

The Postmaster at Bible Hill.

BY ROBERT YULEE TOOMBS

From The Columbusian.

CHAPTER IV. (CONTINUED.)

"Aunt Vina likes him spite of all grandpap can say, but you mustn't tell," looking cautiously right and left over her fat pudgy shoulders.

"Do you mean Mr. Busby, dear?"

"No!" indignantly. "All the others do, but she says he's nasty. She loves your partner 'cause he's so sweet and smells so nice, and—but say, he's Mamie's brother. Can she marry her own brother?"

"No dear," said Mr. Crow interested.

"Well, grandpap's goin' to make 'em anyhow as soon as they get through with you."

Crow started. This was becoming interesting indeed. "Tell me what they are going to do with me, Caddie."

"I am your sweetheart, ain't I?"

"Yes, dear."

"I told 'em so," cried the child clapping her hands triumphantly. "but grandma said to grandpap last night when I was asleep—'most asleep, you know—that you was a-foolin' your time away after Aunt Vina tryin' to get her to love you so she would tell you all about grandpap's whiskey and where he makes it under the kitchen floor. Then grandpap said they'd been watchin' you and would make you jump off'n a big rock somers down on the creek. They made one real nice feller jump off'n that rock once and he never come back any more. But that was all right, 'cause I didn't like him nohow."

Crow's blood ran hot and cold for a moment as he realized the terrible meaning to him of Caddie's artless revelation. He determined to consult Colonel Gault as it seemed there was also some underhand work going on against his family. He heartily assured Caddie in as gay a tone as he could assume that he could not easily and safely jump off'n the big rock and he would be sure to come back to her. Then filling her pockets full of pretty things of her own selection, they walked back to supper. Caddie again and again reminding him to at he mustn't tell her grandparents what she had told him.

CHAPTER V.

Charles Lawrence had met Miss Mamie Gault soon after he came to stay in the mountains, and as blind perverse fate usually wills in such unhappy situations a mutual attraction was at their first meeting born in their hearts.

After that he seemed to haunt her footsteps. At church he met her regularly and returned home with her; at the crossroads store, at the postoffice, at country parties or when she was out walking evenings Lawrence was now ever at her side—and he was ever welcome there.

Her parents objected at first but when the young man brought them his testimonials proving him a member of an excellent family, and his bank book which showed quite a little fortune to his credit the colonel yielded and the young people were happy with each other and in bright anticipation.

Colonel Gault's consent was obtained the sooner perhaps by a bit

of confidence on the part of Lawrence. It was a fine stroke too on the part of that young man and must have been inspired by Parson Rakestraw himself.

As has been written, the colonel and the parson were bad friends and either would readily lend a hand to frustrate any object the other desired to accomplish. Col. Gault therefore, believing the young sportsman at out to bring the old semi crank to justice, at once became the young man's friend and promised him all needed assistance.

But for that unforgotten midnight kitchen council of war in the Rakestraw family of which the reader, little Caddie and the writer were the only witnesses, it might seem strange that Parson Rakestraw was so anxious to have his enemy's daughter capture the young handsome and rich stranger whom his own daughter Miss Vina plainly loved desperately. For despite her promise Vina was evidently determined not to be bound by the kitchen caucus but to win Lawrence to herself if possible not knowing that he was also her brother as he was Mamie's.

Country people are close observers, especially in love affairs, and they could not understand this matter at all nor the close relations and strange confidence that seemed to exist between young Lawrence and old Rakestraw.

"Seems to me like the parson and that jimdandy with the jaybird clothes on is a-gittin' mighty thick," said old Sile Gandy one day as the two mentioned came down the road to the mill where a crowd was gathered waiting for their turns of corn to be ground into meal. The parson and his companion were laughing boisterously about Colonel Gault and singing alternately verses from the old man's favorite "Lorena."

"Yes," growled Dave Mangum, "and it's almighty strange to me that the old singing blockhead can't see that he's a foolin' with one of Colonel Gault's tectives all the while and a-puttin' his foot into a trap ten times stronger'n a bear trap, and"—

Parson Rakestraw however imagined himself "able to tend to his own affairs yet a while 'bout any guardens," and went blindly on trusting his new friend despite all officious friendly warnings. He aroused intense indignation by placing Lawrence in charge of the postoffice as his assistant.

The deputy at once made some long needed improvements in the office fixtures and fitted up a case of letter boxes arranged alphabetically. He also desired to replace the old gourd mail-receiver at the gate with a locked box, but Mr. Rakestraw would not allow this; not even when Lawrence assured him that there were parcels stuck fast and moulded at the bottom which could never be got out, and that they had already been there several months.

It has been charged against country postmasters, unjustly perhaps, that they are generally of a curious and prying nature. Had this been true of Mr. Lawrence he was now in a position to satiate any curiosity he might feel concerning his neighbors' private affairs—Colonel Gaults for instance. This was in fact afterwards charged against the office when fate in the guise of the inevitable revenue raiders swept

the valley clear of illicit moonshine and its lawevading manufacturers. Before that day however the stranger on Toe River had driven Mr. Lawrence and the old postmaster parson to their doom.

In a gloomy cave on the bank of Rock Creek in a lonely remote canon several miles from Bible Hill postoffice, was secreted a mail "dug-out" or cavern still, known among its frequenters as "Dusky's shop." It was the exclusive property and place of business of Sam Busby, Miss Vina's long favored but now forgotten lover.

Half a dozen men are seated about in the semi darkness of the squalid apartment, drinking, smoking and all talking at once. In one corner three others are engaged in an all engrossing, oath-provoking game of cards. The cards are a cheap marked quality, but as each player knows the marks from long usage they all know the hands pretty well by the backs as they are dealt out, and the players "o.g." bet or feel accordingly as good or bad cards are held.

In the doorway sits a stranger—"the stranger on Toe River" he is called far and near, and every one likes him for a free-and-easy young fellow. He shoots better than any coby else, drinks his share and lends money freely. The men like him and the girls have all "gone wild over him" as a few ugly jealous fellows declare.

He is negligently but richly dressed and carries a short heavy repeating rifle and a pair of belt revolvers, all using cartridges as large as a lady's thumb. His form is tall and shapely, his face fair and ruddy, his eyes were pleasant and true, and his smiling mouth—a most seductive confidential mouth—is shaded by a blond mustache thick and long.

His conversation and manner prove him a man of varied experiences and a wanderer in the world. He is plainly only a bird of passage alighted here for a time, soon to wing his flight onward. A few months since when he first came among these people they were shy and cold toward him, having cause perhaps to fear all honest strangers but soon as they came to know him better they learned to love and trust him.

He could never become one of them any more than the mountain hawk could become one of the lean scraggy chickens that eked out a scanty living scratching industriously about their doors, but he was a kindred spirit. Like themselves maybe he was hunted of men, a fugitive from the world's glare, seeking refuge in these dark dens in the shadows of the Black Mountains.

They looked up to him as one of a superior order to themselves and trusted him implicitly and without reserve in just those things concerning which they were always most on guard against strangers.

This confidence they would have said was never solicited by him. Indeed the first confidences between them came from him. He trusted one or two of their leading spirits with certain secrets of his own; almost unconsciously they responded with similar confidences, and the young wanderer was made to feel himself among friends.

He was astonished at the vast amount of wickedness being conceived and carried out by the sleek uncouth and uneducated mountaineers, and at the shrewdness and ability they displayed in their unlawful work.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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