

The Man Who Came Back

There are two ways of doing battle against Disgrace. You may live it down; or you may run away from it and hide. The first method is heartbreaking, but sure. The second cannot be relied upon because of the uncomfortable way Disgrace has of turning up at your heels just when you think you've eluded her in the last town but one.

Ted Terrill did not choose the first method. He had it thrust upon him. After Ted had served his term he came back home to visit his mother's grave, intending to take the next train out. He wore none of the prison pallor that you read about in books, because he had been shortstop on the penitentiary all-star baseball team, and famed for the dexterity with which he could grab up red-hot grounders. The storied lockstep and the clipped-hair effect also were missing. The superintendent of Ted's prison had been one of the reform kind.

You never would have picked Ted for a criminal. He had none of those interesting phrenological bumps and depressions that usually are shown to such frank advantage in the Bertillon photographs. Ted had been assistant cashier in the Citizens' National Bank. In a mad moment he had attempted a little sleight-of-hand act in which certain Citizens' National funds were to be transformed into certain glittering shares and back again so quickly that the examiners couldn't follow it with their eyes. But Ted was unaccustomed to these now-you-see-it-and-now-you-don't feats and his hand slipped. The trick dropped to the floor with an awful clatter.

Ted had been a lovable young kid, six feet high, and blond, with a great reputation as a dresser. He had the first yellow plush hat in our town. It sat on his golden head like a halo.

The women all liked Ted. Mrs. Dankworth, the dashing widow (why will widows persist in being dashing?), said he was the only man in our town who knew how to wear a dress suit. The men were forever slapping him on the back and asking him to have a little something. Ted's good looks and his clever tongue and a certain charming Irish way he had with him caused him to be taken up by the smart set. Now, if you've never lived in a small town you will be much amused at the idea of its boasting a smart set. Which proves

your ignorance. The small-town smart set is deadly serious about its smartness. It likes to take three-hour runs down to the city to fit a pair of shoes and attend the opera. Its clothes are as well made, and its scandals as crisp, and its pace as hasty, and its golf club as dull as the clothes, and scandals, and pace, and golf club of its city cousins.

The hasty pace killed Ted. He tried to keep step in a set of young folks whose fathers had made our town. And all the time his pocketbook was yelling, "Whoa!" The young people ran largely to leather-upholstered convertibles and country-club doings and house parties, as small-town younger generations are apt to. When Ted went to high school half the boys in his little clique spent their after-school hours dashing up and down Main Street in their big glittering cars, sitting slumped down on the middle of their spines in front of the steering wheel, their sleeves rolled up, their hair combed in a militant crewcut. One or the other of them always took Ted along. It is fearfully easy to develop a taste for that kind of thing. As he grew older, the taste took root and became a habit.

Ted came out after serving his term, still handsome in spite of all that story-writers may have taught to the contrary. But we'll make this concession to the old tradition. There was a difference. His radiant blondeur was dimmed in some intangible, elusive way. Birdie Callahan, who had worked in Ted's mother's kitchen for years, and who had gone back to her old job at the Haley House after her mistress's death, put it sadly, thus:

"He was always th' han'some divil. I used to look forward to ironin' day just for the pleasure of pressin' his fancy shirts for him. I'm that partial to them swell blonds. But I dinnaw, he's changed. Doin' time has taken the edge off his hair an' complexion. Not changed his color, do yuh mind, but dulled it, like a gold ring, or the like, that has tarnished."

Ted was seated in the smoker, with a chip on his shoulder, and a sick horror of encountering someone he knew in his heart, when Joe Haley of the Haley House got on at Westport, homeward bound. Joe Haley is the most eligible bachelor in our town, and the slipperiest. He has made the Haley House a gem, so that traveling men will cut half a dozen towns to Sunday there. If he should say, "Jump through this!" to any girl in our town she'd jump and be very glad to do it.

Joe Haley strolled leisurely up the car aisle toward Ted. Ted saw him coming and sat very still, waiting.

"Hello, Ted! How's Ted?" said Joe Haley, casually. And dropped into the adjoining seat without any more fuss.

Ted wet his lips slightly and tried to say something. He had been a breezy talker. But the words wouldn't come. Joe Haley made no effort to cover the situation with a rush of conversation. He didn't seem to realize that there was any situation to cover. He champed the end of his cigar and handed one to Ted.

"Well, you've taken your lickin', kid. What you going to do now?"

The rawness of it made Ted wince. "Oh, I don't know," he stammered. "I've got a job half promised in Chicago."

"What doing?"

Ted laughed a short and ugly laugh. "Driving a brewery truck."

Joe Haley tossed his cigar dexterously to the opposite corner of his mouth and squinted thoughtfully along its bulging sides.

"Remember that Wenzel girl that's kept books for me for the last six years? She's leaving in a couple of months to marry a New York guy that travels for ladies' cloaks and suits. After she goes, it's nix with the lady bookkeepers for me. Not that Minnie isn't a good, straight girl, and honest, but no girl can keep books with one eye on a column of figures and the other on a traveling man in a brown suit and a red necktie, unless she's cross-eyed, and you bet Minnie ain't. The job's yours if you want it. Eighty a month to start on, and board."

"I—can't, Joe. Thanks just the same. I'm going to try to begin all over again, somewhere else, where nobody knows me."

"Oh, yes," said Joe. "I knew a fellow that did that. After he came out he grew a beard, and wore eyeglasses, and changed his name. Had a quick, crisp way of talkin', so he cultivated a drawl and went west and started in business. Real estate, I think. Anyway, the second month he was there, in walks a fool he used to know and bellows: 'Why, if it ain't Bill! Hello, Bill! I thought you was doing time yet.' That was enough. Ted, you can black your face, and dye your hair, and squint, and some fine day, sooner or later, somebody'll come along and blab the whole thing. And say, the older it gets the worse it sounds when it does come out. Stick around here where you grew up, Ted."

Ted clasped and unclasped his hands uncomfortably. "I can't figure out why you should care how I finish."

"No reason," answered Joe. "Not a darned one. I wasn't ever in

love with your ma, like the guy on the stage; and I never owed your pa a cent. So it ain't a guilty conscience. I guess it's just pure cussedness, and a hankerin' for a new investment. I'm curious to know how'll you turn out. You've got the makin's of what the newspapers call a Leading Citizen, even if you did fall down once. If I'd ever had time to get married, which I never will have, a first-class hotel bein' more worry and expense than a Pittsburgh steel magnate's whole harem, I'd have wanted somebody to do the same for my kid. That sounds slushy, but it's straight."

"I don't seem to know how to thank you," began Ted, a little husky as to voice.

"Call around tomorrow morning," interrupted Joe Haley briskly, "and Minnie Wenzel will show you the ropes. You and her can work together for a couple of months. After then she's leaving to make her underwear, and that. I should think she'd have a bale of it by this time. Been embroidering them shimmy things and lunch cloths back of the desk when she thought I wasn't lookin' for the last six months."

Ted came down next morning at 8:00 with his nerve between his teeth and the chip still balanced lightly on his shoulder. Five minutes later, Minnie Wenzel knocked it off. When Joe Haley introduced the two jocularly, knowing that they had originally met in the First Reader room, Miss Wenzel acknowledged the introduction icily by lifting her left eyebrow slightly and drawing down the corners of her mouth. Her air of hauteur was a triumph, considering that she was handicapped by black sateen sleevelets.

I wonder how one could best describe Miss Wenzel? There is one of her in every small town. Let me think (business of hand on brow). Well, she always paid \$8.00 for her girdles when most girls in a similar position got theirs for \$1.59 in the basement. Nature had been kind to her. The hair that had been a muddy brown in Minnie's schoolgirl days it had touched with a magic red-gold wand. Birdie Callahan always said that Minnie was working only to wear out her old clothes.

After the introduction, Miss Wenzel followed Joe Haley into the lobby. She took no pains to lower her voice.

"Well, I must say, Mr. Haley, you've got a fine nerve! If my gentleman friend was to hear of my working with an ex-con I wouldn't be surprised if he'd break off the engagement. I should think you'd have

some respect for the feelings of a lady with a name to keep up, and engaged to a swell fellow like Mr. Stone."

"Say, listen, m' girl," replied Joe Haley. "The law don't cover all the tricks. But if stuffing an order was a criminal offense I'll bet your swell traveling man would be doing a life term."

Ted worked that day with his teeth set so that his jaws ached next morning. Minnie Wenzel spoke to him only when necessary and then in terms of dollars and cents. When dinnertime came she divested herself of the black sateen sleevelets and disappeared in the direction of the washroom. Ted waited until the dining room was almost deserted. Then he went in to dinner alone. Someone in white wearing an absurd little pocket handkerchief of an apron led him to a seat in a far corner of the big room. Ted didn't lift his eyes higher than the snowy square of the apron. The Apron drew out a chair, shoved it under Ted's knees in the way Aprons have, and thrust a printed menu at him.

"Roast beef, medium," said Ted, without looking up.

"Bless your heart, yuh ain't changed a bit. I remember how yuh used to jaw when it was too well done," said the Apron fondly.

Ted's head came up with a jerk.

"So yuh will cut yer old friends, is it?" grinned Birdie Callahan. "If this wasn't a public dining room maybe yuh'd shake hands with a poor but proud workin' girrul. Yer as good-lookin' a devil as ever, Mister Ted."

Ted's hand shot out and grasped hers. "Birdie! I could weep on your apron! I never was so glad to see anyone in my life. Just to look at you makes me homesick. What in Sam Hill are you doing here?"

"Waitin'. After yer ma died, seemed like I didn't care t' work fer no other privit fam'ly, so I came back here on my old job. I'll bet I'm the homeliest headwaitress in captivity."

Ted's nervous fingers were pleating the tablecloth. His voice sank to a whisper. "Birdie, tell me the God's truth. Did those three years cause her death?"

"Niver!" lied Birdie. "I was with her to the end. It started with a cold on th' chest. Have some French-fried with yer beef, Mr. Teddy. They're illigant today."

Birdie glided off to the kitchen. Authors are fond of the word "glide." But you can take it literally this time. Birdie had a face that looked like a huge mistake, but she walked like a panther, and they're said to be the last cry as gliders. She walked with her chin

up and her hips firm. That comes from juggling trays. You have to walk like that to keep your nose out of the soup. After a while the walk becomes a habit. Any seasoned dining-room girl could give lessons in walking to the Delsarte teacher of an Eastern finishing school.

From the day that Birdie Callahan served Ted with the roast-beef medium and the elegant French fries, she appointed herself monitor over his food and clothes and morals. I wish I could find words to describe his bitter loneliness. He did not seek companionship. The men, although not directly avoiding him, seemed somehow to have pressing business whenever they happened in his vicinity. The women ignored him. Mrs. Dankworth, still dashing and still widowed, passed Ted one day and looked fixedly at a point one inch above his head.

In a town like ours the Haley House is like a big, hospitable clubhouse. The men drop in the first thing in the morning, and the last thing at night, to hear the gossip and buy a cigar and jolly the girl at the cigar counter. Ted spoke to them when they spoke to him. He began to develop a certain grim line about the mouth. Joe Haley watched him from afar, and the longer he watched the kinder and more speculative grew the look in his eyes. And slowly and surely there grew in the hearts of our townspeople a certain new respect and admiration for this boy who was fighting his fight.

Ted got into the habit of taking his meals late, so that Birdie Callahan could take the time to talk to him.

"Birdie," he said one day when she brought his soup, "do you know that you're the only decent woman who'll talk to me? Do you know what I mean when I say that I'd give the rest of my life if I could just put my head in my mother's lap and have her muss up my hair and call me foolish names?"

Birdie Callahan cleared her throat and said abruptly: "I was noticin' yesterday your gray pants needs pressin' bad. Bring 'em down tomorrow mornin' and I'll give 'em th' elegant crease in the laundry."

So the first weeks went by, and the two months of Miss Wenzel's stay came to an end. Ted thanked his God and tried hard not to wish that she was a man so that he could punch her head.

The day before the time appointed for her departure she was closeted with Joe Haley for a long, long time. When finally she emerged, a bellboy lounged up to Ted with a message.

"Wenzel says th' Old Man wants t' see you. 'S in his office. Say, Mr. Terrill, do yuh think they can play today? It's pretty wet."

Joe Haley was sunk in the depths of his big leather chair. He didn't look up as Ted entered. "Sit down," he said. Ted sat down and waited, puzzled.

"As a wizard at figures," mused Joe Haley at last, softly as though to himself, "I'm a frost. A column of figures on paper makes my head swim. But I can carry a whole regiment of 'em in my head. I know every time the barkeeper draws one in the dark. I've been watchin' this thing for the last two weeks, hopin' you'd quit and come and tell me." He turned suddenly and faced Ted. "Ted, old kid," he said sadly, "what'n'ell made you do it again?"

"What's the joke?" asked Ted.

"Now, Ted," remonstrated Joe Haley, "that way of talkin' won't help matters none. As I said, I'm rotten at figures. But you're the first investment that ever turned out bad, and let me tell you I've handled some mighty bad-smelling ones. Why, kid, if you had just come to me on the quiet and asked for the loan of a hundred or so, why—"

"What's the joke, Joe?" said Ted again, slowly.

"This ain't my notion of a joke," came the terse answer. "We're three hundred short."

The last vestige of Ted Terrill's old-time radiance seemed to flicker and die, leaving him ashen and old.

"Short?" he repeated. Then, "My God!" in a strangely colorless voice—"My God!" He looked down at his fingers impersonally, as though they belonged to someone else. Then his hand clutched Joe Haley's arm with the grip of fear.

"Joe! Joe! That's the thing that's haunted me day and night till my nerves are raw. The fear of doing it again. Don't laugh at me, will you? I used to lie awake nights going over that cursed business of the bank—over and over—till the cold sweat would break out all over me. I used to figure it all out again, step by step, until— Joe, could a man steal and not know it? Could thinking of a thing like that drive a man crazy? Because if it could—if it could—then—"

"I don't know," said Joe Haley, "but it sounds darned fishy." He had a hand on Ted's shaking shoulder and was looking into the white, drawn face. "I had great plans for you, Ted. But Minnie Wenzel's got it all down on slips of paper. I might as well call her in again, and we'll have the whole blamed thing out."

Minnie Wenzel came. In her hand were slips of paper, and books with figures in them, and Ted looked and saw things written in his own hand that should not have been there. And he covered his shamed face with his two hands and gave thanks that his mother was dead.

There came three sharp raps at the office door. The tense figures within jumped nervously.

"Keep out!" called Joe Haley, "whoever you are!" Whereupon the door opened and Birdie Callahan breezed in.

"Get out, Birdie Callahan," roared Joe, "you're in the wrong pew!"

Birdie closed the door behind her composedly and came farther into the room. "Pete th' pashtry cook just tells me that Minnie Wenzel told th' day clerk, who told the barkeep, who told th' janitor, who told th' chef, who told Pete, that Minnie had caught Ted stealin' some three-hundred dollars."

Ted took a quick step forward. "Birdie, for heaven's sake, keep out of this. You can't make things any better. You may believe in me, but—"

"Where's the money?" asked Birdie.

Ted stared at her a moment, his mouth open ludicrously.

"Why, I don't—know," he articulated painfully.

Birdie snorted defiantly. "I thought so. D'ye know," sociably, "I was visitin' with my aunt, Mis' Mulcahy, last evenin'."

There was a quick rustle of silks from Minnie Wenzel's direction.

"Say, look here—" began Joe Haley impatiently.

"Shut up, Joe Haley!" snapped Birdie. "As I was sayin', I was visitin' with my aunt, Mis' Mulcahy. She does fancy washin' an' ironin' for the swells. An' Minnie Wenzel, there bein' none sweller, hires her to do up her weddin' linens. Such smears av hand embroidery an' Irish crochet she never see th' likes, Mis' Mulcahy says, and she's seen a lot. And as a special treat to the poor owld soul, why Minnie Wenzel lets her see some av her weddin' clothes. There never yet was a woman who cud resist showin' her weddin' things to every other woman she cud lay hands on.

"Well, Mis' Mulcahy, she see that grand trewsow and she said she never saw th' beat. Dresses! Well, her going-away suit alone comes to eighty dollars, for it's bein' made by Molkowsky, the little Polish tailor. An' her weddin' dress is satin, do yuh mind! Oh, it was a real treat for my aunt, Mis' Mulcahy."

Birdie walked over to where Minnie Wenzel sat, very white and still, and pointed a stubby red finger in her face. "'Tis the grand

manager ye are, Miss Wenzel, gettin' satins an' tailor-mades on yer salary. It takes a woman, Minnie Wenzel, to see through a woman's thricks."

"Well I'll be dinged!" exploded Joe Haley.

"Yuh'd better be!" retorted Birdie Callahan.

Minnie Wenzel stood up, her lip caught between her teeth.

"Am I to understand, Joe Haley, that you dare to accuse me of taking your filthy money, instead of that miserable ex-con there who has done time?"

"That'll do, Minnie," said Joe Haley gently. "That's a-plenty."

"Prove it," went on Minnie, and then looked as though she wished she hadn't.

"A business college edjication is a grand foine thing," observed Birdie. "Miss Wenzel is a graduate av wan. They teach you every-thing from drawin' birds with tail feathers to plain and fancy penmanship. In fact, they teach everything in the writin' line except forgery, an' I ain't so sure they haven't got a coorse in that."

"I don't care," whimpered Minnie Wenzel suddenly, sinking in a limp heap on the floor. "I had to do it. I'm marrying a swell fellow and a girl's got to have some clothes that don't look like a Bird Center dressmaker's work. He's got three sisters. I saw their pictures and they're coming to the wedding. They're the kind that wear low-necked dresses in the evening and have their hair and nails done downtown. I haven't got a thing but my looks. Could I go to New York dressed like a rube? On the square, Joe, I worked here six years and never took a sou. But things got away from me. The tailor wouldn't finish my suit unless I paid him fifty dollars down. I only took fifty at first, intending to pay it back. Honest to goodness, Joe, I did."

"Cut it out," said Joe Haley, "and get up. I was going to give you a check for your wedding, though I hadn't counted on no three hundred. We'll call it square. And I hope you'll be happy, but I don't gamble on it. You'll be goin' through your man's pants pockets before you're married a year. You can take your hat and fade. I'd like to know how I'm ever going to square this thing with Ted and Birdie."

"An' me standin' gassin' while them fool girls in the dinin' room can't set a table decent, and dinner in less than ten minutes," cried Birdie, rushing off. Ted mumbled something unintelligible and at once was after her.

"Birdie! I want to talk to you," he said earnestly.

"Say it quick then," said Birdie, over her shoulder. "The doors open in three minnits."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am. This is no place to talk to you. Will you let me walk home with you tonight after your work's done?"

"Will I?" said Birdie, turning to face him. "I will not. Th' swell mob has shook you, an' a good thing it is. You was travelin' with a bunch of racers when you was only built for medium speed. Now you've got your chance to a fresh start and don't you ever think I'm going to be the one to let you spoil it by beginnin' to walk out with a dinin'-room Lizzie like me."

"Don't say that, Birdie," Ted put in.

"It's the truth," affirmed Birdie. "Not that I ain't a perfec'ly respectable girrul, and ye know it. I'm a good slob, but folks would be tickled for the chance to say that you had nobody to go with but the likes av me. If I was to let you walk home with me tonight, yuh might be askin' to call next week. Inside half a year, if yuh was lonesome enough, yuh'd ask me to marry yuh. And b'gorra," she said softly, looking down at her unlovely red hands, "I'm dead scared I'd do it. Get back to work, Ted Terrill, and hold yer head up high, and when yuh say your prayers tonight, thank your lucky stars I ain't a hussy."