

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 11

The Long Road Back - ALBERTA KINNEY

THERE comes a time when the faith of the fathers - that is, your own parents' religion - must become truly your own faith. This is hardly ever easy. For some, it's a painful struggle, at times seeming to lead nowhere, or in the opposite direction.

Alberta Kinney is a woman who understands this. She lived through such a period of growth and came out victoriously. But not until she was a mature adult, self-supporting and independent. Basically, her story is the story of every girl reared in a Christian, church-centered home.

If you'd been a member of the Pierson Station, Illinois, church to which the Kinney family belonged, you would have judged the teen-aged Bertie as a fairly good example of a Christian young person. At the age of thirteen, she made her decision to receive JESUS CHRIST as her personal Saviour. She was faithful to Sunday school. In the youth fellowship, she served on committees. She sang well, and when anybody asked her to sing at prayer meeting, she said "yes." Bertie's real struggle was ahead of her.

Unfortunately, there was confusion in the Kinney family about the way a Christian lives and expresses his faith.

Her father - loud, blustery, and dogmatic about the church - had one idea. "Not in my house will such doings of the devil go on, Sarah. My daughter! Dominoes! Sin! I won't have it. Do you hear me?"

But her mother had gentler ones. "There's nothing wrong with Bertie. She's a good girl, and you know it. A little thing like dominoes . . ."

"It's the thin edge of the wedge. It's the camel's nose under the tent," her father stormed.

But her mother would not give in. "She is a good girl, Bob. We ought to be thanking the Lord that she's so interested in the right things."

Bertie began to think that GOD, too, must be blustery and disapproving, that He hated even the mildest fun. But her gentle mother also influenced her attitude toward life. Her mother simply

lived her religion, expressing sincere love for all.

From this sheltered, intensely religious home, Bertie went directly into nurses' training in Chicago, choosing nursing as a tangible way of putting love for people into practical action. Into this new adult world, she took her memories of singing in the choir back home, her "greenness" and unsophistication, a few over-sentimentalized Florence Nightingale dreams, and her untested girlhood Christianity. At this point, her struggle began.

Training was tough, full of exhaustion and tension. It wasn't the kind of atmosphere to keep dreams alive. Nurses were all different, all human. Some made it clear that they regarded Bertie's desire to serve with tongue-in-cheek.

There was a girl named Smitty, for instance, who labeled patients "fat old dames." One night in the lounge, Smitty announced that she was just about through. Bertie and a nurse named Clara listened sympathetically, but Bertie followed through with constructive action. "Let me get you some coffee, Smitty. You'll feel better."

"Aw, don't bother. I don't need to be waited on any more than - that cackling old hen of a patient."

But Bertie was on her feet. "It's no bother. I'm glad to do it." Looking after her, Smitty laughed shortly. "Oh, you saint," she said.

"That isn't nice, Smitty," Clara said.

"I know it isn't. I'm just taking my grouch out on the most innocent victim in sight. And that gal sure is innocent."

Bertie was back, a coffee cup on one hand, two doughnuts in the other. "Here, Smitty. Take a break and relax."

"Thanks. I'm sorry I hollered."

Bertie sat down quietly. "I don't mind."

Smitty gulped the coffee. "You know something, Clara? I believe the girl means it. I just wonder how long this milk of human kindness business would last - if you had my patients instead of your patience. Listen to me, Bertie. Until you learn to gripe and complain about things, why, you'll just never make a nurse."

It wasn't the first time Bertie had heard this philosophy. But she resisted accepting it.

"You're joking. Isn't she, Clara?"

"A little bit, yes."

"Mighty little!" Smitty declared.

"To tell you the truth, Bertie," Clara said slowly. "You're a sweet, wonderful girl. But sometimes I wish you'd learn to stamp your foot and yell like the rest of us."

"But why?"

Smitty shook her head. "Bertie, I don't know whether to envy you - or run from you."

The doubled-up fist kind of realism was a big factor in Bertie's struggle. But there was another - Bertie's friendship with the good-natured old hospital superintendent called Uncle Bill. Uncle Bill liked to slip into the hospital lounge and listen to Bertie play the old piano there. Old hymns were the only music she knew, but they were all favorites of Uncle Bill.

So when things mounted up, there was always Uncle Bill to talk to. One night, closing the hymnbook, Bertie turned to him. "You know what they've been telling me?" Her fingers picked out a tuneless thing. "Some of the girls think I ought to grow up and get hard-boiled."

"Hard-boiled! Don't you listen to 'em. Just don't you ever change. Why, you're just like a breath of spring around this hospital. You're - you're hooked up to GOD. That's it. The rest of us need to be. And you can help all of us by staying just as sweet as you are right now. You pay no attention to any of 'em." Uncle Bill picked up the hymnbook and leafed through it. "Bertie, that song you were playing just now . . ."

"Sweet Hour of Prayer?"

"That's the one. That's awful pretty."

Bertie stopped strumming. "Uncle Bill, you pray a lot?" He paused before he answered. "No, child. Practically never - no."

"Why not?" Bertie asked.

He set the hymnbook in front of her again, then turned away. "Oh, I did once, Bertie. A long time ago. Actually, when I was a young man - back in New York City - I organized twenty-three Sunday schools - for kids that didn't get the breaks. But that was a long time ago. Then I guess I just got too busy to think much about the Lord. Say, you know any more songs, Bertie? Go ahead and play."

But Bertie did change. She wanted to be accepted. She had no desire to be regarded as a strange kind of smiling Pollyanna.

Studying herself through the eyes of the other nurses, she decided she'd been churched to death all her life. So she didn't join a Chicago church or even attend anywhere regularly. Yet when she thought about it at all, she still clung to her adolescent faith.

Unfortunately, an illness cut short her dreams of becoming a full-fledged nurse. When she recovered, she went back to the hospital and found a permanent job there. Being employed at the hospital, she was able to live with her friends at the nurses' home.

Now the change became more complete. Bertie lost the quality of simplicity. And she began to rebel against GOD.

Her fear that she had been church-ed to death became a firm conviction. She decided that she'd better put herself first. Her attitude toward almost everything changed.

Probably her old friend was the only one who cared enough to talk about it. "Something wrong with the piano, Bertie?"

Hurrying through the lounge with a deck of cards in her hand, Bertie paused. "Not that I know of, Uncle Bill. Why?"

"I never hear you play any more," the old superintendent said.

Bertie shrugged. "Oh, Uncle Bill, all I know how to play is hymns."

"What's wrong with hymns?" Bertie said nothing.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked her. "You've changed."

"I don't know how," she countered.

"For one thing, you've stopped smiling."

Bertie studied the old man. "Maybe I'm just growing up," she told him seriously.

"Then why don't you go to church on Sunday?"

"Why don't you?" she told him pertly.

He grinned. "I asked for that one, didn't I?"

When Bertie spoke again, her voice felt tense. "Uncle Bill, believe me, I've had enough church - enough to last me the rest of my life. I only missed three Sundays in thirteen years back home. But I've missed a lot of other things - things like parties and dances and life. I'm growing up, Uncle Bill, and I'm glad of it."

If you'd known Alberta Kinney in those days, you probably would have thought that the struggle was over and that any attempt to seize a faith all her own had failed. In those days, Bertie's spare time was spent in partying. She was completely wrapped up in her own pursuits. If you'd asked her, she would have said, "Yes, I believe in GOD. Yes, I'm a Christian." Actually, during this time, she was shutting GOD out of her life.

Uncle Bill stopped asking her why she didn't play the hospital piano. Nobody called her little Mary Sunshine any more. Day by day her brittleness increased. With people, nurses, and patients, she was tense, loud, sharp.

One factor in Bertie's life remained constant - the influence of her mother. Putting her mother's

simple faith out of mind wasn't as easy as severing formal ties with a church - because her mother went right on writing. Although it was hard, Bertie went through the motions of answering.

But the letters became increasingly disturbing, and one day Bertie opened an envelope to read these words: "I have never wanted to run your life for you, Bertie. I've intended to leave you entirely in the Lord's hands. You are there now, although I know you don't want to be. I've just gotten off my knees, Bertie. I didn't know just what to say to Him but I let go of my worry about you entirely. You're His child. You are in His hands completely now. You don't need to tell me what you're doing there away from home. He knows."

Without knowing why she did it, Bertie took the letter to the old hospital superintendent. "She's never written like this before, Uncle Bill. I know she's lost all her confidence in me."

Uncle Bill folded the letter slowly and handed it back to Bertie. "It sounds that way."

"How can I answer a letter like that?"

Uncle Bill drummed on the arm of the lounge chair. "I don't know. You've changed a great deal, Bertie. You used to be so . . ."

"So sweet, and like a ray of spring sunshine. And I got sick of it. A girl gets sick of being different," Bertie told him irritably.

"I know, I know. But the others envied you."

Bertie frowned. "Envied me? They made fun of me!" "Because they didn't know what else to do. Bertie, your trouble - was - you were just worn out with church when you were young."

Bertie fingered her mother's letter. "Worn out completely. Fed up to - here. When I came to training, the only songs I knew were hymns. I hadn't been any place but church. Do you blame me for feeling the way . . ."

He interrupted. "Wait a minute. I'm not talking about blame.

Just trying to make you see something. You were worn out with church, so you began to feel worn out with GOD."

She nodded.

"Maybe all you need is a fresh angle, Bertie." She looked across at him questioningly.

"When you thought about GOD, all you could ever see was your church back home. I mean, the way they did things there, the hymns they sang, the way things were when you were still a kid. You say you're grown up now and you look at things differently."

"Yes, that's why . . ."

"Then why don't you? Why don't you look at things differently? Why don't you stand off and look at GOD from a fresh angle?" The superintendent pulled his chair closer to hers. "Bertie, did you ever hear of a place called the Pacific Garden Mission?"

"The what?"

"It's down on Skid Row. It's a mission. But I think that's it. Bertie, if you were to go down there and see what GOD can do in the lives of those men and women who've hit bottom, I think that would be your fresh angle."

Bertie smiled. "For a man who turned his back on GOD, Uncle Bill, you do a lot of talking in His favor."

Bertie took Smitty to the Mission with her. As the two sat in the evening service, hearing men talking about a world they didn't even know existed and telling how JESUS CHRIST had changed their lives, Bertie Kinney felt the strings of a conflict she thought was dead. The hymns were too familiar. So were the preacher's words. And yet, it was all different. Nothing she had ever experienced before had been like this. Certainly not church!

When the speaker asked for "Christians to stand up and witness to the power of CHRIST in their lives," she felt pulled back into the old world of her childhood. Something whispered that the only proper response was to get on her feet and say something.

Bertie stood up. But when she reached into the past for a testimony, it didn't come out smooth and well-polished.

"I - I want - to confess - JESUS CHRIST - as my Saviour. He - I - uh . . ." She sat down, blushing. Looking up again, she met the penetrating eyes of the man on the platform and knew uncomfortably that he was aware that she was not living up to her Christian profession. She wished that she hadn't said a word.

But Bertie went back to the Mission again. And again.

What she was finding there was an aliveness that she had never known before.

The people there talked about the complete surrender of every aspect of a life into the hands of JESUS CHRIST. They spoke of His having made salvation possible when He shed His blood on the cross. They talked about it as a finished thing and said our part was simply to take His gift of eternal life and then follow Him.

These people had been at the very bottom. What they talked about, they knew. They had found it for themselves. When she listened to them, Bertie began to look at GOD and JESUS CHRIST through their eyes, from their point of view. She wondered if she were the only respectable working girl who had come to the Mission this way and had found what she was finding there. She didn't really care. The important thing was that she was finding it for herself, by herself. A fresh angle, Uncle Bill had called it. All she knew was that the preaching and the singing filled her with a sense of excitement and curiosity.

One night Charles Miller, a mission convert, spoke. "In the beginning of the gospel of John we read that **'the Word was God'** . . . that **'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'** Now that's what happened when GOD came to earth in the Person of JESUS CHRIST.

"And then in the fourth chapter of Hebrews we read that the **'Word of GOD . . . JESUS CHRIST . . . is quicker, and more powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.'** JESUS knows your heart and this same JESUS says we cannot serve two masters."

Bertie heard every word. "This same JESUS says we cannot serve two masters. Are you serving JESUS CHRIST, who loved you enough to die for you? Or are you looking out for yourself?"

All the way home on the "el" that night, Bertie stared out at the city lights, the tears streaming down her face. In the nurses' home, walking down the darkened hall quietly, she heard voices.

"Was that Bertie just came in?" Clara asked. Bertie started to call out, but Smitty answered. "She's been to that Mission place again. I wish she'd get off this religion thing, don't you?"

Clara's voice was thoughtful. "I'm not sure. Maybe she's right."

"How could she be? She acts just like the rest of us. She says she's been a Christian for years and years, but you couldn't tell it by the way she lives. She used to be a prude, sure, but she got over that quick enough. I can't see what difference this whole thing makes. I can't see any difference at all."

Bertie ran to her room. Kneeling by her bed, she began to pray as she had never prayed before. "Lord, that did it. I can't live apart from You any longer. Whether I've ever been a real Christian or not, I know now that I'm as much a sinner as anybody on Skid Row. And I want to be different. I want the girls here at the hospital to see a difference. I want them to see Thee. Forgive me. And take me back, for JESUS' sake."

Living her faith was not easy.

Bertie's new way of life was an excuse for a series of jokes and pranks at the home - empty whiskey bottles slipped into her dresser drawer, for instance. But slowly her old friends began to see that this was not a veneer that had been added, nor just a redetermination of her old sweetness-and-light attitudes. This was something that was deep within her, and she was not going to let it go.

For some, the "battle" comes sooner and is over more quickly.

For others, it may go on for almost a lifetime.

But Bertie Kinney, on October 1, 1924, had found her way through doubt and rebellion. The faith of the fathers - faith in JESUS CHRIST as Saviour - was now personally hers.

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