

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

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Chapter Five

Robert Atchison's Training for Missions

THE MISSIONARY and his wife were cooking their noon meal when word came of the plague in the back country. The children spotted the messenger boy when he was only a black speck on the dusty road.

"Look, Mommy, Daddy," they called out. "Somebody's coming." The black speck grew larger. The Japanese boy darted into their camp and threw himself on the ground, groaning to get more breath.

"Mister Atchison, Mister Atchison, my name Toshita.

I come for you. Please to help us on mountain. Please to come and help us. Everybody die."

Robert Atchison slid the vegetables he was peeling into the boiling water on the fire and looked at his wife. "The plague!"

Then the missionary turned to the Japanese boy still on the ground. "I'll come just as soon as I can, Toshita. Mrs. Atchison will stay here. It's too dangerous."

His wife interrupted. "No, Robert. I'm going too. We've both got to help Toshita's people. Don't argue. The plague has killed fifty-five people today right here, even though we've done all we could. They must be dying like flies up on the mountain."

Take a woman into the mountain country in plague time? "No," he said.

"Yes," his wife answered. "We'll just wrap ourselves up in Psalm Ninety-one and both go up together."

"But the children?"

"Yokama will feed them and watch them," his wife said. "I'm going, Robert."

An hour later, the missionary and his wife trailed Toshita on foot down the road that led back into the mountain.

The trip was long. The mountain rose straight up in front of them and when they left the road they found that the path had not been cleared all summer. But Toshita, going on ahead of them, often looked back anxiously. The missionary and his wife trudged on after him.

"Tired, Mary?" Robert asked when they stopped for a breathing spell. She shook her head. They started on again. Slowly, Mary began to repeat, "'I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.'"

The missionary took it up. "'Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence.'"

Together they said, "'He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust; his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.'"

Toshita ahead of them was walking faster now. The sun was hotter and the missionary's tongue swelled in his mouth. Mary tripped over a hidden root.

Perhaps he'd been a fool to start up the mountain, to bring Mary. Probably they couldn't help quell the plague at all.

Mary smiled up at him. "I'm not as rugged as you, but I'm doing all right. And after all, I haven't had exactly the same training as you, or the same experience!"

The same training and the same experience. Oh, GOD, how nearly can a man forget! He straightened his shoulders. He'd walked over rough roads before - miles of them. Better this hot sun than a cold night without an overcoat.

And he had known those nights - not long ago.

In how many states had he sold his coats, his pants and, gloves, if he had them! "How much will you give me?" he had wheedled a dozen times in a dozen pawn shops. "Two bucks for the pants? Three for the coat? All right, take them. It's robbery, but I got to have a drink. Give me the five bucks and hurry it up."

The wind was always meanest after he had sold his coat. So there was nothing to do but hop on a freight and head south where no one needs a warm coat and a wool suit.

He had the training, all right, and the experience for cross-country trips in all sorts of weather, for sleeping anywhere. Most of his life had been that kind of experience.

Sometimes he had a job. Sometimes he didn't. Bumming around the country, sometimes he slept in cheap flophouses, old deserted houses, barns, and jails. Mornings in those days, he wondered where he'd sleep that night, or, what he'd eat before night came. Eating then was a matter of knocking at a back door and asking for a meal. "Oh, good morning, Madam. And isn't this a beautiful morning?"

"I've been too busy cleaning out my cellar to notice," the lady of the house told him. "What is it you want? a handout?"

"Well, yes, Madam. I haven't had a bite to eat for two days. I'll be forever grateful to you if you can--"

"Here's a jar of jelly," the lady would answer, "and half a loaf of bread. Sit down there on the back steps and make yourself some bread and jelly. And just leave the jar at the door when you're through. Eat all the bread and jelly you want. But I want the jar back."

Sometimes it was last night's baked potatoes. Sometimes it was a bride's meal turned down by a new husband. Maybe it was some leftover meat from the week before.

You acquire the knack of begging for food after fifteen years of it. But getting liquor was a tougher problem. You came to count on the nattier dressed men in Chicago's North Side for a dime. A dime was a glass of beer. But some nights the well-dressed gentlemen stayed at home. Then you figured you were out of "luck."

One night back in '95 he spotted a party through the open windows. The blonde woman nearest the window was holding a full glass. He sneaked around to the back and knocked.

The woman that opened the door was somewhat unsteady by then.

"I can see you got a party going on," he told her. "Could you spare just one drink?" He saw the cluster of bottles on the sink, the bowl of ice next to them, the glasses waiting to be filled. An "animal" with claws was tearing at his throat. "I just got to have a drink, Madam."

The woman's laugh was high and silly. "Get out of here," she said. She slammed the door, and he heard her call back into the living room. "Hey, you should see what just knocked on our door. I must be seeing things."

No well-dressed gentlemen? No dimes? No drinks from the party? None.

He dragged around the corner of Clark Street into Van Buren. He was "coming apart at the seams," he relates. "Maybe it's about time I call it quits, go lie on some railroad track somewhere and get rid of myself," he thought.

Even a homeless man should think that over first. The door of the building on his left was open. Above it, the sign read, "Pacific Garden Mission." Inside, he could see rows of seats, some empty. He went in, sat down. He tried to think about dying, but the preacher on the platform wouldn't let him.

The preacher's words about GOD stung him like the cold wind the day after he had sold his last overcoat.

After the sermon, he went to the preacher. "I got a couple of questions to ask you, Mister. And I want straight answers. Not done up in big words."

"I don't use big words," the preacher said. "I was on the street, too. Just like you. What's your first question?"

He asked his questions and he got his answers. "JESUS CHRIST offers a clean slate to anyone who'll come to Him," the preacher said. "And the grace and strength to keep it that way." Then the preacher read a Bible verse that made sense, "Him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out."

"I believe you, Preacher," Robert Atchison said that night in 1895 at the old Pacific Garden Mission. "I want to accept CHRIST."

The hot sun was scorching his head. Abruptly Atchison was back on the mountain in Japan. He chuckled to himself. Mary was right. The devil had provided his experience, had trained him for leading a rugged life. And here he was in Japan, putting that training to use for GOD.

At his chuckle, his wife looked up. "'For he shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways.'" he repeated to his wife. "We'll make it. Look, there's the clearing ahead."

Toshita began to run. Then he disappeared around a bend. The missionary could hear the roar of voices as he and Mary came closer to the clearing.

There must be many people sick there, he thought.

But he didn't hear any moaning, any groans. Odd, the voices didn't sound like sick people. They sounded like angry men. The voices grew louder, buzzing like giant flies. Then the villagers in a mob swarmed through the clearing, down toward the missionary and his wife.

Mary cried out, "Robert! Robert! Run, run!"

The missionary stood quietly in the path. "My friends, my friends," he called out. "I don't know why you have turned against us. We have come as your friends. To help you in the plague. Listen to me. We are here to help you.

And we're here to bring you good news of JESUS CHRIST. He is your Friend. We are your friends."

At that a swarm of giant flies would have heeded better.

The leader in the center of the mob picked up a stone. So did the men in back of him.

"We will kill you, white man and woman. You are devils," someone shouted in schoolbook

English.

"Dear GOD - in the name of JESUS CHRIST - help us!" Mary prayed.

The missionary echoed her prayer; but can it be that a call to the mission field ends this way? Is this the way that life ends? "Help us, GOD!"

A stone snapped from the leader's right hand. The leader's arm leveled with the force of his aim, stayed level, paralyzed in a gesture of pointing beyond.

The babble stilled, the villagers halted. Then, helter-skelter, the Japanese stumbled and ran back into the village.

In back of Robert, where the leader had pointed, flames shot up from a patch of dry weeds. The missionary felt akin to Moses as he watched the burning Japanese bush. It was logical. Not a firegod spewing disapproval, to be appeased in a frenzy of fear and cries of terror. Just hot sun, no rain, dry weeds. Yet, GOD had heard. He had saved mightily.

Together, Robert and Mary started down the mountain.

"For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways," Robert quoted. "We didn't save those people from the plague," he told his wife, "but GOD saved us. And we've many years of mission service ahead of us. Maybe other mobs, more plagues, even wild animals. We'll sleep in many Oriental wildernesses, worry about food, too.

"But if we wrap ourselves up in the Ninety-first Psalm, GOD will be with us!"

Mary smiled.

~ end of chapter 5 ~
