

# Down and Out at Forty-five

## The Story of a "Has-Been" Who Came Back

(The following article by Walt Mason, famous throughout the nation as a writer and author of prose-poems, was published in the American Magazine, and is reproduced in The Commoner by courtesy of that publication.—Ed.)

On October, 12, 1907, I arrived in Emporia, Kansas, to begin at the bottom and work up.

I was forty-five years old, and my assets consisted of the hand-me-downs I wore, an extra shirt, \$1.35 in money, and an old pony and buggy. I had no ambition, and no confidence in the future; everything of that kind had been licked out of me, and the only thing I was conscious of was a profound discouragement. The bottom had fallen out of the planetary system, so far as I was concerned.

I was not the victim of the cruel world, or a stony-hearted society. I was the victim of my own folly. I had spent all the best years of my life with the prodigal sons, holding wassail in wayside inns; and when I arrived in Emporia I was fresh from an institution in Kansas City where pickled people have the alcohol boiled out of them, and are supposed to be sent forth as good as new.

I began my newspaper career when I was twenty-two years old. Before that, for several years, I had been working on Kansas farms, where I achieved a reputation as the worst hired hand in the state. I had a mania for writing and was setting down gems of thought when I should have been currying mules or milking cows, and employing farmers don't take kindly to literary work. My one ambition was to do newspaper work; and one winter day I absconded from the farm and went to seek my fortune. I managed to get a job as telegraph editor of a Kansas morning paper; the work kept me at my desk until the cock was crowing aloof, and when the paper had gone to press the night editor, the city editor and I repaired to a little booth around the corner, where an un-moral citizen sold fire-water. There we sat until broad daylight, every morning, telling stories and quaffing the kind serpent.

And there I acquired a taste for conviviality that stuck to me until my mane was getting gray. In those halcyon days most newspaper men were partial to the flowing bowl. The young man who refused to look upon the wine was considered effeminate. In fact, there was a superstitious belief, in newspaper offices, that one couldn't be a good reporter unless he was a good mixer, and he couldn't be a good mixer unless he was at all times ready to consume his share of booze. There was some foundation for this theory, in those grand old days when city councilmen were recruited from the saloon-keepers, and caucuses and conventions were held in the back rooms of grog parlors.

While this theory survived, I never had trouble getting employment. I drifted around the country from one town to another. Being of a happy-go-lucky disposition, I gave no thought to the future. Sufficient to the day was the evil, or the good, thereof. Because I seemed able to get a job whenever I wanted one, it never occurred to me that conditions might change—and I wouldn't have cared if they had. I was known in all Western newspaper offices, and one reason why I could always get employment was that I was "a hog for work" so long as I lasted. In all my experience I have known but one man who could turn out as much copy, day after day, the year round. This was Ed. Howe, of the "Atchison Globe," for whom I worked for a year and a half.

Some newspaper proprietors considered it a blessing when I turned up; for I would turn in and write the whole editorial page, and edit the telegraph, and read proofs, and do as much as three ordinary people would do. This is not a boast. There are many editors who will endorse my statement. I always tackled a new job with a virtuous determination to cut out the fool heads for good. I was going to turn over a new leaf and be a shining example to the young. Time and again I fooled my employers as well as myself. For two or three weeks I would live and an anchorite and break all hard work records; the managing editor would raise my wages every week, and take me into his private office to tell me that if I kept up my present lick

### WHAT HAPPENED TO WALT MASON

(By William Allen White, Editor of the Emporia "Gazette".)

It was Emporia that did the business for Walt Mason—Emporia and the indomitable soul in him. He already did it himself; but he needed the proper environment. So, perhaps, they did it together.

When he wrote for a job on the "Gazette," he said that he had all the degrees that could be conferred upon him by a certain institution which claimed to cure booze-fighters, and that he had tried high resolves many times, only to wake up and find the brewer's daughter feeding his week's salary to her favorite cat. He said he wanted before he quit to try a dry town. Now Emporia is a dry town. It started dry. In 1857—that isn't a misprint for it was sixty-one years ago, in an age when a preacher could stew his soul in toddy without losing caste—Emporia in the charter of the town company started with a prohibition clause. It did not always hold the Rum Fiend away. But it always bothered him to get in. So he never waxed fat in Emporia. And for a generation Emporia, while not bone-dry, has not been moist.

When Walt Mason came here the town was fairly dry. Alcohol formed no part of the town's conscious thought. No one invited him to drink. He heard no talk of drink; he saw no one drinking, and to get liquor he would have had to associate with loafers and plug-uglies. So Walt Mason in a dry town, having plenty of work to do, did it well. And the town stood by and cheered him. Ten thousand people became his friends. They are his friends today. When he comes down-town every morning at half past seven—and he never varies the time five minutes—he walks with the clerks and storekeepers of Commercial Street. When he goes home at eight-thirty to grind out his day's grist, he meets the professional men coming to their offices. They all greet him, jolly with him, pass the time of day, and, like "the sailors and the fisher men" who consorted with "Omer" when he "smote his bloomin' lyre," these Emporians, a few weeks later, see old gibes, odd quirks of speech, human foibles, and queer twists and turns of human nature "turn up again, and keep it quiet," even as the shepherds and the market girls did three thousand years ago for Homer. Walt Mason is the Homer of modern America, and particularly of Middle-Western America, the America of the country town. For, after drying the city, East and West, he found his feet and restored his soul here in Emporia. And the town is vastly proud of him. And they are glad to tell the stranger all about it. If you really desire to see a doting parent, come to Emporia and start the talk on Walt Mason in any store, in any office, in any shop. No proud father has more stories of his first baby than Emporia has about Walt Mason, and they are all true, for they are all good.

he would give me the half of his kingdom, and the hand of his daughter in marriage, or words to that effect. I had a dozen such opportunities to establish myself firmly in fine situations. But my virtuous resolves never lasted longer than two or three weeks.

I would equip myself with a good suit of clothes, and purple and fine linen, and become obtrusively respectable, and then of a sudden there would come a great longing for the gilded saloon and the company of the people who drank not wisely but too well; and then, poof! away would fly all the excellent resolutions, and I'd

wake up some fine morning in a livery stable, to find that my raiment was in the pawnshop, and I couldn't remember whether it was Wednesday or the Chinese New Year.

In November of one immemorial year I was seated in a beautifully furnished editorial room, the star man of a great and growing newspaper. The managing editor thought so much of my work, and was so convinced that I had reformed for good, that he had fitted up this sumptuous office for my exclusive use. I was honored and petted in every possible way. In the following February I was shoveling snow off the sidewalks in an Iowa town, to get the price of a feed and bunk.

I will give a concrete instance of this sort of experience: I blew into Denver, one cold day, shivering in a suit that would have been considered too gauzy in Florida. I was penniless and hungry, and, as I had been sleeping in box cars for two nights, I looked like something left over from a rummage sale. I went to the office of the Denver "News" and found John Arkins, who was the editor and proprietor. He knew my reputation, and considered me so amusing he laughed for an hour before handing over five dollars. Then he told me I could contribute at space rates if I wished.

I was simply overflowing with good resolutions. At last I had seen the error of my ways, and was going to abandon the husks and the swine. "Never again," said I, in ringing tones. I got me a humble hall room in a cheap boarding-house, and a pad of paper and a pencil, and wrote a column or two of highly moral paragraphs. The "News" printed them next morning, and another batch next day, and in a week they formed a feature that Denver was talking about. I had letters of approval from clergymen and merchant princes, and invitations to everything.

One day Mr. Arkins called me into his private office for a heart-to-heart talk. First, he gave me an order for a suit of clothes, no price limit set, and explained that this was a present. Then he told me that my stuff promised to be of value to the paper, and if I would behave myself and abandon that conduct which had made my name a hissing in newspaper offices from Dan to Beersheba, my future was assured. The "News" didn't quarrel over wages when it found something it wanted. I assured Mr. Arkins, with tears in my eyes, that my good resolutions were like the laws of the Medes and the Persians, and also had a strong family resemblance to the Rock of Gibraltar. Thrones might crumble and dynasties crash, but my resolutions would rise triumphant above the wreck of matter.

"Go and get your suit of clothes," said Mr. Arkins, "and come around to-morrow ready for regular work."

I went forth and got the suit of clothes. I don't remember what happened after that. Two or three days later I woke up at Ogden, Utah, and I have never known why I went there, or how I got there.

This was the sort of life I led for many years. If one is young, and has a sense of humor, such ups and downs don't matter. But one cannot always be young, and a sense of humor becomes frayed along the edges after a while.

Conditions were changing in newspaper offices and I was so busy I didn't notice it. The old superstition that a reporter should be a good mixer, and hence a competent drinker, had died the death. A red nose was no longer a recommendation when one applied for a job in a newspaper office. So, when, at the ripe age of forty-five, I found myself in that bleaching institution at Kansas City, I slowly realized that I was worse than down and out. I was a back number, a has-been. And I no longer had the resiliency of youth. I was feeling very old and humble and useless.

I wrote to editors everywhere, describing my circumstances, and offering to work for any old wage that would assure me a place to sleep and a meal ticket. I went to a daily newspaper in Kansas City and offered to write the whole editorial page for twelve dollars a week. But there was nothing doing. My reputation for unreliability was against me. Those were sickening days, when every mail brought replies from editors, explaining why they couldn't give me work, kindly trying to let me down easy. There seemed to be no place for me anywhere.

Then one weary day I picked up an old magazine and read an article by William Allen White. It was a good article, so full of humor and kindness that I thought he was a man who might understand. So I wrote to him, asking if he couldn't give me some little job on his news-

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