

# THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### A BOX SEAT ON "MURDERER'S ROW"

One of the mission trustees sat successively on two Chicago Street corners with an adding machine, tabulating the pedestrians. He was Louis A. Crittenton, general superintendent for a whole family of rescue centers to which Pacific Garden Mission had given rise. He was confirming the board's suspicion that "many more fish could be caught near State and Polk Streets than at the Van Buren Street location."

There was another factor in the desire for a new Pacific Garden Mission location. The rent at the old site was \$5,500 a year. The lease was to expire May 1, 1922, and the owner wanted \$12,000 to \$14,000 a year for a five-year renewal. The trustees hesitated and named Crittenton a one-man committee to survey the loop for a new mission home.

Crittenton was in a good position to know the specific needs of the mission. As a boy in knee pants he started attending Colonel and Mrs. Clarke's mission ten years after its founding. He sang Saturday nights in the male quartet with Frank Webb, Chris Truelsen and Andy Blackstone, son of the author of "Jesus Is Coming." He spoke many times at Monroe's request. He was there the night Tom Mackey, the ex-prizefighter, was saved and saw him put up his hand for prayer, a strand of his torn overcoat hanging from his arm. Years later Crittenton was to become pastor of Chicago's Little Church on the Corner, where Harry Vom Bruch was converted under Mackey's preaching.

He was at the mission the night Mackey was distributing tracts. A passerby spat on the convert. Mackey forgot himself, hit the man so hard that he went somersaulting into the gutter. In quick remorse Mackey ran to the curb and cried out, "Oh God, forgive me!" Mackey carried the man to the mission altar. When he regained consciousness, Mackey was praying over him. Crittenton was the trustee who bought Scott Lawrence a new suit back in the song writer's pre-Christian days, and talked with him about Jesus. From the Clarks to the present day he knew the whole succession of superintendents.

Working with detectives against prostitutes and gamblers, Crittenton had given many nights to law enforcement. He won 394 cases out of 400, and his group of crusaders were the power that drove the red light houses after 1900 from behind the Van Buren Street mission to Twenty-Second Street. Later he confessed, however, that police seldom cured a lawbreaker. One night at a street meeting testimonies were given by Dick Lane, Tom Mackey and his wife, and others.

Suddenly the door of a red light den opened. A half-naked girl ran into the street and rolled into Mrs. Mackey's long skirt. The madam of the house ran out, insisting that the girl be returned.

Mrs. Mackey said, "This is my girl now—you go back, or you'll land in jail."

That moment convinced Crittenton that there is no substitute for soul-reclamation outside of Christ.

Crittenton knew something about rescue mission objectives, too. When Dr. Harper, president of North Carolina's Elon College, came to Chicago in 1910 to buy a pipe organ, he wanted to see what the city was doing for its outcasts. Crittenton was then in the employ of the Kimball Piano Company. Part of his work was to show prospects the city. He was asked to fulfill Harper's request, which was not too difficult, since he delighted showing visitors the mission anyway. First he took Dr. Harper to the Art Museum and singled out a guard named Dick Ramey.

"Meet President Harper of Elon College," said Crittenton. "He wants to know what Chicago is doing for its down-and-outers."

Tears came to Dick Ramey's eyes. He told how in 1857 he had been born on an Ohio river farm in southeast Indiana, and how he had begun spending his money in saloons the moment he started work on the steamboats plying the Ohio and the Mississippi. In 1889 Ramey's father was deathly sick and lay unconscious for several days

"One evening while alone with him," said Dick, "I thought that I could easily put my hand on his throat and finish the little remaining life there was in him. Suddenly the old man, who had battled adversity all his life, opened his eyes and looked at me as though he read my mind. O, such a look! Those eyes burned their way into my very soul. My brain was stupefied with whiskey, but I never forgot those eyes; I never smiled again until I knelt in Pacific Garden Mission on September 15, 1895."

Then he told how, in May, 1895, his wife died and was buried in a pauper's grave in Chicago. Ramey went back to his hovel of a home so drunk he did not remember how he got there. Four weeks later his little baby girl died. He had spent all he had on liquor, and, not having money enough for a funeral, buried her in a soapbox on the outskirts of his little home town.

These incidents and the doctor's guarantee for him of only a short time to live, utterly destroyed any desire for life. He decided to end it all. Looking up into the blue sky he shouted, "The God that made me and made a hell to put me in, can put me there and be damned!"

He went to Chicago. Walking north on Clark Street Ramey saw the mission's Gospel wagon with a half dozen men who in a chorus repeated John 3:16. Then they sang a hymn, and Harry Monroe called on the men to testify. That night Ramey went to the mission. As he passed through the door he saw a small sticker with the words, "Get Right With God." By the old wall clock were printed the words of John 3:16; back of the rostrum, the phrase "God is Love" and "How Long Since You Wrote to Mother?" When Ramey heard that God is love, and that He had sent His Son to save even poor, ignorant and depraved wretches like himself, his stony heart was crushed. Tears of repentance and gratitude flowed that September 15, 1895. Two weeks later, Ramey went to the cemetery and arranged for the bodies of his wife and baby to be removed to a family lot. He went to work for the Art Institute for twenty years, and then returned to live on the farm.

The visiting college president could hardly restrain the tears as Ramey told his story. When he finished, Crittenton said, "Thank you, Ramey; we're going over to see Dick Lane now."

There at the Chicago Daily News building, Lane, the ex-safecracker, repeated the story elsewhere recounted in this book. Lane became a friend of Victor Lawson, publisher of the News, who had been converted under Moody's preaching and who left the mission \$25,000 in his will. Dr. Harper was so impressed with the testimonies of the mission converts that he wrote an article on the mission for *Christian Century*.

Thus it was that many memories flooded Crittenton's mind as he kept count on his adding machine. He recalled how in 1920 the trustees had opened the Wilson Avenue Mission with Joe Meinardi and later Bob Ingersoll as superintendent; how in 1921 the trustees took over the State Street Mission and began another in the Woodlawn district with Warren Cole in charge. Crittenton was general superintendent of all these enterprises, but the most pressing task right now was to find a new home for "Mission Number One."

Billy Sunday, who had raised \$70,000 in pledges for his spiritual birthplace during his Chicago campaign and Mel Trotter even more, recognized what reasons there were for a change. Sunday even wrote Mel that he would not object to using a part of his Chicago fund for the branch missions "if that seems the wisest thing to do in the furtherance of the work there in Chicago, but I would feel like depending upon your judgment in the matter. I suppose as the city grows, that conditions are naturally different than they were years ago."

In fact, the matter of a new site had been discussed by the trustees with Ma Sunday and Mel Trotter back in 1918, before Sunday's ten-week campaign.

When Crittenton's tabulation showed that hobo paradise had shifted to such an extent that by a fair sampling the pedestrians on State Street outnumbered those on Van Buren by seventeen to one, the trustees felt there was no alternative to moving. The directors held a spirited season of prayer in November, 1921, "for special guidance in connection with the crisis involved in finding a new home for the old Pacific Garden Mission." Trustees attending were George D. Elderkin, George D. Webb, Thomas S. Smith, Charles E. Coleman, John Timothy Stone, and general Superintendent Crittenton. The following March, two months before the Van Buren Street lease expired, the trustees named a committee to negotiate a renewal for a year, so that no hasty action would be taken. There were several problems. Rumors were rife that, if Pacific Garden Mission moved to south State Street, other parties were interested in beginning a mission at the old site. Further, the Van Buren property had fallen to a new lessee, a man named Myer, who offered to sublease to the mission; investigation showed, however, that he wanted \$16,000 a year for a ten year period for the whole building. The trustees were interested in occupying only the first floor for another year.

Several new sites were possibilities. The old Park Theatre, now the State-Congress cinema, was rumored as available. A number of buildings in the six and seven hundred block on South State were for sale. Six months before May 1, 1923, the deadline on Van Buren, the trustees approached mission superintendent Walter Taylor for his views. He expressed readiness to abide by the board's decision, if they felt it was best to move.

The most promising site was a three-story brick building with a twenty-five by one hundred foot lot at 650 South State Street. Meeting one day at the LaSalle Street office of A. M. Johnson, head of the National Life Insurance Company, the entire mission board walked in a body to view the building.

It was located on “Murder’s Row,” so named because more people were illegally killed on that street than on any other in Chicago. The building had sheltered the “White House,” one of Chicago’s most notorious and vicious dens. A veritable palace of sin, it occupied three floors and a basement. On the first floor was the long bar, reputed to be the longest in the world, and the hanging platform (the hooks from which it hung are still in the ceiling) where risqué dancers and scantily clad entertainers held forth. So worn was the beautiful parquetry around the bar from endless shuffling that one of Dad Taylor’s first tasks was to install a substantial flooring. The second floor was devoted to faro, roulette, and other games of chance. On the third floor were the painted ladies.

At the back was a hatchway, or trap door, which remains to this day. It was the reputed site of the historic Burr murder. Through it men were dumped like sacks of coal to the mud basement after being slugged or drugged and their pockets picked clean. Panderers, hanging near the Polk Street station enticed victims to the joint. After being fleeced at cards, or stunned with knockout drops, the men were pushed through a door on the other side of which was a stairway.

Unsuspectingly they stepped upon the trapdoor that worked at the press of a button, and were then hurtled helplessly to the mud-floored cellar. When reparations were made by the new owners, a reminder of prohibition days was found on the roof: several hundred pint and quart liquor bottles.

The street outside seemed like a suburb of hell. It was the main artery of the lodging-house district, where 5,000 men slept nightly. Flophouses and taverns were everywhere. Burlesque shows of the vilest kind played to crowds nightly. The labyrinth of lady barbers, pawn brokers, gambling dens, indicated man’s extremity and God’s opportunity.

The property owners asked \$70,000 for the site. The trustees offered \$60,000 cash but Max and Bertha Jesselson refused. Finally the committee bought it for \$67,000 and the owners moved to California. Of that sum, two-thirds or \$42,000 came from Billy Sunday’s campaign. The balance came from Mother Clarke’s estate. Crittenton took title to the property, then sold it to three trustees, who in turn transferred title to the mission, so that if any question ever arose, it would still revert to good hands. God’s envoys had moved into the “White House.”

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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