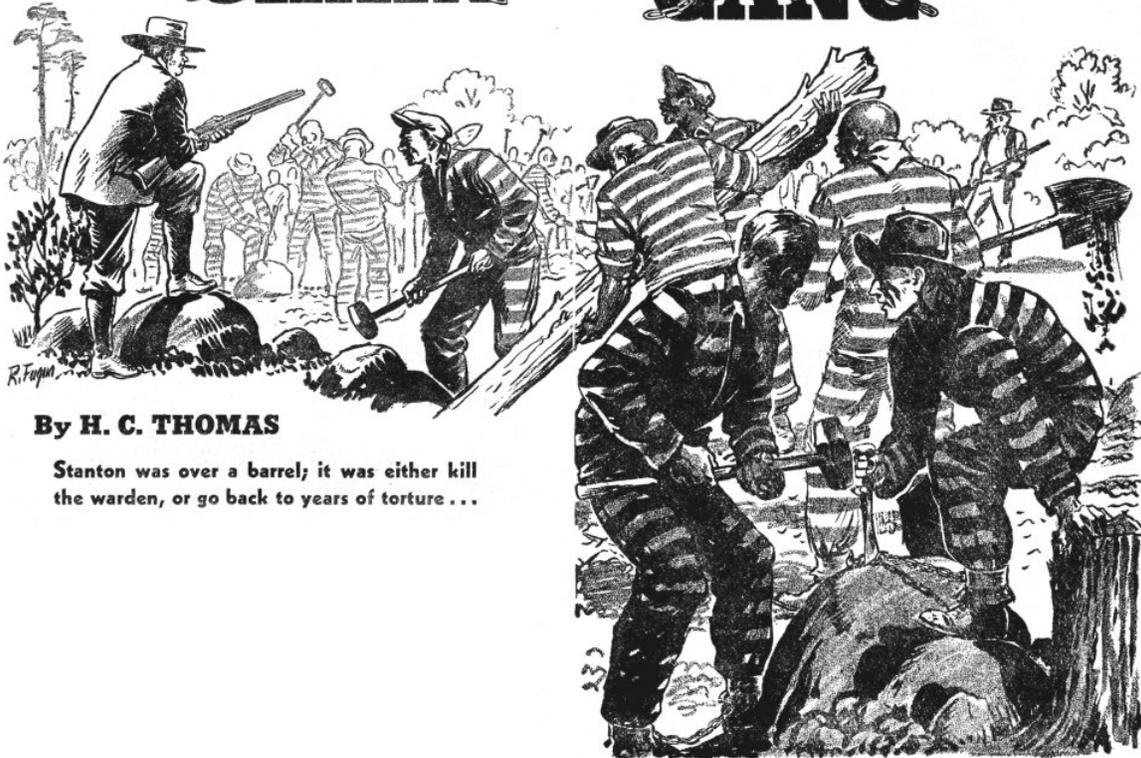


# CHAIN GANG



By H. C. THOMAS

Stanton was over a barrel; it was either kill the warden, or go back to years of torture ...

"Now!" whispered Stanton. "He ain't looking!"

*Stanton was over a barrel; it was either kill the warden, or go back to years of torture ...*

**T**ERRY STANTON, number 45713, one of the sixteen convicts chained together in squads of four, noticed how the negroes turned from a dull carbon shade to glistening ebony in the boiling heat of the mid-day Georgia sun. White men changed from ham-like scarlet to maple, then to leathery hue. Toiling in the red loam of the Piedmont road, Stanton had had plenty of time to observe the phenomenon ... and six years remained.

"You damyank hound, Stanton, lay into it theah!"

Harsh as the scraping of the shovels came the voice of Guard Al Crosby. It made Stanton, the slightly built office worker, cringe with apprehension. He worked feverishly, tinglingly aware of Crosby rising from the shade where his companion guard,

Marley, still lay, and lurching like a thunderhead toward Stanton's quartet of prisoners. Al Crosby was a giant, a malevolent giant with a blacksnake whip. He was a hairy Fury, a Neanderthaler.

Despising himself for cringing, Stanton envied Ambrose, mightiest of the three Negroes chained with him. Ambrose accepted all punishment with stolid indifference. But Terry Stanton was simply unable to bear it, wasted as he was from the killing toil, hollow-cheeked and sickly pale beneath his tan.

Guard Crosby was notorious for his abuse, and of late he seemed to direct all his venom on 45713. Why? Stanton knew several reasons. He was a Northerner, speaking a dialect that sounded outlandish to Crosby. Stanton was invitingly smaller and weaker. He

betrayed the mannerisms of an educated man. Any one of these was sufficient to draw hatred from an ill-tempered animal like Al Crosby.

Glowering, he lurched closer. His blacksnake whined through the air, bit through Stanton's sleazy shirt. Under the cloth a line of blood appeared, tracing the welt. Teeth gritted, Stanton labored on. Admission of suffering only heightened Crosby's sadism.

But submission now exasperated it, apparently. The heavy lash cracked again, and a third time, and a fourth. Strangely, Stanton found time to notice the purpling of Crosby's face as his fury fed on itself.

"Yuh git the box tonight—damn-yankee dog!" he snarled between blows. "Three days, for slackin'! The neck-an'-ankle box, Stanton-! Bread an' swamp watah! Slack, will you? I'll—"

Marley's warning call floated from the shade. Al Crosby wheeled. With a choked-off growl he coiled his whip hastily and flung it into bushes beside the road. Down the heat-wriggling highway purred a large and glistening car chauffeured by a white convict.

"Git workin'!" Crosby strode to where Marley waited in the road. The car drew to a halt. "Aft'noon, Wa'den," Crosby greeted obsequiously, opening the tonneau door of the car for the elderly van Dyked passenger. "Y'all pretty hot ridin' without a top, ain't you?"

Warden Jameson nodded. He asked a few questions, then moved toward the prisoners, Marley and Crosby following. Mighty Ambrose touched Terry Stanton's elbow, sent him a cautioning look.

"Keerful! Ef'n yo lets Wa'den see what Crosby done, guard-man sho' nuff kill y'all tonight!"

JAMESON strolled among the men, looking them over, until his cool eyes found Stanton. He paused, scowling. "What's yoah name, son?" he inquired.

Stanton stopped working. He gave it.

"Yank, eh? What y'all doin' makin' road for Gawgia?"

"I was in the gin office at Higbee. I'm an accountant, sir. When cotton hit six cents, the gin closed."

Jameson's lips pursed. "How long y'all in foah?"

"Eight years, sir. Six years more."

"What foah?"

Stanton's face darkened. "I stole fourteen dollars." He half-turned as if he had no more to say, then faced Jameson defiantly. "I'm not a thief, Warden. But my wife was hungry, and my little kid. I—I couldn't stand it!"

Jameson looked him over again, and a troubled light came into his eyes. "Two yeahs you se'ved? Come from Judge Snead's cou't, maybe?"

"Yes, sir." He watched the troubled light deepen in Jameson's eyes. Frowning, making no comment, the warden walked away. Stanton knew why he had asked about the sentencing judge. Snead had been facing re-election; he'd had need of a record to point to with pride. There were dozens of his victims in Georgia road gangs.

Eight years for stealing fourteen dollars was extreme. And they had been so hungry, he and Millie and the kid! Especially the kid, his eyes slightly glazed, his little body wasting. Sometimes in his sleep Stanton could still hear the kid's wails for food.

The prisoners covertly watched Warden Jameson out of earshot talking with Crosby and Marley. The warden's gestures and the grimness lining his face proved him reprimanding the guards. Al Crosby flared up, but the warden cut in with something that reduced Crosby to sullenness. The prisoners exchanged glances, aware that it was Warden Jameson who had caused Crosby's demotion from prison treasurer to his hot, lower-paid position guarding the chain gang.

Jameson went to his car. In Stanton's ear Ambrose grieved:

"Boy, howdy, y'all sho' nuff gwine catch what-fo' come evenin'! Lak it's all yo' fault what Wa'den tell Crosby that he ain't wuth a damn!"

As if to prove Ambrose's guess, when the car had gone Crosby, hands on hips, stared accusingly at Terry Stanton, his face stamped with evil promise.

"Yuh wait!" he snarled. "Whine, will yuh? Fix to make him see yo' shirt, will yuh? Y'all goin' to have a red shirt this evenin'!"

Shivering at his reptilian meaning, Stanton plied his shovel harder, trying not to think. Beside him Ambrose lifted and struck his heavy sledge, lifted and struck again, tireless as one of the automatic figures on a medieval clock.

The movement fascinated Terry Stanton, became a symbol of his captivity. It had even become part of the language as a metaphor—"Makin' little ones out of big ones"—"On the rock pile." Then the symbol became an idea, and fluttering hope started inside him. A desperate hope pinned to the swing of Ambrose's heavy sledge. . . .

He glanced at the guards, saw them sprawled in shade muttering about the warden's call. And Stanton knew he must attempt to escape. Failure meant hellish torture—but he was slated for that anyway. Crosby had promised it. The warden's notice of blood on Terry Stanton's back, and his reprimand to Crosby, had made the guard savage.

Bent over his shovel, Stanton worked closer to Ambrose. He caught the giant's look, whispering: "Will you break it for me?"

He indicated the cuff welded around his ankle, terminus of the heavy chain. Ambrose's eyes flared, but he said nothing. His shoulder muscles rippled, then bulged as his maul fell with ground-shaking force.

"Crack it, Ambrose!" Stanton begged.

"You can, can't you?"

"Ah kin. But Crosby sho' nuff kill me ef'n I do!"

IF THEY heard, the two men chained with them made no sign. Nor did Stanton say more, realizing that Ambrose was right. He had served three of his four years; it wasn't fair to ask him to jeopardize his chance of early release. Even such as Ambrose could be worn down by the shattering labor on the red loam roads, the endless succession of nights and days, the relentless drag and clank of black steel.

"O.K., boss man," Ambrose agreed suddenly.

Stanton's wild surge of hope made him start. "You mean you're going to do it?"

"Says yes. Put 'er cuff on dat rock."

"But—what about Crosby? What he may do to you, Ambrose?"

"Ah doan care. Ah'll laugh at Mistah Crosby!"

Stanton heard his own breath whistling. Tensely he nodded to the third and fourth members of their squad, and they moved between him and the idling guards. Sinking on one knee as if to tie his shoelace, he settled the welded ankle-iron in just the right position on the six-inch rock Ambrose had pointed out.

"For God's sake, don't miss!" he whispered. "Sure you can hit it?"

"Kin half me a fly with mah maul." Slowly Ambrose raised his sledge until it loomed against the sky.

Terry Stanton fixed his eyes on the metal cuff. His nerves were taut as wires. Let Ambrose miss ... and his ankle would be a bloody pulp. He knew what that would mean; he had seen what happened to another convict. Lying in agony by the roadside until nightfall, carried back to the camp, hours later sent to town for amputation.

"Doan move!" Ambrose hissed.

Then he swung.

The maul whizzed past Terry Stanton's ear, so close that he flinched the instant before it struck. Metal clanged loudly on metal. The maul glanced sharply aside, gouging flesh from Stanton's leg, then thudded into red loam. Ambrose raised it again, looked at the twisted ankle-iron, then turned stolidly to his work. His sledge lifted, crashed against rock and red soil.

Furiously Stanton clawed his cuff away. He flung the chain aside and scrambled erect, with a glance at the guards. But they still idled, unnoticed. The convicts labored on, only an occasional furtive envious glance flashed at him. Not one of the fifteen would have betrayed him; they would gloat with Terry Stanton if he got away. Pray for him. Two, moving their lips, prayed for him now.

He slid into roadside shrubs. Somewhere west lay the reedy banks of the Apalachicola, over beyond Bainbridge. There were swamps there, and despite a deadly population of cotton-mouths and rattlers, swamps were havens of refuge for one in Stanton's position. Dogs had difficulty following a man across a surface of mud and water; not even the bloodhounds Crosby and Marley had left chained several hundred yards up the road could follow a scent over such terrain.

Out of the shrubs, Stanton ran among the close-set scrub trees. Twice he stopped, and the second time heard the distant baying of the hounds. He glanced at the sun, already dropping toward the horizon, and, turning, plunged deeper into the brake that ringed Moccasin Swamp.

FLORIDA sunshine probing through the semitropical growth found a faded sign that named the forgotten subdivision Gulf View. No one lived in the three or four houses built during boom days, but south along the weed-choked street Hortonville still drowsed out its

sleepy existence; and to the north of the subdivision, in a little clearing beside a swamp, was the rickety shack of James Koehn.

Hortonville knew James Koehn as a Northerner recovering from a long nervous illness. He talked little as he performed odd jobs in the village or made his purchases at the store. Constable Pinkard knew him for a tongue-tied down-and-outer, a hermit whose only companion was the young pig fattening in the pen beside his shack.

It was nearly ten months since Stanton's escape and he had all but conquered his limp born of two years of dragging chain. His health was returning, the gauntness of his features softening as flesh mantled his bones. Sometimes his eyes, still shifty, became gentle as he dreamed of returning to Millie and the kid waiting in Ohio, there to rehabilitate himself as a unit of decent middle-class society.

He was thinking of Millie and the kid that day when, on his weekly errand to Hortonville, he struck elbows with the red-jowled stranger.

"Sorry, mister." Stanton shifted his parcels and hurried away. When, far along the street, he glanced back, he was too preoccupied to see the other start in recognition, then move after in pursuit. But when five minutes after he reached home a peremptory rap sounded on his door, Terry Stanton turned pale even before he opened it to face Al Crosby.

"Reckoned it was you!"

Crosby's face was alight, his pig's eyes triumphant. They strayed to the shack's interior, clean and in good order but plain to the point of bareness. He inventoried a rough pine table, a mended chair, two or three packing boxes, a home-built cot and straw pallet in the corner, a few cooking utensils, and some threadbare clothing.

"Doin' all right, ain't yuh, Stanton?"

Crosby sneered. "Sure, if you insist, I'll step in an' visit awhile."

Pale and shaking, Stanton moved aside. He watched Crosby drop confidently into the creaky chair. His mouth opened, lips moving, but at first no sound came.

"You're—taking me back?" he forced out at last.

"Got my duty, Stanton. Six yeahs to se've, ain't you? All I gotta do is call the constable," Al Crosby shrugged.

Stanton felt something snap in his brain. Almost as if he were watching a play he saw himself lunge for his ax in the corner. Fascinatedly watched himself swing it viciously—

Al Crosby was out of his chair, his left hand grabbing the haft just behind the ax-head. His right fist landed solidly on Terry Stanton's chin. The ax fell, Stanton crumpling after it. He lay still while Crosby opened the door and flung the ax outside.

Contemptuously, his wide lips tight, he struck out with one foot. "Git up, dam' yuh! C'mon, Stanton, git your ca'cass out o' theah!"

STANTON crawled erect. At a gesture he backed to the wall, and Crosby strode threateningly after. "Y'all goin' to catch hell foah that, Stanton! Wait till I git y'all back on the gang!"

Wretched, Stanton said nothing, though his lips moved. His chest was cold, but in the pit of his stomach a flame burned, searing his vitals. He sought escape . . . but there was no escape from the powerful Crosby gloating and towering over him.

"Yuh don't act very glad to see me." Crosby dropped on the arm of the chair, measuring his victim. "Look-a here, Stanton," he proposed suddenly, "s'pose I'd forgit about meetin' yuh? Leave yuh alone? Hell, this ain't Gawgia, is it?"

Stanton looked incredulous. "You

mean—?"

"Cou'se. Why not? Listen," he asked cunningly, "y'all seen Jameson hereabouts, maybe?"

Swallowing, Terry Stanton made no answer. He had seen the warden and kept out of his way. He knew Jameson was spending a vacation with a brother up the Gulf shore. The knowledge had tormented him, kept him in his shack except for today's errand, though he thought the chance of Jameson remembering him was remote.

"I've seen him," he admitted finally. "Why?"

"Well, I'm heah on a little business. Maybe y'all could handle it foah me."

"Business?"

"In a way o' speakin'," Crosby grinned. "Jameson's cooked up some sort of graft story about me. 'Cou'se, it's a damned lie. But he let out to a friend o' mine he figures to je'k me befoah the trial boa'd. Always hated me, Jameson has. He's the one busted me from the treasurer's office to bein' a damned guard."

He rose and came nearer, shaking his fist. "But Al Crosby don't take nothin' layin' down. I'm goin' to fix that dirty cottonmouth, Jameson. Hear me? Leastwise, Stanton, you are!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you—if y'all know when youah well off! S'pose," Crosby hinted, "somethin' happens to Jameson? Might be I'd fo'git about seein' yuh, Stanton. So somethin' better happen to Jameson. Y'all understand? Else yuh'll be draggin' that skinny ca'cass back to that road gang. An' gettin' black-snaked to laces!"

Stanton's eyes lowered and a shudder went through him. It was murder Crosby demanded. Warden Jameson's murder. In exchange for his own freedom.

But he bore Jameson no grudge! All the prisoners knew the warden was a good

sort, a humanitarian whose efforts were circumscribed by political influence. All knew how he had tried to improve the prison community of two thousand, and how strongly he opposed the principle of contract labor.

Stanton felt rather a liking for Jameson—but that was beside the point now. What counted was that he had six years more to serve. And watching Al Crosby, he knew what a hell those six years would be.

His lips quivered as he wished he had fled north instead of coming to Hortonville. But at the time of his escape it had seemed the part of shrewdness to hide in Florida, for he was certain that he would be sought first at his wife's family home.

"Well?" Crosby prodded. "Yes or no, Stanton? Ain't got nothin' to lose, have y'all? Got plenty to gain when yuh think of six yeahs more on the road. And I don't care how yuh git Jameson. Do it youah own way. Only prove yuh did get him so I'll know. Then I'll fo'get about seein' y'all."

THERE was silence. Distractedly Stanton gazed about his shack. This had been home until he could move north to Ohio. Sell the pig grunting in its pen outside, get bus fare to take him to Millie and the kid. It had been peaceful here, compared with the chain gang, and—

"C'mon, man, speak up! Will yuh do it? Git Jameson? Or go back on the road foah six years?"

The Adam's apple jogged in his throat. Fists clenched, he raised his eyes to Crosby's. "All right, I'll—I'll kill Jameson. But you'll surely keep your promise about not bothering me any more? You'll let me alone then, Crosby?"

"Cou'se, man!" Crosby whacked him on the shoulder, and laughed. "Y'all are bein' smart, Stanton! Reckon we understand each othah, eh?"

"I'll drop back tomorrow," he smirked. "Remember, I'll want proof the job's done.

Proof, y'all understand?"

"Yes."

Grinning widely, Crosby strode to the door. He was gone.

For a long time Terry Stanton stared after him. Then he fell to pacing up and down, up and down the little shack. Flight? Perhaps he could get—

But no. Crosby would be expecting him to bolt. He'd be watching. And Stanton feared to test again the luck that had attended his escape from the chain gang.

He moved through the door. A full minute he stared at his ax, then picking it up, hefted it reflectively. Three slow steps took him to a stone, and he began to grind the ax blade, trying it with his thumb, grinding again until it was keen.

The night was vaguely moon-silvered when Terry Stanton approached the Jameson cottage. Far behind him the Hortonville bank clock struck one. There was no other sound save frogs croaking in the roadside ditch and the fitful murmur of waves from the Gulf.

On tiptoe Stanton peered in a window, then moved to another. A tremor went through him as he made out Warden Jameson's moonlight-tinged face on the bed.

Stealthily Terry Stanton began to pry at the screen. A catch yielded, then another. With utmost care he lifted the screen from the casement and laid it on the ground. Hoisting himself, he eased noiselessly into the room. Ax ready, he stood gazing down at the gently snoring man.

TT WAS day. Stanton stared at the food on his table; but he couldn't force down a mouthful. Rising, his face working, he began to pace his shack. Time and again he glanced apprehensively at the battered alarm clock on the shelf; then, as if drawn by a magnet, his eyes sought the blood-stained ax in the corner.

There were footsteps outside, and a knock. Rigid, like an animal at bay, Stanton

hesitated, then went to the door. Al Crosby entered, his heavy red face twisted with eagerness. His close-set eyes pinned Stanton questioningly.

"I heard in town," he said slowly, "that Wa'den Jameson's done disappeared. You know 'bout it, Stanton?"

Numbly he nodded. Gestured to the ax.

"That looks pu'ty good," Crosby purred. "What else y'all got, Stanton? Told yuh I got to see proof!"

Going to his cot, Stanton leaned and from underneath drew a bundle of clothing. Opening it, he showed a shirt gory with clotted blood, trousers, tie, and crimson-stained collar.

Crosby's eyes gleamed like steel. "What y'all do with him?"

Stanton gestured toward the swamp behind the shack. "He's—it's back there. It's marshy, and the pieces are sunk so nobody'll ever find 'em."

Al Crosby relaxed. He let a broad grin overspread his face. He turned, and following his look Stanton went paper-white at sight of the man in the doorway—Pinkard, the Hortonville constable.

He clutched Crosby's arm. "You devil! You promised you'd let me off if I— You dirty, low skunk!" he blazed. "You never meant to keep your promise! When you said—"

"C'mon, Pinkard. Git him; he's our man! You fool," Crosby snarled at Terry Stanton, "did y'all think I'd let y'all stay around to make trouble for me? Pinkard!"

For an instant it seemed to Stanton he must rush his tormentor and try to tear him apart. Then it was too late as Pinkard's gun leveled at him.

"Git back!" the constable rasped. "Stick youah hands out!"

Stanton's eyes clashed with the malevolent eyes of Al Crosby. And suddenly, as if answering his veiled, mute plea, Crosby

stepped between him and Pinkard's gun, and his lips moved with urgent message.

"Run!" Crosby mouthed without sound. "Now's your chance! Run!"

His look and slight gesture promised safety. They suggested that if Stanton broke for freedom, Crosby would see to it that Constable Pinkard's shot missed.

But Stanton understood in a flash what would happen. That he would be killed. Conveniently for Crosby, who feared accusation of complicity in the Jameson murder, therefore wanted Stanton slain escaping from an officer. That, for Al Crosby, would be the perfect ending.

"Go on!" he hissed again urgently.

But Stanton delayed. And a new, ringing voice made both jump.

"Hold off, Pinkard! Al Crosby, reach youah hands before I blow youah crooked head off!"

WITH a choked-out curse Crosby wheeled. Pinkard wheeled, and stood gulping at the leveled revolver in the fist of the man barring the doorway.

"Jameson!"

"That's right, Crosby. Seems like we got showdown now, eh? Man, I got enough on you to send y'all up for the rest of youah natural-bawn life!"

He turned to Pinkard. "Slip bracelets on him, Constable. Hold him in jail till I can bring my charges."

Pinkard's mind was slow but he understood a plain order. Crosby manacled, he nodded at Stanton. "How 'bout him, Wa'den? Ain't he escaped one of youah road gangs?"

"Who, Stanton? Don't believe all that cotton-mouth told you. Just throw Crosby in youah pen and hold him. I'll be along in a little spell."

Pinkard dragged the blaspheming Crosby away. Terry Stanton found Jameson's eyes watching him expectantly. His own

lowered.

“I’m glad the hog blood worked, Warden. Thanks for playing along with me.” He drew a long breath. “Guess you’ll want to turn me in now. But—I don’t mind so much, knowing Crosby’ll be there working beside me.”

“Good actin’ y’all did.” Jameson looked thoughtful. “Stole some money once, didn’t you, Stanton?”

“Only fourteen dollars. I got eight years for it. Six years to go.” His voice went husky. “But Warden, I was desperate! We were hungry! The kid was—”

He broke off. Nodding, Jameson drew out a black cigar, bit off the end, and spat it out.

“That Crosby’s a Gawgia moccasin. Nearly skinned a Negro with his black-snake ’bout the time you busted out. Shot another he needn’t have. Things got so bad another o’ the guards complained. Changed Crosby to guardin’ payroll, and he stole two thousand

dollars by signin’ fake names. I discovered ’bout that. So Crosby followed me down heah, plannin’ to hush me up.

“About you, Stanton,” he added. “I ain’t fast reachin’ my gun, nor I ain’t much of a shot.” Jameson paused. “Reckon you could git away. ’Course, if I was you, I’d think about those six yeahs you got left. Think about surrenderin’ and volunteerin’ all I knew about Crosby so he gits everything he deserves.”

Warden Jameson put the cigar in his mouth and lighted it. “Reckon in a month you’d come out free an’ cleah. Pretty sure you would. Pa’doned. Then you could go to yoah fam’ly.”

Terry Stanton tried to believe his ears. That hint, that kindly look was trebly better than Al Crosby’s solemn promise. He watched Jameson, his own lips repeating the words of magic he had heard. Trying to believe them.

Terry Stanton drew a long breath. “I’m going with you, Warden,” he said. “I’m going with you.”