

ROCK OF AGES

By
T-BONE SLIM

What would the cold-sullen stones in a prison wall say if they could talk? Would they burst into poetry lauding nature's wonderful favors or would they rise in denunciation of a most damnable system of society; wherein nature's nobleman performance must linger and languish within a dark, loathsome Heritage-of-an-Age otherwise forgotten? Prison.

It is now Centuries and Centuries since prisons were invented and they appear to be the only establishment that defies the Law of Change. Jails and more jails appear to be the rule in our maudlin society to the end that now our fair land is dotted with them. At the end of a good day's walk you will arrive at a jail or a cluster of jails in certain localities, but in industrial centers an hour's walk is sufficient. So the question arises what would the cold, sullen stones say if they could talk—and they can talk. They do talk. They talk a fluent universal tongue that everybody can understand. Their words may not be as polished as the words of a Daugherty or a Fickert or a Cowan, but talk they do. And what do these sullen stones say? Ah fellow workers, I'm a poor hand at reporting speeches—my memory is so poor, I'm afraid I can not put the words down on this paper in the order they were given me by a cynical block of sandstone in a penitentiary wall. . . .

Feeling flippant one day I asked the block: "How long you in for?"

"I'm in this wall until everybody gets the full product of their toil," replied the stone.

I was completely taken aback by its answer and begged it to explain more clearly.

"Well Slim, you see it's this way, most of these human beings that I am restraining are of an independent sort and would not knuckle down to work for overalls and snuff—they refused to labor long hours for

a small pay—work became irksome to them because there were no rewards—everything they "earn't" went to build their body so that they might work more—a dull, drab, slavish existence stared them in the face—so, like Brodey, they took a chance. Visions of love, comfort, pleasure and rest vanished with the vision of a cottage at the foot of the hill, paid for—a home. They saw it would take several life times to pay for a house that could be whittled out in one year with a jack knife, so they took a chance—they took individual action and realized too late their error—if they had organized they wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be here."

"But," I interrupted, "surely you have some union men in here?"

"Why yes, Slim, but you don't seem to get my drift, I'm trying to tell you, without making a too long story of it, that jails serve to keep the wage-slaves "contented"—of course we've got union men, but they're mostly organizers—the idea is to keep them away from the workers, so that the workers can be skinned more thoroughly. Yes, Slim, it's a damned shame toto—they only wanted what was right and, now, here they are with those that murdered to obtain the money that would not forthcome through the efforts of manual labor. Here they are with those that killed in passion sored by an inequitable system of compensation; or over woman for reasons traceable to same cause. Here they are with those that raped having been brought down to the level of an animal—"no front," malnutrition, self-abuse, atmosphere laden with demoralized "psychology" and suppressed desires are the causes (in the main) acting directly through victim of the deed or through agency of misguided Womanhoo dpossessed of false notions created by unequal system—thousands of reasons that remain fostered instead of exterminated—

Here they are with those that were

framed to save the reputation of police officers—some one had to be sent up; the "guilty" one could not be caught so they sent up a coward—frightened him into confessing—tricks in every trade you know, Slim, and this infamous industry is no different. From time immemorial slaves have been cast into dungeons for rebelling against their drivers. Educators have been jailed for letting slip enlightenment to slaves. Poets have been imprisoned for inspiring hope in the breast of those that toil and moan. Philosophers have been incarcerated for disproving the fitness of existing customs. Christ was crucified. Joe Hill was shot. Frank Little was dragged behind an automobile—can you then wonder that Ford and Suhr are in jail; Mooney and Billings are in the can. Can you wonder that the Centralia boys are in the pen for protecting their property according to law—(as it happened to be)—their hall, the hall which was objectionable to the lumber companies. Yes, Slim, there are organizers in here and yet these stones will lay, one upon the other, until organizers unite the great working class into a one big union and inaugurate a more equitable system of "returns" for labor. But, let me give you a tip, Slim: so long as American working men compete with child-labor so long will you all be slaves. . . ."

It was quite a talk we had with the old piece of mountain side, but of course I can't be expected to remember it all. "Watch your step" was its last words and I confess they gave me a start—I recalled the time I was in a workhouse. . . . as I was being released, the kind-faced superintendent took me by the hand affectionately, gazed into my eyes and said, "Slim, get yourself a job and make an honest living."—Next week he shot himself for misappropriating prison funds—so I resolved to be honest even if they hang me for it.