

## The Postmaster at Bible Hill.

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### CHAPTER II.

Bible Hill postoffice was at the top of the high steep hill that one climbed immediately after crossing Lost Creek, going west. It was also the long-time residence of Parson Rakestraw. The house was one-story two-room pen built of small logs and was inhabited by the parson, his wife, their daughter Malvina and their little parentless grand-daughter Caddie.

The postoffice letterbox—that is, the receptacle of all outgoing mail matter—was a large crook-necked gourd, which hung at the gate, at the end of a rope, from the branch of a tree. There was a narrow opening in one side of the great gourd into which patrons of the postoffice deposited everything which they intrusted to the mails. All incoming mail for the office was held until called for in a candle box on the mantle shelf in the common room of the log hut, where the family cooked, ate and slept, unless it was carried away by mice or rats or it chanced to be used on dark or cold mornings to start the fire.

People who chanced to differ in politics with the postmaster, or were over systematic themselves were shocked at his apparent carelessness in business matters; and in the light of subsequent events will possibly charge that Parson Rakestraw did not hesitate to read the contents of all letters that went through his office in which he imagined he might be personally interested. In advance we will prove this charge unjust to a self-declared honest man; he could not even read the plainest writing—his old large-print Bible was hard work to him.

Miss Malvina, his daughter, however, was a scholar. She was a great big girl—tall, round limbed and red haired; she wore a No. 8 shoe and weighed probably a hundred and seventy five pounds. Miss Vina was strong physically, and mentally her strength was in keeping with her size, but morally her training had been neglected and misdirected and she was a worthy daughter to her sire. Her good name as to personal virtue however was unquestioned. Mrs. Rakestraw was a dirtily dressed, dilapidated woman with small furtive eyes and a rasping fault-finding voice.

Bible Hill, in a steady Excelsior sort of a way, had for years been making for itself a place in the revenue records of the western district. A number of its citizens had been convicted—always unjustly as they claimed—in the Asheville courts of "manufacturing removing and selling" moonshine whiskey; and recently in a vague general way Parson Rakestraw had come to be suspected as an accessory, a general manager, in fact, for a bold and successful band who were known to have their headquarters near the "Hill" and who were running the blockade with large quantities of fine whiskey—much superior at least to the usual grade of the illicit product.

If the old cranky singing preacher were guilty, it seemed utterly impossible to trap him. Detectives in various guises vainly attempted to work up a case against him. One handsome little spy even went to

the extreme and unmanly length of devotedly courting Miss Vina, and paying the postmaster hotel rates for board an entire summer. He was indiscreet enough, however, to send and receive all his letters through the Bible Hill postoffice, and Miss Vina kept even better posted than he on his private business and the state of his affections regarding herself. Being a good-natured dutiful daughter, she warned her father and his friends and made herself extremely agreeable to their spy-boarder as long as he remained with them.

When he went away a number of masked men stopped him on the road to the railway station, and accusing him of trifling with Miss Vina's affections led him away to the woods and most cruelly whipped him with switches; then warned him against ever returning to annoy the poor girl with his fine clothes and town ways.

"We're all honest people on this hill," Parson Rakestraw would frequently say. "I named this hill—myself I named it, an' I promised the Lord, Him a-helpin' me, to use my utmost endeavors to keep unto this hill's good name, an' I'm a going to try to do it."

Rubbing his chin stubble with his great rough hand he would gaze guilelessly into even a "revenue's" infidel eyes and continue: "Some of the boys air bad, myself I know they's bad, nor can I help it hard as I tries—but they's honest."

The old parson-postmaster owned a mill down on Lost creek. It was a slow primitive affair and was kept busy all the time grinding corn into meal for an extensive settlement. Informers had charged that the mill was used to grind "mash" for the mountain whiskey men but this the fair miller, Miss Vina, indignantly denied. She was a miller but she was a lady too and conducted the mill "honest and fair." Let 'em watch if they could n't take her word for it. The handsome but unfortunate little spy had indeed last summer spent many pleasant afternoons fruitlessly lurking about the mill half the time unconsciously in plain view, greatly to Miss Vina's amusement.

It was a strange country.

The people lived in wretched log houses without floors often and larrafters overhead; they were ignorant, unwashed, uncombed, uncouth but strong and healthy. Their appetites and digestion were wonderful. From the arsenical clay which they often ate, to the pure, strong corn whiskey which they drank nothing hurt them. Only help on clear of the cradle and it seemed he asked no further favors until he was ready for you to help him into his coffin.

They raised patches of corn and tobacco, hunted, fished and eked out miserable poverty-stricken existences, yet every landowner regarded himself as a possible millionaire, as the possessor of a gold mine yet to be discovered—"If one of them mineral fellers would just come along an' dig it out," they used to say, never dreaming of digging for themselves.

Many of them had for trifling sums sold all mineral rights in their lands to speculators, but for a long while Parson Rakestraw had declined to part with any "rights or titles whatsoever." He wanted to be able to read his titles clear here and hereafter, he said, like a true Christian; then he would sing

a verse from Lorena. After a long time, however, seeing that the purchasers simply held the purchased right in idleness and made no effort to develop them, he sold his mineral rights also and at once began a vigorous hunt for the precious metals.

He was quite a mineralogist in his way and prospected industriously along the mountain streams and among the rocks on the hillsides. He carried numerous specimens and bits of shining stuff in his capacious pockets, testing them at times after a rude fashion with very unsatisfactory results.

The day dawned at last however, that was to bring him reward for all his labors—as will come to all who dig and wait. Parson Rakestraw struck it rich.

It happened this way:

Late one dreary afternoon it was raining and a dense fog covered the face of the earth. Deep among the rocks and roots in a dismal dell his pick shattered a fragment from a ledge of stone and unearthed a pocket of glittering ore.

With a glad-startled cry cautiously smothered when but half uttered as he remembered how he had sold his mineral rights, he grasped a handful of the bright stuff, pressed it to his heart, to his lips, danced wildly about with the yellow rocks close clasped in both hands, until exhausted and panting with the strang gold fever.

He knelt alone in prayer beside the rich pocket and really resolved to his heart for the moment to lead a changed and better life, to become an honest man with his gold which he was practically stealing from the mineral rights speculator. Then he carefully covered his precious secret with earth and leaves and walked home a strangely saddened man.

The next day Parson Rakestraw gave his mill to his only son John—a great rough parody of his father, saying he felt a call to more entirely consecrate himself to the good cause and that he feared the mill might prove a stumbling block in his path.

John was a mighty hunter who followed his calling seven days in the week. He claimed to always enjoy better luck on Sundays than during secular days. His long old fashioned rifle brought in meat sufficient for family consumption and to sell in exchange for coffee and tobacco, but John was often sorely put out with his wife's questions as to where their "next bread" were a comin' from. Now however, there would never more be trouble on that account; the mill would bring in corn and meal to sell and to keep, coffee, tobacco and whiskey were also brought in secure and easy reach by this windfall. And as his wife could attend to the mill as his sister had heretofore, John could still roam the forests in search of game, with an easy mind and a clear conscience.

Bible Hill postoffice was not very widely or heavily patronized. Its neighbors were not a letter-writing people. The candle box on the mantle shelf rarely contained a dozen letters for delivery and many parcels among its contents were often held for weeks uncalled for. The great gourd at the gate did not average one letter daily.

"When we've got anything for a feller," said a possum-faced mountaineer, "we generally take a squint at him along one of our old rifle barrels and send it to him without troublin' the mail riders."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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