HENRY

Henry was sitting on his bed in Cell 678 of the prison in Long View, in the Land of Hope. “Back in the clink!” he exclaimed to himself. “But so soon. Only two weeks with Fiona and the kids. And now ten years here!” He banged his hand on the bed. The cell door opened. “You have a visitor” the warder said and led Henry to the visitor’s room. On the other side of the grill was Fiona. She was a pretty, young woman with blonde hair scraped back into a bun and with a worn, tired expression on her lined face. “Hello, love,” he said.” Back in the clink,” he said morosely. She did not reply but pushed a sheet of paper under the grill. “What’s this?” he asked. “My divorce paper,” she replied. “Please sign it.” “No!” he said vehemently. “I won’t!” She took off her wedding ring and pushed it under the grill with a pen. Henry signed the paper with a florish. “How do you think you are going to live? That last heist at the ATM, would have left you and the kids well provided for.” “I am well provided for!” Fiona retorted. “Ken has said we may stay in his guest house in his garden, has bought me a small car and given me a monthly allowance.” “Oh! the wealthy Ken, your brother-in-law.” He sneered. “He started out with nothing and made something of his life!” Fiona cried as she walked out of the room.

The silence of the rows of cells was broken by warders unlocking the doors and shouting, “Come out! Get in line. The Gov’s about to arrive!” The Governor walked into the huge courtyard. His name was Mister Smart, and he certainly was smart being well up to all the tricks of prisoners. Standing in front of a lectern with a microphone, he said, “Good morning, everybody.” “Good morning, Governor,” they responded in unison. “Let me remind you,” he said, “it is not a good morning for two prisoners on death row. They will be hanged at ten thirty this morning. If you don’t want a morning like they will have make sure to change your ways when you are back in the tempting world. And now I want the ten prisoners who have served their sentences to come up here so we can wish them well and clap them on their way.” After much clapping and shouts of “Go Well!” the Governor dismissed them.

The inmates were given a wide choice of careers that would help them on their release from prison. Henry had chosen gardening. “It gives us the chance to get in the sun,” he said to his gardening partner, Percy. “Yes, and especially as we are allowed to eat as much veg and fruit as we like! I’m going to eat

my fill of those luscious big cherries." "Wonder what Alec and Jimmy chose for their last meal today?" asked Henry. "Don't think I would be able to eat anything," answered Percy. The choice of careers or activities was wide. Many inmates had very little education and attended lessons in the schoolroom. All learnt the three Rs – Reading, Righting and Rithatic, and some matriculated and went on to study at online universities. Law. Global Business and Politics were popular subjects, as were Art, Music and Drama. The prison had a large library with individual workstations equipped with computers, files and papers. There was an Art Room and Music Room with pianos and violins and excellent teachers to teach them.

Henry and Percy had learnt at the start of their choice of Gardening that life was not all about planting salad greens, tomatoes, beans, and digging up root vegetables like carrots, potatoes and onions. Six afternoons every week they sat in a classroom and had lectures on all aspects of gardening – what to plant and when to and why, how to plant, when to dig up vegetables and how to store potatoes and onions in winter, how to prune fruit trees and vines – Oh my! – the list went on and on! On top of that, they were taken to the farm and shown

how to do all this. They had to practise doing things too, choosing the right implements and cleaning them afterwards. At the end of each month, they were tested orally because neither Henry nor Percy could read or write.

Governor Smart was a forward-looking governor. His policies differed from those of many others. He was also a Christian. After breakfast on Sunday morning in their cells, the inmates were led to the Main Hall for Sunday Service. “What a bore,” said Henry to Percy.” “Oh, it’s not too bad,” said Percy. “I like the band from the Music Department, and I know some of the hymns as I used to go to church every Sunday with my Mum.” The band started playing, and some sang along with them. “What a friend we have in Jesus”, “Jesus Christ is risen today, Hallelujah!” was followed by “Nearer my God to Thee”. Governor Smart and his wife entered and then the Prison Padre, Father James, of the local Anglican church. There were two hymns, the Lord’s Prayer was sung by the Music Department’s choir, and Padre James preached a short sermon. “My sermon today is about Jesus who said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except

by me.’”

After the service, because as Governor Smart said, the Sabbath was a day of rest, the prisoners were allowed to walk in the prison field which was enclosed by a high electrified fence. They all looked forward to this, and even in winter went out for a brisk walk in the field. Because Governor Smart was a Christian and the powers that be allowed him to govern as he wanted, instead of their normal everyday meal, they had a delicious lunch of roast lamb, mint sauce, roast potatoes, cauliflower au gratin, chocolate cake and a can of beer. Governor Smart, Mrs Smart, their daughter and son-in-law and their baby daughter, ate in the visitors’ dining room. Anyone could come, it was very popular and as tables were limited, invitations were given on a first come, first serve basis. Waiters and waitresses were smartly dressed in black, with white shirts or blouses and black ties. They were all students of the Hospitality Course and had set the tables with white tablecloths, expensive cutlery and crystal wine glasses. At twelve noon, the guests arrived, and the Head Waiter led them to their tables. Waiters and waitresses greeted the guests and handed them beautiful

menus which had been made the day before by the Art Department. Father James said grace after Governor Smart had welcomed the guests and the guests placed their orders. There was a crayfish salad or a French salad, roast lamb or duck with vegetables, crème caramel or cheesecake, anything guests want to drink and coffee to finish. It was no wonder that people wanted to attend!

Easter had arrived. It was Easter Sunday, and some inmates remembered the chocolate eggs and bunnies their parents had given them. “No one ever gave me a chocolate bunny,” said Henry morosely to Percy. “My Mum and Dad always gave me one. We even had an Easter egg hunt in our garden. And whoever won did not take all the Easter eggs they found but gave them to my Dad who shared them out.” “Sounds fun” remarked Henry glumly.

Easter Sunday service began. “Praise the Lord! Christ is risen!” said Father James raising his arms. “Let us sing ‘Jesus Christ is risen today, Hallelujah!’ I am preaching today on the two most important verses in the Bible. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him

should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." Everybody here understands what condemned means, and especially those absent from this service and who are sitting in solitary confinement on Death Row. It is an unpleasant and upsetting feeling. But it need not be! Let me repeat the second verse! "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." Is there a man or woman who believes this and wants to be saved? Please come up to me so I can pray for you." There was dead silence, and then Henry walked to the front and stood before Father James.

The next day, Henry said to his warder, "Please will you write a letter and post it for me?" "Sure, Henry," he replied. This is what he wrote.

Dear Fiona

A most wonderful thing happened at the church service yesterday. I became a Christian and asked Jesus to forgive all the wicked things I have done in my life. I am begging you to forgive the unhappy life I gave you and our kids.

Please thank Ken for looking after you all so well.

The Gov has knocked two years off my sentence as I have caused no trouble, so I will be free in 6 months. He has also found me a job as Head Gardener at the Manor. House.

Love

Henry

Fiona came the next day, sat down opposite Henry, pushed her hand under the grill. Hendry clasped it. “Oh, my love” she said.