The hanging judge



Source:101 philosophical problems by Martin Cohen

Now Judge Dread had had many disagreeable people before him, but this one, who styled himself 'the Philosopher', had really annoyed him. Dread says: 'I intend to teach you the value of honesty, prisoner. You have been found guilty of being a crook and a swindler and of repeatedly and systematically lying to the court to try to save your wretched skin. Well, justice has caught up with you now, my friend. The sentence of this court is...' (here the Judge pauses for effect

and dons a pair of black gloves and a little black hat)

'...that you be taken from here to a place of execution and hanged by the neck until you are dead. ...



BUT, as I am a magnanimous Judge, I shall give you one more opportunity to learn the value of truth.

If, on the day of your execution, you sign a statement making one true declaration, the sentence will be commuted to ten years



imprisonment. If, on the other hand, your statement is, in the view of the Chief Executioner, false, the sentence will be carried out immediately.

There, now you have one day in which to make your choice!' At this the jury applaud



at the severity of the sentence and everyone in the courtroom looks at the defendant, pleased to see such a villain get a heavy sentence, coupled with the humiliating public true declaration. But, strangely, the Philosopher just smirks back as he is led away to Death Row. The day of the execution arrives and the crook,

beaming, signs a declaration which is handed to the Chief Executioner who reads it with growing bewilderment. Then, snarling, she crumples it up and orders the Philosopher be released, with no penalty whatsoever to be imposed.

But what happened?

Think of it. What did The Philosopher write, so he is not hanged, not imprisoned for 10 years, but is released.

I will give you the answer very soon. By then, you might find it yourself. Good luck!

