

## Choice Literature.

### A PINCHTOWN PAUPER.

The following pathetic story from the pen of A. C. Gordon appears in the current number of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

#### CHAPTER I.

The place is not inaptly named. It lies beyond the city's suburbs; and there are no handsome dwellings or fine stores in Pinchtown. The clutch of squalid poverty is upon it. In the winter its one street is often hub-deep with mud; and in summer clouds of dust from passing wheels are wafted in through the open doors and windows of its sordid hovels. Its poor pretence of a pavement is ashes and desolation. The windows of the rude huts are garnished with old hats, articles of worn clothing and scraps of newspapers.

To be a resident of the poverty-stricken village is a grave offence in the eyes of the more prosperous of the race to which its denizens belong.

"Dem's ign'unt, an' lazy, an' no'count nigger over dar in Pinchtown," says the uncouth keeper of the little green grocery at the corner of Water Street, a good mile nearer to the heart of the city.

Across the road from Pinchtown, in the summer season, the Union Cemetery, surrounded by its enclosure of massive stone masonry, shows a thousand well kept graves, clad in smoothly-shaven green. Over the walls of the keeper's cottage, near the iron gate, bloom clambering roses; and the darker hue of the ivy marks the spot with verdure through the year. The trees that were saplings two decades ago have come to throw an ample shade over the long lines of graves, and are the haunts of many birds. The walks which wind about the place, among the marble stones, are gravelled and white. Two cannon stand near the flagpole, in mute reminder of the reason for the cemetery's being; and high above floats, in sunshine and in storm, the great flag.

It is the latter part of June, 188-. In the sunny weather, on a broken bench at the door of the forlornest shanty in the hamlet sits its forlornest denizen. Abject poverty has pursued him for many years; and though he denies it stoutly, he has come at last half-heartedly to believe in the reiterated assertion of his wife, that "Newton done los' his luck." Into the uncouth fashion of the coarse splint basket on which he is at work he is weaving disjointed fancies of the dead men hid in the cemetery's sheltering bosom, and of the hardships in the life of one of the noblest living dwellers in Pinchtown.

He had been an "exhorter" in the days of slavery. Since the war ended, he has kept up, in a futile fashion, his former calling; but his age and infirmity, and the disadvantages of ignorance imposed by the old slave system, are powerfully against him. His faith is as broad and catholic as it is simple; and to those of his neighbours who, being almost as poor and no less ignorant than himself, will pay him the respect of a seeming attention, he often speaks as with the gift of tongues. But they do not recognize the force of the homely phrases, and hearken to him grudgingly, deeming his teachings to be of little worth, because he does not expound them from the printed page, after the fashion of the Rev. Givins, of the Ebenezer Church in the city. Like themselves, he is "unlart," and can neither read nor write.

"I shudden wonder ef dem soljers is all in heah'n," he says, reflectively, as he trims a splint with his worn basket-knife; "an' ef dey ain't, dar's whar dey orter be. Dey was de soljers o' de Lord, what sot us free. But dey did n' shake of all de sheekles. Dar's some on 'em a-hangin' ter me yit, like cockle-burrers on ter a sheep. 'Pears like to me ef when I 'ceased I'd be put away onder sech green grass as dat, wid flowers a-blossomin' roun', an' periwinkles a wroppin' my grave all up, 'n' an' de birds a-singin' an' a-carryin' on up dar in dem trees, I'd be sorter satisfied with jes' dat. It 'ud be mos' good enough for ole Newton ter lay down dar an' take his res', 'douten nobody to come along a-pesterin' on him, an' a-cussin' 'case de baskits is cranked. It don't make no diff'ence down dar ef de po' nigger is ign'unt. De hope-grasses an' de crickets an' de littenin'-bugs ain't gwine ter lay dat up agin him. De wimmen folks don't 'buse you down dar, I reckon; an' I knows dey ain't a-always slingin' up at ye dat you's a mighty onery preacher what can't read. Dem dar soljers ain't got no rheumatiz, and misery in de back, I spec'; an' dey don't git tired no mo', nuther."

His little granddaughter comes and sits on the bench beside him. Her dress is ragged and she is barefoot; but her mien is marked with a dignity which is almost ludicrous in its self-possession. The old man regards her approach with an interest in which respect dominates affection. She is a wonderful creature in his eyes, for she carries in her hand the key to the treasure house of knowledge, at whose outer gate he has stood a beggar for fifty odd years. She has come with her primer to teach him his daily lesson.

He lays his oak splints and his half-finished basket aside, and patiently waits while the child opens the book.

"Does you think it's any use, Aggy?" he asks.

"You have got to a, b, ab, gran'daddy," she replies, and points with dusky finger to the first column of the grimy little page. He wants to tell her that he is in despair of ever learning to read; but he has not the heart to wound her.

"Is a, b, ab, right smart and fur on, I say?" he inquires, with seeming interest, and she laughs, and tells him that it is only the beginning of all that she knows.

A lank and hungry-looking cur, that lies with eyes closed in the sunshine, at the old man's feet, pricks up his flea-bitten ears, and lifts his head at the sound of the child's voice.

"Po' ole Sank," she says, as she stoops to caress him, "do you want to learn a, b, c with gran'daddy?"

The dog winks his waxy eyes, and thumps his ragged tail slowly against the ground.

"Aggy," says the ole man, "I'se afeard it ain't no use. You seems to be sorter sot on it, chile, but I done 'bout gin it up. I was smartly sot on it, too, when you fus' started out; but w'at's de sense o' yer tryin' ter larn dem words ter a po' fool old nigger like me? You's young an' kin git 'em straight; but you can't teach old dogs new tricks. Marster used to tell me dat long time ago—an' ole marster, he knowed mo' 'n evvybody else in de worl'. Sank, dar, he cudden larn ter tree a coon like my little bench-legged Towse use ter tree 'em over in Tuckahoe. 'Case why? 'Case Towse just growed up ter it f'om a puppy, an' Sank, he don't got too ole, a chasin' rabbits 'roun' dat 'ar grave yard wall."

Sank wags his forlorn tail again in recognition of his name, and the child slips down from the bench and cuddles up to the dog for a moment. Then returning to her seat at the old man's side, she says, with sturdy insistence:

"Let's start here, gran'daddy," and points again to the head of the little column of two-lettered words.

"A, b, ab; c, b, eb," spells the old man, painfully and anxiously. Then he stops and says, "Aggy, you hear dat 'ar leetle red-bird over dar in dat bush by de stone wall?"

She nods her heads, and looks up at him.

"Dat bird ain't niver been sitg but jes' ont song all his born days. Ef ye was ter ketch him an' shet him up inter a cage, an' pipe chunes ter him as sweet as dem I's heard young Mars' Jeems play on the willer-whistles, way back yonder in Tuckahoe, you cudden larn dat bird ter sing 'em. Dat bird wain't hatched for ter sing but jes' dat one."

The parable has struck home, but he cannot bear the expression of disappointment in the child's face; and so, to please her, he takes the book and begins slowly to spell out the lesson. But his heart is no longer in the work. He has lost the high hope that he once had, and is unhappy in the loss.

Not many words have been spelled over when a cracked voice calls shrilly from the hovel, "Aggee! you, Aggy!" And with nimble feet the girl hastens away to fetch water from the spring beyond the road for her grandmother.

The owner of the voice comes to the door, and speaks apply to the old man, who sits on the bench where Aggy has left him, still gazing hopelessly at a, b, uh.

"De Lord sakes, Newton! Dot gal ain't sho', still a-lookin' r' d tryin' ter larn ye dem books, is she? Ain't ye got no mo' sense 'n ter be a-addlin' yer skull wid spellin'? Ye mought know dar ain't no larnin' a gwine ter hatch out'n dat ole thick held o' your'n. Ye better be a workin' on dem baskits. I'll lay ye'll get mo' ter eat out'n dem dan ye gwine ter git 'long o' dem letters."

"Dat's how it 'pears like ter me, too, Dicey," says the old man, submissively, and laying the book reverently upon the bench near him, he takes up his basket-frame, and again begins to weave the oak-splints in and out. He works on earnestly, but he is oppressed with a sense of failure.

"Here I'se been a-wrastlin' an' a-scuttin' wid dat book nine weeks come nex' Monday, an' ain't no furdur dan close ter de start. Somehow, I can't hole on ter it. De weeds gets away wid de corn quicker'n de hoe can cut 'em out. 'Taint no use."

Aggy comes back from the spring, and passes by him with a tin bucket in each hand. The cool water shimmers and sparkles in the summer sun; and Sank, with lolling tongue, gets up and follows the little water-carrier into the cabin. Dicey sends her out to the garden to "grabble some 'taters," and soon she is busily engaged in the task, with the dog close at her heels.

"Gran'daddy don't want to learn to read," she says, passionately, to the dumb brute, as she drops a potato into the piggan, and lifts the dog's wistful face to hers. "He's got plenty o' sense, ain't he, Sank? He just don't want to learn."

And Sank says "yes" as plainly as any dog's tail ever spoke the word.

But Newton's mind, after a long and bitter struggle, has come irrevocably to another conclusion than that reached by the little girl and the dog. He has weighed his capacity in the balance of experience, and found it woefully wanting. Many a night he has lain awake for hours on his hard bed, while Dicey slept by his side and pictured to himself the grace and peace which should penetrate his soul through the doorway of Aggy's primer. Those waking dreams of the night are ended now; yet thoughts of the child at school and the sight of the little book have started in his mind a train of long unheeded memories. He recalls the old field school in Tuckahoe, beyond the Blue Ridge mountains that lie in the far distance. There rises up before him the stern face of the teacher, who, with unsparing hickory rod, threshed the seed corn of the commonwealth in the persons of Newton's young masters, with whom he always went, as henchman, to "tote" the lunch basket, and as companion to share its contents when recess came. He remembers the ring tail, and knucks, and chermans of those boon days with a deep sense of pleasure in the retrospect. He sees again with his mind's eye the truant fishing for "yaller-bellies" in the Jackfish Pond, whose water was deep and green, and along whose banks the dewberry vines ran rank and the wild dog-roses bloomed. He chuckles to think of his arguments with them to prove that the fish always bit best on Sunday, and how once or twice he had persuaded them of its truth. Then he grows solemn in the reflection that fishing on Sunday was a sin in itself, and that it was far more heinous to entice others to its commission; and imagines that perhaps these covert excursions were the cause of the troubles that have come on him in his old age. He recalls the trapping of partridges in the straw-field next the wood, and the catching of "ole hayars," on frosty winter mornings, in the "gums" at the nibbled bottom of the worn fence. Faces, white and black, of his long-dead people come back to him in the wake of fancies conjured up by Aggy's primer, until at last he recalls the bloody charge at Gettysburg, with his "young Mars' Jeems" lying under the trampling horses' hoofs; and the bent figure of his gray-haired "old marster," left alone at the war's end, in the great old mansion in Tuckahoe with none but "Mars' Jeems'" little daughter.

#### CHAPTER II.

The snow lies deep upon the cemetery, and almost blots out of sight the hillocks beneath which the dead soldiers have slumbered for so many years. The flag is limp and motionless, and icicles hang from the black cannon and the eaves of the stone cottage. But the ivy is still green upon the wall, and there are red berries amid the waxen and pointed leaves of the holly-tree at the gate.

Down the hard-frozen road that leads to the city, the Pinchtown pauper, ragged and forlorn, is trudging painfully, with a number of his misshapen splint baskets strung over his shoulders. He is weak and crippled with rheumatism, and his progress is very slow. But there is a glow about his heart, whose warmth shames the poverty of his torn jacket and his battered hat.

"It's been a rough spell," he says, meditatively, as he pauses for breath and looks up at the gray winter sky, "an' ther's gwine ter be some mo' fallin' weather afo' ter-morrer. Dat ring wain't 'round de moon las' night for rothin'. I done been seed dis weather in de elements for mo'n a week. But me an' Aggy an' Sank an' Dicey is pulled through so fur; an' ef I jes' sells dese yer baskits, de weather may drap, for what I keers, 'twel I sells some mo'."

He places his burden on a snowbank near him, as he speaks and addresses it:

"You's waf a quarter apiece. Leas'-ways, dat's what I axes for ye. You's wuf mo' 'n dat for de work an' de trouble I'se had wid ye; but me an' de white folks ain't gwine to agree on dat one p'int. You looks mighty small an' uply ter dem, but ye 'pears pow'ful full o' white-oak splints ter me. If I gets 25 cents apiece for ye, dat'll come ter \$1.50; and dat'll make de pot bile high for a while, anyhow."

The baskets are mute and miserable looking on their perch. He picks them up and starts forward again.

"I ain't nuvver heer o' po' yit but what I cudden get sump'n or 'nuther for Aggy an' Sank an' de ole 'oman ter eat. But somehow it do appear ter me like de times was a-waxin' wusser. Bar' backs an' hungry bellies seem for ter be in de merjority in dese yer parts. Prayin' an' workin' don't look like dey fetches de blessin' same as dey uster over yander beyant dem mount'ins; " and he turns for a moment and gazes wistfully in the direction of the Blue Ridge range that lies behind him.

A waggon comes along, driven by an acquaintance.

"Git in, ole man, an' I'll giv ye a lift as fur as town," says the driver. "Ye ain't guttin' up de hill no pearler dan de frog in de well, what jumped up one amp and drapped back two."

The Pinchtown pauper, carefully depositing his precious freight in the rear part of the vehicle, clammers to a seat in the front.

"How's you makin' it, dese days?" queries his friend, heartily, and gives him a slap on the shoulder that causes him to flinch. "Wot's de news down in Pinchtown?"

"Pain in de head an' miz'ry in de back, Jim," the old man answers. "But I orten ter grudge dat. De Lord don't let me go hongry or cold many days in de week. Den I'm a-gettin' on in years. De sap in de old tree don't run fast, like it useter run in de twig. News in Pinchtown? Dar ain't nothin' in Pinchtown 'scusin' little niggers an' cur dogs; an' dar ain't nothin' new 'bout dem. Wot's de news wid you, Jim?"

"Nothin'. Hard times an' plenty on em."

"Dat's a fac, Jim,—dat's a fac'. Things ain't like dey uster be wid me when I lived over dar in Tuckahoe wid marster an' de boys."

"I dunno nothin' 'bout Tuckahoe. I ain't nuvver been dar. I'm a-gwine over on one o' dese yer railroad excursions, when de summer time gits back agin', an' take a look at dat gre't land o' Goshen whar all you Louisa County niggers come f'om, an' don't never seem likeye wants ter git back ter it."

"Yer ign'unce is agin ye, Jim," the old man replies, with a touch of asperity. "Dem was high old times we uster ter have over dar. 'N' you can't ketch up wid 'em on no railroad excruss' any mo', nuther. Dem dar times is done lef de Nu. States for furrin' parts, dey is. Many's de day at ole marster's when I knowed twenty-five ter thirty strange white folks at de house at once, wid de kerriges a-takin' on 'em away an' a-fetchin' fresh 'uns up ter de front steps, day in an' day out. Sich a-dancin', an' a-frolickin', an' a-huntin', an' a-fishin', an' a-ridin' hosses, an' a-chasin' foxes!" He pauses a moment in his reminiscences to look back at his baskets. "I got ter keep my eye on dem things. 'Twudden do for 'em ter drap out, an' some good-fo'-nothin' nigger come along an' pick 'em up, an' git 'em patt'n."

Jim hods his head and grins. "Nigger what gits de patt'n o' dem baskits 'un git a fat thing, sho'."

He is interested in the life beyond the mountains, and wants to hear more of it. "Cut a purty big old dash over dar in dem times, did you, Unc' Newton?"

"Dat's a fac', Jim,—dat's a fac'. I'se seed Randall a-fiddlin' for de white folks all night long, wid ole marster footin' de reel same as de younges' an' de brashes; an' o' in de kitchen an' down ter de quarters de niggers was kickin' dey heels jes' as high, wid de banjer a-pickin', de 'possum a-cookin' an' da asheake a-bakin' in de collard leaves on de haif. Dem was days when ashpone and buttermilk had some tas'e ter 'em, an' 'possum fat an' hominy 'ud make any nigger's mouf water. My mouf done los' his relish, Jim; an' I don't nuvver see no possums no mo', nuther ha' no banjers."

Jim laughs, and the waggon rattles along over the frozen road. The atmosphere is keenly suggestive of more snow. It is a parrow, precipitous way over which they are passing, and huge limestone boulders, half clad in snow, jet out above and below them. On the acclivity at their left are evidences of work recently done by quarriers; but the place is almost inaccessible, and the workmen have deserted it leaving the snow trampled any some of the great rocks more exposed to view.

"'Pears like dem folks diggin' a grave up dar," says Newton.