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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Jail-Break

By PAUL ERNST

*Littell wanted to escape from prison, but the aftermath of his escape was far worse than the prison itself*

HE HAD to make the break soon. He would die in here if he didn't. He was used to fine food, good clothes, luxuries; used to women in evening gowns, and cigars at fifty cents, and soft beds and softly upholstered cars. He couldn't stand the harsh and terrible life of prison. He had to get out of here soon. Please God it would be now, tonight. . . .

Well, it *would* be tonight! Wasn't everything all ready for it? Then what was he worrying about?

Alfred Littell stood by the small barred window of his cell. But it wasn't barred any more—at least not as the architect had designed it. The center bar was out, neatly sawed at top and bottom, just now removed. The way was clear from this grim cubicle into the prison yard.

Littell shivered as he looked out. Plenty of reasons to shiver. One was that he was stripped to the skin, and the night was cold. A naked plump form in the dimness, he shrank from the breeze seeping in. Another was the sight of that prison yard; brilliantly lighted, surrounded by a twenty-foot stone wall whose top was set with towers at regular intervals. In the towers were guards with machine-guns ready to mow down anyone mad enough to try to cross the yard and scale the walls in the glare of the searchlights. A third reason was—the stuff which was supposed to enable him to cross that yard and scale that wall unharmed.

Fantastic stuff! Incredible! Given to

him by Harley, who hated him as few men have ever learned to hate.

It was because Harley hated him so, that Littell had snatched at the possibilities of truth in the mad business. From no other man would he have accepted such a remedy, nor have dreamed of trying it, no matter how desperate his urge to escape from prison. But Harley's hatred made it plausible.

He had heard of it in a roundabout way, from a cellmate he'd had a short while ago when the prison was overcrowded.

"Old Doc Harley says he has a sure way of crushing out of here."

"How?"

"He won't tell. But he says it's certain."

That was all. Littell hadn't permitted his interest to show. But he had thought a lot.

Doctor Harley was a brilliant man. Before the judge had sentenced him to twenty years and Littell to life, he had been a famous bacteriologist and biologist, a man of great intellect. The wonder was not that he had discovered a way to break jail, but that he hadn't discovered it sooner.

There was the guarded talk in the prison yard a few weeks later.

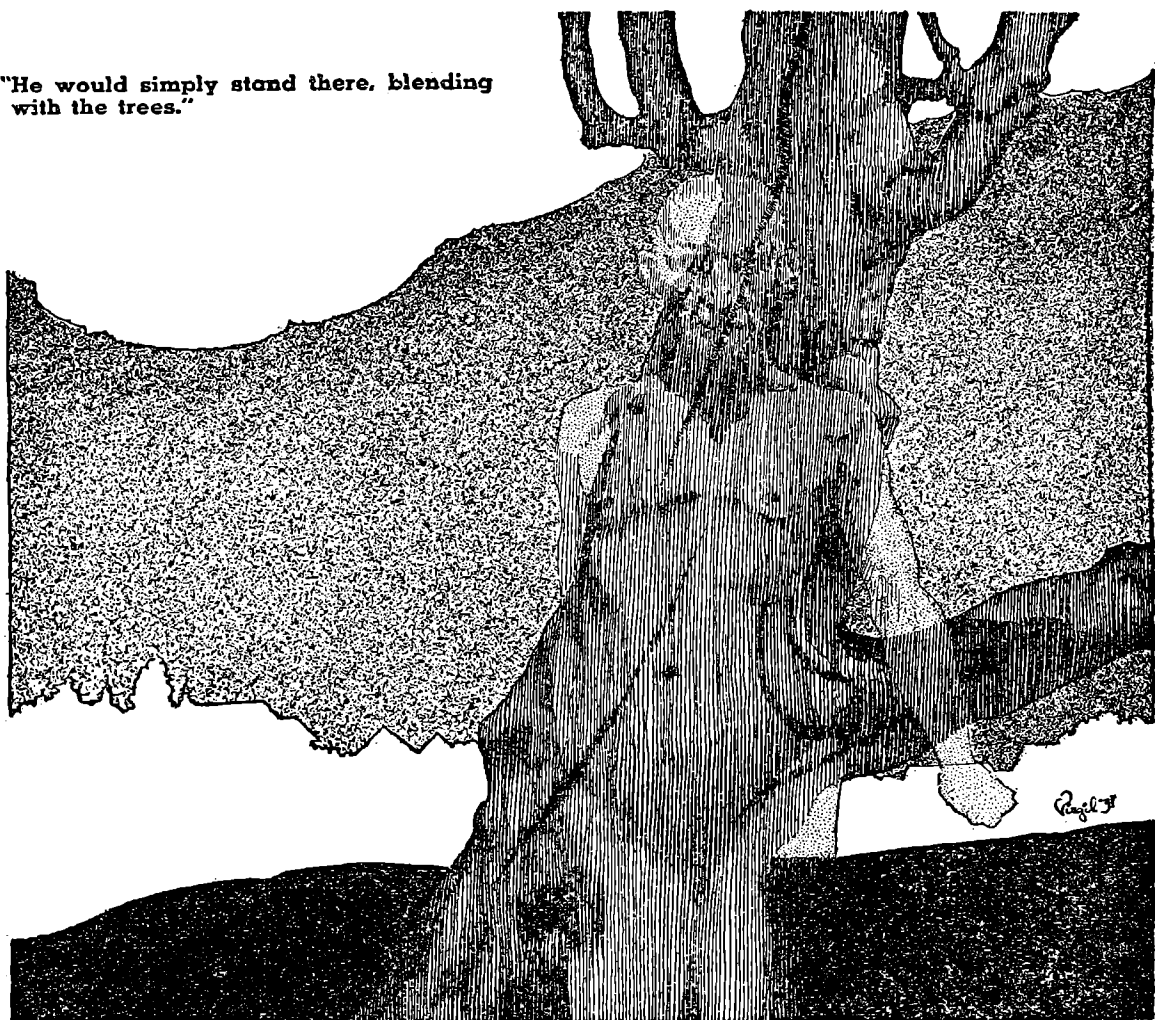
"I hear you've hit on a way out of here, Harley."

Harley's eyes were contemptuous gray ice as they rested on Littell's face.

"You slinking rat!"

For his was a hatred almost sublime in

"He would simply stand there, blending with the trees."



its scope. That, Littell knew, was because the plan he had evolved had not quite succeeded. A little slip. One any man might make. And it had seemed a risk anyone would take, when the stakes were considered.

Half a million dollars! That was the heritage Littell would have split if the murder of his ward, Elizabeth Moore, had gone undetected. And God knows it should have succeeded. Littell could still glow when he thought of the subtlety of the plan.

The sub-microscopic germs of psittacosis, a thing most people couldn't even pronounce, let alone understand. Dread

virus of the parrot disease that could kill like a flaming sword, but subtly, undetectably. A virus obtained through Doctor Harley, eminent Government authority, whose daughter had secretly disgraced herself to such a degree that Harley could be blackmailed into anything through fear of her exposure. Death for Elizabeth Moore; half a million dollars almost in the hand.

And then they had been caught.

"Don't keep thinking it was my fault we were tripped up," he said urgently. "It was just bad luck——"

"It isn't because we were caught that I could cheerfully see you burned at the

stake. It's because you found the one way to force me into the hellish business in the first place. But I suppose you wouldn't understand that. You abysmal scum!"

LITTELL had to take it. If he didn't get out of this place of stone and steel and brute-faced guards soon he would go mad. And in Harley lay the possibility, according to his cellmate.

He had looked furtively around to make sure none could hear.

"MacQueen says you have a way of escape."

The gray ice of Harley's eyes had lightened at that. He had laughed, long and loud, for the first time since the walls of the penitentiary enclosed him.

"Ssh!" Littell had said frantically. "You'll attract attention——"

"What of it? So you heard about that, did you? And you come crawling to me for further details. To *me!* That's good."

Words, laugh and look had stung like whips. But Littell would have taken anything with the possibility of a jail-break in sight.

"You *have* a way out, Harley?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

That was all for that day.

Littell kept after the hawk-eyed man. He believed Harley did have a way out. Prisons aren't built to confine minds like Harley's.

But for maddening day after maddening day, Harley only laughed at him when he cringed up to him in the prison yard. Then had come the day when he looked at Littell with savagely thoughtful eyes.

"By God, it would serve you right if I told you."

Quick! Catch him up on it!

"Why? Is there a catch to it?" Littell had fawned.

"A catch? That's a weak word, scum.

There's hell in it such as a brain like yours couldn't comprehend."

"But *what* is it, Harley? What's your way out of here?"

For answer, only the maddening laugh that drew the eyes of guards and other prisoners alike. Drew their eyes, and also answering grins. For all there knew how Harley loathed the big soft man with the paunch who had killed a girl with the virus of psittacosis.

"I'll bet it isn't sure after all, Harley."

"You know damned well it is." Harley's amused, icy eyes drilled Littell's bloodshot brown ones. "You know I've got brains enough to figure a way out."

"If it's sure, why don't you use it yourself?"

"I told you. There's hell in it. Personally I'd rather stay here than face the consequences of that particular escape."

"Consequences worse than—this?" Littell had chattered hysterically, staring around at the grim yard.

"Decidedly worse," nodded Harley, icy, amused.

"What?" begged Littell. "What are the consequences?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

More maddening days. And then Littell had hit upon the method of prying Harley's secret from him. The brain that had thought of parrot's disease as a murder method was keen enough to find a way out here. It lay through the man's hatred.

"Maybe your way of escape would be painful, or something. But what do you care? I'm the one who would be facing these consequences you talk about. And you certainly aren't interested in sparing me any grief."

Harley's laugh had not rung out, for once. Again that bitterly thoughtful look had slid into his gray eyes.

"Maybe it isn't as bad as you think," urged Littell.

"I don't think—I know."

"I'll take a chance. And you can find out from my reaction whether you could try it yourself."

"I have tried it—enough to get a hint of the aftermath. Just a little as an experiment. I tell you, prison is better."

"Let me judge that for myself."

"By God—it *would* serve you right——"

It had worked, slowly but certainly. Harley had come around, not, Littell knew well enough, because he was willing to help him, but because the brilliant doctor saw a way of revenge.

Harley had told him. And the thing he told had made Littell question his sanity, at first.

"You know what a chameleon is, scum?"

"Sure. A little lizard that changes color to match whatever it's resting on."

"Aren't you the cunning rat! Yes. A lizard of the genus *Chamæleo*. I worked with 'em in the Government lab. I isolated the hormone which causes their pigmentation to change color. I went further. Just before you forced me into the sweet-smelling scheme which deservedly sent us here, I reproduced this hormone synthetically, with common chemicals."

"Well?" Littell had said, frowning perplexedly.

"Well, rat. A chameleon could crawl out of here pretty easily, couldn't it? If it took on the color of these stone walls, a guard wouldn't see it crawling up one of them, would he?"

The thing was so fantastic that it had taken a little while for Littell to grasp it. But long before the next yard period, he was burning and shivering to talk to Harley again.

"You mean you've got some stuff that will make you invisible if you take it? So you can walk out of here?"

"Not invisible, scum. The color of whatever background you have, that's all. And it's not too perfect."

"What is it? A sort of drug you swallow that gives you chameleon qualities?"

Harley had nodded, eyes savage, bitterly undecided.

"But my God, Harley, that's tremendous! Why don't you use it?"

No answer.

"Those mysterious consequences of yours?"

A slow nod.

"The hormones are odd things, Littell. We have isolated many of them, and some we can reproduce. But they're of the stuff of life, and still essentially unknown. This particular one does something to you besides making your skin pigmentation change to match your background. Some terrible freedom of the mind, perhaps. Some sixth sense which opens up—and which should for ever remain a blind spot."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, rat. But there you are."

"*What* does it do besides changing pigmentation?"

"You see things." The icy gray eyes were staring at Littell's face—but obviously not observing it.

**T**HAT was all Littell could get out of him. You saw things. It was a way out of prison. But its aftermath was supposed to be horrible.

Littell went to the prison library and read all he could find on chameleons, particularly *Chamæleo vulgaris*. The faculty that lizard possesses of changing color, he was informed, was due to the presence of contractile, pigment-bearing cells placed at varying depths in the skin.

Hell, the human body didn't have contractile cells. Or—did it? Pigment-bearing, yes. He knew that. But were they contractile, whatever that meant? Was

human skin so made as to react to such an agent as that described by Harley—assuming the man hadn't been simply amusing himself by working up his hopes on a hoax?

The more Littell studied it, the less he could determine. And of course he dared ask no one who might know. You don't advertise an escape.

"Have you got any of this stuff in here with you, Harley?"

"No, scum."

"Then how——"

"It could easily be made. The ingredients could be gotten from the prison hospital. Potassium manganate is the base."

Littell didn't sleep nights. Harley was grimly kidding him! Or was he? Human flesh wasn't like lizard flesh! Or, in respect to contractile, pigment-bearing cells, was it? You couldn't actually break jail by taking a drug! Or—could you?

What was the secondary effect produced by Harley's drug? What horror lay in the thing that the man wouldn't use it himself, and was bleakly amused to offer it to the fellow prisoner whom he hated most on earth?

Littell shuddered away from the mystery, and decided to forget the whole thing. And then, in the dining-hall, he tried to sneak meat from the plate of the man beside him. It took a lot to support that soft paunch of his. The man beat him up till he was a quivering, groaning mass before the guards could intervene.

"I've got to get out of here! I've got to! I can't stand it!"

He sought again the man who loathed the ground he walked on.

"Harley, I don't care what your drug does to a man. I don't care what the aftermath is. Let me have some. There's a hack-saw blade in my cell, stuck with chewing-gum in the angle-iron of the side rail of my bunk. I can get out of my cell,

if there's a way for me to get across the prison yard and up the outer wall after that. . . . Harley, give me some of that drug."

"You fool!"

"Maybe I am a fool. But I can't stay here any longer."

"You know I hate you. Yet you'll take a concoction from me and swallow it, after I've told you the results are such that I wouldn't think of taking it myself?"

"I've got to get out of here!"

Across the yard, the man from whom Littell had tried to steal food snarled at him. Littell's soft flesh crawled with memory of the beating he had taken.

*"I've got to get away!"*

Then the day when Harley, with ferocious mockery in his eyes, slid a little vial of blood-colored liquid into his hand. Harley was occasionally called to the prison hospital to help with cases that baffled the regular physician. It had been easy for him to get what he needed.

"Here you are, scum. Escape—if you're fool enough to take it. But remember, there are some things worse than the penitentiary."

"Nothing could be worse! I'll risk whatever may happen to me—afterward."

There were directions, delivered like the vial: in bitter mockery.

"Wait for a foggy night. This stuff isn't perfect. And it goes without saying that you must take your clothes off and go naked. Otherwise the guards would be treated to the spectacle of a seemingly empty suit of prison denim walking across the yard. The drug doesn't act on hair, either, but the prison hair-cut takes care of that, I guess. You're actually going through with it, Littell?"

"I am. If I'm caught, I'll get solitary for a little while, that's all. They can't extend a sentence when it's already life."

"You keep overlooking the main point, rat. That is, the aftermath of taking this hormone."

"You'd love to see me lose my nerve and stay in here for the rest of my life—with a way out in my hand, wouldn't you?" flared Littell. "To hell with your aftermath!" He didn't have to take Harley's lip any longer. He'd got what he wanted out of him. "And to hell with you—no, no. I don't mean that."

For it had suddenly occurred to him that Harley could still spoil the thing. All he had to do was speak to the warden.

But Harley hadn't spoken to anyone. And this unnerved him, too. The man actually wanted him to do it. Escape—this way—must be horrible indeed. . . .

**H**ORRIBLE or not, he was going through with it. So now he stood in his cell, by the window with the bar sawn out, shivering in the cold night breeze, naked and ready to go. He had swallowed the contents of the little vial. Rather awful pain. Convulsions. Then clear-headedness and a sense of giddy lightness. He looked eagerly down at his naked arm. Had the stuff really worked?

The arm stood out white in the dimness, perfectly apparent. He knew an awful moment when he was convinced that the whole thing was only an elaborate, cruel hoax after all. Quite in line with Harley's hatred of him.

But wait. His body was supposed to take on the coloring of his background, and he was holding it out in empty air. He had got up from his bunk, walked to the wall, and laid his arm against it.

And cold sweat broke out all over his naked body. He could still see it, white and distinct against the stone.

He had fallen to the cold floor on his knees, with his face in his hands and his breath whistling out of distended nostrils. A grim jest of Harley's after all. . . .

The guard for this cell block had walked past, light flashing carelessly in. The rays had fallen squarely on Littell. He had waited dully for the guard to order him back to his bunk, for the rays to flash higher and reveal the bar he had sawn before swallowing the blood-red fluid. And the guard had passed on without saying a word.

It was all right, then. God in heaven, it was all right. He could see himself, but somehow others couldn't see him. The effect of the drug must have included the pigmentation of his eyes in some odd way that let him see that which others could not. . . .

What had Harley said? "You see things——"

He shoved that out of his mind as he stood naked before the window. First get out of here. Then worry about the consequences brought in the train of the draft.

The fog outside whirled more thickly. It was thin at best; only wisps here and there. But Littell hadn't had the patience to wait for a foggier night. He drew himself with difficulty through the all-too-narrow aperture opened by the removed bar.

It wasn't till he was hanging outside the cell window that the most fearful thought of all occurred to him.

What if that stuff was only colored water? What if the man who hated him had gone to these lengths to build up in his mind a baseless dependence on its powers? What if he really hung here as a human body in full view of any guard who cared to see, instead of as a chameleon-like mass melting into the background of stone?

*That* would be a sardonic joke to Harley. To stuff him full of scientific poppycock, placing him here as a helpless target for machine-gun bullets.

The nerves of his back crawled as he

hung there against the wall with the floodlights full on him. He could fairly feel slugs tearing into him from the watch towers. Of course he was visible. The guard who had flashed his light on him must have seen him after all and have passed on indifferently, thinking he was praying. He was going to die. . . .

But no slugs came. He hung there for what seemed two full minutes, with the light strong on him, and no shots sounded out.

He dropped. It was fifteen feet to the yard pavement. Strong chance of a broken leg. But he had not dared to make a rope of bedding. That would show against the wall, even if he did not.

He stood blinking, with the dazzling lights on him. He couldn't seem to see fog wisps at all, now, though they had been apparent from his window. Those lights! Surely, surely he would be seen. Then fog shreds swirled once more.

**H**E WALKED slowly across the courtyard toward the high outer wall. Perhaps if he walked like that, instead of making a dash for it, he would be hailed instead of shot at once.

But still no slugs came. And he began to thrill wildly with a sense of achievement. He was going to make it! Harley's drug was all he claimed it to be! There was no chance of a mistake now—no living thing could have crossed that yard as he was crossing it, unless it was hidden by the chameleon-like power of taking on the absolute tint of the paving-stone over which he moved!

He looked up at the nearest tower. Distinctly he could see the guard in there, gun slung across his arm. The guard wasn't looking right at him, but he was gazing in his direction, and he made no sign.

Littell got to the wall, keeping as much as possible in the thin fog swirls that

danced slowly over the courtyard almost like slowly dancing wraiths.

The wall was made of rough stone. A glance could tell that a desperate man might ascend that wall, clinging fly-like to the slight roughnesses. That didn't matter. The warden didn't worry about the walls. Not with those towers spaced on them, and the vigilant machine-gunners.

He'd worry about them from now on, Littell exulted, as he clung with grasping fingertips and bare toes for his first step up. There were going to be a lot of escapes over these walls. For he had it already worked out in his mind. He would pay Harley for the formula of this stuff, and then sell the drug to other prisoners who wanted to break out.

He had started his slow and painful ascent between two towers. But the roughnesses making ascent possible slanted toward the tower on the left. Littell began to know fear again as he drew near that tower and the top of the wall at the same time. He had come a long way, in powerful light, without being seen. But Harley had admitted that the drug was not perfect.

He searched over and over again for possible handholds away from the tower. But the only ones offering a chance were inevitably in that direction. . . .

"Hey!"

The voice of the guard in the near tower rang out as Littell had his hands over the top of the wall. Littell froze there, heart hammering, sweat freezing on his body. He caught a ragged sob behind closed lips before the sound could betray him. To get so far, and then be caught. . . .

He hung there, as motionless as—as a chameleon in the light. But no chattering shots followed the challenge. Only awful silence in which Littell could fairly feel the gaze of the guard on him. Then,



from the next tower, came a voice: "What's the matter, Pete?"

"I thought I saw something move on the wall," said the near guard. "Looked like a guy climbing. But I don't see it now. Guess it was the fog—or else I'm nuts."

For minutes Littell hung there. Then nearing exhaustion warned him that he must move again. He wasn't made for this kind of thing. He wasn't trained for it. His body was soft with fat living on the income from Elizabeth Moore's fortune, which he had handled till she was twenty-one.

He drew himself slowly up to the top of the wall, lay there till he saw the near guard look in the opposite direction, and then rolled across. There, he hung by his hands and dropped. An even longer drop than the one from his cell window. But he was free! *Free!*

He could have shouted and sung. But he did neither. He ran. He ran till his lungs were bursting, through the outlying street of the small town in which the penitentiary was located. He had to get clothes, now, and get away from here before the cell block guard sauntered by on his next round and saw an empty cell. . . .

A WOMAN was coming toward him along the deserted sidewalk. Littell abruptly slowed his pace. He hadn't seen her before. She must have turned suddenly out of one of the houses lining the street. The walk had seemed empty, then—there she was.

He started to race across the street, then remembered the fantastic thing that protected him.

He stepped to a big tree beside the walk, and leaned against the rough bark. He would simply stand there, blending with the tree, till she had passed.

She came closer, walking slowly but

evenly. In spite of his knowledge of the way he was shielded, Littell shrank back against the tree bole.

She came up to where he stood, and stopped there. She half turned on the walk till she was facing him. And she looked squarely at him.

Looked squarely at him. And *saw* him! After ten terrible seconds Littell knew that. There was no mistaking the comprehension of her level gaze.

And then he saw who the woman was, and all else was lost in that tremendous realization. Scream after scream struggled to his lips and burst soundlessly there, unable to tear free.

"Murderer!" said the woman.

*And her face was the face of murdered Elizabeth Moore!*

"IT BEATS me," said the warden, standing with the cell block guard and the prison doctor in Littell's cell. "He had the bar all sawed and ready for an attempted escape. And then he commits suicide by swallowing that stuff. What did you say it was?"

"Strychnin, mainly," said the doctor. "I suppose he got it from the prison hospital."

"All ready to try to crush out, and he takes strychnin," repeated the warden. "Maybe he took one look at the way the yard was lighted, realized he hadn't the guts to try a break for the wall, and downed the poison in a fit of despair."

"Maybe," shrugged the doctor. "But what I'd like to know is why he took all his clothes off before doing it. What on earth did he have in his mind when he did that?"

The warden grunted and looked at the flaccid body on the lower bunk. In death as in life, Littell was the opposite of attractive.

"Stir-simple, I guess. Anyway, who cares?"