

Last Chance City

Gordon waited in dread for when they'd call his name.

He'd heard other names called, followed by shouts and screams and moans. He saw new faces arrive and old faces vanish. Twice a day he stood in line with his bowl to get a gruel of bean curd and mud or rice and mud, or mud and mud, or whatever it was they were having, and moved back to his mat in the corner where he was left to tend his own imagination until finally they called his name.

"Gordon!" Sour Puss said in his softest voice, so soft it failed to break through Gordon's reverie. "Gordon," the voice came again, but this time redolent with menace, and Gordon looked up with a start to find himself skewered by Sour Puss' malevolent stare.

He tried to answer but found his voice had gone into hiding, at the same time noticing the others watching him with veiled looks. "They're afraid Sour Puss will take it out on all of them," he realized with a start, and he heaved himself up on his feet.

"Here," he croaked. "Gordon; William A.; Captain; number one-five-three-six-two-three-eight; 18 April, 1936." It was his 26th birthday today, he realized vaguely. "Twas the eighteenth of April, 75," the poem so much a part of him since childhood echoed softly in the incongruity of the situation.

If Sour Puss realized the significance, he didn't show it. "In there," he barked, pointing to the door at the far end of the courtyard. Last Chance City, they called it, because when you went through there, you didn't come back again.

"Rossler! Burns!" A pair of "Yo's" acknowledged the challenge. "Through there!"

Gordon had company.

That's when he met Moose Face who was waiting to take them to their new home. Unlike Sour Puss who never smiled, Moose Face lit up when the three hobbled into the dark corridor from the courtyard. They came to a semblance of attention thinking this a game of wait-and-see, and this seemed to please Moose Face even more. Still without a word, he gestured for them to proceed down through the corridor, appearing to offer a little bow to set them on their way.

The next thing Gordon knew, he was on the flinty ground writhing in agony, conscious only of the searing pain in his kneecap where Moose Face had bashed him with the ivory-headed bamboo rod resembling a polo mallet that he kept there resting against his thigh, ready to make its memorable statements.

"Get up! Get up!" he screamed with a ferocity Gordon had never seen or dreamed existed in the makeup of mankind. "Now! Now! Now!" he punctuated each outburst with a vicious swipe of the mallet. Rossler and Burns were ten yards down the corridor before Gordon regained his feet and they never looked back.

"Home" was a twelve foot by ten foot plot enclosed on all four sides by eight-foot high mud walls topped with tangles of barbed wire. There were two doors into the patio (such was it called), one to the corridor down which they had just come, and the other into a twelve foot by six foot mud floor room. Gordon surmised that they were to sleep there, but he was wrong as Moose Face was quick to point out. That was the "classroom", the sacred area where they were to have an opportunity - Moose Face took great pleasure in emphasizing this heretofore curious notion - an opportunity to cleanse themselves of the evil which had led them to this pass.

"You will live here," he gestured to the courtyard, making it clear without further elaboration that the room itself was off-limits except for class periods. "If you are diligent in your studies, you will be permitted to sleep inside, but for now you may enjoy some fresh air." He brightened to full radiance. "Good, huh?"

Then he explained the rules: Morning meal would be brought soon after daylight, after which they had thirty minutes to eat and ready themselves for the day's lessons. Classes went until mid day when they would again be given a half hour before afternoon classes began. After evening meal they would be given an opportunity - again that word - to review what they had learned and relate this to their own lives. Lights out occurred promptly at eight o'clock and talking or moving about thereafter was not permitted.

"I am here to help you," Moose Face offered benignly, and had his knee not still throbbed from the blow, Gordon might have found it almost believable. Still, he wondered how Rossler and Burns were taking this.

"Today, you may tidy up your area," he concluded, pleased with his own largesse. "We begin classes tomorrow."