

HOW HENRY OSBORNE "CAME BACK"

Note: This timely story is, without any excision, given first position because it is charged with a patriotic purpose.—Ed. B. C. M.

By Elizabeth C. Hazelton, Vancouver, B. C.

FOR three days Victory bells had been ringing on the principal street corners downtown, flags and banners waving across the streets, and posters flashing from the windows. Everywhere was the same appeal—"Buy Victory Bonds."

Those three days Henry Osborne had avoided the city as his wife avoided a bee hive. In fact, he seldom went downtown anyhow, so he intended to stay away for the next three weeks. The first and the second days his indomitable spirit had, as usual, pushed his scrawny legs and shrunken form along the path bordering the eight-mile boulevard surrounding Evergreen Park—a piece of woods preserved to the growing city contiguous to the Pacific Coast. The third day he had circled Evergreen Park twice instead of once. For all that, he was back at the three-room apartment in time to help his wife by preparing the evening meal according to a simple menu she had planned before she left that morning for Benton & Ludlow's store.

Alice Osborne, returning home in her accustomed cheerful temper, sensed a trace of irritability in her husband's mood. Ignoring it, she inquired interestedly about his daily walk. It appeared that more well-meaning people than common had stopped their cars (each bearing an invitation to "Buy Bonds") and offered him a ride. Just as though he cared to sit in an automobile when he had trod two miles of cement sidewalk on purpose to get a chance to walk a few miles on the earth!

Dinner over, the couple, who were approaching their china wedding, settled down for the evening. It was not easy to determine whether Alice was comparatively young or middle-aged, for a highly evolved or "old" soul imparts notable youthfulness to the body in which it dwells. Henry looked older than his years, because of impaired digestion and racked nerves. That there was a disparity of years between husband and wife was true, although it was actually less than might be supposed.

Throwing aside the backwoods story he had finished reading, Henry's eyes wandered to his wife, then to her sewing. It seemed to him that she was everlastingly doing something. Whenever he advised her to rest, she intimated that after eight hours of adjusting suits to the stout or slender forms of fastidious women, real work was a rest.

"I wish you could buy a Bond!" said Alice. Wistfully she regarded her husband, who dipped into a box of cigars such as she brought him periodically from town.

"A Bond! I can't buy a shoe-string. If I were working, of course I'd buy a Bond."

"I mean, I wish I could buy a Bond for you," corrected Alice. In ten years her husband had earned twenty-five cents, and that had been forced upon him. On the way to Evergreen Park a woman had hailed him and insisted that he help her carry a small trunk up some stairs. For this she had thrust a quarter into his hand. Alice had suggested that he buy a War Savings Stamp with that quarter. He preferred to keep it in his pocket.

"You always have to buy a Bond—it makes it hard."

"It has put us in a tight place each time," assented Alice, "But we've always crawled through."

"It's a mortgage on your future earnings," he declared.

"Anyway, it's a patriotic mortgage—and we have the Bonds." There was no half-heartedness in Alice's accents.

"If I'd had a show—" began Henry. His forehead got more puckered, his eyes grew duller, and his pleasure in his cigar appeared suddenly to decline.

Too often had Alice heard from Henry how he had helped the "old man" make a farm out of the New Brunswick woods under promise that at twenty-one he should receive a deed to eighty acres, and had finally come West to earn over again his eighty acres, because the "old man" had gone back on his word. Henry did not have to tell her, she knew, that in the working out of his karma in Western Canada he had won and lost several hundred acres, and had lost more—his health.

Alice hastened to describe the mad noonday dash of a hatless man along Main Street, with a policeman and a crowd at his heels. Twice she had seen the policeman catch him, but he got away. The third time the policeman caught him at the entrance of a department store. Again he struggled out of the policeman's grasp, jumped into a waiting car and shouted, "Here's where you buy your Victory Bonds!"

Henry smiled faintly at Alice's narration. "Everything's gone against me since I came West," he soliloquized.

"And before," suggested Alice smiling. "If you hadn't come West you wouldn't have married me," she added consolingly, with a side glance.

"Been better for you if I hadn't come West." He lifted his eyes to her in a deprecating way. "I've not been much good to you," he continued somewhat brokenly. Before she could reply, the words, "You're all that's made life worth living," came from twitching lips.

Alice went over to her husband and kissed him. He detained her, then almost pushed her away, saying, "You never sit on my knee now. I know," dejectedly, "even a hundred and fifteen pounds is too heavy—for my thin—" Another kiss and an arm wound lovingly around him prevented further re-pining.

At half-past eight Henry left his wife. To combat insomnia he must get to bed early.

Alice lived continuously in the future—a future containing her husband, herself, relatives, friends, and even people she did not know. Occasionally, Henry also lived in the future. His future was a world composed of two—his wife and himself. Its setting was back East—in that section of New Brunswick where there is no line except in imagination between the maple, spruce, beech, fir and cedar of New Brunswick and of Northern Maine, far from land booms, irrigation projects and oil exploitations. For awhile, however, after she was left alone Alice lived in the past, seeking illumination on the perpetual subject, her husband's health.

Henry fell asleep thinking of Alice. He was going to get well and work for her again. No one in the world was worth while except Alice.

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The next evening, husband and wife sat together as usual. Alice applied herself to sewing, Henry dived into a magazine. The article that caught his interest was about a man with a chronic stomach trouble who took himself in hand after many doctors had given him up, recovered health by means of exercise and dieting, and lived to the century mark. Having read aloud specially edifying paragraphs, Henry began his evening smoke in remarkably good humor.

"I wish you would come downtown and hear the community singing, Henry," coaxed his wife. "I wish you would come," she reiterated, "It would do you good."

"I can't sing."

"You can listen, and get inspiration—"

"Inspiration! That means they want one to hand out the coin—"