

THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

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CHAPTER THREE

THE ANGEL OP THE SLUMS

The catastrophic fire of 1871 scattered Chicago churches to the city's outskirts, but kindled in its wake a flare of saloons, brothels and gambling halls. Rather than to abandon the Loop to this iniquity and vice, Colonel and Mrs. George R. Clarke wedged the first rescue mission of its kind in the Northwest into Whiskey Row, at 386 South Clark street. September 15, 1877, was its inaugural day.

No seminary training, no prophetic gift was theirs, but an unquenchable passion for souls charged their lives. "Saloons were on either side of us, noise and confusion almost baffled us," she wrote, "but Mr. Clarke preached and I tried my best to keep crooked men straight."

The former Sarah Dunn, born November 13, 1835, in New York's Cayuga county, Mrs. Clarke attended Sunday school just like many another person and was safeguarded by Christian parents from cards, theaters and dances. She longed often to become a Christian, but nobody spoke to her personally about her soul until 1855. Returning from a visit at Wilkes-Barre Seminary, she was asked by an acquaintance waiting with her on the Scranton Depot platform to "give your heart to God." The promise was made. Mrs. Clarke dated her conversion from that moment when cathedral joy flooded her soul.

After teaching school in Elmira, New York, she moved in 1861 to Waterloo, Iowa. It was there that a redirecting revelation changed her life ambitions. Faithful in church relations, she was nevertheless a stranger to real consecration.

One day while completing an elaborate decoration for the family home she seemed to hear an audible voice, as if from heaven,

"What are you doing to decorate your heavenly home?"

Haunted by this question, Sarah resolved to forget perishable earthly adornments and to seek to "adorn the heavenly mansion through all the cycles of eternity." The salvation of sinners grew into an absorbing, consuming passion. Moving to Chicago a few years later, she compromised conscience and time sufficiently by making fashionable calls to assure her social standing. Then, quite penitently, garbed in less costly clothes, she carried on a visitation program among the poor. Such delight became hers in supplying the needs of these unfortunates and in leading them to Christ that she "was at once convinced my mission in life had been revealed."

With a growing number of poor families on her list, she rallied a few friends in 1869 into starting a mission Sunday school at State and Twenty-Third streets. During those years, in a business transaction, she met Colonel George R. Clarke, prominent realtor and Civil War veteran. They were married in 1873, two years after the great Chicago fire, and after four merry years in the fashionable circle to which Colonel Clarke clung despite his Christianity, they decided to abandon their up-and-outer friends to their Cyrenaic philosophy and to lead their down-and-outer prospects to Christ.

Colonel Clarke had a reputation as “the poorest preacher that ever tried to expound God's Word,” but as Mrs. Clarke prayed, and her husband preached, the Gospel spread through the slums, and sinners found the trail to heaven.

Mr. Clarke, too, was a native of New York state, born February 22, 1827, in Otsego county, only to travel westward for study at Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin. After graduation he became principal of Milton Academy, edited a paper called the Sauk County Standard, and studied law. Although admitted to the bar in 1853, he turned his attention to real estate. The new business carried him to Colorado for two years and there, among the miners, only a divine overpowering kept him from shady land deals. God used his sainted mother's prayers to awaken his conscience, and after great agony of repentance for sin came the assurance of Christ's atonement.

When the Civil War broke out in 1860, Clarke returned to Chicago and secured recruits for the 113th Illinois Volunteers. Made captain of that company, then later promoted to major and lieutenant colonel, he served with distinction. At the close of the war, back in Chicago, Colonel Clarke resumed real estate activities and formed the acquaintance of Sarah Dunn, who already had started her peculiar Sunday school venture for the poor. The little mission Sunday school enlisted his growing interest, too, and soon Colonel Clarke was concerned over the example and influence of his Christian testimony, heretofore quite without distinction. More and more funds customarily devoted to Cuban cigars and the entertainment of guests were diverted to Christian effort.

Mrs. Clarke's conscience was troubling her also. Convicted of a misuse of God's time in social functions, she persuaded Colonel Clarke to visit the slums along the levee—the stretch of South Clark street from Van Buren to Twenty-Second street—with its overflow of drunkards and outcasts, male and female. Gambling halls, saloons and brothels had infested the districts. The Colonel was interested in a humanitarian sense, but he had no intention of founding a mission. He had other plans, especially an ambition to acquire great wealth.

For a time it seemed Mrs. Clarke's vision of a united ministry among the needy was hopeless, but she never abandoned it as a secret subject of prayer. A business scheme with great remunerative prospects that carried Colonel Clarke to the Rocky Mountains threatened to fello the final possibility of a rescue mission. Mrs. Clarke agonized many hours in prayer. It was no surprise then that while the Colonel laid his plans for riches, the Spirit of God spoke to him with sharp conviction. Alone with God a thousand miles from home, he fell to his knees and consecrated himself to divine service for mission work. He telegraphed his wife of his change of life purposes and added that he was returning to Chicago at once to join her in founding a mission.

On September 15, 1877, at 386 South Clark street, Chicago, the first rescue mission in the Northwest flung open its doors. Only five years earlier the world's first rescue mission had been founded by Jerry McAuley on October 8, 1872, at 316 Water Street, New York. Word spread from both places that the drunkard was more welcome than the tee-totaler, the thief than the policeman, the harlot than the choir singer. How aware Mother Clarke was of the New York enterprise, if at all, is unknown.

The Clarkes proudly opened house in the tiny store. Fitted with long, wooden, backless benches, the mission boasted a seating capacity of forty. Oil lamps flickered from the side walls. The stove was of ancient design, but it gave heat. The old organ groaned, but it was better than none. The rest of the paraphernalia was limited to a few huge signs painted on the walls. One of them, centered halfway across the front, read GOD IS LOVE. That on the left wall read THOU GOD SEEST ME.

On the right was the great invitation COME UNTO ME ALL YE THAT LABOR AND ARE HEAVY LADEN AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST. There was no pulpit, only a chair and table used by Colonel Clarke.

The Colonel was no evangelist nor pulpit orator. Friends hesitated even to rate him among the world's worst preachers. But God was there in approval of a ministry steeped in tender compassion for the souls of men. As he talked to boisterous crowds, often on John 3:16, his favorite text, tears ran from Colonel Clarke's cheeks. He was regarded by some as the most easily affected man ever born.

The influx of men was under way. Without order and without respect they came, many of them drunk beyond consciousness. It was no small job just to maintain a minimum of boisterousness.

Mrs. Clarke seemed to possess a remarkable influence over the offenders, a service which she accomplished usefully throughout all her years of mission work. But even amid the confused babbling of drunkards, God's presence was manifested.

During the very first days four persons professed conversion three giving evidence of a real conversion experience. The Clarkes had put out the fleece. Night after night the old, old story of Jesus and His power to save rang out to patrons of brothels, gambling joints and opium dens. Night after night thieves, harlots and alcoholics were loosed from Satan's chains and wooed through the Clarkes' ministry into the loving heart of God. The nets of God were straining with precious souls.

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