

A PIECE OF LAND.

— BY —

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

The history of Pinetucky District in Putnam County is preserved in tradition only, but its records are not less savory on that account. The settlement has dispersed and disappeared, and the site of it is owned and occupied by a busy little man, who wears eye-glasses and a bob-tailed coat, and who is breeding Jersey cattle and experimenting with ensilage. It is well for this little man's peace of mind that the dispersion was an accomplished fact before he made his appearance. The Jersey cattle would have been winked at, and the silo regarded as an object of curiosity; but the eye-glasses and the bob-tailed coat would not have been tolerated. But if Pinetucky had its peculiarities, it also had its advantages. It was pleased with its situation and surroundings, and was not puzzled, as a great many people have since been, as to the origin of its name. In brief, Pinetucky was satisfied with itself. It was a sparsely settled neighborhood, to be sure, but the people were sociable and comparatively comfortable. So far as petty litigation was concerned, Squire Ichabod Inchly, the wheel-wright, was prepared to hold justice court in the open air in front of his shop when the weather was fine, and in any convenient place when the weather was foul. "Gentlemen," he would say, when a case came before him, "I'd a heap ruther shoe a horse or shrink a tire; yit if you will have the law, I'll try and temper it wif justice." This was the genuine Pinetuck spirit, and all true Pinetuckians tried to live up to it. When occasion warranted, they followed the example of larger communities, and gossiped about each other; but rural gossip is oftener harmless than not; besides, it is a question whether gossip does not serve a definite moral purpose. If our actions are to be taken note of by people whose good opinion is worth striving for, the fact serves as a motive and a cue for orderly behavior.

Yet it should be said that the man least respected by the Pinetuckians was the man least gossiped about. This was Bradley Gaither, the richest man in the neighborhood. With few exceptions, all the Pinetuckians owned land and negroes; but Bradley Gaither owned more land and more negroes than the most of them put together. No man, to all appearances led a more correct life than Bradley Gaither. He was first at church, and the last to leave; he even affected a sort of personal interest in politics; but the knack of addressing himself to the respect and esteem of his neighbors he lacked altogether. He was not parrimonious, but, as Squire Inchly expressed it, "narrer-minded in money matters." He had the air of a man who is satisfied with himself rather than with the world, and the continual exhibition of this species of selfishness is apt to irritate the most simple-minded spectator. Lacking the sense of humor necessary to give him a knowledge of his own relations to his neighbors, he lived under the impression that he was not only one of the most generous of men, but the most popular. He insisted upon his rights. If people made bad bargains when they traded with him—and he allowed them to make no other kind,—they must stand or fall by them. Where his lands joined those of his neighbours, there was always "a lane for the rabbits," as the saying is. He would join fences with none of them. Indeed, he was a surly neighbour, though he did not even suspect the fact.

His had one weakness,—a greed for land. If he drove hard bargains, it was for the purpose of adding to his landed possessions. He overworked

and unfed his negroes in order that he might buy more land. Day and night he toiled, and planned, and pinched himself and the people round him to gratify his land-hunger.

Bradley Gaither had one redeeming feature,—his daughter Rose. For the sake of this daughter Pinetucky was willing to forgive him a great many things. To say that Rose Gaither was charming or lovely, and leave the matter there, would ill become even the casual historian of Pinetucky. She was lovely, but her loveliness was of the rare kind that shows itself in strength of character as well as in beauty of form and features. In the appreciative eye of the Pinetuckians she seemed to invest womanhood with a new nobility. She possessed dignity without vanity, and her candour was tempered by a rare sweetness that won all hearts. She carried with her that mysterious flavour of romance that belongs to the perfection of youth and beauty; and there are old men in Rockville to-day, sitting in the sunshine on the street corners and dreaming of the past, whose eyes will kindle with enthusiasm at mention of Rose Gaither's name.

But in 1840 Bradley Gaither's beautiful daughter was not by any means the only representative of womanhood in Pinetucky. There was Miss Jane Inchly, to go no further. Miss Jane was Squire Inchly's maiden sister; and though she was neither fat nor fair, she was forty. Perhaps she was more than forty; but if she was fifty she was not ashamed of it. She had a keen eye and a sharp tongue, and used both with a freedom befitting her sex and her experience.

Squire Inchly's house was convenient to his shop; and just opposite lived the Carews, father and son, once the most prosperous and prominent family in the neighbourhood. It was the custom of Pinetucky to take a half-holiday on Saturdays, and on one of these occasions Squire Inchly, instead of going to his shop or to the store, sat in his porch and smoked his pipe. After a while Miss Jane brought out her sewing and sat with him. Across the way Uncle Billy Carew sat in his easy chair under the shade of a tree, and made queer gestures in the air with his hands and cane, while his son, a young man of twenty-five or thereabouts, paced moodily up and down the veranda. The birds fluttered in and out of the hedges of Cherokee rose that ran along both sides of the road, and over all the sun shone brightly.

"Billy is cuttin' up his antics ag'in," said the Squire, finally. "First the limbs give way, and then the mind. It's Providence, I reckon. We're all a-gettin' old."

"Why, you talk, Ichabod, as if Providence went around with a drink of dram in one hand and a stroke of palsy in t'other one," said Miss Jane. "It's the Old Boy that totes the dram. And don't you pester yourself on account of old Billy Carew's palsy. A man's nimble enough in the legs when he can git to the dimmy-john."

"Well, I'm sorry for Jack, Sister Jane," exclaimed the Squire, heartily. "I am, from the bottom of my heart. The boy is too lonesome in his ways. He needs comp'ny; he needs to be help up, Sister Jane. He does, certain and shore."

"Well, we're all near sighted; but when I'm in trouble, I'm like a hen a-layin'; I don't want nobody to stand around and watch me. Not even them that feeds me. The Lord knows what he keeps old Billy Carew here to fret poor Jack for, but I don't," continued Miss Jane, with a sigh. "I'm much mistaken if that old creetur hain't got years before him to drink and dribble in."

"It passes me, Sister Jane," said Squire Inchly, moving uneasily in his chair. "It passes me, certain and shore. Here was Billy, rich and healthy, Jack at college, and ever'thing a-runnin' slick and smooth, when nothin' must

do but the old creetur must take to the jug, and it's gone on and gone on, till old Bradley Gaither owns in about all the Carew plantation that's wuth ownin'. Maybe it was Billy's wife driv him to it, Sister Jane."

"I say the word!" exclaimed Miss Jane, scornfully. "I say the word! How could a little bit of a dried up 'oman drive a grown man to drink?"

"They are a heap livelier than they look to be, Sister Jane," said the Squire reassuringly. "Little as she was, I lay Billy Carew's wife had her say."

"Well," said Miss Jane, "a mouse'll squeal if you tromple on it."

Squire Inchly had a jovial appearance ordinarily; but when he found it necessary to wrestle with the moral problems that the sharp tongue of his sister presented to his mind, he was in the habit of putting on his spectacles, as if by that means to examine them more impartially. He put his spectacles on now, and with them a severe judicial frown.

"That's the trouble, Sister Jane—that's the trouble," he said after a while. "The mouse'll squeal and squeal, but where's the man that ever got use of sech squealin'?"

"Don't pester the mouse then," said Miss Jane, sententiously.

"Old Bradley Gaither," remarked the Squire, showing a disposition to wander away from a dangerous discussion—"Old Bradley Gaither ain't only got mighty nigh all the Carew plantation, but he's hot arter the balance of it. Last sale-day he took me off behind the Court-house, and, says he—

"Squire," says he, 'I'd like mighty well for to git that Carew place,' says he.

"Why, Mr. Gaither," says I, you've in-about got it all now,' says I.

"Squire Ichabod," says he, 'it's only a matter of two hundred acres or thereabouts, and it cuts right spang into my plantation,' says he.

"Well," says I, 'two hundred acres ain't much, yit arter all it's a piece of land,' says I.

"That's so," says he, 'but I want that land, and I'm willin' for to pay reasonable. I want you to buy it for me, Squire,' says he.

"Right across from where we sot," the Squire continued, taking off his spectacles, "old Billy Carew was a cuttin' up and singin' his worldly-minded songs, and Jack was a-tryin' for to get him off home."

"Mr. Gaither," says I, do you want to crowd that poor old creetur out'n the country?' says I. 'And look at Jack; you won't find a better favoured youngster,' says I.

"I disremember what he said," the Squire went on; "but when I named Jack he puckered up them thin lips of his'n like he was fortifyin' his mind ag'in anger. I didn't let on about Rose and Jack, Sister Jane, but I reckon Mr. Gaither has got his suspicions. No doubt he has got his suspicions, Sister Jane."

"Ichabod," said Miss Jane, scratching her head with the long teeth of her tucking comb, "you're too old to be made a fool of. Let old Bradley Gaither do his own buyin' and sellin'. That old scamp is deep as a well. Them that didn't know him'd think he was sanctified; yit he's got devilment enough in him to break the winders out'n the meetin'-house. Well, he needn't pester wif Jack and Rose," Miss Jane went on; "Jack'll never marry Rose whilst old Billy Carew is hoppin' along betwixt the grocery and the graveyard. Lord, Lord! to think that such a no-count old creetur as that should be a-ha'ntin' the face of the earth!"

"He took to fidlin' and drinkin' arter he was fifty year old," remarked the Squire.

"Yes, and the property he hain't drunk up he's fiddled away till now he hain't got nothin' but a parcel of half-

free niggers and a little piece of land, and old Bradley Gaither is hungry for that. And that ain't all," exclaimed Miss Jane, solemnly; "Jack is ruined, and Rose is distracted."

"Ah!" said the Squire, "Yes," said Miss Jane. "From is always double and thribble. I was here last Tuesday, and she sot by the window there and watched Jack at the time she stayed."

"That's what I call courtship a long law,' s' I.

"Yes, Miss Jane," so she, "I am and I'm in a great deal of trouble about Jack. I understand him, but he don't understand me," so she. "He's mad because father loaned his father money and took land to pay for it. But I'd marry Jack," so she, "only to give him his land back."

"I declare!" Miss Jane continued. "'twould 'a' melted airy heart in the univvers to see that child blushin' and cryin'. I went and stood by her and put my arms round her, and I says to her, s' I:

"Don't you fret, honey, don't you fret. Old Billy Carew is full of capers and vain babblin's,' s' I, 'and your pappy is puffed up by his fleshy mind, but the Almighty, he's a watchin' 'em. He'll fetch 'em up wif a round turn,' s' I. 'He knows how to deal wif unreasonable and wicked men.' I said them very words."

"Saint Paul said 'em before you Sister Jane, but you said 'em right, you said 'em right," exclaimed Squire Inchly, heartily.

"Well, I don't sot up to judge no body, but I don't need no spyglass to see what's right in front of my face," said Miss Jane.

Thus these two old people sat and talked about the affairs of their friends and neighbors—affairs in which they might be said to have almost a personal interest. The conversation turned to other matters; but across the way they saw enacted some of the preliminaries and accompaniments of a mysterious complication that finally became as distressing and as disastrous as a tragedy.

Old Billy Carew continued to gesticulate with his cane and talk to himself. He desired no other audience. One moment he would be convulsed with laughter; then he would draw himself up proudly, wave his hand imperiously, and seem to be laying down a proposition that demanded great deliberation of thought and accuracy of expression. After a while his son, apparently growing tired of the humiliating spectacle, left his father to himself, and went over to Squire Inchly's.

Jack Carew was a great favorite with the Squire and his sister. Miss Jane had petted him as a boy; indeed, after the death of his own mother, she had maintained towards him the relations of a foster-mother. His instinct had told him, even when a child, that the asperity of Miss Inchly was merely the humorous mask of a gentle and sensitive heart.

As he swung himself wearily in the chair which Miss Jane had been quick to provide, he seemed, notwithstanding his dejection, to be a very handsome specimen of manhood. His hair was dark, his eyes large and lustrous, his nose straight and firm, and his chin square and energetic. His face was smooth-shaven, and but for the glow of health in his cheeks, his complexion would have been sallow.

"Father has gone to the legislature again," he said with a faint apologetic smile and a motion of the hand toward the scene of the old man's alcoholic eloquence.

"Well," said Miss Jane, soothingly, "he hain't the first poor creetur that's flung his welfare to the winds. The Old Boy's mighty busy in these days, but the Almighty hain't dead yit, I reckon, and he'll come along thereckly and set things to rights."