

Chapter Nineteen

THIS PRISON WHERE I LIVE



I SAT in the front row while the court routine continued. The room buzzed with conversation. J J was busy with formalities, reporters were leaning over to ask me questions. Through the near-by doorway I saw several young men awaiting their sentences like actors in the wings listening for their cues. One was propped against the wall smoking a cigarette. At the sound of his name he raised his head, signifying he had heard, and yet kept on smoking. When it was called a second time an attendant shoved him forward roughly. I could almost feel the hardening of his soul under this brutal attitude and the physical handling. He gave still another puff, then deliberately dropped the stub, stepped on it, and sauntered leisurely forward to receive his sentence.

I was led into an anteroom where other prisoners were being put through the regular fingerprinting procedure. I refused, there was a definite connection in my mind between admission of guilt and fingerprinting, both in their different ways placed me in the category of criminals. My refractoriness was reported to the court. But the judges, poor dears, had worn themselves out trying to avoid sending me to jail and were exasperated and cross, one more rebellion was too much for them. "Don't bother us with that. It's not our job. Take her away."

We were then herded through the rear of the building into an open yard where the van was standing. The careless youth who had

answered the court's call with such unconcern was waving farewell to friends who loitered outside

"How long, Alf?" asked one

"Five years," and he laughed as he said it

Two more boys, their arms fraternally flung across one another's shoulders, shouted, "Three!" and, "Four!" consecutively. Were they normal? Could liberty be of so little account? The muscles in my throat contracted as I pictured the maternal love once spent on their infancy, and now the reckless disregard for freedom culminating in this ride. Thirty days seemed to me the end of the world, but they made light of marking time in life for years, calling this their "sleeping time." They paid no attention to me, I was entirely out of their realm.

The women huddled beside me were more serious. An hysterical and tearful "one-monther" had been obliged to leave her small four-year-old son sitting on the veranda watching for her return. She had not even been allowed to go back to see him and arrange for his care during her absence.

Some experiences, though unexpected, are nevertheless partially anticipated in the subconscious. I had believed fully and firmly that some miracle would occur to keep me from going to jail. There had been no miracle. The doors banged shut, two blue uniforms stared stolidly at each other, the automobile jerked forward.

The trip to Raymond Street was short. We were ushered into a waiting room. A thin-lipped attendant of huge size callously pushed one weeping girl through the door.

"Get ready there, you!" she tossed over her shoulder at me.

"For what?"

"For the doctor." I sat still. She repeated, "Do you hear me? Go in and get your examination!"

I resented this attitude with every fiber of my being and replied, "I'm not being examined."

"Ho, you're not? You're one of the fighting kind, are you? Well, we'll soon fix you, young lady!"

She swung her heavy, massive frame out the door, leaving me wondering, but quivering with excited determination. I was not sure what would happen to me. Within five minutes, however, she came

back with an entirely different manner and tone "Oh, you're Mrs Sanger It's all right Come this way, please"

The next morning I was given a cup of bitter, turbid, lukewarm coffee, and then placed inside the van, which set off for the Workhouse There all my possessions were taken from me A long wait The men were sent somewhere and the women somewhere else, I did not know where I just sat After what seemed hours my belongings were returned and a woman in coat and hat told me to follow her I did A man added himself to our party, and the three of us climbed into another van We were driven some distance down the Island, then put into a boat and ferried over to New York I had no idea where we were going I asked but could elicit no answer

We took a street car and after various transfers I caught sight of a Loose-Wiles biscuit sign But it did not help me because I had not seen it before, the section was unfamiliar to me In early afternoon we reached the Queens County Penitentiary, Long Island City Evidently the Workhouse authorities had had enough of the Higgins family and wanted no more responsibility of this nature

Warden Joseph McCann, who met me, was a jovial young Irishman who had risen from the police ranks "Have you had any lunch?" he asked The cause of his solicitude emerged when he inquired anxiously whether I intended to go on a hunger strike Remembering my morning cup of coffee, I replied, "Not unless your food is too bad" He introduced Mrs Sullivan, the motherly matron

I answered the usual interrogatory about where I was born, how old I was, etc, etc When the clerk came to "What religion?" I replied, "Humanity" He had never heard of this form of belief, and rephrased the question "Well, what church do you go to?"

"None"

He looked at me in sharp surprise All inmates of the penitentiary went to church, ninety-eight percent in my corridor had been reared as Catholics

The prison clothing which I was handed was much like a nurse's uniform and did not disturb me But when I was recalled to the warden's office to be fingerprinted, I said flatly I would not submit He sent me back to my cell

The floor was arranged rather on the order of a hospital ward, with little alcoves of ten or fifteen cells running off the gallery. Mine, Number 210, was small but clean. I had a bed, toilet, and washstand. There was no chair, I sat on my bunk.

All the prisoners were at work except Josephine, a German Catholic who had lost her husband and three children within a short period. She was eager to tell me her story. A few days after they had died, she had gone to their graves and covered those of the children with blankets to keep them warm. Someone saw her, decided she was insane, and had her committed to jail. It was a spring day when she was let out on parole. She was pleased and happy. A hurdy-gurdy was playing her favorite tune, *Just As the Sun Went Down*. She paid the man a nickel to play it over, then another, and another, and another. The policeman at the corner, hearing it, looked her over and arrested her again. During her next ten days in prison she nursed a grievance against this injustice and, as soon as she came out, had several drinks, went after the policeman, scratched his face, and tore his buttons off.

Thereafter, Josephine drank whenever she could, and each time she drank she fought, and, since she had developed a complex against policemen, she landed back in jail in short order, she had been in some seventy times.

I found Josephine a kind, big-hearted person, and, though erratic, fairly intelligent. She had a terrible tongue and a terrible temper, and undoubtedly had periods when she was of unsound mind. Most people were frightened of her.

She was supposed to put curses on her enemies, and they came true. Once a person who had treated her badly and been cursed in consequence had promptly contracted pneumonia and died. At another time the matron of a certain jail had kept her three weeks in a dark cell on bread and water. After the fifth day, when bread was handed into the hole, she said it tasted like cake it was so sweet. From the two or three cups of water daily, she had to assuage her thirst, wash her face, and clean her teeth. When she came out of this Stygian place she could scarcely see, but she managed to distinguish the matron sufficiently to put the curse of God upon her. The next night someone

forgot to close the door of the elevator shaft, and the matron walked through the open gate, fell to the bottom, and was instantly killed. Now, Josephine was let alone.

In spite of my depression I was intensely interested in Josephine, she begged me to help her, and I said I would try. The rest of that afternoon was consumed in this tale of woe until at five o'clock I began my initiation into the prison routine of hours and meals. The dining room was filled with long tables and wooden benches. No one had a knife or fork—only a tablespoon, edge blunted so as to be unserviceable as a weapon. Supper consisted of tea and molasses, stewed dried peaches, and two slices of bread which tasted queer, it was said to have saltpeter in it. We were locked in an hour later, lights were out at nine. Bells began ringing at six the next morning, and the cells were opened at seven. For breakfast we had oatmeal with salt and milk, again two slices of the same bread, and coffee without sugar. Dinner was more bread, a boiled potato with the skin half on, and a sorry hunk of meat.

Because of my active tuberculosis the prison doctor soon put me on what was called a diet. This meant I could have crackers and milk and tea in my cell instead of going to the supper table. Due probably to the influence of the Osborne innovations at Sing Sing the men at the Queens Penitentiary were better treated than the women. Their food was of higher quality and they could buy tobacco and even newspapers. The sole reading matter available to women were two Catholic weeklies and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Our only other news came from the two visitors a month allowed. So fine a mesh screen was placed in the reception room that inmates could with difficulty distinguish, as through a veil, the features of those to whom they were talking. This was a hardship not even imposed at Sing Sing.

After morning cell-cleaning we took a fifteen-minute walk in the yard with our hooded capes over our heads. During this cold tramp the women scanned the ground avidly for butts of cigarettes tossed away by the men. It was tragic to see human beings forced to such a low level as to dig with their fingers in the frozen earth to retrieve these mangled stubs. Each used to grab her little bit and hide it.

When the matron went to her lunch we were locked in our cor-

ridors but not in our cells. Ordinarily she took a nap afterwards, and the girls could usually count on her not being back until three or perhaps four o'clock. This gave them an opportunity to dry their shreds of tobacco under the radiator, then wrap them in toilet paper ready for smoking. At night when we were all locked in they struck the steel ribs from their corsets against the stone floor, and thus ignited pieces of cotton to give them lights. I could see tiny glowing points in the darkness as they puffed away greedily.

Somehow, with the ingenuity born of necessity, these women also managed to have smuggled in to them occasional small news items. The first day one of the girls approached me and in a stage whisper demanded, "Cross your heart and hope to die you won't tell."

I crossed my heart and hoped to die.

She slipped into my hand a short clipping about my trial. Apparently others had been keeping up with events, because a few minutes later Lisa, a little colored girl, called out, "You'se eats, don't yer?"

A third asked me to explain to them what "sex hygiene" was all about. Accordingly I sought permission of Mrs. Sullivan to be allowed in their corridor during her dinner hour.

"What for?"

"The girls want me to tell them about sex hygiene."

"Ah, gwan wid ye," she laughed. "They know bad enough already."

Some of the most lovely-looking girls were drug addicts. It seemed monstrous that the State could take such liberties with human lives as to convict them as criminals and sentence them to as much as three years for something which should have been considered disease.

Other women were pickpockets, embezzlers, prostitutes, keepers of brothels, "Tiffany," or high-class thieves, accomplices of safe blowers, and a few "transatlantic flyers," who assisted in big hauls from Paris or London.

The class snobbishness among the offenders interested me beyond words. No one cared how or where another had been reared, what kind of family background or education she had, the nature of her offense was the key to her social position. The one who picked pockets was scorned by the girl who helped herself to pearl or diamond necklaces, the shoplifter did not "sell her body."

The prisoners sometimes slid their arms in mine as we paced along in the yard. One took me to task "I saw you walking with Gracie. You mustn't associate with her."

"Why not?"

"Do you know what she's in here for? She's a petty thief. Whenever she gets out she rides in street cars and steals money from the pocketbooks of poor people going to pay their rent, or women coming home with their husbands' wages."

"And what are you here for?"

"Oh, I steal from the rich, I take only from people who have jewelry and bank accounts."

I never did the regular work of cleaning, not even my own cell. Nor was I sent into the workshop to sew or to operate the machines with the others. When I asked Mrs. Sullivan why, she replied jollily, "Oh, you look better over there with a pen in your hand."

She had fixed up a table to serve as a desk, and there I sat the entire day with my papers and books, planning ahead and reading countless letters, the tenor of all was much like this from Sarah Goldstein:

The women here in Brownsville need help very bad. Mrs. Sanger has got put away in the penitentiary for being friends with us, but she said we was to use her place while she was gone. If we can have a meeting over here in the clinic, I will put a fire in the stove and ask the women to come Saturday.

We women here want to find out what the President, the Mayor, and the Judges and everybody is trying to do. First they put Mrs. Sanger in jail for telling us women how not to have any more children, and then they get busy for the starve of the ones we've got. First they take the meat and the egg, then the potato, the onion, and the milk, and now the lentils and the butter, and the children are living on bread and tea off the tea leaves that is kept cooking on the back of the stove.

Honest to God, we ought to call a meeting and do something about it.

Part of my time also was devoted to helping some of the girls to read or to write the two letters a month permitted them. I had not believed that any American-born of sixteen to eighteen years of age could be illiterate, but there were at least ten.

I had been in the penitentiary for several days before I noticed a tall, erect woman with white hair and a face which obviously did not belong there, I had never seen her in the yard or at table. Although she had been over nine months sharing the other prisoners' food and working beside them she had not become one of them. Because of her aloofness I found it hard to make her acquaintance, but ultimately "the Duchess," as she was called, told me her story.

After having been a teacher for fifteen years, she had married a minister who lived on a pension. They stayed in hotels, always spending more than their income, while he steadily drew on his insurance money. His sudden death left her practically penniless. Due to her age and the fact she had not taught for so long her application for a teacher's job was refused. She continued in the hotel until she had used up everything and was forced to move. Thereafter, she went from hotel to hotel, fleeing each time angry looks and bills, finally she was arrested and given an indeterminate sentence of from one to three years.

Her constant brooding over her past was not preparing her for any future. I suggested she might keep her hand in by instructing the illiterate girls, and asked J J, my only visitor, to have his friend William Spinney send some primers and lower grade text-books from Henry Holt and Company where he worked, this was done free of charge. The Duchess was contentedly happy from the day she began teaching again.

In the desire to learn whether the girls' background might not be related to the causes of their imprisonment, I asked Warden McCann whether I could see the records, especially as to the size of the families from which they came. He said it was against the rules, but he was willing to give me such facts separately, assuring me I was going to be surprised and disappointed. I was.

When I inquired, "How many brothers and sisters does Rosie have?" the answer was, "None."

"And Marie?"

"She had a brother, but he's dead."

It appeared from the entries that all these women had been single children or, if a brother or sister had been born, he or she no longer survived. This was difficult to believe, but I had to accept it at first.

However, when I became better acquainted with the old-timers they told me quite a different history. The registers were merely evidence of the unwritten rule among them to keep their families out of it.

The madam of a house of assignation was putting her daughter of seventeen through a fashionable boarding school. To prevent the child from knowing anything about her occupation she wrote letters, sent them West, where she was supposed to be traveling, and had them redirected to the school. Many other prisoners were mothers also, and the scheming and planning to hide the painful knowledge of their whereabouts was worthy of the deepest admiration.

One after another admitted she had given false statements to save her relatives from disgrace or constant annoyance by the police. The result of a poll of the thirty-one in our corridor showed an average of seven children to each girl's family.

I was always interested to know why the pretty ones were there. Frances, one of the loveliest, had a radiant color, rosebud mouth, and the most innocent eyes, she even managed to wear her apron with a Gallic chic. It did not seem possible she could have committed a crime, but she turned out to be one of the rogues who made a practice of frequenting gatherings where careless people offered opportunities to pickpockets. She told me how she, with two other girls, had once gone to an up-State fair. After making a grand haul of watches and purses and anything they could lay their hands upon, her two companions said, "We've got enough. We're clearing out."

But Frances had spotted an easy-looking wallet. It was not quite easy enough. Unfortunately for her the owner shouted, "Somebody's stolen my money!"

A bystander pointed, "She did it. I've been in three places today where things have been lost, and she's been there every time."

Other people gathered round. Frances began to cry. Because the friends of the man who had been robbed and he himself insisted she must be arrested the police were called.

Frances continued to weep until several lusty young farmers were ready to defy her accusers. How could they say such things about such a sweet girl! It looked as though a fight were imminent, and

she hoped to slip away during the excitement. But the police arrived too soon and took her to the station. They found nothing on her, somehow she had rid herself of the wallet.

Frances' new-found allies were ready to go her bail, but it so happened that a police chief from a neighboring town who had come to the fair for the express purpose of identifying possible petty criminals recognized her from his sheaf of photographs of habitual offenders. He said to her supporters, "Boys, you're crazy. This girl's as crooked as a snake. Here's her picture!"

"Why, you're crazy yourself! Your girl's a blonde, and this one's dark."

The chief snatched at Frances' hair, and off came her wig. As she told me this great joke on herself she shook with merriment.

But this was not the end of the story. The station captain had been influenced by her attractiveness and, since the wallet had not actually been discovered on her, wanted to let her off. He made a compromise: "I'm going to give you a ticket to Montreal. You either go to jail or take it and get out."

She accepted the ticket, but left the train at a near-by point and rejoined her friends at another fair. There, wearing a different costume, she continued her trade. Although to look at her ingenuous face I could hardly believe it, pitting her wits against the police was to her a type of game.

Gertrude had been equally clever. She was of German origin, very stylish, moving in good circles when not in prison. She had learned that the officers of the submarine, *Deutschland*, which had just crossed the ocean, were to be entertained at a party. Having secured an invitation, she devoted herself to a lieutenant who, she had discovered, was carrying seven hundred dollars in his pocket. When the gathering broke up she took him back to his hotel in her car, suggesting they stop at a night club en route. There she put a drug in his glass. It took a bit of time to work, but after they had started on again he fell asleep. She gave five dollars to the doorman to take him to his room, saying he had drunk a bit too much, and then went home.

At seven the following morning, while Gertrude and her little girl

were still in bed, the police raided her apartment. They could unearth nothing except what she could honestly account for. Her effects were turned upside down, and still no money was to be found.

"Then how could they send you to jail?" I queried. "You didn't take it, did you?"

"Of course I did," she asserted, looking at me as if I were dull-witted. "They couldn't pin it on me, that's all."

Even though Gertrude had been brighter than the police, she, like many of the others, had been convicted on her past record and the present suspicious circumstances.

Josephine was another case in point. After I myself had been released I had her paroled under her own recognizance and secured a place for her as chambermaid in a hotel. Fate so arranged that in the very first room she entered on her first morning's work she was confronted with the corpse of a man who had died in his bed during the night. She rushed out immediately, got drunk, and went directly back to jail again.

The resentment thus engendered in these caged women was like a strong, glowing flame, of a depth that I scarcely had believed possible. The shivers ran up and down my back when I heard the details of their unguided and loveless childhoods, which explained in large part the curious manner in which their minds worked. They thought only in terms of getting away with their crimes, of beating the system—although their presence here was proof that it could not be beaten. Three of the younger girls, too old for Bedford Reformatory but almost too young for the penitentiary, definitely shocked me with their plans for wrong-doing without being apprehended. They asked me about my case. "Was it true the judge gave you a chance not to go to jail if you'd promise not to break the law?"

"Yes."

"Well, why didn't you do it?"

"I couldn't promise that."

"But you didn't have to keep your promise!"

The ever-present bitterness arose, not from being caught in the act, but from being convicted without having been, according to their own belief, proved guilty. It was the woeful mental attitude rather than the actual physical condition of their imprisonment which so

appalled me Not one of them intended to go straight They hated the police who were drawing good salaries from the State and getting credit for putting them in jail, yet all the time they had been smarter This sounds inconsistent, but it was their peculiar psychological twist

I talked it over later with several judges to whom it was rather a new point of view Among other cases I cited that of a brothel keeper who conducted her house as a club and did it so carefully that no evidence could be obtained against her Therefore, a detective had put opium in the plumbing and she had been sentenced on a narcotic charge, although it was well known this was not her offense

"The prisoners were guilty, weren't they?" said one of the judges "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I rejoined, "but to my mind that doesn't end the State's responsibility It seems to me your detectives should be more intelligent than the criminals they are set to catch"

The girls at Queens Penitentiary were unaware they were entitled to bring a far more serious charge against society than clumsy and inept police methods I have never since visited an institution for juvenile offenders without thinking how stupid people are not to recognize that most adolescents are subjected to temptation on some occasion or other, that anyone, in an emotional fragment of time, when young and when the consequences are not clear, may do some forbidden thing More often than not it is merely incidental, and in no way warrants a life of penance

The only brutal treatment I received was during the last two hours Since my fingerprints had not been taken on arrival, Warden McCann first tried to talk me into compliance His argument that all prisoners' prints must be on file, that not having them was unheard of, got us nowhere I refused to submit, even though it postponed my release He then turned me over to two keepers One held me, the other struggled with my arms, trying to force my fingers down on the inkpad I do not know from what source I drew my physical strength, but I managed to prevent my hands from touching it My arms were bruised and I was weak and exhausted when an officer at headquarters, where J J was protesting against the delay, telephoned an order to discharge me without the usual ceremony

March 6, 1917, dawned a bitter, stinging morning Through the

metal doors I stepped, and the tingling air beat against my face No other experience in my life has been like that Gathered in front were my old friends who had frozen through the two hours waiting to celebrate "Margaret's coming out party" They lifted their voices in the *Marseillaise* Behind them at the upper windows were my new friends, the women with whom I had spent the month, and they too were singing Something choked me Something still chokes me whenever I hear that triumphant music and ringing words, "Ye sons of freedom wake to glory!"

I plunged down the stairs and into the car which stood ready for me, and we swept out of the yard towards my apartment At the entrance were Vito, the coal man, and his wife, beaming and proudly pointing to the blazing fire they had made on the hearth to welcome me home