

Song of the Cicada

By R. HUTCHINS

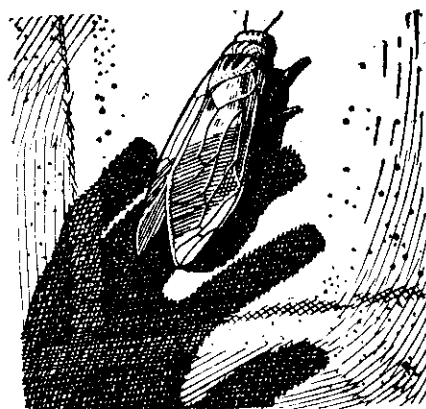
THE cicada was on the wall a few feet away from him. It had come suddenly with a dry crackle of its wings. Its presence crystallised the mood of the summer afternoon. The loud insistent bursts of song from its bright green body on the grey stone filled the prison yard with summer.

The wall stretched away from the corner in a looming dazzling grey down the length of the yard. Prisoners in their white moleskin trousers and the drooping white hats were sprawled or sitting in haphazard groups along the wall. Above them rose the stones. Around them rose the prison, sprawled on to the dry ground like a massive dozing monster. The scene was blurred through his heat-tired eyes. In his ears the song of the cicada was a numbing pulse of noise, a roaring, trilling staccato, insisting, dominating, hypnotic. The cicada singing summer into his ears, his brain, his mind, summer singing into his body and limbs—summer singing all around through

prison air, through prison stone. The cicada on the wall. Grey stone and a song, a dream of summer. He was drifting away in the dream, drifting back to the smallest kernel of his mind, letting the time of day, of months, of years, pass by in summer sweetness. Only vaguely did the yard, the prisoners, and the grey stone drift across his awareness. Only from a lethargy of restfulness could he perceive the wall, the cicada, and Quinn's head below it, a white blur of hat with the formless dark of his face below. Quinn's head with the centre of noise above it. It was a unity, somehow. He felt he should grasp after some tired thought that expressed the unity before him. Perhaps it was Quinn's brain up there, pulsing out on grey stone. Perhaps that dark shadow below the hat was a ghastly empty skull, and Quinn was dead down there, and living on the stone above. Perhaps there was no such thing as Quinn. Perhaps—suddenly, a movement of Quinn's head broke through the drowsiness, and summer and cicada and stone rushed in where sleep had been.

HE looked at Quinn. The eyes across from his were open wide in the dark shadow of the hat. Eyes with wrinkles and rough lines around, in a face of 30 years. Quinn's face was a prisoner's face. Its lines and shapes and colours were prison things. Looking at Quinn, he thought, how could you tell he was a prisoner? Here in the heat of a prison summer, with Quinn in prison clothes you couldn't miss seeing those prison things in his face before you. But on the outside, in the freedom of the streets, would they see the same? He thought that would be harder, perhaps impossible. What clue to look for in Quinn's face to show it was of prison? Funny, that, he'd read in a digest from the prison library that there was no such thing as a criminal face—but something had to be a clue, the digest had said, and that was in men's minds.

He could see that, now he came to think of it, in Quinn. He remembered he'd been on remand with Quinn, their



cases came up at the same time. And in those days of waiting men liked to convince themselves and the others in the remand yard of their innocence. He remembered that even then Quinn had given him a clue as to his crime-mind. Quinn had been up and was waiting for sentence. They'd got him on 27 charges of burglary. The beak had warned him that he was eligible for the act. Quinn only needed to break again and he'd be an habitual. That had upset him. It was his third time up and he was scared it would happen again. He remembered seeing Quinn huddled up in the wintry gloom of the remand yard, sheltering

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