

THE CRIME OF K.15

A Realistic Story in Which Every Line Hurries the Reader on to the Next

By GUY THORNE

SOME years ago there had been a young man at Oxford called Paul Arnold. He was the son of a country Rector, and if there is any truth in the familiar saying "parson's sons are the worst," he was certainly a striking illustration of it. He had gambled, drunk, got into debt, and been "sent down" from the University with every circumstance of disgrace. He had been given a second chance, a situation had been found for him in the city, where, by hard work, he might have risen to a responsible post.

Within six months he had been discovered to have embarked upon a skilful and elaborate scheme of embezzlement, with the inevitable result of a year's hard labour.

His father had died during his conviction, broken-hearted. Towards the end of his term, information came to him that his mother, who still lived in the little country village, where her husband had been Rector, was dangerously ill.

During his term of imprisonment old Mrs. Arnold, the one person in the world who still loved him, had punctually paid him such visits as the prison regulations allowed. The man's father had never attracted his son's love. But Arnold's mother, broken down, irremediably saddened as her life was, had steadfastly refused to give up all hope. The old lady's visits, her letters full of sorrow, tenderness and love, were the only bright spots in the tomb-like gloom of the prison, the only gentle influence that Arnold's evil and crime-sodden heart ever knew.

In France, even the worst of criminals would be allowed, of course, under proper escort, to visit the bedside of a dying mother. In England the laws are not so humane, and day by day, as the moments of Arnold's imprisonment expired, the sands of his mother's life were running out.

Eventually, when he was released he hurried to the remote Cornish village as fast as the express train could take him. But he was half a day too late, and the eyes which had never looked upon him without love and gentleness, were closed for ever.

Paul Arnold, who was a linguist, ceased to cumber the shores of England for some considerable time after his mother's death. The thousand pounds which she had left him kept him in quiet luxury for nearly a year in the South of France and under the skies of Italy, where he passed with such English folk as met him as a reserved, cultivated man of early middle-age.

During this quiet year, mingled with his remorse, was a fierce smouldering hatred for the iron laws which had kept him from his dying mother, for the stern regulations which would not grant him even that remission of the final week of his sentence, which would have enabled him to be present at the deathbed.

When his money was spent, hardly without protest, easily and comfortably, Arnold drifted back into crime.

We find him in London again some two years after his foreign experiences. His name appears in a celebrated criminal trial as an active agent in an affair of blackmail, so heartless, so cruel and dangerous, that the reputations of those who were ruined by the criminals concerned, almost immediately acquired an air of martyrdom.

The sentences upon the engineers of this infamous conspiracy were severe, and Paul Arnold, alias this, alias that, was given twenty years penal servitude.

PAUL ARNOLD NO LONGER.

SO much for the history of Paul Arnold. Now there is no "Paul Arnold." There has not been any Paul Arnold for five years. There is only "K.15."

K.15 is a model prisoner in the great convict establishment of Princemoor—the ultimate organized hell in the West where those who must dwell for long periods in pain are sent.

When visitors came to the huge prison upon the moor, K.15 was always shown to them. He had never broken any prison regulations. The wardens and the Governor pointed to him with pride; he was a gentleman once. Something, the wardens and the Governor were not particularly interested in this, had made him a criminal. But what a man has done "outside" interests those who govern prisons very little. What interests them is whether this or that man makes a good prisoner.

In another ten years his sentence would be "revised" at the Home Office in Whitehall. That is to say, that if his conduct had been uniformly good, a slight remission of the terrible twenty years might be possible.

"A good man that, Snell," said the Deputy Governor to the Chief Warden one morning.

"Never gives the slightest trouble, sir," the Chief Warden replied. "The best prisoner in the place. He is a man we can thoroughly trust. It really seems a shame he ever came here."

Donovan, the warden in charge of B. Gallery, Hall H., saluted. "Chief Warden hasn't said too much,

sir," he volunteered. "K.15 is a real good man. I look to him, in a way, to preserve discipline in the hall."

"The Governor is quite right, of course," the Deputy said, "and meanwhile, as Major Carter will be away for a month, you may give this good conduct prisoner any little indulgences that seem good."

"Thank you, sir," said the warden, "I do believe, when I am allowed, in encouraging well-behaved men. You hear that, Donovan?"

"Yes, sir," said the warden of B. Gallery. "It is what I thought myself. I shall pass it on to Turner."

By this time the Deputy Governor and the Chief Warden had come to the end of the gallery, and were about to descend the circular steps of open iron-work to a lower one. Warden Donovan saluted and resumed his march.

"What did he mean, Snell?" said the Deputy Governor, "by 'passing it on?'"

"Well, sir," the Chief Warden replied, "Officer Donovan is certified for leave. He comes off duty at five o'clock this evening, and he is going straight away by the six o'clock train. His old mother is dying, and if what I hear is true, he will have a bit of a rush to get to her in time."

"Poor fellow," said the Deputy Governor, "I thought he looked a bit piqued. Let us hope he will be in time."

A DEADLY HATRED.

K.15 sat in his cell, waiting the summons to work. The servile look that he had worn for years existed no longer. The face of the prisoner was now haggard and terrible. It shone with an enormous purpose, and there was hatred in it, a deadly hatred.

For five long years K.15 had been distilling hatred. It was quite on the cards, he well knew, that he might die in the prison before his long sentence had expired. It was certain that he would go out into the world an elderly, broken, and useless man.

There would be absolutely nothing for K.15 when he was released upon the world—if, indeed, that ever came to pass. Yet for all his quiet manner and excellent behaviour, the prison life was torture. It was a greater torture than it had been during his previous sentences, for now the memory of his mother's death, and the fact that he had never heard her dying words, became an obsession.

He hated prison and prison-rulers with a hatred so intense that it lay lava-hot, unquenchable within him. He had weighed every possible chance. He had summed up his hopeless situation with bitter deliberation. He had come to a final conclusion. He would escape if possible from Princemoor.

Three days before this very morning, K.15 had been employed in a carpentering job in the officers' quarters. They were about to give a concert in aid of a fund which provided pensions for the widows and orphans of prison wardens. K.15—the clever carpenter, to whom such considerable latitude was allowed—had been employed in erecting the temporary stage in the wardens' recreation room, where the concert was to be held.

In a small room at the back of the improvised stage, K.15 had seen upon a shelf a box of black japanned tin, which he recognized at once. It brought back memories of the past. It was a theatrical make-up box. He had seized his opportunity as a monkey seizes a nut. It was an easy matter to cut off a length of dark brown crepe hair, and to abstract a stick of grease-paint of a dark complexion tint.

After his morning's work he had been marched back to his cell for dinner. During the dinner hour he had concealed his thefts in the mattress of his bed. Like all other prisoners he had to undergo a search twice a day. But this only took place in the morning and evening while his cell was not searched at all.

The day following he had been employed in fixing up some shelves in the prison office. While doing his work there, unobtrusively in a corner, the ordinary routine of the office had been continued. K.15 had learnt that leave had been granted to Warden Donovan to date from five o'clock upon the evening of the following day. Donovan himself, off duty for the moment, had entered the office, and been informed by the Chief Warden that his application for leave was granted, while one of those buff-coloured forms which allow prison wardens to travel upon the railway systems of England at a reduction of fare, had been signed and handed to the officer.

It seemed to K.15 that the fates were playing into his hand at last. The chance of revenge also, for during the evening of that second day Donovan had entered K.15's cell.

"You're to come out with me to-morrow, K.15," he said, "to the new outpost farm on the edge of the moor. The building is all finished, but there are one or two carpentering jobs to be done in the house. It's principally shelves and cupboards you've got to

finish off. Make your tool requisition now, and I will see that you get what you want to-morrow morning when we start. You will come with me directly after breakfast and are excused chapel."

"Thank you, sir," said the model prisoner, writing down upon the form from the stores the tools he thought he would want, and returning the pencil to the warden.

Donovan looked over the list. "Very well, K.15," he said, "I see you have mentioned a glue-pot, you have not wanted one before in any of the work you have done?"

"No, sir," K.15 replied, "but if I might have one it would have a lot of time in nailing and dove-tailing." The eyes of the ex-Oxford man and clergyman's son gave one cunning flicker at the face of his immediate lord and master—the son of a small Cornish farmer.

At nine-thirty K.15 was paraded with the quarry company in the prison yard. In the hollow of his right arm-pit was the inch or two or crepe hair he had stolen two days before, kept in its place by a thread drawn from his mattress. Under his other arm was the thin pencil of grease-paint in its covering of tin-foil. When he raised his arms above his head the threads kept the stolen articles in place, and, as he had expected, Donovan's quick passing of the hands over his clothes was the merest perfunctory ceremony. The quarry party, some hundred and fifty strong, tramped out of the prison gates escorted by warders with loaded carbines.

K.15 marched with the rest along the road to the quarries which were a mile away, over his shoulders a bass containing his carpenter's tools.

At the quarry, in obedience to a sharp order, he left the ranks and trudged forward with Donovan a mile and a half into the trackless moor. Here a space of several acres had been recently re-claimed, and a small farmhouse erected.

So trusted and safe was K.15 considered, that he was to spend the whole day at work in the farmhouse. In his bass of tools he carried the bread and cheese which was to form his dinner. It was not thought worth while to march him back again to the prison at mid-day. And Donovan also had a packet of sandwiches in his pocket.

The two men tramped along under the low and sullen sky, the prisoner a little in front. When they were well out of sight of the quarry Donovan gave the order to halt.

"I think I'll have a smoke," he said, in a friendly voice. He felt quite certain that his charge would not give him away.

"I wish I could, sir," said K.15.

"Well, you've brought yourself so's you can't," said Donovan, sententiously, "and that's none of my fault, K.15. Still, I don't say that when we get out there, and after you've eaten your dinner, I mayn't let you have a whiff or two. I have never been hard on you, K.15, and you're a well-behaved man—we'll see."

K.15 touched his prison cap in servile gratitude, and the pair tramped onwards.

The warden puffed at his old briar pipe, but his dark-complexioned face was hard and anxious. There was a look of pain and yearning in his eyes.

The quick-minded convict saw at once that there was something wrong with his jailer. The look in Donovan's eyes had not escaped him. But he imagined that simply an impatience at the last few hours of duty which remained before his leave began.

A STRANGE FATED COUPLE.

THE November day was as dark as at late afternoon. Along the road the heather was brown and lifeless; an utter desolation surrounded them, only broken by the cry of a curlew as it flitted over the moor.

And in the secret and ominous contrast to the outward vision of the two figures—the one erect and soldierly in its dark-blue uniform, the other, of the same height and build, erect and soldierly, too—were the thoughts of these men's minds, the difference of their natures. One, the warden, was honest, simple, and kind. Of humble birth and of few advantages, he had always done his duty. His heart was wrung with anxiety and filial love.

The other complex, subtle, a child of evil, had been born a gentleman, with many advantages. His life had been a life of shame. Murder and hatred filled his heart!

A strange couple, upon a desolate road, each man marching to his appointed doom!

At last the farmhouse loomed up before them, a low range of buildings which stood up against the leaden sky like a silhouette of black.

They came to it, Donovan opened the door with a key, the two men entered.

Their feet rang with a melancholy sound in the empty dwelling as K.15 dumped his basket of tools upon the stone floor.

"It's those cupboard you've got to do, K.15," said the warden, pointing to a couple of recesses on either side of the kitchen fireplace. "You ought to be able to fit in all the shelves before I march you back.