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*Fearful Was the Mirth of This Criminal and Dreadful
the Laughter That Rolled Through the
Dark Corridors of the Prison*

The Man Who Laughed

By B. W. SLINEY

Author of "The Room of the Black Velvet Drapes"

A SICKLY yellow light filtered through the bars of the cell door and projected an oblong of brightness, cross-sectioned with shadows cast by the bars and cross-bars, over the floor and wall. Everywhere silence. The great prison was asleep, with its condemned men and their keepers. A few guards might be awake, a few night wardens, but they made no sound. Overpowering, this silence. Wadson laughed at it, though. He was not afraid; not of the silence, nor of anything else. Not even of death, which came tomorrow at midnight. The electric chair, at midnight . . .

Wadson was not afraid of death, but he had not expected to face it so soon. No, that part was disconcerting; the suddenness of it, for there were so many things that he had planned to do. He had always wanted to travel, for one thing; he had promised himself a trip to Egypt and to India. But he had delayed too long; his game was up, and now he was to die. All because he had trusted one person too much—his wife. Trusted her because he loved her, and now, by dying, he was to pay for it. The newspapers had it differently, of course; they said he was to die for the murder of Allison Kemp, but they were all wrong. Kemp was merely incidental; he was to die no more for Kemp's murder than for the murder of Hastings, Sidway, or Roberts. He

had killed them all, cold-bloodedly, too; but he had gotten away with it. He would have escaped this time, too, except that he had trusted his wife and told her his plans. Everything had pointed to Tibbets when she had turned state's evidence, squealed on him. And, as it happened, it was his wife who sent him to the chair; no one else. Trusted her, and this was what was to come of it—a damned fool to trust anyone! Certainly, everyone must be crooked, potentially at the best; and the lack of opportunity to be so is but little to praise a man for . . . Oh, a great comedy, indeed! Wadson laughed sardonically; a horrible, mirthless laugh which echoed up and down the long corridors, and returned to him, more horrible than ever. At first he was startled by the sound of it; and then he felt proud that he could laugh so demoniacally.

Presently footsteps sounded on the iron floor of the long corridor. It was the night warden, either aroused by the laughter or on one of his periodic inspections. Wadson remained still; the man passed on and the prison was again quiet. Wadson yawned and closed his eyes, for the yellow light annoyed him, with its unpleasant color and the suggestive shadow it cast. He decided to go to sleep. It would be the last rest he was sure of, and he'd need to be steady if his plans succeeded. If

they didn't, it would be rather trying, anyhow, going to the chair and all. He yawned once more, and slept.

They brought him his breakfast. It was a tasty meal, and Wadson ate it with relish. The man who brought it had a pitying glance for the prisoner. Wadson noticed it and laughed at him. It was the same laugh he had discovered during the night. The attendant paled and hurried away. Later, the warden came to see him, and asked if there was anything he wanted, any last request he wished to make. Wadson asked only that he might see his wife before the end. The warden seemed doubtful, and Wadson pleaded, eloquently. He wished to forgive her; he wanted to see her just once more. The warden looked as if he might feel sorry, too, and promised to speak to the superintendent about it. This time Wadson did not laugh at the pitying glance, but watched the warden hopefully as he hurried away. Much depended on his success, but when he returned Wadson knew that he had gained permission.

"The superintendent says you may see your wife at 4, provided that she will come."

Wadson thanked him; touchingly, the warden thought. But he had forgotten how good an actor Wadson was supposed to be. The kind of a prisoner the warden admired, was Wadson; untroublesome and cheerful. Too bad that he had to die; the warden liked him quite well. It would have been better, for instance, if Wadson were only up for life. But there was no chance of any kind of a pardon; the case was clear against him, and Wadson had himself pleaded guilty. Funny case, altogether, when Tibbets, the other chap, had only gotten twenty years. Must have a terrible temper, this Wadson, but he was likable, anyhow. It was too bad he had gone crooked, for he had a charming personality with which he might have accomplished much. Even

the most obdurate people could be persuaded by him, even as he had just now persuaded the warden.

WADSON was quite happy, considering everything—not because he was going to die, of course, but because his plan was working successfully. It was doubtless the most difficult thing he had ever attempted, and he felt that it would be a suitable climax to his life, which had been ever full of climactic scenes. The plan might fail, but more than likely it would be successful, now that he had gained permission to see Mrs. Wadson. Mrs. Wadson! His violent declaration in the courtroom that he would have revenge had, of course, been foolish. However, if he should succeed, the instance would be recalled and marveled at. The prison authorities had been warned to keep Mrs. Wadson away from her husband's sight. But Wadson had apparently repented; and, if he had not, what could he possibly do? There would be an attendant present, as usual, during the brief interview the visitor would be granted; and even Wadson's strength, which was above that of an average man, would have no effect on the heavy bars which would interpose between him and his wife. So the authorities thought; they had great faith in their iron and stone.

All in all, things were developing with unexpected smoothness. Wadson did not doubt that Tibbets would keep his word and play his part. Tibbets was at least truthful and trustworthy, whatever else he might be, for he had kept quiet about the Allison Kemp murder. He knew, he knew everything, for he had assisted to such an extent that he was equally guilty, although Wadson had committed the actual crime. They had agreed, however, should one of them be caught, that he would say nothing of the other, for the most either could gain by betraying his friend would be a

companion in death, which might be consoling, but hardly satisfactory. It was Tibbets who was caught, and Tibbets had heard his sentence in silence—the chair. Wadson had not been suspected of being connected with the crime, until his wife—his own wife, Nita, whom he sincerely loved—had told the whole truth. Everything. Got up in court and spat out the whole story. It was at once seen to be true, for she had provided herself with indisputable proof of her husband's guilt; and before Wadson had fully realized his betrayal, he had been tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death; while Tibbets, now being favored by the sympathy of the court, was given twenty years imprisonment.

When Wadson heard his sentence he realized for the first time the full significance of his wife's behavior: she loved Tibbets, and had sacrificed her husband to save him. It was then that he denounced her, and promised with a calm, grim curse that he would make her pay.

Some newspapers called it the most spectacular case ever in the American courts from the viewpoint of unexpected developments. Wadson smiled at that; it was an accomplishment, he said, of which he had never dreamed. . . . Yes, Tibbets would keep his word. Now, if Nita would only come—and he was confident that she would, for she was temperamental—Wadson felt assured of success.

It had been a task to plan punishment for his wife, for the scheme required much consideration, demanded nice fitting of detail. But it was worth it! A pleasant way to pass the time. . . . And what business had she to betray him? Why, she had ignored his love for her; she had gone so far as to make his death a certainty. But she would pay. . . . and Tibbets, too, would pay, a thousand times in the suffering he would feel when he knew what he had helped Nita's husband do. It was an

admirable arrangement, Wadson concluded, and he felt regret that he was to die just at the time of his life when he could plan such a perfect atrocity.

First the plan, and then the difficulty of getting his message to Tibbets—Tibbets, who was in a cell at the other end of the corridor, near the steps, there for twenty years—that had to be solved. And it had been somewhat difficult to persuade Tibbets to help him, but when Tibbets understood that all he wanted to do was to kiss his wife farewell, he consented readily enough to do all he could.

But then Tibbets did not know the whole plan; no indeed! All of it had been done a word at a time; a word at a time, carried between them by unsuspecting wardens and attendants. How could they know that the nonsense Wadson asked them to repeat to Tibbets contained a message? And if they did suspect? Wadson and Tibbets were helpless as far as benefiting each other was concerned. Wadson took care to have the messages always short, so that there would be little danger of confusion. The fourth word of every message. Tibbets knew; they had used the code before. The keepers discussed the messages once in a while, and got as much enjoyment from them as they thought the prisoners were getting. They were usually funny. . . . no objection to letting the men have a little harmless amusement. . . . And Tibbets had consented, very foolishly consented. He was rather sentimental, yet this did not give him the right to love Wadson's wife. Not at all; and that was the root of the trouble—of Wadson's trouble.

That afternoon he was visited by newspaper men, and by several nice religious workers. Wadson tolerated them all; it would do no good to hurt their feelings. Wadson did not believe in a God, of course; that was all so much superstition. He did not even bother to form an atheistic doctrine. There was life, and that was

all. Future happiness or future agony—"God" and "Hell" were only curses to him, and then only because people, who believed in them both, used them that way. Properly speaking, he could not curse . . . Well, he would soon find out what it was all about—if the knowledge-after-death part of it had anything in it—even though he felt no particular curiosity.

THE great prison bell mournfully boomed the hour 4. It would sound eight more times before he died. Wadson wondered why prison bells were always mournful; he had heard others. It was time to expect Nita. It was hardly likely that she would refuse his last request. She would come, dressed prettily, and very sad . . . A very great comedy! The thought passed through Wadson's mind: "Who, other than myself, will there be to laugh at this comedy?"

Presently he heard voices in the distant end of the corridor, and footsteps sounding on the iron floor, gradually growing louder and nearer. He counted the time, and knew precisely when they were passing Tibbets' cell; in fact, they paused for a moment there, and Wadson knew that Nita was talking to Tibbets. In a little while they came on, and Wadson went to the iron-barred door of his cell; not, however, until he had rubbed his eyes vigorously to make them red. He assumed an eager, expectant attitude, one mingled with affection and a bit of sorrow. His wife and one attendant came into view, but both of them avoided looking at him. Wife dressed elaborately, looking sad; attendant, looking sorry.

"Nita!"

A single, emotional exclamation would be most effective.

Mrs. Wadson looked at her husband reluctantly. She seemed to be rather ashamed of herself; Wadson could read a certain remorse in her ex-

pression, and he managed to force a tear—it looked well, and very sincere. Nita did not answer him; she stood silent and nervously twirled her purse. The attendant stood back on the farther side of the corridor and watched them closely.

"Do not go nearer than you are," he warned the visitor; "regulations."

"Nita, I am glad you came. I wanted to see you so much . . . otherwise my last wish would have been disappointed."

"Even after . . . You still want to see me?" Nita spoke slowly, unbelievably.

"Nita! Forgive me! Let me forgive you. It has all been a horrible mess . . . everything . . ."

"I have nothing to forgive, Wadson. You were always square with me . . . I am the one to be forgiven."

"No. When you know all, you won't say that. And you will know, soon. Say that you will not blame me for anything you might learn from now on! Say that you will never blame me!"

"I . . . I can never blame you for anything. . . ."

"A kiss!"

The attendant interposed hastily. "You cannot."

"Please, please!—just one—the last!"

"No!"

"Nita!" Wadson screamed the word. "Nita, a kiss! Nita!"

The scream . . . it was the signal for Tibbets. The attendant was startled by the suddenness of the cry, but in an instant he was more startled, still. From the far end of the long hall came terrible shrieks and cries. Tibbets. Tibbets on the job! Screaming for all he was worth; throwing a veritable fit. All so that Wadson could kiss his wife farewell.

Wadson did not seem to notice the uproar. He hung his head and leaned against the wall. The attendant glanced at him; he seemed quiet and

harmless, and he could do nothing—iron and stone, iron and stone . . . And it was as much his duty to be with the raving man as with the visitor. With a final glance of doubt, he left Nita and ran down the corridor.

WADSON was at the bars instantly, pleading again for a farewell kiss. Eloquently he pleaded; passionately, wildly. Nita came a step nearer to him. Another. She was within reach, for how perfectly Wadson knew the distance his arms could stretch through the bars. Still closer she came, and now no longer hesitant. Gone was all doubt of his sincerity . . . her face was at the bars. Her beautiful, lying face! Wadson pressed her to him, even through the bars, and felt a keen exultation at her sobs. He kissed her, almost fiercely; and, at the same time, he put his arms about her neck, caressingly at first; and then his fingers closed about her throat. . . . Before Nita realized that her husband was choking her, her breath had been cut off, and she could not even cry out. Her face became horribly contorted, her face delicately tinted skin turned red, and from red to a nasty purple; her eyes widened and protruded hideously . . . Wadson pressed his thumbs farther . . . felt a sickening caving-in under them . . . Nita's body became quite limp. He stared at her; she didn't look sorry any more . . . no, she looked like a thing—some dreadful thing.

Then Wadson began to laugh . . . that horrible, mirthless laugh which he had discovered in the night. It

roared through the endless corridors of the prison; it penetrated every corner and every room; it echoed and re-echoed in the passages, and came back to him, amplified unbelievably, and even more terrible . . . They took Nita from him, and still he laughed—on and on and on—and nothing they could do would stop him. The whole prison went into a frenzied uproar at the continuance of that nerve-racking sound, but he could not be stopped. The law forbade gagging, and Wadson laughed on . . . a high, penetrating laugh which became low and roaring, and again ascended with awing inflections that suggested unthinkable things . . . Always the laughter. Just laughing at the great comedy . . .

When they strapped him in the chair and placed the copper-mesh headpiece on him, he stopped laughing. But he looked about the chamber sardonically, and winked at the doctor and minister who stood before him. He gave one scornful glance at the reporters, the witnesses, and the medical students in the room, and then he began to laugh again. Laughing at everything: at the chair, at the men, at the whole world, at Nita—would *she* join him?—and he would have laughed at God, except that he did not believe . . .

Suddenly the laughter stopped—with awful suddenness it stopped . . . The men in the room looked with fascinated horror . . . He did not laugh again.

The melancholy prison bell boomed one doleful note.

One!

