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Nearer to the Boys

An Interview with Ralph Connor

By PETER McARTHUR

When I was told that if I went to a certain office at a certain hour, I would have the pleasure of meeting the Rev. Charles W. Gordon (Ralph Connor), I accepted with joy. I wanted to meet him for two reasons. I wanted to meet him because he is our most distinguished Canadian novelist, and also because in my boyhood I wriggled on hard, uncompromising benches, listening to the same stern ministers that he "sat under." I had listened to them in both Gaelic and English, and wondered if he would have a fellow-feeling for one who had come through the same kind of experiences. As my eagerness had brought me early to the place of appointment, I had a few minutes to wait, and fell to wondering what he would be like. Unconsciously I associated him with those old-time Free Kirk ministers and wondered if he would be like the Rev. John Ross, of Brucefield, or the Rev. Lachlan MacPherson, of East Williams. So my surprise was complete when a brisk man in khaki uniform stepped into the room. He did not look enough like those old ministers to make my heart come into my mouth with terror as I faced him. Neither did he look enough like a military martinet to make me click my heels together and come to "attention." And there was absolutely nothing to suggest the producer of "best sellers." It took less than a minute to discover that "Ralph Connor" is, first of all, a fellow-human being, who is ready to take a glance at anything from any man's point of view.

A reference to the old ministers gave us an instant point of contact, and with much laughter—kindly and reverent—but still laughter—we compared notes and exchanged reminiscences of the good men who made the Scotch settlements where we had both been brought up, the places of stern discipline we remembered so well. The hour that had been promised to me was gone and part of another hour with it, before I remembered that the man who arranged the meeting had not done it out of pure kindness. He wanted me to interview Ralph Connor about the war work of the Y.M.C.A. By the time I remembered my duty we had reached a point where I felt that I could ask him about it from a rather daring point of view. I began with a straight question:

"What do you think of the work of the Y.M.C.A. in the war?"

He hunched his shoulders slightly and slipped down a trifle in his chair. From the expression on his face I was afraid that he was going to offer an unfavorable criticism. But his answer made it clear that that was not what disturbed him:

"It is doing a lot of work that the church should be doing."

Now you can understand why my question caused him a shade of discomfort. The minister in him—a touch of the old Free Kirk spiritual guide that made him feel the responsibilities of his calling—made him regret to confess that a purely lay institution is carrying practical Christianity to a point that is as yet impossible for the churches—"beating them to it," as the soldier boys would say.

"Don't misunderstand me," he protested. "The churches and their chaplains are doing a wonderful work, but the Y.M.C.A., being without a propaganda or dogmas, is able to adapt itself instantly to any needs that may arise, either at the battle-front or wherever the boys may be located. It meets them at all hours and in all places with a spirit of good cheer, comfort and helpfulness."

"Then you are of the opinion that the man who supports the work of the church is not doing all he can to help the boys?"

Assuredly. The Y.M.C.A. is able to go a little further. [illegible] of what I meant to [illegible] gets nearer to the boys.

That struck me as a very important point, and I decided to capitalize it from an angle that might [illegible] to a [illegible].

"You know," I [illegible] of half [illegible] of boys who [illegible] at a Y.M.C.A. or [illegible] sissified [illegible] of your [illegible] affect [illegible] the Y.M.C.A.

"Yes. The [illegible] C.A. has won [illegible] C.A. In the beginning the officers of the High Command had something of the attitude you suggest. But whenever there was anything to be done to help the boys the Y.M.C.A. was there to do it and do it well. By its spirit of unassuming helpfulness the Y.M.C.A. has won the hearts of both the officers and men, no matter what their church connections may be or may not be. It gives and it does not ask anything in return. Its sole reward is that it helps [illegible] all who need help. The thing to emphasize about its work is that it gives—it is an organized [illegible] of giving, and it gives without a sting to the giving."

RALPH CONNOR

"But I often hear comments, not always friendly—about the prices that the Y.M.C.A. charges for some of its supplies."

"Such comments have no justification. The prices are as near right as they can be made. If there is any profit on the sales to the boys in the camps or back of the lines, every cent of it goes to provide things free—absolutely free—to those who are in the front line trenches. As a matter of fact, the canteens and other organizations under the control of the churches and chaplains have pretty much the same schedule of prices as the Y.M.C.A."

I could not suppress a smile at finding my ancient enemy the trust or "Gentleman's Agreement" appearing in so admirable a form. But I made no comment. Instead, I asked a concluding question:

"Then I may tell the people that in its war work, especially in the matter of creature comforts, the Y.M.C.A. is nearer to the boys than anyone else?"

"Yes. It stands nearer to them than anything else except the military organization under whose discipline they live and die. You see they are specially organized, trained and outfitted for this [illegible] and they are a mighty [illegible]."

[illegible] said.

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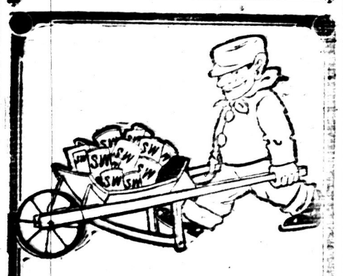

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It is rumored, apparently with considerable foundation, that the above named road is about to buy the right of way and build an independent track from the point where this road touches the G. T. R. down to the lake front. In any event the surveyors are again at work at the above named point and driving stakes. Should the road pass there some property will have to change hands and some houses be moved or torn down.

The cause of the present action of the Company is the probable action of the Government to make immediate repairs to the harbor.

Said a District Supt. to the writer one one day, "Lawson's corner must be a very important point, for ever since I was a small boy the surveyors were more or less busy there and they are still at it.—Port Dover Maple Leaf.

Tractors Busy

The Agricultural Department are again getting their tractors in working order. The International has been unloaded here after being overhauled at Guelph during the winter. The Avery will be taken to the western part of the County while a new Chase will be sent to the East. Some orders have peen received for spring plowing. Waddle Bros. will be the first to utilize the one here in plowing up the flats for their truck gardens.—Advocate.

No Organized Effort

In spite of the fact that the county council devoting a day to the discussion of speeding up farm production practically nothing has been done towards organizing the various townships in the county. The Warden made the best attempt in his own township, but few turned out the advertmeeting and little was done. The season is getting somewhat late for the work now.

At the Head

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