

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

July, 1944

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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# The Man Who Wouldn't Hang



*The official State executioner had one story to tell  
he was not likely ever to forget. . . .*

**By STANTON A. COBLENTZ**

**H**E WAS a burly man with a beaked nose, and hard, cold, glittering eyes. For thirty years he had been the official State executioner; and, consequently, he had interesting if grisly stories to tell. There is one of his yarns that I am not likely soon to forget.

"Did anybody ever get away from you?" one of us put the inevitable question. And Carrigan flung himself far back in his

chair, gave his mat of grizzled hair a violent toss, and stroked his bony projecting chin.

"Well, nobody ever broke out of the death-cell, if that's what you mean," he answered, slowly. "But one fellow did get away, just the same."

All of us leaned forward eagerly.

"Yes, sirree, one fellow got away, but you wouldn't believe me if I told you

Heading by A. B. TILBURNE

about it. Hardly believe it myself, when I come to think of it. It was the dog-gonest case you ever heard of."

He paused long enough to light a cigarette; then resumed.

"Twenty-five years ago it all happened, but I remember the poor devil just as plain as if I met him yesterday. A little sawed-off guy, with a round head and funny popping big black eyes. There was an old scar that ran down from his left temple to just over his right eye. It didn't make him look what you'd call pretty. Perkins or Parkins or something like that was his name, but we all called him Scar-Face. Just a common no-good; tried to hold up a bank with three other thugs, and a clerk got killed. Always swore he didn't fire the shot, but what the hell's the difference? Law says he's guilty whether he fired or not, don't it? Jury wasn't out one hour!"

"So he was sentenced to be hanged?"

"Yes, sirree, hanged by the neck till he <sup>was</sup> dead. I didn't waste any sympathy on his bums, believe me. Just the same, I nād to admire the fellow's spunk, when the time came round. Was game as a fighting cock. Smiled and laughed; you'd of thought he was going to a party. Why, he turned out to be such a good sport I was sort of sorry when the morning came for springing the trap."

"Maybe he expected a pardon from the Governor?" I suggested.

Carrigan flicked out the ashes from his cigarette with a contemptuous toss of one hand.

"Pardon? Like hell! Who was Scar-Face, anyway? Didn't have the influence of a gutter-rat! No, sirree, old Governor Horton wasn't the man to be wasting ink on such cunts. The poor brute knew damned well he wouldn't get a pardon!"

"Then some confederate—"

"A whale of a lot any confederate could do! I tell you, there wasn't none of us

would have given a burnt-out cigar butt for his chances. And there he was, joking up to the last minute; eating a hearty breakfast, and all. Usually they begin to look a little downhearted about this time; lots of 'em get morose. But not Scar-Face. You'd of thought he was being honored, the way he smiled when we led him off to the execution chamber. "What's the matter with the guy? Is he dippy?" I wondered. . . . Made a little speech when they asked if he had any last word; cracked a lot of jokes, and ended with, "Well, boys, see you all in Kingdom Come!" Speaking of coolness—he had a cucumber backed plumb off the map!"

WE ALL sat about, voiceless; while Carrigan, as if re-living the scene, took out his handkerchief and mopped uneasily at his bullet brow.

"Actually helped us blindfold him, would you believe it? The last I saw of those funny popping black eyes of his, they seemed to be sparkling—yes, by God! Sparkling just as if he was enjoying a joke on us! Don't that just beat hell? Well, I never mentioned it to anybody before, but a sort of spooky feeling came over me, like something was holding back my hands and didn't want me to execute that fellow. I think the reporters and spectators felt it, too; it was like a wave that went through them, and they all trembled together. Sounds daffy, don't it? But wait till you hear what happened!"

"Well, what did happen?"

"Nothing you'd of looked for. Acting sort of against my will, I got everything ready. The prisoner climbed the gallows, and was all strapped up in the proper place. All I had to do was pull the lever, and the trap would give way, and he'd fall and break his blasted neck. Guess I'd done it fifty times before if I'd done it once, so there wasn't any reason to hold back, was there?"

"None that I can see."

"None that anybody could see. Just the same, I did hold back. Must of been all of ten minutes. Made all sorts of fishy excuses. Just couldn't get myself to pull that blamed lever. It was like something was dragging back my arms. I must of been about paralyzed till I heard the prisoner himself talking—or, at least, I thought it was him. 'What the hell you waiting for?' But he didn't sound angry or impatient—not the least. Swear to God, it was just like the guy was daring me!"

"So then you opened the trap?"

"Yes, so then I opened the trap."

Carrigan's fingers seemed to be quivering, as he took out and lit another cigarette.

"By Christ! I thought that was the end. By all the rules of the game, Scar-Face should of been dead. But he wasn't."

"You mean," one of us gasped, "when the trap fell, it didn't kill him?"

"No," returned Carrigan, slowly and solemnly, "I mean the trap didn't fall."

The fire by this time had burnt low, and our host had risen to stir the embers and add a log. It was a minute before the narrator could resume.

"No, by heaven!" he testified. "The trap didn't fall! It was the first time that ever happened, and we couldn't figure out what was wrong. I pulled the lever again and again—no result! So we brought Scar-Face down from the gallows, and then tried the trap without him. I'm a blinking four-eyed jackass if it didn't work perfectly!"

"Whatever was wrong must have fixed itself automatically," I suggested.

"That's just what we thought. Still, we went over the whole shooting match with a fine comb before trying it again with the prisoner. There wasn't so much as a screw out of joint. No reason under the sun why it wouldn't work. But all the

time we were examining it, we could hear Scar-Face complaining—no, not complaining, kidding the dickens out of us. 'Why don't you fellows get a move on? . . . What you keeping me waiting for? . . . I got an important appointment, and you're making me late!'

"Well, finally we made up our minds the trap had to work this time. Just simply had to. So we hauled Scar-Face upstairs again, and got ready to finish him off. I was getting sort of riled at him by now, for not hanging decent and proper. But when I pulled that lever again—you can blast me to perdition if I lie—nothing happened. Nothing at all! That trap still wouldn't open!"

"Must have been bewitched," someone threw out, facetiously.

"You're damned right! Bewitched is the word. That's just how it looked to us. Well, we went over the whole rotten contraption again, so carefully you couldn't miss a bolt. Seemed in A One order. Every time we let down the trap—nobody in it, it worked like a charm. Tell you what I did then. Had myself tied by ropes around the middle, and my assistant pulled the lever, letting me down through the trap. Of course, it didn't hurt me much except for the jerk."

"But did it work?"

"Work? You bet it did! If it ud had me round the neck, you wouldn't see me here today, boys! There wasn't anything wrong with that trap, the way it let me down! But what do you think happened next time we tried it on Scar-Face?"

We remained silent.

"Well, the pesky thing just gave a sort of rattling, like it didn't know how to make up its mind, and stayed shut. I tell you, boys, we were plumb tuckered out by then. Just had to give up. So we hauled Scar-Face back to the death-cell, and sent word to the Governor we couldn't hang him."

"How did the Governor take it?"

"How do you think he took it? Set up a hell of a row. Threatened to fire me. But I had plenty of witnesses, so he finally set a new execution date, and came down himself, with three members of the State prison board, to see matters done right and proper. We had a new gallows all rigged up, too, guaranteed fool-proof. But think that made any difference?"

"Should have," I ventured.

"Then you've got another guess coming. Why, I never saw four more surprised looking fellows in my life than Governor Horton and the prison directors. We tried the trap first, of course, and it was beautiful to see the way it worked. Then we put Scar-Face on. He seemed to think it was a great joke; bowed to the Governor before we tied him up, and said, 'I don't mind so much getting hanged, friends, now that it's coming to be a habit.' But we bundled him up good and fast, and I didn't waste much time about pulling that lever, hoping it'd be the end of Scar-Face and all out trouble. But somehow I knew it wouldn't be."

"So he still didn't hang?"

CARRIGAN turned and spat disgustedly into the fire, which was blazing with uncanny fitfulness.

"No, curse him! Right there before the Governor, he wouldn't hang. That trap was balkier than an army mule. The Governor, I tell you, went pretty near white when he watched me trying time and again. They say he had a superstitious vein in him, old Governor Horton. After a while he got up and said, 'Twaint no more use trying, Mr. Carrigan. I commute his sentence to life imprisonment.' And then he got out so fast you'd of thought somebody was chasing him."

The ex-hangman shifted his long bulky legs, lit another cigarette, and went on.

"So that's the only man I ever knew

that cheated the gallows. But there's a sequel to the story. Five or six years later a member of his old gang died, and swore on his death-bed Scar-Face didn't have anything to do with that bank killing—wasn't even around when it happened. There was a new Governor then, and after looking into the facts he issued a pardon. So far as I can make out, Scar-Face has led a decent life ever since."

We all shifted uneasily in our seats, glancing by turns at the eerily flickering fire and at the hard, grizzled face of the narrator.

I do not know which of us it was that asked:

"Have you any theory, Mr. Carrigan, as to why Scar-Face wouldn't hang?"

A slightly furtive, almost a frightened look came into the executioner's eyes. He shuddered; and then hesitantly, in slow, grave tones, replied:

"Well, yes, folks, I have got a theory. Don't know as you'll follow me—matter of fact, I've never let on to a soul. Still, what I saw, the last time I put Scar-Face on the gallows—guess it was what old Horton saw, too, before he commuted the sentence."

"What did you see?"

Carrigan drew a long breath, almost like a sigh.

"Nothing you could describe very well. At first it was like a pale, shining mist. But after a while it seemed—swear to God, boys, I wasn't dreaming—seemed that mist took form. The shape was like two hands. At one end they reached to a big shadowy something that I couldn't quite make out. But, at the other end—I tell you the hair on my head prickled when I saw it—the fingers were tugging at the trap, holding it shut!"

The beads of perspiration that came out on Carrigan's brow, and the glaring, haunted look in his eyes, testified that he was re-living a terrible experience.