A Conjurer's Christmas.

BY JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

From The Century:

This must be Uncle Billy Powers," said the captain. "I've heard you preach many a time when I was a boy."

"That's my name," said Uncle Billy; "an' in my feeble way I've been a-preachin' the Word as it was given to me forty year, lackin' one. Ef I ever saw you the circumstance has slipped from me."

"My name is Moseley," said the captain.

"I useter know Jeremiah Moseley in my younger days," said Uncle Billy, gazing reflectively at the piece of pine bark he was whittling. "Yes, yes! I knowed Brother Moseley well. He was a God fearin' man."

"He was my father," said the captain.

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed Uncle Billy, in a tone that seemed to combine reflection with astonishment. "Jerry Moseley's son! I disremember the day when Brother Moseley come into my mind, an' yet, now that I hear his name bandied about up here on the hill, it carries me plumb back to ole times. He were'nt much of a preacher on his own hook, but let him foller along for to clench the sermon, an' his match couldn't be foun' in them days. Yit, Jerry was a man of peace, an' here's his son a-gwine about with guns an' pistols, an' what not, a-trvin' to give peaceable folks a smell of war."

"Oh, no!" said Captain Moseley, laughing; "we are just hunting up some old acquaintances. Some old friends of our that we'd like to see."

"Well," said Uncle Billy, sinking his knife deep into the soft pine bark, "it's bad weather for a frolic, an' it ain't much better for a straight-out, eve'y-day call. Speshually up here on the hill where the ground is so wet and slipperyfied. It looks like you've come a mighty long ways for to pay a friendly call. An' yit," the old man continued, looking up at the captain with a smile that well became his patriarchal face, "thar ain't a cabin on the hill whar you won't be more than welcome. Yes, sir; wheresomever you find a h'a'thstone, thar yon'll find a place to rest."

"So I have heard," said the captain. "But maybe you can cut our journey short. We have a message for Israel Spurlock."

Immediately Captain Moseley knew that the placid and kindly face of Uncle Billy Powers had led him into making a mistake. He knewthat he had mentioned Israel Spurlock's name to the wrong man at the wrong time. There was a scarcely perceptable frown on Uncle Billy's face as he raised it from his piece of pine bark, which was now assuming the shape of a horseman's pistol, and he looked at the captain through half-closed eyelids.

"Come now," he exclaimed, "ain't Israel Spurlock in the war? Didn't a posse ketch 'im down yander at Jasper an' take an' cornscript him into the army? Run it over in your mind now! Ain't Israel Spurlock crippled some'r's, an' ain't your message for his poor ole mammy?"

"No, no," said the captain, laughing, and trying to hide his inward irritation.

"Not so?" exclaimed Uncle Billy. "Well, sir, you must be shore an' set me right when I go wrong; but I'll tell you right pine blank, I've had Israel Spurlock in my min' off an' on ev'ry since they run him down an' kotch him an' drug 'im off to war. He was weakly like from the time he was a boy, an' when I heard you call forth his name, I allowd to myself, says I, 'Israel Spurlock is sick, an' they've come atter his ole mammy to go an' nuss him.' That's the idee that riz up in my min'."

A man less shrewd than Captain Moseley would have bee deceived by the bland simplicity of Uncle Billy's tone.

"No," said he; "Spurlock is not sick. He is a sounder man than I am. He was conscripted in Jasper and carried to Adairville, and after he got used to the camp he concluded that he would come home and tell his folks good-by."

"Now that's jes' like Israel," said Uncle Billy, closing his eyes and compressing his lips—"jes like him for the world. He knowed that he was drug off right spang at the time he wanted to be gatherin' in his craps an' savin' his ruffage, an' one thing an' another beca'se his ole mammy didn't have a soul to help her but 'im. I reckon he's been a-housin' his corn an' sich like. The ole 'omen took on might'ly when Israel was snatched into the army.

[To be Continued.]

1891.

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