

*Alden A. Nowlan*

## LONNIE COMES HOME

WHEN LONNIE CAME HOME from Dorchester his face and arms were the colour of butternuts. His sun tan astonished everybody in Hainesville. We'd always thought that men came out of prison with skins as white as the belly of a fish. In all the stories we'd heard or read, ex-convicts had something called "prison pallor". And here was Lonnie looking as if he'd spent weeks stripped to the waist, working in the hayfields.

Nobody could ask him about it, of course. Nobody ever asked Lonnie any questions about the penitentiary. What can you ask a man who has just finished a three-year term for something called "conspiracy to commit armed robbery"? Everybody in Hainesville treated Lonnie just as if he'd never been away.

Old Fitz Mosher, the station agent, for instance. Fitz was the first person Lonnie met when he got off the train. Lonnie was wearing a blue serge suit and lugging an old army kit bag. "They give them a new suit and a ten dollar bill when they get out. Leastways that's what I've always heard", Fitz commented later. "Anyway, Lonnie started to go by me, lookin' kinda shamefaced and sulky. And I walked right over to him and said, 'Hello, Lonnie, how are you makin' it?' just as if he'd never been away. And he looked sorta surprised and said, 'Hi, Fitz', just like that, 'Hi, Fitz', he says. And I says 'Pretty hot day, Lonnie'. And he says, 'Yeah. It sure is, Fitz'. We talked along just as if he'd just happened along to pass the time of day".

Everybody in Hainesville acted the same way. Lonnie didn't have any trouble getting his old job back at the feed mill. "Aint nothin' really bad in the boy", Henry Douglas explained. "I was glad enough to get him back. Lonnie ain't lazy. And he never stole anythin' from *me*. I put him right back on the payroll—thirty bucks a week. I acted just like he'd never been away. Never mentioned a word about the pen. Didn't figure it was any of my business. I just said, 'Still want to work for me, Lonnie?' and he said, 'Yes'. That's all there was to it. See him a hundred times

a day when we're loadin' boxcars or he's runnin' the mixer and never mention the pen. Never say a word about it. Treat him just the same as I always did. Act just like he'd never been away".

We think we're pretty good folks in Hainesville when it comes right down to it. In lots of places, people would have never let Lonnie forget he'd been in penitentiary. They'd have asked him questions about it, maybe made sarcastic remarks to his face. We just forgot about the past. Lonnie stayed here six months after he got out of Dorchester and in all that time nobody mentioned the pen to him. Not once. We're that kind of people.

Lonnie went back to work at Henry Douglas's feed mill and boarded at the Chisholms' and went to the dances in Larchmont on Friday nights with the other young fellows. He'd never been wild, which was one reason why nobody could ever understand how he'd gotten mixed up in that robbery in the first place. Some said he'd thought it was a joke and some said he'd been drunk. But, of course, nobody ever asked him.

At first he didn't act much different than he'd acted before he went to the penitentiary. He was a quiet, slow-moving, hard-working boy who liked the occasional good time. But, gradually, he began behaving strangely. He had sulking spells and there were times when he'd barely grunt when somebody spoke to him. He stopped going to the dances. Sometimes he didn't show up at the Chisholms' all night. There were rumours that he hitch-hiked over to Bennington and got drunk all by himself. In a little place like Hainesville, things like that start people talking. But nobody knew for sure until that afternoon he showed up drunk at the feed mill.

He hadn't come to work that morning and Henry Douglas had telephoned the Chisholm house and learned that he'd stayed out all night. "I wouldn't have fired him though", Henry said afterwards. "Lonnie was a good worker. I figure a man has the right to go on a jag once in a while. Then, of course, Lonnie had had enough trouble to make a man want to get drunk—not that I ever mentioned the pen to him. I never did. That's why I couldn't figure out what he was so mad at when he came roarin' in that afternoon. Of course he was drunk but I still couldn't figure him out".

Lonnie staggered into the office of the feed mill about three o'clock. He was drunk and his overalls were so muddy it looked as if he'd laid down in the ditch and rolled in it. Henry and three or four other men were sitting around the office

talking feed prices. Afterwards they all spoke about how calm Henry acted when Lonnie staggered in like that. He just looked up and said, "Hello, Lonnie".

"Hello, Lonnie", Lonnie mocked him. And his eyes were blazing like two hot coals with hatred and bitterness.

"I guess you can have the rest of the day off, Lonnie. Come back to work in the morning", Henry told him, calmly.

"Listen, what's wrong with you guys?" Lonnie snarled. "What's wrong with all you dam fools? I was in the pen three years. You know that? You know what it's like in the pen? And I come back here after three years and everybody acts as if I'd just come back from havin' a tooth filled in Larchmont. You guys crazy or somethin'? Don't you know I been in the pen?"

"Sure, we know, Lonnie, sure we know", Henry said, trying to soothe him.

"Sure we know, Lonnie", Lonnie repeated. "Sure we know. Then why don't you ask me about it? I bet you talk about it plenty. Why don't you ask me what it was like in the pen? No, you wouldn't do that, none of you. Look, you know what it's like to get a fish bone or somethin' stuck in your throat and you cough and cough and you can't get it out no matter how much you try? You know what it's like when your're sick to your stomach and want to throw up but you can't? You ever felt like that? Well, listen, that's the way I've felt for six months. It's been worse than the pen. Look, why couldn't you say just once, 'Lonnie, what was it like in the pen?' Why couldn't you ask me that just once?"

"You're a little drunk, Lonnie. You'd better go home", Henry said.

"Nobody ever asked me once", Lonnie said.

He turned and lurched out without even stopping to collect his pay. That night he caught the train to Halifax and nobody in Hainesville has ever heard of him since.