

THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

Carl F. H. Henry

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY JONAH

The old Van Buren Street mission had two doors. For several years Mel Trotter took one and Walter Taylor the other, distributing tracts and inviting passersby to come in.

Trotter and Taylor were both babes in Christ. Mel learned that Taylor was studying at Moody Bible Institute, so, when the crowd at the door lessened, Mel turned and said: "What's your opinion of the seventh chapter of Romans?"

"The seventh of Romans—," answered Taylor. "Frankly, I've never read it."

Twenty years later, when Mel needed a man to shepherd Pacific Garden Mission in the tradition of the Clarkes and Harry Monroe, he wired a firebrand named Walter Taylor. That night Taylor spent in prayer; he wondered whether the Lord or Mel was calling him. In the morning he answered: "Yes, I'll be there." That was the beginning of an eighteen year superintendency that was to add further miles of miracle to the record of the historic haven.

Walter Grand Taylor, one of eight children, was born October 19, 1865, in a bleak basement bedroom in Pittsburgh. He was forty percent Dutch and the rest real American, like many Pennsylvanians.

His mother, a little red-haired woman, was a true Christian; his father, a tobacco manufacturer, had a deathbed repentance. As a lad Taylor sold papers and grew up with one of the toughest boys' gangs in the city. He even broke into freight cars, stole from wagons and fruit stands. He was never suspected of such misdemeanors and his marks were so good in high school that the faculty gave him a teachers' certificate. Only his youthful appearance prevented his securing a position as principal, so Taylor clerked for a contracting firm until he looked a bit older, and then became an assistant principal for a time. Then, deciding to work as stock clerk for a blast furnace enterprise, he plodded along at three dollars daily, working every day in the year.

Next he became a traveling auditor, moving from New York to Minneapolis, Omaha and New Orleans. Then came the position as secretary-treasurer of a Chicago drug company, where he later was one of the three men entering into an eighteen-year agreement to take over the business.

The sudden death of Taylor's young wife brought deep sorrow into his life.

She was a Christian and he knew she was ready to meet God. In memory he could not forget his past stubbornness at her entreaty, nor his complaints whenever she wanted to hold prayer meetings in their Ravenswood home. A dapper dresser, with wavy, golden hair and a heart set on making a fortune, Taylor had little use for religion. But now, instead of being the cocky, five-foot ten-inch, two hundred pound victor, he was a suppliant on his knees before God, a great burden upon his soul. He was converted that night, February 21, 1896, in his room, when he realized that his wife was already in heaven, but that he was lost.

Taylor had a great yearning to serve his new-found Lord, and prayed that he might be extricated from the long-term contract with his pharmaceutical partners. Not long after, the other partners bought his interest. Taylor went into Y. M. C. A. work, then attended Moody Bible Institute, where his practical work assignments carried him to Pacific Garden Mission. There he learned the art of soul-winning and met converts like Mel Trotter, Harry Monroe, and others, as well as Mother Clarke. His first convert was U. S. Abell, who came to the mission in 1897 and heard the testimonies. Taylor invited him to come to Jesus. Abell later became the well-known Gospel cartoonist.

In a Christian boarding house Taylor met “Bobbie,” the young woman destined to become the mission’s “Ma Taylor.” At a song service, Taylor was asked to sing a baritone solo. When he asked for a volunteer pianist, Miss Ethelwyn Robinson responded. She was from the “Rockefeller Church” in Cleveland, dating her conversion in her home church, although she was spiritually kindled when she heard Dwight L. Moody in Chicago. They harmonized so well together that he sang into her heart and she played into his.

When he found that she sang also, and that the Lord was willing, they were married by Dr. R. A. Torrey in 1898. Two years later Taylor was graduated from Moody Bible Institute. After a brief ministry in the Parkhurst Church House, New York, they went to Colorado for a year as home missionaries among the miners and railroad men. There, 8600 feet above sea level, Taylor felt convicted of sidestepping an earlier call to do mission work among down-and-outers.

He had not forgotten the call, yet how he had shuddered at the idea. Stunningly dressed, he used to do personal work in the mission, placing his arms around the shoulders of the outcasts as he dealt with them. Often Harry Monroe eased Taylor’s arm from around the converts, but Taylor never questioned why.

One night when Taylor was going home on the street car something bit him. He jumped violently. The same thing happened a second time. When Monroe told him that the cooties had taken a liking to him, Taylor felt convinced he wasn’t called to mission work. It was the last time he got close enough to a prospect for heaven to encourage such relationships, at least, so Taylor thought. When the Lord spoke to him about rescue mission service, Taylor suggested that home missions would be an effective substitute.

The next week came a letter to Colorado from a mission superintendent in Montreal. “I heard you preach in New York City some time ago,” he wrote. “I’m leaving my mission after ten years here, and feel you and Mrs. Taylor are God’s choice to run it.”

The Taylors reached Montreal with five dollars in their pockets. On the way they stopped at Pacific Garden Mission for a moment with Harry Monroe, who knew something about the frigid religiosity of Montreal, and its lack of mission interest.

“Taylor, you’ll never stay there,” he said, “it’s such an ice house.”

Taylor nevertheless pressed on to Canada, started raising spiritual energy and a mustache. For sixteen years he and his wife carried on in the Old Brewery Mission, so named because it had its beginnings in an abandoned brewery. There were hundreds of converts—doctors, lawyers, businessmen, as well as immigrants and the downtrodden. During their ministry, the Taylors started the first Gospel fresh air camp among rescue missions, sponsoring a free two-week summer holiday, with the objective of preaching the Gospel to folks away from home.

In two months they reached 2500 women and children, and despite a successful city mission work, won more souls in the fresh air camp than in the converted brewery. That gave them a great vision for mass evangelization, but they could not find among mission supporters financial help consonant with their desired outreach, so they resigned in 1916.

Mel Trotter had just asked Bob Ingersoll to become assistant at Pacific Garden Mission. When he heard that the Taylors were looking for a field with promise, he asked them to step into Ingersoll’s mission in Columbus, Ohio. They plunged into the new soul-saving work with vigor. From there, Taylor went into the chaplaincy under the Y. M. C. A. in Alabama, serving for six months as director of religious work at Camp Sheridan.

Then, in 1918, another telegram came from Mel Trotter. The old Chicago lighthouse needed a keeper. Ingersoll felt his work as assistant superintendent was finished and Trotter felt that the other demands upon his own time were too great for his continuance as general superintendent. Mother Clarke had left the mission, not in writing but by preference, to Mel, and he felt that the hour had now come for the Taylors to take over.

Taylor arrived September 3, 1918, and Mrs. Taylor came September 15. They were destined to stay for eighteen years, during which time the mission was to sustain its reputation, already world-wide, as a great soul-saving station.

As Taylor walked in through the mission doors, he remembered how Mel Trotter used to stand with him night after night. Then he chuckled. “Yes, Mel,” he thought. “I’ve read the seventh of Romans—and the eighth chapter too!”

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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