

The Daily Short Story

TAKING JIM BACK

(By H. M. Eghert)

ABIGAIL SMALE entered the express office at Norbury, which was kept by Mrs. James Searles, her finger on her lip, her free hand pointed down the road.

"He's coming, Jane," she whispered mysteriously.

Mrs. Searles looked up wearily from her delivery book, "Who?" she asked tersely.

"That worthless husband of yours," responded the other tartly. "He's been gone three days now on one of his regular sprees with that Joe Turner and their worthless friends, Jane, promise me you'll not take him back. Show your dignity."

Jane Searles sighed and folded her hands in resignation.

"Abigail," she said, "Heaven knows he's been a good man to me, when he's been sober. But when his friends get hold of him and get him to drinking he's somebody else. I don't know what to do."

Abigail Smale stood up. "Jane," she said firmly, "last time he came home you told him if ever another drop of liquor passed his lips you'd cast him off for good. Here you are with a prosperous business and a worthless, drunken husband that contributes nothing to your support. Why should you endure him any longer, staggering round the house and putting you to shame before decent folks? Jane, if you're weak-kneed and spineless enough to take him back again you'll lose all your friends."

"I guess you're right, Abigail," responded Jane Searles, meekly.

"Good! Good!" exclaimed the other heartily. "And as I see him coming up the path now and don't want to be contaminated by his presence, I'll say good-bye."

Jane Searles looked after her thoughtfully. "I wonder just why you're so set against Jim, Abigail,"

she said. "I wonder if it's true that you and he were sweethearts once. Or is it just love for me?"

"My dear!" said a thick voice behind her. Jane Searles turned. Her husband stood on the threshold, regarding her with a mixture of anxiety and affectionate benignity. "My dear, I've come home to the fold," he murmured with an ingratiating smile. Jane Searles went up to him.

"Jim," she said, "I've been a good wife to you for nearly ten years, and I've worked and slaved for you, and I've stood for a good deal, but it's over now. I told you if you went off again to drink you couldn't come home. This home is mine, and I've paid every penny that's been put into it. Now take yourself off!"

"Jane! Dear Jane!" murmured Mr. Searles uncertainly. But he withdrew hastily as the slammed door grazed his nose, and, looking back ruefully at this unexpected phenomenon, he decided that it was not a propitious moment to renew the attack, and limped back down the road in the direction of his cronies, Joe Turner.

"What, back again?" shouted the latter, looking up from his forge. Though a hard drinker, Joe never neglected his work. He was an old bachelor, a life-long friend of Jim's, and of his wife's, too, until Jane had begun to attribute her husband's occasional debauches to Joe. As a matter of fact the blacksmith had done much to restrain his friend from excesses.

"Wife won't have me," murmured Jim Searles disconsolately, taking a seat beside the fire.

"I guessed not," shouted Joe. "I warned ye, Jim. You've got a grand wife and you've spoiled her temperance by the excessive use of ardent spirits. Now you'll have to go without her."

"But its breaking my heart, Joe," murmured the other. "Help me."

"I'll help ye," roared the blacksmith, advancing upon the other with

a red-hot horseshoe gripped between a pair of tongs. "Get out of my sight, you drunken profligate. I've drunk with ye and I've made merry with ye, but I won't break your wife's home or break her heart, either, Jim." Jim Searles tumbled off his chair and grovelled at his friend's feet.

"Joe, help me out this once," he begged. "I've had my lesson. Square me with her and I'll never touch liquor again. Jane's so cursedly conscientious," he added, seeing his friend set down the horseshoe again. "It's because she said she wouldn't take me back that she's bent on keeping her word. Can't you help me, Joe?"

Joe Turner pushed his friend into the little room at the back of the forge.

"You lie down there and take a nap," he said. "I'll see what can be done for you."

Jim Searles awoke that evening to find Joe Turner toasting bacon over the fire. The table had been laid for two and a caldron of soup hissed on the coals.

"How d'you feel, Jim?" asked the blacksmith, coming back with the bacon. "Pretty bad, hey? Have some beer?"

"Not for me, Joe," said Jim Searles, and the other gave him a violent clap on the back.

"Good for you, Jim," he shouted. "Now I can go ahead with a good conscience. Well, I've been up to your wife's, Jim, there's nothing doing there. She won't take you."

Jim's face fell several inches. The other resumed:

"But, Jim, I guess she loves you, only she can't find a way to go back on her word. So we've got to use stratagems—see? If you can't go in at the front door you've got to go in the back."

"But she slammed the back door in my face," frowned Jim.

"Now take it easy," his friend counselled him. "To-morrow morning we'll find a way. And with this Jim Searles was forced to be content.

The sound of hammering awakened him the next morning. Slipping on his clothes, he went into the smithy to find Joe Turner putting the last nails into a huge packing

case which stood on his cart, the horse being already harnessed. On one corner was a label bearing the words:

"ABIGAIL SMALE, Express Office, Norbury. To be kept till called for."

"What's that for Joe?" inquired Jim in amazement.

"That's for you, me boy," answered the blacksmith. "Hop in."

"But you aren't going to send me to Abigail?" groaned Jim. "She wouldn't take me. Send me to Mrs. Searles."

"Now, see here, you thundering old fool," shouted the blacksmith. "Suppose I send you to your wife and she refuses you—what then? You're put out on the sidewalk. Whereas if Abby Smale don't take you in you'll have to stay three months at the express office. See?"

"Help me in, Joe," cried Jim climbing into the wagon with alacrity, and a minute later the blacksmith was nailing on the slats of the lid. A few minutes later the cart drew up at the door of the express office.

"Package for Miss Smale, Mrs. Searles," called Joe.

"All right; take it into the office, Mr. Turner," answered the lady, and Joe, with many grunts and heavings and bangings which called forth smothered ejaculations from his freight, carried the package into a dark corner.

"Now you keep still until the proper time comes, Jim," he exhorted, and, re-entering his cart, whipped up the horse and drove away.

As soon as he was gone Mrs. Searles went over to the case and looked at the label. She tried to lift it, but it was too heavy for her. Her husband, within, crouching like a frog, with fingers gripping the slats, hardly dared breathe.

"That looks like Joe Turner's writing," he heard his wife say. "Full of old iron, I guess. Some trick of Joe's. He never did like Abby, and I guess I don't either, after the way she tried to set me against Jim."

Jim heard her sob as she turned away. His heart leaped up. He went to the cart for him! If she would trust him again he would never touch another drop of liquor in all his days.

"I was going to say that there's a package come for you, Abigail," she said.

"For me?" exclaimed Miss Smale in surprise. "Where is it Jane? What, that big case? I wonder what's in it. Oh!"

Jim Searles' head emerging grotesquely, like that of a jack-in-the-box, for once completely discomposed Miss Smale. She had no words to say. As for his wife—Jim dared not look at her.

"Good morning, ma'am," shouted Jim briskly. "I'm the filthy drunkard that's been sent to you. I hope you have good accommodations for me, ma'am."

"Oh, this is too much!" gasped Abigail. "How dare you! Jane, you knew he was here. You set him on to do this!"

"Indeed, Abigail—" cried the irate spinster, stalking to the door. "This is a poor return for all my kindness to you."

"Yes, but you've got to take me or pay freight charges!" Jim shouted after her; but she was already out of the house and hurrying into the street. Jim turned to his wife to find her shaking with laughter.

Jim spoke up like a man. "Jane dear," he said, "I've had my lesson. God help me. I'll never touch the stuff again. Won't you give me a chance?"

"I—I'd like to, Jim," murmured his wife. "But how can I take you? You belong to Abby Smale! now. You're—you're—Oh, Jim, you're just freight," she sobbed.

Jim Searles got out of his box and placed his arm round his wife's waist.

"Jenny, I'm going to work to-morrow," he said. "Will you try me out once more—if Abigail don't claim me?"

"Yes," whispered his wife, raising her lips to his. "And I tell you what I'll do, Jim," she added. "If Abigail doesn't claim you within three months I'll put you up to auction and buy you in myself—if you make good."

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