

THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

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CHAPTER SEVEN

MEL TROTTER'S SUICIDE NIGHT

Born May 15, 1870, at Orangeville, Illinois, Mel Trotter was five years of age when the family moved to nearby Polo. His start in life was hardly auspicious. Mel had little schooling. His father wanted him to continue, but it was the son himself who considered an education unnecessary for success. What's more, the father was a drunkard and the three sons after him. Often the boys tended bar for their own father.

When Mel was seventeen, the family removed to Freeport, Illinois, where Mel turned independent and learned barbering. Soon he was drawing a man's salary.

"That's a bad thing for a boy," he said later. "I was able to indulge in many things that did me harm."

Two years later he went to Pearl City, Iowa, to work his trade. There he fell into drinking and gambling, lost his job, and went to Davenport, Iowa, to do insurance work.

"I got to know a great deal about four-legged trotters," Mel used to say. "I was always stuck on the finest horses and I was a good fellow. I kept on drinking and the first thing I knew, I couldn't stop. The friends I had found that when they needed me most I wasn't there to help, so they cut me out, and finally I got to drinking sheenies, three for five."

"And I couldn't help it. I tried to break away and get into the country. A fellow named Cook gave me a dandy black horse, one of the best I ever drove, and so I got a buggy and a job in the country where I made a lot of money. My wife went with me to keep me sober. I would stay sober a little while, and I really wanted to. I'd say, 'I'll never take another drink as long as I live.'

One night, after a long drive, Mel went to put the horse in the barn.

His wife went to the house. It was snowing, and a bitter-cold Iowa day. Suddenly the devil seemed to get hold of him. Although Mel had driven the horse nearly as fast and hard as he would go, he nevertheless started him out again, drove eleven miles and back, with exactly an average of a drink per mile.

In addition the buggy carried three big quarts of whiskey for later consumption.

Mel's wife was heartbroken.

Looking into his face she said, "I didn't know where you had gone, but if I could have walked through this awful storm I would have searched for you." Mel said he would have given his life if he could have stayed sober, but it wasn't in him.

On another occasion, after a record-breaking period of eleven and one-half sober weeks, Mel succumbed to his vice again, possibly encouraged by a suspended court sentence hanging over him. He went into the country, drove up to a saloon, put the horse in the shed and said, "There's the old nag out there with the buggy. Everybody have something to drink. Drink up the horse!"

"I was just simply imbecile," Mel said later. "There was nothing else to it. And I tried my level best. I don't look like a man that goes down easy, but I just couldn't stop. I went on worse and worse. Finally I got back to the city again; the drunks got oftener and oftener, and they always got a little bit longer.

"For six years I tried to quit. There's no fun in that. Every time after promising my wife and my boy and myself that I'd never take it again, I'd fall. That left me just so much lower in my own estimation; I hated myself. Finally after a drunk I just wouldn't go home any more. I got to staying away for three or four days at first, then a week, and gradually longer and longer. I even committed burglary to satisfy the awful craving for drink.

"They tried to turn me off whiskey, but they didn't have a remedy. You can't tie a big fellow like me with a bit of ribbon. It needs something more than that. They tried the gold cure, and they gave me hypodermic syringes and three bottles of medicine. I sold the whole outfit of stuff in fifteen minutes for three drinks of whiskey.

"God gave us only one baby. When the little fellow was hardly two years old I went to our little home one day—it had almost ceased to be a home—I went home after a ten days' drunk, and found him dead in his mother's arms. I'll never forget that day. I was a slave, and I knew it. It pretty nearly broke my heart. I said, 'I'm a murderer. I'm anything but a man. I can't stand it, and I won't stand it! I'll end my life!' But I didn't have the courage. At my mother's knee I had been taught to say, 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'

I knew there's a God and I didn't dare face Him. I couldn't stand suicide.

"Mrs. Trotter was alone with the little fellow when she laid him down, dead. Then she turned aside to God and said, 'Father, I've had my thoughts on the baby more than on you, and now I want to turn to you. You're all I have left.'

"Mrs. Trotter had never been away from the baby one hour from the time he was born till he died in her arms. She had a drunken husband, and her only joy and hope was in the baby. And oh, how she cared for him! Then she turned around from the dead child and said, 'Lord, I'm going to serve you, to help others in trouble. I still have my husband.' She began to pray for me. That's a thing that counts; when a wife gets hold of God without letting go, there's something bound to happen.

"She led me into the little room and closed the door upon the three of us. Over the body of our dead baby, lying in the little white casket, she made me promise that I'd never take another drop.

I promised, put my arms around her, and told her I'd never touch liquor again as long as I lived. The funeral hadn't been over two hours before I staggered home so drunk I couldn't see. I couldn't help it; the devil had me. Tobacco was just as much a fiend for me as whiskey. My right hand was filled with 'wet ones,' and my left hand pocket with 'dry ones.'"

On the night of January 19, 1897, ragged and drunk, Mel Trotter staggered through the streets of Chicago bound for Lake Michigan, where he had determined to commit suicide by jumping into the icy waters. He was a slave to liquor. He was without home and friends, bound hand and foot by sin. Whiskey had been his god for years. He had tried as few men to get away from it; resolution after resolution failed; promise after promise was broken. He had given up in despair, had left his home and wife, and now had reached the final determination to end everything.

This night when he resolved to plunge into the lake was the darkest in his entire life. He would have given anything for the power of becoming a new man, but he was convinced there was no help.

As he staggered along Van Buren Street in his uncertain course, he staggered also into Pacific Garden Mission. The doorkeeper helped him inside, and put him in a chair along the wall so he would not tumble.

Harry Monroe, who had succeeded to the mission superintendency in 1892, was leading singing up on the platform. Seeing the ushers place the ragged drunk against the mission wall, he stopped and asked the crowd to bow in prayer.

"O God," he prayed, "save that poor, poor boy."

Mel Trotter was then twenty-seven years of age. Monroe had been exactly the same age in 1880 when he wandered into the mission. He gave his testimony that night, telling how he had trod a rough road, but how Christ had forgiven him.

At the close of the service, Monroe gave the invitation. "Jesus loves you," he said to the men in the mission, "and so do I. He wants to save you tonight. Put up your hand for prayer. Let God know you want to make room for Him."

Mel Trotter raised his hand for prayer, jumped to his feet and walked forward. Monroe led him to Christ.

From that day forward the two men were great buddies. Harry called Mel his "Timothy" and Harry was "Paul" to Mel. The waters of Lake Michigan were colder than usual that night, but Mel's heart was really warm for the first time. He was headed not for the lake, but for the pulpit. He had tasted Living Water.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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