

THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PORT OF MISSING MEN

More than ever, under the regime of “Dad” and “Ma” Taylor, the humble mission was to become a temporary dry-dock for missing men—absent for long years from their homes and families, and absent for a night from their gambling and drinking hovels. Some of humanity’s hopeless hulks were to tug themselves into the port for help, leaving with new power and a new Captain.

There was a great inheritance of converts, eager to tell the story and to help Taylor send forth the light to the ends of the city. Among them was Honey Briscoe, a colored octogenarian, who had a great testimony. His real name was Christopher Columbus Briscoe.

While in politics, he acquired an appetite for drink that in ten years made him a physical wreck. When Mayor Swift closed the city’s gambling houses, the establishment at State near Polk where Briscoe stayed was padlocked and he was put out on the street. From his first sleeping place, a barrel house at Polk and Clark Streets, he trickled into the hobo lines and slept in the box cars that fringed State Street between Polk and Twelfth Streets. One night while sleeping under an old building he was disturbed by music and singing. Another sleeper said it was the Pacific Garden Mission folks.

Briscoe rolled out. There on the street corner he saw about a hundred men of his own class listening to a group of witnesses. After the service everyone was invited to come to the mission. Briscoe slipped into the hall with the rest of the crowd. He had never heard singing or testimonies like this before.

Several nights afterwards he returned to the mission, yet always saying to himself, “This certainly can’t be for me; I must die a drunkard.”

One night Mother Clarke saw him raise his hand. Coming down from the platform, she led him to the front, and there he took Christ as Saviour. For the first time in ten years he tasted no liquor the next day. He came to the mission faithfully from the time of his spiritual birthday in 1895. When he reached eighty-five years of age, he was called the “Dean of the Mission,” for he was its oldest convert. They also dubbed him “Honey” Briscoe because he called so frequently for that chorus, “There’s honey in the rock for me.” He could pray until the very heavens opened; the young converts said it was because he had been at it so long, but others knew that he stayed near to Christ.

He gave his testimony in power, and when he finished with the words, "It's most time for me to be goin' home with the Lord, 'stead of stayin' 'round down here," the Taylors thanked God for the great stream of converts such as Briscoe, who told redemption's story, and prayed God's further harvest of souls.

From the very start that prayer was answered. Scores of converts were made with the passing months, many of whom went into Christian service. Their testimonies fascinated the newcomers to the mission and often proved the opening wedge for the Gospel.

An elderly Swede, just turned sixty-five, made up his mind to take his life in Lake Michigan. It was a disagreeable, gloomy Sunday, January 26, 1919; the streets, covered with slush, were almost empty. Reared in a fine Christian home by a devout mother, well-educated, and with every reason for a bright prospect, he lost all his friends by dissipation and wanted now to forget.

Just as he braced himself for the plunge, a policeman approached. The Swede walked aimlessly to the Northwestern Railroad station and there destroyed every article that might identify him as G. A. Lind, once a successful furniture finisher and polisher. Then he went again to the lake, but again somebody was nearby. He waited until after dark, walking nervously up and down the loop streets to pass the time. At one place he heard music and singing and saw a big electric sign with the words, JESUS SAVES. Poorly dressed men went in, he noticed; finally he followed, too.

Hearing testimonies by ex-gamblers, ex-drunkards, ex-convicts, he knew these people had found a great power. When the invitation was given, he burst into tears and went forward. With his new-found Lord he went from city to city, preaching the Gospel on faith, and winning many converts. He called himself "God's little errand boy," and told over and over how during his dissipation he tried to prove to himself the non-existence of God and of a hereafter, but how Christ became real in his life and broke the shackles of sin.

Nor was the mission a haven for men only. Needy women also found Christ at its altar, and came back to tell the story.

There was Hattie Matthews, who drank so heavily that one Sunday night she looked at the bottle in her room and said, "I'll die rather than take another drink."

She was such a victim of liquor that the thought of death seemed sweet to her. She had spent most of her life with "the gang" in a State Street theatre, when she wasn't working in a Lake Street restaurant. After the Sunday show the crowd had said, "Good-bye, we'll see you tomorrow." But Hattie's mind was made up; there would be no tomorrow. She boarded an eastbound Van Buren Street car to the end of the line, but by mistake alighted at the wrong corner. Looking up she saw in big red letters, JESUS SAVES. She walked right into Pacific Garden Mission and marched to the front row. "I thought all the sinners always sat in the back, so I would fool everybody," she said. She felt tortured throughout the service; a dozen times she wanted to run out to the lake, but a man with a crutch was sitting next to her and she could not get out. The music, singing and testimonies made her hard and rebellious. During the invitation a chorus was sung:

“They crucified Him, they crucified Him,
And nailed Him to a tree.
And there He died, a King crucified,
To save a poor sinner like me.”

That melted Hattie’s heart, and she cried out for Jesus to save her. Superintendent Taylor noticed her in the crowd, and asked the congregation to repeat the chorus. Hattie didn’t come forward, but Taylor realized later that the crutches were in the way. After the meeting she knelt at the altar and gave her heart to Christ. In another state Hattie took the good tidings to her mother, who two years later died a Christian with a Christian daughter at her side.

Joe Lightfoot wrestled for half a century with King Alcohol. He took his first drink when he was seventeen, and he was not yet twenty-one when he had delirium tremens. Soon crazed by drink, he took pledges, oaths, and every remedy he heard of; he took the “gold cure” twice. His godly mother prayed for him and pleaded with him. On her deathbed she held Lightfoot’s hand and begged him to take Christ as Saviour. He had been drinking, and would not kiss her in that dying hour because of the smell of liquor on his breath.

When she died, Lightfoot went out and got drunk. Downhearted and discouraged, his mind blackened by the thought that he was doomed to a drunkard’s grave, he wandered on a March night in 1919 into the mission. A man named Holland Oates was speaking on how God delivered him from the curse of John Barleycorn. A ripple of hope thrilled Lightfoot’s heart. He went forward and was saved. Night after night he told drunkards that there was but one cure—not an oath, not a pledge, not the “gold cure,” but only the “blood cure.”

Stranger than fiction reads the story of Elmer Wagler, whose speech impediment carried him to a Chicago school for stutterers, from where he went with some improvement to small office jobs. Rooming at the Y. M. C. A. hotel, he wandered occasionally to the mission, where, on February 27, 1921, he received Christ. He had a burning desire to testify, but every time he arose to his feet, he stammered so much it was pathetic. He would turn fiery red and blurt, “Jesus saved me.”

Walter Taylor took hold of him one night after the meeting and told him to get his mind away from his impediment. “When you give your testimony,” Taylor said, “put out your left hand and bang your right fist against the back of the chair—anything to take your mind off your throat!”

After that Wagler discovered that he had unusual freedom when giving his testimony. A few weeks later he told his story in a street meeting, and, in the power of a new life, became head of the Southern Highland Evangel with its Gospel Ministry in “the land of do without.”

The following month the stream of converts included a colorful chap named George Quilty, an electrician. As a youth he had learned his catechism, but thought that anyone who wasn’t a Jew was a Christian. Later he took Christ as Saviour, but never learned the meaning of a consecrated life. Quilty spent his time around the engine house of a Chicago fire department company, where a worker preached to him now and then. One night he spoke about the second coming of Christ and got Quilty a Bible.

They went up in a hay loft to read. Looking down, they saw the men playing pool and betting on the horses in an adjacent room. "Don't pray for them," said the worker, "because it won't work." Then he invited Quilty to a mission service. They went to Pacific Garden Mission on Saturday night, March 12, 1921, and Quilty raised his hand during the invitation. Back among his co-workers, Quilty preached the Gospel to them. He helped hold meetings in front of his place of employment where there were 30,000 workers, did jail visitation on Sundays, and testified from street corners and church pulpits.

Louis Skoda was baptized a Roman Catholic on Chicago's west side. The pictures of the saints in his mother's German Catholic testament were his only knowledge of the Bible. Skoda wandered into the mission July 9, 1921, a warm night, raised his hand for prayer, and was saved. He parted company with the clubs in which he was a familiar figure, and with the west side's Valley Gang. Except for his father, he led the home circle of nine to Christ, told his story wherever he went, then started a south Chicago mission.

It wasn't all sunshine for the mission converts after conversion. Some of them held on to old sins for a time, and faced great spiritual struggle, but Walter Taylor did his part to bring them to full surrender. Such a struggle came into the life of A. A. Bedell, the Michigan Central brakeman. At sixteen his parents took him from school because of an incurable nervous trouble resulting from over study; specialists had pronounced his case as hopeless. He went to work for the railroad, but suffered physically for twenty years. Several times he passed the mission and wanted to go inside, but lacked the courage. On Sunday, November 21, 1921, however, he stepped inside the door. Mrs. Taylor led him to a chair. Although he made a profession of faith, he backslid six months later. Then came full consecration to the Lord, and with his wife, the beginning of a godly home. He told his story so compellingly in his home church that at the mid-week prayer meeting they still pray for Pacific Garden Mission.

The last Saturday night convert in the old mission at 67 West Van Buren Street, before its removal to the present location, was Jake Zimmerman, who showed his gratitude for the Gospel message by tending the mission door at its new site for years after his conversion. Zimmerman was born in Hungary, left home at eighteen, and became a waiter in half the roll call of the United States. His chief sin was gambling. Coming to Chicago in 1910, he attended the mission off and on for thirteen years. He probably turned down the Gospel invitation more times than any other man at the mission. He was invited about a thousand times to accept Christ, including some fifty invitations by Mother Clarke. Yet he kept refusing. Then he wandered into the Van Buren Street refuge on its last Saturday night, January 27, 1923, determined to yield to Christ. From the moment he went in, he found the call irresistible. There were other converts in the old mission the following three nights, but when it opened on Wednesday, January 31, for the noon-meeting at the new quarters on 650 South State Street, it was Zimmerman who for six and one-half years became "**a door keeper in the house of the Lord.**"

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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