

The Deacon's Exoneration

Hugh Pendexter Writes One of His Best Short Stories on an Ever-Pleasing Subject

It was on the first day of the county fair that Deacon Plunkett fell from grace. There were many who merely pitied him for ever wagging his hard-earned money on the gaunt mare Abigail's Pride, but the insistence of the spiteful few that he be disciplined carried the day, and as a result three fellow churchmen met in solemn conclave to mete out justice.

The postmaster, a staunch elder, presided and duly read the charges. The poor deacon could only groan and gaze appealingly from one stern face to another and breathe hurriedly, as if pressed for air. The session was held in the back room of the post-office, overlooking the old-style, half-mile track, where even now the fair managers were preparing for the morrow by dragging brush around the circle.

The rain had interrupted the races after the day of the deacon's downfall, but the culprit, even amid his heavy groans realized the sun and wind would thoroughly dry the gravel inside of the next twenty-four hours.

"Wal, Brother Plunkett, how d'ye plead to this charge of sinfully bettin' on a hoss race?" repeated the

postmaster gravely, his angular jaw thrusting forward with a Puritanic fixity of purpose.

"Lawd! What can I say, elder? That pesky Wilder Peasly says she see me plank down a half dollar on th' fence an' then see Ab Thomas cover it with another half dollar," moaned the deacon.

"We're surprised Deacon Plunkett, that a man of your years should be so weak," growled Hiram Whitten's heavy bass, and he wrinkled his nose sourly, while his half-closed eyes gave no intimation of leniency. "It would seem breathering, that as the Deacon has well nigh confessed we can only return a verdict of guilty as charged, an' leave it for the congregation to say what shall be done."

"Mebbe we ought to dig into this a bit deeper," suggested the third investigator, Head Selectman Carr. "I've known Brother Plunkett so long it don't seem possible he could go around bettin' money on hoss races. Mebbe his mind was upset in some way. What-hoss did ye bet on, deacon?"

The postmaster's eye glinted with interest as he squared his elbows and wet his pencil, while Mr. Whitten shaded his gaze with one long bony hand, and inclined his head a bit to catch the answer.

"On that derned Abigail's Pride," sighed the deacon. "She struck me as such a sweet natur'd driver, such a cheerful, gamey little mare, that I didn't think it was gamblin'. Why, I'd a swore Ab Thomas didn't have a ghost of a show. An' where there ain't no chance to lose I don't see how it is gamblin'."

"I never liked th' way she carried her head," observed Mr. Carr mildly. "I dunno about that," protested Mr. Whitten, shaking his head stoutly and pursing up his lips. "She always struck me as bein' unusually clean gaited forward."

"Why, a man that would bet on that nag," cried the postmaster strangely, "ain't no gambler. He's jest common crazy, that's all. I wouldn't put a penny on her to beat a hearse—that is, 'sposin' I was sinful enough to bet on a hoss race."

"She made good time las' fall on th' Durginville track," defended Mr. Whitten shortly. "Track was muddy, too."

"She's a hummer on a wet track. That's why tomorrow will see her leavin' everything behind her as if they was hitched. Why, Sim Cole's hired man told me yesterday that after a rain like we're just been havin' she'll go through th' field like a streak."

Mr. Carr pricked up his ears and twisted nervously in his chair, while the postmaster bit his pencil dubiously and sneered. "What does Sim Cole's man know about her, anyway?"

"He took care of her at th' Durginville track," informed the deacon.

"He knows a hoss all right," declared Mr. Whitten dreamily. "But I can't say I like th' way th' mare was handled t'other day. Seems if her driver fretted her at th' stretch."

"She grew wuss an' wuss in every heat," added the postmaster, listlessly. "She'd probably make a fine show-in' tomorrow if she was given a fair chance," lamented Mr. Carr.

"An' she'll git th' chance," cried the deacon, seeming to forget the hazard of his position, "for Sim's man is goin' to handle her. Lawd! I pity them folks that's weak an' sinful enough to bet agin her. I feel so repentent I cal'late it's my duty to warn 'em all."

"No," decided the postmaster firmly. "It ain't your duty, Egbert, to do that."

"I should say not," cried Mr. Whitten, his eyes glittering.

"But folks will be givin' odds against her," protested the deacon humbly. "Joshua Runnels says he'll bet a dollar 'n a half to seventy cents she's distanced."

"It ain't our duty to save Josh Runnels' money for him," reminded Mr. Carr decisively. Then he added, "An' so Josh is stoppin' here at th' village this week, eh?"

"He's workin' at th' livery stable durin' th' fair," informed the deacon.

"Him," muttered the postmaster, eyeing Mr. Whitten's unfair proximity to the door in gloomy disgust. "Wal," he finally added, "seems as how Deacon Plunkett is repentant an' don't know hardly nothin' about hosses, I guess we'll draw up a report sayin' he is innocent."

"I'm in a hurry," explained Mr. Whitten, "an' I guess I'll sign my name to this blank sheet an' let ye fill th' report to suit yourself, Elder."

"I'd trust th' Elder to say th' right thing," added Mr. Carr warmly, as he followed the other's example.

The postmaster frowned, and when left alone wrote his brief report most hurriedly. Then he jammed on his hat and sauntered carelessly down the street toward the livery stable.

The exoneration of the deacon was warmly applauded by the majority that night. His long life of correct living and his many kindly deeds were not to be outweighed by one foolish act, it was urged, and with a bland smile he accepted forgiveness and bustled about his duties with all his old-time energy.

The morrow saw the same bland smile on his face as he slowly entered the fair grounds, where he met the tribunal of yesterday in the immediate vicinity of the stables.

"Lookin' at th' hosses?" he asked genially of the postmaster.

The postmaster bit at a straw reflectively and then in a confidential tone returned, "Th' more I see of Abigail's Pride, th' more foolish I think ye was to bet on her."

"I think she's gone plum lame," declared Mr. Carr, joining the other two. "Shoes too heavy," added Mr. Whitten from the other side.

And in vindication of the trio's judgment Abigail's Pride that afternoon, despite the shrewd jockeying of Sam Cole's hired man, proved a complete failure, and was thoroughly distanced.

"Thought ye said she was all hunky-dory on a muddy track," snarled the postmaster, as his friends silently slouched into the back room.

"Simply chain lightnin' to go," sneered Mr. Whitten bitterly as he mechanically slapped an empty pocket.

"A dollar 'n a half to 70 cents," mumbled Mr. Carr despondently.

"Wal, I'm dod rotted glad ye lost on th' first day's racin', Plunkett. Wish ye'd lost today," growled the postmaster.

"So do I," added Mr. Whitten grimly.

"I can't lose all th' time," grinned the deacon complacently, edging toward the door. "Jim Sibby's roan, Bluefly, looked purty good to me today, an' I hedged a bit."

"A reg'lar gambler," gasped Mr. Carr as the door softly closed and the trio were left alone.



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