

NOT THE RIGHTEOUS!

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by Jack Odell

"For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" Matthew 9:13

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Chapter 2 Dan Kearney . . . an unearned miracle

THEY SAY THE AGE OF MIRACLES IS PAST.

No one stops us on the street to say, "Once I was blind, now I see." No one says, "Yesterday I was a leper; today I'm clean." When a man picks up a bed, he heads for a moving van. And so, "no miracles," they say.

Dan Kearney is walking proof of miracle, but no crowds follow him. The cleansed don't attract attention. I wonder if someone in Galilee, unknowing, touched a cleansed leper on the arm and said, "Too bad the age of miracles is past. Now, when Moses was alive"

Dan Kearney is full of contradictions. He walks with the light step of a dancer, but hasn't danced in years. He speaks with the lilt of County Kerry, though he was born in Chicago. His mind is quicker than most, yet he spent three years in a state hospital for the insane. This model of neat-appearing respectability lived for years in gaudy camps and hobo jungles. Dan was born in Chicago in 1900. His father was swept overboard from a lake boat, and the widow suffered from what her neighbors called, "The curse of the dirty drink."

So when Dan was only two, he and his brother John were packed off to Ireland to live with their grandmother.

Kerry is known for beauty. The tallest peaks rise in that corner of Ireland, within sight of Killarney's lakes and the wild seacoast. But without love, beauty doesn't mean much. It was neither love nor beauty, but the frustrating knowledge of being unwanted that set little Dan Kearney at the age of seven literally to banging his head against a stone wall. And when he bellowed in pain, his grandmother poured out abuse.

"Why don't ye shut yer mouth? 'Tis bad enough that I have to feed you, without I should listen to yer iverlastin' bawlin"

Out of Danny's sobbing rose a question that had been troubling him.

"Why don't I have a daddy, like Dennis down the street?"

"Because he's washin' around at the bottom of Lake Michigan, by that county of Chicago! He

was always a thirsty one. Maybe now he's got his fill."

The boy considered this tender news while she railed on. "Mind ye don't grow up to be like him, always causin' trouble. Faith, an' yer marked already!"

"Marked, Grandmother? How?"

"Marked to be more trouble, even to GOD, than ye are good to Him."

So, Dan was marked - by rejection.

When he was fourteen, his schoolmaster made it even clearer. He wagged a bony finger in Dan's face.

"Mark my word, Dan Kearney, ye're a bad one. If ye leave off goin' to church and don't mind yer catechism, GOD will slap ye around until ye're a broken man."

Not long after that episode the grandmother died. Dan and his older brother wandered to Dublin, arriving just in time for the Sinn Fein rebellion of Easter, 1916. The footloose boys were in the thick of it. Dan served as a messenger between the little groups of rebels, but the rebellion quickly died and left him at loose ends.

The two lads made a precarious living on the Dublin streets. Dan had a talent for entertaining, and his songs and dances brought a few coins along O'Connell Street. By the year 1925 he was a real expert at Gaelic folk-dancing. Meanwhile, John joined the army of the new Irish Free State. Dan never saw him again. Armed with the technicality of American citizenship, he sailed for New York.

Booking agents had little need for Irish dancers. Dan made an uncertain living in Irish dance halls, becoming well known in Irish-American circles in New York and Chicago. There wasn't much money, but always plenty to drink.

When Dan acquired a wife and started rearing a family, he took a full-time job as a bus driver. In less than a year he was fired for drinking. The night it happened, as he gloomed over his tough luck, Dan realized he'd passed over the line that separates the social drinker from the alcoholic . . . He knew it, but like many another man, he followed the contradictory pattern of drinking harder to avoid facing reality. Money troubles led to worry, worry led to drinking, and drinking took what money was left. One night, when Dan came home reeling, Kate asked the classic "why?" He gave her the truth in four slurred but accurate words.

"Because I'm an alcoholic."

"Dan, you're not. You couldn't be an alcoholic!"

"Katy, don't make me laugh."

"No, Dan. You don't have to get drunk. If you'll just use your will power and go to church and do like you should, you can take a drop now and then like anyone else!"

"That's very funny, Kate. But I'm not laughin'."

The breaking point came on little Danny's third birthday. Dan Kearney was drunker than usual. While the baby wailed and Kate screamed, Dan turned over furniture and flung whatever came to hand. He drove his terrified wife and child from the house and then drank himself into a stupor.

Kate found refuge with a friend, and this started a train of events that put Dan in a state hospital. His wife was ready to follow any advice that came her way. The friend had a plan.

"Send him away and get him fixed up."

"Fixed up?" asked Kate. This was a new idea.

"That's right. They've got a state institution at Kankakee that's a positive cure for alcoholics."

"For alcoholics? Are you sure?"

"Yes indeed, I'm sure. A lawyer friend of mine fixed up the papers. You sign right here and Dan will be taken care of."

Kate hesitated, then took the pen and signed her husband into a state hospital for the insane. Time dried the alcohol out of Dan's body, but every day of confinement added to his bitterness. Sane though he was, release was almost impossible without his wife's consent.

Kate paid him only one visit. The doctor warned Dan his only hope of freedom lay in persuading her he was sane. Kearney promised his best behavior, but at sight of her his rage boiled over.

"I oughta kill you, Katy," he growled. "I wish I really was crazy. Then maybe I could do it!"

"Dan," she said, "I didn't know what kind of place this was. I thought it was a place where they cured alcoholics!"

"What? Are you gonna lie on top of everything else?" "Dan, honest . . .!"

"Get out of here!" Dan was shouting. "I'd rather stay here and rot the rest of my life than to look at the face of a lyin' woman like you! Get out!"

That scuttled his freedom and his marriage. Kate filed for divorce, and Dan lacked the ability to contest it. It was two more years before a very small door of hope opened.

A senior member of the hospital staff had become seriously ill. His convalescence required a full-time attendant. Nurses were in short supply and Dan was given the job. With the assignment his doctor offered some good advice.

"Kearney, if you behave like a sane person on this job, I think I can swing your release. It won't be easy. You're dealing with a difficult man."

Three months later Dan walked out of Kankakee a free man.

He was free of the asylum, but not free from Dan Kearney. And Dan Kearney was despised and rejected, alone in the world. Two weeks of brooding in saloons brought him back to Kankakee. The diagnosis was acute alcoholism.

This time an Alcoholics Anonymous group arranged his release. They tried to help him, but Dan couldn't stay on the program and wouldn't stay put. He ducked out of Chicago, hiding in hobo jungles along the railroad tracks.

This was his toughest time. Dan descended from cheap whiskey to the brain-rotting imitation muscatel of the winos; then to canned heat squeezed through a rag or a chunk of bread. When he could get dope, he used it. Anything to dull his agony of fear and bitterness.

In 1948 he drifted back to Chicago. Penniless and sick, he was literally unable to speak more than a few words without weeping or cursing. On September twenty-third he reached bottom.

Clinging to a lamp post across the street from the Pacific Garden Mission, he tried to muster nerve enough to throw himself under the wheels of a "Green Hornet" streetcar. To this day Dan has no clear memory of blundering through traffic to the Mission door nor of talking to the man who held it open for him, but his mumblings told the story.

He had come because the Mission sign read, "JESUS Saves."

Dan became defiant, though, when Harry Saulnier, the Mission superintendent, tried to talk to him about JESUS.

"I know all about JESUS," he shouted. "You do?"

"Sure." Dan coughed, then went on. "I learned all about Him when I was a boy. He's the second person in the Holy and Undivided Trinity."

Harry Saulnier had a lot to tell Dan about JESUS, but first came a dinner, shower, and clean clothes. Then he massaged Dan's aching feet and the legs with their splotchy wine-sores.

Twenty centuries ago Peter said, "**Thou shalt never wash my feet.**"

In 1948 Dan Kearney said, "Why should you rub my feet? I'm no good."

Harry told him, "None of us is any good till we've been cleaned up by JESUS CHRIST."

Dan was puzzled.

"Hey, what religion is there here at this place?"

"Just Christianity, Dan. This is a personal thing between JESUS CHRIST and you."

"JESUS CHRIST - and me? I don't get the connection."

But before that night was over, Dan Kearney did get the connection as he listened to Harry Saulnier speaking from the platform of the Pacific Garden Mission.

He heard Harry read from the Bible, "**There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus.**"

When the service ended, he knelt in the old prayer room and received JESUS CHRIST as his personal Saviour.

That's the traditional ending for conversion stories, but Dan still had troubles ahead.

His next bender ended with the only kidnapping in the Mission's history. Harry Saulnier hauled Dan bodily out of a saloon. Hardly standard evangelistic procedure, but Harry Saulnier is a bold man in the Lord.

Next day, Dan was grateful, repentant, and puzzled. He took his questions to Saulnier.

"Look, you're makin' this too easy. I oughta have to do something to earn forgiveness."

"JESUS earned our forgiveness, Dan, when He gave Himself in our stead on the Cross. We can only take it. It's a gift."

There is a Christian farm for alcoholics at Keswick Grove, New Jersey. Its slogan is, "Where men are transformed, not reformed." The Mission sent Dan to Keswick.

There he grew physically strong, but he was weak in faith. He talked it over with one of his new friends, a big, cheerful Pole named Lolly Papete.

"Lolly, I can't seem to get at CHRIST personally! It makes me sore and then I want a drink."

"Maybe you block Him with doubt."

"That's it. I doubt Him. Look, how do I know I'm gonna be with JESUS when I die? You know I'm gonna die with some kind of sins in my life!"

"Yah, Dan, but our line to JESUS is straight. Because I believe in Him, I am one with the Father. The Bible says, "**whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.**"

"I know, Lolly, but . . ." - Dan was pacing back and forth in his excitement. " . . . but I'd be scared to die right now without a last chance to clear myself with GOD. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you be scared to drop dead right now?"

"Scared of GOD?" Lolly smiled gently. "Why Dan, '**The Lord is my shepherd,**' and even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil."

That night Dan prayed for a sign from GOD to help his unbelief. But he passed the days that followed in an agony of doubt.

Then Lolly Papete collapsed in the dining hall and was carried unconscious to the hospital.

As Dan prayed in his room, someone brought word that his Polish friend had died without regaining consciousness. Dan knew Lolly hadn't had time to, "clear himself with GOD."

Deeply troubled, he picked up his Bible.

"Somewhere in the Book, GOD can speak right straight out to me, Dan Kearney."

He leafed quickly through the pages. Something caught his eye at the end of the fourth chapter of First Thessalonians. For the first time he read, **"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him . . . For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."**

Dan slowly put the Bible back on the table and sank to his knees.

"I'm through fighting You, Lord. You spoke right to me, Dan Kearney, and I believe You!"

And Dan took, as a gift, that which is free and cannot be earned.

On a recent summer evening, I talked with Dan Kearney on a busy street corner. He spoke of his Bible studies and his hopes for a Christian rehabilitation farm near Chicago. Though thousands of people passed, no one looked twice at this neat little man whose life is proof of miracle.

I wondered how many of those tense-faced people were walking in silent desperation with the painful belief that nothing but a miracle could ease their troubles, and laughing bitterly at themselves because, "the age of miracles is past."

At last Dan walked off into the crowd; a happy, quietly radiant man. He was heading back to the door over which the burning letters read, "JESUS Saves."

No one followed him.

I remembered that the cleansed lepers showed no scars, and that the healed blind man threw away his staff.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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