

Black Rock

By RALPH CONNOR

(Continued from First Page)

slaying away in that hole and really enjoys it. There must be something in it.

"Oh, look here, Gracie!" I burst out impatiently. "What's the use of your talking like that? Of course there's something in it. There's everything in it. The trouble with me is I can't face the music. It calls for a life where a fellow must go in for straight, steady work, self denial and that sort of thing, and I'm too bohemian for that, and too lazy. But that fellow Craig makes one feel horribly uncomfortable."

Gracie put his head on one side and examined me curiously.

"I believe you're right about your self. You always were a luxurious beggar. But that's not where it catches me."

We sat and smoked and talked of other things for an hour and then turned in. As I was dropping off I was roused by Gracie's voice:

"Are you going to the preparatory service on Friday night?"

"Don't know. I replied rather sleepily.

"I say, do you remember the preparatory service at home? There was something in his voice that set me wide awake."

"Yes. Rather terrific, wasn't it? But I always felt better after it," I replied.

"To me"—he was sitting up in bed now—"to me it was like a call to arms, or rather, like a call for a foreman—some one but volunteers wanted. Do you remember the thrill in the old governor's voice as he dared any but the right stuff to come on?"

"We'll go in on Friday night," I said.

And so we did. Sandy took a load of men with his team, and Gracie and I drove in the light sleigh.

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He announced the hymn, "Just as I Am," read the first verse, and then went on: "There you are, men, every man of you, somewhere on the road. Some of you are too lazy"—here Gracie nudged me—"and some of you haven't got enough yet of the far country to come back. May there be a chance for you when you want to come! Men, you all want to go back home, and when you go you'll want to put on your soft clothes, and you won't go till you can go in good style. But where did the prodigal get his good clothes?"

Quick came the answer in Baptiste's shrill voice:

"From old father!"

No one was surprised, and the minister went on:

"Yes, and that's where we must get the good, clean, honest, good, clean, brave heart—from our Father. Don't wait, but just as you are, come. Sing."

They sang, not loud, as they would "Stand Up" or even "The Sweet By and By," but in voices subdued, holding down the power in them.

After the singing Craig stood a moment gazing down at the men and then said quietly:

"Any man want to come? You all might come. We all must come."

Then, sweeping his arm over the audience and turning half round as if to move off, he cried in a voice that thrilled to the heart's core:

"Oh, come on! Let's go back!"

The effect was overpowering. It seemed to me that the whole company half rose to their feet. Of the prayer that immediately followed I only caught the opening sentence, "Father we are coming back," for my attention was suddenly absorbed by Abe, the stage driver, who was sitting next me. I could hear him swearing approval and admiration, saying to himself:

"Ain't he a thinker? I'll be he gets whizzed just if he ain't a malleable iron, double back action, self adjusting corn cracker."

And the prayer continued, to be punctuated with like admiring and even more superlative expletives. It was an incongruous medley. The earnest, reverent prayer and the earnest, admiring profanity rendered chaotic one's ideas of religious propriety. The feelings in both were akin, the method of expression somewhat widely diverse.

After prayer Craig's tone changed utterly. In a quiet, matter of fact, businesslike way he stated his plan of organization and called for all who wished to join to remain after the ben-

ediction. Some fifty men were left, among them Nelson, Sandy, Lachlan Campbell, Baptiste, Shaw, Nixon, Gordie and Billy Breen, who tried to get out, but was held fast by Gordie. Gracie was passing out, but I seized him to remain, saying that I wished "to see the thing out." Abe sat still beside me, swearing disgustedly at the fellows "who were got" back on the preacher. Craig appeared amazed at the number of men remaining and seemed to fear that something was wrong. He put before them the terms of discipleship, as the Maker put them to the eager scribe, and he did not make them easy. He pictured the kind of work to be done and the kind of men needed for the doing of it. Abe grew uneasy as the minister went on to describe the completeness of the surrender, the intensity of the loyalty demanded.

"That knocks me out, I reckon," he muttered in a disappointed tone. "I ain't up to that grade." And as Craig described the heroism called for, the magnitude of the fight, the worth of it and the outcome of it all Abe ground out, "I'll be blanked if I wouldn't like to take a hand, but I guess I'm not in it."

Craig finished by saying:

"I want to put this quite fairly. It is not any league of mine. You're not joining my company. It is no easy business, and it is for your whole life. What do you say? Do I put it fairly? What do you say, Nelson?"

Nelson rose slowly and with difficulty began:

"I may be all wrong, but you made it easier for me, Mr. Craig. You said he would see me through, or I should never have risked it. Perhaps I am wrong." And the old man looked troubled.

Craig sprang up.

"No, no! Thank God, no! He will see every man through who will trust his life to him—every man, no matter how tough he is, no matter how broken."

Then Nelson straightened himself up and said:

"Well, sir, I believe a lot of the men would go in for this if they were dead sure they would get through."

"Get through," said Craig. "Never hope—hope is a call for a foreman—some one but volunteers wanted. Do you remember the thrill in the old governor's voice as he dared any but the right stuff to come on?"

"We'll go in on Friday night," I said.

And so we did. Sandy took a load of men with his team, and Gracie and I drove in the light sleigh.

The meeting was in the church, and over a hundred men were present. There was some singing of familiar hymns at first, and then Mr. Craig read the same story as we had heard in the stable, that best of all parables, the prodigal son. Baptiste nudged Sandy in delight and whispered something, but Sandy held his face so absolutely expressionless that Gracie was moved to say:

"Look at Sandy! Did you ever see such a graven image? Something has hit him hard."

The men were held fast by the story. The voice of the reader, low, earnest and thrilling with the tender pathos of the tale, carried the words to our hearts, while a glance, a gesture, a movement of the body, gave us the vision of it as he was reading it.

Then, in simplest of words, he told us what the story meant, holding us the while with eyes and voice and gesture.

He compelled us to scorn the gay, heartless selfishness of the young fool setting forth so humbly from the broken home; he moved our pity and our sympathy for the young prodigal, who, broken and deserted, had still pluck enough to determine to work his way back, and who, in utter desperation, at last gave it up, and then he showed us the homecoming—the ragged, heartless tramp, with hesitating steps, stumbling about the dusty road, and then the rush of the old father, his garments fluttering and his voice heard in broken cries. I see and hear it all now whenever the words are read.

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through the window, nudged Nixon out of bed and holding a glass of whisky to his lips, bid him drink, but he knocked the glass away, spilling the liquor over himself and the bed.

It was drink or fight, and Nixon was ready to fight, but after a parley they had a drink all round and fell to persuasion again. The night was cold and poor Nixon sat shivering on the edge of his bed. If he would take one drink, they would leave him alone. He need not show himself so stiff. The whisky fumes filled his nostrils. If one drink would get them off, surely that was better than fighting and killing some one or getting killed. He hesitated, yielded, drank his glass. They sat about him amiably drinking and landing him as a fine fellow after all. One more glass before they left; then Nixon rose, dressed himself, drank all that was left of the bottle, put his money in his pocket and came down to the dance with his old time madness, reckless of faith and plodder, forgetful of home, wife, babies, his whole being absorbed in one great passion—to drink and drink and drink till he could drink no more.

Before Shaw had finished his tale Craig's eyes were streaming with tears, and groans of rage and pity broke alternately from him.

Abe remained speechless for a time, not trusting himself, but as he heard Craig groan, "Oh, the beast, the fiend!" he seemed encouraged to let himself loose, and he began swearing with the coolest and most bloodcurdling deliberation.

Craig listened with evident approval, apparently finding complete satisfaction in Abe's performance, when suddenly he seemed to wake up, caught Abe by the arm and mid in a hoarse stricken voice:

"Stop! Stop! God forgive us! We must not swear like this!"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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