

THE LOYAL MAN

“Jacob and I were going to go legitimate, Pa. Then along came the government, ruining our plans. I bet that his mother didn’t send him away to live with an aunt.”

“Whose mother?”

“The district attorney’s.”

He appeared to be reflecting. “I’m sorry for dying.” I did not want to insult him – he was my father, after all – so I kept quiet. He had been watching me. That was what he did, in heaven or hell, wherever he was, and I could read disappointment on his mien. “What are you covering up for?” He gave me a sideways glance, reaching around his middle in order to adjust his shawl, which was hanging loose with its ends over his trousers, which were muddy; I deliberately looked away, he had an unpleasant odor – how could he not have after so many years of lying under the earth? I had not tricked him into believing that I had ever contemplated going into legitimate business.

“I’m not around anymore, Louis. Do me a favor!” His face had no cheeks, just gray leaves of skin, I was glad that he pulled his skull cap low over his ears. The cell was dark, if I did not gaze at him, it was all the same. “You are a brave fellow, eh? A martyr. Why be a martyr for others?”

“It’s nothing, Pa.”

“You’re forty-six, too young to die.” I was ashamed of myself. He was bending his arms into contortions, he was so upset; as much noise as the man made, he never woke Mendy or Louis Capone, my cell neighbors, nor did the guards come. I dreamed. I was a lonely person, who else could I talk to? The time would come when my two colleagues and I were going to walk the last fifty feet, all that I had were rumors, otherwise only what father brought me. He did not always understand what people were saying, either. “My son! You put yourself on death row. How can I help?”

“There’s nothing to do.”

He told me that Jacob had offered state's evidence against us – me, Mendy, Louis the Italian – but I never believed it. I agreed with the old boy when it came to punishment, oh, there was never enough justice. I was mule headed, old-fashioned. Had there been something in my character that had led me wrong? I would rather be destroyed then, as I was. Mercy was nice, but it would have to come from elsewhere. I could not quibble about it.

“You can't be reasoned with,” he said.

“You're not asking me to be a stool pigeon?”

Jacob was my partner; or he had been that, before he had turned himself in to the police. I was a quiet fellow; Jake, however, was a beast – they called him “Gurrah,” because of his bad language. I knew that he made a boorish impression on people, but that was the purpose, that was the allure of a fitting partnership. When we went to the bakers' union meeting and informed them that in two weeks they would not strike, but that also they would take a cut in pay, Jake took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, called Mendy and Louis the Italian, and that was that. How to lead men, of that Gurrah had no notion. He only wanted to hit them if they misbehaved. He overdid it, but I was there, that was why they called me “the Judge.” I did not talk much, stayed on the sidelines.

I wept in my cell.

“Wipe your eyes,” father said.

“Don't want to. The guards'll see me doing it, and they'll laugh.”

He had no notion of Jake, father still was a greenhorn. In his presence, I had to say that Gurrah had been a partner: I knew it would be impossible to convince father of Gurrah's loyalty.

“I'm implying that you made a mistake,” he reiterated.

“I'm old enough to make my own mistakes, then.”

“If you could get yourself out of this, only! Talk to the district attorney. The law's in his hands.”

“I respect the law.” Why argue with the fellow?

Let me go back a little.

Perhaps they should have kept me behind bars. I did not mind jail, the routine did me good. I worked out, did exercises, I never was healthier in my life. On my twenty-fifth birthday, they released me, and according to the parole board, I was a reformed man. I have never been much of a talker. What was there to jabber about? That saved me, they thought that I was reflecting on my sins. I had a job as prison librarian, spent most of my time reading. I figured that everything that one did, one had to do methodically, that in sheer repetition, one would find oneself and the way. It ended up being true for me. I allotted all of my tasks to a strict time, a few hours for this, twenty minutes for that. It was possible, I mused, to move men and mountains if one knew how to gain people’s trust. One cannot just make others afraid, they hate one too much, one cannot make any deals with the world that way: and if there was one thing that I wanted, it was to be like the plebeian generals and merchant savants that I had read about: how to gain trust, that was how that I learned to lead men – my climb upwards, through loyalty.

The boys in the organization were great fellows. The two in the neighboring cells, they wake up and whisper next to me, “Don’t crack, boss.” Was not that a consolation, to know that they cared? Until my last breath, I will say: men who can stand by one are not to be found on every street corner. I knew that Jake had not squealed on Mendy, Louis, and me, since I knew Jake, and Jake was my partner; we had gone through a lot together on our way up. Sure, we were now going to fry. Murder Incorporated was a name that they gave to some of our Brooklyn boys, that was my hometown. It had been Jake’s idea,

he had gotten himself overly involved, I just know it, so that when Jake turned himself in, he said, “I don’t know from nothing, you get out of here.” What did the detectives reply? Pa said that Jacob was a “no good person,” I thought that Gurrah was a good influence on me. I was the lousy crumb, it was I who pushed us to the brink, determining the direction of the partnership. The group was a notion that I had born, it had no limits, as long as there were working people and protection to enforce, we would be bent on making something more out of ourselves, we were good people, too. They pretend that they do not recognize our faces nowadays, whereas then, no one had turned away from us, whoever had the cash to spare wanted us to do a job.

Gurrah? A friend too. I saw the sweet side of him, missed the raving, slamming people around; one had to know how to control him. My wife Goldie said, “Gurrah is a big softie.” He was angry sometimes, but he could not hurt one with words. That was what I did, I was reserved, brooded, then lashed out. Hurrah for Gurrah, that was the gospel truth, he was a big softie.

I mulled over things. Never spoke about my plans to a soul, out of fear of betrayal. Maybe it was a mistake. I wanted to make a mark in my own manner. Picture Jake shutting up and twiddling his thumbs instead of using his fists, him doing like I did; no, one cannot imagine him with my weaknesses. In my hometown, I gave away money to the poor, but not as much as I should have done; the government labeled me a bunch of names, I thought about it a lot, it made me sad – maybe the whole matter was not about honor but about making my mark, and that was not such a big deal; that was a cheap capability, really. Father had always wanted me, the youngest, to grow up and to allow him say the name of his son with vanity. I bought sedans with whitewall tires for Sadie,

Fern, Bessie, and Eli, my brother and sisters, contributed a scroll to the synagogue. Thief, liar, extortionist, I set up bank accounts for the college education of their kids; the criminal mastermind, as I was called, as they described me in the newspapers, the rat. A blot on the human race. I had had to fight my way upwards. “What is the point, Louis?” The old man again. “You’re going to be executed. You can’t seem to help yourself either.”

“You shouldn’t talk so mighty! You gave me only poverty!”

“It was better than Russia, here one could strive for the best.”

“What a greenhorn. You worked for peanuts.”

“I earned honest money.”

“You worked for other people like a hound.”

My father and mother sewed, sweated, sweated, sewed until their hands bled. They took their work home. How many hours, thirteen, fourteen a day? No one had to explain misfortune to me.

And then he began coughing blood.

Why did I turn myself in?

Think about the clothing industry. We regulated the cycles of down and up; the police chief did not have to do it. We did not want a revolution to take place. I may have been a bum, but then, one was a bum, period. We were not bent on taking advantage of the less fortunate, we did not want to bite off people’s heads. Why did they use the term “racket” to describe my business activities? We were living in the jungle, but there were rules, a law was there. The majority went to a place that they hated in order to work and sweat many hours, that was life. We tried to treat the laboring majority right, we reflected that they wanted only a few days of pleasure, we represented them before the boss. Like I

said, I had this nickname. It was not simple, I had dark moods. Truthfully, I despised myself, had nothing to fall back on but quietness, what was right, what was wrong, that was not to be divided into two heaps, easily, in order to find the proper answer. I used the piddling resources that were on hand, ruminated too much. That was what Jake said, anyway. I had to get the right angle. Threats were not good, but should people be left unorganized? I had the bad luck to be one of those souls who are capable of unifying what was disarrayed, I made the unaffiliated into union people. What happened was that Willie B., our representative in the movie industry, got smart with us. He was supposed to speak for the group. He had lost respect. Dollars and cents, dollars and cents. We were the guarantors of peace, some had to go on the street corner in order to sell apples, but make-believe was what people wanted, and that was the movies; and we had the projectionists in our grip. “That’s only a symbol,” I said to the boys. “Money is the substance that we substitute for the spirit.” Again, I was talking too much, in my view. Gurrah said, “Slam him, Lepke!” They all agreed that Willie was cheating us, had to go. I said, “Wait. It’s a principle. That’s not money, that’s trust that he’s destroying.” “Rat!” cried Jake. He nearly grabbed my neck. The big wonderful bear. Willie had had no beef with us. He had done a stupid thing. “Why has Willie been doing well? We have always been fair to him. Our clients need to be edified,” I discoursed.

I strived after invisibility, but there was no way that I could squeeze out of making the asked-for decisions. Why else was I there? I was someone who looked in the mirror, was seasick at his own face – I did not know me, I did not know me, and when it came to the question of motivation – when it came to guilt, I was scared of other people even more! Will I ever have to plead my case, I asked the mirror. Worthless Lepke, married to

poor Goldie. I never was a wiseguy. I was a usurper, but only for reasons of absent-mindedness, in order to forget and make denial possible. I was nothing, there was no denial possible, however, as father coughed blood and wheezed, “I bet on the horses today, and I lost!” Here we were, in a tenement apartment, six people in a room.

“I’ll tell Willie to leave town,” I told the other fellows.

That was a solution. We were standing on the front doorstep of his apartment building, the other fellows were peering at us, waiting in the parked car half of a block down the street. Mendy and Louis were carrying loaded guns, and all that I had to do was to give them a sign.

“The special prosecutor offered me immunity.”

“So I’m vulnerable, is that it?” I queried.

“He thinks that I know your line of work.”

I looked at him a long time. He probably got the message. I did not utter any threat, just smiled. “A lot of busybodies are sticking their noses in my business.” I laughed.

“What?”

“You’re a city boy, Willie. You need a rest. How’d you like to go to Florida?”

“Don’t like the climate, Lepke.”

“Hey, don’t get stubborn with me.” I looked behind me at the parked car. Gurrah was all for cutting off Willie B.’s head, he had asked for it. If not Florida, I suggested, then New Jersey. The important thing was: out, away from New York City. I never wanted more.

“Don’t need a vacation, I got family here.”

“You aren’t a young guy, Willie. How old are you?”

“Fifty-four.”

“Ripe old age, ha?”

I gave him a packet of twenty-dollar bills, ordered him to stay out of town.

“Lepke, give me a break. New York’s my home.”

He got shot in the head two weeks later. I did not know, should we have waited?

Then the district attorney sent subpoenas to everybody whom we knew. The newspapers published lists of the politicians and business people whom we had supposedly corrupted. That was funny.

“I’ll put the gang behind bars,” the district attorney announced.

Nasty, nasty.

Joe Rosenblatt, Hersh Green, a half a dozen others disappeared. Maybe twenty-five; sure, we made a couple of mistakes along the way, but how were we supposed to keep the noise down? Otherwise, a clean thing down the line. They wanted us to surrender. We had been on the lam, Gurrah, Mendy, Louis, myself. The trouble was that Jake had diabetes, and that made it difficult for him to hide, he needed a physician and the shots that he had to inject himself with. The police stayed off my trail, but Jake had to give up. I went to see the Dodgers every week, in a mustache that I had grown; I had gained a little weight too, in order to throw off the cops -- but, for God’s sake, they were looking for me in Warsaw, somebody said that I had planned to kidnap Prince Radziwill’s bride-to-be and sighted me there.

I should have listened to Albert. “Stay hidden in the city,” he said. “We can protect you.”

I was telling him about the offer that the FBI had made: if I would give myself up, I would not be delivered over to the state prosecutor's office for trial in Albany, but would have to face the music for federal charges against me as an importer of drugs. That was fine. No murder trial. The middleman was Walter Winchell, loud-mouth radio reporter. A gossip columnist would be acting as a go-between between me and J. Edgar Hoover. Why not?

"Don't trust anyone, Lepke," Albert intoned. "The big boy's sitting in Dannemora prison for life. You think that they'll keep their word?"

"The board's promised that the deal's legitimate. It's public. They can't go back on their word."

He shook his head no. Pressed my hand. And left.

I had never dealt in drugs. I was indicted, sentenced to twenty years in a federal prison, and then they sent me straight to Albany, where I would have to stand trial for Willie's murder.

Everything was unraveling. I had had it so well arranged, it had functioned as I had wanted it to.

I always was frightened of these things.

"What I think, Louis, is that I regret dying so early." He cleared his throat in order to get my attention; father was offended that I was not giving my everything to get out of the mess that I now was in.

I looked at my wrist. I had no wristwatch, it had been taken away five years before, but the habit stayed. "I won't promise the warden anything, Pa! I'm not a stool pigeon. I'll just take up his time, he's not in a hurry nor am I."

The guard rattled his keys and announced, “Time for your meeting with the warden, Mister Buchalter.” He juggled around with the key in the lock; Pa jumped into the top bunk; he did not take up any room. Just before he disappeared, we looked at each other. I wanted to say something, did not. Mendy and Louis were dozing, I saw, in their cells. My time was up. The fact was that the warden had said to the press a week ago, “Lepke is incorrigible, society should be rid of such vermin as that.” What was there big to gab about.

I was led, handcuffed, down the hall, away from death row, into the warden’s office. Two armed guards stayed inside while we discussed my last chance. There was a side door to the warden’s chambers; the walls were wired, I figured.

“Lepke, what do you know about the connection between so-and-so and the unions? Isn’t it true that certain people are involved whom you’re protecting?” They shoved a couple of papers at me, the warden handed me a fountain pen. It was nice handling a pen, it felt fine in my hands; anyway, not like this, which is written with a dull pencil stub on dirty sheets of paper that I have to hide from the prison guards. I gave my notes to my father. He prayed for me. The papers were supposed to go to Goldie.

“Never heard of any of the gentleman whom you mentioned,” I rejoindered. Through the side door walked the district attorney and a stenographer. The district attorney said that he hoped that I would discourse about the unions. He had it in for the President. They hated me, too. I was scum, public enemy number one.

After ten minutes of hemming and hawing, beating around the bush, they asked me whether that was everything that I had to say. I had said nothing. “It’s five minutes before twelve, Mister Buchalter!”

I prayed with father that the governor would pardon us. He was upper-class, one might say, but Mendy and I were his co-religionists, and Louis was a born Catholic; why not ask for mercy? Or grace? Or compassion? We people needed it. Outside of the prison walls, the district attorney held a press conference. “Mister Buchalter is going to his justly deserved reward! The country will not forgive him!”

Pa folded his hands together and prayed loudly in my cell, my God, they took me away, brought a chair for me to sit down in, the only trouble was that it was wired; they put jelly on my forehead as they slipped on the clamps where they had shaved my legs, they put more jelly there on my calves where they fastened the wires, and if I had talked, then this charade – as they had called my appointment the last time with the warden – would not have occurred.

“I never heard of anyone, not even myself,” I murmured. Why not whisper a word when they put the mask on, one cannot move.

Goldie will get these papers, will tell how incorrigible I remained.

I was the beetle that had flown in the window. One stepped on it for no reason other than its ugliness and non-utility; but outside the window, it had a purpose – what was the secret information that I possessed?

Here at Sing Sing it wailed, the silence weeping as I waited. They took Louis Capone from his cell, first. I saw that he was shaking. The priest read words out of the good book. It hurt to watch Mendy leave, the rabbi standing beside him. I gulped. He threw a few words at me, waving, “Give my love to my wife and kids!”

The guards came to my cell. What was Lepke? A body? A mind? The best thing that he had? A heart?

They will find this amusing, and the warden will laugh.

In the electric chair I cannot move. Burned, the brain is broiled, one is asphyxiated, it lasts, endures two minutes, three – my last exculpation.