

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Three

That Smart Curly Tom Mackey

TOM MACKEY for all his stunted growth was an unusual boy. And smart. Folks wherever he went agreed on that. Tom could turn out only one way, they'd tell you. And for a long while, it looked like they were right.

Take the regular-paying customers at the Shamrock House in Erie, Pa. They'd have told you that a smarter youngster never hung around the place. By the time he was eight, he was holding his liquor almost like a man and smoking big, black inexpensive cigars.

Of course, Tom had more practice than most boys his age, with his dad owning the saloon. The customers all liked him, too. They'd ruffled his curly hair and let him have the ice out of their drinks.

"There's something eager-eyed and hopeful about the lad, though. For all his grown-up ways, he worships that old man of his," the customers that passed their evening in the Shamrock all agreed. They used to talk about the night he snooped around the poker game as usual, then sneaked out to the back room and called his dad.

"What is it you're wanting, Tom?" his old man asked.

"It's a blasted pest you're becoming. Calling me away from me game like this. Come on, speak up."

"This'll make you glad I'm your son, Dad." The boy dangled a string of watches in one hand, balanced a pile of wallets in the other.

"Where in tarnation did you lay hands on those watches and pocketbooks?" his father asked.

A big grin was spreading on Tom's face. "I took them, Dad. From the guys you were playing cards with. To show you how smart I am."

"Why, you no-good, little, thievin' sneak. You gimme those watches," his father said. "Ruin my business, will you? Come here, and I'll smack you."

Strange, he had laughingly reported to his pals a similar sneak-play by a youngster, named Patrick. When Tom did it, it was all wrong.

The customers at the Shamrock House could see that was the way it was between Tom and Old Man Mackey. The old man never appreciated his son, or his smartness, so it didn't surprise any of the boys when they heard that Tom had run away from home at twelve years and found a job on the Erie Canal.

You'd have gotten the same answer from Tom's buddy on the canal, an old Negro man named John. "I been on this Erie Canal a long time, I know a smart kid when I meet one," he would have said to you. But John fretted about Tom, worried about what was going to become of that boy.

One day he reached up and caught hold of the whip that Tom was cracking down on the mule's back. "Don't beat those poor mules like that," he said.

"Lemme alone," Tom replied. "She's so stubborn, I'll never get this load of pork to the platform."

"Look, boy, kindness goes a lot further than whipping. Do you reckon you'd have left home, Tommy, if your pa had shown you some kindness?"

Tom relaxed the whip. The mule heaved forward.

With a leap, the Negro was on the wagon with Tom, and they jolted along without talking.

Then Tom blurted out, "This place is poison to me. I hate it."

John looked at him sideways and smiled. "That's because you ain't got no peace inside you, Son."

"Shucks. That stuff!" Tom said.

"This old canal can stay the same as it is now, or it can get worse. But what I got down inside me stays the same because the Lord made it," John countered.

"I don't know nothing about the Lord. And I don't want to."

"You always like to hear me sing my song about the Lord, Tommy."

"I like any song, songs."

"You know, Son," his Negro friend launched an opinion, "that song of mine is going to work

right into your little trouble-hardened heart one of these days. Listen." John threw back his head, and the mule wagon jogged along, as he sang,

There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul.
Oh, there is a balm in Gilead
To make the sinner whole.

But John knew his song annoyed Tom. He worried about him, but there was nothing he could do. Especially after Tom left the canal and "shoved on," as he said.

The men who worked on the circus laboring gang Tom joined next would have chimed in about him, too. "That Mackey's a smart one. Too smart."

For the circus, Tom hammered and carted lumber and carried buckets of water. That was during the day. Nights, he took anybody in sight in a crap game.

But the circus people who played with Tom were jealous of his brains. That's why they took a shot at him when he was crossing the midway one afternoon. No one was going to cheat them in a crap game - not even Curly Tom Mackey.

None of them were sorry when he slipped out of the circus that same night under cover of the darkness, then out of town. None but perhaps Eula, the fat lady, for he was always kind to her, in going errands or doing things for her which she could not do for herself.

The big boss of the race track wouldn't have told you right off that Tom was smart. The day Tom applied for a job, the big boss wondered.

"What makes you think you can be a jockey?" the big boss asked.

"Because I'm just the right size, no mistake. Don't think I'm happy about it, but it'll make me a good jockey."

Tom blew smoke rings in the boss' face.

"Smart guy, eh?"

"Yeah, that's another reason I think I can make a good jockey."

"Can you ride?"

"Good enough."

"Good enough for what?"

"To ride for you. I'm not above your kind of riding, I mean."

"O.K., sounds good to me. Now, sign this paper to make it legal."

"Sign it, huh?" Tom didn't take the paper the boss held out.

"Yes, sign it."

"What's the matter? Can't you write?"

It took Tom a while to answer. "No," he said. "I can't write and I can't read. But that's none of your business as long as I can ride."

The boy that can't write? The big boss thought it was funny and he laughed. When he saw Tom's expression, he changed the laugh into a chuckle. Tom walked away in a hurry.

For a year, Tom rode for the big boss. He rode to win or he rode to lose, depending on what his orders were.

One day, the big boss had a hunch. "I'll put five thousand on Pretty Boy to win and I'll get Mackey to bring Buttercup in to place. It'll be a cinch," he mumbled to himself.

Coming down the back stretch in the race that afternoon, Buttercup pulled out in front. And stayed there, with Tom riding her!

The boss was waiting. "You just cost me five thousand dollars." He leered at Tom. "I ought to kill you but I'd just get in trouble. You double-crossed me the first and last time. You're through. Now get out."

"Sure," Tom told him, pointing his face up until it reached the big boss' chin. "I knew what I was doing all right. It took me a year to get back at you. Nobody's going to laugh at me on account of I don't read or write." And he walked out of the stables for good.

That boy's smart - the devil's smart, too, the boss thought. He'll come to no good.

To those that met him in the next five or six years, until he was thirty, Tom didn't look so smart. He was living on the Chicago levee. He didn't hold down any good job, but he always earned enough to buy a bottle. This was more days' work than it may seem, because Tom was nearly always thirsty. "Complete derelict . . . Bitter, hurt . . . An ignorant twisted man . . . A drunk" was about all anybody would have told you about Tom Mackey those days.

But there were one or two fellows around that part of town that recognized what a smart fellow he was, what an unusual brain he had.

One of them caught up with him in a West Madison bar.

"Hi, there, Curly Mackey." The fellow waved him over to the table. "Want to make some easy dough?"

"Huh?" Tom said. His whole body was shaking as he eased into the chair.

"Want to make some easy big dough?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said.

"Take it easy. Let me be sure you're up to it."

Tom put his shaking hands under the table. "I'm in fine shape," he said. "Fine shape."

"It's dangerous business, Curly. But I think a little guy like you can pull it off. If you're careful."

"Sure," Tom licked his lips. "I'm little, I can do it."

Gimme the dope. What's it all about?"

The fellow reached over, pulled Tom closer, whispered to him.

Tom jolted back in his chair. "Hey," he said. "If I get caught, I'll hang for that."

The fellow raised an eyebrow. "Naturally," he said. He reached for his coat draped over the back of the chair.

"Well, I'll look for another guy."

"I'll do it," Tom agreed. "I'll have dough if I don't hang, won't I? I ain't never been scared in my life. I don't aim to start now. I'll be here, five-thirty tomorrow."

"I'll buy you a drink on it," his pal said. "You get the rest of the money tomorrow, after the job."

Tom had his drink alone. "So maybe I'll hang," he said into his glass. "Who'll care about little Tom Mackey anyhow? And if I don't hang, I'll have money to drink and drink and drink."

To the colored fellow he met next that day, Tom looked like any other derelict in front of the Pacific Garden Mission. The colored fellow was handing out tracts.

"I'm awful sick, Buddy. How about a dime for a bowl of soup?" Tom approached him.

"You don't need a bowl of soup half as much as you need JESUS, my friend," the Negro said kindly.

"You're kidding. Who are you, anyway? Hey, hey, is your name John?" Tom asked. He rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"No, my name is James."

"I don't know, but for a minute something about the way you look and the way you talk made me think you might be an old friend of mine I used to work with on the Erie Canal."

"Afraid not. Come on, let me take you inside the mission. I found JESUS in there and I was as

bad off as you are."

"Say, you do talk just like an old friend of mine," Tom said. "Name of John. John used to sing a pretty song for me. Say, you sing for me right now, will you? I may hang by the neck until dead after tomorrow. But just one little song now. Huh? I like songs."

The Negro steered Tom into the mission. Up front a girl was singing,

There is a balm in Gilead
To cure the sin-sick soul.
There is a balm in Gilead
To make the sinner whole.

Then Tom Mackey passed out.

When he came to, there was a sweet, comfortable looking woman standing over him, and the Negro.

"Lady - lady," Tom called. "Can JESUS help me? I'm pretty far gone. I'm standing right on the edge of Hell."

"Tom, listen to me," the mission woman said. "You don't need to understand it all now, but will you take my word for it that when JESUS CHRIST came forth from the grave on the third day He had the keys of death and Hell and eternal life jangling from His belt? He died to save you from Hell on earth and in the next life, too."

"I can fight my own battles," Tom answered.

The Negro was talking too. "You keep getting me mixed up with your old friend, John. Well, listen, JESUS CHRIST had a good friend named John too, John, the beloved disciple. And this John said in his Gospel in the Bible that he wrote down, '**all those things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God**'; and now, get this, '**that believing you may have life.**'"

"All right," Tom said. "I'll do whatever you say for me to do. What do I do?"

"Ask His forgiveness for your sins. Accept the gift of salvation. Then belong to the Giver, forever. Go on. Talk to Him in your own words, Tom," the comfortable-looking woman said.

"JESUS? It's me, Tom Mackey. I'm throwing in the towel right now. I'm going out of the sin-business. I take the gift. I belong to You, the Giver, like the lady here said, forever."

So it looks like the folks that knew Tom Mackey were wrong, after all. Curly Tom Mackey didn't end up the way the folks in the Shamrock House, the circus people, and the big boss of the race track said he would. Only they weren't exactly all wrong. Because Tom Mackey was a smart fellow. Everybody that knew him after his conversion said so.

Maybe you thought so yourself, if you ever heard a sermon by Curly Tom Mackey, the evangelist.

~ end of chapter 3 ~
