

## SOUTHERN SKETCHES.

## Dick Parsons, The Black Slaveholder.

BY MRS. ORRA LANGHORNE.

Ever since I have lived in Lynchburg, I have been hearing accounts of a Negro man of the name of Dick Parsons, who was a famous character in ante-bellum days, and occupied a very different position in society here from that usually assigned to the Southern Negro. Dick, as I gathered from various sources, was free born, a magnificent looking specimen of humanity; "black but comely," a man of brains as well as muscle, who made quite a little fortune by boating on the river, invested his gains after the fashion of the average Virginian of his day, in land and slaves, was a man of excellent business standing, flourished for awhile, and when the evil hour came, went down in the revolution like others of the class with which he had allied himself, and when the rest of his race were rejoicing in freedom, he, like the "white folks" around him, was brought to ruin and his grey hairs went down in sorrow to the grave.

I had long been trying to collect materials for a sketch of Dick Parsons from every available source, and had vainly tried to see some members of his family who were still living, but efforts have, until lately, been unsuccessful. Yesterday, as I was sitting alone in the counting-room at our little store, where I was installed by my husband, while he, and our small colored assistant, "Captain Swan," took a trip into town, a tall, sensible looking elderly black man entered the room, and with an air of hesitation, asked for Mrs. Langhorne. When he learned that I was that personage, he informed me that his name was Isaac Parsons, and that he was desired by a white gentleman in the country to come and see me. I was much pleased at meeting somebody at last who could satisfy my curiosity about the Negro slaveholder, and finding he was a nephew of the famous Dick Parsons, invited him to be seated, and asked him many questions about his uncle.

If I could tell the story in the words of my informant, I have no doubt it would be more interesting than in the form in which I am compelled to give it: but, as like most most uneducated people, my visitor was given to circumlocution and required much questioning to get at what he knew, I shall be obliged to condense the narrative somewhat and give it in quite different shape, from that in which I received it.

## "OLD SETTLERS"

Isaac Parsons said his family, as far back as he knew them, had been free on the father's side. He did not know whether they had always been free, as has occasionally happened to Africans in America, but thought they had been set free some generations before him. He remembered that a long time ago it was a very common thing for "old settlers" to set their slaves free by will. This expression "old settlers" I find in frequent use here with the Negroes, always among them referring to old people of either race or sex, just as the term "settled" refers to middle-aged men or women. "Unsettled," or "unsettling" might apply to young people, but I have not heard it used.

Isaac Parsons' earliest memories took him back to a little log cabin in the Blue Ridge mountains, where the James is called North river, and breaks its way among mountains and valleys, affording exquisite views to the modern traveller who sees them from the trains on the Richmond and Allegheny railroad. My visitor had probably never thought of the beautiful scenery among the hills when he first saw the light, nearly sixty years ago. He remembered it as bleak and dreary. The land on which the cabin stood had belonged to his grandfather, and his earliest recollections were connected with the river and the boatmen taking their bateaux to the tide-water towns. Isaac's father had married a girl in the lowland country and taken her to the log hut in the mountains to keep house for him and his brothers. Isaac was the youngest of several boys, who all took to the river as naturally as water-fowl. In one of the trips, when he was but a few months old, his father was drowned, but this event made little change in the life of the family. His uncles and brothers kept on boating and his mother looked after the little mountain farm, attending to the cows, pigs, and poultry, and cooking and washing for the boatmen when they were at home. There were distilleries all around them in the mountains, with no revenue officers to prevent their making fruit or grain into fiery liquor, and Isaac recalled wild scenes in his childhood when the boatmen would all come home, after a successful voyage, and have a grand carouse. They would give the children whisky, and if they objected to drinking it, in their rough mirth, would force them to

swallow a dram, thus early giving them habits which have done much harm in later life. Isaac had pleasanter memories of a very different kind in seeing his brothers, when at home in the winter, attending school with the white children from among the hills and dales around them. Rockbridge County was then, as now, a centre of culture in Virginia. The famous blind preacher, Dr. Waddell, and Mr. Lyle, the ancestor of Dr. Ruffner, were then teaching in the "log colleges," which formed the nursery of learning in the wilderness, and were the foundation of "Washington and Lee University," especially cared for and encouraged by George Washington. In those early times, there were few slaves in Western Virginia, and the slave power which attained such evil eminence and met with such a fearful downfall had not made itself felt among the peaceful homes in the Blue Mountains.

The race prejudice as it exists now, had not then possessed our people, and it was provided by law and generally thought proper that the children of free colored citizens should attend the nearest school with the other children of the district. These schools were usually taught by white teachers, but one in Rockingham County was taught by a worthy colored man, and children of both races were instructed by him.

Isaac Parsons said his father and uncles had received some education, and his brothers had attended the neighborhood school as they grew older. His mother had begun to talk of sending him to school, when an untoward event produced a great commotion throughout the State. This Isaac spoke of as "Nat Turner's War," which resulted in much hardship for the Negroes generally. Among other changes made in the laws at that time, was one forbidding colored children being taught in the schools. Isaac had been born just in time to come under the ill effects of this change, so that he never went to school at all. He rejoices that his children have fallen upon happier times and are learning in the public schools of the State.

## THE NEGRO BATEAMAN.

Isaac said his Uncle Dick early began to show capacity for business, and though not the eldest son was soon the leader among the family of boatmen. He became a very skillful trader, carrying wood, grain, and all sorts of country produce from the settlements among the mountains to the lowland towns, buying in return groceries and manufactured goods for the country folks. In the course of time he came to own several bateaux and gained the confidence of the farmers and merchants for whom he acted as agent, large and valuable cargoes being constantly intrusted to the brawny boatman, who fearlessly encountered the rapids of the swift and narrow river, on its course to the sea, and could not be outdone in shrewdness when brain instead of brawn was needed in the business.

The boatmen led a merry, roystering life. Their living cost little or nothing, as they found friends all along their route who were ready to furnish abundant good things in exchange for little favors done by the boat hands.

They were not over scrupulous in their ways, and when going into camp at night on some lonely spot, did not hesitate to knock a stray calf or pig in the head or rob an adjacent hen roost to help out their supper, feeling sure that the bateau would carry them far down the river before the farmer would discover his loss. Of course they were particular not to stop just at that point on their way up stream.

After awhile the bateaux were given up and the lumbering canal boat, with its team of plodding mules, took up their trade, the canal being completed about 1840. Dick Parsons was ready for the change, and taking for his partner, a white man named Swinney, who owned several slaves, he extended his business by degrees, purchasing several fine boats and being an important man on the canal.

## THE NEGRO PLANTER.

After a time he invested some of his earnings in a little farm near Lynchburg, and hired hands to work it, finding it convenient to have his home at a more central point than the mountain hut on North river.

In those early days there was a steady emigration from Virginia to the "Western Reserve" of Ohio. There was always more or less agitation of the slavery question, and Lynchburg having been founded by Quakers who would not own slaves, the peaceful Friends were often made uncomfortable by slaveholding neighbors, and preferred seeking "fresh fields and pastures new," to living in strife. The West was fast growing in wealth and importance, and glowing accounts came back to Virginia of the new commonwealth on the Ohio. Among those who decided to seek their fortunes in the Western Reserve was Swinney, the white partner of the Negro boatman.

## BUYING SLAVES.

In settling up the business, Swinney desired Dick Parsons to buy his man Alick, who had long worked with the firm on the canal, and Alick and Dick knowing and liking each other well, the sale was made to the satisfaction of all parties. Isaac Parsons seemed to feel somewhat sensitive on the subject of his uncle's having been a slaveholder, and insisted that Dick would never have been a "Negro-trader," the character indispensable in every slaveholding community, but heartily despised by all classes. He declared that his uncle would never have bought slaves merely as an investment for money, but human chattels being as much merchandize in those times as any other articles of barter and sale, it was difficult to transact business without buying Negroes, and "Uncle Dick" purchased the man Alick just as he did his partner's share in the boats, with the other "good will and fixtures" of the trade.

Parsons had a great regard for Alick, and as his new investment was growing old and needed good care, the Negro master soon decided to leave him ashore, and put him on his farm where Alick was made manager.

From time to time other slaves were bought, of course, merely in the way of business, and put under Alick's charge on the farm, where he had full authority in Dick's absence, and managed his affairs very faithfully and well, his master often promising to set him free when he died and assuring him that he should never want for comforts.

## BUYING A WIFE.

Among Dick's friends was a worthy old free colored man in Lynchburg named Cato. This man had married the slave woman of a white family in the town, who had a little girl, the child of a former marriage. Cato labored long and faithfully to earn money to buy his wife, which he at last succeeded in accomplishing. The child, however, remained a slave in her master's house, and good old Cato and his wife worked hard for the money for the purchase of the girl. Years went by, Cato and his wife were growing old, and found it difficult to support themselves and lay by money enough to pay for the child, who was fast growing into womanhood, and her value constantly increasing to her master. The heart of the mother grew heavy as she realized that her child was a slave, and thought of the many chances that might separate them forever, before she could earn money enough to secure her treasure which had value in eyes that did not look so tenderly on the girl as she did.

In their anxiety on the subject, old Cato and his wife at length determined to ask for aid from Dick Parsons, the Negro boatman, farmer, and slaveholder, who maintained popularity and business standing in the white community, and was the pride and envy of the black people, bond and free.

Dick sympathized with his friends in their desire to gain possession of the young girl, and readily consented to advance money necessary for her purchase, taking a mortgage upon the damsel herself until the funds were returned.

The girl was now the property of her step-father, subject to the lien held by Dick Parsons. She was brisk and active, decidedly what was termed by slave dealers "a likely girl," and ere long found favor in the eyes of the money-lender, who proposed to take her for his wife, and though much older than the mortgaged chattel, he was greatly beloved by the whole family, and no opposition was made to his wishes. Old Cato dryly remarked, when his step-daughter left his house for that of her husband, that he "reckoned dat money was paid now, an' he need not trouble himself any more about it." The young girl, who had already had three masters, was now the slave of her husband, and her story sounds more like an Oriental tale than a sober business transaction in our land of modern improvements and enlightened ideas.

## LOSS OF SLAVES AND SIGHT.

A few years before the war began, some trouble with his eyes, which involved much suffering and useless expense, resulting at length in total blindness, made it necessary for Dick to leave the river and stay at home on his farm. He tried for a good while to keep up his business, but was so disabled by his malady that nothing prospered with him, and his affairs fell into confusion. The beginning of the war disturbed all interests of every kind, and changed all values in the South. Dick had gone in debt for his last boat, and as things grew worse with him he was compelled to give a mortgage on his farm. When the war closed and his slaves were free, almost blind and crippled by misfortunes of every kind, he attempted to resume business on the Canal. A disastrous flood, which almost destroyed the "big ditch," upset his last effort, and the death of his only son completed a sore list of disasters. The old man did not long survive the wreck of his fortune,

He was tenderly cared for in his declining years by his wife and one daughter, who survived him. It must have added to his grief, to realize as he could not help doing, that his family would be left in poverty.

Since his death his affairs have been settled up and a small part of Dick's plantation set apart as the dower of his wife, who, though a slave and not legally married comes under the benefit of the United States law, provided to cover such cases.

Very many people along James river have vivid and kindly memories of Dick Parsons, the famous boatman, who so overcame adverse circumstances as to rise to the rank of a leader in his times, but unhappily failed to read the signs aright, and like other slaveholders, met the ruin which inevitably awaited those who persisted in sustaining a system wholly incompatible with modern civilization.

## ORIENTAL DISCIPLINE.

Many amusing stories are told to illustrate Dick Parsons' indomitable will, and the resolution with which he carried out his plans. Among them is an incident we culled from the gossips, that at one time finding his young wife somewhat rebellious, he sold her to a neighboring white planter, and sent her to her new master, without hesitation. In the course of a few weeks, his wife returned repentant and submissive, entreating her aristocratic lord to buy her back, declaring herself wretched in her new abode. Dick at once relented, received his spouse with much kindness, and promptly applied to his neighbor to let him repurchase his wife, a request which was obligingly complied with. It somehow transpired afterward that the whole thing was a sham gotten up by the astute Dick to enforce obedience to his orders.

Possibly other husbands of the district may sometimes have wished for Dick Parsons' power in his household.

## A Christmas Tree in a Colored School.

To Hampton and Mr. Giles Cook's fine school, we owe the well educated teachers of the colored public school in Harrisonburg. These excellent young women began their work in a missionary spirit, eager to benefit their race. Their pupils, unused to the kindness shown by their teachers, grew fonder of school and anxious to learn, first for their teacher's sake, then for the sake of knowledge, and the result was unexpected success.

Two years ago, they were given a handsome schoolhouse, by the town, and the pupils now number nearly two hundred.

This year the teachers rewarded their praiseworthy behavior by a pretty Christmas tree, at the colored Methodist church, Dec. 25, 8 P. M.

A good many white people were present and the room was crowded.

The entertainment opened by the scholars saying the 23rd Psalm in chorus. The Lord's prayer was then offered.

After a pretty carol had been well sung, a pleasant looking boy, made an opening address. This was followed by several poems relating to Christmas. The grateful scholars had taken of their small means and with the help of parents and friends, all contributed to getting a pretty and useful gift for their teachers to show their gratitude to the faithful friends who were doing such a noble work among them, making school and learning seem attractive and doing all in their power to fit them to become useful, God-fearing men and women. These gifts were presented during the evening and the teachers were much gratified. After these were given and received with suitable remarks there was more music, and nine little girls appropriately dressed and bearing banners with their names painted on them, represented the "fruits of the spirit," Love, Joy, etc.

Each said a poem relating to them and it was very pretty indeed. Quite a number of pieces, intermingled with lovely or tender Christmas carols, followed.

A little time was left for speeches and two good addresses were made.

While the carol that followed was sung, the candles of the tree were lighted.

Each parent sent some little gift and the tree looked very pretty. It would not hold all the gifts and a table below was loaded.

Most of the children had never seen a Christmas tree and none such a one as this. The carol ended, the gifts were distributed. Each child had something beside a bag of candy and all were more than satisfied. The evening closed with another song and the happy scholars flocked out into the night richer than when they entered, fonder of their teachers and better for the songs they had sung "of Jesus and His love," for there is no surer way to reach a child's heart than by happy music.

H. D.