Super Sister: Aimee Semple McPherson (2011)

By Richard Rice

This article by the historian Richard B. Rice introduces you to one of the most famous–and most notorious–Californians of the first half of the twentieth century.

In the late 1920s Carl Sandburg made the observation that, "God once took the country by Maine as the handle, gave it a good shake, and all the loose nuts and bolts rolled down to south- ern California."[1] Many Americans probably shared this view, regarding Los Angeles in particular as a haven for faddists, fanatics, and fakes. The scene of sometimes scandalous Hollywood goings-on and a refuge for countless religious cults, the city has had more than its fair share of flamboyant personalities, but few can compare with Aimee Semple McPherson, evangelist supreme. From her arrival in Los Angeles in 1918 to her death in 1944, "Sister Aimee" preached her novel brand of religious revivalism to literally millions and had a remarkable impact on the city. Mrs. McPherson made the front pages of the major Los Angeles newspapers on an average of three times a week for nearly ten years, and appeared almost as frequently in the rest of the nation's press.[2] One columnist called her "the most original, exciting, and newsworthy space-getter in the land. " Aimee's experiences in Los Angeles also tell us a great deal about the people of Los Angeles and the times.

After years of traveling the country as an itinerant revivalist preacher, Aimee Semple McPherson arrived in Los Angeles in December 1918 with her mother and two children and, she enjoyed saying later, "one hundred dollars and a tambourine." From these humble beginnings she managed, in the next five years, to build a huge 5,300-seat temple, organize her own Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and found the first religious radio station in the United Slates. She attracted a congregation of 10,000, estimated to be the largest in the world, and established branch churches, called "Lighthouses," all over the country and overseas. Her congregation was organized into departments that provided music, players for dramatizations of her sermons, community services of all kinds, and missionaries who spread the Foursquare Gospel throughout the world.

"Sister," as she was known to her followers, became a major influence in the life of the city. She had a shrewd instinct for publicity and adopted attention-getting methods, such as scattering leaflets announcing her services from an airplane. Her sermons were vaudeville-style theatrical productions, sneered at by her critics as "supernatural whoopee." But even her detractors had to agree that she put on "the best show in town." An honorary member of the police department, honorary battalion chief of the fire department, and member of the Chamber of Commerce, she was constantly in the news. Then, one day in May 1926, Aimee Semple McPherson disappeared.

During that spring the thirty-five-year-old Aimee had begun regular excursions to swim at Ocean Park beach.[3] On May 18, accompanied by her secretary Emma Schaffer, she drove to the shore, changed clothes at the hotel where she kept a room, rented an umbrella tent, and splashed into the Pacific, having sent the timid, tight-lipped Emma on an errand. On returning, Emma waited nearly an hour for Mrs. McPherson to come in from the sea. At last, thoroughly frightened, she called Aimee's mother to report her daughter's disappearance. By nightfall the news had flashed through the city. Newspaper "extras" blanketed the area, Aimee's mother publicly announced her daughter had drowned, and thousands crowded Angelus Temple and Ocean Park beach in a state of shock. For the next three days "Sister's" faithful followers, joined by droves of curious onlookers, watched and prayed while police, lifeguards, and divers sought the evangelist's body, and searching airplanes flew back and forth over the ocean.

Who was this person who could create such a commotion? One of Aimee Semple McPherson's favorite sermons was "The Story of My Life," and she told it with a riveting eloquence that always held her audiences spellbound. Born on October 9, 1890, on a farm in Ontario, Canada, she was the daughter of Mildred and James Kennedy. Her mother, eventually known to millions as Minnie or "Ma Kennedy," had long been active in the Salvation Army and dedicated Aimee to that cause.[4] The child demonstrated a strong will, a flair for the dramatic, and unusual leadership qualities. When teased at school one day about her Salvation Army background, she quickly took charge of the situation and soon had the other children following her around the schoolyard in a Salvation Army parade. A natural actress, she loved to be the center of attention and delighted in starring roles in school plays.

As a teenager, Aimee's interest in dancing, movies, and ragtime music brought her into conflict with her mother. Minnie's world had no place for such frivolities, and many a stormy scene resulted. James Kennedy, some thirty years older than his wife, was more

[1] Carl Sandburg was a popular author and poet in the early 20th century

[2] Revivalism is a style of Christianity based on the idea that people can have a profound moment of awakening that "reboots" their relationship with God and also their lives.

[3] Ocean Park beach is in Santa Monica, near the Santa Monica Pier.

[4] The Salvation Army is a Christian charity that helps poor people; it still exists today.

tolerant, but the domineering Minnie usually prevailed. When a new Pentecostal mission came to town and the seventeen-year-old Aimee expressed an interest in attending its meetings, her mother would not allow it. Minnie frowned on speaking in tongues and other physical manifestations of the power of the Spirit, the hallmark of the Pentecostalists. "Shouters" and "Holy Rollers," she called them. But Aimee persuaded her father to take her to the mission, and on her first visit she was captivated by the handsome preacher.

Robert Semple, a tall, dark-haired young man with intense blue eyes, had a dramatic style that held enormous attraction for Aimee. She began sneaking away from school to attend his meetings and one day "fell under the Power" in an exciting conversion experience. Before long she realized that she was in love with Robert, and he with her. After a brief courtship they were married in the summer of 1908 and lived for a short time in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. Although they were poor, Aimee was supremely happy. She adored Robert, reveled in her position as the preacher's wife, and perhaps for the only time in her life willingly submitted to the will of another. Robert spoke often of going to China as an evangelist, and Aimee shared his enthusiasm. In 1910, after several months of work as evangelists in Chicago missions, they financed their voyage to Hong Kong through collections taken at farewell meetings with Robert's parishioners. But the excitement and novelty of missionary work among the Chinese soon turned to disaster. Within a year Robert felt critically ill, probably of typhoid fever, and died soon afterward, leaving Aimee alone in Hong Kong, penniless and pregnant. A month after Robert's death she gave birth to a daughter, Roberta, and six weeks later, in January 1911, Aimee and her baby were on their way back to America.

Lonely and dispirited, she drifted aimlessly until she married Harold McPherson, a grocery clerk. This marriage, which she later admitted had been an effort to provide a home for Roberta, was not a happy one, and Aimee became seriously depressed. Even the birth of a son, Rolf Kennedy McPherson, failed to revive her spirits. Her condition worsened until she found herself near death following an operation. At this point, she was fond of telling her audiences, she heard a nurse say, "She's going," and then God called her to go out and "preach the Word."

Just before losing consciousness, as I hovered between life and death, came the voice of my Lord, so loud that it startled me: "Now-will-you-go?" And I knew it was "Go," one way or the other. And with my little remaining strength, I managed to gasp: "Yes-Lord-I'll-go."

Then "the Lord poured such strength into me that within a few days I was able to be up and go home." Within a short time she was on her way to Canada, leaving McPherson behind. Aimee joined her parents in Canada in the summer of 1915 and spent the next few months attending a Pentecostal camp meeting nearby. One day, when asked to preach at Mount Forest, a small local town, she set out to conduct the first revival meeting of her new career. Despite the eagerness with which Aimee prepared her first sermon, she found herself facing only a handful of people and a great many empty chairs. When the next night brought the same scant audience, she set out to fill the hall. Picking up a chair, she strode down the main street to the center of town, put her chair down, and stood on it. Arms outstretched, eyes closed, and standing motionless, she began to pray. Curious passersby stopped and stared at her, and soon a crowd gathered. All at once Aimee snapped open her eyes, jumped down, and shouted, "Quick! Follow me!" Snatching up her chair, she raced back to the meeting hall and through the doors with the crowd at her heels. "Shut the doors; don't let anyone out," she ordered the ushers and launched into her sermon. The crowd loved it. "From that day to this," she would later tell her congregations, ''I've always preached to crowds."

With her first "offering," as she called the money collected at her meetings, she bought a tent and went from town to town holding revival meetings. As her career progressed she bought bigger tents to hold hundreds of people, and a touring car on which she painted, "Jesus Is Coming Soon-Get Ready" and "Where Will You Spend Eternity?" Traveling from New York to Florida and back, she preached to white and Black parishioners, often together. She became an expert at pitching tents in the wind, driving stakes with a heavy maul. She founded a small religious magazine, *The Bridal Call*, and sold subscriptions at her meetings, forming a network of helpers wherever she went. In the face of frequent harassment she preached a message of love and joy, and she always preached to crowds.

Harold McPherson joined Aimee for a time as her business manager, but detested the itinerant life. They separated again in 1917 and were divorced in 1921, but without Harold a notorious lack of business sense was nearly Aimee's undoing. She collected large sums of money at her meetings but could never seem to manage them. At last she turned to her mother for help, forming a stormy partnership that took them both to the pinnacle of success. Minnie Kennedy joined the caravan in Florida in the winter of 1917 and soon had their financial affairs in order. Aimee had proved she could bring in a great deal of money; blessed with a fine instinct for business, Minnie proved they could hang on to it.

In 1918 the caravan traveled north again, and in New York little Roberta was stricken with the deadly influenza that was then sweeping the country.[5] Frightened by the near loss of her daughter, Aimee decided to take her family west to a more healthful climate. She headed for Los Angeles in a large touring car with her mother, the two children, and a woman companion. Aimee, who did the driving, probably was the first woman to drive across the United States, a considerable accomplishment in an era when roads were likely to be horse-and-buggy trails, often flooded, or almost nonexistent and tires were in constant need of repair. Towns were few and far between, and at times they crossed vast empty stretches with the aid of a compass. Often they had to clear boulders and fallen trees from the road in order to pass. Sometimes in mud to the hubcaps, sometimes in snow, the three women and two children made their lonely way from New York through the southwest to California, holding revival meetings in the towns and camping out between settlements. Through it all Aimee remained cheerfully undaunted, a pillar of strength to her family. It was an experience many of her followers could identify with, and they never tired of hearing her tell it in her dramatic way.

Aimee and her family arrived in Los Angeles shortly before Christmas, 1918. Already famous, she was immediately invited to preach to a local congregation. Aimee had recognized that people were tired of the Calvinist style of preaching and of being told they were damned and destined for hell, so instead adopted an affectionate, anecdotal style, preaching an emotional, charismatic revivalism that emphasized love and hope. Aware that her followers longed for a cheerful, positive religion she would say, "Who cares about old Hell, friends? Let's forget about Hell. Lift up your hearts. What we are interested in, yes Lord,

[5] The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-19 left millions of Americans dead.

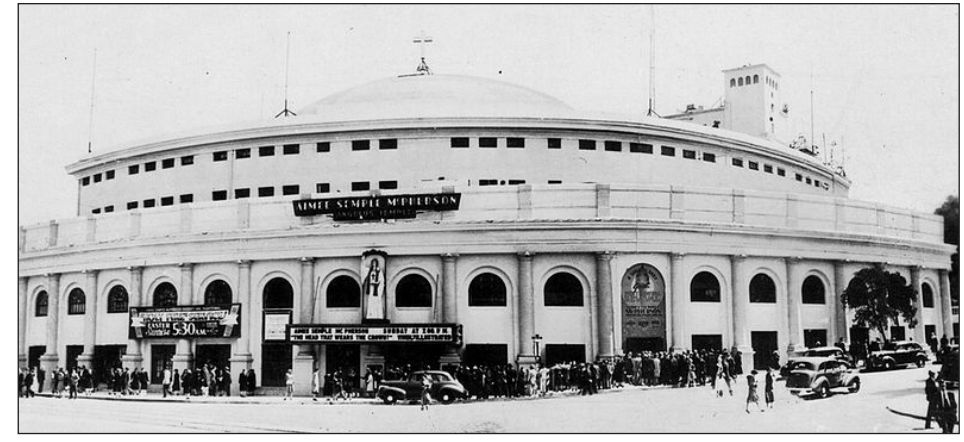
is Heaven and how to get there." As one writer later commented, "Calvin must have turned over in his grave."[6]

Aimee achieved instantaneous success in Los Angeles, and she shrewdly observed that it could last. A steady stream of God-fearing Midwesterners flowing into southern California promised her a constantly growing audience, and she decided to put down roots. By 1921 she had such a large and devoted Los Angeles following that when she mentioned wistfully in her sermons her family's need for a home, they quickly volunteered to build her one. "The house that God built," as Aimee called it, was her first piece of property, and it made her aware that if she wanted anything, all she had to do was ask for it.

From 1916 to 1921, Aimee became famous for her successful faith-healing. She never claimed credit for her astonishing cures, however, saying her followers were cured by Christ through their own faith. Always a secondary part of her service, healing nevertheless stole the show when she held a revival in San Diego in the summer of 1921. For years the sick had congregated in the beautiful little seaside city, hoping to return to health in its balmy climate (and giving it an astonishingly high death and suicide rate). When Aimee appeared there, they swarmed around her in such numbers that she finally consented to hold a special meeting in Balboa Park devoted to healing only. Nearly 15,000 people jammed the place, requiring special squads of police to manage the crowd, while the sick and disabled "fell over one another in their rush to the platform in chairs, in litters, in wheelbarrows, or staggering on foot." For two days Aimee administered to them, "laying on hands" and praying fervently, as countless miraculous "cures" amazed onlookers. Overnight she became a sensation, and the local press dubbed her the "Miracle Woman." Until 1923 Aimee devoted much of her time to faith-healing sessions, but eventually she began to de-emphasize them. Never comfortable with that which she could not control, she believed that the cures were really the work of God and that she was merely His instrument.

At about this time Aimee had begun to enunciate the basic tenets of her religious beliefs more clearly. She called her theology the Foursquare Gospel–belief in the literal infallibility of the Bible, conversion, physical healing through faith, and the return of Christ to earth. Yet she remained essentially an itinerant preacher; she had no real church of her own, just thousands of passionately devoted followers held together by her little magazine, now called *The Foursquare Monthly*, and by the power of her personality. She began to dream of building her own auditorium or tabernacle, where her people could be organized into a more permanent denomination and where they might become a permanent source of income enabling her at last to give up the itinerant life. They had built her a house, why shouldn't they build her a church? The design for a great temple began forming in her mind.

With $5,000 her mother had managed to save through tight-fisted management, Aimee bought a pie-shaped piece of property across from Echo Park, where the trolley lines met in the fastest-growing section of Los Angeles, and ordered the foundations begun for her tabernacle.[7] Then she set out on another of her frequent whirlwind tours of the country to raise money for the building. Using every enticement at her command, she accumulated



The Angelus Temple, shortly after it opened.

the funds that kept construction going. When not out raising funds, she was on the site leading volunteer workers in prayer and directing the design and construction of what she now called Angelus Temple. Almost unnoticed by Angelenos in the building boom of the times, the structure rose during 1922 at Echo Park. On January 1, 1923, Aimee formally dedicated the temple to the cause of worldwide evangelism. To architects the structure was a monstrosity, but to Aimee and her followers it was glorious--a huge white building shaped like a wedge of cake, with a large stage at the point and several sections (including two spacious balconies) fanning out from the stage. Along the sides of the temple were stained-glass windows designed by Aimee, and the ceiling was a large shallow dome painted sky blue and speckled with glass stars. The modern stage lighting rivaled that of most theaters, and adjoining the temple a large luxurious home, known as the "parsonage," housed Aimee and her family. The entire project cost more than a million dollars.

Construction of Angelus Temple was a turning point for Aimee. Her prodigious energies could now be concentrated in one location, and the results were remarkable. She organized her followers into the Church of the Foursquare Gospel with twenty-four departments. Temple workers manned telephones around the clock, to minister to the troubled and lonely; the City Sisters baby-sat, distributed food to the needy, and tended the sick; the Brotherhood helped ex-convicts find jobs. The Children's Church, the Bible School, and an evening school for working- men reached other members of the congregation, while teams of the faithful prayed twenty-four hours a day, year after year, in a Tower of Prayer. Everyone who joined the Foursquare Gospel Association had something to do, even if only typing for the Monthly or ushering at services. In return, Aimee gave her people the sense of purpose and personal importance they craved in the complex, impersonal society of Los Angeles in the 1920s. And she gave them a good time as well.

With the assistance of Thompson Eade, a former vaudeville performer, Aimee wrote, produced, and starred in lavishly staged "illustrated" sermons. Each one featured a large choir and orchestra, dozens of actors costumed by the Western Costume Corporation (which also supplied all the major movie studios), and Aimee, engulfed in flowers. Writing for *Harper's* magazine, Sarah Comstock described a visit to the temple:

[6] John Calvin, the founder of Calvinism, believed that people were destined for heaven or hell from birth, and that nothing they did during their lives could change that. For him, going to church was a responsibility and a duty, and he would have been horrified by the idea that church services could be fun or entertaining.

[7] Echo Park was, and is, just north of downtown, and today is next to the Hollywood Bowl and Dodger Stadium

> In this unique house of worship called Angelus Temple in the city of Los Angeles, the Almighty occupies a secondary position. He plays an important part in the drama to be sure but the center stage is taken and held by Mrs. McPherson. It is in her praise that the band blares, that flowers are piled high, that applause splits the air. It is to see her and hear her that throngs travel, crushed in the aisles of electric cars, thrust, elbow, and bruise one another as they shove at the doors of her Temple ... Over the great lower floor and two balconies attendants arc hurrying to seal the mob, a full hour before the entrance of the star. Men and women stand against the wall, they sit upon the steps of the aisles, and still, when the final whistle blows, there are thou- sands turned away, thousands who stand for two, three, four hours on the street in the nearby park, to listen to the concert and the inspired utterances as they scream themselves forth from the loudspeaker outside the building ... Aimee Semple McPherson is staging, month after month and even year after year, the most perennially successful show in the United States.

In 1924 Temple members raised $75,000 to build a powerful radio station, and thereafter Aimee's services were broadcast each night to thousands of listeners over station KFSG (K-all-Four-Square-Gospel), the third radio station in Los Angeles. She became the first woman to hold a broadcaster's license from the Federal Communications Commission. By the end of 1925, Sister was at the peak of her success. She had the largest Christian congregation in the world; its contributions made her a millionaire. She was a power in Los Angeles and a national figure, often called the "world's greatest evangelist." In the three years since the dedication of Angelus Temple, she had made it the center of a network that spanned the globe. She had survived the animosity of rival preachers who saw their parishioners drifting away to Angelus Temple, and the sneers of her detractors who called her services "a sensuous debauch served up in the name of religion." She had also survived petty politics and factionalism within her organization resulting from her success and Minnie's heavy-handed control of church funds. But beneath her ebullient, vivacious surface she was not altogether happy.

Day after day Aimee made the monotonous walk from house to temple and back again. She preached as often as twenty times a week, taught Bible classes, presided at weddings, baptisms, and funerals, attended meetings of the church board, and prepared her sermons. At the height of her success she was experiencing the loneliness of the star. She had no really close friends and her dream-come-true, Angelus Temple, was beginning to seem like a prison. It was then that the voice of Kenneth Ormiston, her radio engineer, took on new meaning for her. Each night when she broadcast her sermons, she talked to Ormiston by telephone from the stage while the choir sang or some other group performed. He would advise her how the program was going over the radio and would give her encouragement and support. "You have done splendidly tonight," he would say, or "Your voice sounds as if you are tired tonight, Mrs. McPherson." More and more she began to feel he was the only one in the world who cared about her as a person, and their conversations became more personal. Soon they were spending time alone together in the broadcasting studio of the temple.

Minnie Kennedy was frightened by this turn of events. A shrewd bargainer, domineering, undiplomatic, and sharp-tongued, she had relentlessly fought her way to economic security. The Echo Park Association had been incorporated to hold all she had managed to retain of the prodigious sums Aimee could raise at her meetings. The temple, the parsonage, and all other church properties were mortgage-free, and belonged to Minnie and Aimee. Thousands of dollars were taken in weekly, and Minnie reveled in this financial success. ("Only quiet money tonight, folks," Aimee would sometimes say during a collection. "Sister has a headache.")[8] Now this security was threatened. The acoustics in the temple were so fine that, even with the choir singing, some of Aimee's giggling telephone conversations with Ormiston (a married man) had been overheard in the balcony. People were beginning to ask questions. Worried about a possible scandal, Minnie scolded and nagged Aimee about her indiscretion.

Then one day, in January 1926, Kenneth Ormiston quit his job at Angelus Temple and dropped from sight. At about the same time, Aimee left Los Angeles to tour the Holy Land. A few weeks later Minnie heard a rumor that Ormiston had joined Aimee in Europe and, terrified, she cabled this news to her daughter. Soon afterward, Ormiston casually appeared at the temple "to advise on the radio operation" and then drifted off again. When Aimee returned she settled into her old routine, and Minnie heaved a sigh of relief. All seemed well, except that Aimee took to staying in a hotel at the beach in order, she said, to avoid the noise and dust from construction of the new five-story Bible College next door. And she began to demand more money. Under strong pressure from Aimee, Minnie finally agreed that the collection taken on the first Sunday of each month, usually several thousand dollars, would go directly to her, without being counted and with no questions asked. Aimee pocketed the money, and, as the weather warmed, began to go for a regular swim at the beach–until she disappeared that day in May.

For five weeks, Minnie tried to carry on the work of the temple, but she was tormented by secret suspicions as to why Aimee had vanished, and by a press openly suspicious about the absence of her body. Swarms of journalists investigated Aimee's disappearance as the two great rival Los Angeles newspapers, the *Times* and William Randolph Hearst's *Examiner*, competed for scoops. Reporters dug out Ormiston's name and spread rumors that Aimee had run off with him or that her disappearance was another publicity stunt. Hoping to offset these allegations, Minnie offered a $25,000 reward for the safe return of her daughter.

On June 20, some 14,000 attended a memorial service for Aimee. Three days later, and five weeks after her disappearance, she suddenly surfaced in the small Mexican border town of Agua Prieta near Tucson, Arizona, with a dramatic story of having escaped from kidnappers. She was immediately taken across the border to a hospital in neighboring Douglas, Arizona, where Los Angeles police interviewed her and reporters mobbed her. She told them that two men and a woman had seized her on May 18 through a ruse–asking her to administer to a sick baby–and that two of them had held her in a shack in the desert until her escape. She estimated she had wandered fifteen or twenty miles in the scorching heat before finding help in Agua Prieta. The next day Minnie and the two children arrived for a tearful reunion while the world hummed with the news.

On June 26, Sister returned by train to Los Angeles, where her reception surpassed any seen before in that city. No foreign monarch, no president, no national hero had ever evoked

[8] "Quiet money" means paper bills instead of metal coins. Conveniently, bills are not only quieter, they are also worth more than coins are.

such an outpouring of people and emotion. Airplanes rained rose petals from the air, city police carried her regally from the train station to her automobile in a sedan chair, and youngsters flung down a carpet of flowers in her path. Perhaps a hundred thousand people lined the streets for the triumphal cavalcade to her home. Within minutes of her arrival at Angelus Temple, she was on stage, recounting the story of her kidnapping to her nearly hysterical followers.

Exciting and dramatic, the story lacked but one thing–credibility. From the moment Sister Aimee met police investigators and the press in Arizona, they began asking questions that made their skepticism clear. They demanded to know why she had not immediately asked for water after wandering miles across the hot desert, why her clothes showed no signs of perspiration, why her shoes were not scuffed. They wanted explanations for reports that she had been seen more than once since her disappearance in a car resembling one belonging to Kenneth Ormiston, who had also seemingly dropped out of sight. Further doubt was cast on her story by failure to locate the shack she claimed had been her prison for weeks. To her dismay, Sister found the attention of the investigation focused more on the veracity of her statements than on the apprehension of the kidnappers. By the time she met her followers at Angelus Temple following her return to Los Angeles she was heaping scorn on her doubters and demanding that authorities redouble their efforts to find the criminals.

Had Aimee Semple McPherson left the matter where it was and turned away the reporters who hounded her every step, the affair might have eventually died from lack of interest. But, staking everything on the credibility of her story, she embarked on another tour of the country, demanding vindication from an increasingly skeptical public. In the process she set into motion a chain of events that resulted in sensational court hearings and the tarnishing of her image. When it was all over, Sister Aimee was no longer Mrs. McPherson the great evangelist. To the world she was just "Aimee."

Her demand for vindication and pressure from her competing clergy, as well as the Chamber of Commerce, finally goaded the district attorney, Asa Keyes, to action. A Los Angeles grand jury was called to look into the case, and Aimee made a dramatic appearance before it. It found "insufficient evidence to warrant an indictment," meaning her story was unconvincing. Aimee, however, claimed she had been vindicated and seemed to want the matter laid to rest. But aggressive reporters, not willing to let a good story die, continued to dig into the case until at last they unearthed evidence that Kenneth Ormiston had spent ten days at the little resort town of Carmel-by-the-Sea, near Monterey, with a woman whom residents identified as Mrs. McPherson. Experts identified the woman's handwriting on grocery slips as Aimee's, and the case became a sensation again. The sleepy village of Carmel, with its sand streets, artsy atmosphere, and reclusive citizenry, was immediately overrun by newspapermen asking questions and sightseers looking for the "love cottage," while Aimee's rival evangelists demanded a new inquiry. The grand jury was called into session again, and strange things began to happen. A woman grand juror took the damaging grocery slips into the rest room and they disappeared; secret files of the police also vanished; the prosecuting attorney and chief investigator were removed from the case; and when members of the grand jury tried to cover up their destruction of evidence they were dismissed in disgrace.

Meanwhile the case went on. A woman appeared, claiming to be the one seen in Carmel with Ormiston, only to be exposed by reporters as a fraud. In September, Aimee, Minnie, and Ormiston were indicted for corruption of public morals, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy to manufacture evidence. At the preliminary hearing another parade of witnesses spewed forth testimony filling the pages of the press and the airwaves, and the hearings drew such prominent journalists as H. L. Mencken. In the face of all this, Aimee used her formidable talents of mimicry and eloquence to ridicule the prosecutors and their witnesses in her sermons and broadcasts. The grand jury hearings became a spectacle and the talk of the town. On November 3, after six exhausting weeks, the presiding judge wearily ordered Aimee and her codefendants to stand trial in January 1927. City editors gleefully contemplated a long one.

During November and December, however, the prosecutor's case crumbled; key witnesses recanted their testimony, and the district attorney declared that with "so many contradictions and inconsistencies," the case could not be prosecuted with any reasonable hope of success. In January, to the frustration of editors, reporters, and a sensation-hungry public, the case was dismissed. Through it all Aimee's story was the only one that did not change.

It was not surprising, as journalist and author Carey McWilliams later wrote, that the controversial story of Aimee's disappearance became "one of the great news stories of the decade: It contained ... all the right ingredients: sex, mystery, underworld characters, kidnappers, the ocean, hot desert sands, an escape, and a thrilling finale. It was a story made for the period, a period that invested the trivial with a special halo, that magnified the insipid, that pursued cheap sensationalism with avidity and passion." While admittedly quite a story, the "kidnapping" of Sister Aimee became invested with the proportions of a myth and the dimensions of a saga in the great vacuum of the age.

The end of the kidnapping case did not take Aimee Semple McPherson out of the headlines, however. For the next ten years, major Los Angeles newspapers assigned reporters to cover Aimee, her family, and temple activities full-time. Minnie and Aimee were, each in her own way, masters at using the press for publicity, while the press had learned how to use the Angelus Temple to sell newspapers. It was a convenient relationship, and one that lasted into the mid-1930s. Aimee returned from a "vindication" tour in 1927 to be faced with a rebellion that erupted into an angry dispute with her mother. She set out to break free once and for all from Minnie's domination, bluntly informing her mother that she was going to take over control of all the business affairs of the temple. Minnie fought this vigorously, maintaining for anyone to hear that Aimee had absolutely no business sense and would ruin the sound financial position of the church. But Aimee won out, threatening to resign as pastor if she did not have her way. Reluctantly, Minnie retired with a settlement that assured her an income of $10,000 a year. After church reorganization gave Aimee absolute control of all its religious and business affairs, she embarked on a program designed to give the lie to her mother's public disdain for her business talents. Unfortunately, Minnie had been right. Aimee had no business sense, and her managers involved her in one fiasco after another; one was a proposal to sell burial plots in a "Blessed Hope Memorial Park" cemetery, the closer the plot to Aimee's, the higher the price. "Buy a Grave and Go Up with Aimee," was reportedly the slogan. A particularly disastrous undertaking involved organizing a movie company, with Aimee to star in an extravagant religious production. One after another these schemes collapsed, leaving Aimee with a myriad of lawsuits for breach of contract on her hands and a steady stream of court appearances. Noting that Aimee had appeared in court one morning in a natty wool suit and that afternoon in a chic silk suit, a newspaper aptly headlined the .story "Life Is Just One Suit After Another."

Aimee's stylish wardrobe accompanied other manifestations of an effort to upgrade her appearance under the glare of the public spotlight. In her early years in Los Angeles she had

adopted as her normal public attire a blue cape over a white dress that resembled a nurse's uniform, prompting one reporter to describe her as "robust and motherly." Gradually, however, she had shed the motherly image and developed into a glamorous figure, slim and elegantly dressed. This and other changes brought her into conflict again with her mother when Minnie returned to the Temple to try to salvage the business organization. Minnie disapproved of Aimee's new look and seeming tolerance of modernism. Nine months after Minnie's return she entered the hospital with a broken nose received in one last violent argument with Aimee, who then went into seclusion, reportedly suffering from a mysterious illness that was making her blind. But Minnie, whose venomous tongue was hereafter turned on her daughter, maliciously informed the press that Aimee had had a face-lift. Since physical "rejuvenation" was considered outrageously inappropriate in Aimee's church, Minnie's charge added fuel to an already blazing fire of dissension. Aimee's business dealings and her autocratic and secret control of church finances led to another fight within the church. A number of her Lighthouses seceded, one of their leaders forced a grand jury hearing into her finances, and the episode produced more negative publicity. In 1930 Aimee's iron constitution finally gave way, and she suffered a nervous breakdown. By 1931 she had recovered sufficiently to elope with David Hutton, who sang in the choir and had been giving her singing lessons. But two years later they separated and in 1934 quietly obtained a divorce.

Despite her personal problems, Aimee found time to throw her great energy into alleviating the distress of the Great Depression. Los Angeles teemed with retired farmers and tradespeople who had been ruined by the collapse of the economy after 1929. State, county, and city relief funds were pitifully inadequate to deal with the suffering as the Depression deepened; by 1931 there were 200,000 unemployed in Los Angeles alone. For most of the early 1930s Aimee's followers were everywhere in the Los Angeles area, giving aid and sustenance to the victims of the Depression. In November 1931 she opened her first "soup kitchen," serving meals to all who came. Soon she opened another, which served 5,000 persons a day, and when the school system could no longer serve hot lunches to its pupils, Aimee did. Her City Sisters cared for people all over the Los Angeles basin. She enlisted the police and fire departments to distribute clothing to the destitute. She established a free medical and dental clinic, staffed by dozens of volunteer doctors and dentists, and a school to train practical nurses, especially in the care of the malnourished young and elderly. She cajoled and pressured ranchers, meatpackers, business groups, and grocers into contributing to her effort by donating supplies, and she talked truckers into delivering them free of charge. She even persuaded the federal government to open an unused army camp east of Los Angeles, where 25,000 unemployed could live and grow their own food.

The huge relief effort, and her personal troubles, took their toll on Aimee. She was frequently ill and periodically went on a tour or a cruise to regain her health, only to become embroiled in another crisis on her return. All the while, she continued to design, organize, and produce sermons that surpassed most of the spectacles offered in local theaters. But by the mid-1930s she was also becoming obsessed with a fear that others were conspiring to take control of Angelus Temple and church affairs away from her, a fear that drove her into her last great conflict–this time with her daughter, Roberta, and another evangelist, Rheba Crawford. The conflict eventually led to Aimee's dismissing both Roberta and Rheba in a messy disagreement that, as usual, landed in court. In 1937 Roberta won a libel suit against Aimee's attorney, and Aimee, who had no heart for further legal maneuvering, settled with Rheba out of court. This left the disheartened Aimee with only her son, Rolf, as her steadying force in temple affairs. After this episode Aimee Semple McPherson faded from the headlines. By then both she and the press seemed to agree that the public had become satiated with her antics. Besides, world affairs were pushing the frivolous from the from pages. The vacuum filled by Aimee and those like her was now occupied by concerns such as the Spanish Civil War, Japan's attack on China, and the mounting fear of Hitler. Aimee quietly rebuilt her church, expanding the number of Lighthouses nationwide, while her son, Rolf, took over its business management.

When World War II came, Aimee made numerous appearances to conduct revival meetings for servicemen and to sell war bonds. In late September 1944, she traveled with Rolf to hold a revival meeting in Oakland, where she filled the auditorium with 10,000 enthusiastic people. The next morning, Rolf found her near death in her bed, sleeping pills spilled around her. By mid-morning she was dead. Doctors reported that the barbiturates she had taken had probably led to loss of memory, confusion, and an accidental overdose. Sister's last front-page headline, "Aimee Is Dead," appeared in the newspapers on September 27, as Rolf hurried to Los Angeles to arrange her funeral. The temple overflowed with grief-stricken followers wailing and praying in disbelief, while newspapers printed long obituaries struggling to explain her life.

Fifty thousand mourners filed past the bronze casket where Aimee lay dressed in her temple uniform, with a Bible bound in white satin clasped in her hands. The temple was so filled with flowers that five carloads could not even be unloaded, and, when Rolf cried out for a rededication to carry on her work, her people surged to their feet, hands upraised in the gesture of joy she had taught them. Aimee Semple McPherson was buried on Sunrise Slope at Forest Lawn Memorial Park on her fifty-fourth birthday, October 9, 1944.

Through her long, sensational career, many of Aimee's contemporaries shrugged her off as one of the "loose nuts" who had rolled down to southern California. To them, she symbolized the frivolous and trivial aspects of the times, while to her devoted followers, and those who benefited from her depression-era relief work, she represented hope and a cheerful, active religious faith.

From the vantage point of history, the story of Aimee Semple McPherson's life can he viewed not only as the story of a colorful, dynamic personality, but as the story of a colorful, dynamic age propelled, like Aimee, by a restless and capricious energy. Aimee's venturesome coast-to-coast drive across primitive roads in 1918 was the precursor of an historic, and equally speculative, automobile migration that brought hundreds of thousands of new residents to California in the 1920s and 1930s. Her lavish productions in the extravagant Angelus Temple paralleled increasingly lavish Hollywood productions, as the movie industry prospered and expanded. Her establishment of the first religious radio station occurred at the beginning of a great radio age centered in southern California. The ease with which she attracted huge crowds and dominated newspaper headlines testified to the cultural emptiness of the period. Yet when times turned suddenly dark and challenging she, like most of her fellow Californians, turned her energy to coping with depression and supporting the war effort. Aimee's death less than a year before the end of World War II coincided closely with the end of an era and the beginning of another, for California was soon to emerge into a new age, never to be the same again.

The Maltese Falcon (1930)

By Dashiell Hammett

The Maltese Falcon is a "noir" or "hardboiled" detective novel. In the book, the sleazy detective Sam Spade finds himself involved in the search for a black bird-shaped statue called the Maltese Falcon. At one point or another, Spade is betrayed or attacked or deceived by nearly everyone involved in the search, including Brigid O'Shaugnessy (the woman who hired him), Joel Cairo (Brigid's one-time partner and now enemy), and Iva (Spade's mistress, who is married). It is in this chapter that Spade recognizes, for the first time, that Brigid has been hiding information from him (including her relationship with Cairo). As you read, don't worry if you're a bit confused. That is part of the style of fiction noir.

For half an hour after Joel Cairo had gone Spade sat alone, still and frowning, at his desk. Then he said aloud in the tone of one dismissing a problem, "Well, they're paying for it," and look a bottle of Manhattan cocktail and a paper drinking-cup from a desk-drawer. He filled the cup two-thirds full, drank, returned the bottle to the drawer, tossed the cup into the waste- basket, put on his hat and overcoat, turned off the lights, and went down to the nightlit street. An undersized youth of twenty or twenty-one in neat grey cap and overcoat was standing idly on the corner below Spade's building.

Spade walked up Sutter Street to Kearny, where he entered a cigar-store to buy two sacks of Bull Durham.[1] When he came out the youth was one of four people waiting for a street-car on the opposite corner.

Spade ate dinner at Herbert's Grill in Powell Street. When he left the Grill, at a quarter to eight, the youth was looking into a nearby haberdasher's window.[2]

Spade went to the Hotel Belvedere, asking at the desk for Mr. Cairo. He was told that Cairo was not in. The youth sat in a chair in a far corner of the lobby.

Spade went to the Geary Theatre, failed to see Cairo in the lobby, and posted himself on the curb in front, facing the theatre. The youth loitered with other loiterers before Marquard's restaurant below.

At ten minutes past eight Joel Cairo appeared, walking up Geary Street with his little mincing bobbing steps. Apparently he did not see Spade until the private detective touched his shoulder. He seemed moderately surprised for a moment, and then said: "Oh yes, of course you saw the ticket."

"Uh-huh. I've got something I want to show you." Spade drew Cairo back towards the curb a little away from the other waiting theatre-goers. "The kid in the cap down by Marquard's."

Cairo murmured, "I'll see," and looked at his watch. He looked up Geary Street. He looked at a theatre-sign in front of him on which George Arliss was shown costumed as Shylock,[3] and then his dark eyes crawled sidewise in their sockets until they were looking at the kid in the cap, at his cool pale face with curling lashes hiding lowered eyes.

"Who is he?" Spade asked.

Cairo smiled up at Spade. "I do not know him." "He's been tailing me around town." Cairo wet his lower lip with his tongue and asked: "Do you think it was wise, then, to let him see us together?"

"How do I know?" Spade replied. "Anyway, it's done."

Cairo removed his hat and smoothed his hair with a gloved hand. He replaced his hat carefully on his head and said with every appearance of candor. "I give you my word I do not know him, Mr. Spade. I give you my word I have nothing to do with him. I have asked nobody's assistance except yours, on my word of honor."

"Then he's one of the others?"

"That may be."

"I just wanted to know, because if he gets to be a nuisance I may have to hurt him."

"Do as you think best. He is not a friend of mine."

"That's good. There goes the curtain. Good night." Spade said, and crossed the street to board a westbound streetcar. The youth in the cap boarded the same car.

Spade left the car at Hyde Street and went up to his apartment. His rooms were not greatly upset, but showed unmistakable signs of having been searched. When Spade had washed and had put on a fresh shirt and collar he went out again, walked up to Sutter Street, and boarded a westbound car.[4] The youth boarded it also.

Within half a dozen blocks of the Coronet, Spade left the car and went into the vestibule of a tall brown apartment-building. He pressed three bell-buttons together. The street-door-lock buzzed. He entered, passed the elevator and stairs, went down a long yellow-walled corridor to the rear of the building, found a back door fastened by a Yale lock, and let himself out into a narrow court. The court led to a dark back street, up which Spade walked for two blocks. Then he crossed over to California Street and went to the

[1] Sutter and Kearny are prominent streets in San Francisco; Bull Durham is a brand of tobacco.

[2] A haberdasher sells men's clothing.

[3] George Arliss was a prominent actor in the 1910s and 1920s, and Shylock is the main character in the Shakespeare play "The Merchant of Venice."

[4] In that era, the shirt and the collar were separate items, to make it easier to keep the collar clean and crisp.

Coronet. It was not quite half-past nine o'clock.

The eagerness with which Brigid O'Shaughnessy welcomed Spade suggested that she had been not entirely certain of his coming. She had put on a satin gown of the blue shade called Artoise that season, with chalcedony shoulder-straps, and her stockings and slippers were Artoise. The red and cream sitting-room had been brought to order and livened with flowers in squat pottery vases of black and silver. Three small rough-barked logs burned in the fireplace. Spade watched them burn while she put away his hat and coat.

"Do you bring me good news?" she asked when she came into the room again. Anxiety looked through her smile, and she held her breath. "We won't have to make anything public that hasn't already been made public." "The police won't have to know about me?"

"No."

She sighed happily and sat on the walnut settee. Her face relaxed and her body relaxed. She smiled up at him with admiring eyes. "However did you manage it?" she asked more in wonder than in curiosity.

"Most things in San Francisco can be bought, or taken."

"And you won't get into trouble? Do sit down." She made room for him on the settee. "I don't mind a reasonable amount of trouble," he said with not too much complacence. He stood beside the fireplace and looked at her with eyes that studied, weighed, judged her without pretense that they were not studying, weighing, judging her. She flushed slightly under the frankness of his scrutiny, but she seemed more sure of herself than before, though a becoming shyness had not left her eyes. He stood there until it seemed plain that he meant to ignore her invitation to sit beside her, and then crossed to the settee.

"You aren't," he asked as he sat down, "exactly the sort of person you pretend to be, are you?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," she said in her hushed voice, looking at him with puzzled eyes.

"Schoolgirl manner," he explained, "stammering and blushing and all that."

She blushed and replied hurriedly, not looking at him: "I told you this afternoon that I've been bad--worse than you could know."

"That's what I mean," he said. "You told me that this afternoon in the same words, same tone. It's a speech you've practiced."

After a moment in which she seemed confused almost to the point of tears she laughed and said: "Very well, then, Mr. Spade. I'm not at all the sort of person I pretend to be. I'm eighty years old, incredibly wicked, and an iron-molder by trade. But if it's a pose it's one I've grown into, so you won't expect me to drop it entirely, will you?"

"Oh, it's all right," he assured her. "Only it wouldn't be all right if you were actually that innocent. We'd never get anywhere."

"I won't be innocent," she promised with a hand on her heart.

"I saw Joel Cairo tonight," he said in the manner of one making polite conversation. Gaiety went out of her face. Her eyes, focused on his profile, became frightened, then cautious. He had stretched his legs out and was looking at his crossed feet. His face did not indicate that he was thinking about anything.

There was a long pause before she asked uneasily: "You-you know him?"

"I saw him tonight." Spade did not look up and he maintained his light conversational tone. "He was going to see George Arliss."

"You mean you talked to him?"

"Only for a minute or two, till the curtain-bell rang."[5]

She got up from the settee and went to the fireplace to poke the fire. She changed slightly the position of an ornament on the mantelpiece, crossed the room to get a box of cigarettes from a table in a corner, straightened a curtain, and returned to her seat. Her face now was smooth and unworried.

Spade grinned sidewise at her and said: "You're good. You're very good."

Her face did not change. She asked quietly: "What did he say?"

"About what?"

She hesitated. "About me."

"Nothing." Spade turned to hold his lighter under the end of her cigarette. His eyes were shiny in a wooden satan's face.

"Well, what did he say?" she asked with half-playful petulance.

"He offered me five thousand dollars for the black bird."

She started, her teeth tore the end of her cigarette, and her eyes, after a swift slanted glance at Spade, turned away from him.

"You're not going to go around poking at the fire and straightening up the room again, are you?" he asked lazily.

She laughed a clear merry laugh, dropped the mangled cigarette into a tray, and looked at him with clear merry eyes. "I won't," she promised. "And what did you say?"

"Five thousand dollars is a lot of money."

She smiled, but when, instead of smiling, he looked gravely at her, her smile became faint, confused, and presently vanished. In its place came a hurt, bewildered look "Surely you're not really considering it," she said.

"Why not? Five thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"But, Mr. Spade, you promised to help me." Her hands were on his arm. "I trusted you. You can't--" She broke off, took her hands from his sleeve and worked them together.

Spade smiled gently into her troubled eyes. "Don't let's try to figure out how much you've trusted me," he said. "I promised to help you–sure–but you didn't say anything about any black birds."

"But you must've known or-or you wouldn't have mentioned it to me. You do know now. You won't--you can't--treat me like that." Her eyes were cobalt-blue prayers.

"Five thousand dollars is," he said for the third time, "a lot of money."

She lifted her shoulders and hands and let them fall in a gesture that accepted defeat. "It is," she agreed in a small dull voice. "It is far more than I could ever offer you, if I must bid for your loyalty."

Spade laughed. His laughter was brief and somewhat bitter. "That is good," he said, "Coming from you. What have you given me besides money? Have you given me any of your confidence? Any of the truth? Any help in helping you? Haven't you tried to buy my loyalty with money and nothing else? Well, if I'm peddling it, why shouldn't I let it go to the highest bidder?"

"I've given you all the money I have." Tears glistened in her white-ringed eyes. Her voice was hoarse, vibrant. "I've thrown myself on your mercy, told you that without your

[5] The curtain bell is the warning that a play is about to start, and the audience should get to their seats.

help I'm utterly lost. What else is there?" She suddenly moved close to him on the settee and cried angrily: "Can I buy you with my body?"

Their faces were a few inches apart. Spade took her face between his hands and he kissed her mouth roughly and contemptuously. Then he sat back and said: "I'll think it over." His face was hard and furious.

She sat still holding her numbed face where his hands had left it.

He stood up and said: "Christ! There's no sense to this." He took two steps towards the fireplace and stopped, glowering at the burning logs, grinding his teeth together.

She did not move.

He turned to face her. The two vertical lines above his nose were deep clefts between red wales. "I don't give a damn about your honesty," he told her, trying to make himself speak calmly. "I don't care what kind of tricks you're up to, what your secrets are, but I've got to have something to show that you know what you're doing." "I do know. Please believe that I do, and that it's all for the best, and--"

"Show me," he ordered. "I'm willing to help you. I've done what I could so far. If necessary I'll go ahead blindfolded, but I can't do it without more confidence in you than I've got now. You've got to convince me that you know what it's all about, that you're not simply fiddling around by guess and by God, hoping it'll come out all right somehow in the end."

"Can't you trust me just a little longer?"

"How much is a little? And what are you waiting for?"

She bit her lip and looked down. "I must talk to Joel Cairo," she said almost inaudibly.

"You can see him tonight," Spade said, looking at his watch. "His show will be out soon. We can get him on the phone at his hotel."

She raised her eyes, alarmed. "But he can't come here. I can't let him know where I am. I'm afraid."

"My place," Spade suggested.

She hesitated, working her lips together, then asked: "Do you think he'd go there?"

Spade nodded.

"All right," she exclaimed, jumping up, her eyes large and bright. "Shall we go now?" She went into the next room. Spade went to the table in the corner and silently pulled the drawer out. The drawer held two packs of playing-cards, a pad of score-cards for bridge, a brass screw, a piece of red string, and a gold pencil. He had shut the drawer and was lighting a cigarette when she returned wearing a small dark hat and a grey kidskin coat, carrying his hat and coat. Their taxicab drew up behind a dark sedan that stood directly in front of Spade's street-door. Iva Archer was alone in the sedan, sitting at the wheel. Spade lifted his hat to her and went indoors with Brigid O'Shaughnessy. In the lobby he halted beside one of the benches and asked: "Do you mind waiting here a moment? I won't be long."

"That's perfectly all right," Brigid O'Shaughnessy said, sitting down. "You needn't hurry."

Spade went out to the sedan. When he had opened the sedan's door Iva spoke quickly. "I've got to talk to you, Sam. Can't I come in?" Her face was pale and nervous.

"Not now."

Iva clicked her teeth together and asked sharply, "Who is she?"

"I've only a minute, Iva," Spade said patiently.

"What is it?" "Who is she?" she repeated, nodding at the street-door.

He looked away from her, down the street. In front of a garage on the next corner an undersized youth of twenty or twenty-one in neat grey cap and overcoat loafed with his back against a wall. Spade frowned and returned his gaze to Iva's insistent face. "What is the matter?" he asked. "Has anything happened? You oughtn't to be here at this time of night."

"I'm beginning to believe that," she complained. "You told me I oughtn't to come to the office, and now I oughtn't to come here. Do you mean I oughtn't to chase after you? If that's what you mean why don't you say it right out?"

"Now, Iva, you've got no right to take that attitude."

"I know I haven't. I haven't any rights at all, it seems, where you're concerned. I thought I did. I thought your pretending to love me gave me--"

Spade said wearily: "This is no time to be arguing about that, precious. What was it you wanted to see me about?"

"I can't talk to you here, Sam. Can't I come in?"

"Not now."

"Why can't I?"

Spade said nothing.

She made a thin line of her mouth, squirmed around straight behind the wheel, and started the sedan's engine, staring angrily ahead. When the sedan began to move Spade said, "Good night, Iva," shut the door, and stood at the curb with his hat in his hand until it had been driven away. Then he went indoors again.

Brigid O'Shaughnessy rose smiling cheerfully from the bench and they went up to his apartment.