

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

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Chapter Two

Casey Jones - The Chicago Run

I WAS NO "ROOKIE" when I shipped out to Cuba in 1900, even though I was only twenty-one. Six years before I had lied about my age, signed up with the army and seen plenty of action all through the Spanish-American War. No, Casey Jones was no greenhorn and that's why Bunkie puzzled me.

He was my "buddy" in Cuba and a tough fighter. But I couldn't understand him. Every night, I'd sit on my bunk and watch him reading his Bible.

"Bunkie, I don't get it," I said. "There you sit, reading your Bible when there's a big crap game going on outside the canteen. And with a bunch of 'rookies,' too. We could clean up."

Bunkie smiled. "You can go and clean up if you want. I've already told you my sentiments on gambling. I don't need to gamble. I've got a sure thing." He patted his Bible and went on reading.

I wasn't going to fool around with another man's religion but I wasn't going to miss a crap game, either. "Well, you keep GOD," I told him, "and I'll go out and get me a 'wad' of that sure thing I can see and put my fingers on. Say a prayer that I'll win me a pile."

I turned at the door of the bunkhouse and he was watching me. "Sure, I'll pray all right. Not for the pile, but for you."

I forget whether I won that crap game or not, but it was later that same night we all jumped out of our bunks to pitch in and stop another one of those Latin riots. Bunkie and I were out near the front together.

"Hope you prayed good, Chum," I told him just to be saying something in the midst of all the

racket.

"You know I prayed good, Casey," he shouted over the roar. "Listen, I'd be scared to death out here in this hailstorm if-"

That Cuban bullet caught him before he got the rest of the sentence out. He folded up in a heap and I crawled over to him and put his head in my lap.

I wished then I hadn't teased him so much about his religion. I gave him a drink of water and he tried to say something. But he couldn't get it out. He put his hand in his pocket, and next thing I knew he'd slid his New Testament into my hand. Then he was gone.

The fighting didn't seem so much like an adventure after that. I kept remembering Bunkie. Then I'd try a couple of drinks to forget.

"Come on, Casey," the guys at the bar told me. "So it's tough that your pal got his, but he ain't the first one. And anyway, according to Bunkie, he's treading around golden streets plucking on a lily-white harp by now, and flapping his wings."

But talk like that was no good. "Shut up," I growled. It's not so much the fact that Bunkie got his that's eating me. It's him always praying for me. Bothers me."

"Well, he ain't praying now," they told me. "Come on, have another drink."

I might have forgotten him if it hadn't been for his New Testament. I saw it every time I opened my locker. And the gold print on the cover made me think of Mom, too. She'd talked about the Bible even more than Bunkie did, made me promise I'd read it every night.

Maybe I should. So I tried. Seems as if the times I remembered was when I'd been down at the bar trying to forget the whole business.

"The kingdom-of-heaven-is like-unto a net-that was-" I'd struggled along. **"Cast-into the seas-and gathered-of every kind. Which-when it was full-they drew to shore-and sat down-and gathered the good into vessels-but cast-the bad away."**

It didn't make sense. I hung my arm over the edge of the bed and dropped the New Testament on the floor.

But I kept the worn-out Testament with me, and lying flat on the battlefield one day, with the bullets whizzing past, I opened it and tried it again. "Come-unto me-all-ye-that-labor-and are heavy-laden." Oh, what I wouldn't give to rest right now! It was still as "fuzzy" as ever to me, and I put the Bible back in my pocket.

My regiment went to the Philippines twice, and I fought alongside of men that were "tougher'n pig iron," men who'd been Indian fighters. They hated "rookies," and I wasn't taking any chances with them. I kept my Bible out of sight.

Then I forgot about it, because I had other interests.

I was writing letters to a long list of lady friends, names my buddies had given me. When we got back to the States, I started my inspection tour - going from state to state, I looked over the girls I'd been writing to.

That was fun, until I got to Covington, Kentucky. When Ada Burlingame came walking down her front steps to meet me, I knew I was going to get married.

That's how I happened to quit the U. S. Army. I'd had enough of it, anyway; I wanted to quit before I got what Bunkie got out there on the field that night. So I secured a good job with the C. & O. Railroad.

I worked hard, but I had plenty of off-hours. So I drank hard, too, made some extra cash with the dice and lost plenty of it the same way.

I started going to church; that was Ada's idea. I did it to please her, until I heard what the good people down at the church thought of me.

I was sitting in the living room, not exactly sober, one morning when I heard one of them talking to her. "Oh, Mrs. Jones, you good woman, you do have our deepest sympathy. We know how hard it is for a good woman like you to put up with a sinner like your husband. We just don't know how you have strength to do it."

That did it. If Ada hadn't been there, I said, "I'd have smeared that pious weasel face all over our front porch." As it was, I quit going to church then and there.

Of course, maybe that church worker was some right.

I probably was drinking too much for a responsible married man. So I promised Ada I'd stop taking the stuff. I promised her over and over.

"Trouble with me, I haven't any 'won't' power," I admitted to Ada. "Why don't you tell me to highball it out?"

"'Won't' power?"

"Well, I can promise you right now that I won't drink up next week's pay or gamble it either, but maybe I'll break that promise."

"One of these days you promise you'll stop drinking or gambling, you're going to keep that promise," Ada answered lovingly.

I tried hard that pay day. All Ada said when I came home was "Come on, darling, I'll help you upstairs to bed."

One afternoon after that, Ada came out to meet me and told me the news. I was going to be a father. "Great," I thought. "I'll really lay off the stuff now." After all, I wasn't drinking just to

forget Bunkie. I had Ada; I didn't have to.

I didn't drink a drop or gamble until the baby was born - dead. My baby dead? My son? I had to have a drink. I had another one. I left Ada to face the loss alone.

I guess somebody from the church dropped around to talk to Ada that night. And if they did, she most likely took the blame herself for my not being there; probably told the church folks she'd let me down, because the little fellow was born dead. At any rate, I know I didn't dare stagger into the hospital, so I slept my drunk off.

Ada stayed with me, though. Having our next two children, two little girls, did help some. I declared I was going to get hold of myself. I kept on drinking, sure, but not so much, and gambling, but not so often nor for such high stakes. I knew I still wasn't doing right by Ada. One night I stumbled in "as drunk as a hoot owl," and put my head in her lap and told her I was leaving her.

"There's only one way for you and the children to be happy!"

But Ada kept saying "till death do us part." I could see that she wanted me to stay, in spite of everything.

I wasn't sober, but that business about death worried me. "Death do us part - it sure will," I said. "You'll go to Heaven; I'll go to Hell. So look, Ada, I'm going to reform. I'll never lose you here on earth, anyway, if I can help it."

From then, I fought back at the bottle, and I won a lot of the time, too.

Except for those evenings on my out-of-town runs. A pair of loaded dice, and a cork to pop, and cards to deal - that was an evening.

One night my buddy and I were sprawling around our hotel room at the end of a hard day's run, drinking together.

"Nothing like a bottle," I said. "Makes the whole world seem right."

"Sure does, Casey," he said.

I was fast forgetting about Ada and all those promises I'd made. "Course the world ain't right, but this bottle sure makes it seem that way. I got all night here and I'm just going to stay in this hotel room and drink and drink and drink."

The telephone rang. I knocked it off its hook and picked it up. "Yes," I said. "This is Lewis Calvin Jones. Sure, sure, go on." It was a telegram. I hung up, shoved the bottle over to my buddy. "S'matter Casey?" "My - my Mother died this morning."

My thoughts were mixed up and queer when I went to my mother's funeral. I kept thinking of my old pal Bunkie and that New Testament. GOD was mixed up in my thoughts, too.

Got to get this out of my mind, I'll drive myself crazy, I told myself.

And I could have forgotten it, too, if it hadn't been for Uncle John.

Uncle John Mosshammer, almost old enough to be my father, worked on my line, and he was one of those religious fellows. Only he was worse than Bunkie because he was always talking about it, always trying to change me.

"Lay off, Uncle John," I told him. "Why do you have to keep picking on me? I'm not the only sinner working this line."

"I'm not going to pester you, boy," he answered, "I'm just going to pray. You're lost unless you let GOD take over your life, and I don't want you lost."

But he did keep after me. He even gave me a little verse that read, "When I drink, I cannot think; so I think, I will not drink." It wasn't any help. I drank so I couldn't think.

For eight years, he kept the same interest in me. Everybody else had something to say, too. The officials on the line were always complaining about my getting drunk and carousing around. But they had to admit, "Your work is excellent, Casey. Always has been."

On October 26, 1919, when I was thirty-nine, the office called me "on the carpet." "This is the last warning you'll get, Casey. Your work, when you do work, is excellent. But this railroad can no longer countenance disgraceful conduct. This is your last chance!"

When I got out of the office, I spotted Uncle John getting ready for our Chicago run. I complained loudly to him about the whole thing. "What's it to them how a fellow spends his spare time?"

I should have known better than to tell Uncle John.

"I'm taking you to the Pacific Garden Mission with me tonight when we get to Chicago," he said. "I've been praying without a let-up for eight long years."

I'd heard that before. "Sure, sure," I told him. "I'll be there."

"I've heard that before," he told me. "You're going with me. This time I'm taking you to supper and we'll go over to the meeting together."

The old fellow was sly. He must have known I was scared to death that day about losing my job and about my drinking. "O.K.," I agreed. "I'll go."

I felt like running when we got outside after supper.

Inside the mission, I sat down with Uncle John. The speaker was a man named Mel Trotter; he'd been a drunk, too. I felt like turning around and letting Uncle John have it right on the chin. He'd brought me to hear this reformed drunk on purpose and posted him to use that text.

Instead of hitting Uncle John, my hand went up in the air instead, and I was asking for prayer. When Uncle John went with me into the prayer room, I wasn't angry. Even when he kept telling me, "If you'll turn your sins over to GOD right now, Casey, He'll do what you've tried so hard to do and failed. He can help you quit the liquor and keep your job.

"You've been a gambler all your life; can't you take one chance on the love of the One who created you, who died for you? If I slid down and let number four run right over me for your sake, you'd believe I loved you, Casey."

"Yeah," I admitted.

"That's what JESUS did on the cross. Not because we deserved it, but because He loved us so much He couldn't help doing it. We can just reach out by faith and take it, with empty hands. And that means hands empty of loaded dice, bottles, cards, ambition, selfishness, everything dumped at the foot of the cross. You don't need to know all the answers, you just need to be the answer."

"Will you do it, Casey?" he asked me, after further explanation.

"I don't need to, Uncle John. I did it while you were talking," I answered.

That was more than thirty-one years ago. "With the Lord's hand on the throttle I'm high-balling it down the shady side of this life now, heading for my home in glory. I got three old railroad buddies waiting for me there, a conductor, a Pullman porter, and an engineer, and I'll be shaking hands with them one of these days soon. To say nothing of my mother - and my old pal Bunkie.

Come aboard, my friend, your fare was paid a long, long time ago!"

~ end of chapter 2 ~
