

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 6

The Man Who Tried to Outwit the Whole World - WILLIAM NAYLOR

HIS establishment was full of the sounds that usually delighted the ears of Bill Naylor - alias Bill Hennessey.

But that night, he leaned against the bar and wondered why he felt low. The slipslap of shuffling cards punctuated the murmur of male voices. Glasses rang on the counter and in the background a woman laughed. It was a symphony of delicious money-making sounds, and Bill knew he should be reveling in it. Only thirty, and the owner of his own gambling casino! Not bad for a fellow who got his start in a reform school and had to make his way for a while on petty robberies.

Yet there was something about being tied down to one spot even the casino - that was deadly monotonous. Maybe a drink would help.

"Joe, buy you a drink. On the house."

But Joe wasn't drinking. They sat down together at a table in the shadowy corner, Bill nursing his drink, Joe smoking furiously and looking wise. "You know something, Bill," he said, "you look to me like a man who's fed up with what he's doing."

Bill studied his drink. "Maybe I am. Since I've had this joint I've stayed in one place longer than I ever stayed one place my whole life."

"Why don't you make a change?" Joe countered.

"I can't. This joint is my life." He picked up the deck of cards on the table and rifled through them. "And these things are my living. They're my workbench. My past, present, and future." He tossed them down, and two kings slithered to the floor.

"No wonder life gets monotonous. Cards!" Joe smoked silently for a moment. Then he leaned over and spoke confidentially. "I got something that can change the way you feel, Bill. Something that not only makes you feel sharp, but you are sharp. Your head feels clear and you're quick thinking and never fed up at all."

No letdown feeling with this. Not a chance! It's just what you need."

Bill looked at his friend sharply, saw clearly a pock-marked face and dirty fingernails. Then he took a sip of his drink. "I guess you're talking about the stuff you're on now."

"Sure. Cocaine's different from any other dope, Hennessey. It's the cure for the blues."

Bill didn't have the blues. A drink now and then usually dispelled his fed-up feeling. Usually! Joe was fumbling in the pocket of his suit. "Try it. Here. Sniff this. That's all."

Across the card-cluttered table, Bill reached out.

"Sniff it. That's all. Then let me know in an hour if you're ready to try some more."

In an hour Bill Naylor did want more cocaine. And after that, he wanted more. And more. Cocaine sharpened the casino sounds until they were an ecstatic crescendo. Cocaine made the women beautiful, and the colors they wore radiantly shimmering. Cocaine speeded up his hands and his wits at the card table. And in time, cocaine lifted Bill Naylor so far out of the deadly monotony of the nightly card game that he found himself in new places, experimenting with new things.

It was in San Francisco's Chinatown that he first experimented with opium. He took a dare. And suddenly he was swirling in a dream world made up of colors he had never seen before and music more hauntingly sweet than any he had ever heard. In no time, Bill Naylor was hooked. One drug picked him up. The other made him forget his troubles. Alcohol stopped mattering.

Now his problem was not monotony. His skill with the cards began to slip. He lost his lucrative gambling interests within a year. Depressed, he needed more cocaine, and so he continued on the merry-go-round.

He found a new occupation - peddling cocaine, "junking snow." He changed his name. Now he was dope-pusher Bill Lynch. He bought it, he sold it, he used it. He saw no monotony in the cycle.

During those hazy years, he met Edith. He called her a handsome blonde. In the duskiess of the tavern where they spent their evenings, he couldn't discern that her blonde hair needed a touch-up job. In any light, she was well-built. He loved her.

He told Edith all about himself - how he was shipped off to reform school when he was fourteen for being drunk on the streets of San Francisco. How he'd been released and then sentenced to industrial school for petty robbery. How he'd finally made something of himself by prowling the country after his release and learning how to manipulate cards from professional gamblers. How he'd owned his own casino by the time he was thirty.

"And now here you are," Edith told him.

"Here I am - and Edith baby, believe me, in all of this, there's never been any woman that

mattered enough for me to want to get hitched - for keeps."

Edith was a little drunk but she looked at him with something he wanted to interpret as fondness. "How much money do you make junking snow?" she asked.

"Enough to take care of us, honey."

"Enough to take care of me if the cops shut you up for a while?"

"They're not gonna get me, honey. Why, I've got this thing figured down to a pinpoint. I'm all set."

She poured herself another drink. "That's what every cokehead thinks. That stuff - it can fool you. That's why I hate it."

She was brassy and she was probably on her way to becoming a no-good lush. But she had a good laugh and she was honest. He really wanted to marry her.

"All right, Bill, let's. Let's have a nice big drink on it."

He waved the bottle away. "Not me. I don't need that stuff." "Need it or not, you can certainly have one drink with me for saying I'll marry a lug like you. And you'd better be all that I think you are, you good-looking snowbird." She laughed, and it seemed to Bill that there was honest affection in the sound.

The married life of Bill Lynch, dope-pusher, and Edith, brassy, hard-drinking bleached blonde, was short and not at all sweet. There was something about the woman that got to Bill. But he couldn't stomach their battles. The dope didn't numb him to all the fighting. Maybe it made it worse. Maybe it was his fault. Bill didn't know and, after a while, tried to give up caring. He just moved on.

Now it had been years since he'd gone to sleep or awakened without the help of dope. When he looked in the mirror, he knew he wasn't Bill Naylor, young casino sport. He wasn't even a shadow of that man. He was Bill Lynch, living outside the law, sometimes shrewd and high on cocaine, sometimes mellow with opium, always chasing after a buck to spend it on the only thing that made life worth living.

But somehow Bill managed to stay outside the law. It wasn't easy. Once in Nebraska, the law caught up to him. He was there with his pal Joe to make a big drug haul. But it was Joe who was caught with the goods on him. And Bill gave his name as O'Brien and declared he'd never seen Joe before. He told his story in a thick Irish brogue and just by coincidence the arresting cop was Irish too!

"Sure now," the cop declared, "it's clear to see, Mr. O'Brien, that this man is not the sort who'd be the choice of a gentleman like yourself for a traveling companion. It's citizens like yourself that make it easier for the law to function with efficiency. You're free to go, Mr. O'Brien. With the apologies and best wishes of the force."

But the sharp edge of Bill's mind was fast being numbed. A few years later, he landed in New Orleans peddling for small pickings out of a mean dive in the Vieux Carre. Edith was gone from his life completely. His pal, Joe, betrayed in Nebraska, had turned against him too. Bill's shuffling footsteps and shaking hands told his story to anybody he met. But he didn't care. Nothing really concerned Bill Naylor - alias Bill Hennessey, alias Bill Lynch - except getting enough dope to keep going.

He didn't stay in New Orleans long. After a few months, the southern authorities got wise. They didn't jail him but they did send him back to San Francisco as an undesirable. He made straight for the old Barbary coast, figuring he might meet some of his old friends there. He might even run into Edith. She might take him back - at least, until he pulled himself together.

Shambling his way up and down the sidewalk that night, he told himself that Bill Naylor could make a come-back if he tried. Get the shakes out of his hands and he'd show them how to play cards - and win. Suddenly, a hand pulled at his tattered coat sleeve.

"Hennessey? That you, Hennessey?"

It was Mame, a filthy old harridan he'd known in his plush days. Here she was, breathing her vile breath up into his face and saying, "You seen Edith lately, Bill?"

"I been out of town," he said, trying to pull away. But the old woman persisted. "I seen Edith, Bill. I know where she is."

He tried to keep eagerness out of his voice. "I suppose she wants to divorce me."

Old Mame shrugged. "Well, you can tell that woman I'm not having any divorce."

Old Mame touched his arm again. "Poor old Bill. You must be pretty lonesome. You're a big, dirty, no-good slob but you must be lonesome."

He eyed her suspiciously.

"I'm an old woman. And I get lonesome too. That's how come I can spot it in other people. And that's why I feel sorry for you. You don't have a mother, do you, Billy boy?"

Mame was right. He was lonesome. And she was better than nobody to sit and talk to. At least, she knew Edith. Maybe she'd tell him where to find her, if he waited long enough. He had forgotten the Bill Naylor who liked to drink with well-shaped blondes.

"Come on," he told Mame. "But you know I don't care nothing about juice."

Mame cackled. "Maybe we can find something a little more to your taste."

When Bill came to, he was on a ship outward bound through the Golden Gate. He'd been drugged by old Mame, and shanghai'ed. He'd been dumped aboard an out-going vessel and he was heading for the Far East.

He figured it out fast. The old girl must have collected twice on that job. Once from the skipper of the leaky old windjammer, who needed crewmen and was willing to pay for them. And she was paid again by Edith, whose domestic arrangements had probably been threatened by his return to San Francisco. He settled down for a dry, slow journey.

Bill was a long time working his way back to the States.

Eventually, he made it. From the moment he touched the shore, he spiraled down. Back at work as a junkie, he was caught, convicted, and sentenced to hard work on a chain gang.

Locked away from drugs, he suffered. But finally the poison worked its way out of his body. His appetite came back. He began to feel, in some ways, like the old Bill Naylor who could outsmart the world, if the world would play cards his way.

Released, he was back on dope in a week. Now he was fifty years old. Catching a glimpse of himself in a store window now and then, he knew he looked like seventy. But he didn't care. He didn't care about a thing except kicks from cocaine. But they weren't kicks any more. For the man living alone in a oneroom cold-water flat, they were a desperate necessity.

In the rooming house, his neighbors were his kind of people.

Tom, across the hall, kept laughing about the old town being too hot for him. Then one night he announced he was taking off for Chicago. He had a job offer there. He promised Bill that he could find him a spot too.

Bill was feeling low. He reached for his needle with shivering hands. "This job," he asked, "junking snow?"

"Among other things." Tom winked. "Don't forget. I'll put up the dough for the tickets."

"You've hired yourself a guy." Bill sighed and grabbed hard at the needle.

They arrived in Chicago early one evening and drifted directly to Skid Row. Bill remembered Chicago. There was a little place on the corner of State and Van Buren. He remembered the Chicago cops, too, and one of them was studying him from across the street.

"Forget it," Tom said. "We ain't even started here yet."

"I don't care. That guy's got me figured out. From somewhere. I want to get out of sight or we're both in trouble."

"All right, all right." Tom looked around. "Right in back of you. Go on inside and the cop'll forget about you."

"What is it?" Bill hissed.

"Some kind of mission. Go on in. I'll keep on walking. Meet you later."

Bill turned, took about ten hasty steps, and found himself inside the Pacific Garden Mission. There he crowded into the middle of a row of unkempt men, intending to sweat out the service.

Instead, the words of the sermon compelled him to listen.

He stayed until the invitation was over and then he went out. The cop was gone. Tom was probably at some flophouse. But instead of looking for him there, Bill walked along the street until he came to a lonely park. There he spent the night. He had a lot to think about.

In the morning, he had made up his mind. He would leave town, give Tom the slip. But as he started for the freight yard, something pulled him back to the Mission.

He went back, walked inside, and sat all day in the empty chapel. He was waiting for evening to come, and the preaching. He was shaky and sick but he didn't want a needle to fix him up. He wanted something else, and so he waited in the empty chapel. Sitting there, he realized that this was the first time that he had ever been inside any kind of a church.

At the evening meeting, men who talked like his kind of people stood up and told how they had put their trust in JESUS CHRIST. He didn't understand what they were talking about, but something about the way they talked got hold of him.

At the end of the meeting, a man came up and spoke to him. "Do you want to be different, friend?"

Bill looked down at his twitching hands. "Look at me. Wouldn't you? I'm a junkie. Twenty-five years with the habit."

"I can see that. But JESUS CHRIST died to take away that habit. If you'll let Him."

"No, sir. I need it too bad."

The man smiled understandingly. "The need is what He'll take away."

Bill shook his head. His dry spell in jail hadn't taken that need away. "He'll make you a new man."

It wasn't making sense to Bill. He'd tried being a new man - Bill Hennessey, Billy Lynch. "I don't see how," he said.

"You don't have to. It's a gift - the gift of GOD."

"What's a gift?" He wanted to understand, to let the man help him.

"Forgiveness for all the sins in your life. A new life in CHRIST. An eternal life with Him. And the gift of GOD's Holy Spirit to live His life in you. You'll be a new man with a new life."

More than he wanted a fix, he wanted this gift. He wanted a new life. He'd tried so many lives. Juvenile delinquent, public drunk at fourteen. Card shark at twenty. Casino owner at thirty. Dope

pusher. Junkie. No-good stumblebum. "How? What do I do?" Bill Naylor asked.

"Nothing, actually. JESUS has done it all. The only thing you can do is say 'yes' and take it."

Bill's dirty hands clawed at the man's sleeve. "All right. How?"

"You pray."

"Pray! I don't know how."

"Then we'll use the same prayer that a hundred other men like you have prayed." Bill's watery eyes were on the man's face. He was following every word. "It goes like this. '**God, be merciful to me, a sinner,** and save me. For JESUS' sake. Amen.'"

Bill Naylor repeated that prayer and he meant every word of it. He stayed at the Mission that night and from that hour he was off drugs.

For a while, he craved them. The old desire tore him apart.

But when every nerve was screaming, he would pray. His need was answered. In the power of JESUS CHRIST, he kicked the habit of twenty-five years. And he never went back to it.

Bill Naylor - alias Bill Hennessey, alias Bill Lynch - was very much a new man. He found a job as a night watchman and was entrusted with the responsibility of the safekeeping of a warehouse. The old need to outsmart the world or to escape it when he couldn't was gone. He was content to fulfill the job's routine conscientiously. He lived out the rest of the years left to him on the side of law and order.

And he died proving that CHRIST had made him a new man.

Protecting the property under his care, Bill was bludgeoned to death by a thief. He died in the knowledge that he actually lived under the promise of GOD that "**whosoever... believeth in [Him] shall never die.**"

~ end of chapter 6 ~
