

The Mill

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

The late summer air was a bit brisk as a dark curtain of evening twilight draped itself over the grounds of the old asylum. At the sound of the Nighthawk's buzzy call, two patients dressed to look like staff emerged out of the shadows of the vacant sewing room—where they had been hiding for about an hour—and charged southward toward the tall gaol-like brick wall. Having studied the grounds during time spent outdoors while engaged in 'work therapy', the plan was to scale the South section of the wall where the buttresses jutted out slightly on the asylum side.

"Let's hurry! Sir Poundberry the night watchman will be doing his rounds shortly..." A shorter but speedier male says to the other.

"I'm tailing right behind you... You'll be the first one over, the way we discussed."

"Let's take that buttress there at 1 o'clock. I like that there are some trees behind it where we'll be well dissimulated."

"Good idea." The taller and lankier patient says in a hushed tone.

Shortly after, the duo's jog slows to a halt as they gaze upwards at the ten to eleven-foot barrier, composed of a mixture of red, buff and mottled bricks from the old Strong Brickyards. Grabbing the top of the closest buttress, the shorter and stockier patient does his best to pull himself up, aided by his fellow ally, who creates a two-handed platform to boost his lightweight frame all the way to the top. After successfully grabbing the angled coping stone at the wall's summit, a loud whistle and some shouting can be heard from the northern part of the grounds. Soon, a frenetic glowing light from a lantern can be seen approaching the southern boundary of the asylum grounds.

"Hurry, it's Poundberry! I'll pull you up! Try to use the buttress as a platform!"

"I can't! Go without me. Your chance is now! Take care Philip!"

Catching a last look at his friend Joseph with a small tear rolling down his eye, Philip grabs the branch of the tall sycamore on the opposite side of the wall and balances on it before letting go and falling on a patch of Juniper bushes. Faintly hearing the same whistle in the distance, Philip uses his stealth to exit the hidden woodlot by the wall and flees the stark confines of the asylum's perimeter. After running covertly toward the Angels' Gates, he climbs a fence to enter the railyard, and waits—while hunched behind a small cabin—for a cargo train set to leave the city centre. Crouching and sitting with his back to the same small wooden structure, he suddenly sees a dark green locomotive a few yards away in the yard blasting its loud steam whistle before

slowly lurching forward. Not wasting any time, Philip jumps up out of his hiding place and runs toward the second last car, pulling himself into the enclosure as the steam locomotive begins to gather speed. In the darkened compartment, he peers out and notices a small group of guardsmen, all gathered on the dimly lit South platform, possibly patrolling the station for any suspicious persons. Soon, the dark blotches topped with silver-coloured helmets, become specks as the long snaky train lumbers westward out of the centre of town. Famished, but happy to be out of the circumventing walls that had shrunk his world to less than a hundred acres, Philip falls asleep as his cargo train continues spewing steam and coal smoke into the dark of night.

After sleeping for at least three to four hours, Philip awakes as the train lumbers forward towards a long dark approaching tunnel. Eyeing the countryside with dawn soon to break, Philip spots an old woollen mill to the northwest and decides to muster all of his courage to hop off the speeding rail car before it enters the tunnel. Seated with his legs outside the cargo area, he counts to five in his head and pushes off the platform, tumbling into a small gravel ditch with only a few patches of prairie grass to soften the landing. After a few more seconds, Philip peeks over toward the tunnel and watches the cargo train begin to disappear with its rhythmic chug-chug sound dimming in the vast expanse around him. Standing up again and feeling a little shaken, he brushes himself off and starts to limp slowly toward the mysterious mill. Crossing empty patches of farmland, Philip makes his approach toward the mill and looks upward at its tall stone chimney hearing the faint chipping sounds of Chimney Swifts foraging above him as the sun began to brighten up the verdant horizon. After reaching the mill's slightly eerie façade, he notices that the once fully operating water-powered stone and brick structure was now abandoned, surely due to a recent industrial recession in the rural area. After noticing a window on the ground level that had been left ajar without any makeshift plywood barriers blocking it, Philip crawls into the mill's interior eager to camp out in its empty confines. Cautiously walking within the mill, he spots an old dusty cupboard, opens it and sees some canned pork and beans along with a can of condensed milk. Noticing a metal fire poker resting against one of the mill's walls, he uses it to pry open the tin cans and rapidly consumes their contents to satisfy his hunger pangs.

After spending a week hiding away in the same abandoned mill where a small dried out creek bed once flowed with a torrent of abundant fresh water, Philip packs a few supplies in a discarded rucksack that once belonged to a previous mill worker and prepares his exodus from the derelict confines of the small industrial complex at the approach of dusk. Eyeing the same countryside, the weathered asylum escapee trudges onward into the rural unknown, bidding farewell to the same group of foraging Swifts that had greeted his arrival and who had opted to stay longer in the mill's vicinity to forage and lay claim to their prized nests. Thinking briefly about his friend Joseph

who was surely doomed to remain confined within the familiar walls of Kilmingham Asylum, Philip clutches his walking stick firmly in his left hand and begins to ambulate over the vastness of the green patches of farm grass interspersed with the presence of small stands of temperate savannah trees for as far as the eye could see. Walking under the fleeting rays of sunlight now dimming on the westerly horizon, Philip's flight is akin to that of a suddenly animated scarecrow eager to begin a new nomadic existence after years of inert sentinel duty.

[The End->