

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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HOOTCH

By William Sanford

I HAD committed murder. In a terrible fit of rage I had killed my friend, Jim McCarthy. I was going to be hung at sunrise. There was no hope. I must die.

Slowly the great steel door swung open, and four guards entered my cell. One of them stepped a little in advance of the others.

"Come!" he said, and that was all.

I rose, tottering, from my bench. I must die! I must leave the sunlight of the earth behind me. I had committed murder.

I was led through the cold, bleak prison corridors and out into the lighted courtyard where a number of people were gathered—prison officials and a few newspaper men. The scaffold stood before me, and with tottering legs I was assisted to the top.

A black cap, a horrible thing spelling death, was fitted over my head and drawn tight about my neck. All was still about me. No one spoke.

I felt the noose placed about my neck. The cold sweat broke out over my body. I could scarcely stand. *Death! Death!* I was to know the feeling of that terrible rope in a few moments.

"Ready!" said a sharp voice.

I felt the earth slip from under me, and I shot into space. A feeling of

suffocation, indescribably terrible, enveloped me, and a million sparks of fire seemed dancing before my eyes, though I could not see. I tried to scream, but could make no sound. Then something seemed to burst; my lungs were free; I gave a terrible cry.

A voice from above came sharply down to me:

"What the devil's the matter with you, Bill?"

The ship gave a lurch and brought me wide awake. In the dim light of the cabin I saw Jim McCarthy's face peering at me from the bunk above.

"Jim," I said, wiping my sweat-soaked face with the sheet. "If you fill me up on any more of your home-made hootch I *will* kill you!"