

Title: Persuasion

Brief Synopsis: With imposed prohibition, secrecy was paramount. Capone relies on individuals with unique skill sets to ensure mouths stay shut.

Edward groaned and leaned back. The twine binding him to the chair was cutting through his limbs. Behind him, blood dripped from his wrists onto his hands. The growing welt on his left eye was forcing it closed. He sucked at his split lip and spat the blood onto the concrete floor. Breathing heavily, he said, "I told you. I said nothing to no-one, Mister Nitti."

Frank Nitti stood at Edward's side. "I wish I could believe you," he said. "I really do, but ..."

He pushed the barrel of his Colt 1911 against Edward's temple.

"Please, Mr Nitti," Edward pleaded.

Frank considered his options. He lowered his weapon. "Maybe another approach," he mused. He walked around the desk and sat down. He stared at Edward before lifting a jar at the end of the desk. Inside, a butterfly was sitting, opening and closing its wings slowly. "Fascinating things, butterflies," he said. "Macro-lepidoptera Rhopalocera." He placed the jar in front of Edward and turned a valve on a pipe leading to the jar seal.

Edward watched. The butterfly reached out with its antennae, touching the sides of the glass. Its proboscis stretched out, tasting the air. As its breathing slowed, its wings twitched. It appeared to side-step before settling into a rocking motion. Finally, it stopped, wings fully open.

"You see," said Frank, "The use of gas may be a slower process, but the results are far more satisfactory." He closed the valve and twisted off the cap. Frank slid the inert figure onto some tissue paper. "Perfect," he purred. "Most lepidopterists seem to favour pinching the thorax. They claim it's quicker and more humane, but I find that process rather distasteful. It ..."

Frank waved a hand toward Edward's face, "damages the specimen, you see. I also like to think it gives the butterfly a chance for one lasting thought before it passes. Maybe the last flower on which it alighted. Maybe a sense of freedom, fluttering through the air. Or maybe a desire to right any wrongs they have done. They say that gas asphyxiation can force a response approaching euphoria." Frank looked at Edward. "Of course, I can stop

this anytime. Save its life. If only the specimen could speak. To call out and provide the answers I want. Alas.”

“That’s ... sick,” said Edward. “It’s just a defenceless creature. I-It can’t talk.”

“Maybe so. But *you* can. Can’t you? ... In fact, I hear you’ve been talking quite a lot lately. Haven’t you?”

“No. I—”

“I think you have Edward. I think you’ve been singing like a canary to those prohibition agents. And like butterflies, canaries have a unique reaction to gas. An item we have in abundance here. Amongst other things.” Frank waved at the surrounding equipment.

Edward looked around at the massive machinery.

“Canaries, of course, have been used since the eighteen hundreds in mines to test for gas,” Frank continued. “And here, once the liquids have been through the condenser, the scrubber, and the purifier, we, too, need to *test it*.” He waved across the room, ending at a small chamber. “Unfortunately, we don’t have a canary, so to speak. But we have something yellow.” He nodded at the two men standing behind Edward.

“No. Wait,” cried Edward.

The men tilted back Edward’s chair and dragged him into the empty chamber. The scraping sounds reverberated around the cylindrical structure.

“I don’t know anything,” he shouted. “I’ve told no one!” The statement echoed around him, diminishing with each echo. The door slammed shut. Edward looked at the only window, inset into the door. Frank’s face peering in filled it.

Frank pressed a button and his voice echoed through from above Edward. “I wish I could believe you, Edward.”

Edward heard the hissing before he smelt the gas. “Please. I didn’t tell anyone.” He struggled against his restraints.

“Who did you tell Edward?”

He could taste the gas as it poured across his tongue. He coughed as it reached his tonsils. “Please ...” He wretched.

“I could save your miserable life, Edward. As you said, the butterfly cannot talk. But you can. Can’t you? And you did. Didn’t you? Who did you tell Edward, and what did you tell them?”

Edward’s head was spinning. He pulled at his bindings, forcing the chair to topple. He wretched again, gasping for breath.

“Just one turn of the dial. That’s all it would take. And I could stop all this. Who did you tell Edward?”

“O-Okay,” he croaked. He coughed, gasping for air. “I-I told ...”

“Yes?”

“I-I told Ness.” Edward coughed uncontrollably.

“And what did you tell him, Edward?”

Edward gasped. He knew that every breath brought him closer to death. He thought of his home, his family, his children. His head spun. “I-I told him about the next shipment into here. I-Into the gasworks,” he moaned. “Please?”

“Thank you, Edward. That is most helpful.”

Edward heaved, his stomach convulsing. His eyes rolled into the back of his head.

Frank turned away and lifted the earpiece off a wall-mounted telephone. “Yes. Please tell Mr Capone, we have what we need ... No, you will need to move the shipment to the other location ... Yes, we’ll clean up here.” He replaced the handset into the cradle.

Taking a last look into the chamber, he turned the dial to full and watched his latest specimen twitch one last time.

902 Words

© Trevor Flanagan

© Trevor Flanagan