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# Introduction

Many of us have had an electric shock. We never expect it, of course... a powerful encounter that takes us by surprise. Life sometimes throws us together with individuals whose lives have something special about them. A zest, a *je ne sais quoi*, sets them apart with a power that rarely leaves our own lives unmarked. People are fascinating, and the bunch you will meet in the following pages are a real mixture from all walks of life, cultures and ages. What they have in common is an encounter with Someone who was to change their lives... for the better. Maybe you will meet Him too and if you do, let me know!

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Barman

It is said that you can tell a man by his friends. Graham's were thieves, prostitutes and murderers. His job as a barman took him into some of the seediest bars in Toronto, Canada. But it was all a far cry from the respectable start in life back home in Essex, England.

When Graham was a teenager all the talk was of war. Whole families were to experience tremendous upheavals, changes and losses. Faith, if you had any, was severely tested in many cases. Graham's own commitment to God was sidelined as, in the company of other lads his age, he joined the Merchant Navy. It was only a matter of time before he adopted the dubious lifestyle of the stereotypical 'drunken sailor'. Alcohol is a powerful drug that is peddled throughout society with a sense of respectability that it does not deserve. Graham found that the alcohol gave him confidence among his peers and broke down his inhibitions. At each port of call, drink and women were available to the men. 'Every time I fell to temptation

I found my conscience got harder,' Graham recalls. 'Out in the Middle East I saw more evil, sex and vice than one could imagine existed, but I never "blinked an eye".'

Graham's life, like the lives of many of the lads his age, was descending into an abyss of vice and depravity from which he would struggle to escape. Surrounded by his mates, it was easy to be sucked into bad ways and habits that he once might have shunned. With the end of the war came the shock and shame of having to return to his home. It is to his credit that he did in fact still have some respect for his family's feelings and was conscious of feeling shame at his behaviour. But there was no remorse or change of behaviour . . . instead he decided to get away from home and head for London.

One day, half-drunk, he walked into the emigration office in Piccadilly Circus and requested to go to Canada! Forms were pushed under his nose. No one spotted his deliberate lie as he described his occupation as 'farmer'. The medical officer who performed the mandatory medical confirmed that Graham was 'breathing'. And that was that! He was free to depart for Toronto the following week.

Of course, the young 'farmer' was immediately taken to the specially designated farms in his new adopted country. But a few of the lads got together and thought, 'Nobody is holding us, so why don't we go?' So they picked up their bags and walked out. Together they managed to book into a cheap hotel, but they still had to find work. Eventually Graham managed to secure employment with the Canadian National Railway, as a waiter in the dining cars. 'This was on the long-distance train from Winnipeg to Chicago. I don't think we were ever sober.'

The strange thing is that Graham still thought of himself as respectable . . . even though he drank a lot, for

he was young and considered he 'could take it'. Completely taken in by this delusion, he couldn't foresee the impending dangers when he changed jobs and began working in downtown bars, which were some of the seediest you can imagine. His friends were now blasphemers, thieves, prostitutes and murderers. Experience has taught Graham that once you get sucked into this way of life, you find you can't live with respectable people.

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One of the bars he worked in was a place where every crook imaginable would hang out. It was in an area where a person couldn't walk the streets at night or they would be mugged. On his way to work at night, sometimes a shadowy figure would come out of an alleyway and Graham would hear someone say, 'That's Graham the bartender,' and they would slip back into the ominously dark shadows again. By now he had become part of the scene. As a 'regular' he was constantly being questioned by the police.

'If there was a big robbery the night before, the next day there wouldn't be a crook in sight, but more policemen.

"Who was in here yesterday?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice."

'Of course the cops knew you were lying; and a few days later whoever had made the "big haul" would slip you a \$50 or \$100 tip for keeping quiet.'

The scariest time Graham ever had was when a fellow called Skip was shot down by the police as he was climbing in a window. Two afternoons later Graham was in the bar when this same man, Skip, walked in! 'It's Skippy!' he cried out. 'But you're dead!'

He genuinely thought he had seen a ghost, but in fact it was Skip's brother. He walked up to Graham at the bar, displayed two guns inside his coat and said, 'I am going to ask you just once, and if you don't give me the right answer . . . you're dead. Who was Skippy drinking with?'

Graham tried to think – he didn't want to make a mistake! Just at that moment, the owner poked his head around the door, was across the room in no time and after whispering in the man's ear, led him to the office. It was, without a doubt, a timely intervention for it turned out that the man was insane. Some time later he was arrested in Chicago and went to the electric chair.

You might have thought that this was an isolated occasion, but it wasn't. Working in the bar was extremely dangerous. One night a one-armed man came in shouting, 'I am going to kill somebody tonight.' Everyone dived for cover as bullets and glass flew all over the place. Within two minutes there were squad cars, sirens and gunfire . . . just like in a movie.

'People think those films are an exaggeration, but they're not,' comments Graham. 'Life is truly like that in some places, yet you can be living in the same city and have no idea that such violence is there, other than what you read in the newspaper.'

Graham was no longer an innocent youth with ambition. The man he had become was 'hard-bitten' and tough . . . tough enough to keep a baseball bat behind the bar in order to defend himself. He was a tough, drunken, thieving, gambling character just like his friends, by his own admission. He had reached rock bottom.

Graham knew he needed to change. He still felt a strong pull to the sea, so he signed on for work on the cargo ships that plied the Great Lakes. Unfortunately, he didn't stop drinking. But eventually he gained some

common sense from somewhere, making him think about straightening his life out and giving him the desire to go home and see his family.

The trip back to England was successful in that he did manage to reform himself somewhat. He also found a wife. After his marriage he returned to Canada with Kay. Any hopes he had of continuing his personal reform didn't last though, for not long after, he began drinking and gambling more and more. Despite going back to working behind the bar, Graham did at least choose respectable places to work this time.

## New Year's Resolution

Sometimes, when you least expect it, something happens that will forever be etched on your memory.

Graham was doing what he always did at that time on New Year's Eve . . . he was celebrating with a drink. This particular year he was sipping whisky from the bottle when midnight struck. The television was on, flickering in the corner. Graham remembers it as if it were yesterday.

'All of a sudden this beautiful choir came on to the TV singing hymns. Then suddenly it was as though I was transported back into my childhood. Memories came flooding back. But there before me still was my present God-forsaken life. The music completely broke me and I, the hard man, wept many tears. I must have sat there all night long with this strange "warmth" within me. Then the dreadful realization of my wrongdoing, my sin, came to me. What had I done?'

It was his personal day of reckoning . . . his soul laid bare and found wanting. With the morning light and the promise of the first day of the new year, Kay suggested

that perhaps Graham should go to church again. Was God doing something in her heart too?

'God's rehabilitation process in my life has been very slow, sometimes tender and sometimes chastening. At times I have stumbled along the way, but gradually many of the evils have fallen away. When I suffered a heart attack, I remember saying to the Lord, "O God, I can't meet you now . . . I'm not ready." You see, I still had no assurance that God had accepted me and forgiven me. I felt no inner joy and peace. I lacked true Christian joy because I continued to look back and mourn over my lost years.'

By now Graham and his wife were attending a church in Pontefract, in the north of England. At one of the special services held there each year, entitled 'Faith for Our Times', the speaker was Paul Bassett. One of the verses quoted from the Bible that evening was 'I will heal their waywardness and love them freely' (Hos. 14:4).

Graham realized when he heard those words that God had indeed healed and forgiven him for going away from Him. True joy and peace were his from then on.

'The scars of my past life will not be completely erased from my memory, but how wonderful that God chooses *not* to remember. This understanding of God's boundless love brought a peace that has lasted to this day. I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. I know now that nobody is too bad for God to be able to change them.'