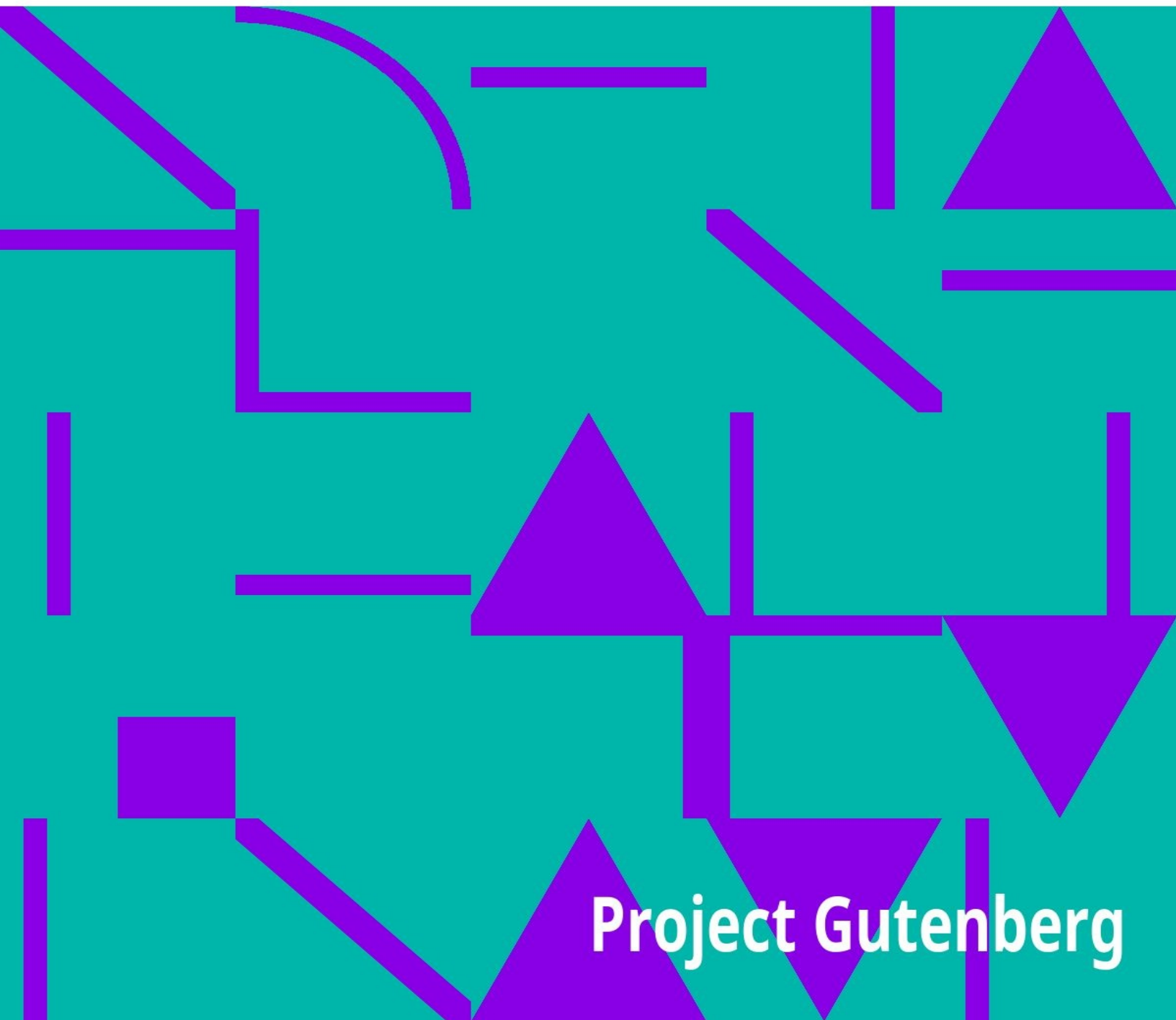


Michael McGrath, Postmaster

Ralph Connor

The background of the lower half of the image is a teal color, overlaid with a complex pattern of purple geometric shapes. These shapes include various line segments, triangles, and polygons of different sizes and orientations, creating a modern, abstract design.

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MICHAEL McGRATH, POSTMASTER

BY RALPH CONNOR

Author of "The Sky Pilot," "Black Rock," Etc.

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MICHAEL McGRATH, POSTMASTER.

Some men and some scenes so fasten themselves into one's memory that the years, with their crowding scenes and men, have no power to displace them. I can never forget "Ould Michael" and the scene of my first knowing him. All day long I rode, driving in front my pack-pony laden with my photograph kit, tent and outfit, following the trail that would end somewhere on the Pacific Coast, some hundreds of miles away. I was weary enough of dodging round the big trees, pushing through underbrush, scrambling up and down mountain-sides, hugging cliffs where the trail cut in and wading warily through the roaring torrent of "Sixty-mile Creek." As the afternoon wore on, the trail left the creek and wound away over a long slope up the mountain-side.

"Ginger," said I to my riding pony, "we are getting somewhere"—for our trail began to receive other trails from the side valleys and the going was better. At last it pushed up into the open, circled round a shoulder of the mountain, clinging tight, for the drop was sheer two hundred feet, and—there before us stretched the great Fraser Valley! From my feet the forest rolled its carpet of fir-tops—dark-green, soft, luxurious. Far down to the bottom and up again, in waving curves it swept, to the summit of the distant mountains opposite, and through this dark-green mass the broad river ran like a silver ribbon gleaming in the sunlight.

Following the line of the trail, my eye fell upon that which has often made men's hearts hard and lured them on to joyous death. There, above the green tree-tops, in a clearing, stood a tall white mast and from the peak, flaunting its lazy, proud defiance, flew a Union Jack.

"Now, Ginger, how in the name of the Empire comes that brave rag to be shaking itself out over these valleys!"

Ginger knew not, but, in answer to my heels, set off at a canter down the slope and, in a few minutes, we reached a grassy bench that stretched down to the river-bank. On the bench was huddled an irregular group of shacks and cabins and, in front of the first and most imposing of them, stood the tall mast with its floating flag. On the wide platform that ran in front of this log cabin a man was sitting, smoking a short bull-dog pipe. By his dress and style I saw at once that

he had served in Her Majesty's army. As I rode up under the flag I lifted my cap, held it high and called out: "God save the Queen!" Instantly he was on his feet and, coming to attention with a military salute, replied with great fervor: "God bless her!" From that moment he took me to his heart.

That was my introduction to "Ould Michael," as everyone in the Valley called him, and as he called himself.

After his fifth glass, when he would become dignified, "Ould Michael" would drop his brogue and speak of himself as "Sergeant McGrath, late of Her Majesty's Ninety-third Highlanders," Irishman though he was.

Though he had passed his sixtieth year, he was still erect and brisk enough in his movement, save for a slight hitch in his left leg. "A touch of a knife," he explained, "in the Skoonder Bag."

"The where?"

"Skoonder Bag, forninst the walls the Lucknow—to the left over, ye understand."

"I'm ashamed to say I don't," I answered, feeling that I was on the track of a yarn.

He looked at me pityingly.

"Ye've heard av Sir Colin?" He was not going to take anything for granted.

I replied hastily: "Sir Colin Campbell, of course."

"Well, we was followin' Sir Colin up to the belagured city when we run into the Skoonder Bag—big stone walls and windys high up, and full av min, like a jail, or a big disthillery."

Then, like a dream from the past, it came to me that he was talking of that bloody fight about and in the "Secunderabogh," where, through a breach two feet square, the men of the Ninety-third, man by man, forced their way in the face of a thousand Sepoys, mad for blood and, with their bayonets, piled high in gory heaps the bodies of their black foes, crying with every thrust, in voices hoarse with rage and dust, "Cawnpore! Cawnpore!" That tale Ould Michael would never tell till his cups had carried him far beyond the stage of dignity and reserve.

After he had helped me to picket my ponies and pitch my tent, he led me by a little gate through his garden to the side door of the cabin.

The garden was trim, like Ould Michael himself, set out in rectangular beds, by gravel-walks and low-cut hedges of "old man." It was filled with all the dear old-fashioned flowers—Sweet William and Sweet Mary, bachelor's buttons, pansies and mignonette, old country daisies and snapdragons and lilies of the valley and, in the centre of the beds, great masses of peonies, while all around, peeping from under the hedges of old man, were poppies of every hue. Beyond the garden there was a plot of potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables and, best of all and more beautiful than all, over the whole front of the cabin, completely hiding the rough logs, ran a climbing rose, a mass of fragrant bloom. Ould Michael lingered lovingly for a moment among his flowers, and then led me into the house.

The room into which we entered was a wonder for preciseness and order. The walls were decorated with prints, much-faded photographs, stuffed birds, heads of deer and a quaint collection of old-fashioned guns, pistols and bayonets, but all arranged with an exactness and taste that would drive mad the modern artistic decorator. On one side of the window hung a picture of Wellington: on the other, that of Sir Colin. To the right of the clock, on a shelf, stood a stuffed mallard; to the left on a similar shelf, stood a stuffed owl. The same balance was diligently preserved in the arrangement of his weapons of war. A pine table stood against one wall, flanked by a home-made chair on either side. A door opened to the left into a bedroom, as I supposed; another, to the right, into what Ould Michael designated "My office, sir."

"Office?" I inquired.

"Yes, sir," still preserving his manual of ceremony, "Her Majesty's mail for Grand Bend."

"And you are the Postmaster?" I said, throwing into my voice the respect and awe that I felt were expected.

"That same," with a salute.

"That explains the flag, then; you are bound to keep that flying, I suppose."

"Bound, sir? Yes, but by no law is it."

"How, then?"

"For twenty-five years I marched and fought under that same flag," said the old soldier, dropping into his brogue, "and under it, plaze God, I'll die."

I looked at the old man. In his large dark-blue eyes shone that "fire that never slumbers"—the fire of loyal valor, with its strange power to transform common clay into men of heroic mould. The flag, the garden, the postoffice—these were Ould Michael's household gods. The equipment of the postoffice was primitive enough.

"Where are the boxes?" I inquired; "the letter-boxes, you know; to put the letters into."

"An' what wud I do puttin' them into boxes, at all?"

"Why, to distribute the mail so that you could find every man's letter when he calls for it."

"An' what would I be doin' findin' a man's letter for him? Shure an' can't he find it himself on the counter there?" pointing to a wide plank that ran along the wall.

I explained fully the ordinary system of distributing mail to him.

"Indade, 'tis a complicated system intoirely," and then he proceeded to explain his own, which he described as "simple and unpretenshus" and, sure enough, it was; for the letters were strewn upon the top of the counter, the papers and other mail-matter thrown underneath, and every man helped himself to his own.

"But might there not be mistakes?" I suggested. "A man might take his neighbor's letter."

"An' what would he do wid another man's letter forby the discooshun that might enshoo?"

I was very soon to have an opportunity of observing the working of Ould Michael's system, for next day was mailday and, in the early afternoon, men began to arrive from the neighboring valleys for their monthly mail. Ould Michael introduced me to them all with much ceremony and I could easily see that he was a personage of importance among them. Not only was he, as postmaster, the representative among them of Her Majesty's Government, but they were proud of him as standing for all that was heroic in the Empire's history; for a man who had touched shoulders with those who had fought their way under India's fierce suns and through India's swamps and jungles, from

Calcutta to Lucknow and back, was no common citizen, but a man who trailed glory in his wake. More than this, Ould Michael was a friend to all, and they loved him for his simple, generous heart. Too generous, as it turned out, for every month it was his custom to summon his friends to Paddy Dougan's bar and spend the greater part of the monthly remittance that came in his letter from home. That monthly letter should be placed in the category of household gods with the flag, the garden and the postoffice. Its arrival was always an occasion for celebration—not for the remittance it contained, but for the wealth of love and tender memory it brought to Ould Michael in this far-off land.

Late in the afternoon, just before the arrival of the mail-stage, there rode up the bench towards the postoffice a man remarkable even in that company of remarkable men. He was tall—a good deal over six feet—spare, bony, with huge hands and feet and evidently possessed of immense strength. His face and head were covered with a mass of shaggy hair—brick-red mixed with grey—and out of this mass of grizzled hair gleamed two small grey eyes, very bright and very keen.

"Howly mither av Moses!" shouted Ould Michael rushing towards him; "'tis McFarquhar. My friend, Mr. McFarquhar," said Ould Michael, presenting me in his most ceremonious style and standing at attention.

McFarquhar took my hand in his paw and gave me a grasp so cordial that, were it not for the shame of it, I would have roared out in agony.

"I am proud to make the acquaintance of you," he said, with a strong highland accent. "You will be a stranger in these parts?"

I told him as much of my history and affairs as I thought necessary and drew from him as much information about himself and his life as I could, which was not much. He had come to the country a lad of twenty to take service under the Hudson Bay Company. Fifteen years ago had left the Company and had settled in the valley of Grizzly Creek, which empties into the Fraser a little below the Grand Bend. I found out too, but not from himself, that he had married an Indian woman and that, with her and his two boys, he lived the half-savage life of a hunter and rancher. He was famous as a hunter of the grizzly bears that once frequented his valley and, indeed, he bore the name of "Grizzly McFarquhar" among the old-timers.

He was Ould Michael's dearest friend. Many a long hunt had they taken together, and over and over again did they owe their lives to each other. But the hour had

now come for the performance of Ould Michael's monthly duty. The opening of the mail was a solemn proceeding. The bag was carried in from the stage by Ould Michael, followed by the entire crowd in a kind of triumphal procession, and reverently deposited upon the counter. The key was taken down from its hook above the window, inserted into the lock, turned with a flourish and then hung up in its place. From his pocket Ould Michael then took a clasp-knife with a wicked-looking, curved blade, which he laid beside the bag. He then placed a pair of spectacles on his nose and, in an impressive manner and amidst dead silence, opened the bag, poured out its contents upon the counter, turned it inside out and carefully shook it. No one in the crowd moved. With due deliberation Ould Michael, with the wicked-looking clasp knife, proceeded to cut the strings binding the various bundles of letters and papers. The papers were then deposited beneath the counter upon the floor, and the letters spread out upon the counter. The last act of the ceremony was the selecting by Ould Michael of his own letter from the pile, after which, with a waive of the hand, he declared, "Gentlemen, the mail is open," when they flung themselves upon it with an eagerness that told of the heart-hunger for news from a far-country that is like cool water to the thirsty soul.

The half-hour that followed the distribution of the mail offered a scene strange and touching. The men who had received letters stood away from the crowd and read them with varying expressions of delight or grief, or in silence that spoke more deeply than could any words. For that half-hour the lonely valleys in these deep forests stood back from them, and there opened up a vision of homes far away, filled with faces and echoing with voices that some of them knew they would never see nor hear again.

But no man ever saw Ould Michael read his letter. That half-hour he spent in his inner room and, when he came out, there was lingering about his face a glory as of a departing vision. The dark-blue eyes were darker than before and in them that soft, abstracted look that one sees in the eye of a child just awakened from sleep. His tongue, so ready at other times, would be silent; and he would move softly over to his friend McFarquhar, and stand there as in a dream. As he came toward us on this occasion, McFarquhar said, in an undertone: "It is good news to-day with Ould Michael," adding in answer to my look of inquiry, "His sister has charge of his little girl at home."

Ould Michael stood in silence beside his friend for some moments.

"All well, Michael?" asked McFarquhar.

"They are, that," answered the old soldier, with a happy sigh. "Och, 'tis the lovely land it is, and it's ha-ard to kape away from it."

"I am thinking you are better away from it than in it," said McFarquhar, dryly.

"Indade, an' it's throe for you," answered Ould Michael, "but the longer y're from it the more ye love it, an' it's God bless Ould Oireland siz I," and he bore us off to celebrate.

It was useless for me to protest. His duty for the month was over; he was a free man. He had had his good news; and why should he not celebrate? Besides, he had money in his pocket, and "what would the byes think av me if I neglected to set 'em up?" And set 'em up he did for "the byes" and for himself, till I heard McFarquhar taking him to his cabin to put him to bed long after I had turned in. All through the following Sunday Ould Michael continued his celebration, with the hearty and uproarious assistance of the rest of the men and most of them remained over night for Ould Michael's Sunday spree, which they were sure would follow.

How completely Paddy Dougan's whisky, most of which he made on his back premises, changed Ould Michael and the whole company! From being solemn, silent, alert and generally good-natured, they became wildly vociferous, reckless, boastful and quarrelsome. That Sunday, as always happens in the Mountains, where there are plenty of whisky and a crowd of men, was utterly horrible. The men went wild in all sorts of hideous horseplay, brawls and general debauchery, and among them Ould Michael reigned a king.

"It is bad whisky," McFarquhar exclaimed. McFarquhar himself was never known to get drunk, for he knew his limit on good whisky, and he avoided bad. Paddy Dougan knew better than to give him any of his own home-made brew, for if, after his fourth, McFarquhar found himself growing incapable, knowing that he could enjoy his sixth and even carry with comfort his ninth, then his rage blazed forth, and the only safety for Paddy lay in escape to the woods. It was not so much that he despised the weakness of getting drunk, but he resented the fraud that deprived him of the pleasure of leisurely pursuing his way to his proper limit.

"It is the *bad* whisky," repeated McFarquhar "and Ould Michael ought to know better than fill himself up with such deplorable stuff."

"Too bad!" I said.

"Ay, but I'll jist take him away with me to-morrow and he'll come to in a few days."

I knew enough of the life in these valleys not to be hard with Ould Michael and his friends. The slow monotony of the long, lonely weeks made any break welcome, and the only break open to them was that afforded by Paddy Dougan's best home-made, a single glass of which would drive a man far on to madness. A new book, a fresh face, a social gathering, a Sabbath service—how much one or all of these might do for them!

With difficulty I escaped from Ould Michael's hospitality and, leaving the scenes of beastly debauchery behind, betook myself to the woods and river. Here, on the lower bench, the woods became an open glade with only the big trees remaining.

I threw myself down on the river-bank and gave myself up to the gracious influences that stole in upon me from trees and air and grass and the flowing river. The Sabbath feeling began to grow upon me, as the pines behind and the river in front sang to each other soft, crooning songs. As I lay and listened to the solemn music of the great, swaying pines and the soft, full melody of the big river, my heart went back to my boyhood days when I used to see the people gather in the woods for the "Communion." There was the same soothing quiet over all, the same soft, crooning music and, over all, the same sense of a Presence. In my dreaming, ever and again there kept coming to me the face of Ould Michael, with the look that it bore after reading his home-letter, and I thought how different would his Sabbath day have been had his sister and his little one been near to stand between him and the dreariness and loneliness of his life.

True to his promise, McFarquhar carried off Ould Michael to his ranch up Grizzly Creek. Before the sun was high McFarquhar had his own and Michael's pony ready at the door and, however unwilling Ould Michael might be, there was nothing for it but march. As they rode off Ould Michael took off his hat under the flag and called out:

"God save Her Majesty!"

"God bless her!" I echoed heartily.

At once the old soldier clambered down and, tearing open his coat, pulled out a flask.

"Mr. McFarquhar," he said, solemnly, "it would be unbecoming in us to separate from our friend without duly honoring Her Gracious Majesty's name." Then, raising high the flask, he called out with great ceremony, and dropping his brogue entirely: "Gentlemen, I give you the Queen, God bless her!" He raised the flask to his lips and took a long pull and passed it to me. After we had duly honored the toast, Ould Michael once more struck an impressive attitude and called out: "Gentlemen, Her Majesty's loyal forces——" when McFarquhar reached for him and, taking the flask out of his hand, said, gravely:

"It is a very good toast, but we will postpone the rest till a more suitable occasion."

Ould Michael, however, was resolute.

"It would ill become a British soldier to permit this toast to go unhonored."

"Will you come after this one is drunk?" asked McFarquhar.

"I will that."

"Very well," said McFarquhar, "I drink to the very good health of Her Majesty's army," and, taking a short pull, he put the flask into his pocket.

Ould Michael gazed at him in amazed surprise and, after the full meaning of the joke had dawned upon him, burst out into laughter.

"Bedad, McFarquhar, it's the first joke ye iver made, but the less fraquent they are the better I loike them." So saying, he mounted his pony and, once more saluting me and then the flag, made off with his friend. Every now and then, however, I could see him sway in his saddle under the gusts of laughter at the excellence of McFarquhar's joke.

That was the last I saw of Ould Michael for more than six months, but often through that winter, as I worked my way to the Coast, I wondered what the monthly mails were doing for the old man and whether to him and to his friends of those secluded valleys any better relief from the monotony of life had come than that offered by Paddy Dougan's back room.

In early May I found myself once more with my canvas and photographic apparatus approaching Grand Bend, but this time from the West. As I reached the curve in the river where the trail leads to the first view of the town I eagerly searched for Ould Michael's flag. There stood the mast, sure enough, but there

was no flag in sight. What had happened to Ould Michael? While he lived his flag would fly. Had he left Grand Bend, or had Paddy Dougan's stuff been too much for him? I was rather surprised to find in my heart a keen anxiety for the old soldier. As I hurried on I saw that Grand Bend had heard the sound of approaching civilization and was waking up. Two or three saloons, a blacksmith's shop, some tents and a new general store proclaimed a boom. As I approached the store I saw a sign in big letters across the front, "Jacob Wragge, General Store," and immediately over the door, in smaller letters, "Postoffice." More puzzled than ever I flung my reins over the hitching-post and went in. A number of men stood leaning against the counter and piled-up boxes, none of whom I knew.

"Is Ould Michael in?" I asked, forgetting for the moment his proper name.

"In where?" asked the man behind the counter.

"The postoffice," I replied. "Doesn't he keep the postoffice?"

"Not much," he answered, with an insolent laugh; "it's not much he could keep, unless it's whisky."

"Perhaps you can tell me where he is?" I asked, keeping my temper down, for I longed to reach for his throat.

"You'll find him boozing in one of the saloons, like enough, the old sot."

I walked out without further word, for the longing for his throat grew almost more than I could bear, and went across to Paddy Dougan's. Paddy expressed great delight at seeing me again and, on my asking for Ould Michael, became the picture of woe.

Four months ago the postoffice had been taken from Ould Michael and set up in Jacob Wragge's store, and with the old soldier things had gone badly ever since.

"The truth is, an' I'll not desave you," said Paddy, adopting a confidential undertone, "he's drinkin' too much and he is."

"And where is he? And where's his flag?"

"His flag is it?" Paddy shook his head as if to say, "Now you *have* touched the sore spot. Shure, an' didn't he haul down the flag the day they took the affice frum him."

"And has he never put it up again?"

"Niver a bit av it, Man dear," and Paddy walked out with me in great excitement.

"Do you know he niver heard a word till the stage druv be his dure with the mail-bag an' the tap av it an' left the ould man standin' there alone. Man, do you know, you wud ha' cried, so you wud, at the look av him; and then he walked over to the flag and hauled it down an' flung it inside the affice, an' there it's yit; an' niver a joke out av him since."

"And what is McFarquhar doing all the time?"

"Shure he's off on his spring hunt this three months; an' he thried to get Ould Michael to go along wid him, but niver a bit wud he; but I heard he'll be in to-day and, bedad, there he is!"

Sure enough there was McFarquhar, riding toward us. He gave me a warm welcome back and then fell into talking of Ould Michael. He had only seen him once after the loss of his position, but he feared things were going badly with him. I told him all that Paddy had given me as we searched the saloons. Ould Michael was not to be seen.

"He will be at home very likely," said McFarquhar. "We will jist put a stop to this kind of work."

McFarquhar was torn between grief over his friend's trouble and indignation at his weakness and folly. We rode up to Ould Michael's cabin. The "office" door was locked and the windows boarded up. In the garden all was a wild tangle of flowers and weeds. Nature was bravely doing her best, but she missed the friendly hand that in the past had directed her energies. The climbing rose covered with opening buds was here and there torn from the bare logs.

"Man, man!" cried McFarquhar, "this is a terrible change whatever."

We knocked at the side door and waited, but there was no answer. I pushed the door open and there, in the midst of disorder and dirt, sat Ould Michael. I could hardly believe it possible that in so short a time so great a change could come to a man. His hair hung in long grey locks about his ears, his face was unshaven, his dress dirty and slovenly and his whole appearance and attitude suggested ruin and despair. But the outward wreck was evidently only an index to the wreck of soul, that had gone on. Out of the dark-blue eyes there shone no inner light. The bright, brave, cheery old soldier was gone, and in his place the figure of disorder

and despair. He looked up at our entering, then turned from us, shrinking, and put his hands to his face, swaying to and fro and groaning deeply.

McFarquhar had come prepared to adopt strong measures, but the sight of Ould Michael, besotted and broken, was more than he could stand.

"Michael, man!" he cried, amazement and grief in his voice. "Aw, Michael, man! What's this? What's this?"

He went to him and laid his big bony hand on Ould Michael's shoulder. At his words and touch the old man broke into sobbing, terrible to see.

"Whisht, man," said McFarquhar, as he might to a child, "whist, whist, lad! It will be well with you yet."

But Ould Michael could not be comforted, but sobbed on and on. A man's weeping has something terrible in it, but an old man's tears are hardest of all to bear. McFarquhar stood helpless for some moments; then, taking Ould Michael by the arm, he said:

"Come out of this, anyway! Come out!"

But it was long before Ould Michael would talk. He sat in silence while his friend discoursed to him about the folly of allowing Paddy to deceive him with bad whisky. Surely any man could tell the bad from the good.

"It is deplorable stuff altogether, and it will not be good for Paddy when I see him."

"Och!" burst out Ould Michael at last, "it is not the whisky at all, at all."

"Ay, that is a great part of it, whatever."

"Och! me hea-art is broke, me hea-art is broke," groaned Ould Michael.

"Hoots, man! is it for the p'stoffice? That was not much worth to any man."

But Ould Michael only shook his head. It was hopeless to try to make such a man appreciate his feelings. McFarquhar rambled on, making light of the whole affair. The loss could only be very trifling. A man could make much more out of anything else. Poor Ould Michael bore it as long as he could and then, rising to his feet, cried out:

"Howly mither av Moses! an' have ye no hea-art inside av ye at all, at all? 'Tis

not the money; the money is dirt!"

Here McFarquhar strongly dissented. Ould Michael heeded him not, but poured out his bitterness and grief. "For twinty years and more did I folly the flag in all lands and in all climates, wid wounds all over me body, an' medals an' good conduct sthripes an'—an' all that; an' now, wid niver a word av complaint or explanashun, to be turned aff like a dog an' worse."

Then the matter-of-fact McFarquhar, unable to understand these sentimental considerations, but secretly delighted that he had got Ould Michael to unbosom himself, began to draw him.

"Not twenty years, Michael."

"Twenty-foive years it is, an' more, I'm tellin' ye," replied Ould Michael, "an' niver wance did the inimy see the back av me coat or the dust av me heels; an' to think——"

"How long was it, then, you were with Sir Colin?" continued McFarquhar, cunningly.

"Wid Sir Colin? Shure an' didn't I stay wid him all the way from Calcutta to Lucknow an' back? An' didn't I give thim faithful sarvice here for twelve years—the first man that iver handled the mail in the valley? An' here I am, like—like—any common man."

These were the sore spots in his heart. He was shamed before the people of the valleys in whose presence he had stood forth as the representative of a grateful sovereign. His Queen and his country—his glory and pride for all these years—had forgotten him and his years of service and had cast him aside as worthless; and now he was degraded to the ranks of a mere private citizen! No wonder he had hauled down his flag and then, having no interest in life, nothing was left him but Paddy Dougan and the relief of his bad whisky.—Against Jacob Wragge, too, who had supplanted him, his rage burned. He would have his heart's blood yet.

McFarquhar, as he listened, began to realize how deep was the wound his old friend had suffered; but all he could say was, "You will come out with me Michael, and a few weeks out with the dogs will put you right," but Ould Michael was immovable and McFarquhar, bidding me care for him and promising to return next week, rode off much depressed. Before the week was

over, however, he was back again with great news and in a state of exaltation.

"The minister is coming," he announced.

"Minister?"

"Ay, he has been with me. The Rev. John Macleod" (or as he made it, "Magleod") "from Inverness—and he is the grand man! He has the gift."

I remembered that he was a highlander and knew well what he meant.

"Yes, yes," he continued with his strongest accent, "he has been with me, and very faithfully has he dealt with me. Oh! he is the man of God, and I hev not heard the likes of him for forty years and more."

I listened with wonder, as McFarquhar described the visit of the Rev. John Macleod to his home. I could easily imagine the close dealing between the minister and McFarquhar, who would give him all reverence and submission, but when I imagined the highland minister dealing faithfully with the Indian wife and mother and her boys I failed utterly.

"He could not make much of her," meaning his wife, "and the lads," said McFarquhar sadly, "but there it was that he came very close to myself; and indeed—indeed—my sins have found me out."

"What did is say to you? What sins of yours did he discover?" I asked, for McFarquhar was the most respectable man in all the valley.

"Oh did he not ask me about my family altar and my duties to my wife and children?"

There was no manner of doubt but Mr. Macleod had done some searching in McFarquhar's heart and had brought him under "deep conviction," as he said himself. And McFarquhar had great faith that the minister would do the same for Ould Michael and was indignant when I expressed my doubts.

"Man aliou" (alive), he cried, "he will make his fery bones to quake."

"I don't know that that will help him much," I replied. But McFarquhar only looked at me and shook his head pityingly.

On Saturday, sure enough, McFarquhar arrived with the minister, and a service for the day following was duly announced. We took care that Ould Michael

should be in fit condition to be profited by the Rev. John Macleod's discourse. The service was held in the blacksmith's shop, the largest building available. The minister was a big, dark man with a massive head and a great, rolling voice which he used with tremendous effect in all the parts of his service. The psalm he sang mostly alone, which appeared to trouble him not at all. The scripture lesson he read with a rhythmic, solemn cadence that may have broken every rule of elocution, but was nevertheless most impressive. His prayer, during which McFarquhar stood, while all the rest sat, was a most extraordinary production. In a most leisurely fashion it pursued its course through a whole system of theology, with careful explanation at critical places, lest there should be any mistaking of his position. Then it proceeded to deal with all classes and condition of men, from the Queen downward. As to McFarquhar, it was easy to see from his face that the prayer was only another proof that the minister had "the gift," but to the others, who had never had McFarquhar's privilege, it was only a marvelous, though impressive performance. Before he closed, however, he remembered the people before him and, in simple, strong, heart-reaching words, he prayed for their salvation.

"Why, in Heaven's name," I said afterwards to McFarquhar, "didn't he begin his prayer where he ended? Does he think the Almighty isn't posted in theology?" But McFarquhar would only reply: "Ay, it was grand? He has the gift!"

The sermon was, as McFarquhar said, "terrible powerful." The text I forget, but it gave the opportunity for an elaborate proof of the universal depravity of the race and of their consequent condemnation. He had no great difficulty in establishing the first position to the satisfaction of his audience, and the effect produced was correspondingly slight; but when he came to describe the meaning and the consequences of condemnation, he grew terrible, indeed. His pictures were lurid in the extreme. No man before him but was greatly stirred up. Some began to move uneasily in their seats; some tried to assume indifference; some were openly enraged; but none shared McFarquhar's visible and solemn delight. Ould Michael's face showed nothing; but, after all was over, in answer to McFarquhar's enthusiastic exclamation he finally grunted out:

"A great sermon, is it? P'raps it was and p'raps it wasn't. It took him a long time to tell a man what he knew before."

"And what might that be?" asked McFarquhar.

"That he was goin' fast to the Divil."

This McFarquhar could not deny and so he fell into disappointed silence. He began to fear that the minister might possibly fail with Ould Michael, after all. I frankly acknowledged the same fear and tried to make him see that for men like Ould Michael, and the rest, preaching of that kind could do little good. With this position McFarquhar warmly disagreed, but as the week went by he had to confess that on Ould Michael the minister had no effect at all, for he kept out of his way and demoted himself to Paddy Dougan as far as we would allow him.

Then McFarquhar began to despair and to realize how desperate is the business of saving a man fairly on the way to destruction. But help came to us—"a mysterious dispensation of Providence," McFarquhar called it. It happened on the Queen's birthday, when Grand Bend, in excess of loyal fervor, was doing its best to get speedily and utterly drunk. In other days Ould Michael had gloried beyond all in the display of loyal spirit; but to-day he sat, dark and scowling, in Paddy Dougan's barroom. McFarquhar and I were standing outside the door keeping an eye, but not too apparently, upon Ould Michael's drinking.

A big German from the tie-camps, who had lived some years across the border, and not to his advantage, was holding forth in favor of liberty and against all tyrannous governments. As Paddy's whisky began to tell the German became specially abusive against Great Britain and the Queen. Protests came from all sides, till, losing his temper, the German gave utterance to a foul slander against Her Majesty's private life. In an instant Ould Michael was on his feet and at the bar.

"Dhrink all around!" he cried. The glares were filled and all stood waiting. "Gentlemen," said Ould Michael, in his best manner; "I give you Her Gracious Majesty the Queen, God bless her!" With wild yells the glasses were lifted high and the toast drunk with three times three. The German, meantime, stood with his glass untouched. When the cheers were over he said, with a sneer:

"Shentlemen, fill ub!" The order was obeyed with alacrity.

"I gif you, 'our noble selfs,' and for de Queen" (using a vile epithet), "she can look after her ownself." Quick as thought Ould Michael raised his glass and flung its contents into the German's face, saying, as he did so: "God save the Queen!" With a roar the German was at him, and before a hand could be raised to prevent it, Ould Michael was struck to the floor and most brutally kicked. By this time McFarquhar had tossed back the crowd right and left and, stooping down, lifted Ould Michael and carried him out into the air, saying in a husky

voice:

"He is dead! He is dead!"

But in a moment the old man opened his eyes and said faintly:

"Niver a bit av it, God save——"

His eyes closed again and he became unconscious. They gave him brandy and he began to revive. Then McFarquhar rose and looked round for the German. His hair was fairly bristling round his head; his breath came in short gasps and his little eyes were blood-shot with fury.

"You have smitten an old man and helpless," he panted, "and you ought to be destroyed from the face of the earth; but I will not smite you as I would a man, but as I would a wasp."

He swung his long arm like a flail and, with his open hand, smote the German on the side of the head. It was a terrific blow; under it the German fell to the earth with a thud. McFarquhar waited a few moments while the German rose, slowly spitting out broken teeth and blood.

"Will you now behave yourself," said McFarquhar, moving toward him.

"Yes, yes, it is enough," said his antagonist hurriedly and went into the saloon.

We carried Ould Michael to his cabin and laid him on his bed. He was suffering dreadfully from some inward wound, but he uttered not a word of complaint. After he had lain still for some time he looked at McFarquhar.

"What is it, lad?" asked McFarquhar.

"The flag," whispered poor Ould Michael.

"The flag? Do you want the flag?"

He shook his head slowly, still looking beseechingly at his friend. All at once it came to me.

"You want the flag hauled up, Michael?" I said.

He smiled and eagerly looked towards me.

"I'll run it up at once," I said.

He moved his hand. I came to him and bending over him caught the words "God save——"

"All right," I answered, "I shall give it all honor."

He smiled again, closed his eyes and a look of great peace came upon his face. His quarrel with his Queen and country was made up and all the bitterness was gone from his heart. After an examination as full as I could make, I came to the conclusion that there were three ribs broken and an injury, more or less serious, to the lungs; but how serious, I could not tell. McFarquhar established himself in Ould Michael's cabin and nursed him day and night. He was very anxious that the minister should see Ould Michael and, when the day came for Mr. Macleod's service in Grand Bend, I brought him to Ould Michael's cabin, giving him the whole story on the way. His highland loyalty was stirred.

"Noble fellow," he said, warmly, "it is a pity he is a Romanist; a sore pity."

His visit to Ould Michael was not a success. Even McFarquhar had to confess that somehow his expounding of the way of salvation to Ould Michael and his prayers, fervent though they were, did not appeal to the old soldier; the matter confused and worried him. But however much he failed with Ould Michael there was no manner of doubt that he was succeeding with McFarquhar. Long and earnest were their talks and, after every "season," McFarquhar came forth more deeply impressed with the grand powers of the minister. He had already established the "family altar" in his home and was making some slow progress in instructing his wife and children in "the doctrine of grace," but as Ould Michael began to grow stronger, McFarquhar's anxiety about *his state* grew deeper. Again and again he had the minister in to him, but Ould Michael remained unmoved; indeed, he could hardly see what the minister would be at.

One evening as we three were sitting in Ould Michael's main room, McFarquhar ventured to express his surprise at Ould Michael's continued "darkness" as he said:

"My friend," said the minister, solemnly, "it has been given me that you are the man to lead him into the light."

"God pity me!" exclaimed McFarquhar. "That I could lead any man!"

"And more," said the minister, in deepening tones, "it is borne in upon me that his blood will be upon you."

McFarquhar's look of horror and fear was pitiable and his voice rose in an agony of appeal.

"God be merciful to me! you will not be saying such a word as that."

"Fear not," replied the minister, "he will be given to you for a jewel in your crown."

McFarquhar was deeply impressed.

"How can this thing be?" he inquired in despair.

"You are his friend!" The minister's voice rose and fell in solemn rhythm. "You are strong; he is weak. You will need to put away from you all that causeth your brother to offend, and so you will lead him into the light."

The minister's face was that of a man seeing visions and McFarquhar, deeply moved, bowed his head and listened in silence. After a time he said, hesitatingly:

"And Ould Michael has his weakness and he will be drinking Paddy Dougan's bad whisky; but if he would only keep to the Company's good whisky——"

"Man," interrupted the minister, simply, "don't you know it is the good whisky that kills, for it is the good whisky that makes men love it."

McFarquhar gazed at him in amazement.

"The good whisky!"

"Ay," said the minister, firmly, "and indeed there is no good whisky for drinking."

McFarquhar rose and from a small cupboard brought back a bottle of the Hudson Bay Company's brand. "There," he said, pouring out a glass, "you will not be saying there is no good whisky."

The minister lifted the glass and smelled it.

"Try it," said McFarquhar in triumph.

The minister put it to his lips.

"Ay," he said, "I know it well! It is the best, but it is also the worst. For this men have lost their souls. There is no good whisky for *drinking*, I'm saying."

"And what for, then?" asked McFarquhar faintly.

"Oh, it has its place as a medicine or a lotion."

"A lotion," gasped McFarquhar.

"Yes, in case of sprains—a sprained ankle, for instance."

"A lotion!" gasped McFarquhar; "and would you be using the good whisky to wash your feet with?"

The minister smiled; but becoming immediately grave, he answered: "Mr. McFarquhar, how long have you been in the habit of taking whisky?"

"Fifty years," said McFarquhar promptly.

"And how many times have you given the bottle to your friend?"

"Indeed, I cannot say," said McFarquhar; "but it has never hurt him whatever."

"Wait a bit. Do you think that perhaps if Michael had never got the good whisky from his good friends he might not now be where he is?"

McFarquhar was silent. The minister rose to go.

"Mr. McFarquhar, the Lord has a word for you" (McFarquhar rose and stood as he always stood in church), "and it is this: 'We, then, that are strong, ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.' It is not given to me to deliver Michael from the bondage of death, but to you it is given, and of you He will demand, 'Where is Abel, thy Brother?'"

The minister's last words rolled forth like words of doom.

"Man, it is terrible!" said McFarquhar to me as the minister disappeared down the slope; but he never thought of rejecting the burden of responsibility laid upon him. That he had helped Ould Michael down he would hardly acknowledge, but the minister's message bore in upon him heavily. "Where is Abel, thy brother?" he kept saying to himself. Then he took up the bottle and, holding it up to the light, he said with great deliberation:

"There will be no more of you whatever!"

From that time forth McFarquhar labored with Ould Michael with a patience and a tact that amazed me. He did not try to instill theology into the old man's mind,

but he read to him constantly the gospel stories and followed his reading with prayer—always in Gaelic, however, for with this Ould Michael found no fault as to him it was no new thing to hear prayers in a foreign tongue. But one day McFarquhar ventured a step in advance.

"Michael," he said timidly, "you will need to be prayin' for yourself."

"Shure an' don't I intrate the Blessed Virgin to be doin' that same for me?"

McFarquhar had learned to be very patient with his "Romish errors," so he only replied:

"Ay, but you must take words upon your own lips," he said, earnestly.

"An' how can I, then, for niver a word do I know?"

Then McFarquhar fell into great distress and looked at me imploringly. I rose and went into the next room, closing the door behind me. Then, though I tried to make a noise with the chairs, there rose the sound of McFarquhar's voice; but not with the cadence of the Gaelic prayer. He had no gift in the English language, he said; but evidently Ould Michael thought otherwise, for he cared no more for Gaelic prayers.

By degrees McFarquhar began to hope that Ould Michael would come to the light, but there was a terrible lack in the old soldier of "conviction of sin." One day, however, in his reading he came to the words, "the Captain of our Salvation."

"Captain, did ye say?" said Ould Michael.

"Ay, Captain!" said McFarquhar, surprised at the old man's eager face.

"And what's his rigimint?"

Then McFarquhar, who had grown quick in following Ould Michael's thoughts, read one by one all the words that picture the Christian life as a warfare, ending up with that grand outburst of that noblest of Christian soldiers, "I have fought the fight, I have kept the faith." The splendid loyalty of it appealed to Ould Michael.

"McFarquhar," he said with quivering voice, "I don't understand much that ye've been sayin' to me, but if the war is still goin' on, an' if he's afther recruits any more bedad it's mesilf wud like to join."

McFarquhar was now at home; vividly he set before Ould Michael the warfare appointed unto men against the world, the flesh and the Devil; and then, with a quick turn, he said:

"An' He is calling to all true men, 'Follow me!'"

"An' wud He have the like av me?" asked Ould Michael, doubtfully.

"Ay, that He would and set you some fightin'."

"Then," said Ould Michael, "I'm wid Him." And no soldier in that warfare ever donned the uniform with simpler faith or wore it with truer heart than did Ould Michael.

Meantime I had, through political friends, set things in motion at Ottawa for the reinstating of Ould Michael in his position as postmaster at Grand Bend, and this, backed up by a petition, which through McFarquhar's efforts bore the name of every old-timer in the valleys, brought about the desired end. So one bright day, when Ould Michael was sunning himself on his porch, the stage drove up to his door and, as in the old days, dropped the mail-bag. Ould Michael stood up and, waving his hand to the driver, said:

"Shure, ye've made a mistake; an' I'm not blamin' ye."

"Not much," said the driver. "I always bring my mail to the postmaster."

"Hurrah!" I sung out. "God save the Queen!"

The little crowd that had gathered round took up my cheer.

"What do ye mean, byes?" said Ould Michael, weakly.

"It means," said McFarquhar, "that if you have the strength you must look after your mail as the postmaster should."

There was a joyous five minutes of congratulation; then the precession formed as before and, led by Ould Michael, marched into the old cabin. With trembling fingers Ould Michael cut the strings and selected his letter—

"But there'll be no more celebration, byes," he said, nor was there.

Transcriber's Notes:

Standardized punctuation.

Left one instance of clasp-knife and one of clasp knife.

Page 10: Changed tell to tall.

Page 29: Changed extarordinary to extraordinary.

End of Project Gutenberg's Michael McGrath, Postmaster, by Ralph Connor

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