

THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

A Doorway to Heaven

Carl F. H. Henry

Copyright @ 1942

CHAPTER TWELVE

FIVE FEET FIVE INCHES OF SNOW

For a quarter century George Delos Snow made a living by gambling—cards, dice, horses. One night the side street gambling house in which he held a fourth interest netted \$1150 profit in the first three sittings. Snow dealt cards like a Thurston. Only a handful of unsuspecting people and an hour's time were necessary for a killing.

In 1873, the year many Kansans went bankrupt, Snow was born in Garnet, Kansas, in the middle of a family of five children. His father was a grain dealer; his mother a praying Christian. Snow thought he could startle the world with a seventh-grade education, so went to work for a school supply house and then became a bank messenger in Chicago.

Soon he fell in with a card-playing crowd. He didn't know the first thing about poker, except that it was a costly game. Losses of ten and fifteen dollars a night were quite a bit for a young fellow like him, so when Snow's mother bought a house in another part of the city it wasn't difficult to accept lodging with her. Sometimes the urge came to see the gang, and he took the four-mile street car ride to renew acquaintances.

One day one of the old circle, an insurance salesman, confided that he had half interest in a gambling house at California and Madison, and offered Snow a job there.

"I don't know anything about gambling," he retorted. "Why do you want me there?"

"You don't have to know much. You can open up in the morning and sell cigars over the counter, can't you? And if a crap game starts, just take a nickel off each lick for being gamekeeper. And if they play pitch, take a dime off each lick."

When Snow thought about the thing, he decided it wasn't so bad. Fair salary, meal ticket at a nearby restaurant, and off for home at night by six o'clock so he wouldn't have to stay for the poker games after dark—not bad, he thought. He was twenty-three years of age at the time. He never told his mother just what he did for a living.

For twenty-five years thereafter Snow made a living by getting other people's money.

He stayed with the first job five years and started to go down from the first step.

In this cigar store, where the three rooms were divided for smokers, pool players, and the card and dice sharks, Snow mixed in the card games. Soon he became a shill, who is to a gambling house what a decoy is to wild ducks.

When the card game gets underway, a shill sits in the game, secretly playing for the house; when a live customer walks in, that is, a customer with money, the manager taps the shill on the shoulder or gives him a less conspicuous signal, and the shill steps out. Sometimes there are two and three shills in a game; if one shill goes, another quite likely wins, but in any event, the house always gets the ante of ten or fifteen cents a hand, or a quarter a hand if the stakes are big.

The den for which Snow worked wasn't making enough money, so the manager hired a professional cheater. Good-looking, well-dressed and slick, he was a high-class bottom dealer; that is, he dealt cards from the bottom as well as the top of the deck, so that it almost took a magician to tell the difference. A clever bottom dealer could be surpassed only by an expert second dealer, one who could deal from below the top card without detection. The shills could spot a bottom dealer because he held the deck unnaturally; they could tell a second dealer by a peculiar swish of the cards when he dealt a hand. That is why gamblers like music.

Snow usually sat to the right of the cheater, who knew how to give the live customers just enough leeway to make them reckless. Then he used his tricks to the advantage of the house. He would deal the hands, five cards to a player before bets were made. Bids would soar. Then the cheater used any of a dozen methods—palming, deck cutting by a slight crimp when the cards were passed to Snow, bottom or second card dealing, and signals.

Not only were the cards marked on the back for easy identification, but the cheater wore a ring with a tiny mirror. Years later Snow met the cheater quite accidentally. The card shuffler confided that he had forsaken bottom dealing and was now one of the best second dealers in the world.

From that job Snow went quickly to the gambling houses. For a number of years, like any live customer, he played for himself against the rest of the group and the house cheater. Drinking took him for two or three years, but Snow found that he couldn't play good cards under the influence of liquor. But it wasn't easy to make a living playing free lance.

The houses had watchers of their own; they were bent on making money, and wanted no cheater but their own to take the pool. Sometimes Snow was on the verge of a big take, but didn't dare bottom deal, for fear the shills would detect him, so took the loss. Sometimes he had courage enough for a shady maneuver and won.

One day a card player came to him and said, "I want you to cheat a friend of mine tonight. We can take him at poker, and we'll split, half and half." It was two in the morning when they reached the friend, a saloonkeeper who was just closing for the night. They played until dawn. Then the right moment came. The saloonkeeper had a great hand and bet heavily. Snow dealt, slipping himself a card from the bottom of the deck. The saloonkeeper lost \$260 that night. Snow lent him enough money to open business in the morning.

By this time Snow no longer lived with his mother, but he made it a point to visit her for a day every few months. She never dreamed he was a gambler, and talked to him about the Lord. One evening when she asked him to go with her to Pacific Garden Mission he rebelled. “Why did I ever come out here today?” he asked. “Am I that bad?” But she wouldn’t be refused.

Not wishing to displease her, because he saw her so few times and was more or less the family black sheep, Snow and his gray-haired mother of seventy took the street car to the mission. He sat with her a few rows from the rear. He was quite disinterested. After the service when Mrs. Clarke came and asked him “Are you saved?” he muttered “Yes,” in an aside that his mother could not hear. Then they left. Snow continued gambling for thirteen years.

Only one thing kept George Snow from opening a gambling house of his own: fear that his mother would discover the truth. It was an easy way to make a small fortune, while others, the cheaters and shills, would be doing the actual nasty work and the house enjoyed half the stakes.

For two years he tried to break from gambling, and got a job on the outside. Every free day, however, found him gambling again, and winning meant cheating. Hadn’t he lost \$125 in a few games with the old timers by playing the cards straight? And he couldn’t break the slump.

The gamblers liked him. Many houses wanted a good cheater, and Snow had many offers. He made ten or fifteen dollars a night for himself, while a hundred or a hundred fifty went to the manager, so he went back to the dens. He fell in with bad women. Then came the tobacco habit that finally meant an operation for cigarette cancer.

One night in the old gambling house he determined to quit. They had played a new game—stush, they called it—and he couldn’t win. He didn’t know it well enough to cheat. Anyway, he was tired of cheating and his heart felt as black as ink. His health was broken and he had only six months to live. He determined to return to the old mission to be saved.

“Then the devil got after me,” said Snow. “The devil said, ‘Would you have the crust to go down to a church or a mission after the life you’ve lived?’ That was the way he talked me out of it. A few nights later I decided I’d go anyway. Then the devil said, ‘Do you think it’s fair to give Jesus the worst part of your life?’ So I didn’t go that night either. The next time I wanted to go, the devil said, ‘What will the gang say?’ Well, I knew the gang all right; they’d think I was crazy. But I was sure, too, that if I had a few thousand dollars on me, they’d probably kill me to get it. Then the devil began listing my sins. He kept it up for three hours— listing one sin right after the other. When he finished, I said, ‘That’s right; I’m a sinner, and you haven’t missed a one. My heart is black.’”

The next night Snow walked out of the gambling house on the north side of Madison Street. As soon as it was dark, he boarded a street car for the mission. He hoped it would be open. It was a cold February night and he had only \$2.50— and borrowed money at that—in his pocket.

Finding his way to 67 West Van Buren Street he went to the door. It opened, but inside everything was dark. He looked at his watch. It was only seven.

He decided he was early, so he walked the street for a while and then waited under the elevated pillars. He hoped there would be a meeting, for he wanted desperately to be saved.

Suddenly a few people appeared and walked into the mission room. He followed and sat down. Folks kept coming. Walter Taylor, the superintendent, wasn't there that night because it was his free night, but Snow didn't know the difference.

An evangelist got up and spoke. Snow kept hoping he would stop and that there'd be an altar call. Then a mission man took the platform and called for testimonies. Snow learned later he was T. B. Davis, now a Detroit pastor. "Lucky" Baldwin was among the witnesses that night. Snow kept hoping more and more that an invitation would be given. Finally Davis closed the testimony period and said, "Is there a man who wants to be prayed for tonight?"

Snow sat still. Someone raised a hand; then another hand went up. Snow followed. "Will you go a step further? Those who raised your hands, come to the front for prayer," added Davis.

Snow went up and took the last place on the left side of the platform. He kept wishing that he were saved. Davis began on the other end of the platform, whispering to each penitent, but Snow couldn't understand a word. Finally he came to Snow and asked, "Are you a sinner?"

Snow said, "Yes."

"If you asked Jesus, do you think he'd forgive you?" questioned Davis.

"I do," said Snow. Then they prayed together the publican's prayer, "**God be merciful to me, the sinner.**"

Snow went back to the meeting the next night. He enjoyed every minute of it, never dreaming he might be asked for a testimony. When the time came, Walter Taylor called for witnesses. "I almost fell out of the chair when the thought gripped me that I would be expected to say something. Then the devil said to me, 'Don't you get up.' I started up three times but slid back.

Then Mr. Taylor said, 'Somebody will lose his testimony if he doesn't get up.' With that spur, I sprang to my feet and whipped out the words, I was in here last night. I used to gamble for a living but Jesus saved me.' Then I dropped into my chair. Taylor shouted to the crowd, 'Let's give him a hallelujah.' They shook the house with that cheer; I can still hear the place ring."

That was February 11, 1919. A quarter of a century a gambler and a quarter of a century a Christian layman is George Snow's story, for next February will be his twenty-fourth spiritual birthday. He has used the intervening years to God's glory, testifying in churches, missions and on street corners. Whenever he can, he still makes his way to the noon street meeting conducted by the mission at State and Harrison, and, with some tickets for a religious rally demonstrates some of the tricks by which he cheated men before Christ saved him. He weighs one hundred ninety pounds, has light blue eyes set in a round, ruddy face, and white hair. He usually begins his testimony by saying, "Well, here stands five feet five inches of Snow."

He has worked as a silk salesman and dry goods clerk, proclaiming the good tidings to many hungry souls. He gives a dollar a week to foreign missions alone.

When Snow was saved three months, the superintendent, Walter Taylor, asked for volunteers for a street meeting. Snow had another spiritual struggle.

“The devil said, ‘If you go, I’ll have the gang out from the west side to hear you.’ The more I resisted, the more guilty I felt. Finally I wanted to run out of the mission. But then Mr. Taylor walked by, and I said, ‘I’ll volunteer to give my testimony at the street meeting.’ Taylor smiled and said, ‘I knew you would.’”

When Snow found out that the meeting would be held at Quincy and State Streets the news almost unnerved him. He had still another struggle. The reason was quite evident. When he gave his testimony, he said, “Right up there, on the fourth floor of that building, is a gambling hall. Swell chance you had when you walked in there. There were eight of us who worked as shills for the house. We would hang around and read the papers until the elevator bell rang. Then we would dive for the table, cards and chips. We made believe it was a terrific game with tremendous stakes. Then, after three or four rounds, one of the shills would say, ‘Cash me in. I’ve got a date.’ Invariably one of the newcomers stepped into the game. He hardly had a chance, with five shills and a couple cheaters against him. Why, we’d clean him right out. These cheaters knew some tricks that I never could explain, and I used to be a cheater myself. But then Jesus saved me. He saved me at the Pacific Garden Mission, just the other night.”

~ end of chapter 12 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
