

Fiery Passions

by Kevin Myrick

Isaac Beauregard Lyons woke with a start as he heard the slamming of a pickup truck door then a curse from someone down on his front lawn.

“Damn it Mike, be quiet!” someone shouted.

Lyons - the third of his name and a preacher to boot like his father before him - pulled the sheets and cover from his bed and turned his feet to the ground, sliding his feet into the slippers sitting by the bed on the floor. He rose unsteadily on old, creaking bones and shuffled over to the closet door where his robe hung limply from a hook in the door. Something glinted in the mirror as he slid his arms through old fraying cotton sleeves and he turned and shuffled over to the window facing the front yard.

Out of the window Lyons saw a tall wooden cross set a fire, blazing in glory below and an assembly of men looking up at it with shotguns and rifles held limply in their hands. Lyons felt a fury boiling inside his stomach, and despite his creaking bones he shuffled out into the hallway and down into the living room. He grabbed the old double barreled shotgun down from above the mantle where it sat and loaded two shells of birdshot into the chambers, closing and cocking the side-by-side his father used to hunt when he was a boy.

The gun felt heavy in unsteady arms. Lyons told himself he was too old to be involved in such foolishness. He told himself this before he started riding around the back country roads in his old Ford pickup truck registering black voters last summer after his wife died of cancer. Margaret told him the day before she died that it was her wish to help heal the sickness in the nation, and that it was never too late to do something. Lyons told himself when he started that

even though the sickness would never be cured simply by helping to register people to vote, he'd do it all the same. A deathbed request was not something Lyons could ignore.

His father, some 60 years before, while he could still speak from a couch inside the town doctor's parlor during the Great Flood of 1909, made him promise to take up his flock at the Baptist Church. Lyons did what his father asked him, not because he himself was a good Christian man. He did it because it was a promise he must keep, one made on the deathbed of his namesake. Honor demanded such things.

With the same goodness and empathy he took up studies in the law, Lyons took up preaching from the pulpit. He preached not the hellfire and brimstone he ingested every Sunday morning from his father's sermons from the same pulpit, but the goodness of Jesus and during the harder years of the Depression, Christian charity.

Yet there was a coldness in him when it came to this profession. His coldness came not in his heart, for he was always a good man and did right by all those who sought comfort in the spirit of the Lord. It came in his soul, for even though he preached the gospel on Sunday as his father had before him, he never felt the presence of God inside him. His father years before preached all the Jesus out of him, making Lyons fear the holy figure in his childhood dreams. Those manifestations turned him away from religion and toward logic as he studied the law in two different Yankee colleges, having been kicked out of the first for allegedly being a blaspheme.

All these years he faked it, and no one ever knew. Now the stakes were raised when he started practicing what he preached from the pulpit just years before, asking the good folks at his church to put aside their differences with Allendale's black folk and come together as one people to make the town a better place.

"I tell you now, my good Christian friends," he said, as if he were addressing the jury he was meant to face instead of his flock. "I don't believe there is any difference between the black man who lives on the farm not two miles from my own and myself. His house is the same size as mine, he's had as my children as I."

"We all bleed the same blood and breathe the same air, and in the eyes of God almighty above we are all his children no matter our sins." On that fateful Sunday he held his hands outstretched over the slack-jawed parishioners facing him sitting stunned in the pews, not expecting this at all. Many of his flock never returned after that day's sermon. It wasn't because he advocated racial equality, it was what he said next.

"Some of you may not be able to change your hateful ways in your heart, may still believe that a man who has different colored skin as you will never be equal to yourself," Lyons said, almost shouting so that all could hear what he said. "And you will think to yourself that the old preacher - and I'm old, some 77 years now of Sundays in this church except while I studied law up north - has gone nutty. That he has dementia, and ain't right in the head no more. I tell you now that I'm of sound mind and body, just as my father was until he suffered a stroke during the Great Flood of '09 and died three days later on Doctor Jones' couch in his front parlor. I'm here to tell you this too: that y'all might make it to the gates of Saint Peter with that sickness in your heart. But Saint Peter is gonna see right through the mask you keep over your face, right through to the hate. He's gonna know how you truly feel, and you just might not get into heaven. Remember that before you decide whether a black man is somehow any different than you are. Because all that hate you have is for something you don't really understand.

It's because you have pride, and pride is one of the worst sins of all," Lyons finished. "God will forgive your sins - even heal the hatred in your heart - so long as you let him. But if you stand tall against every

indication that you are wrong simply based on pride, then you will never feel the love of Jesus in your heart."

A quarter of the congregation left after that day. The rest simply went about their lives without much thought for what Lyons had to say anymore than they did any other Sunday out of the year, except on Christmas and Easter.

And when Margaret died he did ever more to pursue equality for men, something he might have done anyhow had he thought about anything past what he was going to say to his congregation come Sunday morning, since the beliefs they held weren't the same as his own.

His old pickup drove from home to home, going from "kin to kaint" with a vigor townsfolk in Allendale never saw from this Lyons. He used his silver tongue to convince old men and women to hop in the truck with him and drive down to the county courthouse, to face down a slick-haired election official with a nasty streak named Dick Mableton. Along the way he ran into nasty men like the ones now out in the yard but had always ignored them, ones just the same as he was about to face down when he gingerly opened the front door and pushed the screen open with the shotgun, now leveled at the man standing in the bed of a rusting Chevy pickup which looked like it had been driven during the days of Moses wandering in the desert.

Lyons shouted at the men to get off his yard, and they all turned to see the old preacher standing in his robe and pajamas on the front porch holding a shotgun.

"Are you deaf? I said get your asses off my front lawn and go on your way!"

"Well, preacher man," the bearded fellow said from where he stood in the bed of the truck, his shotgun resting on the roof. "Ain't you a sight?"

The bearded man paused, then Lyons saw the bearded man's lips form a smirk.

"And is that any way to greet white knights of the Klu Klux Klan?"

"The only way to treat swine like you is to drive them out of the sty and send them on to the butcher's house," Lyons said, the shotgun still trained on the bearded klansman.

"Go back inside, old man," one of the men in the yard said. Lyons couldn't see the face behind the voice in the firelight from the cross, still flaming bright orange in the darkness. "Go back inside now!"

Lyons didn't move an inch, willing to stand his ground on his own property if nothing else. Deathbed promises were important to him, and he stood by each one made even if it meant his own life in the process. Lyons remembered a line now from the sacred "Battle Hymn of the Republic" that seemed appropriate for the moment: "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." He realized now he was willing to die to make men free, and if he hadn't been able to contribute anything to the law in making men free he'd do it with a double load of birdshot if necessary. He'd take a double load from these devils too if necessary.

"Get out of my yard!" Lyons yelled, then as if deciding it would show he meant business he turned the shotgun skyward and tucked it into his shoulder and let loose with both barrels into the air. The group of klansmen just stood there, and now the others were smiling. He'd lost the battle without even taking anyone with him. So like any enemy now realizing that they'd won before the war was yet over, they taunted their foe.

"Hey preacher, I think ya missed," the bearded man started. "You should've saved yer shells fer one of us. You ain't gonna hit Saint Peta' from all the way down here."

Then another of the men took up the taunting.

"Hey preacher, why you love them darkies so much? Kaint you get a white woman afta big ol' Maggie died on ya?"

The men laughed. Then another man spat out "I bet he likes those black bucks more than he likes them does."

"Think he works them black poles do ya? Maybe so. He's always usin' them big words after all," another replied and said in a nasty jest.

"Tell us, you like to ride the long black train down the Hershey Highway to Brown Town, don't ya Preacher?" the man standing in the back of the truck said, the shotgun now leveled on the cab's roof and tilted directly in line with Lyons' chest.

Lyons, despite the klansmen surrounding him, felt his face flush red in anger. No man, not even a good pastor like himself, should have to tolerate such insults without recourse of some kind. He started hobbling down the steps of his porch toward the truck when the klansman in the truck told him to "stop right there."

"Why does it matter where I stand when you shoot me?" Lyons spat back at him, and the bearded klansman smiled as the others chuckled. Then he pulled the trigger, and the shotgun bucked wilding and sprayed the buckshot over Lyons' head. The old man had dropped to the ground with the shot - maybe just in time - and he had trouble getting himself back to his feet.

"Ain't no respect for elders in these troubling times," Lyons said, finally back on his feet. "I tells ya all straight, these are hard times when a group of supposedly God fearing men come a-shootin' at an ol' preacher man in the middle of the night. Ain't there any shame in y'all's heart? Ain't there any at all?"

Lyons was known to take up to preaching even in common situations, but no one ever imagined him striking up a sermon during the middle of what amounted to a one-sided shootout. The gathered klansmen - nine in all - frowned at each other, except for the man standing in the bed of the pickup truck. He smile grew wider as Lyons went on, calling them all sorts of names and curses.

"Y'all are nothin' but devils sir, devils! Roamin' the countryside and causin' good folk who want nothin' more than peace but bringin' nothin' more than trouble in yer wake. Y'all are satan's helpers!"

"Oh, ain't we?" the bearded klansman said.

Then the bearded klansman pulled the trigger and sent pellets of double ought buckshot right into Lyons' chest, sending the creaky old preacher flying backward with such force he flew through the screen door of the porch and back into his house. Lyons was dead before he hit the dark stained wooden floors.

"Damn it Jeff!" one of the men from the yard shouted at the bearded klansman now jumping down from the pickup and onto the front lawn. "What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

"Well, I was thinkin' we'd take him back to town, string him up from a light pole and put a sign round his neck sayin' 'Nigger Lover' on it? How's that sound boys?"

Jeff Mableton, brother to the county's election official, smiled as he grabbed the feeble body of Isaac Beauregard Lyons III, who indeed

gave his life so that men could be free. But neither Lyons, who was now dead and didn't know anything, or the Mableton boys, knew the preacher's death would indeed make men free.

