

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

Faith Coxe Bailey

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Chapter 9

Bad Checks, Stolen Cars and a Miracle - ARLOS SHOEMAKE

HOW I came to make a living passing worthless checks, how I came to do more than two hundred days in solitary confinement, and how I came to dedicate my life to getting revenge on the prison guards - and then at last, came to have a completely new life that had no place in it for revenge - it's all quite a long story.

It begins in the wheat country of western Idaho where I was born in 1926. I was just fourteen when I tried to pass my first bad check - to pay for a set of drumsticks. The man at the music store was pretty foxy. He took the check, endorsed it, and told me to take it across to the drugstore to get it cashed. The druggist took one hard look at me and the check - and called the police.

After that I guess I was marked for trouble. I skipped school a lot, got into a couple more jams, and wound up serving eleven months in the reform school at St. Anthony. I don't know whether I was reformed or not. But I do know that I hadn't lost my gift for getting into trouble.

Real trouble came the day I walked into a saloon in Lewiston with my brother Bill, right after I'd gotten out of reform school. The saloon keeper was real chummy. "Hey, kid," he called across the counter to me. "Where's your guitar? You played pretty good the last time you were in here."

The guitar had been left at a friend's house. But I was flattered by the bartender's interest.

"Go on, get it, kid," he kept coaxing. "We'd all like to hear you play."

"But I can't," I told him. "My friend lives way over in Washington state and I don't have a car."

"Then take mine. It's right by the door outside. The keys are in it. Go on."

When I got back to that place in Lewiston, the real owner of the car had called in the police and I was arrested for stealing a car and crossing a state line with it. That made it a federal case.

When I came to trial in Moscow, Idaho, I was put on probation. Right then and there, I figured I'd had a bad deal. I was bitter about authority of any kind.

Well, with that attitude, it's no wonder my Army service was pretty spotty. I got in just at the end of World War II, served in a couple mid-western posts and then was transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington. That was pretty close to home. I took all the weekend passes I could get and spent most of the time bumming around getting drunk.

Finally I went AWOL for thirty days, hitchhiked halfway across the country and back again - and when I got back to camp discovered I hadn't been missed. My outfit was being transferred from the East Fort to the North Fort. In the confusion, my absence hadn't been noticed. So I stayed AWOL for 82 days. In time, of course, they caught up with me and I stood court martial.

For a while after I got out of the Army, things went pretty well. I got a good job, bought some nice clothes, began taking flying lessons under the G.I. bill. First thing you know, I opened a little checking account.

That was the beginning of real trouble. It's a terribly easy thing to write a check. It got so easy that even after my account got down to a zero balance, I kept right on writing them. And the day I tried to cash one of those bad checks in the Lewiston Department Store is the day I began the life of a fugitive.

The manager peered at me sharply. "Your own check, Mr. Shoemake?"

"That's right," I drawled.

He turned it over twice. I thought he was going to hold it up to the light or bite it, or put it under an X-ray machine.

Finally, he said, "Have you a charge account here, Mr. Shoemake?"

"No sir. Not yet."

"Hmmm." He inspected the check again. "Wait here. I'll be right back." He stepped toward his office and a phone.

I knew it was time to be moving. There were quite a few bad checks floating around town by then, and I figured that a phone call to the bank would bring the whole thing to a head. But I couldn't move far without transportation.

I found the answer to the transportation problem in a car parked on a hill. The key was in the ignition. I got in, let her roll down hill, and around the first corner, started the engine. I didn't stop until I got to Seattle.

After a few days there I moved on. After about a week, I abandoned the car near Vancouver, Washington, and headed for Portland, Oregon.

In Portland, there was a circus in town. A circus seemed like a pretty good place to hide out, so I asked for a job and got it. But when the circus was due to go into the state of Washington, I quit in a hurry. I didn't want to go there to answer any questions.

I picked up a job with a traveling carnival, operated the Octopus ride, and then finally bought out the Razzle Dazzle game. But the check writing habit was so well established that even with a legitimate income I still kept my pen busy. In time I got worried about the way the paper trail coincided with the carnival route, and when I got worried enough, I just took off on my own again.

As I drifted east across Iowa and Illinois, my only problem was keeping a supply of blank checks on the local banks. My system was simple. I knew I looked like a farm boy and talked like one, so I dressed to match.

One of my favorite schemes was to go window shopping on the main street of a small town. I'd stop and gawk in at the display of men's suits in a clothing store window. If I stood there long enough, the proprietor would come outside to talk to me. Then I usually had it made.

The proprietors all had the same line. "You've got a good eye for clothes, young fellow, if the suit you're admiring is an example of what you like."

"It's good looking all right." I would pull out all the stops on my country-ish drawl.

"You bet it is. Part of a shipment I just got in from New York last week. I got a real price break on them too. That's why I'm pricing them so far below what they're worth."

Pretty soon I'd let myself get talked right into his store. I'd let him talk my jacket off me, and then put the suit jacket on. While he was measuring, he'd get around to casual conversation.

"Live around here?"

"Oh, twenty miles to the north. Pretty close to the Junction." With some pins in his mouth, he'd ask, "Have a farm up there?"

"Nope. I'm a hired man. Work for Mr. Grover. You probably know him, don't you?"

The storekeeper didn't, but this wouldn't discourage him. Before long, I'd decide to take the suit. This was always after I'd make a few remarks about Mr. Grover up there at the Junction and how good he was to me, including his wages.

"All right, sir." The last measurement was taken. "Now you leave a deposit and you can pick the suit up day after tomorrow."

"Fine. Just as you say. Only thing is, I'll have to give you my pay check. I didn't figure on buying anything today, so I don't have any cash. Just a dollar or two."

The storekeeper would take the check. "Mr. Grover's check?"

I believe that'll be all right."

A thirty-five dollar suit out of a two hundred dollar check meant one hundred and sixty-five

dollars in change. "Thanks, sir. I reckon I won't be able to get in before Saturday. We'll probably be shredding corn the next couple of days."

It was all so easy. And that sort of thing went on for about three years. But in spite of the money I was getting my hands on, I was just about the most miserable person you ever saw. I was always moving, never making friends. I wondered about my folks, too. I hadn't seen Mom and Dad for years. But I didn't dare write.

Just once in those days was I caught. I bought a used car for twelve hundred and ninety-five dollars. Using my own name, like always, I wrote a check on the bank back home in Idaho. But I really guessed wrong that time.

I thought the check would take five days going to Idaho and another five coming back. So I took time about selling the car for cash. But the check went west by air mail and the Idaho bank wired a protest back east. I was just getting packed up when the police got to my room. I did ninety days in the county jail.

Having been caught once, I was scared. In ten days, I bounced in and out of ten towns. Then came the real irony. I needed a car to get around in so I went into a car lot and plunked down ninety-five dollars - in cash - for a 1936 jalopy. It was the first legitimate deal I'd made in years.

But on the highway a couple of days later the car broke down.

And while I was sitting there wondering how to get out of this mess, a cop appeared out of nowhere.

"All right, get out of the car."

"What's the matter, cop?" This time I could afford to be casual.

"Let's see what you've got in your pockets." I protested. "I don't get it."

"We've got a notice to look for a stolen car and this one answers the description."

"But I bought this fair and square . . ."

The cop was going through my wallet. "Well - well - well, this is quite a collection you got on you. What about these checks, now? Listen, you're coming with me!"

I was convicted of a felony - a fictitious check in my possession. I was put on two years probation.

After that, the nightmare really began. I passed bad checks all over the middle west.

It was a time mix-up that finally caught me. At 3:15 P.M., daylight-saving time, I cashed a check in one town on a bank in another town just fifteen miles away. I assumed the bank would be closed. But the other town was on standard time, and the bank was open!

When the merchant called and found the account was a fake, he yelled for the police. And when they identified me as the man named in a three-state alarm, I knew I was in for plenty of trouble.

I served six weeks in Joliet and thirteen and a half months in Menard, Illinois. Then they moved me up to Sterling, where the judge gave me thirty days. After that came Janesville, Wisconsin, where they matched the thirty days.

By that time, I thought I'd pretty well paid my debt to society.

But I had to stand trial in Rockford, Illinois. The sentence was two to seven years.

It turned out to be four years and nine months. But they were the bitterest I've ever known. I learned to hate everybody - the entire world, and most of all myself. I expressed my hatred so well that I spent more than 200 days in solitary. And it was just four months before I was due for release that I felt the bitterest blow of all.

The guard stood in front of my cell. In his hand, he held a telegram.

"From the governor," I sneered. "Maybe he wants to give me a pardon."

"Take it easy, Shoemaker," the guard countered. "This one's from Idaho." Without a nicker on his stony face, the guard reeled off these words: "Mother died ten o'clock this morning. Funeral day after tomorrow."

I tried to grab at the wire through the bar. "What? What did you say?"

"Want I should read it again?"

In a frenzy, I grabbed the bars. "No - No - No! I heard it the first time. What are you standing there for? Beat it. What am I? A monkey in a cage! Beat it."

I was so wild after that they had to keep me locked in my cell for ten days. Later I quieted down, but all the bitterness stayed on. It stayed and festered right up to the day of my release. I was eaten alive by a constant, nagging drive to get even - to get revenge on anyone. And the prison guards seemed to symbolize the world I hated.

Released, I got a room in Joliet, not far from the prison. Somehow I had the notion that if I could lay my hands on just one of the guards I'd get even - with everybody! While I waited, I began drinking up my twenty-five dollars release money. But the more I drank, the more miserable I was. The next day was even worse, so I took a bus to Chicago.

Walking from the depot to a hotel, I went through Skid Row and passed the Pacific Garden Mission. One small sign out in front caught my attention. It said, "Mother's prayers follow you!"

I didn't know whether to laugh at the "corn" or to curse GOD for letting my own mother die. I paused. Out of the depths of my hatred for all men came a deep desire to step inside and tell those sign-hangers what life was really like.

As I stood there, a young man stepped out. "Hi there. Anything I can do to help you?"

"Help me? Are you kidding?" I snarled.

"That's what we're here for," he told me. "To help people.

All we can do is help you to take your troubles to Someone big enough to handle them."

"Such as?" I asked, without intending to prolong this.

"The Lord JESUS CHRIST. He's the only One who can help." "Baloney!" I started to move on down the street. I'd had enough of that.

But the young fellow called after me. "Why don't you stop by tonight at eight o'clock? We'll have a good speaker. Maybe he can help you to see what I mean."

I got out of there in a hurry, found a hotel room, and loafed around for the rest of the day. That evening I realized I needed a shave, so I started out to buy a razor and some blades. It must have been just eight o'clock when I went by the door of the Pacific Garden Mission. The little sign about Mother's prayers was still hanging out in front.

Somehow it made me feel even worse than it had in the afternoon. I stopped, looked at it - and then went inside.

I was so miserable and so full of burning hatred that I hardly heard the sermon. But at the end of it, the young fellow who had spoken to me in the afternoon came over.

"Glad you came back," he said with directness. "Wouldn't you like to come in the prayer room and talk the whole thing over with GOD?"

Not knowing why I did it, I got up and followed him. The young fellow, who told me his name was Dave, pointed to the photograph on the wall. "See that guy," Dave said. "He used to be one of the most mixed-up, discouraged guys in the whole world."

"And?" I asked, figuring I was supposed to.

"When he got down on his knees and asked CHRIST to take over his life, he was saved."

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and settled back in my chair.

"How do you know that?"

Dave looked intently at me "Two ways. One - he was a changed man. That's Lucky Baldwin. He was the chaplain at the Bridewell prison for years. A great guy."

"You said two ways," I prodded. "What's the other?" "This." The young fellow named Dave took a little Bible out of his jacket pocket. "Right here in the Bible. It's GOD's promise. Listen. **For**

whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

I shook my head. "If you're trying to say that means me, you're wrong, brother. I'm too far gone."

"But it says whosoever. That means you. Listen, I used to be a drunken bartender - in trouble with a bunch of hoods. But now I'm here. And I'm a happy man. You can be too."

"I'd like to be happy."

Dave said, "Then let's ask GOD to make you that way."

So, as he and I sat together in the prayer room of the Pacific Garden Mission, I prayed. "GOD, come in and make me a different man, because I've sure made one awful mess of my life."

And in that minute, while I was still on my knees, I knew that my prayer had been answered. How? Because all the hate and bitterness just washed right out of me. I could almost feel it being swept away.

Back in my room that night, I said, "GOD, if this is true, don't let it leave." It didn't.

Let me give you some proof. A few months afterward, when I was staying at the Mission, one of the prison guards walked past. It was one of the guys I had sworn to spend my life getting even with.

I darted out into the crowd and chased him half a block. "Hey, wait a minute, will you?" Finally he heard, recognized me, and stopped. "All right, Shoemake," he said defensively, and I couldn't blame him, "you looking for trouble?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Why should you - listen, I know you. You went out of the pen with a chip on your shoulders. What do you want with me anyhow?"

"Why, man, listen, I know how I felt but that's all changed," I told the guard. "I just wanted to say hello and ask about some of the guys. Look, I'm a Christian now. Different. I don't hate anybody."

Either he thought Arlos Shoemake was crazy or he understood. I don't know. But I do know this: As I live every day as a Christian, working hard at rebuilding my life with CHRIST's help, I know that the Arlos Shoemake who got more bitter and more anti-social and more anti-everybody and everything is now a totally new man. Old things have passed away. All things have become new. I live on honest dollars these days, and I don't feed my soul on hate.

That's the story of how a no-good bad-check artist like me lost his grudge against the world and found a new life. To me, Arlos Shoemake, it's the greatest miracle in the whole world!

~ end of chapter 9 ~