

Golden Peter B. Kyne

THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Theodore Gatlin decided to adopt a baby in a dual effort to solve his matrimonial troubles. But all his love for their four-year-old daughter could not shelter her childhood from the hatred of his wife who had never wanted her. The hatred ended in the divorce court, but ten-year-old Penelope was given into the keeping of her father. The next day for two Sunday afternoons a month. On their first day together they sat out joyfully to a baseball game, a ball hit into the bleachers struck Penelope on the head and the neurotic Mrs. Gatlin removed her from the hospital in which her former husband had married her. Mrs. Gatlin spirited the child to Europe. Gatlin retired from business, wills Penelope all his money and was about to begin a career for his daughter when a motor accident ended his life.

CHAPTER II.—Some ten years later in San Francisco, Stephen Burt, a young psychiatrist, was presented by Dan McNamara, chief of police, with a new patient—Nance Belden, a girl whose terrible childhood had left her with a dual personality for which her "saddle nose" was in part responsible. McNamara did not think she was a responsible criminal and obtained Burt's expert testimony in court. Even Lanny, the doctor's faithful office nurse, was won over to her cause despite Nance's hard-boiled exterior.

Her saddle nose can be repaired. I have a very good friend, a specialist in plastic surgery, and I know he would be willing to help without charge, to make a swan of this ugly duckling.

"And you think you would make her over into a responsible moral citizen?"

"I think so, your honor."

"How would she support herself during the period of treatment? By theft—or worse?" The judge glanced at Nance Belden. "How do you support yourself, young woman?"

"I carry my own checkbook," the girl replied.

"You have a private income?"

"Sure, old thing."

"What is its source?"

"I don't know. On the first of every month somebody puts some money in the bank for me and I check against it."

"And that's all you know about it, eh?"

"Sometimes I can remember, but I can't now. It's the time I can't remember that raises me—I with me, Judge. I don't know what name to give to my checks then or I forget I have a checking account. Then I get hard-up and steal."

"How truly remarkable, Miss Belden! Have you ever issued any checks that bounced back on you?"

"Say, are you trying to kid me, Whippersnapper?"

The judge ignored this obvious contempt of court. "I suppose you have had many sweethearts, Miss Belden?"

Nance Belden's scornful laughter filled the courtroom. "Oh, Judge, you're precious. What sort of a sweet man would pick me for a sweetheart, I ask you? Be yourself, Judge. Now you tell one."

"Why not?" the judge pursued remorselessly.

"Well, maybe, because nobody ever asked me," the girl assured him with simple directness. "I don't mind admitting I'd like to have a nice sweetie if I could find one, but what the h—! Is the use trying? I'd only have him a little while; then he'd get ashamed of me. What's the use bothering myself? I know a blind fellow that's mad about me. I've often thought of taking the poor parable on for my steady sweetie, but he makes me so sad I know it wouldn't last. He has that funny staring look, and when he walks with his arms held straight out, it just breaks my heart."

"Where does he live?"

"God knows—now, I was taking care of him when I got pinched. You see, Judge, I took him to a doctor to see if something couldn't be done for his poor eyes, and the doctor said he could be cured, but it would be expensive. He'd have to go east to a very noted specialist, who would charge a lot for the operation. Well, I paid that doctor his bill and that left me short."

"Did the same doctor say anything to you about your nose?"

"Yes, he said he could cure that himself, and to come in when I was ready and he'd put me in a hospital and operate. Gosh, it's some baby, isn't it, Judge?"

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know anything, do you?"

"Yes, I know something."

"What is it?"

"You haven't the slightest intention of agreeing with Steve. That sheep-faced mutt, Bletchen, has given you an awful. You're one of these judges that believes what he wants to believe. Steve's told you I'm nutty, but Steve's wrong. I'm not. Steve's just a good fellow trying to give the little girl a hand."

"So you believe you're quite sane?"

"Of course I am. There's nothing wrong with me except a bad memory, and a beak like the American eagle."

Stephen sighed and shook his head, seeing which, Nance crossed to his side, put her arm around his neck, and laid her cheek against his. "Steve, darling, you'd be a wonderful sweetheart," she assured him, and laughed.

"Your honor," Stephen pleaded, "can't you see she's—"

"I can see she's an intelligent as you say she is, Doctor. In fact, she's more than that. She is very carefully simulating mental irresponsibility by attempting to spoil the good work of her expert witness. It is my conviction that Doctor Bletchen was right when he told me she was the smartest, most adroit criminal type he had ever examined. I believe, with him, that she is incorrigible, and incorrigible criminals should be set apart from society."

He turned to his clerk. "I believe the sentence was two years in San Quentin penitentiary. Verify it and prepare the commitment."

"Good G—d," Stephen Burt cried sharply, "you are not going to commit this social outrage, your honor?"

The judge eyed him sourly. "Doctor Burt, you will apologize to the court for that language or I shall fine you fifty dollars for contempt of court."

Stephen Burt drew a fifty-dollar bill from his pocketbook and tossed it on the table.

"Court is adjourned," his honor mumbled, most embarrassed.

The policeman who had brought Nance Belden into Superior court



"If You're a Good Girl, Nance, I'll Not Put the Cuffs on You."

approached her. "If you're a good girl, Nance, I'll not put the cuffs on you."

"You didn't put them on me coming here; so why should you think it necessary now?"

"You're an important prisoner now, Nance. The judge just gave you two years in San Quentin, didn't he?"

Nance Belden turned. "Did he, Steve?"

The doctor nodded miserably.

"And I'll not see you any more, Steve?"

"Of course you shall, Nance. I'll come to see you from time to time. I haven't finished with you—not by a long shot, my dear. Tyrrell, you're still retained on this case."

The lawyer waved his hand hopelessly. "We're licked," he stated, without emotion. "This is one hand no lawyer can beat, and I wouldn't try." And Tyrrell shook hands with Stephen and Nance Belden, put on his hat and strode out.

"Come, girlie," the policeman suggested.

"Well," the girl declared, with an effort at nonchalance, "this is a tough break for old lady Belden, isn't it?" She smiled upon him patronizingly. "You're a good scout, Steve. Thanks a lot for all you've done and tried to do. You meant well, but at that I think the old scientific hokey has got you a bit cuckoo, too. I stood for it a while because I thought his ribs might fall for it, but when I saw you weren't going to get to first base with the big boob, I called it no contest." She thrust out her little hand. "Well, good-by, Steve. I suppose I'm keeping you from other nuts."

She came close to him and looked up at him wistfully, so he stooped and kissed her. At once tears suffused her eyes. "You don't mind what I look like, do you, Doctor Burt? You're kind enough not to feel sorry for me."

Amazingly she had changed—slipped out of one personality into the other as one slips out of a coat. "Will you do something for me, Doctor?" she continued, and he saw that she was all nerves now. "I'm looking for a girl named Penelope. I can't remember her last name, but I do wish you'd try to find her for me, even with so little to go on."

"Where does she live, Nance?"

"Out there, somewhere."

"You've been reading a poem, I think, Nance—a poem that runs:

And you, my sweet Penelope, out there somewhere you wait for me,
With buds of roses in your hair and kisses on your mouth.

She trembled with eagerness. "Why, you know her, Doctor. That's the Penelope I'm looking for."

"Oh, if that's the Penelope, why of course I'll find her for you. Good-by, my poor dear girl, and remember to look for me at the gate the day you're released from San Quentin."

A deputy sheriff took Nance Belden to San Quentin and was decent enough to refrain from handcuffing her en route. The girl was not particularly sad. Even the first glimpse of the penitentiary did not disturb her, for the road that enters the grounds is flanked by the homes of the officials and guards, and well-kept lawns and flower gardens give no hint of the gloom that lies in waiting beyond the main gate.

The building in which female convicts are housed at San Quentin would readily be mistaken for a hospital were it not for the bars at the windows and the high metal mesh fence that surrounds the grounds. Two young women were hosing in the flower beds; along the cement walks other women strolled, singly or in pairs, chatting and enjoying the sunshine and fresh salt breeze that blew in from the bay, less than fifty yards off the beach some men in skiffs were fishing for striped bass, and with the exception of a guard in a kiosk at the entrance to the grounds, one would have to search in vain for the

slightest hint of official surveillance.

"So this is San Quentin," Nance remarked gaily to her escort. "Not so bad, my boy, not so bad."

The guard did not answer. He knew that the realization of restriction rather than high walls constitutes the horror of prison life. He took her into a small lobby, where a pleasant-faced middle-aged matron greeted the girl cordially.

"Come with me, Nance," she said, and led the girl into her office, where she took charge of Nance's suitcase, opened it and searched it thoroughly.

"You have nice clothes and toilet articles," she commented. "Have you more clothes at home? These will scarcely last two years."

"Yes, May I send for them?" asked Nance eagerly.

"Of course you may. The women inmates of San Quentin are not required to wear a prison uniform, although we furnish one, if necessary."

"Hurrah for our side," Nance replied cheerfully.

"You read and write, of course, Nance?"

"Do I look like a dumb-bell?"

"Well,"—patiently—"here are the prison rules. Read them, and then obey them strictly. Failure to obey them will lead to disciplinary measures, and repeated infractions may lead to solitary confinement. If you prove to be a good girl you'll receive credit for good behavior in the shape of a reduction in the length of your sentence. Good conduct will also render you eligible for parole after you have served half of your sentence; if you should get into trouble, tell me about it first. I try to give my girls a square deal, but very few of them try to give me one. If you should think you're not being treated fairly, I'll always be glad to discuss your grievances with you. You will meet some terrible women here and you will also meet some who, had they been spared the unfortunate circumstances which conduced to bring them here, would be ladies. Conviction doesn't mean that a person is devoid of all human attributes. You will keep your person and your cell clean, and you will not be locked in your cell unless you misbehave. Your cell—it is really a nice little room—will be sacred to you alone, and you will have the freedom of the building and the grounds. I will assign you to a cell and show you up to it. Then you can change your clothes and come down and join the women in the recreation room yonder."

"You'll do?" Nance declared, and held out her hand. Her cell proved to be exactly what the matron had said it was. Nance surveyed it with satisfaction. "This will do me nicely," she said. "Thank you ever so much, Matron."

She unpacked her suitcase, stowed her few belongings in the chest of drawers, removed her hat and sat down on the bed to read the printed list of prison rules. But one of the rules interested her. She discovered she could write a letter once a month—if she behaved herself. "I must be mother's little lamb," she declared. "This is some joint to get out of, but where there's a will there's a way." And she set herself resolutely to discovering the way.

Before locking-up time she thought she had discovered it. It was the fishermen in the cove just off San Quentin point who suggested it to her. In her stroll around the ground she inspected the fence. It was sixteen feet high, of quarter-inch steel mesh, set on steel posts bedded in concrete, and it ran along a concrete base. A barefooted woman, using her toes to climb the mesh, could climb the fence readily enough, were it not for an eighteen-inch topping of barbed wire, strung in strands four inches apart and set inward at an angle of forty-five degrees. One could not possibly surmount that. Nor could one burrow under the concrete base in

daylight, even were the means available, nor could one do it at night, because then one was locked in the cell. But one could stroll down the main walk to the sentry box just outside the entrance and appraise the situation there. As Nance suspected, the gate was kept locked and the guard had the key; indeed, the gate was never opened except to admit a new prisoner or an official, or to provide an exit for a discharged prisoner or official. However, Nance did not despair, for the gate was narrow—two feet—and there was no topping on it. She decided she would climb over it some day when the guard's back was turned; ergo, the thing to do was to induce the guard to turn his back!

For a month Nance gave her thoughts over entirely to this problem.

Lanny came into Doctor Burt's office and laid a letter on his desk. It was dated from San Quentin, on the cheap prison stationery, and read:

"Dear Miss Lanning:

"I can receive visitors next Sunday. Won't you please come over and visit me? I'm so lonely, and you were so kind to me when I visited Doctor Burt's office. I have never forgotten you, and never shall. Sincerely:

"Nance Belden,
"No. 42251."

"Just think, Stevie," Lanny declared proudly. "She hasn't forgotten me, the poor dear."

"I suppose you'll go over."

"Indeed I shall. It would be terrible if I didn't. You'll send her something, won't you, Stevie? I think that might please her. I think she'd appreciate a portable phonograph and a couple of dozen records. I understand model prisoners are permitted such luxuries."

Stephen smiled. "Well, I'll stand for that expense, too, Lanny. And I shall await with interest the report you will have to make on your return." Lanny beamed.

The following Sunday afternoon, therefore, the matron admitted Lanny to the visitors' room and sent for Nance, who arrived on the run and cast herself joyously into Lanny's arms. Then Nance led the latter into a corner, and speaking swiftly and in a low voice, said:

"We aren't permitted to be alone with our visitors, Lanny. You'll notice the matron remains in the room. She won't listen to what we have to say, but she keeps her eyes on us. Will you smuggle a letter out for me? I've got one all written, but the matron reads all our letters before posting them—and I can't have her read this one. It's to a very dear friend and I just couldn't bear to have her read it. Besides, if she read it, she wouldn't mail it."

Lanny's face grew grave. "Do you realize, my dear, what you are asking me to do?"

"Certainly, I wouldn't ask anybody but you to do it, Lanny dear. You're so understanding. If you can smuggle the letter out for me it will mean that within a month I'll be out, too. I'm sorry I cannot give you all my confidence, Lanny, but I just can't. You're the only woman on earth I'd trust, the only woman who has ever been kind to me. And oh, Lanny, dear, I do appreciate your friendship so."

Lanny comforted the girl and considered her request. Considered it sympathetically, too, for at heart she was an outlaw herself. She knew Nance Belden did not belong here; that if the girl had had a fair chance, if she had not been the victim of a code of justice born of ignorance and lack of sympathy, she would be in a sanitarium instead.

"You can read the letter when you get home, Lanny," Nance pleaded, "and if you do not approve of it, you need not mail it. That's fair, isn't it?"

Lanny fell into the trap. "Yes, that's fair," she agreed, for she had unbounded confidence in her own judgment of what was right and what was wrong.

(Continued next week.)