration must have flattered her. Perhaps also she may have been intrigued by my maleness, may have found it a novelty, since she was still being treated as a child by her parents, and saw no young men. Anyway, she got into a habit of finding pretexts to be with me.

Elizabeth used to ask me questions about myself. I lied and exaggerated, trying to make myself seem heroic, while, at the moment, I would feel menial and ashamed, for the conversation might be going on during my polishing of her father's boots.

She liked to talk about getting married some day.

"Of course, I'll marry a Marine officer. I don't like Naval officers."

"But how about a civilian?" I was beginning to have dreams about what I might do when I became a civilian.

"Oh, I hate civilians."

"But there are interesting civilians. Lawyers, artists—" (I hadn't decided whether I would be an attorney or a painter.) "A lawyer might make a lot of money for you."

"He'd probably wear glasses and be stoop-shouldered. No, I'd never marry a civilian."

The conversation made me unhappy.

Even though she intensified my sense of inferiority and disgrace, I think that knowing her must have revived in me something that prison usually kills. Prison breaks a man's spirit, and makes of him a psychological gelding. Prisons are run with an evil cleverness, and everything is insidiously arranged to break a man, to tear out of him all self-assurance, all individuality. I have verified this by subsequently meeting some of the derelicts turned helplessly loose in

the world by the institution where I was. It takes sadistic guards but a little while to knock the spirit out of you, and sometimes they do it literally, with a club. They did this to me, but I think Elizabeth restored it.

She made me feel hopeless and inferior, but, paradoxically, she restored my pride. She gave me back the power to have dreams and hopes. From developing a habit of trying to wear my gray uniform with an air, I progressed to one of planning beyond the end of my term. I think that when I began bribing the prison tailor to keep my pants pressed there was something more complex happening to my character.

Meanwhile, Kraus was making plans for our escape. I didn't want to get away. I told myself that I wanted to finish my sentence and face the outside—the vague, wonderful outside that prisoners talk of as if it were paradise—without the handicap of being a fugitive. Yet I think the real reason I wanted to stay was to remain near Elizabeth. Even prison was not too much to suffer just to see her for a few minutes each day.

I could not bring myself to telling Kraus that I would not go. He would have accused me of being afraid. I had no fear of the possibility of being shot by guards, or of being recaptured, beaten, and given more time, yet I was afraid of what Kraus might think of me if I refused to go. Fear of an opinion was, as it so often is, greater than fear of personal injury. And so I let myself be kept in the plan.

Perhaps I would escape with Kraus. It pleased me to consider how surprised Elizabeth would be when she learned that her meek little prisoner had made a daring escape. In the end, I made up my mind to go.

Elizabeth unwittingly influenced my decision, as she influenced practically everything I thought and did. This she

accomplished, innocently, by making me jealous. A stable sergeant was teaching her to ride, and when she began to talk about how handsome and how charming the sergeant was, I fairly choked with hidden rage. Her talk was mere prattle, but it made me desperate.

That night, in the barracks where the trusties were locked after dark, I visited Kraus at his bunk. We sat on the lower of the bed's two decks and smoked, while we waited for a chance to talk without being overheard.

"Well, kid, everything's set," Kraus said. "The boat is all ready and to-day I made some paddles for it."

As a trusty, Kraus had a job at the garbage dump, at a remote spot on the shore of the island, and he had been able to repair an old abandoned boat. He kept it hidden in the swamp.

"When do we go?" I asked.

"When do you say?"

"Let's make it soon—to-morrow."

"No, we better make it Saturday," Kraus said.

I wondered why he wanted to wait, and extend the chance of the boat's being found. The next day would have done as well as Saturday. Our plan was to go to the boat at dark, when we were supposed to report in at the prison. We would simply put out in the boat and be rowing for the mainland by the time they missed us.

However, I did not challenge his wanting to wait until Saturday. After all, he had taken the leadership; they were his plans, his boat.

I gave Kraus some cigarettes and went back to my own bunk.

The next day I had a talk with Elizabeth. I was turning the crank of the ice-cream freezer for the cook, when Elizabeth came out and sat on the kitchen steps. She had on breeches and riding-boots. Wind had teased some strands of hair loose from the knot at the back



of her head and the blond wisps blew around her face. She had been riding with the stable sergeant. I was bitter about that.

"How is your sergeant?" I asked, trying to manage an inflection of sarcasm mixed with unconcern.

"I don't like him any more," she said, with a laugh. "He smells like the stables."

"You ought not to mind that. He is *handsome*. And *so* charming!"

"Oh, that doesn't matter," she said.

"Why not?"

"Why, I couldn't ever care for an enlisted man."

Elizabeth uttered the words, but it was not she who was speaking. It was an utterance of the Marine Corps, of a military system.

"I'd even turn down Rudolph Valentino if he were an enlisted man," she said.

I turned the freezer crank furiously. I had wanted to tell her of my romantic ambitions, to paint for her with words a vision of a fictive lover, laden with honors and successes, coming back to her. Instead I saw the futility of the whole of my dream. I did not see it in its true terms, but I saw it like this: she would never care for an enlisted man; I was a prisoner and, therefore, still further beneath her.

She got up and went back into the house. After a little while she came out again, and held out to me a pair of tan boots.

"Mother says will you please shine Father's boots for the parade to-morrow."

Those eternal boots! They symbolized the whole of my grievance. Because officers wore boots, I was in prison. Because they wore shiny, leather boots, she was to be forever remote from me. I loved her and she handed me a pair of boots to shine.

"And so I have to shine the boots that trample me!" I said bitterly.

She took the boots back. "I always thought you didn't like to shine them," she said. "I'm going to tell Father not to make you do it any more."

"No, I'll do it," I said. "Somebody has to shine them. No colonel could ever polish his own boots."

We each insisted. Finally, she went back into the house.

Later in the day she came out wearing a new summer frock. I was sitting on the steps polishing the boots.

She told me in detail about the fact that she was going with her mother on the Savannah boat to visit somebody in Savannah.

"We won't be back until Sunday," she told me.

"You'll never see me again," I said bitterly.

When she began to question me as to what I meant, I tried to make it seem that I had merely made a silly remark. When her mother called her into the house, to get ready for the visit, she was puzzled.

At the door she turned and gave me a glance that was casual, but nevertheless thrilling.

"See you Sunday," she said.

See me Sunday? She would not! Sunday I would be free. A fugitive but—*free!*

That night, when count of the prisoners was made, we were not given "at ease." They kept us standing at attention. After a while the guards came thumping along again, taking another count. The sergeant looked worried.

Still we were kept at attention. A third count was made. There was a slight rustle of excitement among the prisoners, at something we felt rather than heard: somebody missing!

A roll-call was taken next. Meanwhile,

over at the guard detachment's barracks, a bugle was blowing "Call to Arms." Marines, in squads, ran with their rifles past the windows. In the distance could be heard the spluttering noise of motor-kicker engines being started.

A little later word of who was gone went through the prison. A man whose name I don't remember—and Kraus!

The liar! The double-crosser! Obviously, he had decided that somebody else could be more help to him in getting away than I could. Yet he had chosen to keep me thinking I was in on his plans. My feelings were hurt.

The next day I went before the commanding officer of the prison, and asked to be relieved of my job as Colonel Hall's orderly.

The commanding officer was an irascible Marine Corps Colonel who was called Terrible Terry Williams behind his back. He was a tall, lean man with a face made ugly by the lines of evil temper and arrogance. Prisoners walked into his office on trembling legs. I did.

When I told him what I wanted, he rose over his desk and began screaming at me in rage. He wanted to know why I asked to have my job changed. "Why?" he yelled. I stammered some silly excuse, to which he did not listen.

"You have a good job and you're not satisfied!" he shrieked into my face. "That's the way with all of you goddam rats! Perhaps you'd like some hard work. Some *hard* work! Well, I'm going to give you something nice and soft. Garbage. . . . Sergeant, take the son-of-a-bitch out of here and put him on the garbage-truck!"

And on the garbage-truck I went. It was the most dreaded detail in the prison. A Marine drove the truck and six prisoners loaded it. We ran, each of us, from the truck to a can in its route ahead. You grabbed up the can, threw it up to a prisoner on the truck, who emp-

ty tied it and threw it back. Then you replaced it in its screened box and ran ahead to another one. The truck never stopped. You had to work on the run for hours at a stretch, with garbage and slops spilling into your face, oozing down your neck. If you were too weak to stand all the running, you either quit or you passed out. In either event, you went to the cell-block for solitary if you failed. And when you went to the cell-block, you automatically lost your "good-time" and had to serve a third longer. There were times when my aching, panting body tried to assert a will independent of my mind, and simply lie down on the ground. I can think of only one word to apply to that daily garbage marathon—*horrible!*

It was humiliating, too, for only prisoners in disfavor were put on that job. Worse yet; I was aware that Elizabeth must, sooner or later, see me when the truck passed the colonel's house—see me trotting along with a garbage-can on my shoulder. Sometimes I had a feeling that she was looking at me out of the window, but I would not turn my face in that direction to see if she was.

I think the sum total of all these humiliations and hardships and disillusionments was what gave me the passion for knowledge, which, as I look back upon it, seems to have come all at once. I had never before concerned myself in the least with what lies between the covers of books. I had received no formal education before I left home, schools not being considered important in the Tennessee backwoods. I was practically illiterate. And yet I was obsessed by a desire to know everything. I tackled the prison library with all the vigor I had left from garbage carrying. At three in the afternoon, when all the garbage of the post had been gathered, I would

rush straight to the library. From then until taps, at ten, I read passionately.

I began by selecting tomes for the solemnity of their titles, the dignity of their formats. At first I had to go slowly, puzzling out the meanings of unfamiliar words. I wanted to read faster, to cover more ground. A friend being discharged was commissioned to send me in a dictionary from the outside. He sent it, and I made a rule never to go past a word I did not understand.

Of course, I read a great deal of drivel. In fact, good books were in the minority, at first. I had to find out. I had to read everything to find the things I needed.

As the months went along, the books and their print-rendered information became more and more my reality. Elizabeth seemed like a creature in a dream more than a girl over whom I had driven myself half crazy. She was a dream and a sensation of excitement that lasted for a moment each day, as the garbage-truck passed her house. The garbage-truck was not even a dream; I worked automatically, my consciousness occupied with the knowledge I was acquiring. I forgot even the stench which clung always to me, which stayed with me after I had finished the day's work and had scrubbed myself with sea-soap.

I was not merely reading; I was studying. My studies were not classified under headings. Fiction, biography, history, economics, psychology, philosophy, natural history—all were fed indiscriminately to the appetite of my awakening mind. The prison library was a good one. When I found my way out of the maze of printed trash, I could find on the shelves nearly anything I needed to suit my forming tastes.

I remember that at this time I thought of my mind as something burning like a fire, and of each book as fresh fuel to make the flames leap higher, to shed more light. I fed the fire with every-

thing. As I made progress, I decided that I must take up Latin and Mathematics. They were hard come by. They required slow, ponderous study. I had to arrive, timorously, at correct pronunciations in Latin by a process of logic (I usually got them wrong). Latin was labor; you can't race through Ovid as you can "Creasy's Decisive Battles of the World." I was impatient about mathematics; you can't solve with a glance a problem in geometry.

Not wanting to waste from my studies the time spent on the garbage-truck, I copied poetry out of books, to memorize while at work. Thus I trotted from garbage-can to garbage-can memorizing verse, mouthing the exquisite words of a sonnet, with slops running down my neck from the can on my shoulder. Now and then I snatched a glance at my "script," which I carried in my cap next to my clipped head.

My fellow prisoners thought I had gone crazy; perhaps I had. At least, I had become a fanatic.

And, as most fanatics do, I acquired disciples. I didn't want them, but they formed a cult for seeking learning and I was their leader. There was the Norwegian sailor who tried to teach me French in return for my tutoring him in reading, spelling and arithmetic; there were half a dozen young men who made me direct them in ways of "improving the mind"; there was George Russell, who seemed to me very cultured, and with him I debated problems of the world as fast as I learned what the problems were. With my disciples, I was always their superior, for my intensity was always greater than theirs; I was always ahead of them in whatever subject they wanted my help in. I may have been only one or two volumes ahead of them, but they did not think of that.

Elizabeth was, in some vague way, back of all this. Perhaps it was some



mixed-up desire of the male to shine in the eyes of the female, some psychological motive twisted by prison into a pathological one. I don't know just how she was back of it. I do know that she was. I know that every time I turned a good phrase in my arguments with George Russell, I thought of Elizabeth, and wished that she could have heard me. Sometimes, with her image in my mind, I would mutter passionately:

"I'll show you, darling. I'll prove that I'm good enough for you!"

One day my reading got me into trouble. It was Sunday, and not having to work, I was blissfully spending the whole long day on my bunk, in the midst of an armful of books. A Marine came in and formed a detail of prisoners to go down to the docks and unload baggage from the Savannah boat. I was one of them. As a trusty, I was to go to the docks without a guard, and be there when the boat came in.

The other men on the detail filed out of the brig, but I remained on my bunk with a volume titled "Meditations of Marcus Aurelius." I did not intend to disobey the Marine; I merely failed to heed his command.

I was, regardless of my intentions, or lack of them, put up for "office hours" next day.

Old Terrible Terry raged and screamed at me until he was swollen and spluttering.

It was a terrifying thing to feel your fate in the malignant hands of Terrible Terry. You trembled, and were half stunned by the severity of his punishments; and when the guard took you out of the office, he led you through the guard-room and unlocked a small, steel-barred door in the back. Beyond that door was the extra-punishment cell-block.

Terrible Terry gave me a punishment as unthought as his oaths.

"Ten days bread and water, sixty days solitary, loss of all 'good time'!"

I had never seen the inside of Number Four Cell-Block and had hoped that I never would. It was a dreaded place, and its associations were as dark and evil as its windowless interior. Its name was a synonym for foulness, for pain, for horror. That little grated door through which I was pushed shut in the secrets of the prison. I was to learn them by the sounds from the other solitary-confinement cells. There was an insane man in there, keeping up an unearthly shrieking and wailing, battering himself against the bars, when he should have been receiving treatment in the hospital. There was a drug addict whom the guards clubbed for begging for drugs. A boy who was hidden away in there to save from court martial the Marines who had beaten him nearly to death. A man who had attempted murder. And also there were those like myself, who had done little more than become objects for the malevolence of Terrible Terry.

Kraus and the man who had attempted escape with him were in there. They had been re-court-martialled, given an added sentence of three years and now were to be removed to the Naval Prison at Portsmouth.

Everybody in that cell-block was on solitary confinement, and it was a crime to open your mouth in speech, but one day in the toilet I had a few words with Kraus.

"How did they catch you?" I asked him.

"We couldn't get out of those swamps over there," he said. "There are only two ways out, the causeway and the railroad trestle. They just waited for us. They got us on the railroad trestle."

"Did they beat you?"

"They didn't—they made some of the guys here do it."

"Why?"

"It's against the rules for guards to beat prisoners," Kraus said. "So they *have* it done, and watch it."

"But they do beat up men themselves."

"Not men who would take their bruises before the officers of a court-martial board," Kraus said. "Just those they can lock up in here until they get well."

The first few days of solitary confinement are not so bad, when you are already used to being locked in cells. It gets you gradually. In the first place, the bread-and-water diet puts you in a highly sensitized state of mind, and the ordinary dumb acceptance is replaced by a full awareness of the horror of prison. There is something profoundly terrible about being locked up, day after day, week after week, in a cell that is cold and bare and dark. You have spells of panic. You suffer from an instinctive terror that comes of utter hopelessness. You go crazy. . . .

One day George Russell was brought into the cell-block for solitary confinement. As he passed my cell, he tossed through the bars a tiny book. It was a vest-pocket edition of "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," to me a greater present than a fortune would be to a man in a bread-line.

By luck I saved it from the guards who were continually searching us. It was very small, leather bound, and I could roll it up and hide it between my legs. For weeks and weeks it was all that I had between myself and the mad terror. The irony of it—reading of red wine, of song, of love, reading with peering, aching eyes in the ghostly, dungeon light of the cell. . . . After a while I knew it all by heart. . . .

And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,  
Whereunder crawling cooped we live and die,  
Lift not your hands to *It* for help—for *It*  
As impotently moves as you or I.

The story has no climax. I lived through the cell-block experience, and when it was over, I was put to work on a laboring gang. We worked on the dock, under guard, as stevedores. I had three months more to serve before I would have two years done. Then I would begin on the final year, which I would have to bear because Terrible Terry liked to rule his prison with an iron hand.

However, Terrible Terry was relieved from duty as commanding officer of the prison at about that time. His successor restored the "good time" of all prisoners whose records did not justify its having been taken away. That left me with just three more months to serve.

One day on the dock I noticed some boxes of furniture with Colonel Hall's name on them. When the Savannah boat docked, we put the boxes aboard. Obviously, the colonel was being transferred.

Just before time for the boat to leave, I saw the colonel and his family coming down the dock. Elizabeth was leading the dog, walking a little ahead. She had her hat in her hand and the wind from the sea was blowing her blond hair, so that she walked with her head down. She had not seen me.

I tried to avoid being seen by stepping behind a pile of boxes. The guard put his hand on the butt of his pistol.

"Come out from there!" he said.

I came out from behind the boxes and Elizabeth saw me. Our eyes met for an instant and she looked away. I went to work with the other prisoners loading tins of gasoline on a truck.

# Oklahoma Race Riot

By FRANCES W. PRENTICE

**I**t happened because a girl was hysterical, and a newspaper item got past the copy desk worded a little more strongly than it should have been. The girl took it back later, and the newspaper perfectly properly said its function was to give the news of the town. But some forty people were dead by then, and half the town burned up.

Maybe it didn't actually start at either of those sources. You heard people say afterward that the niggers had been getting above themselves; that race riots just naturally break loose every now and then anyway, and probably they're good things.

This curious philosophy is not a sectional affair. It doesn't spring exclusively from the smouldering animosities of ex-slave owner and ex-slave. Chicago and St. Louis, safely above the Mason and Dixon line, one would think, have each produced something in the way of records for race riots. Oklahoma hugs no bitter local traditions; they haven't had time for traditions yet. Only a few years ago the State was Indian territory; even the Indians were mostly not natives. The citizens are from any State you care to mention. About all they have in common is a variegated American tongue, a spirit of adventure (generally genial), and an interest in crude oil.

Impossible to guess, then, where this spark smoulders, or what will fan it. Perhaps it smokes always in the darkness of small minds and huge uncontrol.

At any rate——

The Negro section was rumbling with it at four o'clock in the afternoon. There are always agitators, and the sober, fearful members of the race have a

hard time hushing them up. They tried hushing them. Grave-faced black men, ministers, church deacons, real-estate owners, doctors, went in to the back rooms of the short-order barbecue parlors and pleaded with the hot-heads. "Don't, boys. Don't you all go over there. You'll get us all burned out. You can't do no good. Don't go mixing in. Wait and see, boys. Maybe it's just talk. Maybe they ain't fixing to do nothing to Jim. The sheriff's a good man. He won't let them take Jim. He's the law. Don't, boys. Don't before God go over there!"

But the hot-heads were malcontents anyway. They had listened with too much imagination and too little common sense to orators who told them that the Negro was exploited and down-trodden; that if he didn't assert himself, and protect his race from the whites, what could he expect? The choc beer in those back parlors is strong stuff. It burned in the brains of the mutterers. Oklahoma wasn't the deep South, was it? Pshaw! They'd show the white folks you couldn't lynch no colored boy these days. Let the old men go along with their gloomy hushings. They'd see.

And they did see.

The town is divided straight across by railroad tracks. One side is nigger town; on the other side the whites live. The jail is in the heart of the business section. And the boy Jim was in the jail for insulting a white girl in an elevator that morning. She said later she thought she stumbled against him herself, and was just nervous, so she screamed. But no matter.

At seven o'clock three cars full of