



Preacher's Legend, Truman Capote

Preacher's Legend

A south-moving cloud slipped over the sun and a patch of dark, an island of shadow, crept down the field, drifted over the ridge. Presently it began to rain: summer rain with sun in it, lasting only a short time; long enough for settling dust, polishing leaves. When the rain ended, an old colored man—his name was Preacher—opened his cabin door and gazed at the field where weeds grew profusely in the rich earth; at a rocky yard shaded by peach trees and dogwood and chinaberry; at a gutted red-clay road that seldom saw car, wagon, or human; and at a ring of green hills that spread, perhaps, to the edge of the world.

Preacher was a small man, a mite, and his face was a million wrinkles. Tufts of gray wool sprouted from his bluish skull and his eyes were sorrowful. He was so bent that he resembled a rusty sickle and his skin was the yellow of superior leather. As he studied what remained of his farm, his hand pestered his chin wisely but, to tell the truth, he was thinking nothing.

It was quiet, of course, and the coolness made him shiver so that he went inside and sat in a rocker and wrapped his legs in a beautiful scrap quilt of green-rose and red-leaf design and fell asleep in the still house with all the windows wide while the wind stirred bright calendars and comic strips he had plastered over the walls.

In a quarter of an hour he was awake, for he never slept long and the days passed in a series of naps and wakings, sleep and light, one hardly different from the other. Although it was not cold he lit the fire, filled his pipe and began to rock, his glance wandering over the room. The double iron bed was a hopeless confusion of quilts and pillows and scaly with flecks of pink paint; an arm flapped desolately from the very

chair in which he sat; a wonderful poster-picture of a golden-haired girl holding a bottle of NE-HI was torn at the mouth so that her smile was wicked and leering. His eyes paused on a sooty, charred stove, squatting in the corner.

He was hungry, but the stove, piled high with dirty pans, made Preacher tired even to consider it. "Can't do nothin' 'bout it," he said, the way certain old people quarrel with themselves; "sick to death of collards an' whatevahelse. Just sit here an' stahve, that be my fate.... Bet yo' bottom dollah ain't nobody gonna grieve on dat account, nawzuh." Evelina had always been so clean and neat and good, but she was dead and buried two springs ago. And of their children there was left only Anna-Jo, who had a job in Cypress City where she lived-in and went cavorting every night. Or, at least, Preacher believed this to be the case.

He was very religious and as the afternoon wore on he took his Bible from the mantel and traced the print with a palsied finger. He enjoyed pretending he could read and continued for some time: plotting his own tales and poring over the illustrations. This habit had always been of great concern to Evelina. "Why you all de time studyin' ovah de Good Book, Preacher? I declare you ain't got no sense.... Can't no mo' read than I kin."

"Why, honey," he explained, "ever'body kin read de Good Book. He fixed it so'se dey could." It was a claim he had heard made by the Pastor in Cypress City and it satisfied him completely.

When the sunlight made an exact impression from window to door he closed the Bible over his finger and hobbled onto the porch. Blue and white pots of fern swung from the ceiling on wire cords and flowered to the floor, trailing like peacock tails. Slowly, and with great care, he

limped down the steps, fashioned from tree trunks, and stood, frail and humped in his overalls and khaki shirt, in the middle of the yard. "Here I is. Didn't spec I'd do it.... Didn't spec I had de stren'th in me today."

A smell of damp earth hung on the air and the wind turned the chinaberry leaves. A rooster crowed, and its scarlet comb went darting through the high weeds and disappeared under the house. "You best run, ol' crow, else I git me a hatchet and den you bettah watch out. Bet you taste mighty fine!" The weeds swept up at his bare feet and he stopped and tugged at a handful. "Ain't no use. You just grow right smack back agin, nasty mess."

Near the road the dogwood was in bloom and the rain had scattered petals that were soft under his feet and stuck between his toes. He walked with the aid of a sycamore cane. After crossing the road and passing through a wild pecan grove, he chose the path, as was his custom, that led through the forest down to the creek and The Place.

The same journey, the same way, and at the same time: late afternoon because, that way, it gave him something to look forward to. The walks had begun one November day when he had reached his Decision and continued all winter when the earth frosted and pine needles clung frozen to his feet.

Now it was May. Six months were gone, and Preacher, born in May and married in May, thought surely here was the month that would see the end of his mission. It was his superstition that a sign marked this day in particular; so he followed the path more rapidly than usual.

Sun pooled in shafts, caught in his hair, changed the color of the Spanish moss, flung limp and long like whiskers across the waterbay branches, from gray to pearl to blue to gray. A cicada called. Another answered. "Shut up, beetle-bugs! Whut you wanna be makin' so much racket fer? You lonesome?"

The path was tricky, and sometimes, because it was really no more than a thread of trampled ground, difficult to maintain. At one point it sloped downward into a hollow that smelled of sweet gum and here began a thickly-vined stretch where it was night black and the brush trembled with who-knows-what. "Git out o' there, all you devils! Ain't nary a one of you kin scare Preacher. Ol' buzzards and ghosts, bettah watch out! Preacher ... he'll bust you side de haid an' skin off yo' hide an' gouge out yo' eyes an' stomp de whole caboodle down to de pit of fire!" But all the same his heart beat faster, his cane rapped searchingly before him; the beast lurked behind; terrible eyes, shining in hell, watched from their lair!

Evelina, he recalled, had never believed in the Spirits and this made him angry. "Hush now, Preacher," she would say, "I ain't gonna listen to no mo' of dat spook talk. Why, man, dey ain't no spooks 'cept in yo' haid." Oh, she had been unwise, for now, sure as there was a God in heaven, she belonged among the hunters and the hungry-eyed waiting there in the dark. He paused, called, "Evelina? Evelina ... answuh me, honey." And he hurried on, suddenly fearful that someday she would hear and, not recognizing, devour him whole.

Soon the sound of the creek; from there The Place was only a few steps. He pushed aside a thorny nettle and, with anguished grunts, lowered himself down the bank and crossed the stream, stone by stone, with studied precision. Nervous minnow schools made finicky forays along the clear and shallow edge and emerald-winged dragons

plucked at the surface. On the opposite bank, a humming bird, whirring its invisible wings, ate the heart of a giant tiger lily.

So the trees thinned and the path broadened into a small, cubic clearing. Preacher's place. Once, before the lumber mill closed, it had been a washing center for the women, but that was long ago. A flow of swallows swept overhead and from somewhere nearby an unfamiliar bird sang a strange, persistent song.

He was tired and out of breath, and he dropped to his knees, leaning his cane against a rotted oak stump on which clusters of devil's snuff grew. Then, unfolding his Bible to where a silver ribbon lay pressed between the pages, he clasped his hands and lifted his head.

Several moments of silence, his eyes pinched narrow, intent upon the ring of sky, the smoky strands of cloud, like stray loops of tow hair, that seemed scarcely to move over the blue screen, paler than milk glass.

Then, in just a whisper:

"Mistuh Jesus? Mistuh Jesus?"

The wind whispered back, uprooting winter-buried leaves that turned furtive cart wheels across the moss-green floor.

"I'se back agin, Mistuh Jesus, faithful to de minute. Please, suh, pay 'tention to ol' Preacher."

Certain of his audience, he smiled sadly and waved. It was time to speak his piece. He said he was old; he didn't know how old, ninety or a hundred, maybe. And his business finished and all his people gone. If there was still the family, then things might be different. Hosanna! But

Evelina had passed away and what had become of the children? Billy Boy and Jasmine and Landis and Le Roy and Anna-Jo and Beautiful Love?

Some to Memphis and Mobile and Birmingham, some to their graves. Anyway they weren't with him; they had left the land he had worked so hard, and the fields were ruined and he was frightened in the old house at night with nothing for company but the whippoorwill. And so it was very unkind to keep him here when he longed to be with the others wherever they were. "Glory be, Mistuh Jesus, I'se ancient as de ancientest turtle an' ancientuh than dat...."

Lately he had fallen into a habit of pleading his case many times, and the longer he carried on the shriller and more urgent his voice became till it swelled fierce and demanding, and the bluejays, watching from the pine branches, flew away in rage and terror.

He stopped abruptly and cocked his head and listened. It repeated itself: an odd, disturbing sound. He looked this way and that way and then he saw a miracle: A flaming head, bobbing above the brush, was floating towards him; its hair was curled and red; a brilliant beard streamed down its face. Worse yet, another apparition, paler and more luminous, drifted after it.

Intense panic and confusion stiffened Preacher's face and he moaned. Never in the history of Calupa County had such a miserable sound been heard. A crop-eared black-and-tan charged into the clearing, glared and growled with ropes of saliva dangling from its mouth. And two men, two strangers, stepped out of the shade, green shirts open at their throats, snakeskin galluses supporting their corduroy breeches. Both were short but magnificently built and one was curly-headed and

sported an orange-red beard, the other yellow-haired and smooth-cheeked. A slain wildcat was slung between them on a bamboo pole and tall rifles stood at their sides.

This was all Preacher needed, and he moaned again and jumped to his feet and bounded like a jack rabbit into the forest and onto the path. So great was his haste that he left his cane resting against the oak stump and his Bible open on the moss. The hound wagged forward, sniffed at the pages and started chase.

“What in all fired hell?” said Curly Head, picking up the book and cane.

“Damnedest thing I ever saw,” said Yellow Hair.

They settled the cateymount, swinging on the pole where its paws were secured with hemp, over their broad shoulders, and Curly Head said, “Guess we better get after that dog; cuss him anyway.”

“Spec we had,” said Yellow Hair. “Only I’d give a pretty penny to rest a spell.... Got a blister the size of a half dollar about to kill me.”

Swaying under their weight of rifle and game, they struck up a song and moved towards the darkening pines and the cateymount’s glazed, golden eyes, fixed wide, caught and reflected the late sun, kicked back its fire.

In the meantime Preacher had covered considerable distance. Truly he hadn’t run so fast since the day the hoop snake had chased him from here to Kingdom Come. He was no longer decrepit but a sprinter stepping along spry as you please. His legs shot sturdy and sure over the path and it is to be noted that a wretched kink in his back, from which he had suffered twenty years, dissolved that afternoon never to

reappear. The dark hollow flew past without his being aware, and, as he waded across the creek, his overalls flapped crazily. Oh, he was wounded with fear and the pad of his racing feet was a raging drum.

Then, just as he reached the dogwood tree, he had a tremendous thought. It was so severe and stunning that he stumbled and fell against the tree, which scattered rain and scared him badly. He rubbed his hurt elbow, flicked his tongue over his lips and nodded. "Lord above," he said, "what has done been did to me?" Yes. Yes, he knew. He knew who the strangers were—knew it from the Good Book—but it was less comfort than might be supposed.

So he crawled to his feet and fled through the yard and up the steps.

On the porch he turned and glanced backward. Quiet, still: nothing stirring but shadows. Dusk was spreading fanwise over the ridge; fields and trees, bush and vine, were webbed in gathering color; purple and rose and the little peach trees were silver-green. And, not far off, the hound was baying. Momentarily, Preacher considered running the miles to Cypress City but that, he knew, would never save him. "Nevuh in dis world."

Shut the door, bolt it good; there, that's fine! Now the windows. But, oh, the shutters are broken and gone!

And he stood helpless and defeated, staring at the hollow squares where moon vine crept over the sill. What was that? "Evelina? Evelina! Evelina!" Mice claws in the walls, only wind flirting a calendar leaf.

So, muttering violently, he shuffled about the cabin arranging, dusting, threatening. "Spiduh's an' widduh's, hide yo' self fo' shame.... Pow'ful

big comp'ny comin' to call." He lit a brass kerosene lamp (a gift to Evelina, Christmas 1918) and when the flame quickened he placed it on the mantel beside a blurred photograph (taken by the Pose-Yourself man who traveled through once a year) of a cheeky, beverage-colored face, Evelina, smiling, with a twist of white net in her hair. Next he puffed a satin pillow (Grand Prize in Scrap Quilt, awarded to Beautiful Love, Cypress Frolics Fair 1910) and dropped it proudly in the rocker. There was nothing left to do; so he prodded the fire, added a chunk of kindling and sat down to wait.

Not long. For presently there was singing; deep voices chanting airs that echoed and echoed with immense and rollicking power: "I've been workin' on the RAIL-road, All the livelong day...."

Preacher, his eyes closed, his hands folded solemnly, measured their merry path: in the pecan grove, on the road, under the chinaberry....

(On the eve of his Pappy's death, it was said, a great red-winged bird with a fearsome beak had sailed into the room from nowhere, twice circled the old man's bed and, before the watcher's very eyes, disappeared.)

Preacher half expected such a symbol now.

Up the steps they tramped and onto the porch, their boots heavy on the sagging boards. He sighed when they knocked; he would have to let them in. So he smiled at Evelina, thought briefly of his outrageous offspring and, moving ever so slowly, reached the door, removed the plank and opened it wide.

Curly Head, the one with the long, orange-red beard, stepped forward first, mopping his square, burned face with a throat bandanna. He saluted as if he were touching an invisible hat.

“Evenin’, Mistuh Jesus,” said Preacher, bowing low as he could.

“Evening,” said Curly Head.

Yellow Hair followed, jaunty and whistling, a cocky swing to his gait and his hands dug deep in the pockets of his corduroys. He gave Preacher a head-to-toe scowl.

“Evenin’, Mistuh Saint,” said Preacher, distinguishing them arbitrarily.

“Hi.”

And Preacher trotted anxiously after them till they were all knotted before the fire. “How you gent’ mens feelin’?” he said.

“Can’t complain,” said Curly Head, admiring the comic-strip papering and calendar-girl display. “You sure got an eye for the gals, Gran’pa.”

“Nawsuh,” said Preacher gravely, “I ain’t studyin’ ’bout nona them ol’ gals, nawseh!” And he shook his head for emphasis. “I’s e a Christian, Mistuh Jesus: an upstandin’ Baptist, paid-in-full membuh of de Cypress City Mornin’ Star.”

“No offense meant,” said Curly Head. “What’s your name, Gran’pa?”

“Name? Why, Mistuh Jesus, you knows I’m Preacher. Preacher what’s been conversin’ wid you nigh on six months?”

“Why, sure I do,” said Curly Head and slapped him heartily on the back; “course I do.”

“What is this?” said Yellow Hair. “What in hell are you talking about?”

“Got me,” said Curly Head, and shrugged. “Look, Preacher, we’ve had a hard day and we’re kind of thirsty.... Think you could help us out?”

Preacher smiled craftily, raised his arm, said, “Ain’t nevuh touched a drap in my life, dat’s de truth.”

“We mean water, Gran’pa. Plain old drinking water.”

“And make sure the dipper’s clean,” said Yellow Hair. He was a very particular fellow and a bit sour for all his jaunty ways. “What you have this fire blazing away for, Gran’pa?”

“It be on accounta my health, Mistuh Saint. I gits de chills mighty easy.”

Yellow Hair said, “It’s just like these colored folks come out of a machine, all of them all the time sick and all the time got funny notions.”

“I ain’t sick,” said Preacher, beaming. “I’se fine! Ain’t nevuh felt no bettuh ’n whut I feels right now, nawsuh!” He fondled the arm of the rocker. “Come sits yo’self here in my nice rockah, Mistuh Jesus. See de pretty pillow? Mistuh Saint ... hims welcome to de baid.”

“Much obliged.”

“Could do with a sit-down, thanks.”

Curly Head was the older and more handsome: head finely set, eyes a kind deep blue, face full and strong and wearing a rather earnest expression. The beard lent a touch of real magnificence. He spread his legs wide and swung one over the rocker’s arm. Yellow Hair, sharper featured and paler complexioned, collapsed on the bed and scowled at this and that. The fire made a drowsy sound; the lamp sputtered softly.

“Spec I best git my belongin’s?” said Preacher, his voice quite wan.

When no answer was forthcoming he spread his quilt in a far corner, and silently, a little secretively, began gathering Evelina’s picture, his pipe, a green bottle that once had held his anniversary scuppernong wine and now contained seven good-luck pink pebbles and a net of dust and spider threads, an empty box of Paradise candy and other objects, equally precious, which he piled on the quilt. Then he rummaged through a cedar chest, smelling of years, and found a shining squirrel-skin cap and pulled it on. It was good and warm; the journey might prove very cold.

While he did this Curly Head methodically picked his teeth with a hen quill he had borrowed from a jar and watched the old man’s proceedings with a puzzled frown. Yellow Hair was whistling again; the tune he whistled was completely flat.

After Preacher had been about his business for a great while, Curly Head cleared his throat and said, “Hope you haven’t forgot that drink of water, Gran’pa. Surely would appreciate it.”

Preacher hobbled to the well bucket hid among the stove’s litter. “Seems lak I can’t remembuh nothin’, Mistuh Jesus. Seems lak I leaves my haid outside when I come in.” He had two gourds and filled them to the brim. When Curly Head finished, he wiped his mouth and said, “Fine and dandy,” and began to rock, letting his boots drag the hearth with a sleepy rhythm.

Preacher’s hands trembled as he tied his quilt, and it required five tries. Then he perched himself on an upended log between the two men, his small legs barely scraping the floor. The torn lips of the golden girl holding the bottle of NE-HI smiled down and the firelight flared an appealing mural on the walls.

Through the open windows could be heard crocheting insects in the weeds and sundry night cadences, familiar in all Preacher's lifetime. Oh, how beautiful his cabin seemed, how wonderful what he had grown to despise. He had been so wrong! What a doggone fool! He could never leave, now or ever. But there, before him, were four feet wearing four boots and the door well behind them.

"Mistuh Jesus," he said, careful of his tone, "I'se been turnin' de whole mattah ovah an' I'se come to conclude I don't wants to go wid y' all."

Curly Head and Yellow Hair exchanged strange glances and Yellow Hair, rising from the bed, hunched himself above Preacher and said, "What's the matter, Gran'pa? You got a fever?"

Mortally ashamed, Preacher said, "Please, suh, beggin' pardon ... I don't wants to go nowhere."

"Look here, Gran'pa, talk sense," said Curly Head kindly. "If you're sick we'll be glad to get a doctor from town."

"Ain't no use," said Preacher. "If de time's up, de time's up.... But I'd be tickled iffen y'all 'ud leave me be."

"All we want to do is help," said Yellow Hair.

"Sure is," said Curly Head and squirted a fat spit into the fire. "You're being purentee cussed, that's what I say. It's not everybody we'd take so much pains to do them a favor, not by a long shot."

"Thank ya all de same, Mistuh Jesus. I knows I done put y'all to a lota extry trouble."

“Come on now, Gran’pa,” said Yellow Hair, his voice dropping several notches, “what’s wrong? You in trouble with some gal.”

Curly Head said, “Now don’t joke with Gran’pa. He’s just been sitting in the sun too long, that’s all. Else I never saw a case like it.”

“Me either,” said Yellow Hair. “But you never can tell about these old coons; liable to go off the deep end before you can bat your eyes.”

Preacher sank lower and lower till he was almost curved double and his chin had begun twitching.

“First he runs off like he’d seen the devil himself,” said Yellow Hair, “and now he acts like I don’t know what.”

“Dat ain’t so,” cried Preacher, his eyes alarmingly wide. “I recognize y’all from de Good Book. An’ I’s a good man. I’s as good a man as evah lived ... ain’t nevah done wrong to nobody....”

“Ahhh,” hummed Yellow Hair, “I give up! Gran’pa ... you ain’t worth trifling with.”

“That’s a fact,” said Curly Head.

Preacher bowed his head and brushed a squirrel tail away from his cheek. “I knows,” he said. “Yassuh, I does. I’s been a pow’ful big fool and dats de Gospel. But if you leaves me stay put, I’ll yank out all dem weeds in de yard and de field and git back to farmin’ an’ whup dat Anna-Jo ’til she come home an’ care fo’ her Pappy lak she ought.”

Curly Head pulled at his beard and snapped his suspenders. His eyes, very blank and blue, imprisoned Preacher’s face exactly. At length he said, “Can’t seem to figure it out.”

“That’s mighty easy,” said Yellow Hair. “He’s got the devil rattling around inside him.”

“I’se an upstandin’ Baptist,” Preacher reminded, “membuh of de Cypress City Mornin’ Star. An’ I ain’t but seventy yars old.”

“Now, Gran’pa,” said Yellow Hair. “You’re a hundred if you’re a day. Oughtn’t to tell whoppers like that. It all goes down in that big black book upstairs, remember.”

“Miserable sinnuh,” said Preacher; “ain’t I de most miserablest sinnuh?”

“Well,” said Curly Head, “I don’t know.” Then he smiled and stood up and yawned. “Tell you what,” he said, “I speculates I’m hungry enough to eat toadstools. Come on, Jesse, we better get home before the women throw our supper to the hogs.”

Yellow Hair said, “Christamighty, I don’t know whether I can take a step or not; that blister’s on fire,” and to Preacher, “Guess we’ll have to leave you in your misery too, Gran’pa.”

And Preacher grinned so that his four upper teeth and three lower (including the gold cap from Evelina, Christmas 1922) showed. His eyes blinked furiously. Like a wizened and rather peculiar child he fairly danced to the door and insisted upon kissing the men’s hands as they trudged past.

Curly Head bounced down the steps and back and handed Preacher his Bible and cane while Yellow Hair waited in the yard where evening had drawn pale curtains.

“Hang onto these now, Gran’pa,” said Curly Head, “and don’t let us catch you over in the piney woods anymore. An old fellow like you can get into all kinds of trouble. You be good now.”

“Hee hee hee,” giggled Preacher, “I sure ’nuf will an’ thank ya, Mistuh Jesus, an’ you too, Mistuh Saint ... thank ya. Even if ain’t nobody gonna believes me iffen I tells ’em.”

They shouldered their rifles and lifted the cateymount. “Best of luck,” said Curly Head; “we’ll be back some other time, for a drink of water, maybe.”

“Long life and a merry one, you old goat,” said Yellow Hair as they moved across the yard towards the road.

Preacher, watching from the porch, suddenly remembered and he called, “Mistuh Jesus ... Mistuh Jesus! If you kin see yo’ way clear to do me one mo’ favuh, I’d ’preciate it if you evah gits de time iffen you’d find my ol’ woman ... name’s Evelina ... an’ say hello from Preacher an’ tells her what a good happy man I is.”

“First thing in the morning, Gran’pa,” said Curly Head, and Yellow Hair burst out laughing.

And their shadows turned up the road and the black-and-tan crept from a gully and trotted after them. Preacher called and waved good-bye. But they were laughing too hard to hear and their laughter drifted back on the wind long after they passed over the ridge where fireflies embroidered small moons on the blue air.

1945

The end