

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER III.
THE COLONEL

The Colonel sat dozing before the fading embers of a fire. His wooden leg with its neatly fitting shoe was propped up on a carpet-covered ottoman. The table beside him held a motley array of riding crops, bridles, dog-collars, sporting journals, and a cigar box nearly empty; and the floor was littered with newspapers and muddy riding boots.

Betty walked noisily into the room. She had long ago learned the safest way to wake the Colonel. He did not want to acknowledge that he had fallen into the senile habit of sleeping in his chair.

"Company, Colonel!" she said. The word held a certain magic. "Hospitality without murmuring" was the only phrase in the Bible with which the Colonel was familiar. He let down his wooden leg, half lifting it so that the weight would not strain the strappings, and, rising, turned to welcome his unknown visitor.

"Oh, it's you?" he said, without much warmth of feeling, holding out his hand. "I thought you had decided to give us up."

"Never," said Richard, clasping the old man in his arms. "I've come home this time to stay."

"God have mercy!" said the Colonel. "Another bear-hug like that and you'll knock me off my wooden pins outright. If you expect to keep up your psalm-singing here—"

"Now, Colonel," interrupted Richard determinedly good-humored. "I never, by any stretch of the imagination, thought I could sing. I've got a voice like yours—all I can do is to croak like a raven."

The old man laughed approvingly. "I believe on my soul you have improved! Poke up the fire, Betty. Light the lamp! Where are those good-for-nothing niggers gone? How you have filled out, boy! Must weigh close on to two hundred, and got the height to stand it. You look like the portrait of your grandfather. They tell me that he was the handsomest man in the United States Senate. Women went wild over him; but your grandmother led him a dance. The toast of six counties! Betty, child, call Ephraim to bring some wood."

"He's gone, Colonel. I told you Ephraim had gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"He won't work when we can't pay him."

"Impudence!" stormed the Colonel. "What does he expect? Aren't the quarters comfortable? Hasn't he got plenty to eat and to drink? Hasn't he stolen nearly every shirt I had to my back?"

Richard was down on his knees replenishing the fire.

"Seems to me he's a good riddance, then," he said, hoping to preserve the calm.

"Not at all, not at all! I'd rather keep a nigger that had a good supply of my shirts than hire another who needed some. This temporary embarrassment is—"

inconvenient. Money seems essential since Abe Lincoln's fool proclamation. That bank failure hit me pretty hard, Dick. There were a few outstanding debts that had to be paid, and they left me nothing at all. You can't sell a crop that isn't planted. I hope some of your book-learning will help us out of this hole."

"I think Mr. Tom Brent was terrible," said Betty, seating herself on the table and swinging her muddy boots in the flashing fire-light.

"But I think it," she insisted. "He was president of that bank, and he ought to have given us our money first. Dividing the little left over with so many people didn't do anybody any good."

"Tom Brent is my friend," said the Colonel. "He lost his entire fortune. You don't understand business matters, Betty, and neither do I. But if Tom Brent was to start another bank tomorrow, I would deposit all I had."

"Not if I could help it," added his daughter. "I'm so tired of being poor I don't know what to do. My only party dress is a rag. If we could only establish our claim to the Fielding oil wells!"

"What's that?"

Richard looked up with some degree of interest. He was lying outstretched on the dusty rug before the fire, as he had so often done when a boy. The dogs had grouped themselves about him, and he was smooching their plant backs. As the fire brightened, the disorder of the room became more apparent, and seemed to augment the hopelessness of his task.

"It was a steal," declared the Colonel emphatically, propping up his wooden leg once more. "I've always said so. The Fieldings are as common as mud. 'Old Mike Fielding' was overseer on your grandfather's plantation. He says that my father sold him that land in Texas. I say his signature was a forgery. But since everybody is dead, we'll have to wait until Judgment Day to prove it."

"We may be thinking of other things then," said Richard dreamily.

"I reckon you're right," agreed the Colonel in a strangely softened mood. "I reckon the recording angel doesn't take any stock in oil wells. A little too inflammable—seem to belong to the other party!" He laughed at his own pleasantry. He was experiencing a great sense of relief in having his son to lean upon, but he would not let acknowledged so much.

"The Fieldings must have been born lucky," said Richard. "Striking oil in these days is like finding a gold mine."

"I know it," said the Colonel, his face flaming; "and it all belongs to us. You see I was only seven when your grandfather died, and mother never knew anything about the land. Fact didn't seem to matter much then. They told me it wasn't even good grazing land. Oil wasn't discovered there until about ten years ago. Now young Mike's worth a million. He's come back here to live because Texas is too hot for him in summer. He's buying coal mines, railroads, and the Lord knows what. I remember him when he only had one patched jacket, and wore his trousers hitched to his suspenders with a tenpenny nail. Mother was too shiftless to sew his buttons on. Now—well, what's the use of talking about it? It makes me red-hot to think we didn't have the gumption to fight it out in the courts."

A faint hope stole into Richard's mind.

"Is it too late?" he asked.

"Late! About fifty years too late. Betty, child, aren't you going to give us any supper?"

"Come on," said Betty, jumping down from the table. "I hear Aunt Dinah bringing the tea things now. If Aunt Dinah leaves us, I'll be the last straw. I don't know how to cook. We would have to live on cans."

"Then we'll chloroform Aunt Dinah," laughed Richard. "until we have some sort of a crop planted."

He offered the Colonel his arm, and the Colonel, putting aside his heavy hickory cane, actually smiled as he leaned upon the strength of his son. Never before in all Richard's life had his father seemed to derive any pleasure from his presence. As they entered the dining-room Richard gave a sigh of relief. Here was a familiar place unchanged. The great sideboard glittered with well-polished silver; the Colonel's chair and footstool were pulled out at the well-remembered angle; the table was set with candles lit by candlestick and silver sconces. Old Giles, the butler, had been dead many years, but Aunt Dinah, his wife, still lingered; she was indifferent to wages; Matterson Hall was her home, and she struggled bravely to keep up the traditions of the house, trying to deceive even herself as to the actual conditions in the impoverished larder. When saw Dick she threw her gingham apron over her head and cried out:

"Bress de Lord! Marse Dick, Marse Dick! De good ole days hab come agin."

"Dinah!" The Colonel's shaggy eyebrows closed together ominously.

Dick held out his hand to the faithful old woman.

"You're the best cook in the world," he said fervently. "I've been to Paris since I've seen you, and no French chef can beat you."

Dinah wiped her claw-like fingers before holding them out to receive the honor of a greeting. Even the Colonel's beetling brows could not repress her hysterical chuckle of joy.

"I knowed you would come," she said. "You always favored your ma, and when folks wuz in trouble she wuz bound to be there."

"Dinah!" the Colonel said again. He had no patience with anything that savored of familiarity with servants. Old Giles, who had accompanied him to the war as a body servant, had had his natural volubility so suppressed during his long years of service that he had acquired a habit of silence equal to a Trappist's.

Now Aunt Dinah shut her lips resignedly, and stood at Betty's right hand waiting to pass the plates; the meal was a simple one, but skillfully prepared. Hash, an artful combination of left-overs, was served on a silver platter with a well-seasoned gravy, the biscuits were baked to an appetizing brown, the tea was weak, but the dessert of peaches, canned last season, was delicious, and the thick cream that Betty poured over them made Richard forget for the moment that the days of plenty were passed.

After supper Betty retired to the pantry to plan the meals for the morning. The last few days had taxed Aunt Dinah's intelligence at contriving, and Richard's appetite had made the problem more complex. The Colonel returned to the library, and, taking a black bottle from the shelf of the corner cupboard, he promptly began his nightly potatoes.

Richard sat down under the swinging lamp, and idly picked up one of the sporting journals. It was a pink paper full of smelly black portraits of famous baseball players, and held many important

items of news of the coming season. But Richard had no clear idea of the page in front of him. He was wondering what topic would interest the Colonel; how he could keep this tipping from developing into a spree.

"I saw a friend of yours today," he began hopefully. "You remember Jeb Jackson?"

"No friend of mine," snapped the Colonel, holding his glass up to the light with the approving eyes of a connoisseur.

"He's a great admirer of yours," said the Colonel.

"He's an old idiot," said the Colonel.

"He was talking about war times," said Richard.

"Doesn't seem to be," said Richard with a wane smile.

The Colonel put down his empty glass.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"I believe I was trying to make myself agreeable."

"Don't try," said the Colonel shortly. "I like this hour to myself. I'll read the paper and go to bed. You go talk to Betty."

"I think I would rather stay with you."

Two drinks had made the Colonel fretful.

"I don't want you."

Dick put his hand upon the long-necked bottle. "I wish you wouldn't take any more of this tonight," he said gently.

"I'll take what I please. If you think you can come home and dictate to me you're mistaken—I'll do what I please; drink what I please; and I'll be damned if I'll be grateful if you will attend to your own business."

Richard's lips shut in a determined line. He pushed back the armchair in which he had been seated. It jolted the table, and the bottle was upset, sending a thin stream of liquor trickling to the floor.

The Colonel hastily set the bottle upright. "That's d—careless of you, Dick," he said, "or perhaps you did it on purpose. Thank the Lord the bottle was nearly empty, and I restocked my cellar just before the bank failed. I have some port, Dick, vintage '88. Have a drink and go to bed. You're altogether too sanctimonious to suit me."

"No, thank you," said Richard. "Perhaps I had better go and talk to Betty."

He left the room with an exaggerated sense of his own failure, and going out upon the front porch, which was flooded with moonlight, he stood a moment in silent prayer.

The old feeling that he was an alien in his own home had returned to him with renewed force. The heavens stretched above him starless in the white moon rays. The noises of the night—those strange choruses of living things—seemed to mock him in his desolation. A fresh breeze, chilled with the dampness of the woods, sent him shivering close to one of the fluted columns of the door to escape its cold breath. He put his hands in his pockets for greater warmth, and finding his rosary, he took it out and began telling the beads.

The rosary was a long one, lacking all ornament. The big beads had been cut by some pious, unskilled hand. It had been given to him by an old missionary, who had carried it on every dangerous journey he had undertaken, regarding it as a companion and comfort on his perilous way. The missionary, when dying, had tried to explain something of this to Richard, but his voice had failed, and he passed away clinging desperately to the hand of his favorite student. The imprint of his fingers upon the boy's hand seemed a last assertion of a body that had been subdued through a lifetime, a final protest against absolute dissolution from its passionless spirit.

Betty came out upon the porch. "What are you doing?" she asked.

He stopped his pacing to and fro. His little sister seemed very close to him tonight.

"I was saying my rosary," he answered.

"What's that?"

He put the black beads in her hand.

"Didn't you ever see a rosary, you little heretic?" he said affectionately.

She examined the beads critically.

"How funny!" he repeated tolerantly.

"I don't think so. Don't you want me to teach you how to say them, too, Betty dear?"

"Indeed I don't," she laughed, "and I wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't? Why?"

"I don't like praying men. They seem so—"

"Unnatural."

"But, Betty, men have souls to save."

"Most men don't think about them."

"Why shouldn't they?"

"I don't know."

His face looked stern and ascetic in the moonlight.

"Neither do I," he said.

"Please don't be serious," she pleaded, "and please don't pray on beads any more. I don't like them. As she spoke she flung the rosary over the railing of the porch into the tangled bushes."

He was angry and he showed it, but the next moment he had gained control of himself. "I'll find it in the morning," he said quietly, and turning he went into the house.

CHAPTER IV
ANTIQUE SILVER

Richard was accustomed to rising early, but the birds twittering on his window sill roused him at dawn on that first morning. As soon as he was up he looked for water. Bathing was a bodily necessity to which he had never been indifferent, but the old blue pitcher on the wash-stand was empty. There were no towels. There had been no blanket on his bed, and he remembered that he had been half-conscious of the cold all night. Betty had said she was not "dependable"—this first day seemed to prove it.

Slipping on an old moth-eaten dressing gown that he found hanging in the big wardrobe, he went down stairs and brought water from the well, using one of the starched pillow cases for a towel.

The room, which had been his as a boy, had not been occupied for a long time; a gray dust lay thick on everything; a provident little mouse had built a nest out of the feathers that had drifted through a wide rip in the bolster case. The nest had been pushed up close to the roller of the wash-stand for greater strength and safety; now the terrifying splashing of the water from the wash-basin seemed a veritable deluge, and the mother mouse went scurrying under the high four-poster seeking safer quarters.

When Richard had finished his ablutions, he fell upon his knees and gave himself up to a half-hour of silent prayer. But his meditations were distracted. A hundred unaccustomed tasks seemed waiting for him. He must begin somewhere, somehow, without delay.

He went first to the stable. Unbarring the door without effort he went in. The floor was in a filthy condition. Two horses lifted their heads hungrily as the morning sunlight fell across their stalls. The first one was old plug—gaunt, lean, rawboned; the other was one Richard remembered well—Spangles, the Colonel's favorite mount, and the Colonel's sole topic of conversation when he had bought her two years before—Spangles, whose purchase Richard had so resented, for the Colonel had paid as much for her as his whole college course would cost; Spangles, whose record on the race track had made a whole county famous; and whose strange name had been derived from the fact that her jockey had chosen to ride in a shirt glittering with tin tobacco tags "for luck."

Now as the horse raised her high-arched neck and looked at Richard, his old resentment toward her was lost in enthusiasm for her beauty. Standing in the filth of the poorly-ventilated stable, she seemed to be appealing to him for explanation and assistance.

He led her out into the sunshine, and putting on a pair of mud-stiffened overalls that he found in a nail behind the door, he began to clean the stable. His real work had begun.

It was a most discouraging day. Every place he turned the need of ready money was so apparent. Tools were rusty; handles fell away. The feed for the horses had dwindled to a small quantity of corn; the hay loft was empty; the roof of the barn leaked. There were no shingles ready-made, and when Richard undertook to make temporary substitutes he could find no nails, no hammer, and no saw.

The Colonel's shaggy eyebrows closed together ominously. The Colonel's shaggy eyebrows closed together ominously.

The niggers knew where things were. If the niggers had gone, then, no doubt, they had taken everything with them. He had promised Judge Armes that he would ride over and spend the morning with him. The judge was the logical candidate for the United States Senate at the next election. The Colonel meant to make several speeches urging his fellow-townsmen to elect him. He meant to win several political matters. If Richard would saddle Spangles and bring him to the door, the Colonel would leave him to run the farm for the day.

Run the farm! when every machine was clogged with rust—when labor was reduced to one pair of unskilled hands. It would seem easier to start at the beginning and build afresh, than to accept the ruin that the deserting servants had wrought; to decide what things were worthless, to know where to begin, what work was most essential. He knew that it was time to plan for a kitchen garden to supply their daily needs, but the plow-handles were broken; the horse half-fed. There were no seeds, even if the plowing had been done.

Betty, he said at lunch time, "we must have some ready money to begin. Do you think the Colonel would be willing to sell Spangles?"

"Sell Spangles!" Betty's cup fell from her hand, and was shattered against the edge of the table.

"Why, Dick Matterson, he would rather sell you or me."

"I'm sure he would rather sell me," said Richard with a resigned smile, "but since I am not saleable, and since we must sell something, perhaps we could mortgage the house."

The house! It's already mortgaged. The interest falls due next month. I forgot to tell you that."

"How much?"

"About three or four hundred dollars."

"Worse than I thought," he said. "And the Colonel won't sell Spangles?"

"Ask him."

"Have you?"

"Once. He didn't speak to me for a week, and when he did speak—well, I was sorry he had spoken."

"He has wine in the cellar."

"Not much."

"Too much I guess."

"Not enough to sell."

"Then let's sell the silver."

"That belongs to you," said Betty.

"To me?"

"It was grandmother's, and she left it to you. You were the last representative of the name."

"Then we'll sell it."

"How?"

"I'll advertise it in some of the big city papers. Why, Betty, child, some women grow fanatical over antiques. I was coaching a boy some years ago whose mother kept shops in Europe looking up platters and pots. She got me to study up the history of some of the old silver-smiths. I—I believe these are very valuable."

He was standing at the sideboard examining the Matterson heirlooms that Dinah had polished every week for years. It had been old Giles' work, and his faithful spouse felt that this continuation of his labors preserved her in some secret way from his "haunt," which she feared would return to upbraid her if she failed in any of his more conspicuous duties.

TO BE CONTINUED

JUST CHRIS

By Mary Dodge Ten Eyck in Rotary Magazine

Chris was an excellent taxi driver. In his way he was an apostle, too. Undoubtedly it was his speed rather than his zeal that brought unaccustomed prayers to the hearts of frightened sinners. But he was wont to keep a steady head and firm hands on his work, so after the first expectations of an immediate entrance into eternity, considering this was but part of the general rush of the age. Others made pious vows—never to ride with him again!

As a man, our twenty-three-year-old chauffeur was neither better nor worse than the average. From twelve years he had been an orphan, with his way to make. The lessons of his mother and of his school life grew dimmer and dimmer in the course of this struggle. He was better than a nominal Catholic, inasmuch as he heard Mass quite often, but he was not the frequent communicant that Larry O'Moore was. Larry was three years younger, with the face of an Aloysius, and a heart to go with it. Chris and their employers realized and respected this, and to Larry were given calls from prelates and nervous old ladies. Chris was assigned to cater to the fashionable trade.

This evening he was out three or four miles from the city at a roadside inn which bore a rather uncertain name. But the money in it was a sure thing, thought this taxi driver, as he glanced at his rich patron. Chris felt no envy of this wealthy young idler, but a rather healthy disgust and an almost fierce pity for the "painted baby dolls" who accompanied him. He glanced indifferently at the luxurious inn. He was accustomed to the outside of such life and had little desire to indulge in the real thing. The jazz orchestra played a spinning tune, and Chris unconsciously commenced to sway. He loved to dance.

"If I don't get out of this 'bus, she and I will just naturally jazz down the middle of the dance hall," he laughed to himself, as his foot played on the clutch.

Couples were strolling about on the dimly-lighted piazzas. He walked unnoticed among them.

"Not much like the dances Mary and I used to go to," he thought, and unknowingly his finer sensibilities made him frown that she should come into his thoughts just now. Mary was a girl whom he had known in the country, who lately had come to the city to earn her living. Lively and bright, she had seemed to be drifting apart from him of late. He was busy and had seen little of her, but he loved her and believed that she still loved him. Strange rumors of her frivolity had come to him, which he had answered by the strength of his two fists. But still the tattlers were less disturbed by such force than he by their tales, because, although he did not express it in Shakespearean language, he was feeling "the ugly treason of mistrust."

As he wound his way among the strollers he seemed to see Mary's face in that of every girl he met. There were young girls—sadly young!—and women laughing and making merry with their companions. Some were alone and trying to find partners. The club was fast losing all semblance of respectability. Presently Chris stood in a dark, vine-covered nook looking towards his car over the moonlit space. A hand touched him gently on the arm. As he glanced down at it, his eyes moved slowly up the sheer angel sleeve to the face of the owner. Again he saw Mary's features first. Once more they blended into the painted beauty before him.

"Are you lonely? Don't you care to dance?" The voice was soft, even though it came from lips heavily rouged.

"You seem young. Why do you come here?" he asked in return, before "Mary" had fairly faded into the "painted baby doll."

At his words the hand slipped down, the white figure of the girl crouched back a little.

"Chris!"

A moment of silence. Then: "Mary!" The pity of his former words passed from his face and a grim sternness hardened it, as through cold, pressed and sneering lips came: "Mary—Magdalen!"

The girl winced. Real color rushed to the painted cheeks and then seemed to pale them. Her hand clasped on her breast and her brown head lowered as she cried again:

"Oh, Chris! Chris!"

But the cry met no answering pity. Chris would have felt manly indulgence for other women, but for the one he loved there was only revulsion and hardness.

"So you are all I have heard!"

Mary seemed to be slowly sinking to her knees. Her voice would scarcely come.

"Chris, you believe I am—not good?"

His reply was a smile, but there was cruelty and disbelief in it. Can there be anything worse than a cruel smile?

"Chris, will you not take my word that I have been only just foolish, not—not bad?"

"There, there! Brace up. Don't make a scene."

"Then you do believe?" Her clasped hands nearly touched his arm, and in the big eyes stood tears.

"Yes, yes, forget it all!" But he drew away with the same smile that belied his words.

Suddenly Mary felt very ill, as though she had been beaten. Her thoughts ran wild; reasonable arguments deserted her, while her heart suffered most of all. True, she knew she deserved some of this—but not all!

"Dear Lord!" she moaned in agony, "that he should think me worse than I am!"

She had never looked more beautiful to Chris, but her beauty was to him her curse. Slowly, with the disbelief still in his eyes, but the sneering smile gone from his mouth, he turned from her.

"Won't you take me home?" Her arms were extended pleadingly. She looked like an angel in the moonlight.

Without a word, but with a thumping heart, he slowly made his way to the taxi—alone. He was just on time. His party was looking for the driver, so jumping to his seat, he drove away recklessly, without a second glance back at the humbled figure clearly discernible in the moonlight.

Chris had little sleep that night, and to make matters worse, Larry O'Moore was taken sick. It was Friday, too, and Larry always took young Father Ramon on his many sick calls.

"Guess it's up to you Chris," said the chief.

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed the young chauffeur, in dismay.

His chief smiled. But it was no joke to Chris. He had always maintained a shy avoidance of the clergy, acting with them much as he did with religion. Today a merciless and misunderstanding heart added to this shyness. He felt no love for the beatitudes of religion, for the priests' lives of service—no love for anything.

"Oh, it won't be so bad, Chris," his chief encouraged him. "Priests are quite human, usually. Father Ramon is a convert, and they say a saint."

"Huh! Saints aren't in my line!" His lips hardened a little.

But ten minutes later Father Ramon answered Chris' ring. He seemed surprised.

"Where's Larry? Is he sick?"

"Yes, Father. I'm sorry to say he is. But I guess he'll be back again this afternoon."

"I hope so. And what is your name?"

"Chris Murphy."

"Christopher—Christ-bearer!"

"Just Chris, Father, is more like me."

Father Ramon smiled. "However, you will be a modern Christopher this morning." He hesitated, as though pleased at the thought, then added: "Please drive around to the church and I'll meet you there."

Chris did as Father Ramon directed. The young priest was a slender and apparently delicate man, but he had a way and a smile that made him a "regular fellow," even if he was a saint," thought Chris. His conclusion showed that he did not know much about saints. When Father Ramon reappeared there was a slight change in his manner. He nodded to Chris, gave him an address, and with only a half-smile got into the taxi.

Like St. Christopher of old, our chauffeur at first felt no great weight and little sensation of