

# SHOCK

## Magazine

VOL. 1, NO. 3

SEPTEMBER, 1960

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SHOCK MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 3, published bi-monthly by WINSTON PUBLICATIONS INC., 157 West 57th St., N. Y. 19, N. Y. Subscriptions, 1 year (6 issues) \$2.00. Single copy 35c. Application for second class entry pending at the post office at New York, N. Y. and Holyoke, Mass. Characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious. Copyright 1960 by Winston Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A. The publisher assumes no responsibility for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts. Skin, copyright 1952 by Roald Dahl; this story originally appeared in the New Yorker Magazine. The Kennel, copyright by Robert M. McBride Co. Open House, copyright 1957 by Charles Beaumont; reprinted by permission of Harold Matson Company.



*Anybody for a game of soccer? Those guys on the other team are a crazy bunch. When I say crazy, I mean just what I say . . .*

# PRISON BALL

*by JOHN RUBLOWSKY*

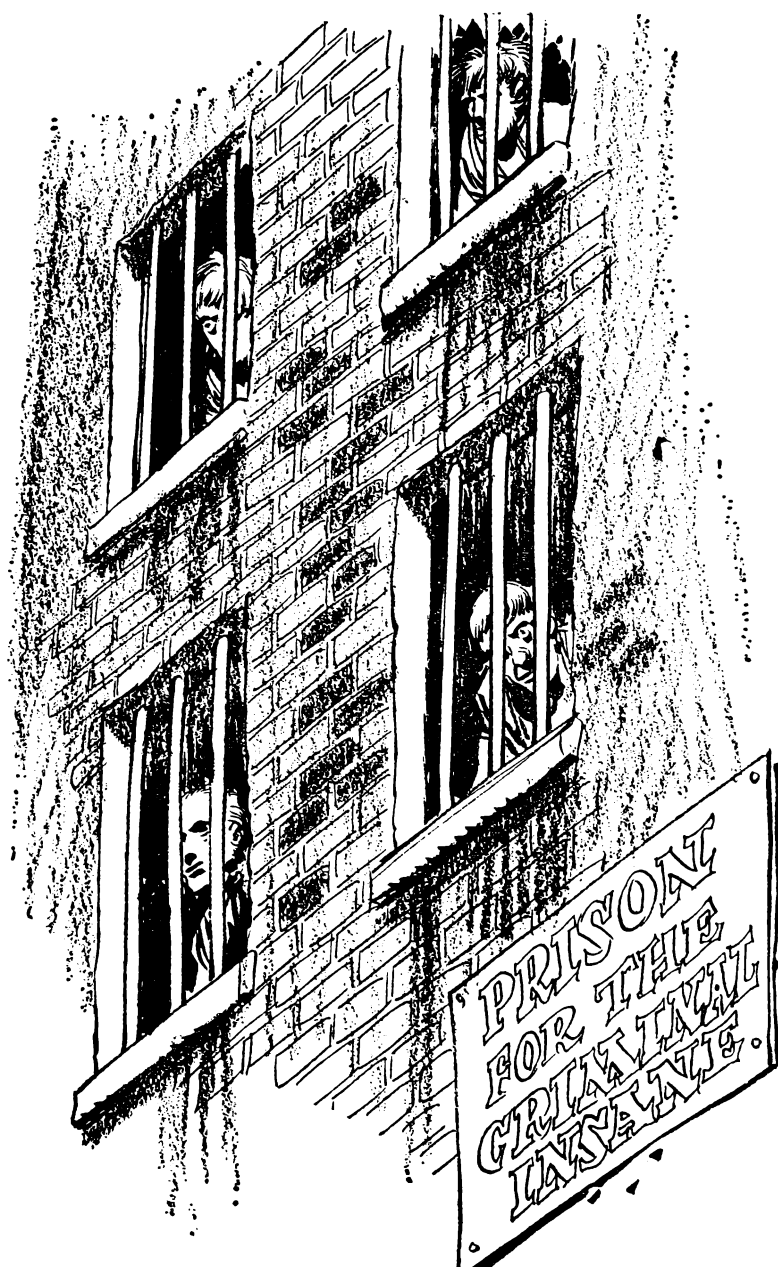
**R**UDOLF BAUMER SHUDDERED INWARDLY as he felt the first throb of migraine—a faint pulse above the left eye that would grow in intensity until each spasm seemed to tear the head from his shoulders. The third time, he thought bitterly, and the new warden's been here less than two weeks.

Sweat began to ooze from the loose folds of flesh that hung over his tightly buttoned collar. Rudolf Baumer wiped his neck nervously, leaving red welts where he rubbed with a coarse linen handkerchief.

By the time he climbed to the third tier, Rudolf's face was

flushed and his heavy gasps echoed in the huge, square building. Save for the three tiers of cells built out from the walls, the structure was a hollow shell. An iron cat-walk ran the length of each tier and the single circular stairwell provided the only access to the three levels.

Each tier held 32 cells—cages really, arranged in four rows about the central square. The top and three sides of each cage were made up of iron bars; the floor—iron grate; the wall—dull, yellow institutional tile. Above the empty central wall was a skylight whose



PRISON  
FOR THE  
CRIMINAL  
MINDS.

large panes, spotlessly clean, framed a panorama of sky and clouds.

\* Each cage held one man.

Cell-block D, the maximum security section of the State Prison for the Criminal Insane, was designed by experts to be escape proof. Rudolf Baumer was making the final bedcheck after lights-out. His shadow leaped grotesquely from bar to bar as he walked in the eerie glow of the red safety-lights shining at intervals along the cat-walk.

The block appeared calm, almost still, but Rudolf felt the hairs along the back of his neck rise. Twenty-seven years as a prison guard had sharpened his sensitivity until he could detect even the slightest nuance of emotion from the inmates. Now he felt the wave of hate and hostility that emanated from each cell.

It was like this every time they appointed a new warden. The new man couldn't leave well enough alone. Each one had to make changes—senseless, stupid changes to demonstrate his authority. What did they know of the importance of routine in keeping order here? Everyday ritual formed a bond of habit and familiarity stronger than any shackle.

This one is no better, Rudolf Baumer thought bitterly. He

doesn't understand and he doesn't care. All he wants is to make a good showing, and move on to a better appointment.

"Just once," he muttered to himself. "Why won't they appoint a man with experience who understands?"

As he waddled along the cat-walk, Rudolf peered deliberately into each cage. Long ago, he had learned never to consider his charges human, to make no emotional attachment. Each cage housed a number, an impersonal entity for whose presence and behavior he, Rudolf Baumer, was responsible.

This was not an ordinary prison, and these were dangerous prisoners. Criminally insane. These in cell-block D were the worst. Killers whose crimes—hideous and unspeakable—read like a madman's tally sheet.

Most of the prisoners lay quietly in their beds, lost in whatever reverie their twisted minds summoned for the night. Some stared sullenly at the patch of sky that glowed through the central skylight.

One of the prisoners stood on his chair, his arms reaching up to the top of the cage. His hands gripped the cold iron bars and his head leaned against the crook of his elbow. The prisoner brood-

ed on the bright star that glimmered into a corner of his cell.

"Into bed," Rudolf hissed. "You know the rules."

The prisoner turned slowly, focusing two burning eyes on the guard, but said nothing.

"You can't hang there like an ape. You know that."

The prisoner climbed down and walked to his bed, slowly, never taking his eyes from the guard. Rudolf Baumer felt the familiar knot of fear in his stomach.

This prisoner had been in cell-block D for 23 years—almost as long as Rudolf—and during these years he never said one word to anyone.

There was only one thing that interested him—his plants. He had built a shelf in his cell that commanded the patch of sunlight that filtered down through the skylight. On this shelf he raised his collection of plants—cacti and succulents—desert plants, adapted to an arid, tortured environment. In their normal state they grow in weirdly grotesque shapes—prickly spines and fleshy, misshapen pads, with flowers that smell of putrid carrion and others that bloom, with extravagantly delicate beauty, only in the heart of the darkest night.

But the prisoner grew only cristates—malformed specimens of the normal plants that pass their deformities through cuttings. He begged specimens from Botanical

Gardens all over the world and, over the years, his collection had developed into an impressive gallery.

When Mr. Kurtz, the new warden, made his first tour of inspection, he had ordered all of the plants removed.

"Mr. Baumer," he said in that precise, clipped way he had, "this is a cell, not a greenhouse. It houses a criminal, not a botanist."

The episode of the plants was only the beginning. Mr. Kurtz was a thorough man, and he discovered much to find fault with:

"Mr. Baumer, I see no reason why the State's money should be wasted by encouraging night reading. Lights-out will go into effect at 8:00 p.m., not 10."

Lunch was pushed up a half hour to 1:00 p.m.; morning recreation was eliminated.

"No need to wear out the State's equipment unnecessarily with two recreation periods. Is there, Mr. Baumer?"

Supper was cut short and library privileges were suspended. Reveille was moved up an hour earlier.

Mr. Kurtz explained. He spoke softly, in a monotone, to force the listener to close attention. "Mr. Baumer, it may seem that my actions are arbitrary and capricious, but they are carefully calculated. I have been assigned to administer this prison, and this I will do—efficiently and economically. I had expected a better post, but I

will do my best even here."

Hostility among the prisoners grew until it hung like a deadly fog about the prison. The guards walked warily along the corridors and cat-walks, and fingered the heavily leaded riot sticks they had not carried for seven years.

Even "Angel" had become morose and sullen, Rudolf Baumer noted, and he was always the most even-tempered and likable prisoner in cell-block D. He had a soft cherubic face, pink-skinned with red arched lips and clear blue eyes. This combination had inspired his fellow prisoners to bestow upon him his unlikely name.

"Angel" was the prison's star soccer player. Fast and resourceful with an uncanny ability to pick out weak spots in his opponents' defenses, he had sparked his team to five prison championships in a row. Tomorrow he was going to play in the final elimination for the cell-block D championship. The game was scheduled just after supper at 6:30 p.m.

When Rudolf Baumer passed his cell, Angel was awake. His cherubic face was drawn into a vicious scowl and he punched at the wall with a tightly clenched fist.

"Easy, Angel," Rudolf whispered. "Get some sleep. You'll need it for the game tomorrow."

When he finished the inspec-

tion, Rudolf checked out with the cell-block guard.

"All quiet," he said.

"Yeh," the guard agreed. "But you can cut the tension with a knife. If that new warden don't stop soon, they're gonna explode. Remember how it was the last time?"

"Joe Patterson and Mike Wiloski died," Rudolf muttered. "They both had children. Mike had only three more years to go for his pension. Poor Mike, we never did find enough of him for a decent funeral."

After saying goodnight, Rudolf walked into the yard. The night was warm and high-moving clouds obscured the moon. In the darkness, the prison looked bleak and inhospitable.

Rudolf Baumer waddled towards the administration building with his peculiar, rolling fat-man's gait. Lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice Mr. Kurtz.

"Mr. Baumer," the new warden said acidly. "A prison is no place to dream."

Rudolf flushed and looked up at Mr. Kurtz, towering thinly almost a foot above him.

"I am sorry," he stammered. "I didn't notice you in the dark."

Rudolf fidgeted nervously. Mr. Kurtz's height made him feel small and foolish.

"I understand there was trouble

in the mess-hall at supper, Mr. Baumer."

"No, Mr. Kurtz, no trouble. The prisoners are a little sullen. You push them too hard, Mr. Kurtz. They are disturbed, restless."

"Mr. Baumer, what happened during supper?"

"What happened?" Rudolf Baumer wiped his face nervously with the handkerchief. "Nothing happened. Some of the prisoners wouldn't eat and wouldn't get up from their chairs. Nothing."

Mr. Kurtz looked down at Rudolf. His small, oddly round head bobbed up and down on his long neck. "Nothing! You call that nothing? Mr. Baumer, these are madmen—criminally insane—and any breach of discipline is something. No matter how small."

As he spoke, a slight hysteria crept into his voice and little beads of perspiration gleamed on his forehead. Baumer thought with surprise: Kurtz is frightened, too. That may be why he does some of the things he does.

"Every breach of discipline must be dealt with," Mr. Kurtz continued, the bobbing of his head growing more pronounced. "We cannot coddle insane criminals, Mr. Baumer. They must be taught absolute, unquestioned discipline. I am canceling tomorrow's soccer game."

Rudolf Baumer's head was throbbing now in the full bloom

of migraine. The pain from each spasm staggered him.

"Mr. Kurtz," he said, "they have been looking forward to this game for months. We cannot cancel it."

"These men must be taught discipline. They must learn to obey. They will pay for every infraction of prison rules."

Mr. Kurtz dabbed at the beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"Is that understood? No soccer game tomorrow."

"Yes," said Rudolf.

At lunch the next day, the mess-hall was charged with tension that almost crackled in the air. The prisoners ate sullenly. For the first time in years, the guards on the cat-walks overlooking the dining-room carried sawed-off shotguns.

Rudolf decided to talk to Mr. Kurtz once more. He would reason with him, show him why the men must play their soccer game. Perhaps he could make the warden change his mind.

At the warden's office, the secretary told Rudolf that Mr. Kurtz had left.

"He said something about the dining room," she said. "He might be there, but I'm not really sure."

"Look here, Mr. Kurtz," Rudolf muttered to himself on the way to the dining hall. He was rehearsing a speech he knew he would never deliver. "You must stop this nonsense. You cannot

destroy routine and expect things to run smoothly. This is a prison and it must be run along certain lines."

No one at the mess hall had seen Mr. Kurtz, but one of the guards thought he might be at the storehouse.

"I saw him walking that way," he said. "Must have been an hour ago."

"You have created an impossible situation, Mr. Kurtz," Rudolf continued his soliloquy as he walked, faster now, towards the storehouse. "I realize you are frightened. But you are doing everything wrong. You have destroyed routine. Routine, Mr. Kurtz, is the only thing that can control these men."

No one at the storehouse had seen the warden.

"That's strange," Rudolf said to the clerk. "Where can he be? I hope he hasn't gone into D-block. No telling what they're liable to do. No, he probably checked out. I'll try the gate."

He hurried to the big gate-block, but the guards there hadn't seen Mr. Kurtz, either.

"Nope," one of them said. "he's still in here, somewhere. He didn't check out—not this afternoon."

"Must be in one of the cell-blocks," Rudolf muttered.

"Yes," the guard agreed, "snooping around and looking for trouble."

The day-guards were returning to the gate to check out after being relieved by the new shift. One of them must know where the warden was.

"Seen Kurtz?" Rudolf asked.

"No," the men shook their heads.

Rudolf began to feel uneasy.

"Listen," one of the guards said. "What's that?"

There was a cheer from the athletic field. The guards rushed to the window. The prisoners, they saw, were lining up for the soccer match.

"He let them play!" Rudolf Baumer could hardly believe it. He went out of the gate-block and towards the field. The surge of relief that he felt was tempered by a curious anxiety. It was not like Mr. Kurtz to change his mind.

As he waddled towards the playing field, Rudolf Baumer felt the tension mounting again. It was as though a switch were pulled to turn on a dangerous electric current. But why? he wondered. They're playing the game and that is part of the ritual. Mr. Kurtz was using his head at last.

The store-clerk passed and stopped to talk to Rudolf.

"The warden changed his mind," he said.

"Looks like it."



"I thought sure we'd have another riot. They were in an ugly mood this afternoon."

They watched the prisoners line up.

"What did he say?" Rudolf asked. "When he changed his mind and agreed to let them play?"

There was another cheer as the prisoners started the game. Angel kicked off for his side. He ran towards the far goal, carefully booting the ball in front of him as he ran.

"I ain't seen Kurtz since lunch," the store-clerk said.

"You had to," Rudolf said. "You had to give him the ball."

The store-clerk was paying more attention to the game than

to the conversation. "I didn't give the ball to Kurtz. I thought you did."

Angel had almost reached the far goal when one of the opposing players got in front of him and passed the ball towards the near goal with a powerful kick. With a roar the action headed now towards the two guards. A vicious kick sent the ball rolling past the boundary line. It rolled close enough to the guards for them to get a good look at it. Rudolf Baumer felt his migraine coming back—worse than he had ever known it. He heard the store-clerk's incredulous voice coming from a far, far distance:

"My God, Rudolf—look what they're using for a ball!" ■ ■

