

POOR WHITES IN THE SOUTH.

THEIR POVERTY AND PRINCIPLES.

THE MOST DEGRADED, IGNORANT, AND HOPELESS CLASS IN THE SOUTH—THE POOREST OF THE POOR WHITES—HOW THEY LIVE IN THE MOUNTAINS—LOOSE NOTIONS OF MORALITY AND UTTER IGNORANCE THEIR CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS.

From a Special Correspondent.

BIRMINGHAM, Ala., Friday, May 4, 1877.

The term "poor white" designates different classes of people, according to the real or the imaginary status of the speaker. Whom the Karkey called poor were poor indeed; and who has more experience and better judgment in this matter? At the other extreme, the wealthy planter of the Black Belt and other cotton regions considered all working white men as poor whites. But to-day whom the planter considered poor are independent; and who has more experience in wealth and in poverty? Formerly the planter had the most profound contempt for workmen. He considered them even beneath his slave, who was a man of property. And accordingly, the oppression of the poor whites was worse than slavery, for they had no protection or help from others; they were the objects of social scorn, and even the victims of petty warfare and annoyances practiced by the slave—under the master's acquiescence, if not incentive—to drive them away from the planter's aristocratic neighborhood. Even the negro considered himself greatly superior to them, for his chief criterion of a man's worth was the number of his slaves. A curious phase of the negro's character is his pride in having had a rich master rather than a good one. Nothing insulted a negro more than to underestimate his master's wealth or possessions. Even now it is not safe to defame his employer's mule, though the animal approves your estimate of his short feed and long whip.

The poor whites were often not only actively persecuted in small ways; they were practically debarred from commercial and other success by the monopoly of money and power in the planter. They had "no showin'," as they say. For their own class had no means for patronizing or helping them; the planter would have nothing to do with them, and the negro had "no use for them." Besides this social ostracism and this financial oppression, they were subjected to a hopeless reign of ignorance. There were no free schools. The planters were opposed, for potent and selfish reasons, to the education of the negro, and hence equally unwilling that schools should exist for whites, since the spread of knowledge is uncontrollable. While the planter's children were educated by tutors at home or in Northern institutions, the poor white's children ran wild in ignorance. And there was no hope for better conditions in this regard. The poor whites, without political power, had no prospect of ever getting any public rights or privileges. It is no exaggeration to say that they were the most unforgotten and the most hopeless class in the South. The planter had many advantages, as well as disadvantages, in his wealth. Travel, education, and leading influence enlarged his views and powers. Even the slave was often, very often, more fortunate in having the discipline of labor, and the food, raiment, and attention demanded by his value. After the war the freedman still had the advantage in many respects. Relieved of his real shackles, he felt like the runner relieved of his leaden soles. Buoyancy and hope gave him a fresh start for improvement. But the poor white was in bonds less tangible. There was no sudden relief for him in emancipation. His ignorance could not be abolished, his poverty could not be relieved, and his ostracism could not be ameliorated by a legal enactment. He felt no buoyancy or hope in the new order of things. On the contrary, the commercial depression and political darkness about him seemed only to confirm his misery for life. And the lowest of the poor whites are to-day what they were in the midst of slavery—the most ignorant, unfortunate, and hopeless class in the South.

As might be expected, the social and commercial disadvantages surrounding them in the Black Belt and other productive cotton regions drove them from the rich lands absorbed by slavery. The poor whites fled to the mountains. This region has always been called "a white man's country." But a significant change is now recorded in the term. Before the war it meant a region without slaves; consequently without wealth, without power, without promise. Now it means the land of promise, where the white man is to rule. The region itself has changed in public estimation. Its mineral wealth is extraordinary, and is regarded as the soundest basis for the hopes of Alabama's development. It is really the land of promise in this regard. Moreover, it is now the most independent region in agriculture and the most enterprising in manufacturing industries. The mountains are peculiarly suited to the poor whites—that is, suited to supply their few necessities, though not to remedy their defects of education. The poor people from the Black Belt, the Valley of the Tennessee, and those immigrants from the States east of Alabama who had not the means to establish large cotton plantations, gravitated naturally to this region. For the free lands suited their purse, the absence of wealth isolated their self-respect, the lack of civilization welcomed their ignorance, and the ease of making a modest living suited their strange mingling of indolence and independence.

Accordingly, the mountains were settled chiefly by whites who worked, and who owned few if any slaves; though here and there was an individual of property and education. The most of them are still poor, though generally self-supporting. In fact the region is a field of poverty; and the grades of civilization are stratified almost as distinctly as the coal and iron on which it stands. Here is a deposit of pure ignorance among the hills and woods; there is a vein of rather lighter character in the valleys; and again, along the railroads is a mixed group of opposite elements. The comparison suggests also the cause of this condition. Where ignorance, poverty, and inefficiency or idleness prevail there is no activity, no intimate relations of distant elements, no interchange of qualities, no amelioration of local or general disadvantages. The people are as inert as their minerals.

An account of the homes and lives here, to comply with the principles of rhetoric, ought to begin with the best; for these show the common-place features of life, while the homes and the people of inferior ranks show the remarkable features, and culminate our interest where the account can enumerate only the absence of all things. But this order would leave a mournful impression that the future will not perpetuate. Let us, therefore, begin by visiting one of the poorest homes; yet one that is not exceptional, but rather of a class well established in point of numbers.

The forest still covers the ridges of this red land, or gravel. The pines predominate, as proof of the thinness of the soil. And the hills or ridges are so steep and closely packed between the larger ranges that there is scarcely a garden plot of level land. But in some places a moderate slope of the bottom along a stream offers a patch of tillable soil. Here and there in such situations I see a small cabin and a small field. The clearing is a mere speck of earth in the forest and a crude and unsightly bluish on nature's handiwork of hills and groves. Here I come to one of these homes. The old house is partly gone near the house, where the rails have been taken now and then for fire wood. The inclosure has about three-quarters of an acre. Dark stumps stand about in a stubborn way, resisting the encroachments of the plow. The place has been the home of the present occupant for 11 years. As I climb over the fence—there are no bars or gate—the hostess leaves her hoeing and goes into the cabin. An axe sticks in a stump at the wood-pile; this and the hoe are all the tools on the place. The cabin is made of logs and cracks in almost equal proportions. The chimney, outside of one end of the cabin, is made of sticks and clay piled up not quite as high as the peak of the roof. It leans from the house in an off-angled manner, as though it might secede in a stormy time. A ragged quilt of unknown colors hangs from a rafter where the shingles have been blown from one corner of the roof. The doorway is a hole almost square, and so low that I see the woman only from her feet up to her waist; the casing is gone, if it ever existed, and the door hangs by the top hinge, a wooden hook and pin. There is not a vine, a flower, or a shrub about the place. The cabin is the only structure. As I come to the door I see the entire woman seated on a low bench, on the further side of the fire-place.

"Good morning, Madam."

"Good morning, Sir," she says, looking up from her dirty knitting. She is rather angular, almost thin and poor, though not over five-and-

twenty years of age. Her face has a pleasant, frank expression.

"Can I have a drink of water here?"

"Yes, Sir; jes help yerself. It's right thar in the bucket."

A bright-eyed little girl of five years stands behind her mother. She is an illegitimate child, for her mother has been married only a few months. In these particulars they have numerous relatives here, certainly as many as one-half the population of their neighborhood. The relations of men and women are perfectly free, and voluntary expressions of liking never occasion any constraint or entail any embarrassment. In chastity and decorum they are at the foot of the ascent. A physician was called to a case of accouchement. He found all the women and girls of the neighborhood in the single room forming the house. They would not withdraw till he refused his services in their presence.

"What do you raise here in your garden?"

"Cotton."

"But do you grow nothing else?"

"No, Sir; not much truck. We kin sell cotton, or spin it, and sell the yarn or the socks, fur a heap mo' 'an any other truck, out hyar in the woods." She spits tobacco-juice into the coals with professional neatness and precision. I have not been invited in; but as this is not a requirement here, I crouch through the door and seat myself on one of the two splint chairs. The entire house is one room about 10 by 15. I see through the cracks in the walls on every side, and at the junction of the rafters at the gables, and along the eaves the holes and cracks are as large as a water-pail. The floor has cracks fully two inches wide between some of the boards. In each corner of one end of the house is a bed. The bedstead is made of a few poles held up by resting in cracks of the walls, and by one leg at the front corner of the foot. Short boards split from pine trees rest on these poles, and form the bottom of the bedstead. Some corn husks, loose, without any tick, cover those boards to the depth of an inch and a half, not more. The bed-clothes are filthy quilts. At the foot of one bed stands an old spinning-wheel, with its bobbin half full of coarse cotton. A pair of cards for carding cotton lie on a shelf above, with some rolls of cotton ready for spinning. In the corner, above the woman, is a shoe-case nailed to the logs as a cupboard. It contains two tin pepper-boxes, one earthen and one tin cup; and a box of salt, a bag of corn-meal, and a piece of pork. Two wooden hooks over the fire-place hold a long rifle and a fish-line wound on a chip. In the corner next the door a shelf nailed to the wall serves as a table. On its bare boards are a fork and two iron spoons. On the hearth are a Dutch baking skillet, a spider, a tea-kettle, and a tin coffee-pot. Three or four articles of clothing hang against the wall over the bed. These articles, with the axe and hoe, are all there are on the entire premises, without or within, in crack, corner, or under the beds, either in food, raiment, or utensils. It is impossible to state the mournful effect. The washing is done at the creek, where a wealthy neighbor has a large iron caldron, and a strong shelf and a paddle for pounding clothes; but as this labor is neither frequent nor long, these facilities are ample. The clothes are dried, bleached, starched, ironed, and crimped by hanging on the fence a day or two.

But the young woman is happy, and as the reserve of a first visit wears away, she talks more freely, and smiles in winning good nature.

"My man works at the mines. But they don't pay nothin' much; its jes as if yo didn't do nothin', 'most, cause yo can't git any money, they pay in goods, and mighty high at that."

"Well, then, how do you make a living with only half an acre of land?"

"The cotton, that's always money; we kin sell hit; or else spin yarn and make socks."

"How much cotton do you get from this patch?"

"May be a hundred pounds in good years. That fetches \$10 or \$12. Then we peel oak bark in the Spring, or chop wood. My man's a mighty good hunter, and he gits right smart o' turkeys and deer in a year, though they haint so plenty as they used to be. There used to be thousands o' game in these hyar woods. And we picks blackberries and carries 'em to town. That's six mile. But we can't git mo' 'an 10 or 15 cents a bucket—the niggers picks such heaps of 'em. Thar haint much money in hit."

"Do you own this land?"

"No, Sir; hit's publicland. We've lived hyar 'leven year, now; but hit's a gittin' wore out, and I reckon we'll move soon."

This class of people generally clear a small piece of public land, build a hut, and stay there till the soil is run down, or some more aggressive and personal disadvantage makes it desirable to seek a new home. Then they move, and repeat the operation. This saves them from paying taxes. They never get a home or land enough to support them, for the proceeds of the cotton crop or the few bushels of sweet potatoes are gone by Christmas. Then day wages are sought, but two or three days are all the man will work at once; he gets meal and pork enough for the next day or two, or week, and then neither his employer's needs nor his own poverty will induce him to work again until the meal and pork are gone.

"How does you'uns live?" This frank question startles me with its contrast of New-York life.

"Some of us buy and sell stocks."

"Sheep and hogs?"

"Yes, and some lamba."

"I reckon it takes a heap for New-York City?"

"More than 200 a week."

"God Almighty!" she exclaims, with unchecked astonishment. I am very glad I didn't tell her the full amount.

"See here, little girl; what's that?"

After much coaxing she comes and takes a silver quarter.

"Nickel," she answers.

"Why, sister, that's no nickel; that thar's a quarter."

But the child is too unfamiliar with quarters and too little versed even in nickels to be persuaded, or to see the difference.

The woman is a fair sample of her class. She cannot read or write. But there is something about her that mitigates her absolute ignorance. Perhaps it is her earnest expression and serious kindness that make me forget her dull mind. But her angular, half-fed appearance, her uncleanness, and the miserable, repulsive, state of her home come over me like a nightmare, when I look from her sallow face to the dismal surroundings. Then her hair is unkempt; her dirty robe of the poorest homespun linsey-woolsey, is without collar or cuffs, pin, ribbon, or the faintest evidence of a single feminine grace. She is dull and slow. But those hands would be devoted without reserve or fatigue to the sick or the needy. In this she has had the education of necessity, and sympathy in mutual dependence. If I had a fortune in money in my knapsack it would be safer in her unlocked house than in a bank, though many of her class have a certain, very certain, fondness now and then for a stray hog in the woods, or for a loose hoe or other tool.

But the good far outweighs the evil, which has the substance of only dark shadows. Yet how dark it is where a page is never lighted; where a thought never gleams in the dullness of common routine; where the hope, nor even the desire of growth never opens a glimpse of the future. But who can tell how much or how little inner life there is in this rough nature. I fear I have forgotten her possibilities, for she seems almost ready for higher things; or at least expectant of me, from a different life than her dull experience affords. And as I shake hands she is saddened that I go and leave nothing to realize her momentary visions or yearnings. I cannot stay longer in such a scene. From the hill-top I turn back and wave the little girl a good-bye wish for a better life.

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