

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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Circulation Director: HERBERT C. HAUPTMANN

Editor: THEODORE IRWIN

Associate Editor: N. R. De MEXICO

Art Director: FRANC L. ROGGERI

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WILL F. JENKINS

Will F. Jenkins has been translated into twelve languages, including Arabic and an African dialect, and he enjoys the distinction of having been pirated in most of them. Take that story he wrote last year about Peru in 1700; recently he heard the whole thing being broadcast from Cairo as true-to-life stuff—apparently current customs in Egypt approximating those of Peru two centuries ago. Or take the tales printed without permission in occupied Scandinavia during the late war; after the invaders were driven out, the successor publishers scrupulously sent checks in full payment, thereby making a gesture unheard of in the history of literary pirating.

Born in 1897, at seventeen he was working for Smart Set, at twenty-one began free-lancing. The only payroll he has been on since was that of the Army in two world wars. For many years a top favorite among readers of the big slicks, he is equally revered by consumers of pulp and science fiction—but under the pseudonym of Murray Leinster. He has just completed a collection titled Great Stories of Science Fiction, to be published by Random House under the Leinster name.

WALL OF

A MAN came down the valley, and Kent straightened up from the weeding of his tomato vines to watch him. He always watched, and there was always a faint constriction in his chest until an approaching figure was identified. There were times when he almost wondered whether he had chosen this place because of the sky above it, or because he could see anyone who came, a long way off.

But he knew it was the sky. There was a feeling of vastness, of a tremendous open space, here. The earth was like a springboard for a man's perceptions, so that always his eyes lifted to the blue with its tufts of white cloud above him. Kent could not doubt long that he had chosen this place because of its nearness to the sky. He was done with closed places forever—if God was good.

to live. But it takes a

sheriff to arrange it

FEAR

The man down the valley was on a horse which plodded along without haste, its head moving up and down. It was climbing. Kent could not see the man clearly, as yet. The constriction in his chest grew greater. His eyes seemed to blur.

Then they cleared suddenly. The man was the sheriff, Kent's old neighbor and good friend, who had no faintest suspicion that Kent had ever been behind walls that were designed to keep him captive.

The constricted feeling eased, but Kent had that momentary weakness of the knees which always followed it. He bent down again to his tomato vines.

The hoofs of the sheriff's horse clinked upon stone. It was nearer. The sheriff's hat showed above a near-by hill-crest. His body. The

horse heaved up into view and the sheriff waved his hand.

"Lo, Kent."

"Morning, Bob," said Kent. He straightened up and eased his back. "Climb down and visit a while."

"Can't do it today," said the sheriff. He frowned suddenly. "Look here, Kent. I came up 'specially to ask you. Do you know anybody name of Sawyer?"

Kent felt the constricted feeling in his chest again. He did not know anybody named Sawyer. But to be questioned about anything caused that horrible sensation.

"Why, no, Bob. Can't say that I do. Why?"

The sheriff poked at the tobacco in his pipe. He was disturbed.

"Two fellas were in town today askin' about you. Name of Sawyer, one of 'em said. Seemed to know you real well. He was short an' freckled an' redheaded, with—uh—a kinda shifty eye. I didn't take to him, Kent. Not a bit."

"Nope, I don't know him," Kent said carefully. "Can't you light and set?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"No. I got to get goin'. I thought I'd ask you about those fellas. I got to—uh—see if I can pick 'em up again."

"What's the matter?"

"Why—uh—that redheaded fella's face looked familiar, so I hunted around. An' sure enough, I found his picture."

"Well?"

"His real name," said the sheriff, poking at his pipe, "ain't Sawyer. He's been in a bunch of jails, it seems like, an' he's wanted again. Y'sure you can't even guess why he was askin' for you? Y'don't know him?"

"No, Bob. I don't." But Kent's whole chest was an agony.

"Funny," said the sheriff unhappily. "He sure seemed to know all about you, Kent. Even about you winnin' a school prize for your hand-writin', when y'were a kid. All right. I'll be gettin' along. I thought I'd ask you though. S'long."

He turned his horse and rode off. And Kent tried to keep on with the task of weeding his tomato plants. But he could not. He sat down weakly and looked out at the vast, empty space all about him.

His own valley ran nearly two miles between gradually deepening walls before it gave upon the larger one. And that other valley's width could be measured in other miles, and beyond it were peaks and mountains which stretched on past imagining.

There were no walls anywhere; no walls that could not be climbed; no walls with guards on top; no walls to limit the space to which his eyes could reach out and his body follow. He could pick up his hat and take the stick leaning against the door and

walk, and walk, and walk, and always he could go farther.

But there was this man who'd asked about him. Sawyer? Redheaded and freckled, with a shifty eye? That could only be Val Downy. He'd been Kent's cellmate for a while, and Kent had heard his boastings—which were not pleasant. He looked to be paroled. But Kent had come to know that he would go mad in prison, and he had made his escape by what—looking back—seemed almost maniacal cunning.

And Val Downy was here looking for him, and he was already wanted for crimes committed since his release, and his quest for Kent.

The sheriff and his horse passed out of sight. Away beyond his own valley Kent saw smoke rising lazily from the chimney of a house six miles away. He could look beyond. Ten. Twenty. More than that many miles. And there was not a single wall or bolt or bar to hold him back if he should choose to walk and walk and walk.

A long time later, Kent bent to his work. He labored all the rest of the afternoon. But he looked down his own valley more than once. And twice—familiar as the outlook was—his chest felt as if it were squeezed empty of breath. He thought he saw someone coming toward him, only to discover that what he had taken for heads were stones. But no one came.

Val Downy did not come until an hour after sunset.

It was almost dark. Kent ate his supper without a light, looking out of wide windows he had upon every

side of his little house. It was not possible for him to be at ease where he could not look for a long distance. He had looked upon walls and bolts and bars for much too long a time. He ate, and rested his eyes upon the dim outlines of the mountains against the horizon.

Then, quite suddenly, a voice said: "Stick 'em up, pal! You got company!"

Something pressed against the back of his neck. Something hard and cold. He froze. Hands felt over his body. Somebody took his revolver.

Kent said carefully: "Hello, Val. I heard you were down this way."

Val grunted. He came around in front of Kent and took a seat. He was short, and—Kent remembered, because it was too dark in the house to really see—Val was red-headed and his eyes were shifty. Kent remembered many things. His hands were tense on the table.

"Y'heard it, huh?" said Val. "Now how'd you hear that?"

"The sheriff," said Kent. "He came up to tell me that somebody'd been asking about me. You stuck in his mind, Val. He hunted up your picture. Now he's trying to find you again."

Val grinned. "All right. I'll duck." He waved his hand. "Meet a old pal o'mine. Pete Shims. We came down to see you. Social call. But also we got some business."

"I've quit," said Kent.

Val Downy laughed.

"Uh-huh. I say that too. Pete, this guy's the best penman in the whole country. He just didn't know how

to push over his stuff. He's on the lam from stir."

The other man grunted.

"Here's the trick," said Val unconcernedly. "Pete an' me, we need a good job of penwork. A letter an' a certified check. We brought the blanks an' some writing for you to look over."

"I'm never going to touch a pen again," said Kent.

Val Downy waved a hand toward Kent. "This guy," he said admiringly to his companion, "he pulls the slick-est break that anybody ever pulled in the world! He's a bookkeeper in the office up in this can, see? An' he sees a pardon an' a order of release that's come through. An' what does he do but fix up some ink, somehow, an' take his pens, an' he writes himself a pardon. Nothing else! He hasn't even got a letterhead, so he writes one. He hasn't got a order-of-release blank, so he letters one with a pen. An' he phonies a envelope with a canceled stamp on it, an' he slips it in the incoming mail—an' he's out a week before anybody notices that that swell-looking pardon is phony!"

"I'm through!" said Kent. "I was a damned fool. I got in trouble for a girl who played me for a sucker. But I'm through!"

Val Downy looked at him and sighed. "But you're good, guy!" he protested.

"I'm not interested," said Kent. "I'm through!"

The man behind him said in a toneless voice, "Will I bop him, Val?" and Kent felt the hard gun muzzle

again against his neck. He sat still. Val Downy looked at him.

"Y'don't mean that."

"I do," said Kent curtly. "I'm finished."

"But look here," said Val indignantly. "You was in stir with me. You used to talk in your sleep about gettin' a prize for your handwritin' when y'were a kid in school. It pestered you. An' you used to talk about this place, namin' it. An' then you made a break, leavin' me behind, when you coulda made it two pardons just as easy as one. An' I didn't spill what I knew. I coulda told 'em what place you dreamed about, but I didn't. An' now I'm askin' you to do this writin' for us. You can do it. An' you'll get paid for it."

"I'm out of the business," rasped Kent.

"All I got to do," said Val Downy, "is write a letter tellin' somebody where you are, an' you go back in stir again. I coulda done that any time. I can do it now. Want me to? You better throw in with us, pal."

The feeling of constriction in Kent's chest grew horrible. His head swam in a despairing rage. Walls. Bolts. Bars. Walls. Stone corridors and stone floors and walls and bolts and barred doors and more walls. . .

"We got a honey of a trick," said Val complacently. "I blow into town an' hand over a letter of introduction to the big bank. I'm a private dick representin' a insurance company. We're makin' a deal to get back some stolen jewelry.

"So I hang around town a coupla days, an' then Pete turns up an' he's

the contact man, an' I shove my certified check into the bank cage an' get the cash, not marked, see, an' I pay it to Pete an' give the bank a package to ship on to the insurance company. An' then we blow. It's a honey. You write the letter an' the certified check. That's all."

Kent said, strangling because of the constriction in his chest and throat:

"I—I won't!"

The man behind Kent withdrew the gun from his neck. There was a sudden crashing blow on Kent's head.

"Guy," said Pete Shims' voice, "you ain't decidin' what you'll do or won't do. We're decidin' that!"

Blood trickled down Kent's neck. Val Downy said stridently:

"Quit it, Pete! He's only gotta think a while. He knows that if he don't play with us, all we gotta do is drop a letter in the mail. He's goin' to do what we want. Hell! He's gotta!"

A chair scraped. Pete Shims sat down disgustedly. Kent bent his head in his hands. But the blow had done something to him. A deep, a horrible anger began to burn in him. This was not his doing, this talk of forgeries and crime. He had done wrong, to be sure. There had been a girl with a wheedling voice, and he had been insane enough—he must have been insane!—to feel that there was no service or crime he could deny her.

And he had done the things she wheedled him into, and the men she called her friends had undoubtedly prospered by Kent's doing those things. But he—well, he'd become

acquainted with the bars and locks and stone corridors and walls with guards upon them.

Now Val Downy proposed to blackmail him into a continuation of his folly. He was an escaped convict.

There was a sudden clicking sound a long distance away. Kent knew what it was, of course. The click of a horse's hoof on stone. His eyes gleamed furtively. But the other men heard it too. Their eyes met.

"Somebody comin'. We duck. We take him along."

A hand wormed into Kent's collar. It heaved upward. Val went swiftly to the door while Kent, half choked, yielded to the threat of strangulation and rose and moved ahead of Pete Shims.

"One man," said Val Downy, listening. "On a horse. I got a idea, Pete. Outside! You keep him from squawkin'. We'll pull a good one!"

The three of them moved out into the vast, cool night as the horse came nearer. The starlight was bright, but not bright enough to reveal it or its rider.

Val Downy had a gun in his hand. He looked singularly alert and evil. Kent, knowing him, could see very clearly just what he would have planned. But a yell of warning from him would do the trick. Val or Pete Shims would kill him. He didn't care. But he wouldn't go back behind walls.

Shaking with rage, Kent filled his lungs to shout. He must plunge forward so Pete Shims' grasp on his

collar would be broken—so his yell would be complete. His muscles tightened—

He flung himself forward, his mouth jerking open for the cry of warning. He heard something like the bare beginning of a strangled squawk issue from his throat. Then it was as if a bar of red-hot iron crushed in his throat. He felt his body spinning and a horrible crashing blow. Then nothing.

A vast throbbing pain was his next sensation. A hard floor beneath him. Light. Voices. Val Downy's voice. It held a mocking satisfaction. As Kent stirred dazedly, Val's voice stopped.

"He's comin' to," he said in a different tone. "Souse him some more."

Cold water, in floods. The whole upper part of his body was wet. His head throbbed unbearably. Something insistently warm flowed down his cheek despite the water. He knew what it was.

He raised his head. Val Downy grinned cheerfully at him. Kent saw the sheriff, tied in a chair. There had been a fight. The sheriff looked stonily at Kent, who had been his friend.

"Back in town again, huh?" said Val. "Y'were kinda obstinate. But it's all fixed now. We been explainin' to y'friend the sheriff here just how we came to call on you. He didn't dream that you'd been in stir for forgery, an' that you wrote y'own pardon so you could get out before th' warden was tired of y'company. He knows now."

Kent made no answer.

"You been obstinate," said Val, "an' I aim to settle that up right now. We're goin' to leave him tied up—"

Kent said in a strange voice:

"There aren't three people a month come up here. He—he might die without ever being found!"

"Yeah?" Val seemed pleased. "If we leave you, we leave you tied up with him. D'you want to come with us or not?"

Kent's mouth was filled with a sticky substance that made speech almost impossible. He made sounds—and Val Downy suddenly said venomously:

"I don't trust you, Kent. Not a damn' bit. You sneaked out o' stir by y'self. Y'wanted to give us the runalong when we found you. Now we got you where you got to do like we say or it's too bad. Are you goin' to do our writin' for us?"

Kent swallowed. He said thickly: "If you'll let—"

"I'll let y'come," snarled Val, "when I'm sure of you. An' you're either goin' to prove you're finished foolin', or we're goin' to tie you right up along side him! An' if somebody does come along an' cut him loose, they'll send you right back in stir to stay there till you rot. See? You're goin' to prove you're with us."

Kent's mouth worked.

"Get me?" demanded Val. "I ain't tryin' to persuade you any longer. But you throw in with us for good—or you stay right here. An' if you want to know how to prove you're throwin' in with us permanently—" His voice rose stridently. "If y'want to know—why plug 'im. The sheriff!

I ain't goin' to an' Pete ain't. But either you plug 'im, or y' stay right here with him an' it's back to stir when they find you—if you're alive!"

Kent strangled. Val Downy watched him.

"It ain't phony," he warned. "He knows who we are. He knows I'm wanted. I ain't goin' to leave him loose while I make my getaway. An' I ain't goin' to take you with me unless you're in the game for keeps. Plug 'im or stay with 'im! You got y' choice. One way or the other. What you goin' to do?"

KENT made futile, ineffectual gestures. To stay with the sheriff would surely mean return to the place of walls and bars. But—the fact of murder aside—to go with Val Downy meant also to stay in many dingy hideouts with walls; to hide perpetually from the sun and stars in a fashion no less horrible. But—then again . . .

"Give me," said Kent thickly, "a gun."

Val Downy's head went on one side. He smirked wisely.

"Yeah! Give 'im a gun, Pete. But—get behind him! I'll get behind 'im too. An' we'll have our guns on 'im. Until he's finished the sheriff. An' watch 'im, Petel Watch 'im till it's over. Then he'll be our little pal. He'll have to be!"

The sheriff eyed Kent stonily. His face hardened. He believed he was going to die. A little of the blood drained away from beneath his skin, but his eyes did not waver. He looked at Kent scornfully. His jaw

clamped. He wouldn't beg, anyway.

Kent poked the gun forward. It almost touched the sheriff's breast. He leaned toward the man who had been his friend.

"Bob," said Kent thickly, "Bob—"

The gun went off loudly.

Kent wavered. Then he turned slowly, the smoking weapon still in his hand.

"You asked for it," he said.

Then the gun suddenly roared itself empty. Val Downy's face wore an expression of extreme astonishment. Pete Shims' face twisted suddenly, as if in agony. The thing happened in the half of a second. Pete Shims' gun went off as if by a reflex contraction of his muscles. Kent's body jerked.

Then Val Downy's knees buckled and he sank suddenly to the floor. Pete Shims pitched forward.

Kent put his hand clumsily to his side. He turned about again.

"I'm not going back to stir, Bob," he said thickly. "I didn't kill you. I wouldn't. You saw me switch the gun aside so I didn't shoot you, close as it was. But I'm not going back to stir."

The sheriff swallowed.

"I'm going away from here," said Kent, speaking harshly. "If you'll promise to give me a start, I'll cut you loose. I can take your word. But I'm not going back in stir!"

"You, Kent," the sheriff said. "Was what they said about you the truth?"

"It's true enough," said Kent.

"I'll give you time," said the sheriff quietly. "Sure! Turn me loose. I promise you time to get away."

Kent cut him loose. The sheriff moved his muscles experimentally and bent over the two figures.

"Dead," he said. He indicated Val Downy. "This fella is wanted bad. This one I don't know anything about. But I'll send off a couple sets o' fingerprints, havin' buried 'em, an' report they shot it out with you an' me when they was cornered.

"It seems to me," he said, almost defensively, "like the fella that these two birds were huntin' for—that forger fella that escaped from jail—it looks to me like he's dead. I ain't breakin' my oath!" he added harshly. "You're my friend, an' that escaped prisoner they were talkin' about—he's dead. I got proof! Uh—Kent—will y' give me a set o' prints to send off an' prove he's dead by?"

Kent looked at him strangely. The sheriff grew vexed.

"Hell!" he said. "Look outa that window. Mountains. Valleys. All outdoors to look at. There ain't a wall in a hundred miles. In a thousand! Nobody to stop you from walkin' wherever you please! Dammit, Kent, you don't want to go away from here!"

Kent gulped.

"It's settled," said the sheriff severely. "An' if you ever mention this thing to me again, after we've got our story together, damned if I don't whale hell outa you! You're goin' to be a prominent citizen after this."

Then the sheriff swallowed. He caught one of Kent's hands and squeezed it convulsively. "Dammit, Kent! I felt that bullet goin' right through my gizzard! You got guts, Kent! You got 'em!"