

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER XI
THE ORATION

The Colonel had been asked to deliver the oration at the Fourth of July picnic. It was a compliment that he always expected. This year he agreed to make the speech with his usual apparent reluctance. There was so much "young blood" in the country, people were "tired" of hearing him, etc. The assurances that followed these protests tickled his insatiable vanity; he would have been mortally hurt if he had turned to the younger generation for a representative man.

In this part of the world there were few days that were considered legal holidays. Not that the people were consumed with energy, or so puritanical that picnicking was considered a waste of time, but they had their prejudices that precluded certain celebrations popular in other parts of the United States. The thirtieth of May was plainly a Yankee holiday. Why should the children of these sharpshooters Confederates stop all their legitimate duties to decorate the graves of their fathers? had so cheerfully made necessary? Lincoln's birthday was passed over in charitable silence. Labor Day did not appeal to these old-time slave owners. Thanksgiving was a New England festival, instituted in a rigorous climate where all fruition seemed doubtful, and prayer was prudently postponed until the scanty crops were gathered into commodious barns. Here, in this fertile land, they cultivated a spirit of perpetual thankfulness for the warmth and sunlight of their Southern skies.

Christmas, of course, was celebrated with all the old plantation customs; holiday for the servants until the back log burned away, and the back log, systematically soaked in the mill pond, sputtered and smoldered for days while the village made merry. There were calling and dancing, and an interminable exchange of presents; there were rum punch and eggnog in every house, and pantry shelves sagged beneath their layers of mince pies, fruit cake, and other indigestible provender; but Christmas was a festival kept within doors. Fourth of July was the only holiday in the year that called for the oratorical gifts of the most distinguished citizen.

And on this third of July the Colonel suffered an attack of laryngitis that reduced his grandiloquence to an irate whisper. Jefferson Wilcox, who had postponed his journey to Texas so that he might share in this July lull, took the head of our debating society. He cranked up his automobile and speeded to the nearest town to bring atomizers, prescriptions, gargles—but the Colonel's voice could not be coaxed to a key above a pathetic croak.

"Dick will have to go for you," said Jeff consolingly.

"Can—can—Dick talk?"

"Talk!" exclaimed Jeff in some surprise. "Haven't you ever heard him make a speech? Why, he was head of our debating society. Won all the prizes. When Dick began to talk the other side knew it was all up with them and sat down. It's a gift," he explained tactfully, "a gift, no doubt, inherited from you."

"Perhaps," said the Colonel. "God knows he comes by it legitimately. My father was an orator. Could hold his own with men like Clay and Webster. Yes, Dick will go and take my place. They'll run in that cross-eyed Yankee judge if Dick doesn't go. I'll make him. Send him to me."

Jefferson sauntered off to look for Richard. He found him in the stable mending a stall that Spangles, in one of her vicious moods, had pawed into splinters.

"The Colonel wants you," he said.

"What for?" said Richard looking up. "I don't mind confessing that I'm trying to keep out of the Colonel's way this morning."

"Well, his temper is fierce," agreed Jefferson, "so I don't know how you are going to fill the bill as his proxy." He took off his hat, and assuming a ridiculous attitude he added dramatically, "I now have the honor of presenting to you the orator of the day, Mr. Richard Matterson."

"What's that?" asked Richard, uncomprehendingly.

Jefferson sat down upon a heap of straw and leisurely lighted a cigarette.

"Very simple proposition. The Colonel has lost his voice, and insists that you take his place tomorrow. You will proceed to enlighten your fellow-citizens upon the glory of the Declaration of Independence and the loveliness of the ladies, God bless 'em."

"I can't," said Richard. "You know I can't."

"Can't! In the bright lexicon of youth—can't! I'd like to know why you can't?"

"But why should I?"

"The Colonel having lost his voice, fears a certain cross-eyed Yankee judge! Since a Matterson is pledged to the job, a Matterson must go."

Richard looked down upon his mud-stained trousers.

"I'd cut a pretty figure in these clothes," he said with some show of impatience.

"It seems to me," said Jefferson lightly, "that I saw a gray suit of

familiar angles hanging in the wardrobe upstairs. If you will accept the loan of them a second time—

"Didn't I send those clothes back?"

"But how can I talk, Jeff?"

"How?" repeated Jeff, sending circles of smoke into the air.

"With your tongue, man; with your tongue."

"Your jokes, Jeff, are frequently of the vaudeville variety. Excuse me if I do not smile."

Jeff grinned.

"I was merely accentuating the obvious. Here, give me that hammer and those nails; as a carpenter you are not a success. Go upstairs and get busy on your oration. Go talk to the Colonel. Seems to me if I lived in this county I'd run for Congress. Here's your opportunity. Send yourself to Washington on a Fourth of July peroration."

Richard abandoned his work as a carpenter, and hurried to the house to register his protest. But the Colonel was obdurate. If Richard had any sense, any judgment, any power for speech-making, there was no escape from this civic duty. If he had intended to become a preacher, he must have received some training in oratory that would enable him to talk in a way that would reflect credit on the family. The Colonel's face was growing apoplectic as he choked out the various reasons why his son should represent him, and Richard, realizing that this whispered colloquy was increasing the Colonel's irritation, finally agreed to go.

With a wet towel wound around his head to offset the drowsiness that now seemed habitual, Richard sat up all night, and labored over his first county speech. Toward dawn he had finished, but his mind was too busy to sleep. He took off his shoes and crept softly down the stairs, meaning to go out on the porch, and lie down under the paling stars and wait for the sunrise. But as he passed the library door, he saw that the lamp still burned upon the center table, and going into the room he found the Colonel lying asleep on the floor. Lifting him tenderly, he placed him upon the leather lounge in the corner, and covering him with an old raincoat, went out into the daydawn, his heart heavy with a sense of failure.

He had longed to be a moral force in the world, and yet here, in his own home, he wielded no influence. Of what use were his high aspirations, his cultivated idealism? He had believed—and the belief had been accepted humbly—that he had been chosen to better a sin-stained world; to bring a sense of the supernatural into toiling lives; to ease their burdens with immortal promises, and now, as he stood leaning against the white pillar of the porch and facing the dim glow in the eastern sky, he wondered at the darkness that seemed to be engulfing him. Why had he believed himself to be chosen to give his life to others? Had he no right to his own energy; no right to the ease that in the years to come his own energy might bring? He had struggled so hard for his education; had he no right to the intellectual enjoyment that comes to the scholar in a life of tranquil plenty? If he had millions—the Fielding millions—he could employ others to do his work for him; he could build churches, orphan asylums, colleges. He need not offer himself as a laborer in the Lord's vineyard. He could grasp at the beauty, the love, the liberty the world offers without sacrificing himself to priestly functions. In the stillness of the dew-wet morning he seemed to hear that blatant cry, as old as creation: "I am not my brother's keeper." Why had he believed that he was, and believing, why had he changed?

He had been forced by circumstances out of the seminary, and he had worked in a sort of torpor ever since. Tonight his speech-making had roused him to intellectual activity again. He questioned himself endlessly, and his merciless introspection made him doubtful of all his motives.

But when the sun rose, he was calmed by the familiar objects around him. Why should he dream of impossible contingencies? Why should he worry himself with vague motives when his present duty was so clearly defined? For the first time he welcomed the arduous tasks of the morning—they offered him an escape from himself.

The small platform, decorated with red and white bunting and reserved for the celebrities of the county, creaked ominously as Richard stepped upon it. The chairman of the "committee on entertainment" regretted at great length Colonel Matterson's disability, and then, with carelessly concealed apologies, introduced "his son."

The good-humored picknickers crowded closer; they were so used to the Colonel's oratorical flights that they welcomed a change of programme; the foreigners from the Fielding coal mines, who were there in holiday attire, fastened their trusting eyes upon the young man who was to tell them of the freedom of this country, which they had sought and failed to find.

A number of automobiles, carrying hay wagons had formed themselves, a hastily improvised dress circle, around the stage, when Miss

Fielding rode up on horseback. Betty, who was sitting beside Jefferson, in his big touring car, called out to her to come and join them.

"Your horse may get frightened by the fireworks," Richard heard Betty say.

"Dear me! Is his speech going to be as pyrotechnical as all that?" Betty flushed her confusion.

"The firecrackers are to come afterwards," he explained, and she introduced Jefferson, who held out a willing hand to assist the pretty stranger into his hospitable car.

To Richard's own surprise her presence seemed to add to the stimulation he always felt when facing an audience. He glanced at his notes and began.

It was a strange speech for a conservative county to listen to, and a stranger speech for Colonel Matterson's son to deliver. The "cross-eyed Yankee judge" was roused to some degree of interest; the laborers from the mines lost their expression of dull hopelessness. Richard's voice was full and resonant as he went on:

"Liberty is a divine right—an indelible mark imprinted on our souls, that has received the heritage of free will from the inspiration of an Almighty God.

"In the eyes of the world the Declaration of Independence was a daring protestation; the signers placed their lives in jeopardy. Have we measured up to the ideal that they have placed before us? Have we not abused our privileges of freedom? Less than fifty years ago we bartered for immortal souls in this old slave market; now, though we no longer buy and sell in name, we bargain for laborers for less than they can live upon. Capital is but an added responsibility in the eternal scheme of things—a power to be used for or against us in the judgment.

As he proceeded, old Major Brown and General Cartwright, who were seated on the stage behind him, frowned their displeasure. Though they begrudgingly conceded that the Colonel's son had surpassing oratorical gifts, his ideas were dangerous and misleading. He was disrupting the doctrine of predestination that so many of the church-going audience found consoling, and he was talking as if the half-human creatures from the mines, the niggers in the fields, were made of the same material as a gentleman. Souls, no doubt, were vaporous commodities without color, but as long as a man had the health and strength to remain in his own body there were distinctions; some people were born to privileges, and some were born to none, so why make such believe they had any?

But when he had finished, the applause sounded so deafening that the General and the Major were ashamed not to add a few feeble handclaps to the general tumult. After all, Richard Matterson was a product of their own State, the son of their oldest friend, so that even if his education had been faulty, if his ideas did not approve of his ideas, he deserved some commendation for his brilliant rhetorical phrases.

Jefferson, from his high vantage ground, beamed his pleasure at this ovation. He saw the foreigners from the mines press forward to shake Richard's hand; he noticed a new light in Richard's eyes; the light that comes at the end of successful effort; but, having felt the response of his audience, he did not care for the after praise; he edged his way through the crowd to the automobile.

"Get me out of this," he said to Jefferson. Jefferson demurred.

"I thought we had come to a picnic," he said.

"Crank up," said Richard. "If we have any food I suppose we can eat it just as well ten miles from here."

"You are coming to my house to luncheon," said Miss Fielding. "I want to tell you that I didn't know you could talk so well."

He looked down, seeming to realize for the first time that she was seated close to him. "I thought you were on horseback," he said lamely.

"I was," she laughed. "It seems that I ought to be, since I have received no invitation to ride with you, but my groom can take my horse back to the stable if I am permitted to stay here."

"We're delighted," said Jefferson hastily.

Then turn down that road," she commanded, "to the left. Pruney will be waiting for us, I know."

"We really cannot go to luncheon," said Richard, laying a restraining hand upon the steering wheel. "We really cannot go."

"Now, Dick, don't spoil things," pleaded Betty. "He has some absurd notions, Jessica."

"Tell me, I like absurd notions."

"Oh, I see," said Jefferson. "I've been as blind as a bat. Must have been dazzled by your unexpected appearance, Miss Fielding. I quite forgot."

"What?"

"That you were Miss Fielding," he added awkwardly.

"You all talk in riddles," she smiled, "and I can guess them every one. Betty told me a week ago. Mr. Jefferson Wilcox, lawyer, called as counsel by Richard Matterson who is curious about a Texas land claim. Didn't I suggest your looking into it fully two months ago? If you act upon my suggestion, why should I quarrel with you? Now will you come home to luncheon?"

"Well, of all amazing law cases!" gasped Jefferson.

"It's foolishness," said Betty. "We haven't a shadow of a chance to prove our claim. I told Jess because I knew it would amuse her, and I thought it only fair to let her know that we were not as friendly as we seemed."

"I like enemies," said Miss Fielding reflectively. "There's a certain distinction in having them. Now will you come home with me, or are you going to ask me to get out?"

"Even Dick wouldn't be so rude to a lady as all that," laughed Jefferson. "I think we shall accept your invitation."

TO BE CONTINUED

A TEMPORARY
ABERRATION

AN INCIDENT OF THE WAR

By Mary E. Mannix

For more than a year Pere Bilodeau had not been to the Sacraments, or even to Mass—he who was formerly the model of St. Eulalie.

It had happened since the death of his youngest son in France. The boy was the apple of his eye—but he had sent him cheerfully to fight with the first Canadian troops who went over.

At the same time Pere Bilodeau had an ardent faith in Pierre's return. Others were wounded, many had been killed, but the old man seemed to have no fear that such a tragedy would take place in his own life.

"Oh, Pierre will be all right," he would say. "The good God will never take from me the boy whom I love so tenderly and whom I sent off so willingly to fight the battles of his country. Yes, yes, Pierre will be all right!"

Although her trust in Providence was great, his good wife did not share this sublime confidence, while the neighbors would shake their heads and say to one another: "Poor man, why will he become of him if anything should happen to the boy? It will kill him."

When the blow came it did not kill him—but it changed him altogether. He was no longer the same man, but went about his work with set lips and despairing eyes, with never a smile in the house or outside of it—he who had all his life been laughing and jesting with his friends and neighbors. He never spoke of the boy either to his wife or children, and no one dared to mention him in his presence.

The news had arrived on Thursday. The good Cure, who would have been one of the first to cross the threshold of the house of mourning, was absent in Montreal, and a strange young priest had taken his place.

On Sunday morning garbed in sombre black, Mere Bilodeau said to her husband:

"Charles, it is time to get ready for Mass. Today we must speak to the priest about a Requiem. I would rather have it after our own Cure returns, the last of the week."

"As you like, Iatale," replied her husband, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs to the fire, burning pleasantly on the hearth, "as you like." Have all the Requiems you please, but I—I go to Mass no more."

"What!" exclaimed his wife, uplifting her hands in astonishment, while Marie and Melanie, the son and daughter in the background, looked at each other in horror.

"What is that you are saying, Charles? You go to Mass no more?"

"No more," he answered. "I have done with Mass—and God!"

The trio stole in silence from the room, whispering to one another through their tears: "He is losing his mind, poor father! What shall we do?"—and went to Mass without him who had never once missed a Sunday Mass.

Gradually it came to be known in the parish that Pere Bilodeau had given up his religion because of the death of his son. The Cure, detained by illness, did not return until a month later. He was deeply grieved at the news of his old parishioner communicated by his sorrowing wife.

"I will talk to him," said the Cure.

I beg to take him carefully M. le Cure," replied Mere Bilodeau. "You know his cheerful temper?"

"Everybody does."

"Well, M. le Cure, it has departed. He never shows us even the ghost of a smile. There has grown a deep frown between his eyes, his lips are tight together. He seldom opens them except when he speaks, which is not often, or when he eats—which he does not badly, for all his queerness. Several have been about to ask him why he acts so strangely, but he has silenced them by a wave of his hand. Even his work is different. He is not the same man any more, M. le Cure. I fear he is going mad."

The priest reflected.

"I shall do what I think best," he said. "And you know well, Mere Bilodeau, that I would never resent anything he might say. His mind is no doubt temporarily upset, by the loss you have both suffered."

"Very well, M. le Cure," rejoined the weeping wife and mother. "You will do right, whatever it is; and wrapping her black mantle more closely about her the poor woman left the presbytery.

The following day the Cure was walking along the road to the village from which the church was removed a short distance, when he saw Pere Bilodeau coming towards him carrying a sickle on his shoulder.

The Cure stopped and accosted him, observing as he did so that the face of the old man had grown paler and thinner, and that his eyes had assumed a peculiar expression of hardness and coldness formerly quite foreign to them.

"Good morning, Pere Bilodeau," said the priest. "You know my heart—I have no words to express what I feel there."

"Yes, yes, non Pere," replied Bilodeau hastily. "That will do—good morning." And he strode on rapidly, his gray head erect, his shoulders squared, as it were, against the world.

"Poor man, poor man!" soliloquized the priest, continuing his walk.

Christmas came and went. Spring was sending forth heralds of her speedy arrival. One day the Cure, passing Bilodeau's house, found him working in his garden. Obeying a kindly impulse he stopped and said:

"Good morning, my friend."

"Good morning, M. le Cure," responded the former, lifting his head for a moment, then returning to his spading as though he did not mean to continue the interview.

"Stop a moment," resumed the Cure. "I have a few words to say to you, Bilodeau. I fear I have delayed them too long—my conscience has reproached me. Come nearer—I do not wish to speak so loud."

For a moment Bilodeau hesitated. But the life-long habit of reverence for the priest, as well as his natural kindness, asserted themselves. He put down the spade and came close to the low stone wall, on the other side of which the Cure stood.

"I want to ask you why, my friend, you continue to absent yourself from Mass and confession, which now, above all times, should, I think, afford you the only consolation possible in your great bereavement. What is the matter with you, Pere Bilodeau?"

The old man lifted himself to his full height, pointing upward with his finger as he replied:

"I will tell you once for all what is the matter with me, and then you will leave me in peace. They have treated me badly up there," he continued, raising his eyes to heaven. "God has punished me unjustly. He has forsaken me, and I renounce Him."

"How has God treated you unjustly?" calmly inquired the priest.

"By taking from me the flower of my life, the pulse of my heart—my Pierre, my youngest born."

"And have not others been thus afflicted as well as yourself? There is Armand Boiteaux, who has lost two sons—"

"Armand Boiteaux!" interrupted Pere Bilodeau scornfully. "He who used his boys as beasts of burden and fed them with blows. It was a release, I think, for Raymond and Eugene—to leave their bones over there."

"Well, then, Guillaume Marceau. His Jean has gone."

"Yes, and he has six boys left, while I have only three."

"And the Widow Beauregard—what of her?"

"True—she must be lonely, but she does not feel it as—as—"

"As you do?" asked the priest.

"How do you know that, Bilodeau?"

"Because from the very first she knew he would not come back—she told me so. She was ready for it when it came."

"She is resigned—poor woman!" said the priest thoughtfully. "So you should be," he continued. "Thinking of the thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands of fathers and mothers in the same case."

"I have nothing to do with that, M. le Cure. Every one to his own way. It is because I confided so in the Almighty, was so sure of His care of my boy, that I am disappointed and angry."

"What! Angry with God! Pere Bilodeau, this is blasphemous."

"As you please, M. le Cure."

"I am not the keeper of my brother's soul," rejoined the old man, haughtily.

"It would almost seem that the devil has taken possession of your own," said the Cure.

"That may be, also," replied the old man, seizing his spade and digging it fiercely into the ground.

At the other side of the garden the Cure was met by Mere Bilodeau, who had seen the meeting from the window.

"You have been talking to him, M. le Cure?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, but without effect. However, do not worry. All will come right in time. We must pray. His mind is astray—the shock was too great. God will not abandon that soul once so devoted to Him."

Six months later Pere Bilodeau was stricken with paralysis. The doctor said he would never be well again but might live for years. His wife, who had lived with him for nearly half a century, thought otherwise. She sought the Cure, begging him to come and do what he could with her refractory husband.

The priest replied:

"Dr. Boileu tells me there is no immediate danger. I shall wait a

few days, and in the meantime he may change of himself. This stroke may have the effect of bringing him back to his normal condition. My presence now might be very bad for him."

"But, M. le Cure, if he should go off suddenly, as people sometimes do, what would become of his soul?"

"God will take care of that, Mere Bilodeau. He has always been an exceptionally good man. God will not forget him. He is not himself, you know—not himself. And God, who is far more just and merciful than man, will take that into account."

The sorrowing wife went slowly away, shaking her head sadly.

The following morning the Cure had just finished breakfast when Nicholas Bilodeau came running to the presbytery.

"M. le Cure," he cried, "my father is worse; he has been taken in the night with a second stroke. But in another way he is better. He has changed; he is himself again—he has asked for you, M. le Cure."

When the priest reached the house he saw several carts and other vehicles outside. In some mysterious manner the neighbors in those country parishes speedily become aware of the approach of the last, great visitor, almost before the family know it themselves. Mere Bilodeau received him at the door. The kitchen was filled with women—dressed in their best. The men remained outside. The wife, pallid and worn looking, preceded him to the bed-room.

Pere Bilodeau lay, propped up with snowy white pillows, his long beard spreading over the coverlet, almost as white. His face was drawn and bloodless; his hands tremulous and attenuated, held his own well-beloved Rosary—held it very fast and close to his breast. He looked fixedly at the priest, his eyes strangely luminous.

"Pray for me, Father," he said. "I am going. But first I wish to make my confession."

The room was soon cleared; the Cure closed the door. In fifteen minutes he appeared in the kitchen and said to Mere Bilodeau:

"The doctor has just come. He thinks Charles may last forty-eight hours longer, but he is not sure. He has made a good confession. And now, before receiving the Body and Blood of Christ—this afternoon, as a Viaticum—he wishes to summon all the neighbors that can be reached, near and far—and all the school children."

"Le pauvre, his mind wanders," said one of the women.

"Oh, no, Clarette," answered the Cure. "He is in his right mind—perfectly. His idea is a beautiful one. I am greatly edified. Mere Bilodeau, I leave it to you to send the boys around that the house may be full at four o'clock."

"I will, M. le Cure," replied the old woman. "I am so glad—so glad to do anything that he wishes, for the last time. The Cure left the house."

At four he returned. The house was full of people, the porch overflowing. The school children were marching down the street, led by one of the Sisters. The Cure went immediately to the room of the sick man. Near the bed stood a table, covered with a white linen cloth, edged with fine knitted lace. On it were placed two glass candlesticks, containing blessed candles, a vessel of holy water, a small willow-branch and a piece of raw cotton.

Men and women were passing through the room, entering at one door and leaving by another, their rosaries in their clasped hands. Some lingered to say a word of encouragement to the sick man, but for the most part they bowed towards him silently and disappeared. Close to the bedside stood his wife, son and daughter, his son's wife and her mother. The doctor was on the other side.

The priest entered, saying, "Peace be to this house and all who dwell herein." All fell on their knees—he was bearing the Lord of Heaven and earth in his bosom. He placed the bag containing the Holy Oil for Extreme Unction on the table and turned towards the doctor, who nodded and moved nearer the sick man, whom he propped a little higher on his pillows.

"Are they all here?" inquired the dying man.

"You see the rooms are full?"

"Where are the children?"

"Yonder, close to the door."

"Where they can hear me?"

"Yes, very well."

"I can hardly see. Are the windows open?"

"Wide open, with hosts of people outside."

"That is good. I will do the best I can. Those who are not here, or who cannot understand what I say, will learn it from others."

"Yes, Pere Bilodeau."

Suddenly the old man raised his voice, strong, sonorous, beautiful, which from his boyhood had been the pride and joy of Sainte Eulalie in the village choir. Now, in his dying hour, it seemed to put forth new strength and vigor.

"My friends," he began, slowly but with wonderful clearness. "I have called you together to ask your pardon for the scandal I have given and also publicly to ask pardon of Almighty God, Who has been so merciful to me in my last hours. You all know my sin, you have all been scandalized thereby—even the old—rich and poor—young and

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