

# I'm Not Guilty

It was a perfect day for a man to die—if such a day might be called perfect. The gloomy, barren cell, lighted only by the dim light coming from the tiny barred window high above the floor, was clothed in ominous silence as we sat there engrossed in our somber thoughts. Outside, the rain was pouring down relentlessly, its steady droning occasionally interrupted by the sound of the guard's endless pacing back and forth along the corridor; and the cold, damp air seemed to penetrate to the very marrow of our bones. The weather always affected our moods and thoughts as we fought to endure our miserable existence within those grey stone walls without going insane.

It seemed that scores of years had passed since I was put here, though it had been only fourteen months; and a term of eight long years and ten months still lay ahead of me, a bleak eternity with nothing to look forward to after my release except an endless struggle to eke out a meager living while vainly trying to re-establish myself in society as an ex-convict.

"Still, I deserved it, every year of it," I thought bitterly, as I pondered over the crime I had committed; "and, though it will be a long, hard road, I will still have a chance to live as a free man." My comrade, slumped on his iron bed as he stared vacantly at the floor, was not so fortunate; he was to die in thirty minutes—die in the electric chair for a crime he swore he had not committed.

My thoughts wandered back, as they did again and again, to that other dismal, rainy day when I had stridden into the friendly little jewelry store operated by a kindly old lady and demanded a tiny gold watch from the display case. It all seemed so foolish and unnecessary now that I often won-

dered if I had been altogether sane as I devised my daring scheme. Then there appeared before my eyes a vision of the girl who had been the cause of my foolhardy act. She wasn't a beautiful girl, but there was a certain something about her that had made me want to keep right on loving her and to do anything under the sun for her. We had been married in a simple wedding ceremony at her home and then had begun to build a little home of our own. But changes began to come; jobs weren't so plentiful as before; then one day we had found ourselves with no money. It was a bad situation to be in; and to make matters even worse, she was having a birthday two days later.

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By  
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Then a wild idea had entered my head. There were never very many people around that quaint little jewelry store far out on the outskirts of town, and the old woman who owned and operated it was practically helpless; furthermore I had reasoned that it would be comparatively easy for me to lose myself again within the city after I had carried out my plan. I had waited till it was almost dark and then pushed open the door and walked into the store, which was empty except for the old woman and me. How should I have ever guessed what her reaction would be when I demanded the watch? How was I to know that this meek old woman would defend her possessions so fiercely? But suddenly she was upon me with all the ferociousness of a snarling tiger as she beat me about the head and shoulders with

her clenched fists, screaming for the police and forcing me across the room. I shoved her backwards roughly and sprang toward the door, only to be met by the menacing black muzzles of the guns of three policemen.

The judge had sentenced me to five to ten years in the state penitentiary, and . . .

Suddenly my thoughts were interrupted by the hoarse voice of the doomed man sitting on the other bed.

"I guess I've reached the end of my rope," he was saying in a quiet tone, "and I swear now as I've never sworn before that they are taking the life of an innocent man."

I knew what was coming next; it always did; and even though I had heard his story hundreds of times, the bitterness and cold fury with which he spat it out never failed to cause beads of perspiration to break out over my body.

"Yes, I am innocent," he went on excitedly, "but of what good are the feeble arguments of one man against the evidence that was against me?" Without warning he sprang to his feet and began shaking the iron door wildly. "Listen to me," he cried; "I'm not guilty; I don't deserve to die. I'm not supposed to die. Guards! Guards! Let me out of here! Turn me loose!" He stood there for a moment, breathing heavily and trembling with emotion, then turned slowly and slumped back to his former position on the bed, holding his head in his hands.

There was complete silence there in the cell for several minutes. Then, as he spoke again, the calmness of his voice showed that he had regained control of himself and was going ahead with his story. I sat and listened quietly because I knew he would never tell it again.

