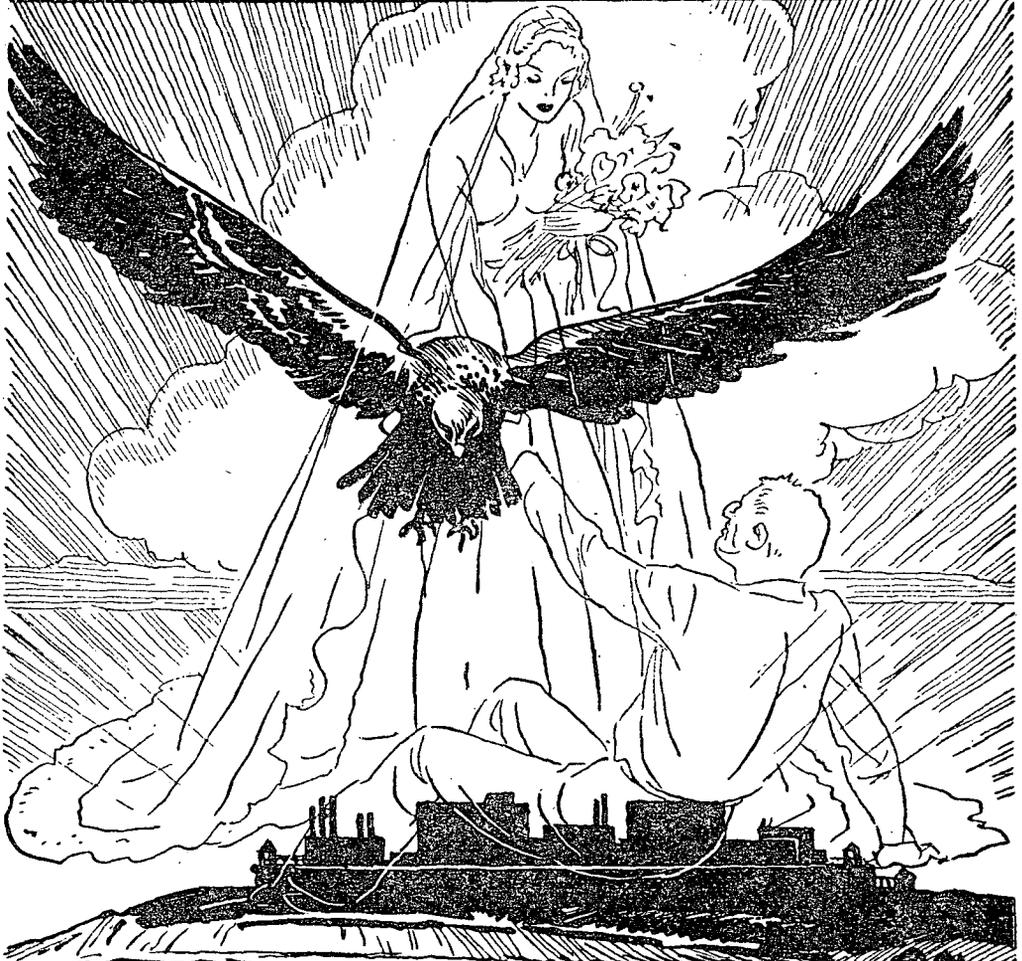


PAROLE



By THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY

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There is a parole no board can grant or take away—and a final release no man controls!

By Thomas Calvert McClary

A BELL clanged along dank stone and steel. Morning slipped hesitantly into the cold, gray prison. Monotony stirred and clung clammy around the rotting souls of men—half dead.

In the third cell from the end on the top tier, two figures stirred. The convict in the lower bunk heaved from his covers and went to the heavily barred window. Gawking wondrously at the mist swirling past the iron that shut them from the world outside, he said: "Gees, ain't it beautiful!"

Soupy Solomon jerked upright in his bunk and blinked unbelievably as Two Ton moved his ponderous bulk with the dainty tread of a hippo. Two Ton talking about beauty? Hell, the guy was pen-cracked!

He watched Two Ton move to the carefully blocked-out calendar on the wall and begin blocking out the date with extreme care. Surer than the devil, the giant machine gunner had gone screwy! Soupy swung his legs over the side of his bunk and shouted: "Hey, youse hadn't oughta do that until nighttime!"

Two Ton gave him an immensely superior look. "I been figuring," he announced ponderously. "Blocking the date in the morning makes the time pass quicker."

Soupy snorted. "What the hell! With good time off, I still got a hunnert and three years, and you got eleven more!"

Two Ton shook his head with aloof pity. "No espreet de corpse in youse! Think of the Swede. A guy like him hasn't even got a chancet! He's got *straight life!*" Two Ton looked at Soupy to see if he got the vast significance of the difference. He cocked his head to one side dreamily. "What you need is somethin' with class and breedin' waiting outside for youse."

Soupy's brow creased with thought. "You mean a horse?"

Two Ton snorted with disgust. "No, I don't mean no horse! I mean a lady, something you wouldn't be ashamed to go to church wit'!"

"Cripes!" sputtered Soupy. He studied Two Ton closer.

"I mean something you wouldn't even want to give a hot chunk of ice to, unless it was trimmed and safe, see? On account of a lady like this one I'm talking about wouldn't want nothing hot. She's that pure."

Soupy's ears wiggled feverishly. No dame is that pure, he thought.

Two Ton breathed on his fingernails and buffed them on his coarse prison coat. "Like my lady," he said with an attempt at softness, "what's waiting for me!"

Soupy stared suspiciously. He wouldn't want Two Ton thinking no dame, not even a lady dame, was going to wait maybe two hundred years for no mug! "You never told me nothin' about this lady friend before," he announced accusingly.

"Oh," Two Ton said apologetically, "I wasn't holding out on you, pal! I just met her. Last night."

Soupy took a deep breath of relief. So it was just one of them *pen* dames! Sometimes you met classier skirts in your sleep inside the pen, than you could meet outside if you owned Tiffany's. Like the one Soupy met himself last November.

"Only I can't never get her back all in one piece," he grumbled reminiscently. "Sometimes it's her face missing, then maybe it's her legs. Or she turns into a mob of fat cops, or an empty safe, or something."

"Gilly will come back," Two Ton murmured with certainty. His eyes took on a faraway look. "She told me so. And she's a real lady, see? And real ladies don't kid you none."

GILLY came back just as she had promised. In the grim quiet of the prison nights she used to take Two Ton to ritzy shows and big-time fights and sometimes even a political beefsteak. She came almost every night. There was never any part of Gilly missing! Because Gilly was a lady and wouldn't pull no fade-out, Two Ton explained to Soupy. And Soupy agreed, in sorrow that he had never known a real lady.

A new Two Ton emerged out of the hardened old trigger man. He began cleaning his teeth extra hard every day. He grumbled that the prison only let them take baths once a week. He began paying real attention to the Sunday church service, and he went in for reading the history of the arts! His pal watched him with envy and wonder.

"We got tickets for the World's Series," Two Ton said in late summer. "I wanna get her something real swell, you know something elegant, that'll make her look like a million when she's sitting in that box just behind the home plate." He stopped to pick a tooth and suddenly drew his finger away from his mouth in

recollection of what was manners. "I got her a box," he added as an afterthought, "on account of I don't like her mixing with all the rabble and hoi polloi."

Soupy tossed aside a magazine of lurid semi-nude knockouts as beneath the sanctity of the discussion. He didn't even want them kind of girls' pictures around when they talked of Gilly. And Two Ton's life with her had taken on a permanent seriousness.

"Say!" Soupy shot with sudden suspicion. "You two been hittin' the high spots pretty regular lately. Where you gettin' the coin?"

Two Ton glared indignantly. "I'm a big-shot coal dealer!" he explained aloofly.

"Oh, that's O. K.," Soupy nodded. "I was afraid maybe you'd gone back in the racket!"

Gray weeks rolled into another summer. There was no kidding about Gilly. You didn't kid none about real ladies.

"She's going to take me yacht-ting," Two Ton confided while shining his heavy prison boots.

"Gees!" said Soupy with interest. "Right on a big boat with all them swells! I always wanted to go on a big boat. That's why I enlisted in the war."

"You was blown in by the draft," Two Ton corrected.

"All right! Anyway, the nearest I come to a boat was rowing the adjutant across a creek once. When you going?"

"Tonight, maybe," Two Ton said.

It was a very big boat Two Ton took Gilly aboard that night. In fact, it was the Queen Mary as it had appeared in prison newsreels. But it pitched violently when a storm came up.

Two Ton thought about heroically saving Gilly. But he got seasick instead. He was awakened by Soupy shaking him. "You must have et something," Soupy said.

"Pheasant," Two Ton gulped. "Gilly



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SHADOW

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told me not to take that thoid helping. *Third helping.*" he corrected himself.

He paid even more attention to bettering himself after that.

SLUG MACKEN was the first punk to get wise to Two Ton's bent toward culture. Slug worked on the big belt in the shoe shop next to Soupy.

"A punch-drunk lug like him don't go shining his shoes and scrubbing his neck just on account of he's dumb," Macken leered. "He's pen-cracked. He thinks he's got a broad somewhere! And your little Oscar is going to have some fun about it."

That meant Two Ton would have to take Slug to pieces and probably lose the good time he was working so hard for. Worse, he'd get in dutch with Gilly! She didn't want him mixing with a bunch of mugs and acting like a hoodlum.

Soupy's eyes grew hard. Men cherish small illusions when in prison. "Yeah?" he asked from the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah!" answered Slug with an edge to his voice. His hand crept toward a wrench.

"You don't mean that," Soupy said.

Soupy moved swiftly. There was a shriek of pain, and the big belt of the shoe binder quivered with sudden strain. The shriek died in mid-note. The belt began to skid, slipped, jerked a dozen times, and hissed to a stop.

A shoe-binding machine can stitch a man's body just as it would a shoe. The prison croaker spent the next eight weeks wondering whether Slug Macken would survive to look like a monstrous mass of seamed meat, or be buried looking almost like a badly seamed shoe.

Soupy spent sixteen weeks in the damp and airless black hole on bread and water. When they carried him back to his cell, the dim light felt like hot lead in his eyes. His stomach lay flat against his back, and his tongue was twisted like a corkscrew.

"You want to hurry and get fixed up," Two Ton welcomed. "Gilly's met

up with an old girl friend, pal, and we're all going stepping."

Soupy gave a cackling chuckle, then fell morose. Hell, what good was it going to do him? All he'd dream about would be that slimy ward boss; or maybe a safe fading in where Gilly's girl friend ought to be; or maybe he'd think about how Slug Macken looked as the stitcher swallowed his arm and began stitching his head.

But he never mentioned the swift changes of his dreams to Two Ton. If Gilly was real to Two Ton, she was real to him!

GRAY had frosted the hair around Two Ton's temples. Yet the ravages of time in the soul-crushing walls of stone had not marked Two Ton's face, nor stooped his shoulders, as it had other men. His step was buoyant, his motions quick, his eyes alert.

Carefully, Two Ton marked a heavy circle around a calendar date. "Eighteen years, Soupy! I'd be pen-cracked if it wasn't for Gilly."

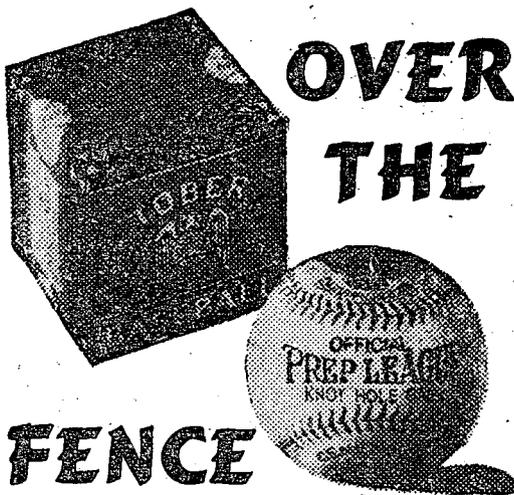
"Yeah, you'd be screwy as a bedbug," Soupy agreed.

Two Ton sighed. He looked up at his pal with embarrassment and childish wonder. "We're gonna be hitched, pal!" he confided. "Church and all. June 16th."

"Married," Soupy repeated in a husky whisper. Tears gathered in his aging eyes. "A house and kids. Gees—"

Soupy had money with the warden. He sent for a wedding ring for Two Ton the day the warden sent for Soupy's pal. He got special permission to send out for a cake and some small dainties, because of his long sentence and his recent excellent behavior.

Two Ton was sitting in the cell looking puzzled and afraid when Soupy came in from work. Every once in a while he would walk to the barred window and gaze out. The great muscles of his back would bulge beneath his prison coat.



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"Some rat ain't started trouble?"
 Soupy blurted.

Two Ton laughed harshly. "They're gonna parole me, Soupy!"

"Cripes, what do you want?"

Heavy window bars bent under Two Ton's grasp. His shoulders heaved. His voice welled up from his very soul. "I never asked 'em for it! But they're gonna do it! Kick me out—June 15th!"

"Hell!" Soupy muttered in bewilderment. Suddenly he remembered. June 15th would be the day before Two Ton's wedding!

Two Ton's voice rushed on: "I never knew a real lady like her before! Like this, it was all right. I was in business and doing O. K. and maybe we'd have had a house and kids." His arm shot out in a crushing blow against the world outside the grim gray walls. "Out there it would be different. I wouldn't be no big-shot coal dealer out there. Maybe I couldn't even find her again!"

His great shoulders shook as he cursed the fates that were giving him his freedom. That night he went down with prison fever.

A WEEK later the turnkey wakened Soupy. "The chief croaker says to bring you. Your pal's about finished his stretch, Soupy." Their footsteps down the long cold corridors echoed like the steps of approaching death.

Two Ton lay grayer than the bleak dawn shadows. There had been a fever spot on his cheeks, but even that was now gray, like cooling embers. He

opened frightened, weary eyes.

Soupy leaned over. "It's June 15th, pal! The sun ain't up yet," he whispered.

Two Ton's great body quivered once. "I can't last it, Soupy!"

Soupy swallowed and bent lower over the dying giant. "I got Gilly here," he murmured huskily. "And I brung the wedding ring. She wants to get married right now, see?"

He slipped a man's wedding ring off his own hand and over Two Ton's finger. He raised the heavy arm so that the spent giant could see. A chuckle of happiness came from Two Ton's throat. His eyes fired with gladness.

His chuckle turned to a more sullen sound, and the fire went out like a sunset dying into a black typhoon.

The croaker pulled down Two Ton's lids and crossed his arms across his chest. The chaplain said the prayer. They walked into the outer ward.

"He would have been paroled today," the croaker noted.

"Never noticed his ring before," the chaplain said. "I didn't think this wife he was talking about was a real woman."

Soupy blew his nose and spit forlornly. "She was real enough. Real enough for him to die for!"

Dawn glared white and brash over the gray parapets. Far in the distance a hawk hurtled skyward to its shaftless pinnacle. The sun, not yet over the horizon, glinted off its wings. For a second the hawk hovered and called down its strident cry of freedom.



THE HEXER



By H. W. GUERNSEY