

THE GRAVEDIGGERS' REDEMPTION

By Veronica Leigh

WHY WE LIKE IT: When we first started reading 'The Gravedigger's Redemption' we thought 'just a little, please', and then, as we found ourselves drawn deeper and deeper into the lives of the characters, we couldn't get enough of it. This is American heartland writing and the wine-sap of small town values, local colour and folk language runs powerfully through its veins. The story is told through shifting viewpoints and a community of voices, wonderfully realized—especially those of the Widow and Missy-- a device Faulkner famously used in As I Lay Dying. What we especially love is Leigh's use of homespun 'plain speak' which sounds like a snap but is soooo hard to write convincingly. 'You shine up like a bright new penny.' And '...he could talk the hind leg off a mule.' Her descriptive prose is an exercise in envy (ours)... I shuddered as I crossed the threshold of the church, fearing that the roof might cave in. Or that God might strike me down with a bolt of lightning because I dared to enter his House. Neither happened and I shook more hands than a crooked politician as I made my way to the Walker pew.' Five stars.

THE GRAVEDIGGER'S REDEMPTION

1931

Oren Nelson

I used my balled-up handkerchief to mop the sweat off of my forehead and I sighed.

Lordy, Lordy, how Preacher Burns can go on when he gets in a tangent. Then again, he never could hear himself speak because those lips of his was flapping wide open. Preacher Burns reddened with each passing second, reminding me of an over ripened tomato, squishy on all sides. The hot air pluming off the river and the hot air from his mouth wearied us all.

As the proprietor and funeral director of Nelson Funeral Home, I was accustomed to long services in varied degrees of weather, as well as being confined in my customary three-piece suit. But on the thermometer on the mom 'n pop store spiked past 90 degrees and it wasn't yet mid-morning. I wasn't the only one swaying on jelly legs.

He is nowhere near finished. I muttered a curse under my breath. Preacher Burns' eulogy for the Colonel had shifted into a full-blown Altar Call. Everyone was gathered to pay their proper respects for the last Union soldier alive in the valley. A man known only as the Colonel since he was mustered out of the army, his Christian name had been long forgotten. Rather than a tribute, what we got instead was a sermon. Because the Colonel was an unabashed heathen and croaked unexpectedly, Preacher Burns was determined to rescue the remainder of the lost souls from the fiery pits of hell.

The Colonel's Widow hadn't budged an inch since she stationed herself by the mouth of the grave. She peered into it, her careworn face wearing an impassive expression. Wholly devoted to her husband, she was of the generation that never betrayed their emotions. In her black mourning attire, she was sure to wilt like an aged rose, shrivel and end up by her husband's side before the day was out. *Yes siree*, I bobbed my

head in silent agreement. If Preacher Burns tarried too long, we'd all have to gather to bury Widow – nee' Mrs. – Jones tomorrow.

There's no two ways about it. Someone would have to go up and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It would be the only way to put an end to Preacher Burns' rambling. I was hard-pressed to find a heathen amongst all of the God-fearing folk though. However, there had to be a lost sheep amongst the flock.

My eyes darted to the old gnarled sycamore tree where young couples were known to carve their initials into its bark. I spied Leroy Shirely, pressed against its trunk, stealing a nip from a flask he kept tucked into his back pocket. Known in the valley as Leroy the Lush, he'd gone off to the Great War a good man and come back a drunk. Prohibition be damned, he found libations one way or another. From quarrels to stealing, to hoaxing us by riding a borrowed cow at midnight down Main Street, he was a lost sheep if ever there was one. A lost black sheep. Unable to hold down a real job, Leroy had the occasional occupation of gravedigging. Digging holes was all he was good for and it was the only reason he was in attendance today.

I approached him, breathing through my mouth rather than nose because he reeked of spirits and stale sweat. "Say Leroy..." I pinched my nostrils together and continued in a nasally whisper, "Do you want to earn a dollar extra?"

"Rather earn two more," Leroy harrumphed and jammed the flask back into his pocket.

A grizzled man, what hair he had left was dark, peppered by gray. His beard hid half of his mottled face, which was for the best. Leroy's bulbous nose was always reddish from his drinking and his sharp eyes were dark, but the color was muddled by blariness. He would never be good looking, but he could have been decent like other folks. Instead, he preferred to run around in raggedy, ill-fitting clothes and bathe once a month whether he needed it or not.

"Fine, fine." I stuck my hand in my suit pocket and fingered the crumpled bills. I had already promised him a dollar to dig the Colonel's grave, which also included the labor of filling the hole again. But he had me over a barrel. "Go up there and accept Jesus as your savior."

"Say what now?" Leroy cocked his head to the side, his tone much too boisterous for the service.

I brought my finger to my dry lips and shushed him. "Unless someone goes up there," I hissed through gritted teeth, "Preacher Burns will carry on until the cows come home, and Widow Jones will drop dead of heatstroke."

Leroy the Lush cast a glance at Widow Jones and I swear, a look of pity crossed the man's face. Even a drunkard such as he had respect for the Colonel's widow.

"Go on now, if you want two dollars more." I tugged the three dollar bills out of my pocket and waved them, to tantalize at him.

“Yeah, okay.” Leroy shrugged and leaned his shovel against the tree, he heartily pumped my hand until I wrangled it out of his meaty grasp.

I grappled for my handkerchief and wiped my hand clean.

The mourners gasped as Leroy the Lush ambled up to Preacher Burn’s side, to ask Jesus into his heart.

Nudging my spectacles back up the bridge of my slick nose, I thanked God that the service would only go on a few minutes longer and Widow Jones’s life would be spared.

#

Preacher Burns

It’s a rare phenomenon for me to be rendered speechless, but when Leroy Shirely bounded up, waving his hand, crudely shouting, “Preacher, I want to repent of my sins,” I was dumbstruck. In all of my years of ministry, I had never been able to convert a drunkard. The good Lord knows I tried, but men like Leroy Shirely prefer wallowing in their transgressions the way hogs wallow in their excrement.

The Colonel had gone through a war too, but at least he was a good man and came back a hero. How a war could twist a man like Leroy Shirely into something so foul was beyond my imagination. Especially when he had the Colonel as an example. A prince of amongst men, the Colonel was esteemed, having served his country for four long years and for participating in Sherman’s March. Much as I revered the Colonel and his

memory, he refused to come to church and died a sinner, damned for all eternity. In good conscience, I couldn't allow another soul end up in hell, and knew that I had to use the Colonel's funeral to further the gospel. A few complained of the heat, but they would be grateful to escape the fiery heat of hell if they were saved.

I preferred to reach the good souls. They were easier to deal with than a soul like Leroy's. Leroy and his kind never took religion seriously. After the cow-riding incident, I visited him in jail and asked if he'd like to find Jesus.

Leroy threw his head back and howled, "Didn't know Jesus was lost."

He wasn't laughing now. He is penitent, dropping to his knees. Head bowed, the crown of his balding dome reflected a blotchy, white gleam. Ugly as sin, he could beautify his heart, but never his homely face.

"Repeat after me," Bracing my palm on his head, I instructed and led him through the customary prayer of repentance. When we had more time and he was presentable enough for a ceremony, I would baptize him.

I felt the Holy Ghost stirring within him, filling his heart with godliness, chasing out the demons that gnashed their teeth and trembled in the presence of the Almighty. Lifting my hands in praise, I blessed the Lord's Name for saving this wretched creature. Wholly satisfied with fulfilling His pleasing and perfect Will, I ended the service in a short prayer and dismissed everyone. The believers rejoiced, for a new brother in Christ had been welcomed into the fold.

The mourners began to disperse, Owen Nelson signaled to Leroy Shirely that he too could go. But I was nowhere near through with him. I grabbed Leroy Shirely by his yellowed shirtsleeve before he left.

“Leroy, the angels in heaven are celebrating now that you are one of us.” I reminded him, shutting my Bible and pressed the Good Book to my chest.

Leroy blinked his confusion and scratched his scalp with his dirty fingernails. “Oh, right.” He cracked a saucy grin and winked. “There’s a real shindig going on up there, huh?”

When he exhaled, I smelled the foul odor of alcohol on his heavy breath. Whilst a new believer, the demon liquor still had a hold on his soul and the devil wouldn’t cease in his attempts to regain the ground he lost. Leroy’s soul was fertile soil and must be tended to diligently. He had a flask on his person, I knew it to be true. Leroy never left home without one. To let him go on like that, it would be detrimental. It’s the Christian duty of older believers in Christ to help the new believers along. If we neglect them in their crucial time, they will fall back into their sin. If we shirk our duty, it would be better to shoot the new believer in the head than to allow him to fall by the wayside.

“Hand it over, Leroy.” I held out my hand and wiggled my fingers, “C’mon now. Turn it over to Jesus.”

With an aggravated huff and a roll of his eyes, Leroy tossed me his flask. Knowing what was to come, he looked as mournful as Widow Jones did during my eulogy.

Uncorking it and pouring its contents onto the cracked ground, I consider hugging him right then and there. But since he stank to high heavens, I decided to wait until the following Sunday to show him the extent of my brotherly love. Hopefully by then he would have taken a bath.

#

Widow Jones – The Colonel's Widow

I stirred and rolling onto my back, I thinking on the events of yesterday.

Widow Jones... I was once known as Zillah and I had been known as Mrs. Jones for nigh on for six decades. But on losing my man, I was newly christened Widow Jones. Names were surely a funny thing. Take my husband – the whole valley knew him as the Colonel. He was the one who enlisted the second the South succeeded so's he could fight for the Union and he rapidly rose up in the ranks, proving his bravery during Sherman's March. He was hailed a conquering hero when he returned, despite the fact he couldn't grow more than peach fuzz on his cheeks to save his life. But I knew him back when he was simply Willie Jones, the boy who stole my hair ribbons and carried them on his person during the war, as good luck charms.

I praised the Lord when Leroy the Lush...when Leroy Shirely came forward and repented of his sins. Sure, I was happy he wouldn't go to hell. But I asked God to doubly bless him because he put an end to Preacher Burns' longwinded sermon. Preacher Burns was trying to scare the hell out of all the mourners by reminding them that the Colonel they dearly loved, had not been a believer and was now being tormented by the devil.

Fool man. The Colonel couldn't stand Preacher Burns and that was why he refused to set foot in church. On Sunday mornings, the Colonel worshipped God in the privacy of our parlor.

Leroy Shirely deserves my thanks. God alone knew how long we would have been there, the stagnant humid air dissolving us into puddles of sweat.

I rose and dressed, then filled a large tub full of water. I began heating a kettle and waited in my rocker on the porch till Leroy sauntered by. A creature of habit, he did not disappoint. Every morning, I watched him go east – on his way to find some liquor - while I read the Good Book in my chair. A pang of guilt seized me cause I never tried to befriend him before.

The short, squat fellow stopped in his tracks when I called out to him, beckoning him like a wayward child. "Leroy Shirely, you come here." I quirked my finger.

"Ma'am," Leroy doffed his cap and mounted the steps. "Sorry for your loss. The Colonel was a great man." He dropped his head and hunched his shoulders.

"Thank you kindly." I nodded, appreciating his thoughtfulness. Rocking forward in my chair, I stood and gestured for him to follow me into the house. "Come along now, I have something for you."

He trailed after me, pausing a few times. I motioned for him to continue after me, until we reached my bedroom. I went to the chifforobe in the corner, took out an old suit, and laid it before him on the bed.

Leroy gave me a blank look.

“This was my son’s.” I ran my thumb along the shoulder and sniff loudly. “My youngest boy, he never came back from the Great War.” Thirteen years had lapsed since my boy Dan had gone missing and I never gotten over it. Never would. “I was older when I had him and he nearly died at birth, so I always had a soft spot for him. Never knew precisely what happened to him. For the longest time I believed that he’d find his way back to me.”

Leroy nodded knowingly. His large dark eyes, the only beautiful thing about him, were watery. He might have been the only one who understood my pain, because he had fought in that same war. Saw the same things Dan saw, been to the same places Dan had been.

“You have his build.” I observe and nudged the suit towards him.

“Ma’am, I couldn’t.” Leroy held up his dirt encrusted hands and backed away.

“It’ll hang in the chifforobe and the moths will rot it out.” I reached out and clutched his weighty shoulder. His muscles twitched beneath my fingertips and I wondered how long it had been since somebody willingly touched him. “Listen, you’re beginning anew. You need to find a real job and you can’t do that unless you look proper.”

Filthy was a kind way to describe Leroy Shirely. The man’s leathery skin had not had a good scrubbing in years.

“But you see, I’m not...” His lips twisted and he shook his head. “Worthy.”

I sighed. Leroy didn’t have to say it, I knew what he meant. He didn’t think he was worthy to wear the Colonel’s son’s clothes. The whole valley put the Colonel on a throne and paid homage to him like some god. Little did Leroy – and the rest of the valley – know that the Colonel had come back from the War Between the States a different man. In those days, newly married, we kept to ourselves. For the first three years, he was broken. He drank, had troubles finding work, and would wake up screaming from terrible nightmares. The Colonel overcame the first two, but he never could shake off those dreams. The lives he took, the deaths of his fellow soldiers, the destruction of Georgia – it stayed with him to his dying day.

“Stuff and nonsense.” I waved Leroy off and I knew I was doing the right thing. If my boy Dan came back a broken man and I wasn’t around to help him, I’d want some other mother to take him in hand. “You were in the Great War and survived. Its high time that you, the real Leroy Shirely, come back to us.”

Leroy clamped his hand over his mouth, lest he let out a garbled sob. I sensed if he could hold it in until he made it to the kitchen, that’d be for the best. He’d preserve his manly pride, and there’s no better way to heal your soul than to have a hot bath when you’re sad.

I picked up the suit and ushered him into the kitchen. “Now, there’s a tub here waiting for you.” He stood idly while I draped the suit over one of the chairs and added the heated water to the tub. “Go on now.”

I left him and waited on the porch. The swell of his cries fills the air, but I didn't disturb him. *He will come out when he's ready.* I decided. To keep myself occupied, I folded my hands and sent up a prayer to Almighty to comfort Leroy. Now that the Colonel was gone, my days in the house were numbered and I'd have to make plans of my own. My children were coming later, to discuss my breaking up housekeeping and which child I'd move in with. I'd miss the house I spent six decades in, but I've come to realize that nothing endures but change.

An hour passed before Leroy emerged from the house and stood before me, trembling. I smiled, which inspired him to give me a grin. His skin and hair were several shades lighter and with the new suit on, he was no longer ugly. I couldn't lie and call him handsome, but he was a new man, and whether he knew it or not, he was on his way to being happy.

I edged forward in my seat and he held out his arm and let me lean on him as I got to my feet. "You shine up like a brand-new penny." I declared, patting his hairy cheek.

"Thank you, ma'am." Leroy nodded obediently. "I'll try not to let you down."

"You'll do just fine." While he was short, I was even shorter, and I rose on my tip toes and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Now, don't be a stranger. Come back and visit me."

When I pulled back, I noticed the tears welling in his eyes. "I will. Thank you, ma'am." Leroy rasped.

I watched him make his descent down the steps and quit my property.

My heart soared when he retraced his path and went west, for I knew he was not going to get a drink now, but to begin again.

#

Missy McMasters

I plopped down on the bank's steps and waited for Daddy while he did business inside. He didn't like for me to come in with him. Not because I was bad or anything, but because the bank men were nasty towards Negroes. Daddy didn't want me hearing their bad words.

Chin in hand, it wasn't long before I started to cry. Daddy had an accident a few weeks before and hurt his leg and now he couldn't work our farm like he used to. I heard Momma and Daddy talking about it the other night and they didn't know what they were gonna do. If he couldn't work in the fields, we couldn't sell our produce, and then we couldn't pay our bills. Momma was crying and she never cries so I knew it was bad.

I dragged my wrist against my cheeks to sop up the tears and sniffed loudly.

No one stopped except a short, ugly white man in a suit. He looked familiar, but I couldn't remember his name. But like the whites who stayed with the whites, we stayed with our own kind too. The only white person I knew was Miss Walker who learned me my lessons. Well, we did know the Colonel, but he was dead so he didn't count no more.

"You all right?" He studied me and looked relieved when he saw I wasn't hurt. "Here, look up." He stuck his fingers behind my earlobe and plucked out a penny.

I gasped and thanked him when he handed me my prize. “How’d you do that?” I asked.

“Magic.” He said with a flourish of his hand. “My name is Leroy.”

“I’m Missy.” I said and wondered why was being so nice to me. I still couldn’t figure out where I had seen him.

Leroy sat down on the step I was sitting on, leaving a space between us. “What are you sad about?”

“Daddy hurt himself and he can’t work.” I answered, my eyes burning and my cheeks wet again. “Momma says we could lose the farm.”

Times like these, everybody had it bad. We weren’t any different, but Daddy said we were luckier than most. We had a nice house and good land we had been able to hang onto since the Stock Market crashed. White folks tended to hate on us cause we had better than they did and they believed we ought to “*stay in our place.*” They told us so many times. It was only since Daddy’s accident that we didn’t know how we’d make ends meet. Daddy tried to hire someone, but no white man wanted to work for a Negro.

Leroy nodded. “I don’t know much about farm work, but I need a job.” When he turned his head and his forehead scrunched, I figured out who he was.

He was the fella that came to Jesus during the Colonel’s funeral. Daddy, Momma, and I weren’t welcome to join the other mourners to pay our respects. We stood off aways and put flowers on his grave after the others left. My Daddy knew the Colonel for

years and used to work for the Colonel until Daddy got land of his own. The Colonel was always good to us and gave me peppermints whenever he saw me. He's the one who paid for Miss Walker to come learn me, because I wasn't allowed to go to the public school. He wanted me to have schooling too.

I brought up a finger the way Momma did when she had an idea. "Ain't you the one who digs holes for dead people?"

"Yeah." Again, Leroy nodded and added, "I need to do something else."

Right then, Daddy hobbled out of the bank on his crutches and loomed behind, his large shadow fell on us.

Leroy scurried off the steps and onto the sidewalk.

Daddy screwed his face into a snarl. He couldn't barely walk, but he was a big man, twice the size as Leroy, and his muscles bulged when he moved. "Can I help you?" He asked, his voice deeper than usual.

I scrambled up and latched onto Daddy's hand, tugging on it. "Daddy, he needs work." Though it wasn't polite to point, I thrust my finger at Leroy.

Leroy gulped and crossed his arms over his belly.

"That a fact? Heard talk about you." Daddy jutted his chin at Leroy and it made me wonder what other stories there were about Leroy. Maybe Daddy heard that Leroy knew all sorts of magic tricks. "You came to Jesus at the Colonel's funeral. You're the gravedigger." My Daddy squinted, his coal black eyes burning a hole through Leroy.

“Well, I don’t begrudge you none, but I have my wife and little girl to think of. Won’t have someone causin’ trouble.”

My mouth swung open wide. I was surprised. Daddy never talked to white folks like that, else he’d get into a whole heap of trouble. I didn’t know what Leroy could have done that was so bad. He came to Jesus, he was nice to Negroes, and he showed me a magic trick, and gave me a penny to stop me from crying.

“I understand.” Leroy nodded to us and turned on his heel to walk off. “Thank you anyway.”

Daddy’s fingers tightened around mine. “That it?” He called out to Leroy before Leroy could get two paces away. “Mr. Shirely, if you give up that easy, you’ll never find a job. Not in these parts.” Daddy let go of my hand and hopped down the stairs, and wagging his finger at Leroy, he warned, “You have to swear to me that there’ll be no drinking on my property and you won’t come in soused. And my cows are not to be ridden.”

He rode the cow! I let out a high-pitch squeal and slapped my hand over my mouth when Daddy glared at me. Momma didn’t want me hearing about the cow rider, but the whole valley talked of it when a cow was ridden down Main Street at midnight.

“I will swear on a stack of Bibles, you have my word.” Leroy vowed, holding up his right hand.

“Be at our place tomorrow morning, crack of dawn.” Daddy ordered, sounding more like himself. He motioned me over and I jumped down the steps and went to his side.

“Thank you, sir.” Leroy shook Daddy’s hand, which was something else that never happened. White folks didn’t like to touch Negroes.

But it made me think, that if Leroy had done things that folks didn’t like, then maybe that was why he was being nice to us. He was an outsider too.

“Everybody deserves a second chance.” Daddy stated.

The knot in Leroy’s neck got bigger when he swallowed and I held out the penny he gave me in my palm, thinking it might keep him from crying too.

“Will you show me more magic tricks?” I asked.

“Yeah, if you’d like.” Leroy grinned and shook his head. “Go ahead and keep it.”

Daddy and me watched as Leroy turned and moseyed off, whistling a tune.

I couldn’t wait for Leroy to come work for us, that way he could tell me how he rode the cow.

#

Elsie Walker

Missy McMasters was in a chatty mood the whole morning but finally settled down enough to tend to her schoolwork. While the Colonel was gone and the McMasters

couldn't afford to pay for my services, I continued to teach Missy McMasters on weekends. No child should suffer from lack of an education merely because others were prejudiced. A sweet girl, her thin, gangly limbs had the habit of knocking into people and things. When she spoke, she whistled through the gap where her two front teeth should be. Twin dimples make pinpricks in her cheeks.

While my pupil studied, I wandered to the window and peered outside, in time to see Leroy Shirely shuffle onto the McMasters' property. Since his come-to-Jesus moment at the Colonel's funeral, he hadn't fallen off the bandwagon or been late for his job once. Gone was Leroy the Lush - a new man took his place. One that never reeked of spirits, one that bathed regularly, and one who was always respectful and honest.

Sighing aloud, part of me hoped the old Leroy's untamed spirit was still in there somewhere. The old Leroy was the one who defended me from school bullies back when we were school chums, using his fists to give black eyes and busted lips to those who made me cry. The mousy, birdlike, four-eyed girl evolved into a mousy, birdlike, four-eyed woman, and was still poked fun of for being a spinster schoolmarm. More than once Leroy came to my defense, chasing off my tormentors who likened me to an owl. The old Leroy was the one who left bouquets of flowers on my doorstep for my birthday. I never knew for certain that he was my admirer, until Missy McMasters confessed the other day that she had witnessed him do it.

Nothing had ever been declared, though. He suffered from his demons from the Great War, and I remained dedicated to teaching my students. He always tipped his cap

to me when he passed me on the street, as though I were some great lady. Hope abounded within my heart that he might call on me. Then I understood that I would have to be the one to do the pursuing.

I excused myself and rushed out the front door, following him to the barn. “Mr. Shirely, wait!” I called out, lifting my skirts high enough to run and catch up.

“Miss Walker!” Mr. Shirely spun around and whipped off his cap respectfully.

“Mr. Shirely...” I smoothed down my mussed skirt and patted my upswept hair, flushing for setting propriety at naught. “I heard about the Altar Call and your new job. I congratulate you.”

“Thank you, Miss Walker.” Leroy ducked his head bashfully and studied the tops of his boots rather than meet my gaze.

My two front teeth sank into my lower lip. “I was wondering, would you like to sit with my mother and me at church this Sunday?” I clasped my hands together and tried to temper my enthusiasm. “We would love for you to join us.”

Leroy slowly raised his head, looking sheepish. “Miss Walker, I’m not what you think I am.”

My heart clenched tightly in my chest. Part of his troubles was that Leroy was eaten up by guilt for whatever happened during the Great War. Rather than show him an ounce of compassion, we looked the other way. I was just as guilty. I could have ignored

what the others thought and helped him. Only now did I feel brave enough to do the right thing.

“Mr. Shirely, unless you can read my thoughts, you have no idea what I’m thinking.” I drew in a lungful of breath and placed my hand on his muscular forearm. “Let me tell you. I think you’re a good man and I’ve always believed that. Even when you rode that cow down Main Street. I’ve always liked you.”

“No one’s ever going to forget that one, are they?” Leroy snickered, his chortles went all the way down to his belly and made it jiggle. It has been ages since I have seen him look so happy.

“I’m afraid not.” I shook my head as I joined in on his laughter. “So, will you join us?”

Leroy’s shoulders slumped and he reminded me of a child when he kicked a rock loose from the dirt. “Yes, Miss Walker. Thank you.”

“See you Sunday.” It dawned on me that I was still touching him and I drew back my hand, my face warming under his soft gaze.

“See you then.” Leroy promised, jamming his cap back onto his head.

He turned and sauntered towards the barn.

I headed back to the McMasters’ and noticed Missy in the window, waving at me before dashing back to her school work.

I was beaming, feeling truly happy for the first time in years.

#

Leroy Shirely

I shuddered as I crossed the threshold of the church, fearing that the roof might cave in. Or that God might strike me down with a bolt of lightning because I dared to enter His House. Neither happened and I shook more hands than a crooked politician as I made my way to the Walker pew.

Oren Nelson was the first to stop me. He winked at me as I pumped his pasty white hand. “Thanks again, Leroy.” He mumbled low enough that only my ears could hear and understand. He alone knew the truth and he wouldn’t tell a soul.

I moved onto Preacher Burns. He shook my roughened hand and hauled me into a brotherly hug. “Welcome to the family, son.” He released me and clapped me on the shoulder. Because to him I was clean inside and out, I no longer disgusted him.

Before he could talk the hind leg off a mule, Widow Jones squeezed in between us, brushing the minister aside. Widow Jones angled her cheek upward and tapped it. I pressed a gentle kiss there. Again, I thanked her for her gift and she invited me to visit her this week, which I eagerly accepted.

My heart sank a little, because it seemed after jawing with those three, that I should now be jawing with Missy McMasters. The church might welcome a sinner like me, but they’d never welcome a good family like the McMasters – Negroes - to worship amongst them. None of that seemed fair.

Wearing the suit that belonged to Widow Jones' son, I was determined not to make any sudden movements, in case I tore or soiled it. Mrs. Walker, a hawkish looking lady, primly nodded to me when I sat beside her daughter.

And Elsie...she beamed at me like I hung the moon. A thin, tall, willowy creature, she reminded me of a doe, wide eyed and innocent. I had loved her forever, but I never deserved her company before. But now, I could strive to be a better man and win her heart properly.

I never meant to take the wrong path. When America entered into the Great War, I enlisted along with my other buddies. I wanted to be a hero, like the Colonel. But the bloodshed...it changed me. It was never the dying, it was the killing. I killed men. Many men. And when I got home, I drank to forget about it and drink ruined me.

It's not every day a fellow gets a second chance at life. Truth be told, I wasn't sure that I was a Christian. I went up during the Altar Call, knelt before Preacher Burns, and I repeated the prayer solemnly. But I was drunk as a skunk, so I didn't know if that counted. Since then I hadn't touched a drop of liquor, I was clean, employed, and belting out "Bringing in the Sheaves" like a good believer. Something changed inside of me that day at the Colonel's funeral. Folks called me "sir" now. No one's ever called me "sir" before in my life. People looked me in the eye and made a beeline to shake my hand. Like I was finally worth something.

The collection plate was passed to me and I fished the two dollars out of my pocket that Oren Nelson paid me for going up during the Altar Call. Tossing them in, I

decided it's better the church has them. Whether I was Christian or not, I couldn't make money off of Jesus. After all, I wasn't Preacher Burns or one of those faith healers.

Casting a bashful smile at Elsie, I reached for her hand and our fingers laced together. I was no longer a gravedigger or "Leroy the Lush" who rides cows down Main Street at midnight.

I was simply a man who wanted to live a good life.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My Dad never wrote much, with the exception of an exaggerated, hilarious story about his sweet little mother. He had a warped sense of humor. However, my Dad was an entertaining storyteller and one of the stories he used to tell was of someone he knew who worked for a funeral home. During one of the funerals, a long-winded minister was giving a "Come to Jesus" sermon that lasted for a couple hours and the funeral director approached this employee, offering to pay the employee if they'd go up and receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The funeral director wanted to move things along, and probably prepare for another funeral.*

I don't know what the employee did, but I thought the incident would make a comical story. Being raised in Indiana and believing my home state needed more literary representation, and raised on stories of the Great Depression, as well as influenced by Harper Lee, Kathryn Stockett, and Margaret Mitchell – I wrote "The Gravedigger's Redemption."

BIO: *Veronica Leigh has been writing ever since she was young, but didn't take the craft seriously until her aunt invited her to join a writers workshop she was leading...a writers workshop for senior citizens. Veronica has been published in a number of anthologies and magazines. She makes her home in Indiana with her family and furbabies.*

She is a regular contributor to the blog Femnista, I had an essay published on GoTravel.com, and I have guest blogged on The Artist Unleashed. My fictional stories have been published in Page & Spine, Dark Moon Digest, Alban Lake Publishing, and I will be eventually published in the Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine.