

The Postmaster at Bible Hill.

BY ROBERT YULEE TOOMBS

From The Cosmopolitan.

CHAPTER II. (CONTINUED.)

The mail was carried on horse-back forty miles across the mountains to the nearest railway station twice a week. It was not therefore on official business that great trundling ox wagons lumbered up to Parson Rakestraw's back door at midnight. The strongly hooped barrels with which these wagons were loaded certainly contained no mail matter; nor were their muffled drivers, ghostly and bulky of outline, without human form and void of voice in the gloom, in the government service.

The singing parson evidently had other secrets in his old cracked cranium besides that yellow treasure back in the gloomy canon among the hills. But he only gazed blankly in the curious stranger's eyes and declare:

"We are all honest people on this hill an' all our business is fair an' square."

The old man's good resolutions fail to wear of course. On second thought, believing himself now to be immensely wealthy, he determined to enjoy life and to conduct his business to suit himself, and, if need be, to defy the revenue men. He therefore for a season bloomed and fruited in a worldly way. His genial good humor and open-handed generosity rendered him every day more popular with his poor neighbors, who began after the true American fashion to nominate him for their next congressman.

But Fate's heavy hand was already reaching forth out of the shadowy future to grasp and crush him.

CHAPTER III.

Colonel Gault lived on Toe River about five miles from Bible Hill postoffice. The colonel was the county representative in the state legislature, which office he had held for years, and was the wealthiest and most prominent citizen in all the Lost Creek and Toe River section.

He was quite an old man now—probably near seventy. He had married late in life a pretty young widow who had borne him but one child, a daughter now about seventeen years old. This daughter Mamie was a pretty, intelligent, lovable girl with shy timid ways and was loved and respected by all who knew her—except Parson Rakestraw's wife and daughter.

"The sly little sunburnt sneak!" cried the big blown rose-hued Vina. "Some day I'll get a chance to drabble her fine feathers in the dust and then I'll make her squirm."

Those who knew Miss Vina knew she would keep her word too if she could have an opportunity to injure Mrs. Gault.

Mrs. Rakestraw was also a ready speaker and her tongue had more than a local reputation for guile and bile, while Miss Vina was second to her mother as a queen of slander and hate. These women never let an opportunity to speak cruelly of Colonel Gault's family pass unimproved.

The colonel and the parson were also bad friends, as innocense and guilt must inevitably be when brought in contact. The colonel had suffered long at the hands of

the malicious old postmaster, while he had in turn frustrated many of the musical old moonshiner's best-laid plans for wickedness.

Ill-dressed and unshorn as he now appeared, leading the life of a wild hog, with the appearance of a bear, no one could realize that in his youth Parson Rakestraw had been a well reared well-favored young man bearing a good name as a member of an excellent family. In those days too, he and Mrs. Gault, then a very romantic young girl, Lorena Sawyer, had been far more than friends. They never mentioned this to any one now, however, but when chance threw them together and no one else was present he always pained her by recalling those forgotten days. Possibly he recalled them too when he sung:

"The story of the past, Lorena, Alas! I care not to repeat. The hopes that could not last Lorena

They lived, but only lived to cheat."

Mrs. Gault's youth, as no one now knew except Parson Rakestraw, had been a very sad and unfortunate one. A handsome stranger passing the summer months in the mountains down in Tennessee where she then lived with her parents, had met her and during those long idle sweet summer days fit only for thornless flowers and love and hope and truth, had won her love—the first blind unrestrained love of impulsive girlhood in which self is sunk in passionate worship of the loved object and it is sweeter far to give than to receive.

Her parents refused to sanction her marriage with the young adventurer and she trusting his sacred promise of immediate marriage had fled with him. Once completely in his power these promises were disregarded and for years pretty Lorena Sawyer was never seen at her father's home nor at Big Ivy Church on Sunday.

Strange distorted stories floated through the mountains that she had married her lover, who had proved a very rich man, and was now living as a "great fashionable quality-lady away off yonder;" while others said that he had never married her but at the end of a year had deserted her and their baby boy.

This seemed the more probable story and by sensible people was generally accepted as the true one; but there were many romantic and unworldly people who had known and loved her who still believed in Lorena.

Five years after her flight Lorena returned calling herself Mrs. Laurence. The years had dealt leniently and kindly with her if the world had not, and she was greatly improved. From a shy awkward country beauty she had developed into a beautiful self-possessed worldly-wise woman. She came richly dressed with evident signs of wealth. Her husband had recently died, she said, leaving her all of his property which she had turned into money to the amount of five thousand dollars. This sum was a handsome fortune for that country at the time and as her prosperity became known her parents welcomed her back to their hearts again; her old-time friends thronged around her lovers were numerous and offers of marriage were daily events of her life. But she had grown very wise. This sudden popularity did not turn her head as it might have

done a few years ago. She said "No!" most decidedly to would-be husbands and borrowers alike until a year after her return she met Colonel Gault.

The colonel was a handsome and brilliant middle-aged man with easy pleasant manners and a clean record. She knew she could trust him. There was much—of which she could never speak, of which she dared not too often think—in her varied past which made her feel very kindly toward an honorable man who loved her truly, as she was sure Colonel Gault did.

It pained her deeply that while she knew him to be true-hearted and without reserve toward her, she could never speak truly of her recent past to him. Whether she deceived him or allowed him to deceive himself in any material matter will affect the conclusion of this story.

They were married after a very brief courtship and she went at once with her husband to his home "away over the mountains" as her friends expressed it, and was again lost to her old associates to whom a journey across the mountains was the event of a lifetime.

In her new home, to her unutterable surprise and consternation, she had met under another name her old lover, the man who had so cruelly betrayed, ruined and deserted her. She had believed him dead but now she found him alive and prosperous, a married man with a son and daughter at his knees.

He had never as the years passed betrayed the unhappy woman's secret to her husband, but he would never tell her what disposition he had made of their child or his present whereabouts. The boy was well and doing well she was assured—a fine handsome young fellow whom it would make her heart proud to see. At the end of a year a daughter was born to the Gaults and the colonel was a very happy man and proud of his wife and child.

"I'm glad it's a gal Loreny," said Parson Rakestraw one day to Mrs. Gault while she shrank from the tones of his voice; "we must make a match after 'while 'tween her 'n my John."

The words outlined vaguely a wicked plot that was even then taking place in the cruel wretch's head but of which as yet Mrs. Gault could not even dream, it was so malicious and heartless.

The years passed on bringing joy and sorrow, filling cradles and graves, blessing some lives and blighting others; and all the while Lorena's old lover was using fate and time and circumstances as aids to his heartless prosecution, which he called revenge on the poor girl whose early life he had blighted because she had spurned him on learning how low and base he really was.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Albany Democrat: The Primeville papers of last week have both arrived, but failed to narrate one of the most interesting items of the week, that of a fight between D. W. Aldridge, editor of the News, and J. A. Douthit, editor of the Ochieo Review. It is said to have been fierce but short, friends interfering and stopping the contest. Bad blood exists between them.

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