

Convict 69

by George Albert Leddy

**TWENTY YEARS IN A PRISON, WAITING FOR DEATH TO COME;
PRAYING EACH NIGHT TILL THE MORNING, FOR THE MASTER TO TAKE ME HOME.
TWENTY YEARS AND I'M WEARY, WEARY OF LIFE IN A CELL.
MY LIFE IT IS CURST, YET I'M PRAYING, AND GOD HE MUST HEAR, AND HE WILL.**

The Prisoner sits within his cell, his home of twenty years;
Fond visions seem to come and go, he sees them through his tears.
He seems to be a boy again, with heart that knows no care;
He seems to see a little girl, with sunny flowing hair.
He reaches out to take her hand, the vision fades away;
He rouses just to find himself—the Prisoner old and gray.

Without the scene is sadder still: a hungry, half-crazed Tramp;
With shrunken cheek and furrowed brow, a worthless worn-out scamp.
His life has been a burden, filled with crime and sin and shame;
He'd wandered on, he cared not where, till weary, weak and lame;
He'd reached again the home he'd known, in happy days of yore.
A silent shadow leads him blindly, to the prison door.

The Prisoner, in his cell, can hear the conversation low:
“Why yes, a number man was sent here, twenty years ago.”
“What was the name? What was the crime? Was he sent-up for life?”
The answer came in muffled tones: “They say he killed his Wife.”
“Ah Warden, let me see his face, and if it should be he;
I swear to furnish all the proofs—to set the Prisoner free!”

The Warden said, “Among them all, we have Old 69;
For twenty years he's been, of all, the best one on the line.
He's reconciled unto his fate, he's faithful first and last;
But since the crime his mind is dead, to all the living past.
He can't remember who or where, or how it all began.
I'll let you see Old 69—perhaps, he'd be your man.”

The door is wide, he steps within, then falls back with a cry:
“My God! that cannot be the boy, I knew in days gone-bye.
The stately lad, so proud, so stern: now shrunken and forlorn;
The handsome face, the noble brow: now haggard, old, and worn;
The handsome head of nut-brown hair: now shaggy, thin, and white;
The eyes that sparkled truth and love: now filled with deadly light.

“The boy who once I called my Pal, when life was young and gay;
The boy who loved the little gal, the winsome Little May;
The boy who won that fight for love—for I his rival were.
The day they wed, my poor heart bled, my thoughts were all of her.
With jealous rage, I cursed the love, she gave to him alone;
And swore by all, the day would come—I’d claim her for my own.

“And like the wolf that waits the lamb, to wander from the fold;
I waited for the day to come, my heart was cruel and cold.
Then came the day, the fatal day, I tremble now to tell:
Disguised as man, but with a heart and soul, as black as Hell,
I crept into their humble home, she met me with a smile.
My God! that smile, I see it yet—it nearly drove me wild.

“I clasped her madly to my heart, she fought to get away;
But no, I held her like the jungle lion holds its prey.
I held her, and I kissed her lips—then one unearthly cry;
Which seemed to chill my very blood, and cause my soul to die;
Went ringing through the little room, then vanish into space;
And lo, my once-loved Pal and I—were standing face-to-face.

“His eyes were filled with mad-man’s hate, I shrank like cowards will;
From what I saw within his face, I knew he meant to kill.
And like a tiger brought to bay, I thought but for my life.
I struck a blow, ‘twas meant for him—but God! it killed his Wife.
And as he raised the lifeless form, he cried, ‘My Love! My Own!’
I shrank away, a frightened cur, and left them all alone.

“For twenty years, I wandered through this rough old world alone;
No living soul to call me friend, no place to call my Home.
The pain I’ve suffered for my crime, no tongue could ever tell;
If happiness is Heaven, then my life has been a Hell.
For every time I close my eyes, her face I seem to see;
A-warning me, through eyes of hate—‘Go back, and set him free.’

“But no, the coward in my heart was keeping me away.
She warned me in the dead of night, she led me on by day.
But sure as right will win o’er wrong, she won her fight at last;
To lay my sins before the world, my hiding days are past.”
“Oh God!” he cried, “Thy will be done!” and on a bending knee:
“He’s innocent, the crime is mine—go set the Prisoner free!”

Alas, too late to free the form, that sits with bowed-down head;

A Mighty-hand has freed the soul—Old 69 is dead.

Upon the face, a peaceful smile, the first in twenty years.

The Warden stands with bowed-down head, his eyes are filled with tears.

While he who caused this life of shame, so wildly does entreat:

“Oh God, have mercy on my soul!”—then dies at his victim's feet.

Another sun shines bright and clear, to name another day;

Shines o'er two freshly mounded graves, where two who'd suffered, lay.

One little slab marked: 69; the other marked: Unknown.

While to a Court of Justice, far above, two souls have flown.

And may the Judge, who judges all, release them from all care;

For they have suffered here, below—may they be happy, there.
