

THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

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CHAPTER TWO

GOD'S FLOPHOUSE

Stained with blood and seared with lust, sinners have thronged to the Pacific Garden Mission no less than to the other strange hangouts in this block. For twenty years it has been the only church in "The Street of Harlots."

Founded in 1877, it is the oldest rescue mission in the Northwest, the second oldest in America, and probably the best known in the world. It has not been closed a night since its beginnings. Bank presidents, lawyers, farmers, sailors, ex-convicts and tramps have visited there, some out of desperate need and others out of mere curiosity, but all have been spiritually lifted.

Billy Sunday was a nationally-known baseball player when he walked in; when he left he was destined to become one of the most famous evangelists in Christian revivalism. Mel Trotter was a candidate for suicide in Lake Michigan when he stopped; he went out a firebrand for God's kingdom.

Here, on "Bum Boulevard"—another name for this stretch of Chicago's world-famous State street—the driftwood of humanity floats in. Once wealthy men from fine families, who have lost themselves and their loved ones, come for respite for their tortured souls. Here they learn that sin pays off in broken hearts, broken minds, broken families and purses, yet there is no sorrow that heaven cannot heal, and it is not yet too late to find the long-sought glory and sparkle of life.

Suspended outside the second story, shaped like a cross ten feet long and more than half as wide, glows a red neon sign: JESUS SAVES. The warm letters reach the eye almost simultaneously with the ear's throb to the loud speaker which carries the mission service to the street. Old hymns echo through the night air, and the keen thrusts of the speakers pierce every needy heart within hearing distance.

Nobody walks past the familiar eighteen-foot neon sign PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION and the additional reminder MOTHER'S PRAYERS HAVE FOLLOWED YOU, without a personal worker's invitation to attend the service and without receiving a Gospel tract, unless it is rejected. "Four Things God Wants You To Know," and other folders go into many thousands of pockets and homes weekly.

Any night at 7:45 will find a crowd many times the size of most prayer meetings and much more ready to confess its need.

Homeless men in ragged overcoats or sweaters sit with bent heads on rough, wooden chairs. Some seem to be praying, some half listening to the gospel music and preaching; others are too tired either to pray, listen or sleep. Their thoughts may be on the “good supper” they’ll get downstairs after the service, but the preacher shouts and repeats that there is always hunger without the Bread of Life. It takes untold perspiration to arouse in these men the guilt of rejecting Christ, the need of repentance and faith in His Saviourhood.

During World War II attendance has hovered at one hundred every week-night, a considerable decrease. Men otherwise not close to the government's heart become suddenly important in the trenches and in industry. But Pacific Garden Mission, for almost 24,000 nights in peace and in war time, has stressed the individual's eternal worth in God's sight, and a congregation aggregating more than two million has heard the call, “Come to Jesus.”

There is an underlying routine—song service led by a visiting group, testimonies, special music numbers, the Gospel message, the invitation to take Christ as Saviour—but almost anything may happen to change the program. The only invariable feature is the closing appeal; for sixty-five years it has been given, and the mission intends thus to continue every night in every year until the age of grace be done.

Behind the venerable black walnut pulpit a song leader swings his arms before introducing special singers from Chicago's wealthy but conservative Buena Memorial Presbyterian Church. The song leader of the evening, it turns out, is a student at Chicago's Northern Baptist Seminary, and gets practical work pleading for souls by taking part in about twenty meetings monthly in Chicago missions. “Sing it out!” he shouts, as he waves his arms in exaggerated gestures. The crowd echoes back,

“O that will be glory for me,
Glory for me, glory for me;
When by His grace I shall look on His face,
That will be glory, be glory for me.”

“Sing the chorus again!” shouts the leader, and the husky-voices respond. Then: “Amen! Glory for me. Glory for you, if you'll take Christ into your heart . . . tonight.” Then two women singers are presented, an overflow of Buena talent and religious enthusiasm. They lose themselves “Resting in His Love”:

“God has shown His loving face
From His throne in heav'n above:
And I've found a resting-place,
In the shelter of His love.”

“I am resting, resting,
Resting, sweetly resting in His love;
I am resting in His love,
Resting in the shelter of His love.”

“When the cares of life oppress,
When the sky is dark above;
I can always find a rest,
In the shelter of His love.”

Etc.

“Time for testimonies!” sings the song leader. “Let’s have a regular popcorn meeting. One right after the other. Tell what Jesus has done for you. Tell the old, old story. Are you resting in His love? You’ve got to admit you’re a sinner. Come to Jesus for cleansing, and then you’ll know His love. Amen. Who’ll be first?”

On the left side of the room an old man in a gray suit jumps to his feet. “I’ll be first,” he says. “Everything’s better since I found Jesus. Life is better. Music is better. Rivers are better. Oceans are better. Singers are better. Even the preacher sounds better.”

The crowd chuckles and he sits down. There is a twitter of amens. “Who’s next?” asks the leader. Nobody moves. The leader speaks: “When you don’t have a cent in your pocket, God still loves you.”

Another fellow, up toward the front, stands to his feet. “I’m glad God loves me,” he says. Then he repeats John 3:16: **“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”**

There is another ripple of amens. Several other men stand to their feet. The movement is started. Testimonies come easier now. The variety is incredible; men of few years and of many years, in every walk of life, all of them saved from sin through the shed blood of Christ. Some of them veterans, others babes in Christ. Some of them backsliders returned to the fold, others as much on fire now as on their conversion night when they staggered to the altar under the weight of sin and were freed from its shackles.

The unbelievers look on with mixed feelings. Some are afraid, others indifferent, some are drunk, others hungry. All know there is something strange about this crowd of bums that has turned to preaching. Behind the pulpit, painted on the front wall of the mission room in letters a foot tall, is the Scripture verse: **BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD.**

The leader begs them to come to Jesus. It is seventy-five feet from street door to pulpit; the front of the room is so much closer than the exit, but still it is hard to go up.

It’s time now for the Gospel message and the speaker reads the twenty-third Psalm with its familiar words: **“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”** He gives a verse by verse commentary, interspersed with illustrations, and then a final appeal. Heads are bowed. “Who feels the need of prayer? Who wants to come to Jesus? Who wants to be saved? Raise your hand, and we’ll pray for you.”

Some hands are raised. Personal workers in the rear come to the help of the prospects, and lead them forward before the prayer is finished. Here, kneeling at the pulpit, needy souls find salvation. Personal workers quote Scripture verses, ask for an uncompromised confession of guilt and sinfulness, then prod the penitents to pray. Meanwhile the leader continues the appeal: "Come to Jesus tonight. Don't harden your heart; if God is speaking to you, come and be saved." The pianist strikes up softly the melody of "Just As I Am." The crowd begins to sing:

"Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!"

Suddenly Harry Saulnier appears on the platform. He's the mission superintendent, hated and loved on State Street like few other men. Toughs have threatened to fix his wagon, to take him for a ride, to bump him off, but Saulnier knows they don't talk like that after finding Christ,

"Billy Sunday walked in here one night and found Christ, and then set the world afire!" he shouts. "Mel Trotter was going over to the lake to commit suicide, and he came into the mission and Jesus saved him. Gangsters, bums, hoodlums, gamblers, drunkards—they've been here, hundreds of thousands of them—and nobody was ever too bad for Jesus to save. Amen, glory! You aren't saved because you're good; if you were good, you wouldn't need to be saved. But Jesus died for your sins. He paid it all, glory to God! Make Him your Saviour tonight. Come down the aisle for prayer. Come just as you are."

The piano strikes up the hymn again and the whole mission echoes electrically,

"Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!"

More people are coming down the aisles: a sailor lad from Louisiana, a college student from New York. A broken drunk can hardly manipulate his legs; a personal worker hurries to his side. Then all are taken from the mission altar to the rear office, where they kneel before a circle of chairs. Tears begin to flow; here and there a heart is breaking with grief.

One man keeps saying: "I'm such a punk that Jesus can't save me." He bursts into tears. A personal worker's arms enfold him and from the Bible he reads, "**Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out.**" He asks the man on his knees: "What does that say?"

The man repeats it. "Well," says the personal worker, "have you come to Jesus?"

The answer is steady: "Yes, I came tonight."

"Well, will He cast you out?"

The man breaks into tears again and sobs, “I hope not!”

The personal worker isn't satisfied. “What do you mean—you hope not? You can be sure. Listen . . .”

Then he reads again the Scripture verse, and goes through the whole conversation. This time the man becomes a man of faith. “I know He's my Saviour,” he says and jumps to his feet. Over in the corner of the mission office someone takes his name and address and records another spiritual birthday.

The convert looks around the room and sees a half-dozen others praying through. “It's like being a new man,” he says. Then one of the workers shows him to supper and to a night's lodging. By morning the office will have several leads for a job at which this salvaged soul can work and walk into a new life.

Out in the mission hall everything is now quiet. The place is deserted; the men are down at supper and on their way to bed. But there is a strange halo around the empty old chairs in which men like Harry Monroe, Billy Sunday, Mel Trotter, Dick Lane, John Calahan, Robert Atkinson, Rob “Razor” Fenton, Tom Mackey, Dick Ramey, and scores of others sat and grappled with Satan, until, in the strength of God's grace, they tore themselves loose from those old chairs—valued by fire insurance underwriters today at forty cents a piece—and walked the trail to salvation in Christ.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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