*The New Yorker Magazine*, January 17, 1959

**ANNALS OF CRIME**

# SOMEBODY IS GOING TO GET HIT

By Bernard Taper

(Headings added by the Captain for easier reading)

The old fraud the King in "Huckleberry Finn" made his rascally way through the world by free-lance preaching, fortune-telling, faith healing, and what he lumped under the heading of "missionaryin' around." For bilking the gullible, as he saw it there was simply nothing that could beat taking up collections at revival meetings, where he got his richest results from some of his most bogus appeals. The King, as a thoughtful student of the techniques required to rouse such gatherings to the fervent belief that their best chance of laying up treasures in Heaven consisted in depositing their earthly treasures in the collection plates, would undoubtedly have derived considerable edification from watching the operations of a fundamentalist minister named C. Thomas Patten, who once boasted, "I am the only man in the world who ever made a million dollars three times over from religion," and who, in the heyday of his operations as the dominant member of a husband-and-wife evangelical team, during and soon after the Second World War, may well have been one of the greatest virtuosos of all time in the art of exploiting the honest spiritual urges of others for his own dishonest ends. Patten, who died last year of a heart attack at the age of forty-five, was a burly, brash, unlettered man with a powerful gift for the sort of rhetoric that passes understanding; considerable charm of a backwoods variety; an uncommon flair for the whimsical, ludicrous, and outrageous; and a round ruddy face of the kind often described as "frank and honest." When in form, he could not only take up collections of extraordinary size for his ostensibly godly purposes, but could also persuade his followers to donate money to buy him such manifestly secular items as peacocks, pet bulldogs, and cowboy boots. Once, giving a bravura demonstration of his talents--as Paganini might have dashed off a breath-taking cadenza--he even took up a collection for money to throw into a lake. It was, by all accounts, a goodly offering. No witnesses can be found who saw him actually throw the money into the lake, but there are some who can recall that when he received the collection plates at the pulpit on this occasion, he dramatically tore a bill in half--to show his good faith, presumably--and then carefully stuffed both halves into his pocket. Though naturally proud of his abilities, Patten did not claim sole credit for them. "God gave me the power to take money from people," he used to say, with pious modesty.

## Patten Didn’t Believe In Keeping Records

It was in California that Patten's career flourished after years of barren effort elsewhere in the country. There, he and his wife set up what they called a permanent revival and gathered the congregation whose faith and pocket-books he was to drain in succeeding years. Though it might be thought that even a minor talent for fraudulent evangelism would stand a good chance of being richly rewarded in California, it must also be recognized that nowhere else does an entrepreneur of Patten's sort have to put up with such stiff competition from so many varieties of prophets, quacks, eccentrics, and fanatics. The most impressive measure of Patten's success in the face of such rivalry was the wealth he amassed during the years between 1944, when he arrived in California, practically penniless, and 1950, when after the state had indicted him on various charges of fraud and embezzlement, he was packed off to jail. No one has ever discovered exactly how much he persuaded his congregation to donate to him during those six years, since Patten didn't believe in keeping records, but it's known for a fact that in that period he and his wife made deposits of more than a million dollars in their personal bank accounts, acquired real estate that included a quarter-million-dollar building and two well-stocked ranches, and set themselves up as proprietors of a thriving, though unaccredited, college and seminary, and of an assortment of business enterprises. In filling Patten's collection plates to the brim, most members of

his congregation had the impression, which he assiduously fostered, that they were contributing to God's work. The fact that a large part of these donations were used by Patten for private speculations, and even for gambling, did not emerge until a few of his parishioners finally, and with deep reluctance, decided to take legal action against him. It was during the ensuing trial, which turned out to be one of the longest and gaudiest in the State of California, that the full scope of Patten's talent for charming or wringing money from a bedazzled congregation became generally known.

**Aimee Semple McPherson Was Run Out of Oakland, Her First Choice to Build a Temple**

The principal scene of Patten's activities was the city of Oakland, a sprawling, shapeless community of about four hundred thousand people, just across the bay from San Francisco. Geographically, and in a number of other respects as well, Oakland's relationship to San Francisco is comparable to that of Jersey City to New York. Oakland has long envied San Francisco its dramatic site, its colorful history, and its fame, and has resented its own status as something of a metropolitan joke. Dreary, unadventurous, inevitably second-best in everything, the city seems to be waiting for some miracle that will completely transform its life and quality. Its chief geographical ornament, Lake Merritt, an obviously artificial body of water, was clearly intended to make up for the natural marvels Oakland felt it lacked. Though the city is situated on San Francisco Bay, few of the streets and homes afford maritime vistas; rather, they seem to turn inward on themselves. The prevailing westerlies, which sweep invigoratingly across San Francisco, ruffling the canopies of the outdoor flower stands and bringing to San Franciscans the challenge of the Pacific and a sense of broad destiny, have conveyed to Oaklanders chiefly the persistent reminder of their sewage problems. When Aimee Semple McPherson, the Patten's most celebrated predecessor in California evangelical circles, went West, during the First World War, looking for the right place to set up her evangelistic temple, Oakland struck her as the perfect location; as it happened, she was run out of town by an inhospitable chief of police, and only then did she settle in Los Angeles, her second choice.

**Both Pattens Born in Hickman County, TN**

C. Thomas Patten (the "C" was for Carl, but it gratified his odd sense of humor to tell people that it stood for Cash) and his wife, Bebe, first appeared in Oakland in January, 1944. They had been travelling revivalism's sawdust trail through the South and Midwest for nearly a decade, and when they drove into Oakland, they were fed up with wandering and, as Patten told it subsequently, were so poor that their only assets were three dollars and a spare tire. "We sold the spare tire," Patten told his Oakland congregation in days of later opulence. "Then we got down so low we had only enough to buy a bowl of soup between us. My wife ate the soup and I ate the crackers." At the time of their arrival in Oakland, Patten was thirty years old, and his wife--a tall, imperious brunette with a rather long nose, a dazzling but impersonal smile, and a voice that was resonant, commanding, and most important, tireless--was twenty-nine. On the platform, they made a striking pair, Bebe Patten usually being attired in resplendent white satin robes, while her husband favored wild neckties (including one with dollar signs rampant), suits of assorted flavorsome hues, from pistachio to raspberry, and invariably, cowboy boots. Both Pattens had been born in rural Hickman County, Tennessee. Bebe Patten, who had been brought up in Detroit, affected a citified manner and never mentioned her Tennessee origins, but Patten--who could not have disguised his broad backwoods drawl if he had wanted to--gloried in them. When relating some Bible story, which he told with homely and absurd detail, he would almost inevitably be led, by way of illustration or reminiscence, into anecdotes about his own past and his family's doings down in Tennessee, and would then at last wander back to his Biblical tale--his listeners being left with the impression that Patten, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, Patten’s father (or daddy, as he always called him), Jesus, The Twelve Apostles, and Patten's ten brothers and sisters had all been running around Hickman County at about the same time and were all figures in the same grand comic myth. In these reminiscences, Patten's father figured as a man of enormous wealth, learning, and political power, who had, unhappily, nourished a grudge against religion ever since the time a crawfish nipped him on the toe while he was being baptized in a mountain stream. According to the legend, he had disinherited the younger Patten when the latter was converted. "I have seen the time" Patten recounted in one of his sketches of Patten Senior, "when my daddy

had bodyguards. One in front of him, one on either side, and one behind him, and in crooked politics up to his neck. He was a college teacher, and I believe he is one of the most brilliant men I have ever met. I went home one time and my daddy was worth a million dollars and was sitting right in the middle of the bed. He used to wear big old red flannel pajamas, and he used to have them tailor-made. He would be right in the middle of the bed and I would say, 'Daddy, you're going to Hell.'"

**C. Thomas Patten--"Bootlegger" at 17**

Disentangling the reality from the myth in Patten's life story is an involved task. The facts, as compiled by investigators at the time of the evangelist's trial, were that his father, Thomas Hendrix Patten, had run a small country store in Lyles, Tennessee (pop. 500), and had owned a scrubby, run-down farm. He had been four times convicted of bootlegging by the federal authorities and had served three terms in the Atlanta Penitentiary (which may have been where he had had the bodyguards). At the age of seventeen, young C. Thomas Patten was kicked out of high school for making whiskey in the school basement. When he was twenty-one, he was arrested in Florida on a charge of transporting stolen cars across state lines. On that occasion, when he was asked by the police what his occupation was, he forthrightly replied, "Bootlegger." He was convicted on the stolen-car charge and given a two-year sentence, suspended. Shortly after this, he met the twenty-year-old Bebe Harrison, who was visiting relatives in Hickman County while recovering from a brief, unfortunate marriage. "She was the only girl I ever met I couldn't get fresh with, so I married her," Patten used to tell his congregation, which doted on each detail of the Patten's romance. "And, folks, if that woman was to ask me for the moon, I'd go a-huntin' for a ladder." Before she met Patten, Bebe had lived for a time in Los Angeles, where she graduated with honors from Aimee Semple McPherson's Lighthouse of International Four Square Evangelism. According to the Pattens, Bebe had insisted on her fiancé's conversion as a condition of their marriage. After the newlyweds set out on the road together, he studied the Bible under her tutelage, and was ultimately ordained a minister of the gospel by the Fundamental Ministerial Association, a group loosely uniting various Pentecostal and Southern Baptist denominations. The Patten's longest ministerial sojourn before they reached Oakland was a year in Cleveland, at a place of worship known as the Broadside Tabernacle. The rest of the time, they moved from town to town, organizing revivals that lasted anywhere from one day to eight weeks, and often barely making what Patten called "eating money."

**Big-Time Religion Comes to Oakland**

At the outset of the Pattens' stay in Oakland, where they began holding daily services in a small wooden Pentecostal church called the Elim Tabernacle, in a shabby part of town, they seem to have had little expectation of the success they were to achieve. It soon turned out that they had underrated both Oakland's thirst for salvation and their own powers of persuasion. Within a few weeks, the crowds at the Elim Tabernacle had grown so large that the revival was transferred downtown to the plush City Club auditorium, with a seating capacity of twelve hundred, and then to the Oakland Arena, with a capacity of eight thousand. Sinners were coming forward in droves at the end of each service to make their decisions for Christ, their joy of salvation manifest in their faces, and many were announcing that they had been marvelously healed of various ailments. The Pattens publicly explained their tremendous reception as due to a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the city of Oakland. It also showed what could be done with advertising. "I broke this town spiritually by spending five, six thousand dollars a week on advertising. Nobody ever put over big-time religion here like I did," Patten boasted to a reporter a few years later. Sound trucks roamed the city proclaiming Oakland's awakening and the approach of the millennium. Large ads appeared in the papers urging, "FOLLOW THE CROWDS TO THE OAKLAND ARENA!" In addition to the services, the ads noted, there would be "Green Palms! Choir Girls in White! Music!," and scattered here and there on the page, like the words that are represented as issuing from the lips of angels in Fra Angelico paintings, were promises of "Miracles!," "Blessings!," "Healings!" The revival lasted nineteen weeks, and the total amount collected by the Pattens in that time was later estimated by one of the ushers, a man named Glen B. Craig, at around thirty-five thousand dollars. Craig, who had been head usher of the little Elim

Tabernacle, had gone along with the Pattens when their audiences outgrew that church. For the first few weeks, he continued his previous practice of counting the offering and recording the total in a notebook before turning the money over to Patten. One day, Patten asked to borrow the notebook. Craig handed it over. When he later asked for its return, Patten coldly refused, saying, “Any further records will be kept by C. Thomas Patten.”

**19-Week Revival!**

To finance their initial activities in Oakland, the Pattens had borrowed money from some of the city’s established churches, the pastor’s assumption being that when the Pattens moved on, they would be leaving numerous converts behind, who would settle down and become regular Sunday churchgoers. In a sermon called, “A Tree Planted in Oakland,” Bebe Patten expatiated on this very theme: the Pattens were going to plant and prune the tree; others would harvest the fruit. As the revival continued, week after week, some ecclesiastical throat-clearing began to be heard, with the local churchmen dropping hints, in the manner of a host who, being obliged to get up and go to work in the morning, tries to dislodge some loquacious guest, cheerfully oblivious of the lateness of the hour. But by this time, apparently, the Pattens were beginning to think what a shame it would be to go off and leave all that lovely fruit. At the end of the nineteenth week, they closed their revival, amid the tears and blessings of the faithful; accepted a Chrysler station wagon, presented to them as a token of the everlasting gratitude of those they had converted; and drove to the outskirts of town, where they made a U turn and came back. God, they said, had spoken.

**Oakland--Poor People With Money!**

Taking a lease on the City Club auditorium, which they decorated in purple and gold, they set about establishing their permanent revival, with daily evangelical services, classes in religious subjects, and assorted other attractions. Both the time and place were propitious for their venture. America was experiencing in those war years a resurgence of the sort of highly emotional religion that generally accompanies periods of great dislocation and uncertainty, and waves of the lonely, anxious rootless people to whom such religion makes its strongest appeal had come flooding int the Oakland area to work in the shipyards and defense plants. A lot of them were from the rural South and Midwest—the traditional Bible Belt. Their jeans were bulging with war-inflated earnings, which they did not know how to spend, goods being scarce, but which it seemed pointless to save. Many were what might be called poor people with money, a condition much to Patten’s advantage. Revivalism in America has generally been thought of as a frontier phenomenon; for the last fifty years or so the American frontier has been, as historians have pointed out, the metropolis, and of late the Western metropolis in particular. As the Pattens astutely perceived, they no longer needed to go out into the wilderness—they could just stay put in Oakland and let the wilderness come to them.

**“Glossolalia,” Often a Dun – Reminder God Needs Money!**

In their partnership, Bebe Patten conducted the services, preached the sermons, and supervised the teaching program. Her husband ran the business affairs, which soon proliferated in every direction; taught courses in the life of Christ and the major prophets; and, of course, took up the collections. The services were traditional Pentecostal in most of their practices and doctrine, if the term “traditional” can be applied to a brand of religion that distrusts the institutional and extraordinary fear’ the end of the world is deemed close at hand, with a real burning Hell awaiting sinners and a glorious shining Heaven for the saved. With about a million adherents in this country now, in various sects ranging from the Assemblies of God to the Sought Out Church of God in Christ and the Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God, the Pentecostal religion has been growing rapidly; it is, in many ways, the inheritor of the fervor and simplicity that characterized Methodism—now grown rich and respectable, as its founder, John Wesley feared it would—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Based on a literal reading of the Bible and a thrilling, awesome, personal relationship with the Lord, it strives to be a religion without conventions or inhibitions. Worshippers are expected to give full vent to their emotions during the services. This, in fact can be considered one of the conventions of a Pentecostal church. A service in which no one burst out with shouts of glory or moans of anguish would be as destressing to a Pentecostal congregation as a service in which such outburst did occur would be to an Episcopalian or present-day

Methodist group. One much cherished feature of Pentecostal services (and of the services of some other revivalist denominations as well) is a manifestation called by theologians “glossolalia” and more commonly known as “the gift of tongues.” A member of the congregation, seized by a sudden rapture, speaks out in gibberish or in a completely unknown language. It is generally supposed to be the Holy Ghost who is speaking, and the message, as interpreted by the evangelist, ordinarily signifies that the meeting is blessed. At the Patten meetings, the message, when translated remarkably often turned out to be a dun—a reminder that God needed money His wonders to perform.

**A Typical C. (for Cash) Thomas Patten Offering!**

The services were usually opened by Bebe Patten with hymns and exhortations. Brother Patten would then stomp forward to take up the offering, after which his wife would deliver her sermon. Before long, the collections developed into the central feature of the services. About them there was nothing the least traditional—either institutional, traditional or Pentecostal traditional. They were a unique product of C. Thomas Patten’s peculiar genius. Before launching upon the characteristic example of such an appeal, based on the recollections of members of the audience, went about as follows: “All right, now, brothers and sisters, God says they’s five thousand two hundred and forty dollars and fifty-five cents (or some such specific sum) that is here today and that is to be taken up for His work, and God’s word never fails. If God told me that money is here, it is here. That’s a fact. How many say Amen? Hallelujah to His glorious name! That’s a lot of money, but believe it or not, brothers and sisters, they’s people here among you going to open their hearts to the Lord and pledge a thousand dollars each. Isn’t that glorious? Everybody say Amen! How many people believe the Lord is telling the truth when He says they’s three people here going to give  thousand dollars each? Raise your hands! Now, who’ll be the first? Somebody in the back rows? Pray for him, brothers and sisters. He’s got his hand up. It’s Brother Lilian. Bless you, Lord, and the angels sing! Isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that just wonderful? Now they’s just two more going to feel the Holy Spirit on them today, just two more.” And on he would go, through the five-hundred-dollar pledges, the hundred-dollar ones, and the rest. By turns he joked, hectored, wheedled, and stormed. Sometimes, when he felt he was encountering untoward difficulties, he would lash out at his hearers savagely, stamping back and forth across the platform. “You fossil faces and stony hearts, you’s better melt before the Lord if you know what’s good for you! Some of you when I get tough, you well up like a toad-frog. There must be something wrong with you or you couldn’t do that. The same Jesus that patted the little children on the head is the same Jesus that took a whipcord in his hand and whipped the tar out of them.” Next, he might shift to genial confidences and jests. These performances sometimes went on for as long as an hour and a half. During all this time, Bebe Patten sat quietly on the stage, her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes demurely downcast. It was Patten’s wont to let the congregation know that there would be no sermon from her until his collection terms had been met—somewhat as if she were being held for ransom. When he was at last satisfied with the pledges he had obtained, and was in high good humor once more, he was apt to look the congregation over and ask, “Now, how many of you people will promise that you won’t steal anything out of the collection plate when it comes around?” This always brought a roar of laughter. After one such collection, early in Patten’s Oakland career, the Reverend J. K. Hubbard, a meek, unworldly man who was pastor of the Elim Tabernacle approached him and ventured, “My that certainly was a splendid…er…offering. For a while, I didn’t think you were going to make it.” Patten flashed him a broad, sunny grim. “You gotta make it!” he replied. “That’s the whole secret. If you once fail that, they’ll beat you every time.”

**Paid Off Mortgage of $265,000**

In the fall of 1944, not long after Patten and his wife had established their permanent revival in Oakland, they were offered the opportunity to buy, for two hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars, the City Club building, whose theatre auditorium they were renting. When Patten told his congregation about this, the members responded enthusiastically. Within a few weeks, they had contributed the sum necessary for the down payment, and inside of a year Patten—using funds he collected at the church services, supplemented by money he borrowed from individual church members and from banks—was able to pay off the entire mortgage. Exactly how much he obtained from these various sources and

how many of the loans he ever repaid has to this day not been unraveled; he was almost as skilled at the art of sowing confusion as he was at the art of taking up collections, and, indeed, confusion was always an essential part of the atmosphere in which he flourished. In raising funds for this cause, Patten did not have to bully or hector his congregation, because the purchase of a building of their own so soon after their church had been formed apparently inspired in the members a strong feeling that God had chosen them as His special instruments. “The word ‘Miracle’ is the only expression capable of describing the wondrous works of the Almighty God in Oakland,” one of them subsequently wrote in the Patten Revivalist, the church publication.

**City Club Would Never Be Sold!**

Patten and his wife held joint ownership in the City Club building, but the congregation was given to understand, in a variety of ways, that they were simply acting as trustees, “Brother Patten and I have it fixed so that this building can never be sold,” Bebe Patten, in her flowing white robes, declared triumphantly from the pulpit, her arms outstretched. (She looked, one parishioner has recalled, “like an angel from Heaven.”) “It will always belong to the people, It will be here until Jesus comes, until the hinges are rusted off the door.” And her husband, who was standing on the platform beside her, wearing his cowboy boots and one of his pistachio-colored suits, added to this the promise, tinged with a note of poignancy, “You will have it as a church long after my wife and I have left Oakland and gone back to working in the field.” In a fervent ceremony, the members of the congregation dedicated the auditorium to the Lord forever. Praying, singing hymns of rejoicing, and calling out, in their ecstasy, “Glory! Glory!,” they moved about the hall touching the walls, the floors, the sills—sanctifying all of these in the ritual known as “the laying on of hands.”

**Patten Collected $12,000 From Leased Bar and Dance Hall!**

The City Club building was a substantial five-story structure. The auditorium, which occupied most of the ground floor was, of course, its most impressive feature, and among its other amenities was a basement swimming pool. The one blight on the satisfaction that the congregation took in the building was a commercial bar and dance hall on the second floor, which Patten’s followers regarded as a place of sin and damnation, since it was frequented by those who not only drank strong spirits and danced to popular music in lewd embrace but also smoked cigarettes and permitted their women to wear lipstick and rouge—all condemned as vices of the gravest sort by the Pattens. (“I believe you can smoke and be saved, but I don’t believe you can smoke and stay saved,” Patten used to tell a Bible class he taught.) After the transaction for the building was completed, Patten announced to his congregation, with an air of great distress, that they were going to have to put up with this evil presence in their midst for a while, because it turned out that the proprietors of the bar and dance hall held a long-term lease, and there was no way that they could be evicted. The fact of the matter, it was revealed much later, was that the bar and dance hall had been rented merely on a month-to-month basis, until Patten offered the proprietors a permanent lease. From this concession, Patten collected at least twelve thousand dollars in rent, for which he never accounted to anyone.

**O.B.I.’s Top Enrollment – 500 Students!**

Above the dance hall was the array of educational institutions that the Pattens set up to go with their church. There was the Oakland Bible Institute, whose name was frequently applied to the whole complex of Patten religious enterprises, including the church, and whose slogan was “In All the World No Institute Like This”; the Patten College and Seminary (“P.C.S.—The Best in the West”); the Academy of Christian Education; and according to some of the surviving Patten brochures, a music school for the training of choir leaders, gospel singers, and church accompanists. (This last may or may not have existed, the Patten’s cosmos being one in which figments of the imagination tended to develop robust lives of their own.) The peak enrollment achieved by the Patten schools was about five hundred. The students, drawn from the Patten’s congregation, were people of all ages—elderly widows and widowers, adolescents and their parents, and, after the end of the war, a number of young veterans, whose tuition Patten had arranged for the government to pay under the G.I Bill of Rights. Some of the students were preparing to become evangelists themselves, others were training for careers as missionaries and still others had enrolled for some such uncomplicated reason as a

sixty-year-old seamstress from North Carolina gave when she registered at the Oakland Bible Institute: “All my life I’ve always wanted to make a thorough study of the Bible.” In inventing rules and customs for these schools, Patten let his sense of fantasy and his gift for ludicrous detail have full play. He had the knack of turning almost everything not only into gold but in parody as well. He seems to have decided that his students weren’t going to lack for what is generally known as college atmosphere. The students—frumpy grandmothers and wizened old men, along with the young people—were sold lettermen’s sweaters, such as most colleges award their star athletes; these were navy blue with a huge yellow block “P” covering the chest, and with yellow stripes around one arm, the stripes signifying not how many years the wearer had made the varsity but, rather, how many years he had paid tuition to the Pattens. The owners of these sweaters wore them wherever they went in Oakland, to the considerable astonishment of the other townspeople. On Friday afternoons, Patten liked to have the students serpentine through the halls, waving pompons, down to the auditorium. There the cheerleaders (Patten believed that experience as a cheerleader was excellent training for a would-be evangelist) led the student body in yells that Patten had adapted from the standard college repertory. The well-known Stanford University “Give ‘Em the Axe” yell, for instance was converted by Patten into:

Give ‘em the Word, the Word, the Word,
Give ‘em the Word, the Word, the Word,
Give ‘em the Word, Give ‘em the Word,
Give ‘em the Word—Where?

Right in O.B.I., B.I.,
Right in O.B.I., B.I.,
In O.B.I., in O.B.I.,
In O.B.I.—Now!

Praise the Lord!

**Twice-Convicted Swindler Sold Patten “Temple Hall” Charter**

The cheering sessions were followed by songfests, featuring school anthems, such as “Oh Hail to O.B.I.” (“From O.B. we’ll go/To preach and rout the Foe”), and hymns, among the most popular of which was one called “Your Roses May Have Thorns, but Your Thorns May Have Roses, Too.” The Pattens advertised their schools as accredited by the University of California, but this was, of course, a fib. Among subjects listed in the catalogue were Holy Spirit, Homiletics, Divine Healing, Shorthand, Life of Christ, Major Prophets, Minor Prophets, Psalms, Wind Instruments, Bible Analysis, Christian Evidence, Typing, Scripture Memory, Hawaiian Guitar, and one generally referred to about the premises as “the charm course” but formally known as Christian Graces. All the schools had the same teachers, recruited from the congregation, and all vied with one another in dispensing an exuberant variety of theological degrees. Both Pattens made a point of appending strings of impressive letters to their signatures on diplomas, and Bebe Patten, as possessor of a putative Ph.D., always insisted upon being addressed as Doctor. The Pattens had obtained their own degrees without effort or inconvenience, and at comparatively slight expense, by mail from the Temple Hall College and Seminary, of McNab, Illinois, an institution run by a twice-convicted swindler named Denver Scott Swain. In 1947, Swain talked Patten into buying Temple Hall’s charter, along with its “magnificent library of several thousand volumes: (which turned out to be mainly old mail-order catalogues and telephone books) and its list of prospective students and potential donors—all for twenty-five hundred dollars, knocked down from Swain’s asking price of four hundred thousand. When this transaction was revealed at Patten’s trial, he denied the allegation that the scholastic degrees he had been awarded were part of the deal. “I didn’t pay one red penny for those degrees,” he asserted cheerfully. “Didn’t study one day in school either. Mr. Allen (one of Swain’s associates) gave me them degrees, and I guess he’d give me a hundred of them if I’d wanted.”

**City Club Must Be Sold!**

The members of Patten’s flock were still congratulating themselves on their prodigious feat of purchasing the building they occupied when, in the summer of 1945, Patten broached a new venture. Yes, of course, he told them, the

building they had was all right, if they wanted to be paltry about their faith, but it wasn't half large enough for the coming spiritual awakening in Oakland. An entirely new edifice was needed, he said—a great tabernacle that would be ten stories high, with the largest church auditorium in the city, and that would be topped by a flaming torch a hundred feet tall, which would burn day and night, casting a glow of righteousness over the whole sinful San Francisco Bay area. Some notion of the response that this suggestion evoked can be gleaned from a passage in a letter that a girl who sang soprano in the Patten choir wrote to a brother overseas in the Army; "Brother Patten is working greater miracles than ever before. Sunday he raised ten thousand dollars in less than thirty minutes for the glorious new tabernacle we are to have." About the same time, a somewhat less enthusiastic choir girl (an alto) paid equal tribute to Patten's powers of persuasion in a telegram that she dispatched to her mother, who was vacationing in Illinois. "COME HOME QUICK!" the telegram said, "DAD'S GONE CRAZY AND IS GIVING ALL HIS MONEY TO THE PATTENS." At succeeding services, Patten elaborated on the grandeurs of the projected tabernacle. It was, he said, to have a deep-water, electrically heated, glass baptistery; a hydraulically operated choir loft, like the stage at Radio City; a "bawl room" (the term he regularly employed for a nursery, where babies could be left during services); and—probably the most inspired feature—escalators in the aisles to transport the faithful and their offering to the altar. This last bit of whimsy appealed particularly to Patten's imagination, and he expatiated on it with gusto. He would have push buttons at the altar, he told the congregation, so that he would be able to start, stop, reverse, or speed up the escalators at will. "And if they's any hypocrite tries to get out during the offering, I'll spin him round and round like a squirrel on a treadmill," he declared. To hold back on contributions seems to have been about as great a sin as a Patten parishioner could commit, and it was one that Patten spared no effort to save his congregation from. A poem by a Mrs. V. S. Smith that appeared in the Portal, the Oakland Bible Institute yearbook, for 1946, expresses this inimitably:

A Man of Faith is our dear Brother Patten, in spite of how the hypocrites come in a spattern,
He shows them how God Blesses His own when they come in Showering the bills and coin.
Faithfully, uncompromisingly, comes our own Brother Patten,
I wonder many times how he keeps from cracken
Under the strain and burden he must bear,
Making it easy for sinners to be free from sin's care.

**Patten's Interpretation of Tithing—You Keep the Tenth!**

Most fundamentalist churches promulgate the belief that the Bible requires good Christians to tithe—that is, to contribute a tenth of their earnings to religion. Patten's notion of tithing, one member of his congregation has said ruefully, was to permit his followers to keep a tenth of their earnings—if they insisted. Certainly it often seemed that way. Services were held every evening during the week and three times on Sunday, and there was a collection at every service. At an ordinary Sunday service, an offering would usually run anywhere from a thousand to four thousand dollars, witnesses have said. Periodically, the congregation make special "love offerings" to Bebe Patten, to do with as she wished; according to Patten's testimony at his trial, these averaged about four thousand dollars a month. On some of the numerous occasions when Patten was making an urgent appeal of one sort or another, his collections exceeded ten thousand dollars. His record, witnesses have testified, was in the neighborhood of thirty thousand—a remarkable sum to obtain from a group of no more than a thousand people, most of them ordinary working folk.

**God Will Single Out One Person "To Hit"**

Those unfamiliar with the atmosphere in which revival meetings such as the Pattens' are conducted may find it hard to understand how it was that so few people resisted his demands. It is, in fact, almost impossible for an outsider to conceive of the reign of terror that can be established by a powerful and willful personality such as Patten's. Increasingly, as time went on, he made use of the technique he called "hitting" somebody, or putting him "on the spot." "I told you God said they was four people in this church was going to give a thousand dollars each today," he might say, "but I guess you just don't believe Him. You don't believe God means what He says. But He does, He always does. And He's going to have to put four of you spineless cowards on the spot to prove it. They ain't no way out of it. God ain't

going to back down, that's for sure." What followed was supposed to be governed entirely by divine inspiration. "Everybody bow their head and pray now," Patten would continue. "Help us, Lord, help us! Are you all opening your hearts to Jesus? Glory! Glory! The Lord's not fooling around now. He's sick and tired of fooling around. He's going to hit somebody hard in a minute. He's just going to knock somebody flat." Patten would bow his own head for a moment. Then, as the tension mounted, he would lift it again, look the congregation over, and suddenly call out the name of the person put on the spot, or else, as an exciting variant, he would send one of the ushers down the aisle to clap a hand on the chosen victim's shoulder. Everyone would wait expectantly while the person thus singled out made up his mind what to do. After a brief struggle, he would ordinarily yield, raise his hand, and dutifully pledge the amount asked, whereupon Patten would invoke blessings, sometimes kissing the carpet in sheer ebullience, and the congregation would cry "Amen!" and "Glory, Hallelujah!" Very often it would turn out that the person put on the spot had, through some modest stroke of fortune, just come into possession of a few thousand dollars. Sometimes, however, Patten would hit a penniless but highly susceptible and conscientious member of the congregation; when this happened, Patten would urge the victim to hurry off to a bank and take out a loan in order to make his pledge good. One member of the congregation, a seventy-year-old barber named Gustave Rode, gave different banks five promissory notes, for a total of $6,150, in order to fulfill his pledges to Patten, and at one period his payments on these loans came to more than four hundred dollars a month. How seriously members of the congregation took these obligations, and the weight of the burden they often imposed, can be gathered from a letter that Rode enclosed with his final payment on one of the notes:

Dear Sir: Enclosed please find cashier's check to the amount of $232.00 (two hundred and thirty-two dollars) which is to cancel my debt. Thank you for your patience you had with me for months and months. Well, I had to sell the shop; that's the only way I could make it. Now we are square and I am free—that's one good consolation. Now will you kindly send me a receipt? I am,

Yours, truly, Gustave A. Rode

**Being "Put on the Spot," You Can Give or Go To Hell!**

In an effort to describe the experience of being put on the spot, another member of the congregation declared, "All of a sudden, you had to make a choice—on the one hand there was this thousand dollars you could give, and on the other hand there was Hell." The services, then, were not only dramatic but dangerous; the congregation never knew where the lightning would strike next. A woman parishioner, who had often been the butt of Patten's jokes, and whom he had once playfully said he was considering leaving on the bottom of the baptismal tank, was among the few who ever attempted to resist his demands. "I just haven't got the money," she said when he put her on the spot for two hundred dollars one day. Shortly afterward, her son, who was in the Army, fell seriously ill in Arizona, and she flew to his bedside. As soon as she returned, Patten put her on the spot again. "It cost her two hundred dollars for the plane trip," Patten told the congregation. "Now she's paying double. If she'd given two hundred dollars in the first place, it wouldn't have happened." His victim had had enough trouble, and pledged the two hundred.

**Patten Extracts A Promissory Note For $5,523.83 On The Off Chance His Kin Will Regard It As Legal**

Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson has written, in an opinion pertaining to the conviction, for using the mails to defraud, of the founder of a Los Angeles cult called the I AM sect, "The chief wrong which false prophets do to their following is not financial. The collections aggregate a tempting total, but individual payments are not ruinous." It is a nice generalization, but it certainly did not apply to the payments made to Patten, who took every last penny from a considerable number of his followers. In Rode's case, when there wasn't another cent left, Patten extracted from the old man a final promissory note for $5,523.83—on the off chance, apparently, that after Rode's death some of his kin might be foolish enough to regard the note as a legal obligation.

**Bankers Are Conned**

Although Patten liked to claim that the initial "C" in his name stood for Cash, he might have said, with almost equal aptness, that it stood for Credit. Throughout his years in Oakland, he borrowed constantly from every source he could tap. "God's business man of the hour" was what he often styled himself, and the bankers of Oakland seem to have been just as charmed as the congregation was by his bold, hearty manner, his open countenance, and his air of purposeful sincerity. For instance, as soon as he had collected enough money to make the first payment on the lot he had chosen as the site of his tabernacle, he engaged in what had become his standard practice: he negotiated a loan on the property. In this case, he managed to obtain a bank loan of ten thousand dollars immediately after making a down payment of eight thousand dollars. The pleasure of obtaining a loan amounting to a hundred and twenty-five per cent of the collateral is something that the average citizen can never hope to experience, but it was by no means unusual for Patten. In one year, one bank alone lent him a total of $448,000, most of which, commingled in riotously unbusiness-like confusion with funds contributed by his congregation, he used in real-estate speculations, which he liked to call "business adventures for God." From the Bank of America and the Bank of Commerce, he obtained, during 1947, ten completely unsecured loans, totaling ninety-five thousand dollars. For several months in 1946, the Bank of Commerce permitted him to go along without making any payment at all on a loan of a hundred and seventy-nine thousand dollars, and almost daily during that time this same institution where he had one of his personal checking accounts, tolerated overdrafts running as high as twenty-nine thousand dollars. When he presently decided that he wanted to start a radio station, he had no trouble in getting a number of leading bank officials (one of whom later became Oakland's city manager) to vouch for his character and probity to the Federal Communications Commission. (Patten's success with banks furnishes substantiation of a theory once propounded by Joseph R. Weil, who as the Yellow Kid, was famous as one of the shrewdest confidence men of our era; according to Weil, bankers are among the best marks to be found, and if a con man can’t fool a banker, he should really consider taking up some other line of work.)

**“I Want You to Build an Orphanage”**

While still collecting funds toward the construction of the tabernacle; Patten began awakening his congregation to the need for building an orphanage forthwith, as well as for establishing the proposed radio station to spread the gospel powerfully and unceasingly. The idea for the orphanage came to Patten, he has said, while he was riding in a plane one day in May, 1946. As he later described it, he was sitting quietly in his seat, bothering nobody, when out of a clear blue sky, God struck up a conversation with him as follows:

God: I want you to build an orphanage for Me. Will you do it?

Patten: Lord, I don’t see how I can do it with everything else I have to do, but if You say build an orphanage, then I’ll build one.

**Purchased 420 Acre Ranch for Orphanage**

The collection receipts on the Sunday Patten reported this conversation were around ten thousand dollars, and subsequent offerings, as he colorfully embroidered the outlines of his latest grand design, were still more lavish. Under the stimulus of Patten’s rhapsodic prose, the members of his congregation glowed as they thought how glorious it would be to hear broadcast from their own radio station, atop the tower of their own ten-story tabernacle, the sweet, childish voices of orphans who had found haven in their own orphanage, singing hymns of praise and thanks. As a site for the orphanage, Patten bought, for thirty-two thousand dollars, a four-hundred-and-twenty-acre ranch in handsome rolling country about eighty miles north of Oakland. Like other Patten projects, this one tended to generate a host of subsidiary ventures. The orphanage, it developed, was going to require building materials that were expensive and hard to get; it therefore struck Patten as logical to ask his followers to buy him an interest in a hardware store, and they did. The place had to be stocked, if it was to be worthy of being called a ranch, so blue-blooded cattle had to be bought, as well as sheep, goats, riding horses, chickens, and—for some reason that Patten at the time probably made seem not only plausible but even of the utmost urgency—peacocks.

**Easier to Acquire Peacocks Than Orphans!**

It turned out to be much easier to acquire peacocks for the orphanage than orphans. As the months went by, Patten told one glib story after another. First he said he had seven or eight orphans in San Francisco, just waiting for the dormitories to be finished. (Dormitories capable of holding two hundred children were supposed to be under construction at the ranch.) Then he announced that New York City's chief of police was holding a batch of Greek orphans for him and would ship them as soon as he gave the word. Next, there were all sorts of legal and technical difficulties. It seemed that it wasn't as easy as one might think to get hold of orphans, but the congregation wasn't to worry, he's get some somehow—he knew a man in Washington who would cut through the red tape for him. "It's all in knowing the right man to get things done, and also in having the ready cash," he sometimes said.

**Patten Buys Another Ranch!**

A former student at the Oakland Bible Institute recalls that every now and again during this period a wave of rumors would go around that the orphans were on the way, and then there would be much excitement and elation. Once, teasing the congregation, Patten announced that there was one orphan settled on the ranch, at any rate. He was a man in his fifties, whose parents were, true enough, no longer alive. Although the caretaker remained the only orphan on the place, Patten was presently able to persuade the congregation that the adjoining ranch had to be acquired—to prevent the children, when they did arrive, from being contaminated by a roadhouse that he said might otherwise be built there. "I bought another ranch" was the way Patten began his collection appeal on October 27th. "Now, hold it a minute. Let me tell you about it. I am not getting ready to start farming. We bought the ranch next to the ranch we have up there now…" He then went into his explanation of why it was vital to acquire this new property. "That give us everything we need. We will be opening the orphanage, I believe, by the grace of God, before the Bible School itself gets up there." The Oakland Bible Institute students were planning to visit the ranch the following month. "Now, I will tell you what we have got to have this morning. We have got to have three thousand five hundred and fourteen dollars and sixty cents. I haven't even got the sixty cents—ha, ha. You folks sure keep me broke. I…" And on he went, shifting from breezy congeniality to scorn and threats as the mood came upon him, or as he encountered any hesitation about compliance with his demands. "Some of you people are froze up—froze up. There's not much more life in you than in the North Pole. I'm telling you that God is knocking at your hearts and telling eighteen of you to give fifty dollars apiece. And somebody is going to get hit if you don't raise your hands and give…All right, I would like two in the right-hand balcony. I'll tell you who the two are. One of them if Brother Sheppard. And Evelyn—where are you? Stand up, Evelyn. You pray right now, and I'll talk to your dad later. Bless you, Jesus. What do you say, Brother Sheppard? Bless you, you gave…" This collection, one of Patten's more arduous ones, took well over an hour.

**Aimee Semple McPherson's Ears Offended By Jangle Of Coins**

Comparisons of the results that Patten obtained by his outrageous methods with the collections of other evangelists are difficult to make. With only a few exceptions--Dwight Moody, Gipsy Smith, and Billy Graham are the outstanding ones--evangelists have tended to be closemouthed about the size of their offerings. Many of them have maintained that they were financially accountable to nobody but their Maker--a claim that Patten's attorneys also made, as a defense, at his trial. The rip-roaring Billy Sunday, whose income from revivalism shortly after the First World War was rumored to be around a hundred thousand dollars a year, is known on occasion to have challenged his audience with "If there's any man here feels it's his business how much money I'm receiving, let him step forward and I'll knock his block off." During the twenties, it is said, Aimee Semple McPherson--who used to tell her audiences that her delicate ears were offended by the jangle of coins, and who passed clotheslines down into the auditorium for people to pin their greenbacks to--raised as much as twenty thousand dollars at one meeting of around five thousand people. The collections made in recent years at Billy Graham's meetings are quite another matter, both in the way they are taken up and in the way records of them are kept and published. Graham is, in face, a sort of organization man of evangelism. A central corporation--the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Inc.--handles the financial aspect of his general religious

activities, and a separate corporation is set up in every city where he conducts one of his campaigns. Each corporation is run by local businessmen, church officials, and other community leaders, and at services it is one of these people who calls for the offering. The largest collection ever made at a Graham meeting was in the neighborhood of forty thousand dollars, from a crowd estimated at a hundred thousand people in Yankee Stadium in 1957. Graham himself takes up no collections, though at times he has been known to utter a crisp reminder of how costly it is to rent an arena these days. All the proceeds from Graham's books, films, television programs, and so on, go to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, from which he receives a salary of fifteen thousand dollars a year. This glass-fishbowl type of operation has been worked out by Graham only in the last decade. Before 1950, he was a free, unincorporated agent, taking up his own collections and making his living from the customary "love offerings" accounting to no one, like most evangelists. The impulse that led him to break this pattern, he has said, was his distress at seeing, in an Atlanta newspaper, a photograph of stacks of cartons full of the money collected at one of his meetings, which seemed to him to convey the implication that he was capitalizing on religion. Such misgivings, it would seem, never disturbed C. Thomas Patten, who once posed for newspaper photographers wearing his dollar-sign-emblazoned necktie and with a bouquet of greenbacks sprouting from his lapel, and who used to say, "I read the Bible through, and I never found any place where it said a preacher had to be broke."

**Gussa Norton Receives an Inheritance Check**

If Patten was a virtuoso at collecting money, there is no denying that, as time went by, many members of his congregation developed increasing virtuosity at contributing it. One woman, who donated a total of around five thousand dollars to the Pattens, recalls that during their reign in Oakland she became as cunning as a bank embezzler at juggling the entries in her various checking and savings accounts to prevent her husband, who did not approve of her largess, from finding out what she was up to. Certain followers of Patten’s seem at times to have deliberately courted exploitation. A woman named Mrs. Gussa Norton, for instance, a middle-aged nurse from Des Moines, whose great ambition was to become a missionary, was the victim of an unpleasant demonstration of Patten’s rapacity. Shortly after she began attending the services, she dropped a ring into the collection plate one day, together with a note saying that she was donating the diamond but would like the gold setting back, because she wanted to pass it on to her daughter. Not only was the setting never returned but Patten was brusque and noncommittal when she ventured to ask him about it. Nevertheless, when Mrs. Norton received a check for the proceeds from a small inheritance the following year, she hurried down to Patten’s office before cashing it, to ask him if he needed any money. “Man, man, do I ever!” Patten replied. “How much you got?” Her check was for $4,252. Patten figured out that she owed $425.20 as her tithe on the inheritance and $395 in back pledges. He then gave Mrs. Norton $232 in cash, saying that should be ample to take care of her wants and telling her that he would hold the remaining $3,200 for her. During the following ten months, this was simply eroded away as Patten persistently extracted new pledges and donations from Mrs. Norton. Later, when she went to him to seek an accounting, Patten asked her to let him see the IOU he had written for the $3,200. She handed it over, and he tore it up and walked away. It would be logical to suppose that at this point Mrs. Norton started looking for the nearest policeman. Actually she did no such thing but continued meekly as a member of the Patten church, as did most of Patten’s other dupes.

**Rode Experienced “Warm Bath of Blessing”**

While testifying as a prosecution witness at Patten’s trial, Rode, the elderly barber upon whom Patten had planned to attempt posthumous extortion, reminisced with obvious nostalgia about the Patten church meetings, where, he said he had so often experienced a “warm bath of blessed feeling.” “The doors were hardly ever opened but I was there,” he continued. “I attended every revival with the exception of a few, because they were so attractive to me.” And he testified, with manifest gratitude and awe, that through her faith-healing prayers Bebe Patten had cured him of a hernia “in the twinkling of an eye.” To him, and to most of the other members of the congregation during those years, all the things that were happening at the Patten church—the tremendous sums given for the projects that Patten had dreamed

up, the purchase of the City Club, the faith healings, the struggle against unbelievers—not only represented the central drama in their own otherwise drab lives but also loomed, in the words of the Patten Revivalist, as “the greatest miracle and the greatest work of faith of the present age…It has surpassed anything yet seen and known by Christendom since the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.” The members of the congregation thought of Patten as possessing a special kind of fantastic practicality that would enable him, as one wrote in the Portal, to “accomplish the impossible with natural materials in a materialistic world”—in other words, to transform Rode’s warm bath of blessed feeling into a brand-new electrically heated baptismal tank. Long after it should have been obvious that Patten had no intention of keeping his promises, the congregation remained trustingly hopeful that all the visions would suddenly flower into fulfillment: the orphanage, the tabernacle, the radio station and Glory! Glory!

**Liquidate Ranches and Pocket Money!**

As far as can be ascertained, none of these unrealized aspirations troubled Patten in the least. Occasionally, on a Sunday evening, he and his wife would drive up to the still orphanless ranch in one of their several Cadillacs, and spend a day or so in communion with nature, shooing the peacocks out of the way as they strolled about the grounds, and taking long horseback rides through the lovely countryside. No dormitories were ever built, or even started; no orphans were ever received; and a couple of years after buying the property Patten quietly sold it, pocketing the proceeds. The tabernacle and most of the other projects for which Patten ransacked his followers’ pocketbooks and tantalized their faith suffered much the same fate. He always made what appeared to be a start toward the fulfillment of his exuberant promises, but then obstacles of one sort or another would inevitably be encountered, and ultimately, without consulting the congregation or rendering an accounting to them, he would liquidate whatever investment had been made, often realizing a good profit.

**75 Suits and 200 Hand-Tooled Cowboy Boots!**

In Oakland, the Pattens lived luxuriously in a house that the congregation had bought them in the most fashionable part of town. Bebe Patten engaged the Hollywood couturier Adrian to design a form-fitting white satin gown for her, while Patten indulged his own brand of conspicuous sartorial consumption; at one point, his closet contained seventy-five suits and two hundred pairs of hand-tooled cowboy boots, some of the latter having cost as much as two hundred dollars a pair. One might have expected the members of the congregation, austere in their own habits and otherworldly in their religion, to be appalled by the Pattens high living; but, for some paradoxical though no doubt psychologically explicable reason, this seems to have been one of the least of their grievances. “We loved those people and wanted them to live well,” recalled Mrs. Martha Griffith, a gentle-natured woman who, in addition to making heavy financial contributions as one of the congregation, served as the Patten’s cook for a while. During a talk with a reporter soon after she had served as a witness at Patten’s trial, she showed no acute regret at the loss of the money she had given. “Money didn’t mean as much to me as it did to Brother Patten,” she explained. “It seemed to mean an awful lot to him.” It was Mrs. Griffith’s opinion that the Pattens didn’t know when they were well off. “I do think they were two of the foolishest young people who ever lived,” she said. “We wanted those people to have everything on earth they desired, if only they had kept their promises to us.”

**Moderation Was Intolerable With The Pattens**

Indeed, it is very likely that if the Pattens had fulfilled even a token number of their promises, they could have continued their flamboyant and profitable career indefinitely there on California’s benign soil, with a constant supply of lonely, rootless, susceptible migrants to draw on as replacements for sheep lost from the flock. If Patten had been cautious enough to avoid making specific representations—such as those concerning the tabernacle and the radio station—he could undoubtedly have gone on employing his “God say” technique with impunity, no matter how profanely he disposed of the money, for the fear of infringing on the First Amendment makes courts loath to prosecute religious figures. As a matter of fact, the California district attorney who later prosecuted Patten conceded that he was unable to find a precedent for a trial that hinged directly on the manner in which church collections were taken up and misused. At

the very least, if Patten had chosen to be somewhat moderate, he and his wife would have been assured of an income of close to fifty thousand dollars a year whose legitimacy no court could challenge, this being the approximate annual total, according to the trial testimony, of the congregation's frequent "love offerings." But moderation was intolerable to Patten's reckless nature. Throughout his career, he seems to have been deliberately pushing his luck. One day in July, 1947, he pushed it farther than it could stand. Tempted by an opportunity to realize a quick profit of about two hundred thousand dollars, he sold to the Loyal Order of Moose, for four hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the City Club building that the church and schools occupied, the very building that had been dedicated so fervently three years before and that the Pattens had sworn would remain as a monument to God "until Christ comes again."

**"If I Throw The Money Into Lake Merritt, It Is Nobody's Business!"**

This was the greatest disillusionment the congregation could have suffered, and for the first time some members were bold enough to remonstrate with Patten. In his usual highhanded fashion, he retorted, "it's nobody's business what my wife and I do with our property." He brushed aside the suggestion that he was obligated to use for church purposes the money he had solicited at church meetings, declaring that evangelists couldn't be held financially accountable. "If I'd wanted to, I could have throwed that money into Lake Merritt," he said. It was soon after this that, as an ultimate demonstration of his persuasiveness, he took up his collection for money to throw into that body of water. Despite such bravado, he presently decided that it would be expedient to pay off some of the loans his parishioners had made to him at the time he purchased the building. Walking into the auditorium one Sunday when the congregation had assembled for the service, he began taking wads of green-backs out of his pockets and piling them on the pulpit. "All right, now," he called, " "Come and get it, everybody here I've borrowed money from." He claimed to have paid off forty-five thousand dollars worth of debts then and there, and even though the total was probably not as high as that, Patten being congenitally unable to resist the temptation to exaggerate, those who were present agree that the occasion was spectacular. The sight of Patten passing out money to members of his congregation, instead of taking it from them, was something many of them had never expected to see this side of Paradise. When he had disbursed all the greenbacks on the pulpit, the service proceeded on its normal course--hymns, prayers, announcements, and then, of course, a collection by Patten. There is no record of how much of his money he took right back.

**F.C.C. Turns Down Radio Station Offer**

In September, 1947, soon after the sale of the church building, the Federal Communications Commission held a hearing in Oakland on Patten's application for a radio station. This was his second hearing before the F.C.C., the first one having been held in Washington some months previously. At the Washington inquiry, Patten apparently got along quite famously with the F.C.C. members and their lawyers, representing himself throughout the interview mainly as a wealthy Southern real estate man who liked to indulge his wife in her religious efforts. The Oakland hearing was a different matter. In the course of this session, a good many of the multitudinous misrepresentations that Patten had made first in his application and then in Washington, came to light. Several of the people he had named as references repudiated him, and a spokesman for the Oakland Council of Churches told the F.C.C., "The Patten church meetings are highly emotional and hysterical. They are a racket dealing in mass hysteria, and a money-making device." Even though some of the bankers who had fallen under the spell of God's businessman of the hour came forth to vouch for his sterling character and remarkable sense of enterprise, on the whole the F.C.C. was most unfavorably impressed, and after deliberation it turned the application down. The denial was based chiefly, the F.C.C.'s report stated, on "grave doubt as to the credibility of the applicant." Among other things, it appeared that Patten had lied about his assets, his income, his sponsors, his purposes, his occupation, his relation to the congregation, his criminal record, his charitable contributions, and his status in the community. He had told the F.C.C. that he had never solicited money at church meetings for the purpose of building a radio station, whereas he had taken up numerous collections specifically for that project; moreover, one of them, amounting to something like thirty thousand dollars, was probably the largest of his career. Reviewing his testimony, the F.C.C. report declared soberly, "These misrepresentations indicate an underlying

propensity on the part of the applicant to embellish or manufacture facts whenever he might consider it to his advantage to do so." The F.C.C. was obviously perplexed by the exuberant purposelessness of Patten's mendacity at times, for he seems to have produced some of his lies as unthinkingly as larks sing, but the Commission dug up an excerpt from a Supreme Court decision that it found relevant to the situation. "We do not think it is an answer," the court had declared, "to say that the deception was unnecessary and served no purpose."

**City Club Sold To The Order of Moose!**

The sale of the church building, followed by the fiasco of the radio station, marked a turning point, and from 1948 on the Patten star declined rapidly. Many people resigned from the congregation. The Veterans Administration withdrew its approval of the Patten's schools, and enrollment fell off. Presently, it became known that Patten had sold both ranches and the site for the tabernacle as well. It proved difficult to find another location for his schools and church, and he delayed moving from the City Club building until the Order of Moose, eager to take possession, went to court and had him evicted. Eventually, he found another building, but his congregation was none too happy with it; all the gold-and-purple drapery could not hide its shabbiness. Despite the resignations, Patten and his wife still had a sizable congregation. A surprising number of followers found that disengaging themselves from the Pattens—in whom they had such a large stake, spiritual as well as financial—was not a simple or painless matter; most of those who did break away had to find other spiritual solace first. A few of the disillusioned, however, went to the district attorney's office with their complaints. When Patten heard that he was under investigation, he seemed highly amused. "The D.A. can't prove I'm taking money under false pretenses. You can't prove that against a church," he told newspapermen. He blamed the moves against him on a cabal of Oakland's stodgy established clergymen. "All the other churches are mad because we cleaned them out," he said cheerfully, "None of them get crowds like we do. We have stolen their sheep."

**Reno Escapades!**

With these various unpleasantnesses developing in Oakland, Patten began to seek diversion by slipping off to Reno for gambling sessions. The atmosphere of the casinos--the display of large amounts of cash, the sudden strokes of fortune, the swift gain and loss, the opportunities for suicidal recklessness and large ruinous gestures--was probably very congenial to his spirit. But in Reno, as in Oakland, he pushed his luck too far. After his second visit, he paid for his losses at a casino called the Palace Club with two checks amounting to forty-two hundred dollars, which bounced. When the club sent a collection agent to Oakland, the amused Patten allowed that there must have been some mistake at the bank, and wrote out two more checks, which proved to be just as worthless. The collector came again, and Patten grandly traded him two brand-new rubber checks for the old ones. This episode quite disturbed the faith of the manager of the Palace Club, a man known as Baldy West. By Baldy West's standards, it was all right if ministers wanted to gamble, but it was unthinkable that they should welsh on their debts--not because West deemed them more honest than secular gamblers but because he took it for granted that they were more vulnerable to public exposure. "I knew he was a minister all along--that was why I took his checks," West later told a district attorney's investigator rather sorrowfully. "I figured he wouldn't dare run the risk of any trouble."

**Patten Before a Grand Jury**

On November 4, 1949, Patten was summoned before a grand jury, which asked him if he believed in God. Patten refused to answer the question, on the ground that his reply might tend to degrade or incriminate him. He responded in the same way to the jury's hundred or more subsequent questions, most of which, more pertinent to a jury's inquiry than that about his private beliefs, concerned his collections and what he had done with the proceeds. Shortly thereafter, he was indicted on ten counts of grand theft, embodying charges of embezzlement and two forms of fraud: taking money under false pretenses, and obtaining money by trick and device. On February 14, 1950, his trial began. It was unique in California's judicial annals not only because of its length--four and a half months, which set a record for criminal jury trials in the state--but also because of the camp-meeting atmosphere that Patten and his followers brought to the proceedings. Soon after the case began, a procession of Patten's embattled faithful, carrying signs that read "GIVE RELIGIOUS

FREEDOM BACK TO THE UNITED STATES!" and praying for miraculous intervention, marched for hours round and round the county courthouse, like Joshua's army at Jericho. To their disappointment, the courthouse--a fireproof, earthquake-proof, and apparently prayerproof building--didn't even tremble. As the trial proceeded, these disciples, wearing their "P" sweaters packed the courtroom day after day; they chorused "Amen!" to the testimony of defense witnesses, glowered at the prosecution table, laughed with delight at Patten's constant sallies and asides, and ran errands that he kept thinking up for them--all to the increasing exasperation of the judge and bailiff.

Though Patten's followers were intensely agitated, Patten himself remained unperturbed. (A court appointed psychiatrist who gave him some elaborate but not particularly revealing tests could not help marveling at the low score he racked up on the anxiety index.) From the start of the trial, he manifested a cheerful contempt for the processes of the law and made no attempt to modify his grand and reckless manner. Changing his garb during each luncheon recess, he wore twenty-one different suits in a row before his attorneys were able to persuade him that the effect of this display on the jury might not be entirely salutary. During the thirteen days he was on the stand, he appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. Lolling back in the witness chair until it was tipped at the most precarious angle—as if in this regard, as in all others, he was trying to see just how far he could go—with his legs crossed and a cowboy-booted foot swinging jauntily, he tossed off witticisms, suggested questions for his attorneys to ask him, helpfully pointed out to the prosecution statements in his testimony to which they might well register objections, blandly told lies, and then, his right hand upraised and his round, hearty countenance stamped with an expression of utter frankness and transparent honesty, even more blandly lied about the lies that the jury had just heard him tell. Often, after some particularly outrageous remark, he turned his head and beamed at the judge, and he did this so genially that the judge could not resist smiling back. Eventually, the judge had to turn his chair away in order to save the court's face.

In general, Patten acted as if he were being challenged not so much to refute the prosecution's accusations as to top them. As assistant district attorney, Miss Cecil Mosbacher, presented evidence to show that from 1944 to 1948 the Pattens had deposited $1,354,706 in their personal bank accounts, of which, after all other possible sources had been eliminated, $691,640 must have come from the church congregation. To this Patten amiably replied that, impressive as the sum of $691,640 must seem, it didn't really represent half of what he had obtained from his congregation during that time; he liked to pay his bills with cash, he said, so most of the money he collected never even got to the bank. After that day's session, he told reporters that he had probably been too modest in his assertion, and that the total of what he had got from his congregation was probably more like four times the prosecution's carefully compiled figures—in other words, over two and a half million dollars. (The mention of such considerable sums inevitably made a sharp impression on at least one observer—Ralph Read, chief of the Internal Revenue Bureau's Intelligence Unit in the district, who told the press that even though "income-tax evasion is very difficult to prove against persons in religious enterprises," he intended to start looking into Patten's tax returns. The Bureau, as is customary did not reveal the results of his investigation, but it is understood that a substantial settlement was worked out with Patten.)

**Patten Offers To Take Up Collection**

The only time that Patten seemed really stung during the trial was when Richard H. Chamberlain, the chief assistant district attorney, referred to an occasion when Patten had supposedly asked his congregation for an offering of twenty thousand dollars, which he had failed to obtain. "Mr. Chamberlain," Patten replied, becoming deadly serious "I never attempted to raise a sum of money that I started in to raise without raising it." His equanimity restored, Patten offered to take up a collection in the courtroom to show just how the process worked, an offer hastily rejected by the state, whose attorneys apparently felt unable to vouch for the powers of resistance of anyone in the room—spectators, jury, judge, bailiff, court clerk, even themselves—if exposed to the full force of Patten's spellbinding. "Too bad," Patten remarked. "I was reckoning on raising a little something to help pay for what this here trial is costing me."

**Bebe "Set The Stage On Which He Operated"**

The state carefully constructed its case around the host of misrepresentations that Patten had made in his collection

spiels and the myriad promises he had failed to keep. Patten's defense—when his lawyers bestirred him into offering one—consisted mainly of assertions of his righteousness and of his immunity, as a religious leader, from secular proceedings. There were occasional moments, though, when he seemed to be trying to convey the notion that he had really been just a speculative real-estate operator all along, in whose transactions the congregation had for some reason, taken a special interest. His wife made only two appearances in court during the trial, and neither the prosecution nor the defense called her to the stand. For reasons that were never divulged, the state did not seek to indict Bebe Patten along with her husband, although in the course of the trial Miss Mosbacher told the jury, "It was she who made the emotional appeal, she who set the stage upon which he operated…They conspired together to defraud and deceive this community." What happened to all the money that the couple acquired has never been explained. Some of it may have been lost in Patten's real-estate ventures and in his gambling; most was squandered on personal luxury and ostentation; and an indeterminate amount was spent on church business; and an unknown—perhaps large—amount may have been tucked away somewhere. Every now and then during the trial, Patten dropped tantalizing hints about a steamer trunk full of greenbacks that, he said, his wife owned and kept the key to, but the existence and contents of this piece of luggage have remained a mystery.

**Sentenced to 7 Years in Prison, But Served 3**

At the end of nineteen weeks, a period that spectators with a sense of form may have recognized as that of the Patten's revival when they first came to Oakland, the trial ended, with Patten found guilty on five counts. He was sentenced to seven years in prison, of which he served only three, before his release on account of a cardiac condition. During his stay in the penitentiary, his wife maintained the church and seminary in Oakland, in much reduced circumstances, as she still does. After his parole in 1953, and until his death last May, Patten assisted her with various duties, but only in a desultory fashion, being seriously hampered by the terms of his parole. These terms--probably as unusual as any that have ever been promulgated--were that he could go back into church work if he wished but that he must never again take up a collection.