

KEN

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THE LAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

His two years in concentration camp were up according to law. What law? Who followed the law? Still, they searched him naked and gave him his clothes, without his money or keys. Freedom! And then they took him back to Gestapo headquarters. Into solitary. The waiting. Again the questioning. Then the whole identification rigmarole of seeming release. And back to solitary. He didn't break. He was steel when he got out. They're looking for him again.



THE prisoner stood naked between two dark horse blankets. The trustee loudly called off each piece of clothing that had been stripped off by Fritz: "one pair of blue pants; one blue jacket; one blue cap . . ." The guard checked off each article on a piece of paper that was lying in front of him.

The body is beaten and feels the pain; the body stands at attention, stretches its arms, bends its knees, keeps itself in wooden rigidity before a brownclad young wretch; man has no part in this . . . he is silenced . . . buried until . . . The Day.

A loud voice at the door. Fritz was called to the guard's table. There a number of papers were waiting to be signed. The pen in his hand wobbled uncertainly across the paper. The letters were illegible.

"What's the matter with you? Write clearly," the guard yelled at him. It was useless even to try. No matter which way he pointed the pen the ink formed shaky scrawls. "For God's sake calm yourself—calm—c-a-l-m."

What a relief it would be to take that uniformed scoundrel by the throat, throw him on the floor, pay him back for his beating, yell "You dog! You swine!"

Slowly Fritz put the pen back in its place. Again he straightened his body to military attention. Only the eyes were looking into far emptiness.

A couple of drops of perspiration dropped from his nose to his lips. Me-

chanically his tongue lapped them up and tasted the salt of anger. He took deep rhythmic breaths. "You are not smart enough to provoke me on the last day. That's what you'd like—bring me back into concentration camp on the last day. Nothing doing. Even if you throw a pail of slops over my head I will say nothing—right now. Here I will say nothing. But when I'm free—when I'm out of here, then . . .!"

In the meantime one of the trustees had placed his civilian clothes on the blankets. Under the continuous observation of the guard, Fritz started to dress. Every piece was clammy. At the time of his arrest the police had torn a hole in his jacket. He looked for it. The brown suit was mended with black thread. While Fritz was putting on his clothes, the trustee emptied a little bag of personal belongings. An empty purse (the police had taken the money); a key ring (the keys had been kept by the police); an empty cigarette case (the cigarettes had been taken away by the Gestapo).

When he requested his missing belongings he got the answer: "If you are so interested in those things you'll have to wait here until the Gestapo informs us of their whereabouts." Whereupon Fritz signed the receipt for everything with the murmured remark "Those things aren't important anyhow."

Two minutes later, Fritz marched behind another guard through the echoing corridors on the road to release. But first he was brought down into the cellar, shut up in a bathroom and told to undress again. Two other guards entered and searched every wrinkle and seam of his clothing for messages. Then his body got a thorough going-over. "Open your mouth. Spread your legs. Bend forward. Spread your buttocks." Nothing whatsoever was found. At least, no written messages. Whatever Fritz took along in news and reports was buried in a place they could not search—his memory.

Back into his clothes. Wasn't everybody smiling as he marched down to the registration office to get his papers of freedom! "Two minutes more and I'll be seeing the golden sunshine and the blooming flowers." The clerk picked up a paper from the pile and read to Fritz: "You are released from here now, but at the request of the Gestapo you will be transferred to their headquarters."

The deepest impression Fritz got at the time was of the indifference with which the clerk made the statement. Only when he marched back into the prison and down the corridor again.

did he start to realize the enormity of his desire for freedom. "Back into concentration camp!" Hadn't it been the same with Schlasinger a few months ago? His time had been served. On the day of his supposed release the Gestapo had brought him back into the concentration camp because he had made a mistake and discussed political problems with a stool pigeon. Then there was Charley, who had slept alongside him for months. He likewise had landed back into concentration camp after his term in prison. Fritz remembered another and another who had so gladly pressed his hands in "good-bye" and had never arrived home. Every one of them had been told the same thing he had heard: "The Gestapo wants to see you."

It was not a lack of courage or a feeling of despair which made him walk back and forth like a furious animal in the cell. Not that. It was the realization that they had trapped him despite his knowledge that the Nazis always found new devilish means of torture. He knew their ways all along, but had closed his mind to all logic; his desire for freedom was so strong he had played ostrich.

Yes, Fritz thought, Theo had been right the time he said, "Each one of us is a piece of anti-fascist iron, but to beat the Nazis we must be steel and it takes much hammering before the steel is of the right temper." Fritz had been hardened to a certain degree already, but seemingly, not enough.

Whenever new prisoners arrive in jail, carrying tobacco in some form with them, and manage to sneak a smoke, they have only one place where they can dispose of the burning cigarettes to avoid detection—behind the radiator pipes. Fritz wetted his middle finger and carefully ran it around all the corners collecting every hard piece of dust he found there. After 20 minutes' crawling and tapping he had gathered a little lump of tobacco—about the equivalent of a butt. He rang the bell, got permission to go to the toilet, and brought back with him a piece of brown toilet paper, in which he rolled the tobacco scraps he had collected. Then he started again to pace from one side of the cell to the other. At 11 o'clock he heard the police automobile arrive in the yard. Shortly afterwards the door of his cell opened: "Step out!"

With the two other prisoners who were already standing there he was given over to the custody of the chauffeur of the waiting Gestapo car.

Fritz sat in one of the tiny cells in the automobile and tried to figure out from the direction of the turns the car was making, where he was. Since the occasion in 1933 when a couple of political prisoners had greeted people

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in the streets with clenched fists, the police had equipped the cars with frosted glass which prevented visibility. Once he thought of asking the guard in the car for a light for his cigarette butt, but thought better of it. Judging by his expression and his arrogant behavior, he very likely was a Nazi, and Fritz could not risk losing his precious smoke. There was no telling when he might again get a chance to puff on a cigarette if he was brought back to the concentration camp. In prison the price of tobacco had been high: he had traded his month's ration of fat for five puffs on a butt. He had exchanged that special luxury, the little meat balls that were served only on Sundays, for two deep inhalations from a cigarette. The crumbs of tobacco in Fritz's pocket were too valuable to lose by a thoughtless question.

The automobile turned sharply into an alleyway.

"The yard of the Gestapo headquarters," calculated Fritz.

Uniformed guards opened the doors to the various cages.

"Get out, one after the other."

It was just like two years ago, when Fritz had been arrested for the first time. A policeman with a gun on either side of the car door. "Hurry up, more motion, or we'll kick your goddam pants."

Two steps to the door, then eight steps down to the cellar, and the long road to the iron door of the Gestapo station, which opened at exactly the moment he was two steps away from it. As formerly, the command,

"Over there, with your face against the wall."

The same dirty grey paint everywhere. The same close, musty smell compounded of perspiration, human excrement and food remnants.

The door closed behind them. One by one they stepped over to the desk where a guard checked their arrival on the record before him. He unlocked the dormitory-cell. As Fritz started to follow his two companions, the guard held him back.

"No, not you. You are going into solitary."

As he dragged Fritz along the hallway, he murmured under his breath.

"Orders from above."

The cell was so narrow that Fritz could touch both walls when he stretched out his arms, and it was only five short paces in length. A tiny window high up on one wall was three-quarters obscured by a board across it. Everything around him was in nearly complete darkness. The whole cell was permeated with the odor of carbolic solution. In one corner was a little bench, the only furniture.

Fritz heard the steps of the guard diminishing down the corridor. The

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only sound remaining was a soft murmuring interrupted now and then by a sort of dribbling. This came from the neighboring cell where the Gestapo had placed a group of "harmless" prisoners who now and again flushed the toilet to rid the air of a little of the terrible smell.

For a time Fritz paced rapidly from one wall of his cell to the other. Then, remembering solitary confinement from imprisonment in concentration camps, he took off his jacket, rolled it up into a pillow, and threw himself down on the bench.

"Well, if there is some waiting to do, the best thing is to try and catch a snooze."

In vain. His mind went from one thing to another. He saw his comrades shaking his hand—so close they seemed a bodily reality. He tried to imagine all the questions the Gestapo could possibly ask, so that he could prepare his answers, for on his answers would depend his final release. What would they ask? There still remained untold the story of that illegal meeting which the Gestapo had never cleared up. Then, the Gestapo stool pigeon had visited him four times to find out the real name of "Mr. Muller" . . . the hell, there were so many things that could endanger his neck that attempting to prepare for everything was futile. With an effort, he turned his mind to other things. Well, if he should be released despite everything, if . . . if this coming night he should once more hold Grete in his arms! He let his imagination play with the thought. He tried to picture love scenes with her. Tormenting desire grew within him. He started pacing the five-step cell again.

A key rattled in the lock. Fritz hastily turned his face toward the guard outside, made one step forward.

"Is your name Berg?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all I wanted to know."

The door slammed again. The steps went away.

For a minute, Fritz was tempted to lift his fists and hammer against that door. His arms were already raised, his fists clenched. He stood tense in the semi-darkness. Thoughts flashed through his mind.

"Should I hammer now, they will beat me to a bloody pulp. A thousand to one they are waiting outside now for me to make some unnecessary noise. Yes, that's it. They are just waiting for that."

His fists rested for seconds against the iron door, and the sound of his teeth grating was audible. Forcibly he took his hands from the door, shoved them into his pockets, swung his body away from the door, and started pacing the dark cage again.

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Twice Fritz found that he stood listening behind his door when steps neared his cell. Then he started an old game, familiar from solitary confinement in prison. As soon as he heard steps near his cell he started a conversation with himself. By concentrating on his own voice he tried to drown out the noise outside. It was useless. In prison it had helped, but here it no longer worked. Slogans: "only six months more" . . . "just 100 days" . . . "the last three weeks" had been the strongest help and the best bulwark to endure the suffering and prevent rising to the provocations of the Nazis. And then the prison had after all been a community. The same destiny, the same suffering. Today me, tomorrow the next one. What counted a couple of teeth knocked out when next to you slept one whose kidneys had been ruptured, who urinated blood? Why get excited about one, or two, or three years' imprisonment, when you march with hundreds who are condemned to serve ten, fifteen, or even more years, and when with everyone the idea lived: "We won't serve all of our time, anyhow"? This general conviction that some day something would happen which would free everybody, this fundamental granite conviction that nobody was alone, that nobody was isolated, but was part of a giant movement strong enough to help everyone, made the community of sufferers look hopefully to the future. When one of them was released, they all shook his hand: "Luck to you, brother." Unspoken the question remained: "You who are going outside now, with your help will we be able to follow you soon?"

Fritz had shaken the hand of many who had left before him, and his hand had been pressed by many who remained in prison still. Now he was sitting here, just like two years ago, waiting, waiting, waiting for the freedom to which he was entitled according to law.

Law. Bah. Did anybody ever hear of Nazis respecting law? Was it according to law that they beat prisoners into invalidism and then sentenced those same invalids to longer prison terms because they mentioned their beatings in court?

Fritz leaned against the wall opposite the door, mumbling between his teeth, "You beast . . . you beast . . . you beast. . . ."

Then he sat on the bench, scolding himself. "Fritz, keep quiet. You've got to get out of here. As long as you are alive there is hope. Regardless of whether you are released today or some other day, you have no right to lose your temper. Those in prison are waiting for you. Fritz, keep quiet, keep quiet."

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The single sunray which had come thru the narrow opening in the window vanished. The neighboring cell was silent, for its occupants were gone. Fritz heard only the sound of his own breathing and his own heart beating.

Again the key in the door. Automatically Fritz rose and stood at attention under the window. Reported:

"Prisoner Berg. Two years' imprisonment for high treason. Reporting to the Gestapo."

"Step out."

When the guard led him into a room he placed himself from habit face to the wall, hands pressed to his thighs. And so he stood for about 20 minutes. Thank God he was no longer in a concentration camp. There, the tips of the toes had to be pressed against the wall also. After ten minutes of standing at attention in this position the knees weakened, and the upper part of the body had to be leaned backwards to ease the pain that ran through one's whole frame. And any stormtrooper who passed such a delinquent would slap his hand against the back of that one's head; the stone wall was harder than the lips and nose; bloody faces followed surely. Here, at least, a person could keep his feet a little away from the wall, and lean his forehead against it, thereby easing the torment of rigid attention.

"Berg, step forward."

Five steps to the wooden barrier behind which a man in civilian clothes was sitting at a table piled with papers.

"You are Fritz Berg?"

"Yes sir."

And so began a game of cat-playing-with-mouse between Fritz and the man behind the desk.

"How long have you behind you?"

"Two years."

"Well, well . . ." the face of the official turned to Fritz. His eyes scanned the prisoner from head to foot.

"How did you like it there?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"I imagine it was a little rough in the prison camp, eh? And the general opinion is that they don't treat you any too well, either."

"He wants to provoke me," Fritz thought. He shrugged his shoulders. "A prisoner, naturally, can't expect too much."

The official fussed around with the papers before him. Fritz tried to read some of the writing upside down.

"By the way," the voice behind the desk began again, "What happened to that manuscript?"

Now it was beginning. Attention. Don't say anything. To know nothing is the only formula for getting out of here. Whoever admits even a little knowledge is lost. He will never get out of the hands of the Gestapo until

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he tells everything or . . . can't ever tell anything. Attention, Fritz.

Slowly, as though he was spelling out each word, with his eyes always on the face of the official to watch his reactions, Fritz said,

"Manuscript? I don't know anything about a manuscript. As far as I know, I've never been asked about such a thing in the past."

"What? You're still trying to lie? You don't know anything about any manuscript? You have been questioned about this twice. You goddam liar!"

The official's fist smashed down on the table. His whole body shook with exasperation.

"If you will permit me, sir, I have been questioned probably 20 or 30 times over a period of months. I don't know exactly how many times, and I have been questioned about so many things. The court has recognized that I am guilty only of having organized a meeting forbidden by the laws of the present government. How can I know today all the things about which I was questioned two years ago? You know, after two years one forgets so many, many things."

"So, you haven't learned anything yet. Still the old tactics. You will be sorry for that."

Fritz made no answer. He just looked at the official. The man made some notes on the papers.

"You still claim not to know the real name of 'Mr. Muller'? And possibly you don't know yet who bought the paper for your illegal newspapers? Very likely you don't know anything. You know nothing."

Fritz remained silent.

Continuing to make his notes, the official remarked,

"By the way, how long did you have to stay in the hospital the time they broke your arm in the concentration camp?"

"I broke my arm when I accidentally fell down the stairs. I was kept in the hospital for about two months."

Did he smile over there? Surely. They always smiled when they heard the prisoners explain that accidents, their own clumsiness, had brought about the results of the atrocities. Let them smile. No one was idiot enough to declare, "Yes, they had beaten me and when I defended myself, they broke my arm." The pain was over already, and the pay-off would come later. To speak now, here, of those things was equal to suicide. They would send him back to the torture chambers he had left. Let them smile. Those who laugh last laugh best.

The official rose.

"Follow me."

They passed through several rooms. Fritz landed in the office of the Iden-

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tification Bureau. His physical characteristics and his fingerprints were checked.

Every new action of the police, every new question, eased the tension under which he labored. He felt almost happy when they went back into the room with the barrier. So he would be discharged after all! Why else the whole rigmarole in the Identification Bureau?

Almost pleasantly, the official turned the pages of his files. Now and then a question:

"What is your present address?"

"Where do you intend to live?"

"Do you still have your parents, and where do they live?"

"Do you have a passport?"

Stronger and stronger the conviction grew in Fritz that everything was over at last.

The official started reading from a pamphlet: "It is forbidden to have contact with members of your former organization. . . . It is forbidden for you to leave Germany. . . . It is forbidden to listen in on any Russian radio stations . . . Any infraction of the rules will be considered high treason and will be punishable with death. . . ."

Fritz listened with only one ear. What interest had he in these official mutterings when out there the sun was shining, when out there—

Had the official realized that Fritz wasn't listening very carefully to his speech, or was it just part of police routine when he suddenly raised his voice and yelled,

"We know that none of you ———, not one of you has been converted to National Socialism, yes, we know you only wait for the day when you will be released. We know that you teach each other political economy in concentration camps to be able to fight Hitler better and more efficiently. Anti-fascist universities, you dogs call the prisons. But God help you when we catch one of your new professors. We can't prevent your thinking but we are able to prevent you from speaking, and despite . . ." here he raised his fist and swung it most threateningly in Fritz's face.

He pulled the door open violently.

"Get out of here. Get out. *Get out!*"

His steps pounded along the hallway to the door. Passed the door, reached the desk of the guard.

"One man back."

Fritz did something unthinkable in prison routine. He grabbed the arm of the Gestapo agent.

"Sir, when . . . when will I be released?"

With a fiendish smile the answer came,

"Released? . . . When? . . . I don't

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know anything about it. You belong to the Gestapo now, and they are very busy at present. You will stay here indefinitely."

The fat body of the Gestapo agent moved across the hallway with rhythmic, swinging steps. His throaty chuckle echoed through the silence of the bastioned walls.

When Fritz was returned to his cell he found on the end of his bench a dish of slum, cold and nearly congealed in the time he had been away. Indifferently he pushed it aside and sat down on the bench. Time crawled slowly. The last bit of light faded from the window. Fritz sat on the bench as though made of stone. For the second time he had had the latch of the door to freedom in his hand and had lost it. How cleverly that rascal had understood the prisoner's feeling that now at last he was on the path to freedom. How dirty his grin had been that last minute in the office.

The darkness grew more intense. The green door shone in the obscurity like a sheet of water. Solitude and silence. Nothing else. And in one corner, hidden in the darkness of the night, one human, one of the millions who asks again and again "Why?" and finds no answer.

Ten o'clock at night. The door to the cell opened. Outside, a young official in civilian clothes.

"Berg?"

"Yes, sir."

"Step out. You are discharged. And if you ever have the intention of opposing the National Socialist state, you had better remember your last hours here."

Three minutes later, Fritz stood in the middle of the street, a free man, looked at the blinking lights, at the shining windows of the department stores. Mechanically he went along the route to Tiellesstrasse, stopped at the entrance to his former trade-union local office. As he opened the door, the thought flashed through his mind: "If the police find you here, you will be back in the concentration camp for sure."

Warily he closed the door. Turned around. His shadow vanished down a dark alley.

Four weeks later a teletype went out from the Gestapo headquarters:

**TO ALL AGENTS OF THE GESTAPO:
WATCH OUT FOR BERG STOP IS ORGANIZING
ILLEGAL TRADE-UNIONS STOP
HEADQUARTERS. ●**