11-15-2001

The Pear Tree

Charles Edward Brooks

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview

Part of the Fiction Commons, Nonfiction Commons, Photography Commons, and the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol21/iss1/3
The truth is, that the possession of a grievance is the one state of human blessedness. (Anthony Trollope: The Vicar of Bullhampton)

"But Miss Irene, we don’t want the pears. We’ve tried and tried to tell you that, but you just don’t believe us. You act like you think we’re not tellin’ the truth," Lucille Cheek’s croaky voice quavered.

"Lucille, it don’t have a thing to do with you personally. Nor with Cornelia, either. It’s not persons I’m interested in; it’s principles. It’s justice." Over the low stone wall, Miss Irene Gledge peered through the spinster Cheek sisters, as though focusing her vision on the very Platonic Idea of justice somewhere beyond their corpulent bodies. Over her head, ripe fruit hung on a knotted pear tree. A few heavily laden branches extended over the Cheek property on the other side of the wall.

"Well," Cornelia remarked with a tinge of sarcasm, "it’s Lucille and myself personally who have to pay our lawyer’s bills and get up in the witness stand. We personally might have to pay you damages one day—"

Lucille squealed and clapped both hands over her mouth.

"—and see our names in the paper like convicted criminals. Not your principles and high-soundin’ ideas." The sarcasm sloughed down into maudlin. "And we were both lookin’ forward so much to a happy retirement when school lets out next year."

Mutilated by years of litigation, the post-retirement tomorrows that had stretched out before the schoolteacher sisters like a bright plain had long since retreated to the realm of the unreal.

Lucille Cheek tore her hands away from her mouth. "The law is: the pears that fall on our yard are ours, Miss Irene. No matter where the tree is. Not that we want ‘em—we’ve told you a thousand times that we don’t—but they are ours!” An angry vermilion surged through the rice powder on the woman’s puffy cheeks.

"No, ma’am," retorted Miss Irene Gledge, still looking through and beyond the increasingly agitated sisters. "They are not. That’s a wrong interpretation of the law. I’m gon’ establish that if I have to go to the Supreme Court of the United States to do it."

"Miss Irene," exclaimed Cornelia in a loud voice, "the Supreme Court of the United States has more important things to do. They don’t care about a fruit tree in a wide spot in the road in North Carolina. For heaven’s sake!"

"We’ll just see about that, ladies. Good afternoon to you."

"Cornelia, the woman’s stark ravin’ mad!" wailed Lucille as their neighbor stalked off.

"That’s the Lord’s truth!" agreed her sister. "But if she keeps goin’ on like this we’re gon’ be in the insane asylum long before she is!"

***

On the second floor of her prim Victorian house, in what had once been her parents’ bedroom, Miss Irene Gledge sat on a wooden stool disentangling a thicket of Manila rope. As she gradually freed the rope, she wound it tightly onto a spool. From time to time she paused, leaned toward the window, and squinted down at the Cheek sisters’ back yard. Although the high summer day was sweltering outside, the gelid presence of times past chilled the room like a block of ice.

Concentration sharpened the hatchet-like features, which hinted at an admixture of the Native American in the woman’s ancestry. Seventy-five years of living had etched a network of lines in the florid face, framed by dishwater-gray hair pulled back in a severe knot. The arthritic fingers still
worked deftly.

Faded blue overalls and a blue calico shirt encased Miss Irene's rugged physique. On a winter's day two decades earlier, her father had donned these very garments to prune the pear tree, fallen from a high limb, and met his death. Both the apparel and the body inside it were clean as a snowdrop.

Next door, Lucille Cheek scudded through the cellar door into the yard. After scrutinizing the walls of Miss Irene's house at some length, she sidled toward the stone wall dividing the two lots and scooped up two pears from the ground.

"Uh huh!" grunted Miss Irene before raising her voice to a high whine: "No, ma'am, Miss Irene, we don't want your pears. We really don't.

She attacked the last gnarl of rope with gusto. "I'll show those hussies who they're dealin' with, Papa. You can count on me."

A photograph of Judge Gledge, flanked by one of his late spouse, formed the sole adornment of the room's wall space, otherwise covered by stacks of cardboard boxes, spools of rope and cable, lumber, magazines, and books. Twine, scraps of fabric, old clothing packed in mothballs, tidy bundles of letters, sachet bags gone odorless, out-of-fashion shoes polished and stretched on trees, empty medicine vials, chunks of minerals: A miscellany of enormous span filled the boxes, each one labelled clearly in India ink.

The magazines reached back into the first half of the nineteenth century. On the four volumes of Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* reposed a column of the *Westminster Review*. Some fifty case-books on the law of torts braced up crumbling pillars of century-old political and legal journals.

The five other rooms on the second floor and four of those downstairs possessed a similar topography. All through the house, the silence of stalactites reigned over stockpiles of tools, building materials, disassembled furniture, printed matter, and what-have-you.

When a metallic rapping broke the silence, Miss Irene raised her eyes to Judge Gledge's stern countenance and shrugged, as though disclaiming all responsibility for the disturbance. Her brogan shoes banged hollowly on the stairs.
as she made her way downstairs.

“Miss Irene, I hope I’m not interrupting your afternoon rest.”

“No time for rest, Preacher. I’ll be restin’ soon enough for good—in my grave. So come in.”

Dr. McCutcheon, the Presbyterian minister, fixed a determined smile on his features before opening the screen door and passing inside. His hostess led him through the barren hall to her sitting room—less cluttered than the remainder of the house and equipped with a few pieces of fully assembled furniture.

Motioning the visitor into a wicker chair, she asked him point-blank: “What can I do for you?”

The man’s smile tautened. “Miss Irene, it’s about the pear tree.”

“What about it?”

“It’s causing a schism in the church.”

“The tree is?”

“You are, Miss Irene.”

The woman looked steadily into the minister’s eyes and said nothing.

The man went on. “What I’m talking about is Gledge vs. Cheek. It’s been going on for years now, and there’s no settlement in sight. Our communicants have started to take sides. The animosity between the two groups has gotten so bad that it’s affecting the life of the church.”

“Which side is bigger?”

“That’s neither here nor there. The point is that you’re treating two fine Christian women cruelly and sowing dissension in Christ’s church. Miss Irene, if you had to stand before the throne of God tomorrow, what kind of account of your actions could you give?”

Miss Irene’s ice-blue eyes narrowed. “In the first place, Preacher, you can leave the accountin’ to me. I’ll draw up a balance sheet that’ll do me proud, on this earth or anywhere else. In the second place, people who steal are not fine Christians. And remember: We’re talkin’ about two women with a good education and responsibility for the minds of the young. In the third place, Gledge vs. Cheek is a civil, not a criminal suit. It don’t concern a soul except the parties to the action, their lawyers, and the bench. Other folks can mind their own blessed business!”

The man of God’s smile sagged. “Well, since you mention the lawyers, Miss Irene: Your nephew Tom isn’t a bit enthusiastic about this idea of yours to go see the State Attorney General. There’re already too many people involved in the suit without bringing him in. And Tom’d be mighty glad if he didn’t have to spend so much of his time representing your interests in the litigation.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“Not in so many words. But that was the impression he gave the last time I talked to him.”

The woman stuck out her lower jaw. “I don’t believe for a minute that he feels like that. If he did, he’d be unworthy of his grandfather. Unworthy of the family name.”

The preacher raised his voice in desperation. “Miss Irene, we all have to learn to rise above petty things. To ask questions about the meaning of life and God’s will for us. How else can we get through the days, the years that we’re allowed—or condemned—to spend on this earth?”

“How indeed?” Miss Irene rose from her chair with the agility of a much younger woman. “Preacher, I’ve got a lot of work to do, and I know you’ll excuse me. But wait here just a minute. I’m gon’ fetch a jar of pear preserves for Miz McCutcheon.”

***

“Folks, this is Merry Oaks. We’ll stop here for ten minutes. You can get yourself a drink or whatever you want to do.” The ancient sound system rendered the bus driver’s voice even more twangy than it was in nature.

The score of passengers filed obediently out of the bus and into the Merry Oaks General Store, which also served as the community’s post office and bus station. The aroma of freshly ground coffee spiced the forlorn smell of chicken feed hanging in the air.
As soon as the first passenger crossed the threshold, the storekeeper began to call from behind the counter like a circus Barker: “Miss Irene Gletch. Miss Irene Gletch. They’s a telephone call in the office for Miss Irene Gletch.”

A robust septuagenarian, as proud as Lucifer, stepped up smartly. “The name is Gledge. D G E.”

“Yes, ma’am, Miss Gletch. It’s in thar.” The man pointed to a door at the back of the premises.

A chair and a rolltop desk constituted the only furnishings of the storekeeper’s tiny office. The single window looked out on a desolate array of weeds and dismantled cars. Above the desk, the drawing on the wall calendar depicted a pear orchard in blossom. A pile of chewing tobacco lying just beneath the calendar scented the stuffy atmosphere.

“Irene Gledge!” the woman barked into the telephone.

“It’s Tom, Aunt Irene.” An unaccustomed sharpness edged the words of her nephew and attorney.

“Is somebody dead?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s good news. Wonderful news. You can take the next bus home. There’s no need for you to bother the Attorney General now.”

“What on earth?!”

“The Cheeks have conceded.”

Within seconds, the woman’s ruddy coloring shaded off to a livid pallor. The mouth fell open; saliva trickled over the hanging lower lip onto her cotton print dress. Her free hand clutched at the rim of the desktop.

“Aunt Irene?” On the battered telephone, the lawyer’s mellow voice sounded tinny.

“What did you say?” Miss Irene screamed into the mouthpiece. “Conceded?”

“Why, yes. They’ve agreed to the damages we’ve been trying to get out of them for years. It’s all over. Now we can turn our attention to other things.”

“Other things, indeed!” She threw the instrument onto the desk and began to rock back and forth in the swivel chair. The tinny voice continued to issue from the telephone, but the woman’s shrieks overlaid it.

“So Gledge vs. Cheek is finished, just like that. A tissue of mist and nothin’. In a back room of the Merry Oaks General Store. At eleven thirty on a summer mornin’.”

The storekeeper jerked the door open and gawked at the raving woman. A knot of curious locals and bus travellers quickly formed behind him.

An ancient black woman articulated what all of them were thinking: “She done lost her mind.”

“It’s old Judge Gledge’s daughter,” explained the bus driver with a perky smile. “The Gledges always was kindly peculiar.”

“My own nephew!” raged Miss Irene, jouncing in the chair and beating on the desktop with her fists. “He settled. He just left me here like to die for hunger in the place where I am: for there is no more bread in the city.”

“They’s somebody talkin’ on the phone,” observed the black woman.

Falteringly, as though expecting to be attacked, the storekeeper edged into the office. With a quick lunge, he grabbed the telephone receiver and re-
treated as far from the screaming woman as the length of the cord permitted. Rolling his eyes at the silent audience, he pressed a palm tightly over one ear and began to speak with the man at the other end of the line.

The bus pulled away from the Merry Oaks station ten minutes late. Trussed up with manila rope like a calf on the way to market, Miss Irene Gledge occupied the long back seat all by herself. She no longer ranted and raved, for wide strips of white gauze had put her mouth out of commission. The sturdy body lay slumped in utter passivity. The ice-blue eyes, like a light bulb going dead, flickered with occasional, ever rarer coruscations. Their expression bespoke the confusion of someone listening to echoes in a labyrinth. The passengers who looked at her shuddered. From a seat in the next row, the black woman watched to make sure that the prisoner did not budge.

On the outskirts of the capital, the bus made an unscheduled stop at an ornate cast-iron gate. Beyond the bars, a drive swept up a hill to a grim brick building. The driver and two male volunteers removed Miss Irene from the bus and hustled her toward an entrance in the building with a sign reading ADMISSIONS above it.

Once through the double glass doors, the driver hurried to the counter. “Delivery from Merry Oaks,” he announced cheerfully. “I reckon her nephew’s called by now.”

“We’re expectin’ her,” said a woman in white. Very quickly, other figures in white uniforms seized the delivery and disappeared into the bowels of the building with it.

“Let’s go,” cried the driver to his two passengers. “We’re late already. Course, now we won’t have to make a detour to let anybody off at the Attorney General’s office.”

Early the next morning, when the bus driver reported for work, he was handed a hand-knitted shopping bag. The cleaning staff had found it under a seat in his vehicle the night before.

“Well, now,” he grinned at the maintenance manager, “let’s see what we got here.”

Pulling out a thick sheaf of legal-sized paper, he perused the first page. The heading, in heavy type, read: Gledge vs. Cheek.

“It’s hers,” he announced. “That woman that went crazy yesterday. I’ll take it down to her nephew on my run this mornin’.”

Reaching once more into the knitted bag, the driver extracted two quart-size Mason jars. Even without reading the labels, neatly lettered in India ink, he saw at once what they contained: golden, sugary home-made pear preserves.