

MY BATTLE WITH DRINK

I could tell my story in two words--the two words "I drank." But I was not always a drinker. This is the story of my downfall--and of my rise--for through the influence of a good woman, I have, thank Heaven, risen from the depths.

The thing stole upon me gradually, as it does upon so many young men. As a boy, I remember taking a glass of root beer, but it did not grip me then. I can recall that I even disliked the taste. I was a young man before temptation really came upon me. My downfall began when I joined the Yonkers Shorthand and Typewriting College.

It was then that I first made acquaintance with the awful power of ridicule. They were a hard-living set at college--reckless youths. They frequented movie palaces. They thought nothing of winding up an evening with a couple of egg-phosphates and a chocolate fudge. They laughed at me when I refused to join them. I was only twenty. My character was undeveloped. I could not endure their scorn. The next time I was offered a drink I accepted. They were pleased, I remember. They called me "Good old Plum!" and a good sport and other complimentary names. I was intoxicated with sudden popularity.

How vividly I can recall that day! The shining counter, the placards advertising strange mixtures with ice cream as their basis, the busy

men behind the counter, the half-cynical, half-pitying eyes of the girl in the cage where you bought the soda checks. She had seen so many happy, healthy boys through that little hole in the wire netting, so many thoughtless boys all eager for their first soda, clamoring to set their foot on the primrose path that leads to destruction.

It was an apple marshmallow sundae, I recollect. I dug my spoon into it with an assumption of gaiety which I was far from feeling. The first mouthful almost nauseated me. It was like cold hair-oil. But I stuck to it. I could not break down now. I could not bear to forfeit the newly-won esteem of my comrades. They were gulping their sundaes down with the speed and enjoyment of old hands. I set my teeth, and persevered, and by degrees a strange exhilaration began to steal over me. I felt that I had burnt my boats and bridges; that I had crossed the Rubicon. I was reckless. I ordered another round. I was the life and soul of that party.

The next morning brought remorse. I did not feel well. I had pains, physical and mental. But I could not go back now. I was too weak to dispense with my popularity. I was only a boy, and on the previous evening the captain of the Checkers Club, to whom I looked up with an almost worshipping reverence, had slapped me on the back and told me that I was a corker. I felt that nothing could be excessive payment for such an honor. That night I gave a party at which orange phosphate flowed like water. It was the turning point.

I had got the habit!

I will pass briefly over the next few years. I continued to sink deeper and deeper into the slough. I knew all the drugstore clerks in New York by their first names, and they called me by mine. I no longer even had to specify the abomination I desired. I simply handed the man my ten cent check and said: "The usual, Jimmy," and he understood.

At first, considerations of health did not trouble me. I was young and strong, and my constitution quickly threw off the effects of my dissipation. Then, gradually, I began to feel worse. I was losing my grip. I found a difficulty in concentrating my attention on my work. I had dizzy spells. I became nervous and distraught. Eventually I went to a doctor. He examined me thoroughly, and shook his head.

"If I am to do you any good," he said, "you must tell me all. You must hold no secrets from me."

"Doctor," I said, covering my face with my hands, "I am a confirmed soda-fiend."

He gave me a long lecture and a longer list of instructions. I must take air and exercise and I must become a total abstainer from sundaes of all descriptions. I must avoid limeade like the plague, and if anybody offered me a Bulgarzoon I was to knock him down and shout for the nearest policeman.

I learned then for the first time what a bitterly hard thing it is for a man in a large and wicked city to keep from soda when once he has got the habit. Everything was against me. The old convivial circle began to shun me. I could not join in their revels and they began to look on me as a grouch. In the end, I fell, and in one wild orgy undid all the good of a month's abstinence. I was desperate then. I felt that nothing could save me, and I might as well give up the struggle. I drank two pin-ap-o-lades, three grapefruit-olas and an egg-zoolak, before pausing to take breath.

And then, the next day, I met May, the girl who effected my reformation. She was a clergyman's daughter who, to support her widowed mother, had accepted a non-speaking part in a musical comedy production entitled "Oh Joy! Oh Pep!" Our acquaintance ripened, and one night I asked her out to supper.

I look on that moment as the happiest of my life. I met her at the stage door, and conducted her to the nearest soda-fountain. We were inside and I was buying the checks before she realized where she was, and I shall never forget her look of mingled pain and horror.

"And I thought you were a live one!" she murmured.

It seemed that she had been looking forward to a little lobster and champagne. The idea was absolutely new to me. She quickly convinced

me, however, that such was the only refreshment which she would consider, and she recoiled with unconcealed aversion from my suggestion of a Mocha Malted and an Eva Tanguay. That night I tasted wine for the first time, and my reformation began.

It was hard at first, desperately hard. Something inside me was trying to pull me back to the sundaes for which I craved, but I resisted the impulse. Always with her divinely sympathetic encouragement, I gradually acquired a taste for alcohol. And suddenly, one evening, like a flash it came upon me that I had shaken off the cursed yoke that held me down: that I never wanted to see the inside of a drugstore again. Cocktails, at first repellent, have at last become palatable to me. I drink highballs for breakfast. I am saved.