A HAND ON HIS SHOULDERS: A STORY: BY CLARENCE EARLE FISHER

The new Governor's honor system had reached Slim Haley. For six months now it had been given a thorough trial as one by one the convicts were taken from the cavernous interior of the prison and placed on probation in agreeable outdoor work, without guards. The Governor and his admirers were enjoying a period of satisfaction. His enemies were shaking their heads sagely and predicting all manner of impending social dangers. Most of the men inside were cognizant of the Governor's amazing innovations, and wondered daily who would be next. No "lifer" had thus far been included among the favored ones. The short-termers were first. There was much conjecture among the long-termers and the "lifers" as to how far the new policy would be extended. There was also a rumor among the men that the Governor had said that he would assist personally in a man-hunt for the first who broke the rule.

Slim Haley alone was ignorant of the new movement, due perhaps to a certain taciturnity that kept him aloof from the other prisoners. "Number one thousand three hundred and fifty-six, report to the warden," said a guard.

Slim turned deliberately from his toil in the foundry room, and stared in manifest amazement.

"What 'cher give'n me?" he demanded. "Say, ain't I doin' all right? Ain't I doin' all right?" he reiterated. "What's up, eh?"

"No back sassin'," snarled the guard. "Git yer glad rags on."
"Glad rags, eh?" Slim chuckled at the irony of it. "Th' ones I brung with me ten year ago, huh?"

A faint gleam of hope lingered in his sunken grey eyes. Maybe some good angel had interceded in his behalf. Maybe a pardon! But the hope-flicker died away. No use wishing or hoping, or even praying.

An hour later Slim appeared before the warden.

"The Governor wants to see you," the warden said curtly.

Then Slim did try valiantly to smooth his close-cropped gray hair into a semblance of respectability. The Governor wanted to see him! The prison was a mile from the Governor's office. During the brief journey his mind went quickly back over the ten years. He was in the courtroom and the judge was pronouncing sentence. Life imprisonment! "The jury has found you guilty," the judge was saying, "although the evidence has been mainly circumstantial. See to it that you behave yourself." Black despair would have settled upon most men under such a penalty. Not so with Slim. He had heard
many sentences in his forty years, and since the first had never quailed. True, this was the first for life, but a “lifer” has many years before him, and prison walls are not so secure after all, as many prison records will show. Slim grinned in remembrance of the records in certain prisons where his own Bertillion measurements were written boldly after the “name” of an escaped inmate.

The crime for which he was now serving sentence was a most atrocious one. Slim still grimly asserted that he was not guilty, yet he could never explain all of his movements on the night of the murder. He had taken the finding of the jury philosophically, remarking to the attorney who had defended him:

“’Taint no use to grumble and whine. They gits men like me, guilty or not. Th’ cops has to run in some one to hold their jobs. Its better inside someways. They treat ye half like a man anyhow. Outside yer nothin’ but a rat, jest a ornery rat, scurryin’ from the cops all the time.”

So Slim made no tearful plea for clemency. He trusted to luck and the future. Ten years had passed now, and luck was still against him. Maybe Fortune had turned his way at last!

He faced the Governor a little sheepishly, as a man naturally does after so many years of confinement. The Governor was young, sharp-eyed, evidently a man of quick determination.

“Number one thousand five hundred and fifty-six, what is your name?” he asked Slim, abruptly.

Slim had not expected this as a preliminary question. He opened his mouth awkwardly and then choked a bit. “Slim Haley, I t’ink it was, Gov’ner, when I went up fer dis trick.”

The Governor appreciated the humor in Slim’s answer. He smiled, and the smile gave Slim the self-assurance that he had lost for the moment.

“Mr. Haley,” the Governor began. Again Slim’s mouth opened in surprise. “Mr. Haley!” He had never been addressed before in his whole life as a gentleman. What sort of a stripling was this beardless executive to be calling “lifers” Mister! Had the voters elected a nincompoop for their Governor?

“Mr. Haley,” the Governor continued, “I’ve a notion that you would like to work outside a bit. Now, the landscape gardener over at the asylum for the blind needs an assistant. The present policy is to supply such needs from our prison. This gives some of the boys a bit of fresh air. Here is my proposition: The State can’t afford to place a guard over one man. I want you to do this work faithfully and I want your promise that you will not break the trust I am placing in you. Can I trust you?”
“Gov’ner,” Slim’s voice wavered and tears welled in his eyes. “I ain’t never been given a chance before. You’re white—”

“Never mind that!” exclaimed the Governor, hastily. “Remember, I can be harsh if necessary. See to it that you do not betray this trust.”

For many weeks the park surrounding the asylum for the blind was the prettiest of the State’s public grounds. Summer was passing. Out near the big geranium bed a man was industriously potting plants. Ten earthen pots were already filled with the vigorous green geraniums with their clusters of brilliant red blossoms. A pile of ugly, empty pots lay heaped upon the green grass beside the bed. The man arose and rested for a moment on the edge of the wheelbarrow. A warm, ravishing wind, full of Indian-summer allurement, was blowing up from the south. A soft haze mantled the wavering eastern hills. The woods and fields invited. The sun was just over the edge of the mountain range to the west, and the serrated horizon flamed a warm orange.

The trowel dropped from Slim’s hands and his lips suddenly moved.

“Ten pots—ten years—an’ all that pile of ugly empties left. An’ the rest of them years will be just thataway—ugly, empty years! If they could be filled with flowers like these pots it might be worth it. But they won’t!” he ended savagely. “They won’t be nothin’ bright to fill ’em with.”

He glanced longingly toward the hills. “Th’ big city’s thataway,” he muttered, “toward the valley. They ain’t no other big town between here and th’ hills. I can make forty mile tonight—rest tommorrer—forty th’ next day—”

He arose slowly, arranged the filled pots on the barrow, and made off toward the hot-house. There he carefully laid aside his rough overalls, helped himself to the suit which the gardener had left hanging behind the door, put on a stiff-brimmed hat and left the building, making his way confidently down the avenue to the busy streets.

Within an hour, unmolested and unnoticed, he was outside the city limits, and with long strides was making toward the mountain range, now boldly silhouetted against a perfectly clear sky.

All night he walked. Not once did he swerve from the path which he had chosen until the grayness of dawn. Then he slipped into a thicket, made a rough bed of boughs and flung himself down to sleep soundly. He awakened with a start to find the sun half-down, and was cognizant of a terrible hunger. He waited until the
sun was almost set, and then trudged on toward a cabin which ap-
peared in the clearing.

When he reached the cabin, he went to the door and knocked. A
powerfully built, hairy-faced man answered his summons.

"I am hungry," Slim announced briefly. "What can you give
me for two bits?"

"Where ye from?" the rancher asked suspiciously.

"Sacramento," the traveler answered.

A woman's face appeared at the door. She peered sharply at the
man and then drew her husband aside for a hurried whispering. Slim
captured a few random words—"telephone—gray hair—sunken
cheeks—"

Realizing for the first time that he had failed to take into account
modes of man-hunting that had come since he knew the old tricks
of the road, he did not wait for further questioning, but turned,
walked quickly to the fence and vaulted the rough boards. The
farmer, his suspicions confirmed, was shouting to his wife:

"Git the shotgun, Susan! Git the shotgun!"

Before Susan could locate the weapon, Slim was running far down
the road. He dodged into a thicket and lay panting for several
moments.

As he sat resting from his exertion, he began to realize that he
must be more cautious. His hunger was intense; and yet there was
little opportunity now of satisfying the craving for food. He arose
and continued his way deeper into the fir woods. He came across
an abandoned camp, evidently deserted but a few hours ago. He
found half a loaf of dried bread and a small piece of moldy bacon,
which he devoured eagerly. Then he laid down to rest and to think.

As he recalled the brutish farmer and his inquisitive wife, his anger
rose. He began to feel the old hatred for his fellowmen which had
obsessed him since childhood. As far back as he could recollect men
and women had found something peculiar about him, had whispered
and nodded and frowned and laughed at him. Policemen had never
taken his word for anything, had sneered at him. Judges had ignored
his protestations of innocence, had refused to consider anything which
he had said. Guards in the prison had no kind words for him. Even
at this very moment a squirrel was chattering angrily from a limb
overhead, because he had been robbed of the loaf and the meat.

Poisonous thoughts rankled in Slim's mind.

After he was thoroughly rested Slim determined to push onward.
It was night again. A chill rain filtered through the fir boughs; a
cold, raw fog enveloped everything. He followed the abandoned log-
gers' road until it merged again with the main highway, and intuitive-
ly chose the branch which led toward the mountains. Not a sound
broke the great solitude of the deserted roadway save the slosh, slosh
of water in his shoes. They were worn and broken at the seams, and
the water ran into them in streams, softening his already tender feet.

A faint light gleamed dully through the fog. Slim made directly
for the light, and found that it came from the window of a wood-
chopper’s cabin. He peered through the window. A woman and a
little child, a girl of seven or eight years, sat by the rough table.
Slim knocked at the door. After some delay the door was opened
a mere crack, and the woman asked:

“Who is there?”

Slim shoved his foot into the door crack and said:

“I am cold. I want coffee. I want to warm myself.”

“Go away!” the woman cried, terrified.

“I won’t hurt you,” the man encouraged. “Let me have coffee.
I am tired.”

He pushed with all his might against the door, and the woman
fell back from it. As the door gave way, Slim tumbled into the
room, sprawling headlong upon the bare floor. The woman cowered
in the corner. The little girl was crying. Slim saw the woman held
a gun, but was too terror-stricken to use it.

“Shoot if ye want,” he laughed, “but wait till I’ve had th’ coffee.
I’m awful cold.”

The woman made no effort to do his bidding. He walked over
to her and took the gun from her nerveless hands. “Lay it here,”
he said, “and get me somethin’ to eat. I want coffee—hot.”

Somewhat reassured, the woman moved toward the stove and
began to prepare something to eat. Slim watched her through half-
closed eyes. The child clung to her dress whimpering. Slim watched
the child for some time. He had not been so near a child in many
years. At length he rose and examined the gun. It was new, and
in the corner hung a filled cartridge belt. “I may need this,” he said
half to himself, “I will take it along.”

The woman kept her eye on the uncouth, weary-looking man.
Suddenly she turned and said to him, calmly:

“Be you the man that broke away from the prison?”

Slim was startled by the abruptness of the question. He stared
at the woman for a moment and then seemed to find something
humorous in the query. He laughed.

“What do you know about thet feller?” he asked.

“They say a man broke from the prison, a ‘lifer,’ an’ they’s huntin’
fer him all over the State. My husband’s huntin’. You look like
the man.”
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“I am him,” Slim affirmed. Then noting that the child began to cry and that the woman trembled, he added hastily: “But ye needn’t be afraid, lady. I will go as soon’s I git th’ coffee. I don’t want to hurt no one—. But they’d better be careful,” he added, with bitterness.

As he devoured the food he heard the woman mumbling:

“Ye ought’n’t to’a done it. The Gov’ner’s a good man.”

After he had finished the coffee and the eggs, Slim laid the money which he had found in the pocket of the borrowed coat, upon the table, gathered up the rifle and walked to the door. He halted a moment and turning to the woman said:

“Tell ’em I’m him, lady, but they’d better stay to home with th’ women folks. All I want is to be left alone. If it hadn’t been fer them empty— Ugh!”

For two days Slim eluded his pursuers. He had made, as near as he could figure it, close to a hundred miles and was in the foothills. Another day and he would be safe in the mountains. He would probably see no more cabins until over the range. He determined to change his plans. Thus far he had traveled only at night. Now he would travel by daylight. Once he had stopped at a house and finding no one at home, had helped himself to provisions, taking bread and cheese, and some salt and coffee. With the gun he had killed a few squirrels and a pheasant. He decided to rest for a night, and had arranged a little camping spot. He had built a fire and was preparing to cook a squirrel and make a can of coffee. The smoke of his campfire ascended straight toward the sky, and Slim lay down upon the fir boughs which he had cut for a bed, and watched the curling smoke meditatively. He fell into a doze and awakened with a start a moment later. Some prowling animal, he thought, attracted by the smell of the cooking flesh, had snapped a twig. Yet something made him leap to his feet and reach for the rifle which he had left leaning against a tree a few feet away.

Before he could grasp the rifle, a man’s figure appeared beyond the smoke of the campfire, and he heard a brief command.

“Don’t touch that!”

Slim could see the man but dimly through the smoke. Presuming that the other had the better of the argument, he stopped abruptly.

“Are you her husband?” he asked cautiously.

There was no answer immediately, and Slim felt a sickening fear lay hold of him. Suddenly the voice of the other rang out:

“Why did you lie to me?”

“Gov’ner!” Slim gasped. “Gov’ner—I—”
He did not finish. He saw that the Governor was unarmed, and that he was making no attempt to cover him with a weapon of any sort. "My God!" he cried, bewilderedly. "You come here all alone fer me? You follered me an' took chances! Why I might 'a killed ye! You come clean here an'— How'd ye git here?" he demanded, a cold sweat beading his face.

"By automobile. You left a fine trail. Your campfire gave you away," the Governor explained. Then his voice was hard and cold again. "Why did you run away?"

"Honest, Gov'ner," Slim was saying earnestly, "I didn't mean to break my word. It was them ugly, empty pots— an' th' wind whisperin' to me to come— an' the hills and the mountains— Ugh! Ten years in them walls an' no mountains ner nothin'—"

Slim was aware of a movement on the part of the Governor. He knew that he was coming nearer to him, that he was beside him, that his hand was upon his shoulder; that it was not the firm, cold, unfeeling hand, or rough grasp of the officer! It was the hand of fellowship, of friendship, and for the first time in his life, Slim felt something like emotion. His heart seemed to beat spasmodically. Tears came into his eyes. His slight, worn frame shook convulsively.

"I'll go back, Gov'ner," he said quietly, "without no trouble."

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**WISDOM**

I KNOW what the wild stars say now,
    And what the seven still planets say,
And why the oak trees mourn and bow
    Along the water edge all day.

I know the words of the sea-song,
    And what the wheeling birds would find
That wail and circle all night long
    Through the eight crossways of the wind.

Oh, I am lonely! Dim the crowd
    And desolate the friended way.
I know now what winds cry aloud
    And what the seven still planets say.

MARGARET WIDDEMER.