

# ... A ... Postponed Funeral.

By Curran Richard Greenley.  
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OVER ridge and swamp and along the reaches of the Barraclaw the buds were swelling on the topmost branches of oak and cypress, and the lush grasses that stand up straight and tall in the dark red pools later on in the year began to send their first green shoots to herald the spring. There was a troublesome rumor going the rounds, ominous and dread. Men said that the new levee was treacherous, that it might hold, but all knew that a mighty river was sweeping down from the north, jealous of its ancient prerogatives over the valley. Would the narrow line of earth hold out against it? Jake Alders heard the news when he was doing his trading down at Wash Evans' store. On the way home he fell in with little groups of men who jogged along discussing the probability of an overflow, not that it was a new thing on the Barraclaw, for many times and often had the Father of Waters swept his royal way across the land, but their little holdings had been heavily taxed to build the levee that was to protect them, and now, thanks to the gods of red tape, Father Messasable had challenged it and the levee was not.

Jake rode along slowly. He was turning a problem over in his mind. Amanda, his wife, had been one of the annual victims to the dread swamp fever, dying in the early winter. She had made him promise to have her funeral preached in the spring "when the woods is a-gittin' green an' things is a little mife more cheerful." Jake had just made arrangements for the funeral and that day had received a message from the parson to the effect that he would be on hand the following Sunday, and now, if the water came, there was no telling when the funeral could be preached.

Jake swung along the yellow ribbon of road, around the big bend and across the long bridge over the bayou thinking deeply. The first bluebird of the year fluttered over him into a nearby cotton field. Over his head a robin wheeled, chattering to his mate. Against the dark gray green of the winter woods the red bud blazed its crimson banners and the nipping wind ruffled the brown breast of the river to scales of golden armor. He gathered himself together, gave the mule a sharp cut and began to whistle—he had made up his mind.

Miss Josie Derr whisked the broom sharply over the steps, shook out her starched purple calico skirt and settled herself on the gallery to enjoy the morning sunshine. There was some little appearance of thrift around the comfortable little log cabin of two rooms and the lean-to kitchen at the back, its well fenced yard and clap-board outbuildings. Miss Josie herself, spare, gray haired and active as a well intentioned hornet, was known throughout the Barraclaw as a "hus-tin' woman, if she is an old maid." Her sixty acres of land were well managed, and, though contrary to custom, she never worked in the cotton herself, at the end of the year she was usually ahead of those who did.

As Jake Alders came in sight, a limp and dejected figure astride of the patient mule, she stood up and peered under her hand. "Why don't the fool straighten up and use the back his God give him? He'd be right decent lookin' if it wasn't for his slonchy ways." And Miss Josie pulled her own shoulders a trifle straighter as she walked slowly down the path.

"Howdy, Jake? How's the children and what's the news from the water?" The mule came to a halt. "Well, now, Miss Josie, I was jes' a-sayin' to myself as how I was a-goin' to ask your advice this very mornin' along of the children. You heard tell how Mandy was a wantin' her funeral preached in the spring? Sorter foolish. Lord, Wimsen folks has their notions, an' I'm a man what believes in humorin' 'em, dead or alive. Parson Arms, he loved he'd get here a-Sunday, an' we was a-layin' off to have the funeral preached down at the bayou; but, Miss Josie, them kids ain't got one rag what's decent to wear to their ma's funeral, an' what I'm a-goin' to do 'twist now an' then God knows!" Jake paused and looked hopefully at Miss Josie; then he went on, "Seen' as you be such a fine manager, I was a-thinkin' you might kinder help me out, and if—"

"Now, see here, Jake Alders! Do you think I'm a woman or a Christmas tree? How do you reckon I can make clothes grow on them six kids 'twist now an' Sunday, an' this beah's Tuesday? Man, you've plum lost your senses."

Jake fidgeted with his rope bridle. "I didn't know but what you was"—

"Stup up, Jake Alders. You know you've been plannin' all along the road as how you was a-goin' to dump them kids an' their fixin's on my conscience, an' now you've been an' gone an' done it. Yes, I'm a fool for meddlin', but I'll get 'em ready, but don't you ask me nothin' more, 'cause I ain't goin' to do it." Miss Josie trailed this last over her shoulder as she disappeared into the house, and Jake grinned knowingly as he jogged down the road.

During the remainder of the week he made himself as scarce as possible about the straggling two room cabin that owned him as master. Miss Josie took possession of it and the six small Alders, whose tow heads were subjected to a process of yellow soap and rainwater and later to innumerable little rolls of paper. Meanwhile Miss Josie's machine clattered unending miles of pink calico and domestic, and her energetic tones stirred the Alders progeny to something like industry, so that the cabin shone with unwonted cleanliness as Saturday afternoon deepened into twilight.

The parson was to spend the night, and Jake had gone to the station to meet him. Miss Josie was preparing to go home, having completed all the arrangements, even to laying out the finery in six little heaps on the bench that ran along the wall. There were rolls of light bread and a jelly cake, two roasted fowls and some of Miss Josie's own pies, all destined to do duty as the funeral baked meats.

Miss Josie started down to the gate, trailing a torrent of minute instructions to the forlorn little group in the doorway. Away up the road she heard the clatter of hoofs and the rattle of the ancient buggy that Jake had borrowed from the squire, and it was coming faster than Jake Alders' old mare mule had ever traveled that road before. Jake was leaning over the dashboard in the effort to hurry old Mag along. He shouted something—nearer—and Miss Josie stood stock still. "The water's a-comin'! Levee's broke at Carter's end, Bend Nigger Wool swamp's plum full! She'll be here by daylight!"

Jake tumbled out, and the parson, a thin, active man, jumped to the ground and began to unharness the mule. Miss Josie started down the road in a running, but Jake yelled after her: "Don't be skeered. I'll be down there 'fore mornin'. You ain't got no men folks to be a-nallin' and a-lifin'. Them shifless niggers will be a-lookin' out for their own fool necks. I'll put you chickens an' things in the loft an' your stock on my mound an'— But the dark had swallowed Miss Josie.

Jake was roused from his careless ease. Other years had left their lesson. Aided by the parson, he drove his cattle into the field where the old Indian mound afforded a refuge. A dugout that had done duty as a trough in front of the cabin was wrenched from its posts and a pair of paddles hastily rived out. From under the cabin Jake dragged out an old bateau that with a little patching was made passably safe. Then a pile of rough planks was transferred to the front gallery from the corner of the yard where Jake had "lowed" to build a crib in readiness for the building of a false floor should the necessity arise. They piled firewood in every inch of available space, even upon the flat part of the roof. "She'll be in the Barraclaw by mornin'," said Jake as he toiled in with the last load.

The hush of dawn was in the air when they ceased their labor. The parson straightened up. "It is the Sabbath morning, Brother Alders, but traly the ox is in the ditch before us. Sister Derr needs our help."

"B'gosh!" Jake slapped his thigh. "If I didn't go and forget all about that woman clear as a whistle, an' a-a-promis'n so big. Come on, parson." She was waiting for them, her preparations all made. She had collected her cattle into the barnyard, tied the chickens by the legs ready to be transferred to the barn loft, and her trunk stood locked and strapped.

"How deep you reckon it will go?" she questioned.

Jake scratched his chin. "Can't say, Miss Josie. Last water I had to put a false floor in my house, an' they do say this'll beat that holier."

Miss Josie collapsed helplessly into the splint bottomed rocker. "If I'd the sense God gave geese I'd stayed back in them old red hills of Georgy 'stead of comin' to live in a frog pond."

The parson shook his head. "Now, my sister, you're tasking the Almighty with shortcomings. Every country has its drawbacks, but the Barraclaw folks never failed a stranger in trouble yet. Here's Brother Alders willing to take care of you and"— Jake coughed and looked at the parson, and the parson understood. He went to the door and stood peering into the brightening east.

"Miss Josie"—Jake twirled the ragged hat between his fingers and moved a step nearer to the sobbing woman in the chair—"parson heah has jes' about put into words what I been a-tryin' to say all this week. I'm a-needin' you terrible bad, me an' the chillun, an', though I 'low I ain't men to look at, Mandy was mighty fond of me, an' you know there never was nuthin' I wouldn't do for Mandy. Miss Josie, this ain't no time for a woman to be livin' alone with God A'mighty's ragin' floods comin' over her head. Can't you make up your mind to come along with me?"

The sobs had hushed, but the apron still sheltered Miss Josie, when the parson turned. "Brother Alders, I would suggest that you send Lem to the station as soon as he gets back and telegraph the clerk to issue the license. It's a little irregular, but I can make the return next time I go to Grayson. I'm here now, and it is not a time to stand on ceremony as to the manner of doing things."

Miss Josie jerked the apron down. "You two men are a-fixin' the whole thing an' a-plannin' it out without me gettin' a word in, as if a woman didn't have the right to settle about her own marryin'." Go ahead. But there's one comfort. I'll be on hand when the time comes to see that Mandy's funeral

is all right!"

"Thanky, Miss Josie. There's comfort in them words, an'"— Jake's mouth hung open and his eyes widened as he tore out the door. One look at the river whispering, bubbling and creeping visibly up the bank. "She's here! Hustle with your traps, Miss Josie. There ain't no time to lose." And he fell to work.

As an example of muscular Christianity the parson was no laggard and the gospel of works was fully demonstrated that March Sunday when he laid down rod and staff to help Jake Alders rescue cattle and hogs.

The sun was climbing over the cypress brakes when they arrived at Jake's cabin. The children, breakfastless and forlorn, were huddled upon the doorstep. At sight of Miss Josie and her leather trunk on Jake's shoulder they came swarming about her skirts. "Oh, goody, she's goin' to stay!" announced Jemina, Jake's eldest, as she planted the baby in Miss Josie's arms with a gesture of finality.

All day long the muddy tide crept over the land. It entered the dusty road in thin streams, widening until road and dooryard, barnyard and pasture disappeared. Jake stood eying the pile of lumber as the water sucked and gurgled beneath him. The parson squared his shoulders. "Yes, Brother Alders, there is no time like the present," and the sound of hammer and saw rang over the rippling tide as the parson wrought for these sheep of his pasture. Ten o'clock saw the last nail as the high March wind sent the first wave over the cabin sill. Miss Josie settled the children and the household belongings with some degree of comfort, but the parson and Jake could not stand upright under the low rafters.

The irregular beat of dugout paddies came around the bend, and the parson stepped outside, while Jake stood fingering his hat and glancing sidewise at Miss Josie where she sat in the low rocker, bending over the drowsy baby. The other children slept upon the mattress. She lifted her head as the parson paused in the doorway, a bit of yellow paper between his fingers, and behind him, peering over his shoulder, the station agent and Jake's young brother Lem.

"Brother Alders, the clerk wires me that he has issued the license."

Miss Josie arose, the sleeping baby against her shoulder. The warm little body nestling there in drowsy helplessness stirred and woke the primal woman, virginal and shy, that slept below the crest of years. Her keen gray eyes softened with a new light above the sorrow cheek, where the long banished blushes burned beneath Jake's ardent brown gaze. At her feet his children slept.

The parson raised his hand, and Jake blundered to Miss Josie's side, his tall head stooping to avoid the rafters. Over the lap-lap of the waves beneath them, over the keening of the wind in the cypress brakes, the parson's voice rose in solemn sentences, and then he was saying goodbye, and the faces were gone from the doorway.

Miss Josie took refuge behind the sleeping baby as she knelt to place it with the other children, and down the road she heard the parson singing as he paddled into the night.

And when the long May days came to the Barraclaw, newly risen from the chrysalis of the waters and teeming with the gifts of Father Messasable, the first Mrs. Alders received due meed of song and service, thoroughly ordered by Mrs. Alders the second.

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