

The Postmaster at Bible Hill.

BY ROBERT YULEE TOOMBS

From The Cosmopolitan

CHAPTER IV.

One day a few weeks previous to the night we saw the revenue officers encamped on Toe River, two city men had applied to Parson Rakestraw for summer board.

They were made welcome without question and installed in the better of the two rooms the house afforded. As there were but two apartments, there was, grammatically speaking, no best room. In truth they were simply very bad and worse.

The older one of these two men introduced himself as Henry Crow, a newspaper man. He was writing up that section of the mountains for a magazine, and, besides a small valise and a portable photograph outfit used for making views and portraits to illustrate his articles, he carried no baggage or impediment whatever.

His companion was a mere youth, a real sweet girlish daintily dressed and heavily perfumed young fellow twenty odd years of age perhaps. He carried a perfect mountain of luggage as he termed it: an elegant new breech loading bird gun, a fine jointed fishing rod, the latest agony in gamebags, hunting suits, etc. He was dressed in loud contrasting colors and wore gold rimmed eyeglasses. The word dude had not yet reached that far-back land, so the country people who had never seen so elegant a creature called him a stuck up fool without hesitating an instant for a better name. Nor did they on better acquaintance ever think it worth while to reverse this hasty judgement.

"Maybe the rich youngster'll take a notion to you, Vina," said Mr. Rakestraw while the newcomers were getting ready for their first dinner. "My ain't he purty!"

"Mr'n likely 'twill be the other as makes up to Vina," sagely remarked the old parson; "them writin' fellers are allers doin' somethin' cranky and unexpected. I used to write songs myself, you know."

"We loved each other well, Lorena. More than we ever dared to tell."

The guests entering at this juncture dinner was served and after Mr. Rakestraw invited his younger guest—who had with a courtly bow presented a slender snow-white card bearing in intertwined script the name Charles Lawrence—to walk down to the mill. Left to himself Mr. Crow sat down to write and, attracted by something gentle and tender in his face, little Caddie the grand-daughter before mentioned came in to entertain him and they were soon great friends.

Meanwhile the old parson and young Mr. Lawrence were in earnest conversation at the spring under the hill, and the vague nameless terror that had so long hung over Mrs. Gault's life was assuming definite shape.

Miss Vina spent the afternoon in a long-sweet dream of the handsome girlish young sportsman whose perfumed card already lay in her treasury-box over the tintype of her long-timed lover Mr. Sam Busby. After an early supper Mr. Lawrence and Vina went out for a walk and half an hour later Vina returned alone with flaming face and tear-dimmed eyes and at once went

to bed without speaking to anyone.

Mr. Crow, a soft voiced commonplace man, never offended anybody. He sat until late in the hall or passageway between the two rooms smoking a big pipe and conversing with the parson.

Little Caddie had climbed upon his knee and gone into a deep trustful sleep with her head against his breast. His delicious old brandy and mellow fine-cut smoking tobacco made the old parson's eyes water in pure enjoyment and strangely warmed his heart toward this sneaking sweet-mouthed spy as he secretly believed him to be.

Around the kitchen hearth the Rakestraw's, father, mother and daughter, held a council of war. There he told the two women of Mrs. Gault's early misfortunes but did not reveal his share in her wrongs. That was more than he dared confess to his wife.

It was a strange trio: the old parson, with his flowing gray beard unkempt white hair and loose coarse clothes, looked like a bear; his wife's head was covered with a great nightcap tied beneath her chin, beyond the fringes of which her sharp nose and bulging eyes alike projected; Vina tall, strong and muscular, her scant night dress displaying the rounded symmetry of her great red strenght and beauty of person.

"All right pa," said Vina, as her father paused. "I can go to sleep now. I have wanted a chance all my life to get even with that hateful Mamie Gault. And just think he didn't talk of anything else this evening but Miss Gault—Miss Gault—until I got so mad and sick I left him to finish his walk by himself"—Vina's eyes filled and her voice broke—"but now we'll see who gets him!"

"She shall get him, Vina; that is why I brought him here; he is a thief and a blackguard at home. I provided him with all this finery he has brought with him and got him to come here on purpose to marry Mamie Gault and bring all their high heads down into the dust."

The women stared stupidly in his face unable to see how a simple misalliance would so ruin or humiliate their hated neighbors, until the wicked old father concluded with this terrible disclosure:

"He is Mrs. Gault's stray young 'an—and Mamie's brother!"

"I'll help you, pa," cried Vina in vindictive delight, and his wife and daughter embraced him enthusiastically again and again while little Caddie, with wide open curious eyes that gleamed prettily in the firelight, peered from beneath her coarse coverlet wondering in childish fashion why they wanted Mamie Gault to marry her brother. Then she drowsily rested back to sleep again determined to ask her new friend Mr. Crow about it tomorrow.

Mr. Crow was a very quiet and studious man—reading, writing and smoking during the day and strolling out for long walks along the lonesome country roads at night.

"He's writing a book," Vina Rakestraw would tell visitors, with a queer expression in her eyes; and the gaunt roughbearded mountaineers, with their long rifles and scarecrow clothes, would stare at him in open mouthed silly wonder until she added: "And it may be sort of

a doomsday book to some of you fellows when the United States marshal gets it. He asked me yesterday to get some of the most picturesque among you, to let him take your pictures. You'd better watch him too for he can make 'em when you ain't expecting it. He made me the other day when I was a-running the old rooster out of the garden."

Nervous hands clutched long lighttriggered rifles and Henry Crow became a marked man. He made numerous pictures for Vina however, and they seemed to remain friends. Little Caddie was his great pet though, and her sweet round face and chubby figure was his favorite study and appeared in many of his pictures.

Mr. Charles Lawrence was in the meantime hunting and fishing industriously, and was gathering from these pastimes an immense amount of fun and malicious enjoyment at the expense of the curious and suspicious mountaineers who were not as yet in Parson Rakestraw's confidence.

He soon discovered that for strangers around Bible Hill there were many eyes, and that one eye at least was ever on him. Generally there were two except when one-eyed Sam Busby, Vina's discarded lover was watching. Beside the shaded streams, in lonely canons, on the mountains, along the highway someone was ever dogging his steps; dodging from tree to stone, from rock to bush or bramble cluster, the spies followed him every hour in the day.

Mr. John Rakestraw was to a limited extent in his father's confidence and trusted the elegant stranger who often fished and fished about his mill without reserve.

"Honest now, Mr. Lawrence," said John one day in the presence of several others, "you ain't no revenue man now, are you?"

Lawrence's answer was so reassuring that the young miller that very afternoon introduced him to a select company of moonshiners and blockaders ever on Lost Creek guaranteeing him to be all right.

"I stands for him," said John, and so does pap."

"Yes," said Sam Busby, Vina's one eyed lover, "an' you an' him'll both be sorry for this trip. He wants to jail me I reckon, so's he can get my girl 'thout any trouble, an' you 'uns is a helpin' him. Is e your game?"

All this time Mr. Henry Crow was busy every day in his room, writing, smoking and winning the affection of little Caddie. She was a little heathen by nature and lack of training, and an entirely original bud of the Rakestraw variety, crossed outside the marriage ring with a more intelligent but not more moral stock. Her mother was dead, her father was an absentee for personal reasons best known to himself and the legal authorities.

"Come, Caddie," said Mr. Crow late one afternoon, "let's walk down to the crossroads"—where there was a country store—"and get something nice."

Caddie, calling up a vision of striped candy and china dolls, readily assented, and donning her torn straw hat walked gravely on beside him, talking in a funny old fashioned way of a number of subjects until they were well away from the gate; then:

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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