

## A PIECE OF LAND.

— BY —

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But he never thought of Rose Gaither without a scene of deepest humiliation. He had loved Rose when they were school children together, but his passion had now reached such proportions that he resented the fact that his school-boy love had been so careless and shallow a feeling. Now that circumstances had placed her beyond his reach, he regretted that his youthful love experience was not worthier of the place it held in his remembrance. He could forget that Rose Gaither was the daughter of the man to whom he attributed his troubles, but he could never forget that he himself was the son of a man whose weakness had found him out at an age when manhood ought to have made him strong.

Still, Jack Carew made the most of a bad situation. He had the courage and endurance and the hopefulness of youth. He faced his perplexities with at least the appearances of good-humour; and if he had his moments of despair, when the skeleton in the jug in the closet paraded in public, Pinetucky never suspected it. The truth is, while Pinetucky was sympathetic and neighbourly, it was not inclined to make a great fuss over those who took a dram too much now and then. Intemperance was an evil, to be sure; but even intemperance had its humorous side in those days, and Pinetucky was apt to look at the humorous side.

One fine morning, however, Pinetucky awoke to the fact that it was the centre and scene of a decided sensation. Rumour pulled on her bonnet and boots, and went gadding about like mad. Pinetucky was astonished, then perplexed, then distressed, and finally indignant, as became a conservative and moral community. A little after sunrise, Bradley Gaither had galloped up to Squire Inchly's door with the information that two bales of cotton had been stolen from his place the night before.

The facts, as set forth by Bradley Gaither, were that he had twelve bales of cotton ready for market. The twelve bales had been loaded upon three wagons, and the wagons were to start for Augusta at daybreak. At the last moment, when everything was ready, the teams harnessed, and the drivers in their seats, it was discovered that two bales of the cotton were missing. Fortunately, it had rained during the night, and Bradley Gaither had waited until it was light enough to make an investigation. He found that a wagon had been driven to his packing-screw. He saw, moreover, that but one wagon had passed along the road after the rain, and it was an easy matter to follow the traces.

The fact of the theft had surprised Squire Inchly, but the details created consternation in his mind. The tracks of the wagon led to the Carew place! Squire Inchly was prompt with a rebuke.

"Why, you've woke up wi' a joke in your mouth, Mr. Gaither. Now that you've spit it out, less start fresh. A spiteful joke before breakfast 'll make your flesh crawl arter supper, Mr. Gaither."

Squire Inchly spoke seriously, as became a magistrate. Bradley Gaither's thin lips grew thinner as he smiled.

"I'm as serious as the thieves that stole my cotton, Squire Inchly," said Bradley Gaither.

"Two whole bales of cotton in these days is a heavy loss," said the Squire, reflectively. "I hope you'll ketch the inconsiderate parties to the larceny."

"If you will go with me, Squire, we'll call by for Brother Gossett and Colonel Hightower, and if I'm not mistaken we'll find the cotton not far from here."

"Well, sir," said the Squire, indignantly, "you wont find it on the Carew place. I'll go wi' you and welcome. We don't need no search warrant."

The long and the short of it was that the cotton was found concealed in Jack Carew's rickety barn under a pile of fodder. Of those who joined Bradley Gaither in the search, not one believed that it would be found on the Carew place; and some of them had even gone so far as to suggest to Mr. Gaither that his suspicions had been fathered by his prejudices; but that injured individual merely smiled his cold little smile, and declared that there could be no harm in following the wagon tracks. This was reasonable enough; and the result was that not only was the cotton found, but the wagon standing under the shelter, and two mules at the trough in the lot showed signs of having been used.

These things so shocked those who had gone with Bradley Gaither that they had little to say. They stood confounded. They could not successfully dispute the evidence of their eyes.

They were simple-minded men, and therefore sympathetic. Each one felt ashamed. They did not look into each other's eyes and give utterance to expressions of astonishment. They said nothing; but each one, with the exception of Bradley Gaither, fell into a state of mental confusion and awe.

When Bradley Gaither, with an air of triumph, asked them if they were satisfied, they said nothing, but turned and walked away one after the other.

They turned and walked away, and went to their homes; and somehow after that, though the sun shone as brightly and the birds fluttered and sang as joyously, a silence fell upon Pinetucky—a silence full of austerity. The men talked in subdued tones when they met, as though they expected justice to discharge one of her thunderbolts at their feet; and the women went about their duties with a degree of nervousness that was aptly described by Miss Jane Inchly long afterwards, when reciting the experiences of that most memorable day in the history of Pinetucky. "I let a sifter drop out'n my hand," said she, "and I declare to gracious if it didn't sound like a cannon had went off."

In all that neighborhood the Carews, father and son, had but one accuser, and not one apologist. Pinetucky existed in a primitive period, as we are in the habit of believing now, and its people were simple-minded people. In this age of progress and culture, morality and justice are arrayed in many refinements of speech and thought. They have been readjusted, so to speak, by science; but in Pinetucky in the forties, morality and justice were as robust and as severe as they are in the Bible.

It was not until after the machinery of justice had been set in motion that Pinetucky allowed itself to comment on the case; but the comment was justified by the peculiar conduct of the Carews. When they were confronted with the facts—the cotton concealed in the barn and the warrant in the hands of the sheriff—old Billy Carew fell to trembling as though he had the palsy. Jack had turned pale as death, and had made a movement toward Bradley Gaither as though to offer violence; but when he saw his father shaking so, the color returned to his face, and he exclaimed quickly—

"The warrant is for me alone, Mr. Sheriff. Pay no attention to father. He is old, and his mind is weak."

"He's a liar!" the old man screamed, when he found his voice. "He's a miserable liar! He never stole that cotton. Don't tetch him! don't you dast to tetch him! He'll lie to you, but he won't steal your cotton! Put my name in that warrant. Bradley Gaither stole my money and land; I reckon I've got the rights to steal his cotton."

"He's drunk again," said Jack. "We'll carry him in the house, and then I'll be ready to go with you."

But the old man was not carried to the house without scene. He raved, and screamed, and swore, and finally fell to the ground in a fit of impotent rage, protesting to the last that Jack was a liar. When those who were present had been worked up to the highest pitch of excitement, Bradley Gaither spoke—

"Don't criminate yourself, Jack. I am willing to drop this matter." He appeared to be greatly agitated.

"Drop what matter?" exclaimed young Carew in a passion. "I have a matter with you sir, that won't be dropped."

"Go your ways, then," said Bradley Gaither; "I've done my duty." With that he mounted his horse, and Jack Carew was left in the hands of the sheriff.

The machinery of the law was not as difficult to set in motion in those days as it is now. There was no delay. Pinetucky was greatly interested in the trial, and during the two days of its continuance delegations of Pinetuckians were present as spectators. Some of these were summoned to testify to the good character of young Carew, and this they did with simplicity that was impressive; but neither their testimony nor the efforts of the distinguished counsel for the defence, Colonel Peyton Poindexter, had any effect. The facts and the tacit admissions of Jack were against him. Colonel Poindexter's closing speech was long remembered, and indeed is alluded to even now, as the most eloquent and impressive ever delivered in the courthouse in Rockville; but it failed to convince the jury. A verdict in accordance with the facts and testimony was brought in, and Jack Carew was sentenced to serve a term in the penitentiary at Milledgeville.

The first to bring this information to Pinetucky was Bradley Gaither himself. He stopped at Squire Inchly's for his daughter, and went in.

"What's the news?" asked Miss Jane.

"Bad, very bad news," said Bradley Gaither.

"Jack ain't hung, I reckon," said Miss Jane. "My mind tells me, day and night, that the poor boy is innocent as the child that's unborn."

"Innocent or guilty," said Bradley Gaither, "he has been sent to the penitentiary."

Miss Jane gave a quick glance at Rose, and was just in time to catch her as she fell from her chair.

"Ah, poor child!" cried Miss Jane, "her heart is broke!"

"Rose!—Daughter!—Darling!" exclaimed Bradley Gaither, dropping on his knees beside her. "Oh, what is this! What have I done! Speak to her, Miss Inchly! What shall I do?" He was pale as death, and his features worked convulsively.

"Do nothin', Mr. Gaither. You've done more'n you can undo a'ready. You've took and gave that poor boy over for to be persecuted, Mr. Gaither, and now the innocent suffers and the wicked goes scotch-free."

Bradley Gaither covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud.

"What have I done! What have I done!" he cried.

Miss Jane supported the girl in her strong arms with a grim display of affection, but her attitude towards Bradley Gaither was uncompromising.

"Don't alarm yourself, Mr. Gaither," she said; "this poor child'll come to, quick enough. Folks don't sling off their misery this easy!"

Rose revived after a while, but she seemed to have no desire to talk to her father. After a copious use of camphor, Miss Jane fixed Rose comfortably on the lounge, and the girl lay there and gazed at the ceiling, the picture of wide-eyed despair. Bradley Gaither paced the room like one distracted.

His sighs were heart-rending. When Miss Jane succeeded in getting him out of the room, he paced up and down the entry, moving his lips and groaning as though in great mental agony. Failing to understand what emotions he was at the mercy of, Miss Jane failed to sympathise with him. To her mind his display of grief bore no sort of proportion to the cause, and she had a woman's contempt for any manifestation of weakness in man, even the weakness of grief.

"I'll pray to the Lord to forgive me!" he cried out piteously.

"That's right," continued Miss Jane, in her decisive way, "But if the grace of pra'r was in the hinges of the knee, I know a heap of folks that'd be easy in the mind."

Every word she spoke cut like a knife, but not until long after did Miss Inchly realise the fact. When she did realise it it is to be feared she hugged the remembrance of it to her bosom with a sort of grim thankfulness that Providence had so happily fashioned her words and directed her tongue.

As time passed on, the Pinetuckians became aware that a great change had come over both Bradley Gaither and his daughter. The father grew old before his time, and fell into a decline, as his neighbours expressed it. The daughter grew more beautiful, but it was beauty of a kind that belonged to devoutness; so that in contemplating it the minds of men were led in the direction of mercy and charity and all manner of good deeds.

One night, a year or more after the trial and sentence of Jack Carew, a negro on horseback rode to Squire Inchly's door, and said that his master, Bradley Gaither desired the Squire to come to him at once. The worthy magistrate was prompt to obey the summons; and when he arrived at the Gaither place, he found that many of the other neighbors had also been summoned. Bradley Gaither lay upon his bed, surrounded by these, and it was plain to see that his sands of life had about run out. He presented a spectacle of dissolution calculated to arouse the sympathies of those who stood around his bed.

When Squire Inchly had arrived, Bradley Gaither lay a little while with his eyes closed as in a dream. Then he motioned to his daughter, who drew from beneath his pillow a few sheets of letter-paper stained and blotted with ink. This she handed to the Squire.

"Read it aloud," said Bradley Gaither. The minister, with some degree of embarrassment, adjusted his spectacles and read:

"With this paper will be found my last will and testament. I am unhappy, but I should be less miserable if I knew I could put such meaning in these lines as no man could misunderstand. I have sinned against an innocent man, I have sinned against my dear daughter, I have sinned against myself, I have sinned against God. I have been guilty of a great wrong, and though I cannot forgive myself, yet I hope to be forgiven. Jack Carew, who is now in prison, is an innocent man. I coveted his land. In my worldly-mindedness I set my heart upon his possessions. I offered him double their value. I thought he treated me with contempt, and then I hit upon a plan to drive him out. I carried the cotton to his barn and hid it. He knew no more about it than any honest man. But, as God is my judge, I did not foresee the end. I thought he would compromise and sell the land and go away. At the last the law took the matter out of my hands. John Carew believes that he is suffering punishment in place of his father; but William Carew is as honest as his son, and no man could be honestier than that. I, Bradley Gaither, being in my right mind and of sound memory, do hereby charge