

Marching Men

by

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CHAPTER I.1

Uncle Charlie Wheeler stamped on the steps before Nance McGregor's bake-shop on the Main Street of the town of Coal Creek Pennsylvania and then went quickly inside. Something pleased him and as he stood before the counter in the shop he laughed and whistled softly. With a wink at the Reverend Minot Weeks who stood by the door leading to the street, he tapped with his knuckles on the showcase.

"It has," he said, waving attention to the boy, who was making a mess of the effort to arrange Uncle Charlie's loaf into a neat package, "a pretty name. They call it Norman--Norman McGregor." Uncle Charlie laughed heartily and again stamped upon the floor. Putting his finger to his forehead to suggest deep thought, he turned to the minister. "I am going to change all that," he said.

"Norman indeed! I shall give him a name that will stick! Norman! Too soft, too soft and delicate for Coal Creek, eh? It shall be rechristened. You and I will be Adam and Eve in the garden naming things. We will call it Beaut--Our Beautiful One--Beaut McGregor."

The Reverend Minot Weeks also laughed. He thrust four fingers of each hand into the pockets of his trousers, letting the extended thumbs lie along the swelling waist line. From the front the thumbs looked like two tiny boats on the horizon of a troubled sea. They bobbed and jumped about on the rolling shaking paunch, appearing and disappearing as laughter shook him. The Reverend Minot Weeks went out at the door ahead of Uncle Charlie, still laughing. One fancied that he would go along the street from store to store telling the tale of the christening and laughing again. The tall boy could imagine the details of the story.

It was an ill day for births in Coal Creek, even for the birth of one of Uncle Charlie's inspirations. Snow lay piled along the sidewalks and in the gutters of Main Street--black snow, sordid with the gathered grime of human endeavour that went on day and night in the bowels of the hills. Through the soiled snow walked miners, stumbling along silently and with blackened faces. In their bare hands they carried dinner pails.

The McGregor boy, tall and awkward, and with a towering nose, great hippopotamus-like mouth and fiery red hair, followed Uncle Charlie, Republican politician, postmaster and village wit to the door and looked after him as with the loaf of bread under his arm he hurried along the street. Behind the politician went the minister still enjoying the scene in the bakery. He was preening himself on his nearness to life in the mining town. "Did not Christ himself laugh, eat and drink with publicans and sinners?" he thought, as he waddled through the snow. The eyes of the McGregor boy, as they followed the two departing figures, and later, as he stood in the door of the bake-shop watching the struggling miners,

glistened, with hatred. It was the quality of intense hatred for his fellows in the black hole between the Pennsylvania hills that marked the boy and made him stand forth among his fellows.

In a country of so many varied climates and occupations as America it is absurd to talk of an American type. The country is like a vast disorganised undisciplined army, leaderless, uninspired, going in route-step along the road to they know not what end. In the prairie towns of the West and the river towns of the South from which have come so many of our writing men, the citizens swagger through life. Drunken old reprobates lie in the shade by the river's edge or wander through the streets of a corn shipping village of a Saturday evening with grins on their faces. Some touch of nature, a sweet undercurrent of life, stays alive in them and is handed down to those who write of them, and the most worthless man that walks the streets of an Ohio or Iowa town may be the father of an epigram that colours all the life of the men about him. In a mining town or deep in the entrails of one of our cities life is different. There the disorder and aimlessness of our American lives becomes a crime for which men pay heavily. Losing step with one another, men lose also a sense of their own individuality so that a thousand of them may be driven in a disorderly mass in at the door of a Chicago factory morning after morning and year after year with never an epigram from the lips of one of them.

In Coal Creek when men got drunk they staggered in silence through the street. Did one of them, in a moment of stupid animal sportiveness, execute a clumsy dance upon the barroom floor, his fellow--labourers looked at him dumbly, or turning away left him to finish without witnesses his clumsy hilarity.

Standing in the doorway and looking up and down the bleak village street, some dim realisation of the disorganised ineffectiveness of life as he knew it came into the mind of the McGregor boy. It seemed to him right and natural that he should hate men. With a sneer on his lips, he thought of Barney Butterlips, the town socialist, who was forever talking of a day coming when men would march shoulder to shoulder and life in Coal Creek, life everywhere, should cease being aimless and become definite and full of meaning.

"They will never do that and who wants them to," mused the McGregor boy. A blast of wind bearing snow beat upon him and he turned into the shop and slammed the door behind him. Another thought stirred in his head and brought a flush to his cheeks. He turned and stood in the silence of the empty shop shaking with emotion. "If I could form the men of this place into an army I would lead them to the mouth of the old Shumway cut and push them in," he threatened, shaking his fist toward the door. "I would stand aside and see the whole town struggle and drown in the black water as untouched as though I watched the drowning of a litter of dirty little kittens."

* * * * *

The next morning when Beaut McGregor pushed his baker's cart along the street and began climbing the hill toward the miners' cottages, he went, not as Norman McGregor, the town baker boy, only product of the loins of Cracked McGregor of Coal Creek, but as a personage, a being, the object of an art. The name given him by Uncle Charlie Wheeler had made him a marked man. He was as the hero of a popular romance, galvanised into life and striding in the flesh before the people. Men looked at him with new interest, inventorying anew the huge mouth and nose and the flaming hair. The bartender, sweeping the snow from before the door of the saloon, shouted at him. "Hey, Norman!" he called. "Sweet Norman! Norman is too pretty a name. Beaut is the name for you! Oh you Beaut!"

The tall boy pushed the cart silently along the street. Again he hated Coal Creek. He hated the bakery and the bakery cart. With a burning satisfying hate he hated Uncle Charlie Wheeler and the Reverend Minot Weeks. "Fat old fools," he muttered as he shook the snow off his hat and paused to breathe in the struggle up the hill. He had something new to hate. He hated his own name. It did sound ridiculous. He had thought before that there was something fancy and pretentious about it. It did not fit a bakery cart boy. He wished it might have been plain John or Jim or Fred. A quiver of irritation at his mother passed through him. "She might have used more sense," he muttered.

And then the thought came to him that his father might have chosen the name. That checked his flight toward universal hatred and he began pushing the cart forward again, a more genial current of thought running through his mind. The tall boy loved the memory of his father, "Cracked McGregor." "They called him 'Cracked' until that became his name," he thought. "Now they are at me." The thought renewed a feeling of fellowship between himself and his dead father--it softened him. When he reached the first of the bleak miners' houses a smile played about the corners of his huge mouth.

In his day Cracked McGregor had not borne a good reputation in Coal Creek. He was a tall silent man with something morose and dangerous about him. He inspired fear born of hatred. In the mines he worked silently and with fiery energy, hating his fellow miners among whom he was thought to be "a bit off his head." They it was who named him "Cracked" McGregor and they avoided him while subscribing to the common opinion that he was the best miner in the district. Like his fellow workers he occasionally got drunk. When he went into the saloon where other men stood in groups buying drinks for each other he bought only for himself. Once a stranger, a fat man who sold liquor for a wholesale house, approached and slapped him on the back. "Come, cheer up and have a drink with me," he said. Cracked McGregor turned and knocked the stranger to the floor. When the fat man was down he kicked him and glared at the crowd in the room. Then he walked slowly out at the door staring around and hoping some one would interfere.

In his house also Cracked McGregor was silent. When he spoke at all he spoke kindly and looked into the eyes of his wife with an eager expectant air. To his red-haired son he seemed to be forever pouring forth a kind of dumb affection. Taking the boy in his arms he sat for hours rocking back and forth and saying nothing. When the boy was ill or troubled by strange dreams at night the feel of his father's arms about him quieted him. In his arms the boy went to sleep happily. In the mind of the father there was a single recurring thought, "We have but the one bairn, we'll not put him into the hole in the ground," he said, looking eagerly to the mother for approval.

Twice had Cracked McGregor walked with his son on a Sunday afternoon. Taking the lad by the hand the miner went up the face of the hill, past the last of the miners' houses, through the grove of pine trees at the summit and on over the hill into sight of a wide valley on the farther side. When he walked he twisted his head far to one side like one listening. A falling timber in the mines had given him a deformed shoulder and left a great scar on his face, partly covered by a red beard filled with coal dust. The blow that had deformed his shoulder had clouded his mind. He muttered as he walked along the road and talked to himself like an old man.

The red-haired boy ran beside his father happily. He did not see the smiles on the faces of the miners, who came down the hill and stopped to look at the odd pair. The miners went on down the road to sit in front of the stores on Main Street, their day brightened by the memory of the hurrying McGregors. They had a remark they tossed about. "Nance McGregor should not have looked at her man when she conceived," they said.

Up the face of the hill climbed the McGregors. In the mind of the boy a thousand questions wanted answering. Looking at the silent gloomy face of his father, he choked back the questions rising in his throat, saving them for the quiet hour with his mother when Cracked McGregor was gone to the mine. He wanted to know of the boyhood of his father, of the life in the mine, of the birds that flew overhead and why they wheeled and flew in great ovals in the sky. He looked at the fallen trees in the woods and wondered what made them fall and whether the others would presently fall in their turn.

Over the hill went the silent pair and through the pinewood to an eminence half way down the farther side. When the boy saw the valley lying so green and broad and fruitful at their feet he thought it the most wonderful sight in the world. He was not surprised that his father had brought him there. Sitting on the ground he opened and closed his eyes, his soul stirred by the beauty of the scene that lay before them.

On the hillside Cracked McGregor went through a kind of ceremony. Sitting upon a log he made a telescope of his hands and looked over the valley inch by inch like one seeking something lost. For ten minutes he would look intently at a

clump of trees or a spot in the river running through the valley where it broadened and where the water roughened by the wind glistened in the sun. A smile lurked in the corners of his mouth, he rubbed his hands together, he muttered incoherent words and bits of sentences, once he broke forth into a low droning song.

On the first morning, when the boy sat on the hillside with his father, it was spring and the land was vividly green. Lambs played in the fields; birds sang their mating songs; in the air, on the earth and in the water of the flowing river it was a time of new life. Below, the flat valley of green fields was patched and spotted with brown new-turned earth. The cattle walking with bowed heads, eating the sweet grass, the farmhouses with red barns, the pungent smell of the new ground, fired his mind and awoke the sleeping sense of beauty in the boy. He sat upon the log drunk with happiness that the world in which he lived could be so beautiful. In his bed at night he dreamed of the valley, confounding it with the old Bible tale of the Garden of Eden, told him by his mother. He dreamed that he and his mother went over the hill and down toward the valley but that his father, wearing a long white robe and with his red hair blowing in the wind, stood upon the hillside swinging a long sword blazing with fire and drove them back.

When the boy went again over the hill it was October and a cold wind blew down the hill into his face. In the woods golden brown leaves ran about like frightened little animals and golden-brown were the leaves on the trees about the farmhouses and golden-brown the corn standing shocked in the fields. The scene saddened the boy. A lump came into his throat and he wanted back the green shining beauty of the spring. He wished to hear the birds singing in the air and in the grass on the hillside.

Cracked McGregor was in another mood. He seemed more satisfied than on the first visit and ran up and down on the little eminence rubbing his hands together and on the legs of his trousers. Through the long afternoon he sat on the log muttering and smiling.

On the road home through the darkened woods the restless hurrying leaves frightened the boy so that, with his weariness from walking against the wind, his hunger from being all day without food, and with the cold nipping at his body, he began to cry. The father took the boy in his arms and holding him across his breast like a babe went down the hill to their home.

It was on a Tuesday morning that Cracked McGregor died. His death fixed itself as something fine in the mind of the boy and the scene and the circumstance stayed with him through life, filling him with secret pride like a knowledge of good blood. "It means something that I am the son of such a man," he thought.

It was past ten in the morning when the cry of "Fire in the mine" ran up the hill to the houses of the miners. A panic seized the women. In their minds they saw the

men hurrying down old cuts, crouching in hidden corridors, pursued by death. Cracked McGregor, one of the night shift, slept in his house. The boy's mother, threw a shawl about her head, took his hand and ran down the hill to the mouth of the mine. Cold winds spitting snow blew in their faces. They ran along the tracks of the railroad, stumbling over the ties, and stood on the railroad embankment that overlooked the runway to the mine.

About the runway and along the embankment stood the silent miners, their hands in their trousers pockets, staring stolidly at the closed door of the mine. Among them was no impulse toward concerted action. Like animals at the door of a slaughter-house they stood as though waiting their turn to be driven in at the door. An old crone with bent back and a huge stick in her hand went from one to another of the miners gesticulating and talking. "Get my boy--my Steve! Get him out of there!" she shouted, waving the stick about.

The door of the mine opened and three men came out, staggering as they pushed before them a small car that ran upon rails. On the car lay three other men, silent and motionless. A woman thinly clad and with great cave-like hollows in her face climbed the embankment and sat upon the ground below the boy and his mother. "The fire is in the old McCrary cut," she said, her voice quivering, a dumb hopeless look in her eyes. "They can't get through to close the doors. My man Ike is in there." She put down her head and sat weeping. The boy knew the woman. She was a neighbour who lived in an unpainted house on the hillside. In the yard in front of her house a swarm of children played among the stones. Her husband, a great hulking fellow, got drunk and when he came home kicked his wife. The boy had heard her screaming at night.

Suddenly in the growing crowd of miners below the embankment Beaut McGregor saw his father moving restlessly about. On his head he had his cap with the miner's lamp lighted. He went from group to group among the people, his head hanging to one side. The boy looked at him intently. He was reminded of the October day on the eminence overlooking the fruitful valley and again he thought of his father as a man inspired, going through a kind of ceremony. The tall miner rubbed his hands up and down his legs, he peered into the faces of the silent men standing about, his lips moved and his red beard danced up and down.

As the boy looked a change came over the face of Cracked McGregor. He ran to the foot of the embankment and looked up. In his eyes was the look of a perplexed animal. The wife bent down and began to talk to the weeping woman on the ground, trying to comfort her. She did not see her husband and the boy and man stood in silence looking into each other's eyes.

Then the puzzled look went out of the father's face. He turned and running along with his head rolling about reached the closed door of the mine. A man, who

wore a white collar and had a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, put out his hand.

"Stop! Wait!" he shouted. Pushing the man aside with his powerful arm the runner pulled open the door of the mine and disappeared down the runway.

A hubbub arose. The man in the white collar took the cigar from his mouth and began to swear violently. The boy stood on the embankment and saw his mother running toward the runway of the mine. A miner gripped her by the arm and led her back up the face of the embankment. In the crowd a woman's voice shouted, "It's Cracked McGregor gone to close the door to the McCrary cut."

The man with the white collar glared about as he chewed the end of his cigar. "He's gone crazy," he shouted, again closing the door to the mine.

Cracked McGregor died in the mine, almost within reach of the door to the old cut where the fire burned. With him died all but five of the imprisoned miners. All day parties of men tried to get down into the mine. Below in the hidden passages under their own homes the scurrying miners died like rats in a burning barn while their wives, with shawls over their heads, sat silently weeping on the railroad embankment. In the evening the boy and his mother went up the hill alone. From the houses scattered over the hill came the sound of women weeping.

* * * * *

For several years after the mine disaster the McGregors, mother and son, lived in the house on the hillside. The woman went each morning to the offices of the mine where she washed windows and scrubbed floors. The position was a sort of recognition on the part of the mine officials of the heroism of Cracked McGregor.

Nance McGregor was a small blue-eyed woman with a sharp nose. She wore glasses and had the name in Coal Creek of being quick and sharp. She did not stand by the fence to talk with the wives of other miners but sat in her house and sewed or read aloud to her son. She subscribed for a magazine and had bound copies of it standing upon shelves in the room where she and the boy ate breakfast in the early morning. Before the death of her husband she had maintained a habit of silence in her house but after his death she expanded, and, with her red-haired son, discussed freely every phase of their narrow lives. As he grew older the boy began to believe that she like the miners had kept hidden under her silence a secret fear of his father. Certain things she said of her life encouraged the thought.

Norman McGregor grew into a tall broad-shouldered boy with strong arms, flaming red hair and a habit of sudden and violent fits of temper. There was something about him that held the attention. As he grew older and was renamed by Uncle Charlie Wheeler he began going about looking for trouble. When the

boys called him "Beaut" he knocked them down. When men shouted the name after him on the street he followed them with black looks. It became a point of honour with him to resent the name. He connected it with the town's unfairness to Cracked McGregor.

In the house on the hillside the boy and his mother lived together happily. In the early morning they went down the hill and across the tracks to the offices of the mine. From the offices the boy went up the hill on the farther side of the valley and sat upon the schoolhouse steps or wandered in the streets waiting for the day in school to begin. In the evening mother and son sat upon the steps at the front of their home and watched the glare of the coke ovens on the sky and the lights of the swiftly-running passenger trains, roaring whistling and disappearing into the night.

Nance McGregor talked to her son of the big world outside the valley and told him of the cities, the seas and the strange lands and peoples beyond the seas. "We have dug in the ground like rats," she said, "I and my people and your father and his people. With you it will be different. You will get out of here to other places and other work." She grew indignant thinking of the life in the town. "We are stuck down here amid dirt, living in it, breathing it," she complained. "Sixty men died in that hole in the ground and then the mine started again with new men. We stay here year after year digging coal to burn in engines that take other people across the seas and into the West."

When the son was a tall strong boy of fourteen Nance McGregor bought the bakery and to buy it took the money saved by Cracked McGregor. With it he had planned to buy a farm in the valley beyond the hill. Dollar by dollar it had been put away by the miner who dreamed of life in his own fields.

In the bakery the boy worked and learned to make bread. Kneading the dough his arms and hands grew as strong as a bear's. He hated the work, he hated Coal Creek and dreamed of life in the city and of the part he should play there. Among the young men he began to make here and there a friend. Like his father he attracted attention. Women looked at him, laughed at his big frame and strong homely features and looked again. When they spoke to him in the bakery or on the street he spoke back fearlessly and looked them in the eyes. Young girls in the school walked home down the hill with other boys and at night dreamed of Beaut McGregor. When some one spoke ill of him they answered defending and praising him. Like his father he was a marked man in the town of Coal Creek.

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