

FORTY YEARS OF IT

BY
BRAND WHITLOCK



NEW YORK AND LONDON
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
MCMXIV

1914

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The incident, like that on which the story itself was founded, occurred in the course of another effort to induce the Governor to save a poor wretch from the gallows. The autumn preceding, just when the World's Fair at Chicago was at its apogee, a half-crazed boy had assassinated Carter Harrison, the old mayor of that city, and had been promptly tried and condemned to death. The time for the execution of the sentence drew on, and two or three days before the black event I had a telegram from Peter Dunne and other newspaper friends in Chicago asking me to urge the governor, or the acting governor as it happened at that time to be, to commute the sentence to one of imprisonment for life. The boy, so the telegrams said, was clearly insane, and had been at the time of his crazy and desperate deed; his case had not been presented with the skill that might have saved him, or at least might have saved another in such a plight; there had been the customary hue and cry, the most cherished process of the English law, "and," Dunne concluded, "do get Joe Gill to let him off."

Joe Gill was Joseph B. Gill, the young Lieutenant-Governor of the state, and because Governor Altgeld was just then out of the state he was on the bridge as acting governor. Gill had been one of the Immortal 101, and as a representative had made a record in support of certain humane measures in behalf of the miners of the state. The newspaper

correspondents had had pleasure in celebrating him and his work in their despatches, and because of his popularity among the miners, to say nothing of his popularity among the newspaper men, he had been nominated for lieutenant-governor on the ticket with Altgeld. There was in our relations a *camaraderie* which put any thought of presumption out of the question; besides, I was always so much opposed to the killing of human beings, especially to that peculiarly horrible form of killing which the state deliberately and in cold blood commits under the euphemism of "capital punishment," that I was always ready to ask any governor to commute a sentence of death that had been pronounced against anybody; so that it seemed a simple matter to ask Joe Gill, himself the heart of kindness, to save the life of this boy whose soul had wandered so desperately astray in the clouds which darkened it.

Early the next morning—the telegrams had come at night—I went over to the governor's office, and the governor's private secretary told me that Lieutenant-Governor Gill had not yet appeared, and as a good secretary, anxious to protect his chief, he asked:

"What do you want to see him about?"

"This Prendergast they're going to hang in Chicago next Friday."

At this a man sitting in the room near the secretary's desk looked up with a sudden access of intense interest; and, starting from his chair and transfixing me with a sharp glance, he asked:

"What interest have you in the Prendergast case?"

"None," I said, "except that I don't want to have him, or anybody, hanged."

On the man's face, tired, with the expression of world-weariness life gives to the countenance behind which there has been too much serious contemplation of life, a face that seemed prematurely wrinkled, there suddenly appeared a smile as winning as a woman's, and he said in a voice that had the timbre of human sympathy and the humor of a peculiar drawl:

"Well, you're all right, then."

It thereupon occurred to the governor's secretary to introduce us, and so I made the acquaintance of Clarence Darrow. He had taken it upon himself to neglect his duties as the attorney of some of the railroads and other large corporations in Chicago long enough to come down to Springfield on his own initiative and responsibility to plead with the Governor for this lad's life (he was always going on some such Quixotic errand of mercy for the poor and the friendless), and we retired to the governor's ante-chamber to await the coming of Gill. We talked for a while about the Prendergast case, which might have had more sympathetic consideration had it not persisted as the Carter Harrison case in the mind of that public, which when its latent spirit of vengeance is aroused can so easily become the mob, but it was not long until I discovered that Darrow had read books other than those of the law, and for an hour we talked of Tol-

stoy and the other great Russians, and of Thomas Hardy and of Mr. Howells, to enumerate no more of the long catalogue of those realists whom we liked in common, and when I discovered that he actually knew Mr. Howells, knew him personally, as the saying is, I could feel that poor Prendergast, though I had never seen him in my life, or scarcely ever thought of him until the night before, had done me one service at least, and it made me all the more anxious to save him.

When Joe Gill's tall Egyptian form came swinging into the room our talk of books was interrupted long enough to arrange for a hearing that afternoon, and then we resumed our talk, and it endured through luncheon and after, and I left him only long enough to have a conversation with Gill and to ask him as a sort of personal favor to an old friend to spare the boy's life.

At two o'clock the hearing was called. The reporters and the governor's secretary and George Brennan and I made the audience, and Gill sat up erectly in the governor's chair to hear the appeal. Darrow asked me the proper address for a governor, and I said since this was the lieutenant-governor I thought "Your Excellency" would be propitiative, and Darrow made one of those eloquent appeals for mercy of which he is the complete master. It moved us all, but the Lieutenant-Governor gathered himself together and refused it, and Darrow went back to Chicago to unfold those legal technicalities which make our law so superior to other forms in that they can stay the hand of its

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vengeance. He did not succeed in the end, and the boy was hanged, and murder has gone on in Chicago since, I understand, the same as before. But Darrow could not leave Springfield until midnight of that day, and we talked about books all the evening, and when he boarded his train he had in his valise the MS. of my story about another governor and another pardon, concerning which he was charged to answer a certain question to which all my doubts and perplexities could be reduced, namely: "Is it worth while, and if not, is there any use in going on and trying to write one that is?"

I had to wait almost as long for his decision as though he had been an editor himself, but when I called at his office in Chicago one morning in the autumn to get the MS., and he told me that his answer to my question was "yes," and that he would, if I agreed, send the story to Mr. Howells, I was as happy as though he had been an editor and had accepted it for publication. I could not agree to its being sent on to weary Mr. Howells, but took it back with me to Springfield, in hope, if not in confidence.