

Chapter 25

Those new rooms we had in the big house with the Norwegian families, oh, I used to love them. They were so light and big with the high, high ceilings; I just loved them. But then one day a high-educated man came there, Dr. Taylor, and he wanted to rent the whole building to make something. So the boss came and he told all the families that we had to move. He said we could stay one month with the free rent, but after that we must be out, because there was going to be some kind of big home there.

Everybody was telling a different story: some people said it was going to be a hospital; some said it was going to be a home for girls; some said it was going to be a home for the orphan children. Nobody knew what it was. The boss didn't know-nobody knew. But they said it was going to be something good for the people. Dr. Taylor, he told the boss that something good was coming. He said it was going to be a good home to teach the poor people good things. But whatever was coming, we had to get out anyway.

Me, I was so sorry to leave that house, and I didn't know where to go. I couldn't find no more good rooms, because nobody would rent to Italians. I was staying there till the one month was gone. Then I had to go someplace. I had to go in a basement about one block away [end page 219] next to a factory. That factory, I don't know what it was, but they were melting all the waste from the tin-the scraps of tin they brought there and melted. They had so much fire in that factory that when the wind was one way, all the hot cinders came down on

the sidewalk and the children scalded their feet-those cinders all the time burned the children's feet. I was so sorry that I had to live in that basement! I used to take my children and go back and watch those carpenters working on our old home. I thought maybe we could get our old rooms back again. But even before the carpenters got through the work, the people started to move into that building. They were all high-up people, dressed up nice. Me, I was even mad with them that they made us poor people get out. I was crying-I had no more the nice light rooms to live in.

Then one night after a while it rained hard. My poor rooms had one foot of water in. The baby's cradle was swimming around, and that basket of clothes I used to wash, it was swimming around too. We were all the night up from the scare. My husband was throwing the water out with a shovel and sweeping it out with a broom. When morning came I went by our old house and I was standing by the door crying and angry. A nice lady, a nice young girl, came out and said, "Why are you here, lady? Why are you crying?"

I said, "It's you people-on account of you people I had to get out from this home! And now come and see where I live! Last night I was drowned with the water, me and my children! "

That young lady felt so sorry. She came along and saw my house. And still my husband was shoveling the water out. She said, "Oh, I'm very sorry! Very sorry! I'm going to go right away and look for a house for you."

And she did. She went and she found a house and paid the rent and sent the wagon. She had to pay the rent ahead of time, because it was such a poor time

nobody had any money. Before six o'clock in the evening I was in the new home.

It was three nice little rooms in the front on the first floor of a wooden house. (They made the bridge there now for the railroad. They tore down those houses when they made the railroad.) So we were in that nice little house. And as soon as I could I collected all the little money I had and paid back the lady [end page 220] all the rent and the express she had to pay for me. Then I was nice and happy.

That lady-she wore a nice red blouse-she got a little work for me in the new settlement house. I started to wash the clothes for the residents and cleaned around the building and helped the cook-anything they told me. But when I first started that job-scrubbing the floors in the Commons-I was still so afraid of the teachers. And one day, I didn't see it, but a hole in my apron caught hold of one of those iron curls on a big lamp that was standing on the floor and that lamp fell over. I heard the crash and I looked around and when I saw that beautiful pink glass lamp shade in a million pieces on the floor I fell over in a faint. I thought I would be put in jail! I thought I would be killed! Miss May and one other teacher, they came running in to see what had happened. When they saw me there on the floor without my senses they woke me up and carried me into the kitchen and made me drink hot tea with sugar in it. "Rosa! Rosa!" they said. "Where are you hurt? Where did it hit you?" And when they learned that I had only fainted from scare because I had broken the pink glass lamp they started to laugh. "But Rosa," they said, "you did a good thing! That lamp was terrible! Somebody gave it to us, so we had to keep it. But now it's gone and we won't

ever have to see it again. You did good! We're glad it's broken!"

Think of those angel women! They didn't scold me or anything. They were giving me hot tea with sugar in it and patting my shoulder and telling me they were glad. How can I not love America! In the old country I would have been killed for breaking a lamp like that!

So after that time of the pink glass lamp I said to myself, "Oh, I hope I do my work good so I never have to leave this place! I'm never going to leave!" And I truly never did. Forty or fifty years I've been scrubbing the floors, cleaning the rooms, doing the cooking, and telling the stories in the Commons. I grew old with that building. I love it like another home. I know every board in the floors, and I think those little boards know me too. Now I am old, I only have the little job to do the cooking when the regular cook is off. But even if they didn't pay me I would not want to stop working in the Commons. Never! [end page 221]

In that time us poor women, we didn't have any pleasures-no movies, no shows, no this, no that. And so many drunken men there were! Some men-those Toscani on Franklin Street and Gionin-on Sundays they used to play boccie. They'd throw the wood balls in the alley, and they'd play cheese too. They had that forma, the Italian cheese, and they'd throw that. They all went together to buy it, but the one that threw hardest, he won the cheese. But the alley was too dirty; when they had the cheese, they'd go far away where there was the clean road or some green grass.

Those swill boxes in the alley used to stay so packed full that the covers were

all the time standing up. Oh my, oh mercy! It was stinking so the poor little children were holding their noses when they ran back the alley to come home. Inside those boxes the wood was all rotten and juicy. One whole box of garbage was nothing but white worms. After the wagon passed to shovel the box out-they weren't careful how it was falling-all the alley was full of white worms. The children, they didn't like those worms! They used to pick up stones and tin cans to throw at them. They couldn't stand it when they squashed them with the bare feet. That garbage was terrible, terrible! I don't know why everybody in Chicago didn't die.

Rushing-the-can like the men, that's all the pleasure the poor women had in that time. In the summer when it was so hot you couldn't stay in those buildings, the women and the boys and girls and babies were sitting down in the street and alley. All the women would bring down their chairs and sit on the sidewalk. Then somebody would say, "All the women put two cents and we'll get the beer." So everybody did and the children would run by the saloon and get the can of beer. The saloon had ice and they kept that beer ice cold. So the women, and children too, were drinking beer to get cool. Nobody but the saloon had ice in that time. That's all the pleasure we had-the cool from the beer in summer. Even when we started the club in the settlement, the women in the alley were drinking beer. After not long, one lady from the settlement house-she was American but she could talk German too-she asked me if I wanted to go round the neighborhood with her and ask all the women to come and start the woman's club. Those women didn't know what it was, [end page 222] but they wanted to come anyway. Oh, I remember

there was one lady-everybody knew her-she was tall, tall, about six and a half feet, with red hair. She was really a lamp post on the street. That woman, for one dime she would choke the Devil, so stingy she was for the money. And bad! Everybody was scared of that lady. She had the saloon and she was getting drunk herself, and she was swearing terrible and chasing the children. She fought with everybody. Mis' Reuter, she said to me, "We're going in the saloon and ask that lady."

"Sure not, Mis' Reuter!" I said. "If she comes in the club the other women won't-they'd be too scared."

But Mis' Reuter, I guess she went sometime when I didn't know it and asked that lady anyway, because one day here she was in the club. The other women were saying, "She's in our club? She's coming in our club? What are we going to do?" That lady, in two or three weeks, she changed from a devil to a lamb-honest to goodness! She got good. When it was her turn she was the first one to go and wash the dishes and make the coffee. And she was talking nice to the women to make them laugh, so they would like her. She got to be the best one of all. And when she moved to California the woman's club were so sorry they gave her a big well-fare party. And some were even crying. (What was that lady? I guess she was Irish or German. I remember her name, but I won't tell it. I'll leave it to the people to find out if they want to know who she was.)

In the first beginning we always came in the club and made two circles in the room. One circle was for those ladies who could talk English and the other circle was for the ladies who talked German. Mis' Reuter talked German to the

German ladies, and Miss Gray talked English to the other ladies. But I guess they both did the same preaching. They used to tell us that it's not nice to drink the beer, and we must not let the baby do this, and this. Me, I was the only Italian woman-where were they going to put me? I couldn't talk German, so I went in the English circle. So after we had about an hour, or an hour and a half of the preaching, they would pull up the circle and we'd play the games together. All together we played the games-the Norwegian, the German, the English, and me. Then we'd have some cake and coffee and the goodnight song.

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One nice lady, Miss Chase, she used to teach the girls and the women to sew. Some young girls were ready to get married and they had never held a needle before. And Miss Chase, she'd teach them to make their own wedding dress. She was teaching me to sew too. She was a wonderful lady, Miss Chase, but she died after one year.

Oh, I have to tell you about the two gray hoods I made my Maria and my Visella from somebody's thrown-away underskirt. I found that old petticoat in the trash, all holes and torn, but it was wool and warm. All the other children in the sisters' school were Irish. They used to laugh at my two little girls and call them "spaghetti." When those other children laughed at those hoods, Visella used to carry hers by the string behind her. Gionin, he couldn't stand it to see those little girls crying because they had to wear those funny hoods, summer and winter-they had nothing else. So one day-he said nothing to me so I wouldn't stop him-he walked downtown to the Boston Store and he came home with two little

red-and-black knit caps. He said he got them very cheap. Those little girls were just crazy with joy to have the really caps! I had stitched up those two hoods any which way so the cloth stayed on their heads. But after Miss Chase started teaching me, I made nice little dresses-well not so nice with all old cloth, but they were not so funny anyway.

Pretty soon they started the classes to teach us poor people to talk and write in English. The talk of the people in the settlement house was different entirely than what I used to hear. I used to love those American people, and I was listening and listening how they talked. That's how I learned to talk such good English. Oh, I was glad when I learned enough English to go by the priest in the Irish church and confess myself and make the priest understand what was the sin! But I never learned to do the writing in English. I all the time used to come to that class so tired and so sleepy after scrubbing and washing the whole day-I went to sleep when they started the writing. I couldn't learn it. They had the clubs for the children too; my little girls loved to go. And after a few years when they started the kindergarten, my Luie was one of the first children to go in.

That big and old building where Chicago Commons was in the [end page 224] beginning was all full of rats-three pounds, five pounds, I don't know how many pounds to make those rats, but they were big! The residents used to wait in line by the bathroom door, and when somebody didn't come out and didn't come out, they'd push open the door, and there it was the rats playing tag with themselves. And when the residents were all sitting down eating dinner, those

rats chased between their legs. And sometimes in the morning the dining-room girls came down and found big holes in the tablecloth. Those rats ate up all the places where the grease spilled! So Dr. Taylor begged the money to build a new building. He made it about six blocks away on the corner of Grand Avenue and Morgan Street. And me, I was the one to go in that new building and light the first match in the stove. I cleaned the kitchen the first one in the new Chicago Commons! In those first years the settlement house didn't have enough money to tell me to come every day. They were poor in that time. The residents-men and girls both-were going in the kitchen and washing the dishes themselves. Each one had something else for a paying job. They did the janitor work and everything like that free. Just once a week I was going there to do the heavy scrubbing and the washing.

Well then Dr. Taylor asked me if I wanted to go there in the old building and watch all the plumbing. The bathtub and all those plumbing things belonged to Chicago Commons and he was afraid somebody would steal them, so he wanted one family to live in there and watch. I said, "Well, I have to ask my husband." He said, "You have to answer quick, because I want someone to be in that building."

So I told my husband and he was glad. He said, "Sure, we're going to go and pay no rent. It's good to pay no rent for a few months."

I said, "But I'm afraid. I don't feel like going."

He said, "Oh why do you want to be afraid? There's nothing to be afraid of. You go tell Dr. Taylor we're going to move in there."

Me, I was brokenhearted because I didn't feel like going. I ran by the Madonna Addolorata in the Irish church and I prayed. I said, "O Madonna, I feel so unhappy to go in that house! You put it in my mind if I should go or not go." Then I said a prayer. When I got up I felt in my heart, "No, don't go! [end page 225]

So I went right away back to Dr. Taylor and I said, "No, Dr. Taylor. We don't go, because I'm afraid in a big house like that."

He said, "All right. When you're afraid, don't go."

When I came home and told my husband he was mad! He said, "Why did you tell him that? We want to go! Why not? Why you are afraid? We're going to go! "

I said, "No. You can go yourself, but I won't go there!

Dr. Taylor put boards up to all the windows and he left that old house there alone in the middle of the lumber yard. And then it came one day after a week or two (I don't remember just how long, but just a short time) and an old man came by in a wagon. And nobody knew why that old man said what he did. He said, "I'll not give five cents for all the houses on this street! " (I guess he saw a little fire that started in the lumber yard, or something.) Just after he passed there exploded a great big fire. And there the old Chicago Commons went up in the air! If I had been there with my children we could not say "Jesus-Mary-Joseph," we'd have been killed so quick! The wind picked up that fire and it spread all down the street. All the lumber from the lumber yard, the wind picked it up in big chunks and it came down on our roofs all blazing-all fire. Those banana wagons full of hay in our alley, they caught on fire. My

husband had his bananas in the basement, so they didn't burn, but all the swill boxes caught fire and the boards on the sidewalk. Everybody was carrying water and wetting the roof.

One lady, the boss of our house, she raised up her two hands and she hollered, "Oh, Sant' Antoni, help us! Help us! " She saw that fire coming. It was terrible. And just when she hollered like that the wind changed and went the other way! Sant' Antoni is the protector of fire. You can ask anybody that was in the Commons then and they will tell you too: that wind just changed around. Maybe it was not Sant' Antoni; but why did it change like that? The wind it turned around and it burned four blocks the other way. But all the houses by us caught on fire anyway.

My husband wasn't there when the fire exploded; he was downtown to send the ticket for his brother in Italia to come to America. But he heard down there that there was a terrible fire, and he right [end page 226] away came home. He had his wagon with the horse on and grabbed up some clothes and some quilts and trash from the bed. Then he took us and went out to the end of Indiana Street-a little further than Western Avenue. It was all prairie there then-all country.

So me and the children were in that prairie, and my husband went back to look after the house. Our house, the carpenter had just made the new roof on, and it didn't catch fire. It had all that resina still in.

Me, I had a five-dollar gold piece I had saved. I had hidden it and I didn't tell my husband. And there I forgot it and left it in that house! Gionin came back ten o'clock night. He said, "Our house is saved. We can go back."

I said, "Oh, then I have my gold piece safe!"

He said, "You have the gold piece? You hid it from your husband, huh? See, that's what you get!" But he was glad too. He was a good man, Mr. Cavalleri. He was good to me. He didn't do nothing. Me, I didn't care for the house or nothing-I was only thinking of my gold piece!

We went back so happy and started eating the soup that was on the stove. There we had run away and left all the doors open and the soup on the stove. (I had the gasoline stove that time, I remember.) But I had the faith our house wouldn't burn, because I had prayed Sant' Antoni too.

I don't have to say it. You can guess yourself that the Madonna made a great miracle to save me and my children from the dead! My husband, probably he wouldn't have died because he was downtown sending the money to his brother; but me and my children died for sure if we'd been in that old Chicago Commons. It was some big boiler in the meat market next door that exploded.

That night the old settlement house burned those ladies from the new building didn't eat their supper-nothing-they were all watching. And after the fire they came over and picked up some little pieces of burnt wood. They said, "Sure, I recognize! It's a piece of my bedroom-it's a piece of the decoration!" They were so sad-they saved even those little pieces to remember. [end page 227]