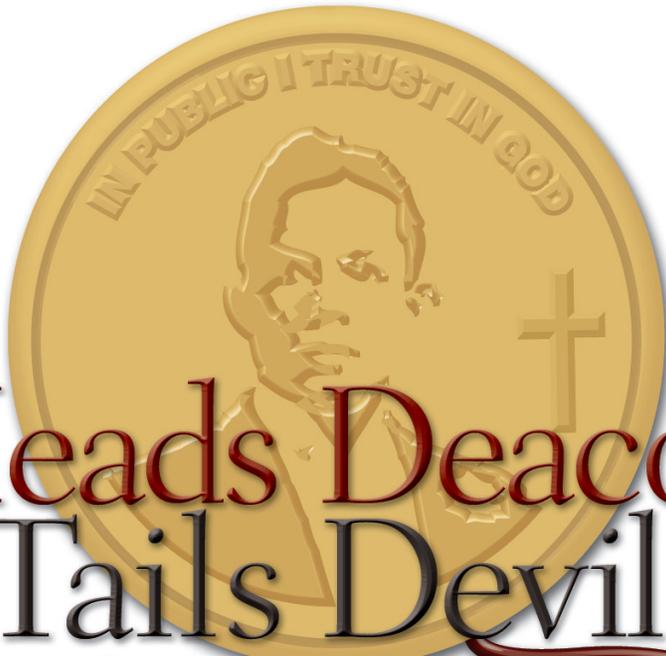


  
*a P. J. McCalla novel*



# Heads Deacon Tails Devil



A gripping story about a deacon who shows  
his best side to his adoring, unsuspecting public,  
**but is the devil incarnate at home.**



P. J. McCALLA

**Rachel Grant** sat in the third row pew at Nazarene Baptist Church. With her were her five children, Evelyn, Jim, Mary, Betty and Fran. Her husband, Robert, sat up front with the deacons. The Reverend Clyde Bacon was preaching one of his finest sermons. His closeness to God was evident by his facial expression and closed eyes. His text was “Church, Don’t Go There.”

The amens of the congregation pushed the pastor to even greater heights. The building seemed to rock on its foundation. With a flourish, the preacher wiped his face from time to time with a large, white handkerchief. He was perspiring profusely. The children no longer whispered. Every eye was on the man of God. He brought his sermon to a dramatic close amid thunderous clapping and amens. He wiped his brow once more and said, “Sing, choir!”

The choir took over where he left off. Amy Anderson, the soloist, was a large woman with a voice to match her girth. She belted out, “It’s a Highway to Heaven”. The rest of the choir accompanied her in the background. It was simply awesome! Five people joined the church that morning.

After the service, a sumptuous dinner was served to all. Tables were set up in the church yard, laden with chicken cooked in every style, potato salad, corn, peas, and greens. There were also hot biscuits, cornbread, and a variety of beverages.

This was before the turn of the century. People in the country traveled primarily by horse and buggy. Because of the distance, food was brought to the church. They ate there and remained for the afternoon service. It was the perfect time for people who hadn’t seen each other for awhile to socialize.

After they'd eaten, Robert Grant rounded up his wife and children and they rode home in the buggy. They rode in silence because Robert both expected and demanded that they not talk without his permission. The children held hands, trying to draw comfort from each other. Robert maintained total control over his household. Rachel was a strong woman, but she was no match for him.

Rachel had a lot of time to think during the long, silent ride home. She earned extra money by working for the funeral director in town. She sewed the linings and fancy pillows for the coffins. In those days, the funeral director and his assistant handmade each coffin. Sometimes a carpenter was hired to make them, but she always sewed the linings.

Robert was super strict with all of them, but oddly enough, he never made her give the money she earned to him. Rachel couldn't accurately explain it, but she guessed that he merely hadn't thought of it. She swore that if that day ever came, she would stop helping the director.

While riding along, she thought about her mother, Mom Maggie, who lived a few country miles away. She was a tall, handsome woman with long, silver hair. She wore it braided and wound around her head. Often, she put on her bonnet and traveled on foot to see her family. All seven of her children were married and had families of their own.

Mom Maggie was a very special woman who had very special gifts. She could make predictions that always came true. Rachel smiled to herself when she thought about her mother's talents. She, too, had that same gift. They both used it quietly, but people knew and respected them because of it.

Rachel's thoughts shifted to her husband. He could be described as a man of average height, super-neat, highly intelligent, but very condescending. He had an extraordinary singing voice, and he composed religious music. Those two assets were the only thing that kept him from being a totally un-likeable human being. People came from far and near to hear him sing his music. He was always

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the main attraction at the annual camp meetings.

Few knew the real monster that lurked behind that glorious voice. Involuntarily, Rachel shook her head when she recalled how his singing attracted her to him. She was flattered when he pursued her. She was, at the time, envied by her friends. When he asked for her hand in marriage, she readily agreed.

Mom Maggie had reservations, and she wanted Rachel to turn him down. Rachel, too, didn't feel quite right about it, but she ignored the small voice inside. She married Robert in spite of everything. Tears stung her eyes when she remembered her wedding night. She knew immediately that she would regret marrying him for the rest of her life. That night he announced, "You are to see that I have a fresh white shirt every morning. My clothing is to be placed on the bed every day. I expect you to keep my shoes shined, and my meals served on time."

Rachel had been speechless! Where was the romance? This was not what she expected on her wedding night. It was too late to wish that she had listened to her mother. She was in it now for better or for worse. She would try to find a way to operate around him, she hoped. If things became too difficult, she would consider telling her brothers about him. They would have a little "talk" with him, she was sure.

She remembered one Sunday, in particular. They had attended church together. Robert seated her, and then he walked over to the deacon's bench. He shook hands with the others and took a seat. Rachel enjoyed the service so much that she joined in the singing. When it was over, she found herself still basking in the glow.

She and Robert rode home in almost complete silence. There had been no afternoon service, so she started supper. Robert came into the house later and stood in the kitchen watching her. She hummed as she moved about the room. When the meal was ready, they ate in silence.

Rachel had cleared the table before Robert spoke. "Rachel, did you join in the singing this morning?" She thought that it was an

odd question, but she said she had. He grabbed her arm, and asked, "Did you sing every song?" Rachel nodded. He said, "If you did, you were singing a lie. You are not a child of the King. You are the devil's child!"

Rachel could not believe that he had actually said something so ridiculous. She exclaimed, "Oh, Robert! What is going on with you?" Instead of answering, he slapped her hard across the face. Before she could react, he began to beat her with his fists. Her screams brought no help as the houses were too far apart. When he stopped, finally, he yanked her to her feet. "Get in the bed and shut up!" She was weeping, but she did as she was told. She thought, "I've married a beast!"

They rode over a rocky place in the road, and she was jostled a bit. It interrupted her train of thoughts, briefly. Losing herself in thought was kind of a salvation for her. The road became smooth again, and she let her mind wander once more.

Now, she remembered when she became pregnant with their first child, Evelyn. He seemed pleased, oddly enough. He was almost kind to her. Her mother came over one evening, with a little bag that she had packed. She put her hands on her hips and said, "You're going to give birth tonight! That's why I'm here!"

Rachel remembered how surprised she was when Mom Maggie said that to her. She hadn't had the slightest twinge. What's more, if she'd counted right she had a few more weeks to go before anything happened. She'd smiled indulgently at her mother, but she said nothing.

Sure enough, just as Mom Maggie said, the pains began that very night. A few hours later, her mother delivered a baby girl. Mom Maggie stayed a few days to be sure that Rachel could properly care for the baby. Robert was gracious all of that time, and he even took her home in the buggy. Mom Maggie watched him, and she let him think that all was well, but he hadn't fooled her.

Rachel found that everything had just been put on hold. After the baby was born, the beatings resumed. She began hating him on her

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wedding night, and that would never change. She had four more children. Each was delivered by Mom Maggie. Having the children was the one good thing in her life. It was a good thing for Robert as well. Now, he had five more people to abuse. He beat them for the slightest reason. Baby Jim was so afraid of him that he wet his pants whenever Robert walked into the door.

Rachel was jarred out of her reverie when she heard Robert talk to the horse. They rode near the carriage house and got out of the buggy. While Robert was tending the horse and putting the buggy in the carriage house, the children washed their hands and faces. They laughed and chattered until they heard their father's footsteps on the porch. All laughing ceased, and they formed a line.

Robert started at the beginning of the line, asking that they recite numerous bible verses. No mistakes were permitted. Evelyn was the oldest, but the most sensitive. She feared him so much that the words would leave her memory. When she stammered, Robert said, "Step back!" When the quiz ended, sometimes one of the others had faltered also, and they would have to step back.

He made them wait while he played cat and mouse with them. Suddenly he would dismiss the ones who had not made error. To the offenders he said, "You haven't studied. I am not satisfied with your disobedience. Therefore, I must punish you." The children leaned across a chair and he beat them with his belt. Sometimes he drew blood. Rachel would step in when she could no longer stand such brutality. "Please, Robert! Don't hit her again!" Slowly, he would turn to her and say, "Do you want to take this for her?" If Rachel were feeling brave that day, she would say, "If it will make you stop!"



From Monday through Friday, the children got up early to help milk the three cows and feed the chickens and pigs. They ate a hearty breakfast, and then they walked to school. That walk was another chance to laugh and have a little fun with each other. They were joined by other children along the way.

Grades one through four were in one classroom. Jim, Mary and Betty were in that room, and Miss Addie was their teacher. Grades five to seven shared the back of the room. Grades eight through ten were the bigger children. Robert, their father, was the teacher. Their school time was not as carefree as it should have been, because their father had them closely monitored at all times.

Robert was an intolerant parent. As a teacher, he was very strict. He held every child to the same rigid standard. He was intolerant of slow learners, and he refused to give them special attention. Some of them really weren't slow at all. They were just deathly afraid of the teacher. Now and then a child would drop out of school and go to work on the farm. Robert's rage and abuse had become too much for the child to bear.

Study time was always after they'd eaten supper. Robert checked their homework and put them "through their paces." He demanded perfection from the children. They were well aware of the consequences if they fell short of his expectations. Evelyn knew the work and proved that she did when she was in the classroom. However, before her father's hostile stare she lost all that she had studied. He didn't care that she got excellent grades in school. His only concern was the answers she gave him. He gave her ten whacks with his belt and threatened to give her more if she continued to look him in the eye when he spoke to her. To him, that was considered rebellion.

The children slyly watched him like a hawk. He would reach for his belt for the slightest infraction. What's more, the rules changed whenever he saw fit and without warning. He seemed to thrive on the fear that he created in his house. He never paid his children a compliment or patted them on the head. Robert made demands, never requests. At one point and for some unknown reason, Robert decided that it was un-Christian to beat the children on Sundays. He adopted a new policy which was effective immediately. He would beat them on Saturday night for what they might do on Sunday! He informed his wife Rachel of his new rule. "From now on, there will be no punishments on Sunday. I have decided that to do

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so is wrong. Saturday is the best day. Therefore, I will beat them on Saturday for what they might do on Sunday. That covers everything. After all, I am a deacon in the church. My life has to be lived a certain way. God wants this change, and I am going to do His will.”

Rachel had never met a madman, but she wondered if Robert was one. She wondered, “I don’t know why I never thought to question his sanity before. His mind swings back and forth more than a pendulum in a clock. We’re all kept off balance because of him.” Other than in the classroom, he showed the world a different, gentler man. He had enough control to manage that.

She wondered, too, if there were other women in her predicament. “I never talk about my own private hell. Maybe there are other women who have rotten marriages, and like me, they’re quiet about it. For some reason, I’m inclined to believe that Robert is in a class by himself. Marital breakups are, virtually unheard of, but how does one cope?”

Rachel began to pay more attention to other women. She was afraid to broach the subject with them, but she made subtle hints. Several times a few of the women began to fidget. She guessed that they understood her meaning, but they were reluctant to say anything to her. Their apparent nervousness tied her tongue, and she changed the subject. From that moment, she waited for an opportunity that never came.



Mom Maggie began showing up at unusual hours. Rachel believed that she was trying to catch Robert beating her. Because her mother had urged her to not marry Robert, she never said anything against him to her. He professed to not believe in Mom Maggie’s gift. He thought that Rachel had talked about him, and he was careful when she was around. If he had not beaten her before the visit, he would be sure to beat her afterwards.

Mom Maggie was almost eighty-years-old, but she was still

strong, and she looked like a woman in her sixties. Robert was uncomfortable when she was around. He tried to avoid looking into her piercing brown eyes. Mom Maggie was aware of his discomfort, and she deliberately tried to make him even more uncomfortable. Always, she succeeded.

Sometimes, Mom Maggie spent the night, unexpectedly. Robert's explosive personality went underground when she was there. The next morning Robert would say, "I'll take you home, Miss Maggie." On the spot, she would change her mind and say, "I'm not going today. Do you mind?" Robert would die a little on the inside, but he would take on a wide-eyed look. "Of course not. Stay as long as you wish." Rachel would turn away so he couldn't see her broad grin. She loved seeing him squirm and so did her mother.

When her mother decided to leave, the house seemed to sag and die. Once more the children became quiet and withdrawn, and Rachel resumed her constant alert. The air became charged with tension, and gloom spread throughout the building. Robert's swagger returned along with his take charge attitude. The children didn't talk above a whisper, and they walked quietly so as to not disturb their father.

Rachel wished that her mother would close her place and move in with them. Robert would not dare to block the move because of his awe of her. She knew only too well that was just wishful thinking. Mom Maggie had a special love for the house where she had lived with her deceased husband and her children. Whenever Rachel asked her to come with her, she had her answer ready. "I don't want to give up. I have to be there!"



Unexpectedly, Robert received an offer to sing at a revival meeting in a nearby state. Rachel clasped her hands together. "Oh this is a blessing from the Lord! I'm going to get down on my knees right here, and pray that he'll accept that invitation!" At one point, he said, "I'll take the family with me. I can't control your wildness if I'm not here."

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Rachel went down on her knees again. At the last minute, he packed a bag and left alone. One of the deacons at the church took him to the train station. When Rachel was really sure that he had gone, she danced a jig in the kitchen. She sang, "Lord, let him fall in love with somebody! Let him leave me for good!"

A million ideas popped into Rachel's head. She would make the most of the week of freedom. She would show her children another side of family living. "I will begin now!"

When the children came home from school, she had baked pies and cinnamon buns for their enjoyment. For the first time in their young lives, they were allowed to be children. Rachel put records on the phonograph, and they had a little party. Rachel loved seeing the smiles on their faces and hearing their spontaneous laughter. It was worth more than all of the tea in China.

They did their homework in peace for the first time in their lives. From force of habit they formed a line in the living room. Rachel cried when she saw them, and she tried to gather them all in her arms. "No lines, babies! Daddy won't be back until next week. This will be our secret." Little Jim said, "I don't like Daddy, do you?" She answered him by saying, "We are going to make our time together joyful. We won't mention Daddy's name. Okay?" Little Jim nodded his head and winked. That made all of them laugh.

When it was time for bed, Rachel turned it into a game. "The last one to say prayers and get into bed won't get a goodnight kiss." They laughed and scrambled to avoid being the last one. She giggled as she watched them trying to be the winner. To her amazement they all jumped into bed at nearly the same time. She said, "That was just too close to call. I declare everybody a winner and nobody a loser." She hugged and kissed each one.



She planned a special treat for them the next day. After school, Rachel hitched up the buggy and took her children to see their grandmother. When they arrived, Mom Maggie was baking a batch of her "secret recipe" cookies. She planned to bake enough for all of her

children's families and deliver them personally. She was pleasantly surprised when Rachel and her children showed up at her door. The children hugged her knees and pulled her arms. They adored their Mom Maggie and she adored them. Separately she told them, "I love you a lot! Give Mom Maggie a big kiss!"

Little Jim made a mad dash to the barn to see the horse. It had been along time since he'd seen him. Mom Maggie reminded him that she had sold Old Ben. When he remembered, Little Jim was sad for a brief moment. His sorrow vanished rather quickly when he spied a swing in the tree. He let out a loud whoop as he ran towards it. Mom Maggie laughed until tears sprang up in her eyes. She said, "Well, so much for missing Old Ben."

The great lady finished baking cookies while she and Rachel talked. Robert's name wasn't mentioned, but he was certainly on their minds. The very mention of his name would have caused a blanket of gloom and doom to descend on them. The visit would have been ruined. By silent but mutual consent, they avoided his name like the plague.

The girls amused themselves and the adults by trying on some of their grandmother's bonnets. They modeled them for their mother and Mom Maggie. They took exaggerated bows while the grown-ups applauded. They almost succeeded in remembering that they had a father.

After the little show, Mom Maggie made thick sandwiches and Rachel made lemonade for their lunch. Little Jim tore himself away from the swing and joined his family.

It had been a splendid day and one that they would remember during the difficult days ahead. They had tried very hard to thrust their father's shadow aside, but it loomed in their midst in spite of their best efforts. Mom Maggie knew, and she cuddled each one on her lap and kissed them.

When they left her house, they climbed up into the buggy. Robert had no idea that she knew how to drive the buggy, and she would never tell him. She thought, "In this case, Robert's

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ignorance is truly bliss!”

The children slept until they rode up to the house. Rachel woke them up and sent them to the house. She then took care of the horse and buggy. She put them in the exact spot where Robert had left them.

The outing had worked wonders for all of them. They slept soundly all night. The days passed too quickly, but each day was full of great times and promise. Rachel had given them a bit of sunshine and something to remember. For awhile, they were able to live like children, not like robots.

Rachel had not deluded herself. She knew that all good things must come to an end sooner or later, and so it was with her and the children. Robert was due back the next day, so it was time for them to settle down. She told the children, “Your father is coming home tomorrow. We won’t be able to do the things that we have done. I hope it was as special for you as it was for me.” She didn’t have to warn them to not tell him about the fun they had. They wouldn’t!

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