

## Choice Literature.

### A PINCHTOWN PAUPER.

#### CHAPTER II.—Continued.

Jim draws rein at a street corner, and the old man slowly and with difficulty descends from his perch. Jim hands him his baskets.

"Thankee, Jim, thankee," he says as he takes them. "I ain't a-gwine ter forget ye for dat turn. It help me pow'ful. I shudden 'a got up de long hill 'fo ten o'clock, scusin' o' you."

Jim bids him good-morning, and turns the corner at a brisk pace.

The old basket maker wanders about among the shops, offering his wares for sale; but the fates are unpropitious. Here a surly "Don't want any baskets," and there a gibe at the uncouth workmanship of his stock. There are no buyers, and he grows downhearted.

"It's throng-time wid 'em," he says to himself, in apology for the many refusals he has met with; "dey ain't got no ledger minutes for ter stop for an ole nigger, wid nothin' but split baskets."

So he leaves the business streets, and strikes out at a snail's pace for F— Avenue. He enters at the area gates, and goes to the kitchen doors; but his commodities meet with no readier sale here than among the shops.

"De luck's agin me," he says despondently, as the fifth gate closes behind him with a click, and the baskets still hang upon his back. "I must ha' forgot ter make a cross-mark dis mornin', when Dicey called me back. Looks like I mought as well fling away dis yer rabbit foot, w'ot I been totin' in my pocket for two mont's, it don't 'pear ter make de luck no better; an' me an' Sank'll have ter ketch another one, w'ot ain't no graveyard rabbit. I'm a gwine ter try one mo' place, an' den, ef dat don't come ter nothin', it'll be a honery day for Aggy an' Sank and Dicey an' me termorrer."

The warmth has died out from about his heart, and the cold is creeping in through the rents in his garments, and pinching his withered flesh, and frostling his rheumatic bones.

He opens the next area gate. It turns on its hinges with a creak, which he echoes with a groan. His knock at the kitchen entrance is feeble and almost despairing.

"Come in, Uncle," says the girl who opens the door. "Mis' Mary, de man 'pears like he mos' froze. He shakin' jes de same as de leaves on dat aspen tree in de summer time, out dar in de back yard."

The old basket-maker steps hesitatingly into the warm atmosphere of the snug kitchen, with his burden on his shoulder, and looks timidly about him.

"I kim ter see ef I cudden part wid one o' dese yer baskets ter you, young mist'is. You'll fine 'em uncommon handy for chips an' things 'bout de place. Dey ain't much for purty, de's a fac', but dey is p'int'y good an' strong."

He bows low to the young housewife, who, with skirts tucked up and dress covered with a long checked apron, is standing by the kitchen table. There are bundles of citron and plums and spices, and measures of flour and sugar, and numbers of eggs scattered here and there near her; but he sees nothing but a possible customer. He is thinking of the little girl, the lean dog and the old woman out in Pinchtown.

"I done been tryin' all de mornin', an' I ain't got shet o' nary one yet. Dey don't cost but a quarter, an' dey's wuf dat ef dey's wuf anything. Ef you'll take two, ye kin have 'em for forty cents."

"Mis' Mary," interposes the brisk cook, "we don't want no mo' baskets. Dis yer house is chuck full o' baskets now."

"I'se speakin' ter de mist'is, gal. I war n't makin' no remarks ter you," says the old man in a dignified rebuke; and the "mist'is" laughs. Touched at the pathetic sight of the bent figure and the uncovered gray head, she says: "I'll buy one o' your baskets, uncle. Take a seat by the fire, and get warm."

His face beams, and he says "Thankee, mist'is, thankee!"

He makes her another of his curtly bows, and casting a glance of contempt at the cook, who returns it with scornful interest, he draws near the fire. He sits there in silence for some moments, and watches the slim figure bending over the kitchen table. She is seething raisins with nimble fingers. As the warmth of the genial atmosphere permeates his body, and the fragrant aroma of fruits and spices fills his nostrils, his good spirit comes back to him. He looks from her to the table before her; and memories take possession of him which he cannot forbear expressing.

"Dem dar reminds me o' de times ef 'de war, over in Tuckahoe," he says, and rubs his horny hands together, and smiles an apologetic smile; "reminds me o' de old days, dat dey does, young mist'is."

She turns to him, and says pleasantly, "And so you come from Tuckahoe?"

"Yes, marm," he answers proudly. "I'm a East Ferginier quality nigger fom de county o' Albermarle, not fur fom Lindsay's Turnout, close by ter Ole Benivoloyer. Many's de day I'se help Mis' Agnes seed de raisins for de Chris'mas puddin' at de ole place, which de sight on 'em now fetches dem times back ter me."

His eyes have lost their cunning with the years, or else the crowding memories hinder him from noticing the eager interest with which the young woman regards him.

"How did you get so far away from your home?" she asks.

The white hands are no longer busy with the raisins; and an egg rolls off the table, and is smashed upon the floor. She does not heed it, but stands there and looks at him, with a half-smile on her face. He gazes down at the ragged hat which he has flung upon the floor near his chair, and sighs as he answers:

"De war tuk 'n' bruk us all up, young mist'is. 'Twas a fine ole place onct in times, wid plenty o' niggers, plenty

o' hosses an' stock an' pigs, plenty o' vittles an' clo'es, plenty o' ev'rything. But de niggers was sot free; de sassafras an' de broom-swage run away wid de fiels'; de barns an' de stables an' de fences jes' natch'ly drapped ter pieces; Mars' Jeems, he done got kilt in de war; ole marster sort o' los' his grip onter things, 'long o' missin' young Mars' Jeems, which he sot mo' sto' by him dan all de 'boys; old mist'is and Miss Agnes, dey tuk 'n' went one arter de tother; all o' de balance o' de young marsters, dey married off an' reffygged away; an' Mars' Jeem's little girl an' me an' my ole 'oman was all dat was left on de plantation wid marster, 'scusin de ole hyars an' de patt'idges. Den he tuk 'n' 'ceased, an' dey kim an' sole de ole place out, an' kerried de little mist'is away. Me an' Dicey jes' slipped over dis side o' de mount'in, whar my son Bill was a-workin'; but Bill, he's done gone now, two year come nex' spring."

She has drawn nearer to him as he speaks; and as his voice falters with the closing words of his story, she lays her hand lightly upon the ragged shoulder.

"Uncle Newton," she says.

"Marm!" he answers, and looks up at her, startled and wondering. It has been many years since such a hand has touched him. It reminds him of Tuckahoe even more than the raisins had done.

"I have grown out of your memory, Uncle Newton, as your face has passed out of mine."

He is puzzled. He does not understand what she means. He passes his hand across his forehead, as if trying to remember.

"It is sixteen years since I used to sit on your knee, and hear you tell the stories about the fox and the rabbit. Don't you recollect the big wheels and the little wheels—'Ruu, little 'Fraid, run, 'fo big 'Fraid ketch you!'" she says, and smiles at him with tears in her eyes.

"Bress me, ef it ain't little Mary!" he says, as he rises to his feet. "Oh, honey, it p'intly does de ole nigger's eyes good ter look at ye! An' dat purty, too! As purty as Mis' Agnes, an' de spittin' image of her!"

But the glad eyes cannot look at her long. To hide the mists that gather in them he stoops, and makes a foolish feint of searching for his hat upon the floor. The cook, consumed with jealousy, says:

"Dar's yer hat nex' ter yer foot, ef dat's what yer huntin' for!"

He does not hear her. Lifting his head again, he says: "Well! well! Mars' Jeem's little Mis' Mary!" Then, with a sense of humiliation in having failed to recognize her at first sight, he goes on: "I jes' sorter 'spicioned you was kin to some o' my white folks, mist'is, when I fus' looked at ye, an' heered ye say 'baskets.' Dicey, she gwine ter be jes' as crazy as a Juney bug, when she fine out I done seel little Mis' Mary."

#### CHAPTER III.

It is late in the afternoon at Pinchtown. The frost in the snow has lost its sparkle, for the sun is down. But the chill of the winter day is everywhere, and the frost pendants still hang from the eaves of the cemetery cottage. The snow birds that all day long have been hopping about in search of food have given up the quest, and are now huddled together, with their heads in their feathers, in the thick of the thorn bushes.

The Pinchtown Pauper is just getting home. The baskets which his "young Mis' Mary" has bought were only a small portion of his stock; and the sum of money they have yielded will not keep the wolf from the door very long. But "half a loaf is better 'n no bread," he says, and he feels cheasier than if he were returning to his cabin penniless. He does not know that since his visit to "Mars' Jeems daughter" his cupboard has grown fuller than for years; and that a hamper of clothing and a waggon-load of cut wood have been put out at his hovel in his absence. The fact that the neighbours have come and stared at the unwonted sight, and canvassed it among themselves and with Aggy and Dicey, is likewise unknown to him. He would doubtless have laughed aloud, could he have stood there unobserved, and heard Dicey tell them all that it was "conjur' work." It would have been no hard matter for him to have guessed who the conjurer was.

In the meantime he is drawing near home. He can see a bright light in the narrow back window of his cabin, and is fretted at Dicey's extravagance in having such a blaze when the stock of fuel is so low.

"Dat fool ole 'oman is al'ays a pesterin' arter me 'bout makin' baskets an' makin' baskets, 'twel I done got sick o' de very sight o' baskets, let alone makin' o' 'em,—and now jes' look at her! Done gone kindle up a great big fire out o' de las chunk at de woodpile, an' I ain't sole but two baskets ter day. She mus' 'spec' me ter steal riders off'n de wurm-fence for ter keep her warm this winter. Wimmen folks is cur'us critters, anyhow; an' Dicey, she aint got no more sense'n a mule's hine leg, no way you fix it."

But his heart is so full of his recent meeting with young Mis' Mary that he soon forgets Dicey's recklessness. He is racking his brain for fit words in which to convey to her and to Aggy his conception of the great beauty and gentleness and goodness of Mars' Jeem's daughter.

"Don't look like none o' dese here valley folks, dat young 'oman don't, now. I jes' 'spicioned she come fom over de mount'in soon as I put my eyes on her. Step wid her head up jes' de same as ole mist'is. Ain't no po' white trash over yer kin tetch dat breed o' Tuckahoes! Skan finer satin an' whiter dat snow. Eyes shinin' like de stars in de elements. Dese yer niggers thinks ole Newt' is ign'at an' don't know nothin', but howsomever o' dat, my white folks is high-up white folks, I done tole ye!"

On the right of the narrow road, which is cut sharply into the side of the great hill, a high bank towers up, and huge rocks jut out above it. The bank is pretty enough in summer, with its tangle of wild honeysuckle and its green undergrowth of hardy chineppin bushes. But now its rocks are capped with snow, and the stunted cedars here and there only serve to accentuate its bareness. It is here the quarriers were at work yesterday.

On the left, down a steep declivity, yawns a bleak valley. The tops of its girdled pine-trees, that raise their gaunt white arms like spectral things, do not reach the level of the road above; and the face of the valley is covered with vines and sinuous undergrowth, and limestone boulders of desolate gray, and rotting logs, all hidden beneath the drifted snow, as far as the little branch with its frozen pools.

The old man, trudging along in the gathering gloom, moves with more caution as the night comes swiftly down, and shudders with a vague superstition as he approaches the lonely spot. He knows the story of the accident that is said to have happened there years ago, and believes that the ghosts of the man and woman who went over the precipice that stormy night still haunt the place.

The noise of a heavy rushing body, tearing through the vines and undergrowth of the bank above, makes cold chills run down his back, and his eye-balls distend with terror.

"Mussey, Mussey!" he shrieks, as it crashes down before him, and stops, huge and dark and mishapen in the road bed at his feet, midway the narrow track.

In the direction of Pinchtown he hears the ringing of sleigh-bells; and gazing with more intentness at the mysterious object in front of him, he sees that it is a huge lime stone rock, loosened from its place in the hillside by the workmen of yesterday.

"Dat sleigh gwine ter run over dis yer rock, ef I lef' it here, an' dat ain't no pebble for a crooked-back ole nigger like me ter heft down into de bottom."

He attempts to move it, but it remains unshaken.

"Ef dem folks runs agin dis yer thing, it's a-gwine ter fling 'em inter de hollow, an' lan' 'em all in kingdom-come, an' dat's p'int'y a fac'."

He pauses, and listens to the bells.

"Umph! dat s'eigh don't 'pear like 'twas a gettin' no closer. Lord! jes' s'pose dat's dem dar two harnts out a-takin' a sleigh-ride dis dark night! I ruther git de patter-rollers arter me, I tell ye. Dis yer ain't no place for ole Newton, sho!"

The sound of the bells, drawing nearer, reassures him. "Dem ain't no sperrit-bells. I 'spect's dar's live folks in dat sleigh; an' mebbe I jes' better sit here an' wait for 'em. Ef I goes to'ds 'em, dey mought pass me in de dark, dem dar sleigh-bells makes sich a everlastin' racket."

He takes his seat upon the fallen boulder, in the darkness; but he is far from comfortable. The blood moves slowly in his veins, and the chill in the air is nipping. But his moral courage waxes strong as the sleigh draws nearer, and he falls into a soliloquy:

"Dis yer's a mighty bad place in de road. I don't see how come white folks aint got no better sense 'n ter go make a road inter de hillside, like dis, nohow. Ef I hadden jes' happened 'long 'bout dis pertickler time, dem dar two ole harnts 'ud 'a had some fresh 'uns ter keep 'em company dis night, sho!" He passes his hand over the rough edges of the rock on which he is seated, and continues: "Dis yer rock 'ud a-flung a fo'-hoss waggon an' team overboard, let alone a Yankee jumper."

The sleigh is near at hand, and he stands up to halloo. But the jangle of the bells drowns his call, and the sleigh comes on. He steps nearer the bank on his right, to catch the ear of the driver, and calls again. It is very dark, and he cannot distinguish the outlines of the horses as they approach. Then there is the sound of another rushing boulder from above him. It comes hurtling down in the path of the one already fallen; and in a moment old Newton lies sorely wounded and bleeding in the highway.

The horses halt suddenly, rear up snorting, and stand with trembling limbs and dilated nostrils.

Its occupants turn the sleigh as best they can in the darkness, and, taking the old man up gently, lift him, and drive him, at his own request, to the cabin in Pinchtown, to which he directs them. His voice is faint and unnatural, and he speaks very little. They place him on the rough bed, and the young woman whose life he has saved, bending over him with unspeakable pity, sees his face in the light of the flickering fire, and says:

"It is Uncle Newton."

He lies there very quietly, with a new blanket over him that has come from her house. The city this morning, and looks up at her with dumb, staring eyes that bring the tears to her own. He hears her husband say, "It was an awful accident, Mary," and it dawns upon him by degrees that it was Mars' Jeem's daughter who was in that sleigh. A faint smile flits across the worn features, and he whispers:

"I kep' ye fom goin' over de bank, Mis' Mary."

The staring eyes close, and he moves restlessly. His mind is over in Tuckahoe.

"Dem lilac bushes by de cabin gate is gettin' mon's'ou' big, an' de chesnut-tree is jes' climed up inter de sky."

Outside the hovel, in the "lug road," an urchin, unconscious of the tragedy within, has fired a cracker. The wounded man shifts his position quickly, and starts up.

"Hi! wat dat?"

"It's Unc' Pete's Jim a-shootin' poperackers for Chris'mas," sobbs Aggy, with her face hidden in her apron.

Sank gets up from 'is place in front of the fire, and fixes his almost human eyes upon the group about the bed.

"I tho't dey was a-drawin' de corks out'n de champagne bottles in de dine'-room at ole marster's," the sufferer says. "Yes, sah! comin' sah! dar tereckly!"

The voice is on a high key now, and Dicey shrieks, "Sabe him! He's ou'n' he head wid de feber."

"Ole marster," he goes on in his raving, "I know as how it's agin de law for de niggers ter larn ter read an' write, an' dat dar ain't no mo' forgiveness for dat dan dar ef der patter-rollers ketches 'em out arter night." The tones of his voice grow softer. "But I ain't afear'd o' you, ole marster. I never wanted nothin' wid dem letters an' a, b, als 'scusin' ter read de Good Book, marster; an' little Aggy, she was a-he'ping de ole nigger ter 'scape fom de bondidge o' sin. I knows yer ain't a-gwine ter bar down too hard on me. I'se 'longed ter you sence de day I c'd remember, an' ye ain't never yet laid yer finger's weight onter me. I ain't afraid now. I'se worked for you, an' slaved for you, an' loved you an' all my tother white folks!"