THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION
Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

Faith Coxe Bailey

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Chapter 8

Position Wanted: By Experienced Bookkeeper - GEORGE McARTHUR

WHEN I was nine, I was a spoiled little rich boy. My father was a banker, and my grandfather, too. We lived in an old brownstone mansion in Manhattan. Because I'd been left to a nurse and my own devices, I'd developed a taste that was somewhat unusual, even for spoiled sons of successful bankers. At nine, I had a taste for good liquor.

Of course, Dad and the "Old Man" were totally ignorant of my youthful maneuverings. Nights, I'd wait until Dad's poker party broke up. Then I'd sneak downstairs and drink whatever was left in the glasses on the card tables. If I was lucky, there was something left in the bottle too. Then I'd slip back upstairs for a good night's sleep!

Sometimes, I'd get no farther than the living room rug.

Otherwise, my childhood was fairly uneventful. I was sent to an exclusive boys' school, where I seem to have forgotten how good Dad's liquor tasted. But about the time I was sixteen, I began to remember again. When I was home on summer vacation that year, I started nipping at Dad's private stock. The quality hadn't changed a bit!

One day when I was relaxing and sipping in the comfort of Dad's oversized leather chair, the Old Man pushed open the library door, intent on looking for files or ledger books or some of the rest of the nonsense that went with his banking. For one flustered moment, I thought of pouring the stuff into the Oriental rug, but the Old Man's eyes had been sharpened by his years of adding up columns.

Pretending to riffle through some papers on Dad's desk, he said dryly, "Having a little nip, eh, George?" He shuffled a few more papers and then he looked up and trained those sharp, clear eyes on me. "I wouldn't bother to try to think up any excuse, boy. Natural curiosity is in any red-blooded boy. But it has just occurred to me that if you're old enough to be interested in the taste of liquor - you're old enough to work. Want a job at the bank this summer while your Mother and Dad are in Europe?"

This was no punishment! Reporting for work at the Old Man's bank, I was eased into a non-essential job, custom-built especially for me. Not many sixteen-year-olds in Manhattan drew the

salary I was handed every payday.

Suddenly, I was a grown-up gentleman. Before, I'd always taken banking and money for granted. All I had to say about it if I said anything - was that I liked the things it provided. Like good liquor, and trips to Europe!

But now things were different. The sight of all that money made my head swim with hunger for it. As I had loved the taste of a grown-up man's liquor, now I loved the feel of a grown-up man's money. The feel of those crumpled, rough, tattered bills. The smoothness of the new ones. And the sound of it! The earthy clunk of silver dollars striking together in the teller's drawer - or on my bed in my room at home!

It was so easy to slip the money out of the bank - past the teller, the secretaries, and even past the Old Man.

Before my seventeenth birthday, I had stolen more than a thousand dollars. Tens, twenties - sometimes even a fifty.

Naturally, I developed a strong desire to stay with the business world! So I spoke to the Old Man about it.

"Gramps, I'm sick of school. I love the bank. It's in my blood."

"So you love the old place too, eh?"

I told him I felt right at home there. I asked him to let me stay on, to convince my Dad that I didn't need any more education. It was pathetically easy to persuade him.

"Well, all right, George, if that's what you really want to do.

And you've made your grandfather very happy by falling in love with his old bank. It's been a family enterprise ever since I was a young man. I have great hopes for you, lad. Yes, great hopes."

In the next ten years, I went up and up - to a vice president's chair. But my itching, unsatisfied fingers were going right down into the bank's coffers.

At twenty-six, I was in complete charge of the small loans department and I had hit upon a beautiful system of staggering the books to cover up my weekly thefts. It was a very simple system. I just worked harder than anybody else. And I worked longer hours.

My whole system depended upon my spending every Saturday afternoon at the bank. When I was there alone, in the restful quietness of those silent vaults, surrounded by all the beautiful green money, I could attend to the details of my system with no fear of interruption. Alone, I juggled the books expertly, and on Monday morning, I was ready for business again.

Usually I spent Saturday morning at the race track with the Old Man. But in the afternoon, no matter how hard the Old Man coaxed me to stay out there with him, George P. McArthur, Vice

President in charge of loans, had to report back to the bank. Naturally, the Old Man continued to be impressed with my industry.

I was no miser, content to line my bedroom closet with dollar bills. I invested in some property. I bought a church out on Long Island and turned it into a racing stable. After two or three years, the racing stable bored me, and I sold it at a handsome profit.

Then I went in for ice-boating on the Hudson. I needed danger as a safety valve for my pent-up nervous tension.

Embezzling money from a bank - even if it is all in the family - isn't conducive to unbroken sleep at night. The whole thing made me as nervous as a new bookkeeper looking for a penny error. But I couldn't stop. I didn't need the money any more, but I couldn't stop. So I took up ice-boating.

Every Saturday morning in the winter, I sailed up the Hudson - flirting with the Palisades, saluting Tarrytown, pioneering as far as Nyack. But Saturday afternoon found me at the bank, expertly camouflaging my take for the week. So the weeks went by, and life was very pleasant. The Old Man was happy, and so was I.

Things might have gone on this way indefinitely, because I was a cautious thief and a clever camouflage artist.

But one clear, cold Saturday morning when I was thirty-six, I was skimming the sleek smoothness of the frozen Hudson when abruptly the iceboat hit rough ice. I swung her to the left, but the rough ice jolted her back. I twisted to the right, and the last thing I heard was the agonizing shouts of my friends on the river bank.

When I came to, I was in a hospital and a strange doctor was giving orders to a nurse. "All right, nurse. Anesthesia."

I struggled to sit up. I pushed the pain away. They couldn't keep me in that hospital. It was Saturday noon!

"No, no, doctor! Not yet," I mumbled, trying to shout. Through a fog of pain, I heard the doctor's voice. "Broken your leg in three places . . . can't walk, man . . . come on . . . lie back . . . relax."

"Have to go - to work this afternoon."

"Anesthesia," I heard the doctor repeat. "Breathe deeply." "Got to get to the bank." A stack of ledger books rose up out of the fog and moved in toward me, blotting out everything with their blackness. I tried to scream, but it was only a murmur. "I've got - to - get to the bank . . ."

For the next forty-eight hours, my conscious thoughts were as shattered as my leg. I woke and slept, dreamed and woke, tried to knit my thoughts into a coherent whole, and slept again. Finally, sometime on Monday morning, the doctor walked into my room.

"How's my patient today?" he said inanely.

"Good. Leg doesn't feel too bad. When can you have me out of here?"

The doctor leaned against the dresser on the other side of the room and smiled across at me as if I were a disobedient child. "Can't you think about anything but leaving the hospital, McArthur? Why, Saturday you gave us a pretty rough time . . ."

"I'm a busy man. Bankers don't take time off."

"I think your bank will give you a little time off." The ridiculous smile on his face was an attempt, I suppose, to calm me down. "If there's anything about business that needs attention, your grandfather can take care of -"

"No!"

"Fact is, he's waiting outside right now."

The bleak hospital walls stared at me with all the comfortlessness of a prison cell. I heard the doctor say, "He's been very anxious to see you."

"Tell him - tell him I don't feel like seeing - anybody.

I . . ."

But the door to the boxlike hospital room was opening. My grandfather strode in. "I've waited two days, George. Doctor, I'd prefer to speak to my grandson alone."

The door closed behind the doctor. My grandfather sat down.

When he spoke, he was an old, tired man. "What you need, George, only GOD can give you, if what they say about GOD is true."

I tried to be casual. "What do you mean, Gramps? The leg is fine. Give me a couple of days and . . . "

"We know, George. We know." There was heartbreak in his voice, and it got through to me. "We know you've taken at least thirty thousand dollars from the bank, and maybe more. No, we're not going to prosecute you, George. Your father and your uncles and myself have too much pride in the name of McArthur."

I tried to say something, but the words were a sob. After all, there was nothing to say. But the Old Man had a few words more. He walked across the hospital room and stood at the door. He looked as if he had been ill for a long time, but his clear eyes were reading me as sharply as they had ever read a stock report. "Just as soon as you're able to be up and around, we're shipping you out of the state of New York - for good. No need to cry. We've already covered the thirty thousand. No one will know. Well, you've made an old man out of me at last, son."

He laughed, but there was nothing but bitterness in it. "I was so proud of you. But you've made

an old man out of me for sure. And I never want to lay eyes on you again."

When I left the hospital, I went directly to Chicago. To a New Yorker, it seemed as if Chicago could be the frontier of a new beginning. Everything I had, I left behind - friends, family, money. The only thing I had left was a kind of weary relief at getting off free after almost twenty years of habitual theft. But except for the relief, there was nothing but emptiness. I felt hollow with it.

In Chicago, I landed an acceptable job as assistant cashier for the Pullman Palace Car Company. I put in eight honest hours a day and gave them all the benefit of my skill with figures. I didn't take a penny from the Pullman Company. After all, I was no common thief.

But the emptiness haunted me. It was a hollow that had to be filled somehow, with something. Liquor seemed like a logical filler.

For twenty years, I'd been a social drinker. Now I upped my quota of expensive brandies and whiskies. For short spaces of time, I was able to chase away the emptiness. But after a while, it took more liquor to do the job, and eventually, a cheaper brand.

Finally, I was fired at the Pullman Company.

Not for mishandling funds. I was completely honest - an honest drunk who couldn't be relied on to keep the books straight on Monday morning, and sometimes Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning as well.

Jobless again, rejected again, and broke, I wandered down to Chicago's Skid Row one afternoon that summer, just after the World's Fair of 1893 had closed. I was looking for any kind of small change that would buy any kind of liquor, just so it had alcohol in it. I walked up to a pleasant-looking chap. "Excuse me, mister, could you spare a few cents? I'm temporarily out of funds."

"When a man gets thirsty, he really gets thirsty, doesn't he?" I hadn't expected this kind of understanding.

"Be nice if you could get that thirst quenched once and for all, wouldn't it?" the pleasant-faced man said pleasantly.

"Yeah. Provided I stopped thinking too," I said, without intending to.

"Drinking to forget somebody?"

"No." Now I wanted him to shut up and move on. He persisted. "Something? Out of your past?"

"None of your business," I snarled. "You going to give me the price of a drink or not?"

"No sir, I'm not. I care too much about you to buy you a drink that'll be gone in two seconds and leave your tongue hanging out for more. The drink you need was paid for a long time ago. And when you drink it, you'll never get thirsty again. Here - read this."

He shoved some kind of printed card under my nose and pointed to some lines. Against my

better judgment, I took the card and read out loud, "**If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink**." Now what kind of a nut was this?

He went right on. "Wait a minute. Be man enough to give that some serious thought before you throw the card away. The place where you can get that thirst of yours quenched once and for all is right there on the little card. See the address?"

I stepped back but I read it hurriedly. "The Pacific Garden Mission!" This guy thought I was a bum! "I'm just temporarily out of funds, sir, and I . . ."

"You need this drink of Living Water, friend. No matter who you are. And incidentally, if you want to talk some more to me, you can find me at the YMCA down on the corner."

"YMCA, huh? What's your name?" "Sunday. Billy Sunday."

I stood there staring after Sunday as he swung down the street. Nobody could miss the spring in that step. I'd watched Billy Sunday play ball in New York dozens of times. He was famous. Then I remembered reading in the sports pages that he'd gone religious and quit baseball altogether. He was a real fanatic, I was sure, but I stood there on Van Buren Street and watched him until he was out of sight.

I wanted to curse him for handing me a mission card with a Scripture verse when what I needed was a drink. I started down the street, heading nowhere, still feeling empty and hollow - and thirsty. I was still holding the card he had given me, feeling around with the edge of it just to have something to do with my nervous, twitching hands.

I tore off a little and began chewing on it. I went down the street, chewing on that card, ashamed, lonesome, and tired. I was forty-five years old but I felt older - older than the Old Man.

But I didn't want to think about him. I didn't want to think about anything, and then suddenly, music - good, happy music - washed out over my numb mind and over the stink of Skid Row. It was coming from an open door - the door of a mission. It was the Pacific Garden Mission, and I looked down at the half-chewed-up card Billy Sunday had handed me and I saw that I had wandered to the place he had asked me to go to!

But I wasn't going to walk into a mission service like some man off the streets. I was no bum! Yet this was more than coincidence. I knew I had to go in. I walked through the door, asked for the superintendent's office, walked up, and knocked on the office door. A woman's voice told me to come in.

In the office, a little woman with a sweet face introduced herself as Mother Clarke and told me that her husband had been superintendent of the mission until his death. Sitting across the desk from her, I began to relax and found myself talking like I hadn't talked to anybody, ever. I told her about my childhood, my family, the Old Man, and working for the bank for twenty years.

She looked up at me and said softly, "Isn't there something from which you shy away in your memory, Mr. McArthur?"

There was no use pretending with this woman. Quietly she listened to what I told her. Then she said, "And you drink to forget this, don't you? Tell me, Mr. McArthur, does a drink of whiskey make you forget it?"

"It helps. For a while. But I get thirsty again."

There was a Bible on her desk, and she moved her hand toward it, yet she didn't touch it. "Mr. McArthur, GOD created us with free wills. We're not puppets in the hands of GOD. We're men and women created in His image, with intelligence and conscience which He means us to use. He built moral laws right into the universe. We can't break them. But we can break ourselves over them. And when we do - by ignoring them, joking about them, or saying, 'Let bygones be bygones' - that won't relieve us of our guilt."

Now she was preaching to me. But it made sense.

"Mr. McArthur, GOD mercifully hedges us in on all sides when we sin against Him."

"Mercifully!" I thought of the empty, hollow years.

"Those thorny hedges by which GOD hems us in are merciful, because they are GOD seeing to it that we are not comfortable while we do evil. Guilt is a great blessing. It brings a human soul to the only place it can find freedom from sin - at the foot of the cross of JESUS CHRIST. He can wipe out your guilt, Mr. McArthur."

There was an unreality about my being in this place, letting a sweet-faced woman preach religion to me. But I had no desire to stand up and walk away. "Is this true?" I asked.

"JESUS of Nazareth was either all He claimed to be - the Lamb of GOD who taketh away the sin and the guilt of the world - or He was the biggest fraud the world has ever known! Do you honestly think CHRIST is a - fraud, Mr. McArthur?"

"No." I said it hesitantly.

"And if you'll just believe in Him, He will bring you into perfect peace. He died to wipe out your sin and your guilt."

The music downstairs was beginning again.

I remembered how it had stopped me on the sidewalk and I realized that it was a hymn I'd heard years ago. "That hymn - the one they were singing before - there was something in it about guilt, I think."

Mother Clarke nodded. "There is a fountain filled with blood - drawn from Immanuel's veins . . ."

Across the years - the rotten years, the empty years - the words came to me out of nowhere. "And sinners plunged beneath that flood -lose all their guilty stains."

"Do you believe it, Mr. McArthur?"

And I sat there and knew that I did believe it. I felt the emptiness easing. I was being filled by a feeling of peace, a feeling of being forgiven and accepted.

"It's all right now," I tried to tell her. "For the first time, I feel - forgiven - for everything. The Old Man was right. He said - that day when he found out - he said what I needed only GOD could give me, if what they say about GOD is true. Now I have it."

The woman and I looked at each other across the desk, and the hymn from downstairs filled the room. My only regret was that it was too late to tell the Old Man that what they say about GOD was true!

I was just forty-five the night that I found JESUS CHRIST at the Pacific Garden Mission. Now I looked back over my life with new eyes. Instead of seeing only crime and dishonesty, I could see twenty-six years of experience in banking and a variety of financial matters. My taste for fine liquor and my lost weekends could be the foundation of a sympathetic understanding for other humans caught in the same mess. This was my life. It was all I had. I could only trust GOD to use what it was, somehow.

He did, in a most logical way, for in the forty years left to me He again entrusted me with money - as financial manager of an organization whose every operation I could believe in and work for - the Evansville Rescue Mission of Evansville, Indiana!

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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