

# A Heart and Its Hardening

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can't get any satisfaction out of it any more. It disgusts me," he says.

I felt awful sorry for him. You know, after he begun to dry out, he wasn't a half bad sort of a kid in his own helpless way, and it did seem a shame for a man who'd been soused and happy all his life to be paid with misery for getting sober. So I says to him, I says:

"Now, I'll go have a talk with her, and see if I can't put her to sleep again; and if I do," I says, "for the love of Cupid don't drop any more confessions and wake her up again. I'll go talk hearts and flowers to her, and when she snores I'll give you the tip."

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So I went up. She was in bed, all propped up with perfumed pillows and ringed around with empty chocolate boxes and novels, and—what are you laughing at? Oh, well, she lay there looking like a set piece of immortelles at a lodge member's funeral.

"Listen," I says, "way down deep and slow, like I was saying my prayers where somebody could hear. "Listen. Would you have the boy's blood on your hands?" I says. "He's frantic with grief, and if you don't forgive him I shudder to think of what may become of him."

I made no hit in the part.

"Don't speak his name," she says. "That odious beast! And after all I did for him! I wish never to see him again!"

"But," I says, "he's played cards your way since you took him up, and you knew what he had been when you first met him."

"Ah, but I didn't," she says. "And he never told me until after he had led me on to care for him; and now my whole life is ruined," she says.

"But who's going to understand him now?" I says. "What soul's going to be a guiding light to lead him from the darkness into the light, and all that stuff? You wouldn't ditch the poor boy and let him wander on alone, lost and hopeless, would you?"

"I cast my pearls before swine," she says. "I wish never to see him again!"

I begun to get sore. Freddie'd never pestered anybody but himself, and I knew that she's netted him in the first place with malice of forethought; so I got up, and I says:

"Well," I says, "if you keep your eyes to the front when you're out, maybe you won't be in much danger of seeing him," I says. "You know Freddie don't make everybody sick since he quit drinking, and there's many a queen would rather marry him like he is now than work for a living," I says. "He's love-sick all right, but you know you ain't the only prescription ever put up for that ailment," I says.

That got beyond her fifth row. She tried to register "Home, James," but the best she did was jealous rage. She ordered me out, and I went; but I took an idea with me.

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III.

**L**ISTEN," I says to Freddie. "She's got insomnia. As a beautiful dream," I says, "you're all through. She can see just what you look like, and she don't like what she sees. The only way to make her think you're worth having around is to give her the idea that you've jumped her pasture forever and found the grazing sweeter elsewhere. Now you pick out some woman that can listen to you talk and look as if she liked it, and let this guiding light of yours that's gone out see you together a lot. When she sees some other beacon lighting up the wilderness for you, I think she'll shine again."

"But who will I get?" Freddie says.

"I've seen you with a lot of them," I says. "They haven't all died, have they?"

"No," he says. "But I ain't drinking now. You don't expect me to sit with one of those silly frills sober, do you?"

See? He wasn't so worse, was he?

"Well," I says, "I'll hire you a lady for the part. She's a friend of mine, so don't let your tongue stumble when you're with

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

"Why, certainly," Freddie says. "I would treat any friend of yours with the greatest respect."

See? He was a real polite little skate, as well as harmless. So I called up Madge Grady and asked her to come and see me. Madge was playing with the Fourth Avenue Stock Company, but when I first met her she was chauffeur on a telephone switchboard, same as myself; and just because life was hard, and she got to be an actress, I didn't look down on her. I was friends with her just the same as if nothing had happened.

So she come down, and I told her about Freddie.

"For you I'll do it," she says when I'd explained the thing. "But if he's as bad as you paint him, it's going to be hard labor. But I'm strong," she says, "so trot out the calamity, and I won't shiver."

It's a cinch Freddie didn't exhibit any symptoms of abomination when I introduced him. Madge was no blemish. They got busy right away, and when Miss Marsh came in they were cuckooing over in a corner of the lobby too quiet to be heard. I saw her lips shrink up like somebody had dropped alum dust on them, and her head snapped back like she didn't care; but she did. Buh-lieve me! They didn't have to do any sleuth work to locate her after she got that initial peep; she managed to be in eye-shot of their bliss most of the time, and she enjoyed it all like a case of the smallpox.

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After a few days her pride got leg-weary, and she came to me.

"I see," she says to me, with a double reverse curve like a letter S on her mustache lip, "I see that Mr. Van Sicklen has found balm for his wounds. Your solicitude for him was as unwarranted as my interest in him. He seems quite foolishly happy with that—that brazen creature."

"Ain't that lovely?" I says. "It pleases us both, don't it, and takes a lot off our minds? We was so worried for fear he'd do himself some harm on account of your losing him, wasn't we?" I says.

She didn't seem to exactly agree with me.

"Who is that degraded person he's constantly seen with?" she says.

"Why," I says, "I'll try to find out for you. Next time I see Freddie I'll tell him you want to know."

"You'll oblige me by doing nothing of the sort," she says. "I'm not in the least interested in Mr. Van Sicklen and his lights-o'-love," she says, and made her getaway.

So later I seen Madge and told her maybe her sentence was pretty near served.

"What do you think?" I asks her. "Is now the time for him to give himself back to her, or should he play a while longer?"

"Why, it's nothing to me," she says. "Nothing at all! You'd better consult Mr. Van Sicklen."

"Well, say," I says to her, "I don't know whether you're earning your board by the sweat of your feelings or not," I says. "You don't act like it was so awful tough helping spend Freddie's money. Can you look at him and keep your appetite, maybe?" I asks her.

"Don't be absurd!" she says.

She talks that way sometimes now, since she got to be an actress. When she was sowing telephone-plugs and reaping harsh words, she'd have said:

"Can that stuff!"

You can't get away from environment, can you? So she called Freddie, and Freddie says:

"Well," he says, "we'll let her bake a while longer. We might as well make a good job of it while we're about it."

And they certainly did. They was together all the time; out to dances and down to the cafe; out joy riding half the night. It seemed to me they got kind of careless as to whether they played their parts where the sweet soul could see them or not; but she saw enough of them—oh,

take it from me! Say, she wilted like a leaf of lettuce in a skillet of hot grease.

The thing went on like that for several days more. Then, one afternoon, Freddie come to me, fizzing like a bottle of champagne. He says to me, he says:

"Come on out with Madge and me this afternoon," he says. "We got a surprise for you."

"Well," I says, "I can't get off just now; I won't be through until 3."

"Well," he says, "we're going to have a blowout on the stage up at the theater. When you're through," he says, "come up. Now, don't fail me, will you?"

"No," I says. "Sure, I'll be there."

About half past 2 the manager come to me.

"You can get off now," he says. "Miss Marsh says she wants to see you up in her room."

She'd crumpled. When I went in, she got down on her knees.

"Oh," she says, "can't something be done?"

"What do you mean?" I says.

"Oh," she says, "he must be saved from that horrible creature! She has utterly bewitched him. My cruelty has driven him to this," she says. "Can't something be done?"

"Well," I says, "if harsh words drove him away, kind smiles ought to bring him back."

"I-know," she says; "that was my theory. I have smiled and smiled," she says, "and he never notices me. I can't seek him out," she says. "That wouldn't be maidenly, would it?"

"Well, maybe not," I says, "but it might be efficient. What do you think I can do for you?" I says.

"Oh," she says, "you know him well. He sent you to me in the first place. Go," she says, "and tell him that I forgive him."

"Are you willing to sacrifice your pride?" I says. "Are you willing to prove to the poor boy that you forgive him, and that you are sincere?"

"Yes," she says. "I'll do anything—anything to save him from the clutches of that horrible creature my cruelty drove him to," she says.

Ain't it the limit? She couldn't even own up to herself then that she wanted him. She still had to make believe she was a life-line.

"Listen," I says. "I know where he is to be found. He is in the company of that awful woman at this minute," I says. "If you want to prove your sincerity, come with me," I says, "and rescue him from her yourself."

"Oh, anything!" she says. "Anything to save him from that dreadful woman!"

"Well," I says, "you be dressed at ten minutes of 3, and stand for the taxi fare, and we'll go tear him loose from the tentacles of shame and degradation," I says.

"Oh, anything!" she says. "Anything!"

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IV.

**W**ASN'T I cute? You see, I had it all figured out. We'd go up to this blowout at the theater, whatever it was, and make a scene and a lot of trouble, and then she never could say it wasn't her own fault. I thought maybe she and Freddie might get married somehow in the excitement and never feel it.

She came down on time, and we went out and put a taxicab around us and joyed up to the stage entrance of the Fourth Avenue Theater. There was a lot of actors and some people going in, and I says to the doorman, I says:

"We was expected."

He let us in just as if we was, and we went on the stage. Believe me, death made an awful strong bid for me fight there. There stood Madge and Freddie, holding hands and looking like a couple of condemned spies with a wall back of them and the sun coming up. About two paces in front of them was a ministerial firing squad of one, all togged out with sideburns and a frock coat, and with a determined look in his eye.

I would have yelled myself when my

voice come back, but the guiding light beat me to it. She let out a screech streaked across the stage, and decorated Freddie with her slim person.

"Oh," she says, "that I should have driven you to this! But it isn't too late," she says. "Come back, and all will be forgiven!"

Then she backed off and fainted where she thought Freddie's arms were; but the floor got her. So then I come to and went over and lifted her head, and I says:

"Listen," I says. "Don't weaken now. You're in time," I says. "He's all yours. Wake up and enjoy him."

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Then I begun to suffer. My old friend Madge give me a look like I was a germ that had bit some of her folks.

"What do you mean," she says, "bringing that madwoman to our wedding?"

Now, what would have been a nice answer to that, do you think? I sure couldn't find any apt replies on me just then.

Freddie come to my rescue. Yes, he did, just like an athlete shoving a cripple off a cliff. He grabbed Madge and kissed her a couple of times, and he says:

"Take no notice of her, sweetheart," he says. "I think she's in that woman's pay. You know," he says, "she has done every thing in her power to induce me to return to her. It's a nasty conspiracy," he says, "but don't fear, sweetheart!"

She didn't. She was too busy hating me to fear anything just then.

"And I thought her a friend!" she says. "What treachery!"

Just about then Miss Marsh got her second wind. She got on her feet all by herself and talked. Her remarks were addressed to me. There was no doubt about that. She used some words that went over my head, but I knew it was me she meant.

"So you were in his pay!" she says. "Gee, I was getting double pay and didn't know it! "You were in his pay, and you brought me here just to humiliate me. I see it all now," she says. "I have been tricked, betrayed. But never fear, you shall pay!" she says, and went away.

"Well," Freddie says to me, like a dyspeptic judge talking to a wife-beater, "do you think you have made enough trouble for Madge and me on our wedding day?" he says. "I think the ceremony can be concluded without you."

I think he was asking me to leave, don't you? Maybe "telling" would be a better way of putting it. So I come away and left them with their new-found happiness and when I got back the boss says:

"You're a fine diplomat!" he says. "What have you been doing to Miss Marsh?"

"I haven't been doing," I says. "I been done, on both sides," I says, "and I'm crisp around the edges. Don't ask me what happened," I says. "I wish you find somebody that knows, and get the to tell me."

"Well," he says, "she told me I'd either have to discharge you or she'd leave the hotel tomorrow morning. Said you'd be sulted her. Did you?"

"Listen," I says. "I've been on a binge. I've been soused to the heartstrings of other people's troubles, and mixing the brands. I don't know what I done," I says; "but if you'll overlook it this time I'll never do it again."

And he did. But I will. Oh, I know I'm hard-hearted now. If I saw a midget stealing pennies out of a blind man's cup, I wouldn't call a cop; I'd halve with him. But I'll fail. Some of these days the tears will rise to my eye at the thought of some poor bewildered woman who can't keep her servants without paying them, and then I'll know I'm due again.

Is there some of them German doctors do you think—have ever discovered a little animal savage enough to go down into the depths of your blood and bite sympathy germs? Or am I hopeless? dunno.

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