

# THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

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## CHAPTER ONE

### DOORWAYS TO HEAVEN AND HELL

Chicago's Loop, like the heart of any huge city, is three steps from heaven and two steps from hell.

It was a bristling evening in May. Rough and ready, clad in old clothes like any man of the streets, I wandered aimlessly through the Loop. Into the shifting eyes of down-and-outers who sauntered by, I looked with conscious effort to feel the emotions of men whose feelings are jaded, and to think the thoughts of men too tired to think.

It was no easy job, this business of a preacher being a bum, even for a night or two.

Colorless, empty, bleary eyes. Heavy, lazy, tired feet. Workers, homeward bound, after a day's work. Businessmen hurrying to a cab or to the elevated. Homeless outcasts. Wandering refugees. Drink and drug addicts. Philanthropist and harlot, millionaire and stenographer walking the same streets.

From Madison, I shuffled southward on State street, banked on either side by the shopping district that brings throngs to showrooms and counters. There was Kresge's, Walgreen's, Grant's, and, as I neared Adams, the rear annex of the famed Palmer House, and then the Fair.

Newsstands, traffic lights and street corners were passed with monotonous succession, as also the unending chain of stores: Woolworth's, Howard's, Benson and Rixon's, Hilton's, the Hub, and then Jackson boulevard; Rothschild's, Goldblatt Brothers, and then Van Buren street with the elevated circuit that encloses the Loop. Just inside that circuit, as night fell, glittered the flickering lights of the Rialto, heralding a giant stage revue, the world's greatest show, and, as a Saturday night special at 12:05, "Paris in Chicago."

Those words were the first tangible evidence that State Street's "500 block" was just ahead. City within a city, it is the fair ground of burlesque and 30-cent a night hotels, pawn shops and women barbers, bar-rooms and cut-rate stores, gloomy dens and greasy lunch counters that still feature a hot dog or a hamburger on a bun for a nickel.

Just one step from the Loop, and opposite the modern Sears' department store which extends a block long from Van Buren to Congress, flows this weird mixture of two worlds. White men, black men, yellow men surge in and out of the changing crowds.

The best of men and the worst of men, the best of women and the worst of women are there. Strangers hurry through the throngs to the Dearborn-Polk Street Station for trains to eastern Canada and the southwest, unaware that plain clothes detectives patrol the streets.

Here young couples wander and old men shuffle into burlesque houses, lured inside by strip tease billboards displaying immodest women. Down State Street walks a stunningly dressed butterfly, with a graceful rhythm and an inviting air. Not until she turns into the burlesque house for the nightly performances is it apparent that expert facial decoration has sheared ten or fifteen years from the world view, but not from the heart.

Outside the customers slide their two dimes through the ticket window to the gray-haired woman cashier and then trickle inside. At the State-Harrison, beautiful Ann Corio furnishes the week's attraction in "Swamp Woman," with "Guilty Parents" scheduled for an early appearance.

Every Saturday night promises a midnight show. The lurid display signs of two other burlesque houses scream their features. "Unknown Blonde" is the attraction at one of them, and a taxicab arrives there with three girls and two sailors. State Street is broken up with subway construction, so the pride of the navy convoys its cargo to the sidewalk pickaback. The crowd chuckles.

All the way from Russell's Silver Bar at State and Van Buren to the State-Harrison Bar, the "500 block" is a seminary of sin with a sprinkling of ordinary businesses. Beyond Russell's corner spot stands one of the omnipresent Thompson restaurants. Then the first "loan bank," probably so dubbed to impress the paupers visiting the pawn shop that there isn't so much sting in poverty after all, flaunts its welcome. Next comes the first "hotel," with rooms as low as thirty-five cents. Between two men's clothing shops—one with 15-cent neckties in the show window and the other modestly affirming itself the "largest retailers of pants in America"—stands Bradley's Bar.

Just beyond another jewelry pawn shop vibrates the tumultuous jazz echo of the Club Cabana, with its red and green lights over the street windows, but no yellow for caution. A casual glance through the tilted blinds reveals that the crowd is merry and business is good, to desecrate the adjective.

Next is a game shop and lunch counter, where patrons munch a sandwich and gulp down a cup of coffee between target practice on wooden ducks and other mechanical contests, some of which call for skill and others for luck, but all of which require nickels, dimes and quarters. Still pictures of nude women for a penny a series and movie pictures of artists' models for a nickel a run pack in the small change. A roly-poly colored boy, almost as wide as tall, runs back and forth between the penny arcade and the street window of the nearby Pink Poodle, a night club featuring "Puppets on Parade." He presses his nose flat against the window, watches the dancer do her rhumba, mutters "She's not so hot, even if she thinks she is," and goes back to spend another penny.

Beyond the arcade are two more pawn shops and between them, with its hilarity concealed from the street world by super-decorated windows, Millie's. Then comes another cheap hotel—rooms at thirty cents—and the Babette, where liquor flows freely.

Next door is the thirty-cent Gem, first of the three slapstick burlesque houses as one walks south in this block. Street signs display half-naked women, and whatever sensuous appeal the photographers and artists have overlooked has been more than offset by sign-writers who spare no superlatives to evoke trade. The ticket girl is unattractive and the barker, whose appearance fits him nicely into the regular society of the “500 block,” mumbles his announcements just unintelligibly enough to arouse the question whether he is deliberately attempting to evade being understood.

With mingled speeds the throng moves in all directions. The collection of human faces changes every few seconds, but it is none the less interesting. Old men and old women, mostly alone, sometimes in couples, bend over the street as they plod along. Middle-aged men and middle-aged women, their foreheads deeply lined with furrows, follow the path of least resistance through the crowd. Young people, some jolly, some tired, wind in and out, in search of a good time.

Now and then they dart into a tavern, or into a recreation Parlor, and then out into the streets again. Soldiers and sailors walk along leisurely; the nation is at war and this is their leave. They come with buddies, soldier with soldier and sailor with sailor, and sometimes they have found giggling companions for the night. Despite the early evening hour, men are already swaying on the streets like trees bending with the wind.

From across the street echo strange words and music for a land like this. A street meeting is in progress and a Chicago Tract Society group is singing “*Wonderful Words of Life*.” The theme comes with shocking suddenness to those who live intensely in the “500 block” without any life at all. Almost everything is peddled within hearing distance: liquor, dope, women.

A few hags—middle-aged women, unattractive despite layers of rouge—ply their trade as street walkers. Their story is more disgusting than that of the younger prostitutes for whom promoters, procurers and madams, not to mention taxi drivers and bellhops, discover prospects. Most any police station can tell the story of the prostitutes who pay occasional penalty in court, but not much is done about the operators who profit from the business, and who select the “right girls” to make a honky-tonk a popular resort. The policeman's say-so sends a prostitute to jail for three to six months, but nobody gets the so-called “barrel of evidence” necessary to land a solicitor, madam, owner or promoter.

Most of these younger girls are neither professional nor successful prostitutes. They did not set up a girlhood ambition for venal lewdness. They became commercial prostitutes before they reached the decision. From a job as waitress in a low-class drinking joint they found it easy to make a few dollars occasionally while on dates with “nice fellows.” Then, confronted with an illegitimate child, or with sex delinquency for which neither psychiatric nor medical treatment is being provided, or beset with an impassioned desire for drugs and the necessity for money, they suddenly find themselves commercial prostitutes. Some of them even enjoy their association with small-time rackets and racketeers, which brings extra prominence. But few of them find prostitution so financially profitable that they engage a selected clientele; such girls are not found in the brothels and hovels of the slum districts.

These are not the “hostess for a night” professionals for which some hotels have become infamous, but they are the low-grade, low-priced, unsuccessful prostitutes who are the greatest venereal disease menace. Their solicitors, clever middle-aged men who know how to overlook curious folks that obviously want to be solicited, know the poolrooms and dubious resorts where they can pick up delinquent youngsters.

There aren't many red lights in the State Street area now, and the number of prostitutes is smaller. The most obvious reason is that there aren't as many prospects this year. There are fewer drifters and less men out of work, because these are war years, and the armed forces and defense plants have put all available hands behind triggers and machines. So the prostitutes, too, have been on the move to defense centers and other areas where lonely men are susceptible to commercially exploited women and girls.

Beyond the burlesque house is the entrance to the Yes-Yes Club, and then another pawn shop. Then, on the door of the Kelly Building is posted this rather curious announcement for war-time: “U. S. Army Moved to 515 S. Franklin.” Along the sidewalks are display signs, inviting young men to join the Army or the Marines for a broader education.

Shoe store, pawn shop, radio store, Regal Hotel and thirty-five cent rooms, and so it goes. The Pink Poodle features an all-star girl revue, and a passing glance through the blinds shows the bar lined with drinkers; toward the rear a mint-gold blonde dancer, garbed in black satin on a ration plan, lithely moves in step to semi-savage rhythm. She finishes her number and then an older performer, jet hair hanging over her orchid gown, steps into the spotlight for a whirl of dance steps. The glassy-eyed cashier sits at his register with a stare, undisturbed except by customers on their way in or out.

Radio shop, a recreation center with mechanical games, a lunch bar with five-cent hamburgers, pawn shop, another lunch counter, and then the Eagle Hotel with thirty-cent rooms. A men's clothing store.

Then the Gay 90's Arcade, a playland with games, penny film machines, and special tattooing service that includes names of sweethearts, special designs, or one's social security number. Another pawn shop.

Then the Tiny Spot, and next door, another burlesque theatre—for adults only. Another lunch room, from the rear of which echoes the click of colliding billiard balls.

Then Moore's Hotel—rooms fifty cents and up. Then a uniform supply house, with outfits for all comers, whether for the restaurant waiter or the rodeo cowboy.

Next, pawn shop number nine in the same block, same side of the street. Next door, the State-Harrison burlesque, with a large signboard blazing forth the question, “What's Wrong With Love?” Then, at the corner, the State-Harrison grill and bar, and the fat man who sits on a box and shouts, “Chicago Tribune!”

Sex, liquor, poverty and squalor tell the story of most of that block from the Silver Bar to the State-Harrison burlesque with “beautiful Ann Corio.” Women without morals at twenty cents a ticket for the show. Whiskey at fifty cents a half-pint. A meal for seventeen cents: hamburger steak, dessert and coffee. Across the street it is the same story. The Trocadero Club, cut-rate stores, a book store with pamphlets on magic, astrology and dreams.

Beyond the glittering lights of the “500 block” and the Harrison intersection nicker the darkening recesses of south State. The light may be dimmer, but the “600 block” tells the same story. Cigar store, pawn broker, restaurant, movie house featuring a screen show and burlesque for fifteen cents, pawn shop, the Red Hot Burlesque located at the new State-Harrison subway entrance, the New Paris Theatre, a tattooing studio, a lunch counter and billiard room, the Fleetwood Hotel—not for men only—with rooms at sixty cents, a restaurant, a barber shop with three lady barbers wearing white satin aprons, the Elk Hotel—for men only—with rooms as low as thirty cents a day, a restaurant, another game and recreation center, and then the strangest doorway on all south State Street—the doorway to heaven.

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