



GRAY MAGIC

BY
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*Was it a woman or the gray magic of the Big House
that made The Kid take the big gamble?*

STIR IS funny that way—there's magic in every Big House. It's queer, the radically odd things that it does to some men, an' it works a little of the black art on all of 'em. In my ten years behind the turrets an' ramparts, I've seen it pull its Houdinis as methodically as the tickin' of a Big Ben. What could be more interesting, more intriguing than the gray process that can transform men? Gray process? Gray shadows, gray walls—an infinitesimal kingdom where gray ominous clouds constantly drape the blue to frame the land o' shamblin' things. Slinkin' things castin' their gray shadows on grayer walls; leaden footsteps pacin' the gray, small area of a cell, beyond the ever yawnin' gates of prison—that monster who feeds

on the embers of wasted things, wasted dreams, wasted years, an' men.

I've watched the process work—an' it works both ways, but in most cases it does it for the worst. When a bad man comes in all the screws mark him for a quick workout. All the wise ones know this an' they dummy up pronto—which saves them many a crude tampin', an' burns up the hard screws that are lookin' for a rep. An' when a hard one comes in decidin' to live up to past records—it's curtains. After they give him the final rubdown that baby can only do two things—rate a free suite at the nut house, or eat outta their hands. But, many a lad comes in without any advance press agent stuff an' in no time he goes Jesse Jimmy. Why? There's

plenty of reasons, yet in most cases it's some little thing that makes 'em go bad. A little push in line, sour hash, a little argument, a dirty word—an' sometimes nobody knows just what starts it. Anyhow that happens—an' how, an' when!

NOW, I'M thinkin' of the Kid. There was a boy that any ol' timer woulda told you woulda pulled his time the easy way an' made the bricks early. But a sure bet is, as a rule, sucker-bait. I saw The Kid the day he came in, a mighty nice lookin' lad. He had one of those collegiate outfits an' he was fulla ganders as he went across the yard to the rag-box to change togs. He had a smile on his face all the way.

Later, I got to know him an' there wasn't a moment that he didn't sport that nice lookin' grin. Everybody got to likin' The Kid right off the bat—you couldn't help it. Well, a year goes by an' to my knowledge he never crashed the cooler-court on a write-up—not that he never needed a word of judicial advice—but no hack, none he came in contact with anyhow, could get apast that smile. He was only doin' three, which is a walk-away these days, an' it looked as if he'd clear in less than half of it.

He celled with Red Slone, an' Red used to tell me what a swell cellmate The Kid was. Red was always tellin' me about The Kid. How he used to keep the drum clean, an' share everything that he got with Red—in them days it was a keen scuffle to keep in weed, but The Kid always had more than his share, an' he kept Red puffin'. Maybe you think that ain't much. Well, just get in an' see how many miles you'd walk for the charred remains of a Camel—I know.

The Kid didn't go in for any serious readin', just went for the joke books that were kickin' about the place. He knew more gags than the guy that started the idea an' he didn't mind pullin' 'em. You could always get a laugh if you were around The Kid. The boys all knew this an' he had plenty of friends. Now that's a bad thing for anybody—plenty of company in stir. The reason is this: The more you mix, the more chance you have of palin' around with a stoolie—an' them animals is tough. You never know when you'll take the rap for somethin' you never heard about. Some of them raps are not strawberry shortcake—I know. I tried the straitjacket a couple of times for some other boy's little prank—an' if you think the ol' bread an'

water is an easy go—try it for about ten days standin' up in a straitjacket—just for fun. But, The Kid was lucky, he never got in wrong. I suppose the wire was out to lay off—he had plenty of friends. An' I was glad to say that I was one of 'em.

Well, one day, right out of a clear sky as the poets say, it come to pass. I got a chance to hold a chin-carnival with Red that mornin', an' as he looked a bit peaked an' worried I ask him what the trouble was. He just shook his head an' said: "It's that damn Kid!" Now, that surprised me plenty, an' of course I wanted to know what was off.

"Oh," he says, "you know those letters he's always been gettin'. I told you about how regular they came, well, they started to drop off, women an' girls are that way, absence makes the heart grow fonder—is the bunk. He used to just stick his hand out the bars every night when the mailman was comin' along the range, an' sure enough he'd pull a letter every time—well, he hasn't got one for a month—he sits there waitin' an' when the guy with the sack passes him up, he crawls into the bunk—an' that's the end of the evenin'! I tried to talk to him last night an' this mornin', but he froze up—won't tumble me!"

Now, that looked pretty funny to me, an' Red felt bad too an' I didn't blame him, he thought a lot of The Kid.

I heard about The Kid later that day, seems someone in the shop said somethin' he didn't like an' in a flash he was at him. That musta been some scrap, from what I heard later, they both were even on the weight an' it took two husky hacks to pull 'em apart. The Kid made the hole three days on that one. The day he came outta the hole he fell on a screw, an' the hack got a little fancy needle work done on his cranium.

He done ten days on that. Then he refused to work. What could have been worse than that? If you wantta job they won't give you one, but if you have one an' you suddenly get the idea that you don't like it, that's just when they start to make you like it—plenty of different ways. But The Kid wouldn't work, an' that was all there was to it. After a few trips—straitjacket an' bread an' water in generous portions—they laid off of him. They put him in an idle company an' he didn't have anything to do but think, an' I guess he did plenty of that, accordin' to results.

Then, one wintry mornin' he made the big gamble—an' lost. The big gamble of a try at the

wall—an' take it from little me, it's a big gamble. Anytime you try a fade-out between a nice oiled pair of machine guns—knowin' that they're goin' to spit those nasty little red-hot pellets at you—it's a toss-up. Some make it. Some don't. The Kid didn't.

Well, when he thought the wall hacks weren't lookin' he made a run for it. He just reached the crest of that wall when the gun of the farthest tower cuts down on him. An' did it cut down on him? Plenty! When we picked him up, he was riddled. Those gunners in those towers know how to use

those meatchoppers. I know. I saw it.

Well, Red felt pretty bad about it. I guess we all did feel like last year's Christmas tree. The Kid was well liked. After we'd carried him into the little, gray morgue-house an' Red had stooped an' touched him for the last time, I heard him mumble in a low broken voice, "Huh! Women—they even bust a man up after he's been holed up in a stir!"

Now I didn't want to argue with Red, but I knew it wasn't a woman that pushed that Kid up the ladder—it was that damn gray magic of the Big House, playin' its dirty tricks.