

A Heart and Its Hardening

By William Slavens McNutt

Illustrated by Irving K. Manoir



GOT a hangover. My feelings are all pale gray and poverty struck. When I look at the sun I wonder what time of night it is, and the "Texas Tommy" sounds just

play different systems for calling attention to their cargoes. Some claim they're sober, some tell you how spiffed they are, and Freddie's game was to apologize for being so stewed. When the elevator boy

her wire. "But what do you mean by sorrow?" I says. "The worst grief he ever had was a headache on the morning after." "Ah, but he hasn't found himself," she says. "That is the whole trouble. And so

got all wet and shiny like a hungry kid's lookin' at a mince pie. "What a victory, what a proof of the truth of my theories!" she says.

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I DIDN'T know what she was talking about any more than she did, but I knew the look. She had a man on the brain; or at least she thought Freddie was a man, and it counted up the same.

"Listen," I says to her. "Don't got off wrong about this male thing," I says. "He's a mistake, and he'll go right on happening, no matter what anybody says or does."

"Ah!" she says, like as if I'd stuck her with a hatpin. "How blind! I shall reclaim him," she says. "I know I shall be victorious."

Well, of course, if you want to call Freddie a victory, she was. Oh, sure, Freddie fell in love with her first pop! Ain't it funny? When a rounder falls hard, it's al-

ways for some gentle thought like her; and one of them perpetual does like Miss Marsh always fastens onto some broken-winded old stag that wants to be good 'cause he ain't healthy enough to be bad no more.

Anyhow, Freddie was hers. He got so's he could say "Seashells" at 3 p. m. as a regular thing, and he learned about the other things water was used for besides filling bathtubs and oceans; and then of course they got engaged. Oh, sure! She was reforming him to marry him—fattening him up to kill, in a manner of speaking. She wore him all around town as conspicuous as one white duck shoe with a dress suit, and Freddie got tea-broke and tame.

They were both much too happy to be contented; so one rainy afternoon she asked him to confess all of his past life to her, so that they could float to heaven together without any anchors dragging.

So Freddie started in. After he come to, he picked out my right ear for the overflow from his bucket of sorrow, and I didn't have the will power—what? Oh, sure, they split! Pasts don't cut a lot of ice with a woman as long as she don't know the horrible details. A man can

confess to murder and arson, kidnapping and bigamy, and she'll think he's naughty but nice; but if he tells her he kissed Sadie Kazootski three times in the front parlor at 11:48 on the night in question, she'll call a cop and press the charge.

"She'll never speak to me again," Freddie says to me. "Oh, what am I going to do?"

"Well," I says to him, "judging by past performances, I'd say that you were going to take a drink."

"Ah, but I can't," he says. "I tried getting pickled, but it didn't do any good. She taught me the horror and shame of that dreadful life," he says, "and now I

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the same to me as a Methodist hymn on a rainy Sunday. Oh, don't get me wrong; I haven't done anything Bryan wouldn't, but you know wine ain't all. No! When I get sick of common sense you never see me melting my brains with highballs and such like, do you? You do not. 'Cause why? 'Cause I got a habit that can lose me more friends quicker and make me sadder and sicker sooner than lots of quarts. I keep company with other people's troubles.

I felt one of them sympathy jags coming on me two weeks ago, and I put up a battle to keep it off. I acted mean to everybody for days. I rowed with the boss and gave all my regular patrons a grouch, but it was no use. My sympathy was ripe and ready to pick. I was due to get soused on other people's trouble—the brand didn't matter.

Freddie Van Sicklen mixed me my first earful of the deadly stuff—a cocktail of woes that would have made a stone lion cry all over the front steps.

All Freddie had was an uncle, and that was enough. Seems like all the uncle had was enough money and Freddie; and Freddie was too much. So the old man sent him out here to Seattle "to absorb the virility of a new and growing country."

But Freddie put one over on the old man. He absorbed the same brand of virile spirits out here that he'd had an appetite for on Broadway.

Freddie was one of these rough and ready kind of fellows; meet any sort of emergency, you know. He didn't have to stay in bed if his valet got sick. N-o-o-o! He could put on his clothes himself, if necessary; sit right down on the spur of the moment and figure out which shoe went on which foot. Inventive cuss!

He made his home here in life hotel. That is to say, he was here less than 'most any place else except church and his office. It was just an address for him and his mail to be sent to; a place where people brought him when he was too far-gone to tell them where he'd rather be taken.

And he had a way with women. Yes! It was wide and long, and paved with check stubs set on edge. He had a large staff to pick and choose from, but he never did. When he was sober enough to see, he was too busy getting soused to make a selection; and when he was woozy enough to be sentimental, he couldn't see well.

A woman didn't need to be good looking to land Freddie; all she needed to be was first. He was a fish, but he thought he was a hook and line.

But all women were just part of his expenses to him, mere incidents, until he met Miss Marsh, and she was an explosion. She was one of these thin girls with a nice mind. She'd found out the world was made wrong, and she was always busy fixing it over. She was all eyes and hair, and she pined.

She come down from her room one afternoon, on her way to some thought party to read a paper on "How to Feed the Poor Without Giving Them Anything to Eat," or something like that, and stepped out of the elevator right onto Freddie. Then she stepped off him and hopped away, and says:

"Oh! How terrible!"

I never yet saw a souse that wasn't proud of what he had aboard, but they

lifted him up he begun to cry and wave his arms.

"Terr'ble!" he bawled. "Goo' woman shee me thish deplor'ble condition. Shame! I'm a gen'l'man, an' I'm 'shamed myself."

Then the boy yanked him into the cage and Miss Marsh came over to me.

"Isn't it horrible?" she says. "And he has such a good face; such fine, frank eyes!"

"He's a bum," I says to her, and she looks at me as if I'd murdered my poor old grandmother for the family album.

"That's just it," she says. "No one understands him. Nobody sympathizes with him, so he wanders on, alone, hopeless—"

"He's hopeless, all right," I cut in on

young and boyish!" she says. "All he needs is the guiding light of a sympathetic soul to lead him into the true light."

"All he needs is eight hours' good sleep and an absinth frappe," I says to her.

"Listen," I says. "If you've got any spare sympathy, don't waste it on Freddie Van Sicklin," I says. "He does just what he'd rather do, and he's got money enough to keep it up. Envy him, if you want to," I says, "but, gee, don't sympathize with him!"

"How little you understand," she says, "the mystery of the soul, and its pitiful blind groping for the light through the devious paths of darkness," she says. "He can be reclaimed," she says, and her eyes



"She's an actress, and she's a regular girl, so behave."