

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 7

Toughest Kid on the Block - PERCY DIEHL

I STARTED out as a pretty tough guy, fought my way through two world wars with as much nerve as the next fellow, and wound up as a no-good, sniveling, bawling bum. Here's how it happened.

When I was growing up, I don't suppose I was any better or any worse than any other young fellow. On second thought, though, I recall that I did pride myself on being just a little bit wiser, a little tougher than the other kids I ran around with.

When Pa sent me up to the saloon to bring home a pail of beer, I usually did the job with a swagger. I rather prided myself on the fact that doing this job made me part of a man's world. Don't get me wrong. Pa was no drunkard, but he did like to relax with his beer. Sometimes he'd offer me a little - even when I was just a kid - but I didn't like the taste of it at all. Mom and Pa always said that I'd never get into any trouble from drinking.

They were both right and wrong. My first real trouble came from stealing. But it was drinking that got me caught!

You see, I never had any pocket money. And a fellow can't look wise or tough to his pals if he doesn't have any dough to spend. So there was just one way to remedy things. When I was in my teens, I learned to steal. Once I broke into a store in town. Not for kicks. For money to spend. Nobody asked me where I got it, and I felt like a pretty smart guy with some dough to toss around.

But trouble was just around the corner. Some folks in the neighborhood had a pony of beer cooling in their cellar for a Fourth of July celebration, and a pal and I sneaked in. This was for kicks. I still didn't like the taste of beer but somehow I got the notion it was smart to drink it. My pal and I went after that stuff until we were both out on the cellar floor, and that's the way the folks came home and found us! If they'd been sophisticated or even had a sense of humor, they would have thought it was funny two kid robbers out cold from their own loot.

But they didn't think it was funny and they turned us over to the district attorney. I was put on probation for two years.

Mom and Pa wrung their hands and said I'd disgraced them.

Then they decided to get rid of the embarrassment by shipping me off for the duration. A half-brother in Ohio agreed to take me.

My tough-guy complex took a walloping at this point. Mom hauled me into a secondhand clothing store and bought me a special going-away suit - a suit some dead guy hadn't gotten around to wear out! She paid seven dollars for it (it didn't fit anywhere), and then she graciously topped it off with a ten-cent secondhand hat. I left for Ohio vowing I'd live my own life from then on.

In Ohio, I worked for a while as a farmhand. Then I got a job stringing wire for a telegraph company. I liked the atmosphere on this job. Our crew was on the move most of the time and when we weren't working we were usually drinking.

It wasn't long before I learned to handle my share and then some. The days when I'd been a little squirt who didn't like the taste of beer were all gone.

Just about the time I was getting bored with stringing wire, I took a good look at a Marine Corps recruiting poster. That was all I needed. Those guys were plenty tough. I decided I wanted to be one of them. A few weeks later I was on duty in Maryland. To me, the big difference between stringing wire in Ohio and marching in Maryland was that the whiskey changed from bourbon to rye.

I joined up in the year 1914, and it wasn't long before I saw some action. I'd asked for it, I'd wanted it, and I found myself in the fight at Vera Cruz. I told myself I wasn't any more scared than the fellow standing next to me and probably I wasn't. But he was plenty scared! There was a hot, moist wind blowing on ashore from the Campeche Gulf but it wasn't that alone that made me sweat. The enemy fire was close. I was in a bad spot, and I had brains enough to know it. And crazy as it sounds, there in the heat and dust and gunsmoke, I did something I hadn't done for years.

I prayed.

"Get me out of this alive, and I'll be a better man. That's the truth. I'll be a better man," I told GOD.

It was easy to mean it, there in the blood and the grime of Vera Cruz. But it was just as easy to forget when I got back home. I'd said I'd be a better man. Well, back safely in the States, I was so much my old hard-drinking, carousing self - or worse, maybe - that the Marine Corps handed me a dishonorable discharge.

So there I was, miserable, rootless, and a little ashamed. I hung around a while, and then because I didn't have anywhere else to go, I headed back to Michigan and the family. Before getting on the train I put a couple of bottles of whiskey in my bag and dropped another in my pocket for the trip. When I walked in the door to greet the folks for the first time in years, I was staggering.

Mom didn't say anything. She was too glad to see me, I guess. Pa just looked at me up and down and then advised, "It's bad stuff when it gets you, son."

But I was too far gone that day to listen. And I was too far gone generally to get any help from a little mild advice from an old man who had taught me how to drink in the first place.

My folks soon found out the little kid who didn't like the taste of beer had grown up to be a big man who couldn't get enough of the hard stuff.

Living at home, I spent half my time drinking. Pretty soon I was ready to call it quits. But I discovered that the tough ex-Marine wasn't man enough to do it. I got scared. In fact, I got so sick and shaky I was ready to try almost anything.

So Mom cut out an ad in a magazine, and we sent off for some kind of medicine that was supposed to cure me. I took it, and I'll admit that for a while it made liquor taste and smell awful.

But two weeks later, when I stopped taking the medicine, I was drunk again. I gave up and left home.

And the rest - the years before World War I was declared - get kind of fuzzy and blurry when I think back. Mostly it was a pointless, crazy life as a lumberjack when I was sober, and as a public-nuisance when I was drunk. When I was coming out of a two-week drunk in the north woods somewhere, I had guts enough to ask myself where it was going to end.

Then the United States went into World War I. Here was escape. I enlisted in the Army using an assumed name. To me, it was a chance to square my own personal ideas of honor where that old dishonorable discharge was concerned.

They shipped me to France. There as a runner with the Fifth Division, I was under fire again and again. And this time, just like in Mexico in 1914, when the shells began landing close by, I prayed.

"GOD! Bring me through alive, Lord, and I'll change my ways. That's the truth. I'll change my ways. Amen."

Sure, I got through the war. And after the Armistice had been signed, it was the same old thing all over again. I forgot what I'd promised GOD in the trenches. When my Pa died, I was sober for the funeral, but it didn't last. I worked around Chicago for a while, and then went back into the woods.

Up there, while I was working as a fireman on a dinky little railroad that chugged its way through the back country, I made another big mistake.

I got married.

I say it was a mistake because I'm thinking about what I did to that woman. She thought she was marrying a he-man who fought bears single-handed and slugged it out with any woodsman, but before she was through she was married to a sodden, sobbing piece of human wreckage.

Albina was pretty and she loved me, and for a while I behaved myself. Then when the depression came along, we went back to the farm in Michigan and I started drinking again.

Partly it was because of the old thirst that had bothered me for years. Partly it was because, as the kids came along, I hated to see them living in ragged clothes and shoes open at the toes. I used to go on long benders. Then when I came home, I'd see the way the kids were living while their dad was out making a fool of himself. And that made me more miserable than ever.

I wasn't much of a man any more and I knew it. I didn't know what happened to the guy who had nerve enough to enlist in the Marines, but I knew he didn't exist any more. What was left in his place was something close to a drunken bum. I hated this fellow that was left, and decided one day to get rid of him. I tried to kill myself and came within an inch of succeeding.

Then something strange happened at our home.

My wife was sick with a painful swelling and infection in her mouth. A little old lady who came calling from time to time heard about it, and the next thing I knew she was bustling up our front walk. I let her in, and then I was sorry I had. Seems she had just come over to ask if we'd let the minister come up and pray for my wife.

And that's how it happened that the minister came to our house. He turned out to be a nice, quiet, friendly fellow. When he prayed, it sounded as if he meant every word of it.

"Now GOD, our loving Father, we know that there is nothing too hard for Thee. We know that Thy love for Thy children is without limit. And so we're just placing this woman in Thy hands and asking for Thy mercy. In JESUS' Name. Amen."

Of course I had my own opinions about praying. I had prayed a few prayers myself and it hadn't worked.

But when my wife's infection cleared up within a day, I was so shocked and amazed that I had to do something about it. That Sunday I surprised Albina by telling her I wanted to go to church. And that day, even before the service began, I knew what I was going to do. I don't recall the sermon. But I do know that at the end of the service, I was on my knees, trying hard to make my peace with GOD through His Son, JESUS CHRIST.

Now that's the way most stories end, and I sure wish that's the way it was with mine. But it isn't. You see, after I received CHRIST, I was so enthusiastic about it all that I went traveling around the countryside, speaking and testifying in country homes and even in a bootleg joint! And people were saved after I spoke, too.

I was sincere, and I was grateful for what happened, and I was staying sober, but all the time I was holding back from GOD. I wasn't turning all my will over to Him. That's the only explanation I can give for what happened. Because I know now that when that happens, sooner or later there's likely to be a break. And when a man who has transacted business with CHRIST and meant it, goes wrong, he usually makes quite a terrible thing of it.

When I backslid - and it didn't take me long - I turned into the meanest, messiest, drunkest old rip you ever saw.

I left the town and county where I was known and came straight to Chicago. I brought Albina with me, and she tried to make a home out of one miserable little room while I stumbled up and down the streets of Skid Row.

My thirst was back and it was bigger than before. I was drinking everything and anything and all the time. I was nothing but another drunken derelict on Skid Row. And the days began to slide together into one tremendous drunk.

Once I knocked a man down, and he pulled a knife and cut my head. Some stranger found me staggering around the street, bleeding to death. When he got me to the hospital, I had lost so much blood that I hardly had any blood pressure.

Eventually, as every alcoholic does, I came to my last big drunk. It lasted ten days, and I got to the point where I couldn't sleep at all. Early one morning I went out and bought a bottle of wine. The first clerk wouldn't even take my money. The second one did.

Holding the bottle like a baby, I shuffled out on the street, intent on getting into an alley to open it and begin drinking. But I was too shaky to make the alley. I dropped the bottle and, looking down at the mess of broken glass and beautiful, lovely liquor oozing away into the trash-clogged gutter, I began to sob. Diehl, the tough guy, standing on a street corner, sobbing his eyes out because fate had stolen the only happiness left to him!

I found my way back to our room and then I knew I'd reached the end of the road again.

Somehow, I had the idea I wanted to go to the Pacific Garden Mission. In the days when I had been stumping the countryside as a small-time evangelist, I'd heard plenty about the old Mission. I borrowed my wife's last two dollars and then I started limping toward the busline. But I never made it. Instead I ran into my old friend, Jim Burke. "You don't look good, Percy," he told me.

"I'm sick, Jim," I said, weaving back and forth. "I'm a sick man."

My friend had advice. "Take Doctor Burke's word and let's go get us a drink. You got any money?"

I felt for the bills I had taken from Albina. "Two bucks." "Fine and dandy," he assured me. "We'll have you feelin' better in no time."

I came out of my blackout in a cheap liquor store. The two dollars were gone. Somehow, I got somebody to loan me carfare. It was quite clear in my foggy mind that I had to get to the Pacific Garden Mission. I still don't remember an inch of that trip. All I remember is the sight of people on the street shying away from me.

Then it began to rain. The rain soaked the shoulders of my crumpled jacket and plastered my hair over my forehead, but it cleared my head a little. I asked one person after another where the Mission was, but everybody was afraid to talk to me.

Finally one well dressed man - I never forgot his face - stopped in the rain to give me the right direction, and I found the block. But I stumbled my way into the lobby of a shabby flophouse instead of the Mission.

I waited for the religious service and the singing but nothing happened. Half crying to myself with confusion and sickness, I stood there in a daze. Then I heard the music, and realized that it was coming from next door. I went out on the street and then back into the Mission.

When I got inside, some clean hands took hold of my arms and eased me into a seat at the back of the room. I flopped down and began to sob.

The music had stopped, and someone up front was talking now, but I just sat there and sobbed. I was drowning in all the misery and hopelessness of the years I had messed up. What I had done was completely clear to me, even through the alcohol, and I sat there, a big hulk of a man, crying like a woman.

"Shut up," a voice said. The guy in the seat next to me was peering at me. He was drunker than I was. "Don't know who was nuts enough to let you in here. Can't somebody get this nut out of here? He's bawling like a baby. Throw him out."

The drunk's voice of doom rang in my ears. I wasn't wanted anywhere, even in a row full of bums. I must have thought it was the voice of GOD Himself, because I got up and started out. "All right. I'll get out if I'm not wanted."

"S'more like it. Good riddance. Go on. Beat it."

I started shuffling down the aisle, coughing, sobbing, when suddenly the clean hands were stopping me. "Wait a minute, friend. You're going the wrong way," a voice said. "That's the street out there."

"I know it," I said through tears.

"That's the wrong way. Out there on the street men are going down and down in hell."

"Don't you think I know it? I been there."

"Then turn around. GOD wants to forgive you. And He made that possible when He gave the gift of His Son, JESUS."

"I know. I know. I'm a backslider." The memory of what I had done convulsed me again with sobbing.

"Then right now is the time to ask Him to lift you up again. GOD will, friend. He really will. Now go back and sit down. And listen."

So I did. At the invitation that night, I made my way to the altar and knelt there in complete surrender. Then I made my way into the prayer room and asked the Lord JESUS CHRIST to take

away the things that had come between us and had sent me back into the gutter.

I asked for a clean heart and for peace and joy and forgiveness. He heard my prayer. He gave me all those things, and much more. He gave me strength to stay sober. He gave me a home. And He gave me a self that I could respect and call a man once more.

From a nervy kid learning how to drink to a bum at the end of his rope - that's the story of my life. But thank GOD, it didn't end there.

~ end of chapter 7 ~
