

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER II HIS HOME COMING

The next day, late in the afternoon, Richard arrived at his own home station. There was no one to meet him. The old freight agent, who had ambled leisurely out of the baggage-room every time a train rattled by, stared curiously at the impressive-looking stranger, and then said with a toothless smile: "Reckon you got off at the wrong station, sir."

"Hope not," answered Richard humorously. "But it seems to be a habit of mine. Ought to have arrived a year or two ago. Your Southern trains are slow."

The old man relieved his puzzled state of mind by sending a carefully aimed spray of tobacco juice arching toward an empty crate.

"The country is growing, sir," he said, "but this ain't no place for drummers. Money is tight and scarce. There ain't been no real prosperity here since Abe Lincoln freed the niggers. Deacons and Swedes and such ain't coming here to work when New York's opening its arms of sin and greed right there at the boat dock."

"I haven't even the distinction of being a drummer," said Richard. "I'm just a down-and-outer coming home."

"Home!" the old man's sparse chin whiskers and sharp nose nearly met as he squinted his dull eyes to discover a resemblance. "You ain't Dick Matterson, who's studying to be a preacher?"

"You've guessed it," said Richard carelessly. "I've given that up to come home and run the farm."

The old man cackled a laugh. "Lord! I knowed that preaching was only a passing notion. The Mattersons ain't that kind. I've known 'em root and branch for over fifty years. I was in your pa's regiment—one of the first to enlist. I tell you he was a fighter, and he could swear harder than any man in the regiment. Swear black and blue, with the bullets whizzing around him like hail. Don't believe he'd know how to pray at the judgment seat! When they picked him up at Gettysburg with his leg shot in two, he was still a swearing. But I reckon he didn't mean no disrespect to the Almighty. Your pa is a great man, and we young fellows in them days would have followed him into hell fire, I reckon. We were in some mighty tight places. Caught in a ridge of rocks one day with a skirmish line of Yanks on either side. I don't want no hotter place than that. But the Colonel was as cool as you please. Lit his old corncob pipe—ever gentlemen smoked them in those days—didn't have nothing else—and he climbed up on that there ridge and signalled for help down the valley. Yanks thought there was a whole army behind the hill and they lit out. Signalling down the valley was his box. Colonel knewed there wasn't another regiment of Confeds nearer than twenty-five miles."

"I've heard of the signalling," said Richard quietly. "Reckon you have," said the ragged old soldier. "Reckon everybody's heard of it. Your pa's a great man. Used to call him the 'Fighting Bantam' in them days, 'cause he was undersized, and all the other Mattersons have been tall men like you. Reckon you favor your grandfather; he stood six feet three in his socks; he was a Mexican War veteran; your pa sure was a great soldier, a great man."

"Thanks," said Richard genially, holding out his hand. "Every son likes to hear his father praised. Come and see us. The Colonel will be glad to have you. I know."

"Well, I ain't sure of that," said the old man reflectively, wiping his mouth on his coat-sleeve. "I ain't nothing but poor white, and I know my place. Musn't get up to a regiment one thing, and parlor visitors is another."

Richard smiled. He had held so many heated debates on the equality of man, the absurdity of social distinctions in a democracy, and he had been leading the academic life so long, that he had almost forgotten the old South's taut lines of aristocracy.

"Nonsense," he said aloud, patting the old man on the back. "You are both of you together. I thought my sister would drive over to meet me. I sent a telegram."

"Reckon you did," agreed the old fellow reminiscently. "So that was your telegram? Reckon you can find it lying on the desk in the office. The operator had a spell of cramps and had to go home. He said the telegram wasn't important, no weddings nor deaths, and he never did believe in people telegraphing about nothing."

Richard laughed. "It's good for a man to realize his own nothingness. I forgot I lived in a country where they sent telegrams by mail. I'll leave my grip here until tomorrow. It's a little too heavy for a four-mile tramp. Good-by to you."

The old man straightened up and gave the military salute. "Tell the Colonel you seen Jeb Jackson," he said. "Some of Richard's natural boyishness returned to him as he strode along the moist brown roadway. The first poignant sense of dis-

appointment had passed. Since he had to break away from the life that most attracted him, he would not play the coward, the shirker, the grumbler. His duty seemed so clearly outlined that it did not offer even the privilege of choice.

The air was fresh and full of the delicious earthy odors of early spring. Richard wondered a little at his own unexpected sense of elation. By nature introspective, the past two years had added to the habit of self-examination. He had experienced many moods since the receipt of his nearest approach to anything like contentment. It had been hard to be called from the congenial atmosphere of study, from the preparation for his life-work, a life planned for the service of others. His own bodily necessities had seemed too slight to need consideration. Ever since those thoughtful days of his boyhood he had dreamed of going out in the world as a warrior, at first as an armoured knight of romance battling for the dusty high-road, or fighting his way across slippery moats to rescue sickly maidens from cold castle towers. Then, out of the haze of these medieval ambitions, had come a definite desire to grapple with the more subtle powers in his own complex civilization; to denounce greed, to defend the poor from their greed, to study preventive measures that would relieve the multitudinous forms of suffering, while all the time he struggled to infuse a sense of the supernatural into the material mass, arming men against despair with the strength and knowledge of their own immortality.

But the great dream was ended. He must go down into the competitive world, and plan like a million other men for the immediate needs of himself and his family.

There had been some satisfaction in his departure from the seminary, that he hoped to offset the tragedy of the leave-taking. His teachers had expressed such genuine regret; the students had crowded around him, full of sorrowing sympathy; Jeff Wilcox's loyalty had cheered him, and the old freight agent had contributed, all unconsciously, to lessen the darkness of his homecoming.

For between Richard and his father there had never been any real companionship or affection. The Colonel's spirit was martial, and since that dismal day at Appomattox, finding no legitimate outlet, it had exploited itself in acts of small tyranny in the household. The loss of his leg at Gettysburg had given him all the selfish privileges of an invalid. He did not care to read; he had always considered manual labor degrading. He loved horses and dogs and the excitement of riding to hounds—the fact that he had an artificial leg had never deterred him from reckless feats of horsemanship.

Richard did not resemble his father in any way, for he had inherited much of his mother's gentleness; he grew to be a bookish, dreamy boy, and the indolent Colonel, disapproving of such development, soon fell into the habit of ignoring him. Twice they had come to open warfare—only ten years old. The boy was only ten years old. The boy was only ten years old. The boy was only ten years old.

It had required courage to stand his ground and confess to them what he had done; but, forgetting himself, he had pleaded so hard for the life of the little animal that one of the young ladies of the party added her entreaties to his, and because she was the belle and beauty of the county, not one man ventured an objection, and she led them laughing away, promising them roast turkey and dumplings if they would return and dine with her.

When the Colonel heard of the episode his face turned an appoplectic purple—that a son of his should interfere with the gentlemanly sport of his friends and neighbors was an unforgivable offence. He stormed and swore at the trembling boy, and struck him so hard with his clenched fist that Richard bore the bruise for days.

The next difficulty between them did not occur until some time later. The Colonel was going duck-shooting, and, in a rare mood of paternal interest, had decided to take Richard with him. Richard had been trained by his mother to an attitude of respectful obedience, so he made no objection to his father's suggestion. Even when the Colonel ordered him to wade out into the shallow river to pick up a wounded bird that had fallen and floated a little beyond their reach, he turned up his trousers and went in without complaint, though the water at the edges showed films of ice.

The Colonel had made a fire on the shore, and while he busied himself whittling sticks to a point preparatory to roasting the duck, camp fashion, he told Richard to dress the bird, and they would have it for breakfast. The boy glanced at the Colonel, then at the bird, and without warning, fainted at his father's feet.

The Colonel looked down upon him without compassion. That the son of an intrepid soldier should faint at the sight of blood was not to be regarded as an idiosyncrasy, but as a grievous fault in character. When the boy slowly regained consciousness, the Colonel proceeded to discipline him by sending him home in disgrace without his breakfast. The injustice of the punishment left an indelible mark upon the sensitive boy's mind.

Betty was more like her father. She had been left motherless when she was very young, and the Colonel's personality had impressed itself upon her. She had had few educational advantages. For a short time she had been taught by an assortment of frivolous governesses, who were seeking matrimonial opportunities in the village. Later she spent one or two years at a "Polite Institute for Young Females," where the curriculum consisted chiefly of piano practice and embroidering floral pillow tops. Both accomplishments Betty had abhorred, so one night, without asking leave of absence, she returned to her father. Her conduct was considered so reprehensible that she was promptly expelled. Since the Colonel hated to return, the expulsion was altogether supererogatory. This experience had brought her education to an abrupt conclusion.

As Richard reached the long, poplar-shaded avenue that led to the old Matterson mansion, he stopped for a moment shocked at the desolate appearance of his home. A tree, rotten at the heart, had fallen across the driveway, and no one seemed to have had the energy to remove it. One of the white pillars of the portico was propped up with a rough wooden beam; shutters sagged from their hinges, the window-panes in the west wing were broken out, and part of the chimney had fallen, scattering the shingles of the roof. "God help us!" said Richard, striding on more quickly.

He had not before fully realized the real poverty of his family. Now that he saw, every personal regret for his own future was laid aside; his one desire was to plunge in and remedy this pitiful situation. He had been home but seldom during the past eight years, for he had been late in entering college, and his whole course had been a struggle to pay his way through. His father had told him frankly that he could give him no assistance. At the time this had seemed a hardship, for the Colonel had inherited a small competence after the war that enabled him to live with some show of feudal grandeur; he had servants, horses, a well-tilled farm, and ready money in the bank, but he was not willing to sacrifice any of his luxuries to aid or abet the impractical "bookishness" of his son. A few years later, when Richard wrote and announced that his historical studies had led him to become a Catholic, the Colonel was more than ever bewildered. A religious son was worse than a studious one, and both were incomprehensible.

The Colonel had only the vaguest ideas of supernatural truths. He was a gentleman, a gentleman could not lie, nor steal, nor turn traitor to his friends—a gentleman never did anything dishonorable; he preserved his honor at all costs, at pistol point or sword's end if need be. The Mattersons had been wise statesmen, great soldiers, hospitable neighbors. He lived consistently up to this creed, leaving, he said, the praying to the women and the rest to God Almighty.

Without any monetary help from home, even Richard's vacations had been busy ones. He possessed a patient genius for teaching, and a certain captivating charm for his fellow-students, so that he was always in demand as a tutor. Several times he had gone to Europe with backward boys, who had to be "coached" all summer while they toured the continent with their strenuous families. Richard's visits home had thus been few and far between, and then his mother and good half-doubtful of his welcome. Now he blamed himself remorselessly for his neglect of his family, tolerantly forgetful of the Colonel's disregard of him. The old freight agent had done much to help him to this contrite mood, and the fact that he had hitherto seemed superfluous, added to the joy that all unselfish souls experience when they enter a wide field of usefulness, and realize that their presence is essential.

As he neared the house four setter dogs ran out, barking at his heels. Betty followed, shading her eyes from the sunset glare that she might better see the approaching stranger. She was a slight figure standing against the dark of the doorway; her small feet in thick tan shoes that buckled high above her ankles, her mud-stained corduroy skirt grazing their tops; a middie blouse open at the throat, and an old gray sweater flung about her shoulders, the sleeves tucked around her neck to keep it from slipping off; her curling black hair was caught in a loose knot. It would have been hard to tell whether she was child or woman. Richard tried to remember her age. He had always made a point of sending her some small memento on her birthday. She had been twenty-two last March. He hurried up the three steps that led to the wide brick portico, and lifting her in his arms kissed her and cried out, "Stop—stop—let me go. The Colonel will shoot you for this!"

"You little spitfire!" he laughed. "Don't you know your own brother, Betty? Didn't you tell me to come home?"

She flung her arms about him, crying half hysterically. "You frightened me to death, Dick. Why didn't you telegraph that you were coming?"

"I did."

"But we didn't get it."

"They didn't consider it worth delivering."

"Jeb Jackson is an old fool," said Betty, stamping her foot. "He's always poking his long nose into other people's business, and deciding what is best for them. He's the biggest gossip in the village."

"Men don't gossip, Betty," said Richard, his eyes twinkling. "Men love gossip," said she with great finality. "They won't acknowledge it, but they always encourage it. Now if you had only sent us word you were coming, I would have come to meet you. Why, you don't look at all like I thought you would look."

"I can't have changed so much in two years."

"But you have," insisted Betty, holding him out at arm's length. "The year you left college you had a half-grown Vandyke. Now—Well, you must have shaved on the train. Your face is as smooth as mine."

"Not as smooth as yours, Betty dear."

"And you look—you look quite human. Not at all like a preacher."

"But I'm not a preacher, Betty. I'm glad you're not," she said. "It's almost worth our financial failure to have you home."

He regarded her tenderly. "I did not know you cared."

"I do care. I need a brother dreadfully to take me to parties and dances and things. You really are very good looking. I'm quite proud of you. I'm sure the other girls will be crazy about you."

"Work will save me from that calamity," he said, without greeting of any kind. "I want to put a proposition before you."

"Yes?" he replied. "What is it?"

"You expect to rule our Stanton Hall when I die. Mind I am not going to do so just yet."

"I hope not," he ejaculated. "Well, here is my offer. If you marry Lena Fordyce, the estate is yours."

"Lena Fordyce? Why I scarcely know her! I replied in bewilderment."

"Fordyce's sister," my uncle said; and I recollected the lady and her appearance."

"No," I said after a pause. "No, I won't marry Miss Fordyce."

"Then the man raged and swore; and I rose in disgust and opened the door. A word of his stayed me with my hand on the knob of the door and I noticed a man pass along the corridor. He had evidently heard the noise in the room."

"You'll rue it, you fool!" my uncle cried. "You'll never inherit an acre or penny of mine!"

"I don't want to," I replied shortly. "Perhaps it is you who will regret taking—"

"I was angry, but not angry enough not to notice that the man in the corridor had paused to listen and I don't want any more interviews. I ended, and closed the door, the man in the corridor subsequently swore, with a bang."

I walked the long distance to my lodgings slowly. In spite of what I had said I had never ceased to hope that Stanton Hall should come to me. God knows, though, I was sorry for my cousins' deaths. But my father, the younger of the twin brothers by a few minutes, had liked to talk of a brief visit traditions, and during a brief visit to it, in the lifetime of Bill and Arthur, I had admired the old Tudor mansion with its quaint rooms, and twisted chimneys, set amid the hoary oaks and giant elms. The Stanton had conformed to the new religion in the days of Queen Bess; but there was a story set down of how Dame Stanton had sheltered a Massing-priest in the persecution of that reign, and had resolutely refused to give him up to the search party.

The widowed lady possessed four stout sons and a resolute spirit. Father Ayton was saved, only to die a martyr two years later. When leaving Stanton Hall he blessed the family and said:

"A Massing-priest, the Stanton race Shall oft from dangers free; And the old faith be theirs when one Escapes the gallows-tree."

"Don't laugh, Hugh."

"I haven't the least inclination to do so," Westman said. "Didn't I tell you I was converted to Catholicity in a hut on the west coast of Africa, when I lay ill of fever, by the French priest who doctored both body and soul?"

"Oh! Well, I must hasten on. The night I interviewed my uncle he was stabbed to death in the hotel. I needn't go into all the circumstances that gave the police the belief that I was the murderer. There was the noisy interview between us; and the man who had passed along the corridor swore he would threaten the dead man. A waiter in the hotel insisted he had seen me quitting the hotel hastily at half past twelve o'clock at night. The coroner's jury committed me for trial. In my rooms a long dagger was found that might easily have made the fatal wound."

"I was besides in sore want of money; and I could see that my

Westman nodded, with a faint smile on his lips. "I came in for some hard times, old man. Many a night I went hungry to bed, and I shifted my lodgings as my funds dwindled lower and lower. Then my cousins were drowned. In some inexplicable way Uncle came to hold me responsible for their tragic fate, and he certainly came to hate me."

"The estate, you know, was not entailed, and he could have bestowed the property on whom he wished. It appears he made several wills. In one I was sole legatee; in another all was bequeathed to the State. Another left everything to his steward, Alan Fordyce. This man had come to possess extraordinary power over his master."

"Was Mr. Stanton mad?" Westman asked.

"No," the medical man said. "I suppose it was natural that he should dislike me. Indeed, he had never shown me any partiality."

"My own affairs had been going badly, and I occupied lodgings in a poor suburban district, where the houses were like as peas in a pod. Editors had been unusually hard to satisfy in the matter of the pot-boilers that kept me from absolute starvation while I kept pegging away at the novel that was, I hoped, to make a name. It by the way, never did."

Hugh Westman gave a grunt, as the speaker paused to shake the ashes from his cigar.

"I was surprised when I was summoned by my uncle to the hotel he stopped in during his infrequent and short visits to the metropolis. The hour fixed for my visit was 9 o'clock at night, and when I reached the hotel I was shown by an attendant to Mr. Stanton's private sitting-room. It was one of many on a long corridor. My uncle had dined and was awaiting my appearance. He looked ill. His face was purplish and drawn."

"Sit down," he said, without greeting of any kind. "I want to put a proposition before you."

"Yes?" I replied. "What is it?"

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"I hope not," I said, ejaculated. "Well, here is my offer. If you marry Lena Fordyce, the estate is yours."

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legal advisers were not very hopeful of their case. My long confinement had left me so dispirited and hopeless that I ceased to care very much how my trial went.

"It was on the last day of the trial when all the witnesses had been examined that a priest, Father Loughran, came into the witness-box. The priest had been away for a long holiday in his home in the west of Ireland, and had heard nothing there of the murder."

"What had he to say?" Westman asked, knocking the ashes out of his pipe.

"Father Loughran had been attending a fellow countryman who was dying of rapid consumption in the house next to the one I lived in. He got a sudden summons that night just after he had gone to bed, instead of entering the house where the poor boy was dying, he came into the house where I boarded. He had found the door on the latch and rushed up the narrow stairs. My room corresponded in position to that of the sick boy. I was sleeping in an old rod-chair with my right hand resting on the table where a lamp burned. You see that old mark on my wrist. The priest noticed it. He went out without rousing me, attended his penitent, and next day set out for Ireland where he remained for over two months. His health was bad."

"His evidence, clear and decisive, led to a verdict of 'not guilty.' The jury never left the box. Father Loughran had looked at his watch as he left the house. It was exactly thirty minutes past midnight."

"I became a Catholic almost at once. And as my uncle had destroyed all previous wills I succeeded him as next-of-kin."

"And the real murderer? Did he escape?" Hugh asked.

"He escaped man," Paul Stanton replied slowly. "But he was struck down by a traction-engine, and before he died he confessed he had killed Mr. Stanton. The man was the steward, Fordyce. His accounts were all wrong, and he feared—quite mistakenly—as it turned out—that his employer had discovered the discrepancies. Thank God, he had a day to repent in! Oh, I should say in regard to the old prophecy that I wasn't the first of the Stanton's saved from death by a priest. A priest saved my father from drowning, and further back a squire of Stanton returning from a dinner-party drove his mare and trap over a steep embankment. He was seen by a priest returning from a sick-call. Now for bed!"

"And your novel?" Hugh asked. "Was never finished—and won't be. I was never a genius."

"So much the better," Hugh growled as he rose. "There are too many such in the world."

THE REAL MEXICAN PROBLEM

Eber Cole Blynn in America

No discussion of any phase of the Mexican problem can be serious or enlightening which does not involve the religion of the people as an important, if not the most important, factor. Mexico is Catholic, and so thoroughly so that after a century of bloody revolutionary efforts to uproot the Catholic Faith, the non-Catholics are so few as to constitute less than one per cent. of the population. There are some who would try, by quibbling arguments, to show that the Catholicism of Mexico is something different from the rest of the Catholic world. But these efforts deceive only those who wish to be deceived.

For a hundred years Mexico has been in the hands of a succession of revolutionary Governments, most of which have based their reason for being upon the declared purpose to destroy the Catholic Church. Catholics have been persecuted constantly and persistently, themselves calumniated, and their Faith reviled and ridiculed. Prominent Catholics have been exiled in thousands and their properties confiscated; the clergy have been suffered every character of martyrdom; and religious women have suffered a fate such as only the most brutally savage of men will inflict. The churches with their sacred objects have been subjected repeatedly to the most diabolical sacrilege, and the numerous educational and beneficial institutions have been closed just as repeatedly by revolutionary factions, to be confiscated and their endowments stolen by such Governments as felt themselves powerful enough to perpetrate such crimes.

Every effort has been made, and the most tyrannical methods employed, to suppress every institution of learning wherein the teaching of the Catholic Faith formed a part of the instruction given. Constitutions have been adopted, and laws have been passed, having for their object the complete and permanent crushing out of every suggestion of Catholicism. And the later Governments have been so frankly atheistic as to taboo even the mention of God by any of their officials.

That there are any Catholics at all in Mexico is a wonder; that there are as many as there are is a miracle. Let us consider the figures. The census of 1910 gave Mexico a population of 15,150,369. The Protestant missionary organizations working in Mexico claimed a total of 21,771 "communicants," and the grand total of "adherents" of all ages was but 92,156. And these were not all Mexicans by any

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