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## OVER THESE PRISON WALLS

By Robert Traver

Every community that harbors a penitentiary has a time bomb planted in its midst which may explode at any minute of any day. Our prisons are crowded with long-termers and lifers, most of whom are there because of some fatal social clash, some feverish inability to discipline themselves, to adjust themselves to life. They are -- many of them, not all -- men of wild impulses for good or bad, men of unbridled emotion, incredibly courageous, cowardly, ruthless, tender. They are the wounded, the lost, among all intense individualists in their lifelong war with the pressures of organized society.

The failure of this swelling army of caged men to harmonize their restless natures with the common weal -- the appalling waste of potential good -- is one of the great tragedies of modern life. "There, but for the grace of God....."

Suddenly these men, who have brooked no discipline, heeded no halter, are caught up in the unyielding, iron regimentation of prison existence. Those that are not broken by it, utterly crushed, become raving or quietly staring-eyed, spend their every waking moment planning, scheming, contriving -- to get out of there. Freedom! becomes their only prayer.

It is this consuming lust for freedom that fills our newspapers with fantastic tales of plots and attempts at escape, of actual prison breaks. A Dillinger fashions a wooden gun, escapes from a country jail, and a nation follows a relentless, blood-stained, hounds-and-hare manhunt, winding up in the spattered gutter of an obscure Chicago movie house.

Three lifers in the lonely, swamp-surrounded prison at Iron Bay, Michigan, in the Upper Peninsula, silently await their chance at a Saturday night movie in the darkened prison chapel -- and when the smoke clears away the warden is dead, his deputy and one of the prisoners are fatally wounded. And the hapless prosecutor, who was probably trout fishing at the time, has a new batch of murder cases to try. For it is the duty of the prosecutor to handle

all criminal offenses occurring in any prison located in his county. He helps gather away the debris, you see, whenever the bomb explodes.

My first experience with the cold violence of these men who prefer death to confinement, came near the end of my first term as prosecutor of Iron Cliffs County.

The barred, guarded building where the state parole board heard its cases stood in the center of the main prison yard. The parole board was in session, hearing its last supplicant to freedom. The warden, his deputy, the chaplain, the prison physician were all there. The stenographer rapidly took his notes as the hearing neared its conclusion. "Just give me one more chance -- --"

There was a scuffle at the barred door, the door opened, and in rushed three gray-denim-clad inmates pushing a bound guard before them.

"This is a break, men," Musto said, levelling a revolver at the assemblage. "Tie 'em up, boys."

Musto's two partners had long knives, and coils of binder twine. In five minutes the job was done. Musto took one of the knives and held it at the Warden's back.

"Warden," Musto said quietly, "I want you to telephone."

"Yes?"

"I want you to phone out for a fast prison car to drive up to the door of this building -- to open the gates wide -- sorry, but we're going to leave you."

"And if I don't?" the Warden said.

"We'll kill every man in this room -- starting with you." Musto laughed. "We've nothing to lose, Warden. Sooner be dead than in here. Do you phone?"

The Warden had a wife and three children just outside the wall. He had been the skipper on a submarine chaser during the last War. He knew no personal fear.

"Give it to 'em, Mus," Garrett said. Garrett was another inmate.

"Shut up, Garrett!" Musto said. "Warden, I like you -- you've been good to us -- as decent as you slugs can be -- but we've got to hurry." He twisted the knife in the Warden's back. "We've got a blind date with freedom....."

The Warden looked at the others, trussed there in their chairs. They nodded their heads.

"I'll give them your message," the Warden grimly answered, speaking into the phone Musto held for him.

When the big car rolled out the open prison gates, an army of state, county, city and prison police and guards were lined up on both sides -- they could have reached out and touched the car. Bristling with revolvers, rifles, shotguns, tear gas bombs, submachine guns, they sat or stood there and watched their quarry ride away. For in the car with the inmates, sitting packed on and around them, were the three members of the parole board, the Warden and his deputy. A member of the parole board was driving.

As the big car rounded the curve on to the state highway, it shot into high, gathering speed, and with a roar and clash of gears, the army of officers rolled into pursuit.

Musto laughed and thrust his revolver under the Warden's nose.

"Warden, now that we've got some real guns, what do you think of this job?" The Warden grunted. "The "gun" was made of wood. "I made it myself. Pretty good, don't you think, Warden?"

The big car sang and hummed down the road. The pursuers were drawing nearer.

"Stop the car!" Musto shouted.

The car slid, pulled up on the shoulder. The cars in the rear drew to a halt, the lead car but five hundred yards away. Musto quickly cut the bonds of the Deputy Warden, opened the car door, and pushed him out.

"Bill," Musto said, "you're the oldest -- and not the worst screw in the world. Go back and tell the boys that if they get in sight of us again, our next warning is going to be a dead body. Get going!"

Musto slammed the door, and the big car again gathered speed. A half mile farther Musto ordered the car into a gas station.

"But the indicator says the tank's full," Jerry, the parole board driver, said.

Musto pressed a knife at his back. "Drive in there, Chum. I want some gas for my lighter."

The tank of the big car took over nineteen gallons. It was nearly empty. Musto dropped a twenty-dollar bill out on the ground, laughing "full hey," as the car sped away, gathered speed, taking the curves at seventy, passing Rapid River, Gladstone, Escanaba, approaching Menominee, where lay the Michigan state line. None of the inmates had thought to turn on the car radio, which would have informed them that the show-down would be at Menominee. Impatient, Musto took the wheel. "Faster, faster!" It was getting dusk, a fine drizzle had started, and the big old car was careening along at nearly ninety as they approached the boundary bridge.

Musto shouted, "Look out, men -- barricade!"

As Musto swerved the big old car to the left, it leaned over like a great sailboat, groaning and squealing, smoking from tire burns. It plunged over the shoulder, into the ditch. The right door flew open and Ross, the chairman of the parole board, leaped out and rolled away like a rubber ball. He had played football in his youth. As he stood up, he saw the big car disappearing in a cloud of dust along a gravel side road following the lake shore.

The first pursuit car drove up, and Ross leaped in, and away they went. In two miles they sighted the prison car, drew nearer and nearer, when suddenly at a curve the tired old car left the road, pitched, tilted, and rolled over and over in the ditch, wheels churning.

"Are you hurt, men, Warden?" Ross shouted in the rainy darkness.

The Warden raised the rear door of the car, lying on its side, submarine fashion, and climbed out.

"No, but we're all hungrier than hell," he said.

The three inmates pleaded guilty, and another prison break was ended.

On a day during the following Spring four convicts, all lifers, by a strange coincidence found themselves sitting in the waiting-room of the prison physician, each bearing a slip that the doctor should examine them for various minor ailments. By a stranger coincidence, each of the four had a loaded revolver hidden in his clothing. The four prisoners did not talk with each other and sat there silently awaiting their turn. A trusty-nurse appeared at the door.

"Alex Stasiak -- next."

"What seems to be the trouble, Stasiak?" Gray-haired Doctor Hornberger smiled, reading Stasiak's slip.

"A little cold, Doc, is all."

"Cold? On such a beautiful spring day? Here, open your shirt." Old Doctor Hornberger advanced towards Stasiak with his stethoscope. "I'll listen to your chest."

"No, no, Doc." Stasiak drew back. "It's -- it's in my throat."

But Doctor Hornberger, laughing jovially, had pulled open Stasiak's shirt. There hung the hidden revolver. The two men stood watching each other, frozen, for just an instant. The trusty-nurse took one look and leaped down the laundry chute.

"Doc," Stasiak said in a low voice. "Doc, I hate to do this. I didn't think -- we didn't plan we'd have to do it to you."

Stasiak pointed the pistol at the doctor, and there were two shots. Old Doctor Hornberger fell dead with two bullets in his heart. Stasiak ran through the waiting-room with the smoking pistol. "The bets are off, men. Follow me!"

At the main entrance to the hospital unit the four convicts overpowered and disarmed a guard and, lifting him before them like a football hero, they rushed across the open area to the tobacco factory, into the elevator, and up to the second floor. As they got to the second floor, an avalanche of tear-gas bombs broke through the factory windows near the elevator. The guard and the four convicts began coughing and blinking.

"Back into the elevator!" Stasiak shouted. "We'll shoot our way out at the bottom."

The elevator did not work. The power was shut off. Stasiak stood looking at his three companions and the guard.

To the guard: "Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Any kids?"

"Four."

"Get the hell out of here." Stasiak pushed him into the factory proper and turned to the other three inmates.

"Men, you picked a loser. The race is over. There is only one way." Stasiak levelled his gun at Bronski's temple. "Goodbye, Bronk."

Bronski closed his eyes and nodded his head. Stasiak pulled the trigger. Bronski fell dead.

"Goodbye, Gurney."

One more shot, and Gurney dropped dead in the elevator, falling over Bronski.

"And you, Charlie -- I'll see you in hell, too."

But Charlie, his eyes wide and gleaming with horror, leaped over the gushing bodies and tried to get into the factory. Stasiak pulled the trigger, and Charlie fell with a bullet in the back of his head. He rose to his knees, bloody, walking like a man on stumps.

"Stace -- Stace --"

Stasiak fired again and Charlie thumped on his face. Just as the guards burst up the stairway and rounded the corner, Stasiak, grinning, held the revolver to his own head and fired the last shot into his brain.

After the dead were buried, there was the question: Where and how did the men get the guns and ammunition? After months of police work, we found this to be the answer:

A convict called Barlowe was released from prison two months before the fatal shooting. Before his release he was told by Stasiak to go to a certain address in Detroit, and he would receive a thousand dollars in cash. With the money he was to buy four pistols and ammunition and return to Iron Bay and hide them in a culvert outside the prison grounds. A trusty would smuggle them in. He was then to return at once to Detroit and keep the balance of the money.

Barlowe, released, went to Detroit, found the address, got the money -- and proceeded to spend it. He was enjoying himself immensely when one day the bartender at the Blue Goose answered the phone and turned to Barlowe and said, "Telephone for you, Barlowe."

Barlowe answered the phone, and a voice said, "Barlowe, we give you just one more week. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Barlowe understood.

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Barlowe's trial was a long and involved affair. His lawyer was a crafty old fox who missed nothing. On behalf of his client he called, as was his right, a long list of character witnesses from the prison. One of these witnesses, a big Detroit Negro, was on the stand, and had just testified as to Barlowe's good character. Finally I questioned the witness. It was the only touch of humor in a grim, tense courtroom struggle.

To the inmate: "When you speak of the good character of the defendant, do you mean good character inside the institution or outside the institution, Mr. Jones?" I asked.

"Inside de prison walls, Suh." The witness beamed at me, the judge, the jury, everyone.....

"What do you call 'good character' inside the institution?" I asked.

The big Negro folded his arms and grew thoughtful. "Good charactah in de 'stushun, Suh? Hm. Yassuh. An inmate what does a favah foh 'nother inmate, keeps his mouf shut, an' pays his gamblin' debts -- dat's what Ah calls good charactah, Suh!"

But despite these glowing traits -- which many of us on the outside could emulate -- Barlowe was convicted, transferred to a down-state prison, and escaped while he was being held in detention. Two weeks later his body was found in an alley -- in an alley behind the Blue Goose, a chummy little tavern in the City of Detroit. But that was a headache for the Detroit prosecutor to cope with.

Tommy and I took the Model A and went fishing out on the Yellow Dog -- miles from the hundreds of brooding caged men in the prison at Iron Bay.

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