

Black Rock

By RALPH CONNOR

CHAPTER XIV. GRAEME'S NEW BIRTH.

HERE was more left in that grave than old man Nelson's dead body. It seemed to me that Graeme left part at least of his old self there with his dead friend and comrade in the quiet country churchyard. I waited long for the old careless, reckless spirit to appear, but he was never the same again. The change was unmistakable, but hard to define. He seemed to have resolved his life into a definite purpose. He was hardly so comfortable a fellow to be with; he made me feel even more 'lame and useless than was my wont, but I respected him more and liked him none the less. As a lion he was not a success. He would not roar. This was disappointing to me and to his friends and mine, who had been waiting his return with eager expectation of tales of thrilling and blood-thirsty adventure.

His first days were spent in making right, or as nearly right as he could, the break that drove him to the west. His old firm—and I have had more respect for the humanity of lawyers ever since—behaved really well. They proved the rectitude of their confidence in his integrity and ability by offering him a place in the firm, which, however, he would not accept. Then, when he felt clean, as he said, he posted off home, taking me with him. During the railway journey of four hours he hardly spoke, but when we had left the town behind and had fairly got upon the country road that led toward the home ten miles away his speech came to him in a great flow. His spirits ran over. He was like a boy returning from his first college term. His eyes were the boy's open, innocent, earnest look that used to attract men to him in his first college year. His delight in the fields and woods, in the sweet country air and the sunlight, was without bound. How often had we driven this road together in the old days.

Every turn was familiar. The swamp where the mammals stood straight and slim out of their beds of moss; the brule, where we used to call it, where the pine stumps, huge and blackened, were half hidden by the new growth of poplars and soft maples; the big hills, and we used to get out and walk a soon roads were made to the orchards, where the harvest apples were best and most accessible—all had their memories.

It was one of those perfect afternoons that so often come in the quiet Canadian summer before nature has wearily with the heat. The white road was unhampered on either side by a turf of bright green, close cropped by the sheep that wandered in flocks along its whole length. Beyond the picturesque snake fences stretched the fields of spring grain, of various shades of green, with here and there a dark brown patch, marking a turnip field or summer fallow, and far back were the woods of maple and beech and elm, with here and there the tufted top of a mighty pine, the lonely representative of a vanished race, standing clear above the humbler trees.

As we drove through the big swamp, where the yawning, haunted gully plunges down to its gloomy depths, Graeme reminded me of that night when our horse saw something in that same gully and refused to go past, and I felt again, though it was broad daylight, something of the growl that shivered down my back as I saw in the moonlight the gleam of a white thing set far through the pine trunks.

As we came nearer home the houses became familiar. Every house had its tale. We had eaten or slept in most of them; we had sampled apples and cherries and plums from their orchards, openly as guests or secretly as marauders, under cover of night—the more beautiful way, I fear. Ah, happy days, with those innocent crimes and daring remorse how bravely we faced them, and how early we lived them, and how reassuringly we look back at them now! The sun was just dipping into the troughs of the distant woods behind us as we came to the top of the last hill that overlooked the valley in which lay the village of Riverdale. Wooded hills stood about it on three sides, and where the hills faded out there lay the millpond sleeping and smiling in the sun. Through the village ran the white road, up past the old frame church and on to the white manse, hiding among the trees. That was Graeme's home and mine, too, for I had never known another worthy of the name. We had up our team to look down over the valley, with its ramparts of wooded hills, its shining pond and its smiling village. The sun was in the pines, the warm, loving, benevolent of the scene, came about us like the hand of a loving man, we could feel his work.

"Let's go," said Graeme, and down the hill we were as I reached and weayed, to the atmosphere of the steady breeze, whose eddies from the earliest years had impressed upon their minds the ordinance of attempting to do something, but walk carefully down a hill, at least for two-thirds of the way. Through the village is a cloud of dust, we swept, catching a glimpse of a well known face here and there and flinging a salutation as we passed, leaving the owner of the face rooted to his place in astonishment at the sight of Graeme walking on in his old time, well known

reckless manner. Only old Dunc McLeod was equal to the moment, for as Graeme called out, "Hello, Dunc!" the old man lifted up his hands and called back in an awed voice:

"Bless my soul! Is it yourself?"

"Stands his whisky well, poor old chap!" was Graeme's comment.

As we neared the church he pulled up his team, and we went quietly past the sleepers there, then again on the full run down the gentle slope, over the little brook and up to the gate. He had hardly got his team pulled up before, flinging me the lines, he was out over the wheel, for coming down the walk, with her hands lifted high, was a dainty little lady, with the face of an angel. In a moment Graeme had her in his arms. I heard the faint cry, "My boy, my boy!" and got down on the other side to attend to my off horse, surprised to find my hands trembling and my eyes full of tears. Back upon the steps stood an old gentleman, with white hair and flowing beard, handsome, straight and stately. Graeme's father, waiting his turn.

"Welcome home, my lad!" was his greeting as he kissed his son, and the tremor of his voice and the sight of the two men kissing each other, like women, sent me again to my horses' heads. "There's Connor, mother!" shouted out Graeme, and the dainty little lady, in her black silk and white lace, came out to me quickly, with outstretched hands.

"You, too, are welcome home," she said and kissed me.

I stood with my hat off, saying something about being glad to come, but wishing that I could get away before I should make quite a fool of myself, for as I looked down upon that beautiful face, pale, except for a faint flush upon each faded cheek, and read the story of pain endured and conquered, and as I thought of all the long years of waiting and of vain hoping, I found my throat dry and sore, and the words would not come. But her quick sense needed no words, and she came to my help.

"You will find Jack at the stable," she said, smiling. "He ought to have been here."

"I should like to see you out there, sir," said Graeme admiringly. "You'd get them, but you wouldn't have time for election."

"Yes, yes," said his father warmly; "I should love to have a chance just to preach election to those poor lads. Would I were twenty years younger?"

"It is worth a man's life," said Graeme earnestly.

His younger brother turned his face eagerly toward the mother. For answer she slipped her hand into his and said softly, while her eyes shone like stars:

"Some day, Jack, perhaps, God knows."

But Jack only looked steadily at her, smiling a little and patting her hand.

"You'd shine there, mother," said Graeme, smiling upon her. "You'd better come with me."

She started and said faintly:

"With you?" It was the first hint he had given of his purpose. "You are going back?"

"What—as a missionary?" said Jack.

"Not to preach, Jack—I'm not orthodox enough," looking at his father and shaking his head—"but to build railroads and lend a hand to some poor chap if I can."

"Could you not find work nearer home, my boy?" asked the father.

"There is plenty of both kinds near us here surely."

"Lots of work, but not mine, I fear," answered Graeme, keeping his eyes away from his mother's face. "A man must do his own work."

His voice was quiet and resolute, and, glancing at the beautiful face at the end of the table, I saw in the pale lips and yearning eyes that the mother was offering up her firstborn, that ancient sacrifice. But not all the agony of sacrifice could wring from her entreaty or complaint in the hearing of her sons. That was for other ears and for the silent hours of the night. And next morning, when she came down to meet us, her face was wan and weary, but it wore the peace of victory and a glory not of earth. Her greeting was full of dignity, sweet and gentle, but when she came to Graeme she lingered over him and kissed him twice, and that was all that any of us ever saw of that sore fight.

At the end of the week I took leave of them and last of all of the mother.

She hesitated just a moment, then suddenly put her hands upon my shoulders and kissed me, saying softly:

"You are his friend. You will sometimes come to me?"

"Gladly if I may." I hastened to answer, for the sweet, brave face was too much to bear, and till she left us that part of world of which she was a part I kept my word, to my own great and lasting good.

When Graeme met me in the city at the end of the summer, he brought me her love and then burst forth:

"Connor, do you know, I have just discovered my mother. I have never known her till this summer."

"More fool you," I answered, for often had I, who had never known a mother, envied him his.

"Yes; that is true," he answered shortly, "but you cannot see until you have eyes."

Before he set out again for the west I gave him a supper, asking the men who had been with us in the old varsity days. I was doubtful as to the wisdom of this and was persuaded only by Graeme's eager assent to my proposal.

"Certainly; let's have them," he said. "I shall be awfully glad to see them. Great stuff they were."

"But I don't know, Graeme. You see—well, hang it—you know—you're different, you know."

He looked at me curiously.

"I hope I can still stand a good supper, and if the boys can't stand me, why, I can't help it. I'll do anything but roar, and don't you begin to work off your menagerie act. Now, you hear me?"

"Well, it is rather hard lines that when I have been talking up my lion for a year and then finally secure him he will not roar."

"Serve you right," he replied quite heartlessly. "But I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll feed! Don't you worry," he added soothingly. "The supper will go."

And so it did. The supper was of the best, the wines first class. I had asked Graeme about the wines.

"Do as you like, old man," was his answer. "It's your supper. But," he added, "are the men all straight?"

I ran them over in my mind.

"Yes, I think so."

"If not, don't you help them down, and anyway you can't be too careful. But don't mind me. I am quit of the whole business from this out."

"No, my boy. You don't feed babes with meat. But what came to him?"

Then Graeme asked me to finish the tale. After I had finished the story of Billy's final triumph and of Craig's part in it they sat long silent till the minister, clearing his throat hard and blowing his nose more like a trumpet than ever, said, with great emphasis:

"Thank God for such a man in such a place! I wish there were more of us like him."

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So I ventured wines, for the last time, as it happened.

We were a quaint combination—old "Beetles," whose nickname was prophetic of his future fame as a bugman, as the fellows irreverently said; "Stumpy" Smith, a demon bowler; "Polly" Lindsay, slow as ever and as sure as when he held the halfback line with Graeme and used to make my heart stand still at his cool deliberation. But he was never known to fumble or fink, and somehow he always got us out safe enough. Then there were Rattray—"Rat" for short—who, from a swell, had developed into a cynic with a sneer, awfully clever and a good enough fellow at heart; little "Wig" Martin, the sharpest quarter ever seen, and Barney Lundy, center scrapper, whose terrific roar and rush had often

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struck terror to the enemy's heart and who was Graeme's slave. Such was the party.

As the supper went on my fears began to vanish, for if Graeme did not roar he did the next best thing—ate and talked quite up to his old form. Now we played our matches over again, bitterly lamenting the "ifs" that had lost us the championships and wildly approving the tackles that had saved and the runs that had made the varsity crowd go mad with delight and had won for us, and as their names came up in talk we learned how life had gone with those who had been our comrades of ten years ago. Some success had lifted to high places, some failure had left upon the rocks, and a few lay in their graves.

But as the evening wore on I began to wish that I had left out the wines, for the men began to drop an occasional oath, though I had let them know during the summer that Graeme was not the man he had been. But Graeme smoked and talked and heeded not till Rattray swore by that name most sacred of all ever borne by man. Then Graeme opened upon him in a cool, slow way:

"What an awful fool a man is to damn things as you do, Rat! Things are not damned. It is men who are, and that is too bad to be talked much about. But when a man flings out of his foul mouth the name of Jesus Christ—here he lowered his voice—"it's a shame; it's more—it's a crime."

There was dead silence. Then Rattray replied:

"I suppose you're right enough. It is bad form. But crime is rather strong, I think."

"Not if you consider who it is," said Graeme, with emphasis.

"Oh, come now!" broke in Beetles. "Religion is all right. It is a good thing and, I believe, a necessary thing for the race. But no one takes seriously any longer the Christ myth."

"What about your mother, Beetles?" put in Wig Martin.

Beetles consigned him to the pit and was silent, for his father was an Episcopal clergyman and his mother a saintly woman.

"I fooled with that for some time, Beetles, but I don't do. You can't build a religion that will take the devil out of a man on a myth. That won't do the trick. I don't want to argue about it, but I am quite convinced the myth theory is not reasonable, and, besides, it won't work."

"Will the other work?" asked Rattray, with a sneer.

"Sure," said Graeme. "I've seen it."

"Where?" challenged Rattray. "I haven't seen much of it."

"Yes, you have, Rattray; you know you have," said Wig again.

But Rattray ignored him.

"I'll tell you, boys," said Graeme. "I want you to know anyway why I believe what I do."

Then he told them the story of old man Nelson, from the old coast days, before I knew him, to the end. He told the story well. The stern fight and the victory of the life and the self sacrifice and the pathos of the death appealed to these men, who loved fight and could understand sacrifice.

"That's why I believe in Jesus Christ, and that's why I think it a crime to fling his name about."

"I wish to heaven I could say that," said Beetles.

"Keep wishing hard enough, and it will come to you," said Graeme.

"Look here, old chap," said Rattray. "You're quite right about this. I'm willing to own up. Wig is correct. I know a few at least of that stamp, but most of those who go in for that sort of thing are not much account."

"For ten years, Rattray," said Graeme in a downright matter of fact way, "you and I have tried this sort of thing," tapping a bottle, "and we got out of it all there is to be got, paid well for it, too, and, fudge, you know it's not good enough, and the more you go in for it the more you curse yourself. So I have quit this, and I am going in for the other."

"What? Going in for preaching?"

"Not much—mildreding, money in it—and lending a hand to fellows on the rocks."

"I say, don't you want a center forward?" said big Barney in his deep voice.

"Every man must play his game in his place, old chap. I'd like to see you tackle it, though, right well," said Graeme earnestly.

And so he did in the after years, and good tackling it was. But that is another story.

"But, I say, Graeme," persisted Beetles, "about this business—do you mean to say you go the whole thing—Jonah, you know, and the rest of it?"

Graeme hesitated, then said:

"I haven't much of a creed, Beetles; but I really know how much I believe in it, and that's the time he was standing—"

"I do know that good is good, and bad is bad, and good and bad are not the same, and I know a man's a fool to follow the one and a wise man to follow the other, and," lowering his voice, "I believe God is at the back of a man who wants to get done with bad. I've tried all that folly," sweeping his hand over the glasses and bottles, "and all that goes with it, and I've done with it."

"I'll go you that far," roared big Barney, following his old captain as of yore.

"Good man," said Graeme, striking hands with him.

"Put me down," said little Wig cheerfully.

Then I took up the word, for there rose before me the scene in the league saloon, and I saw the beautiful face with the deep, shining eyes, and I was speaking for her again. I told them of Craig and his fight for these men's lives. I told them, too, of how I had been too indolent to begin. "But," I said, "I am going this far from tonight." And I swept the bottles into the champagne tub.

"I say," said Polly Lindsay, coming up in his old style, slow, but sure, "let's all go in, say, for five years."

And so we did. We didn't sign anything, but every man shook hands with Graeme.

And as I told Craig about this a year later, when he was on his way back from his old land trip to join Graeme in the mountains, he threw up his head in the old way and said: "it was well done. It must have been worth seeing. Old man Nelson's work is not done yet. Tell me again." And he made me go over the whole scene, with all the details put in.

But when I told Mrs. Mavor after two years had gone she only said, "Old things are passed away; all things are become new," but the light glowed in her eyes till I could not see their color. But all that, too, is another story.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

novel trouble in Fowls.

"Bowel trouble," says the Country Gentleman, "is frequent in some poultry yards during the hot season. In most cases it is preventable. Foul drinking water, putrid meat and sour food all tend to produce diarrhea in the flock. Observe strict cleanliness in the houses and yards, and give the birds only pure food and water. Blow or dig over the runs frequently, so they don't get the ground sweet. Fowl runs are a prolific source of disease. Keep the grit and charcoal box full, so that the birds may have free access to them. Remember that one 'keep clean' is worth many 'clean ups.' Do not feed meat food too heavily while the weather is hot, and be sure that the fowls have plenty of fresh green food or a clean grass run. Don't overfeed. Quarantine all new arrivals."

A Word About Comb Defects.

Side sprigs on a comb are a serious defect, and it is not advisable to use a bird in the breeding yard that has them, as they are very apt to "show up" on the combs of the chicks from such birds, says the Poultry Herald. We have experimented with such birds and have found that even where this defect did not show up very strong in the chicks of the first season, yet by the use of these chicks the next season, the side sprigs would be very numerous. It is better not to make use of a bird that has them, unless such a bird is one of unusual merit otherwise. Then one might be excused for taking chances in using it. But as a general thing one must avoid such defects if possible, they will be numerous enough without breeding from birds that have them.

Start in a Small Way.

No man that has not handled hundreds of fowls should start in with a big poultry plant. It is better to begin the poultry business as a side issue and gradually develop it. The side issue will teach many lessons that will be valuable when it becomes the main issue. The cost of learning is considerable even with a small flock. With a large flock it frequently becomes so great that the whole enterprise is abandoned. Many a man has sunk a large sum of money in this kind of enterprise because he tried to learn his lessons en masse, with consequent disaster.

Piction in Our Libraries.

In some of the public libraries of the United States the percentage of fiction called for has been reduced below 60. Even this figure is misleading. Novel devotees read three times as fast as those who call for books of other classes. Novels are often skimmed or returned as unsatisfactory after a few chapters are sampled. When the novel reading is sealed down by this consideration the excess of fiction taken out of public libraries is largely reduced.

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Celebrated Her 101st Birthday.
Orange, N. J., Aug. 4.—Miss Jane Elizabeth Hillver, of East Orange, celebrated the 101st anniversary of her birth today. Miss Hillver was born in Madison, and was the daughter of the late Rev. Dr. Asa Hillver, and an aunt of the late Dr. William Pierson. Her father was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Orange, of which she has been a member for 70 years. The aged woman retains all her faculties, but owing to an accident a few years ago is compelled to use crutches.

To Raise Wrecks In Manila Bay.
Washington, Aug. 4.—The ten Spanish vessels sunk by Dewey in Manila Bay are to be raised and sold as junk. The contract has been awarded by the Philippine commission to a construction company to remove the wrecks, and an expert diver has been put to work. No one here has any idea of the value of these vessels, and the contractor has undertaken the work on a speculative basis.

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