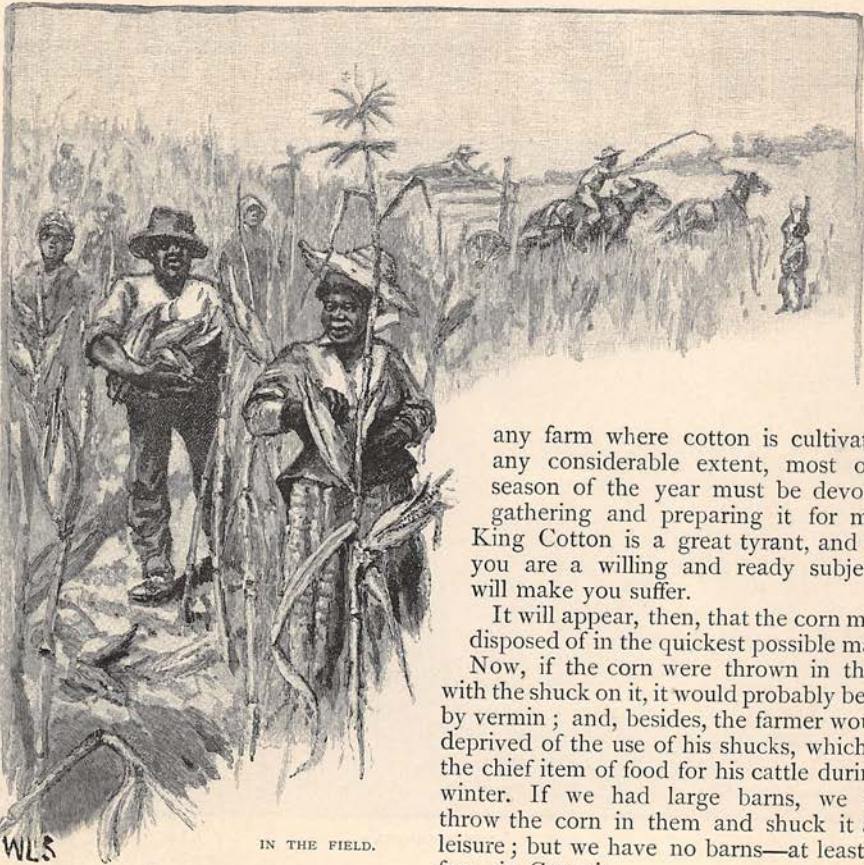


A GEORGIA CORN-SHUCKING.



IN THE FIELD.

any farm where cotton is cultivated to any considerable extent, most of this season of the year must be devoted to gathering and preparing it for market. King Cotton is a great tyrant, and unless you are a willing and ready subject, he will make you suffer.

It will appear, then, that the corn must be disposed of in the quickest possible manner.

Now, if the corn were thrown in the crib with the shuck on it, it would probably be eaten by vermin; and, besides, the farmer would be deprived of the use of his shucks, which form the chief item of food for his cattle during the winter. If we had large barns, we might throw the corn in them and shuck it at our leisure; but we have no barns—at least, very few—in Georgia.

Out of these conditions has sprung the corn-shucking; and it has grown into importance, even more as a social than as an economic feature among our farming people. It is peculiarly suited to negro genius. Among no other people could it flourish and reach the perfection which it here attains.

The first work toward gathering the corn crop in Georgia is to strip the stalks of their blades, *i. e.*, “pull the fodder,” which is done in August or September. This work is done by hand, the laborer stripping the blades from stalk after stalk until he gets his hands full, and then tying them together with a few blades of the same; and this constitutes a “hand.” These hands are hung on the stalks of corn a day or two until they are “cured,” after which they are tied up, three or four together, in bundles, and these bundles are stacked in the fields, or hauled up to the stables and thrown into the fodder-loft. The corn is thus left on the naked stalk until some time in October or November, by which time it will have become hard and dry. If Georgians, like the Western farmers, had nothing to gather in the fall but the corn, we might spend the whole fall gathering it; but, on

The farmer who proposes to give a corn-shucking selects a level spot in his lot, conveniently near the crib, rakes away all trash, and sweeps the place clean with a brush broom. The corn is then pulled off the stalks, thrown into wagons, hauled to the lot, and thrown out on the spot selected, all in one pile. If it has been previously “nored” through the neighborhood that there is to be plenty to eat and drink at the corn-shucking, and if the night is auspicious, there will certainly be a crowd. Soon after dark the negroes begin to come in, and before long

the place will be alive with them,—men, women, and children. After the crowd has gathered and been moderately warmed up, two “gin’r’ls” are chosen from among the most famous corn-shuckers on the ground, and these proceed to divide the shuckers into two parties, later comers reporting alternately to one side or the other, so as to keep the forces equally divided. The next step, which is one of great importance, is

in a corn-shucker differs from that of the soldier in that the former is in greater danger than any of his followers; for the chances are that, should his side seem to be gaining, one of their opponents will knock the leader off the corn-pile, and thus cause a momentary panic, which is eagerly taken advantage of. This proceeding, however, is considered fair only in extreme cases, and not unfrequently leads to a general row. If it is possible, imagine



THE SHUCKING.

to divide the corn-pile. This is done by laying a fence-rail across the top of the corn-pile, so that the vertical plane, passing through the rail, will divide the pile into two equal portions. Laying the rail is of great importance, since upon this depends the accuracy of the division; it is accompanied with much argument, not to say wrangling. The position of the rail being determined, the two generals mount the corn-pile, and the work begins. The necessity for the “gin’r’ls” to occupy the most conspicuous position accessible, from which to cheer their followers, is one reason why they get up on top of the corn; but there is another, equally important, which is to keep the rail from being moved, it being no uncommon thing for one side to change the position of the rail, and thus throw an undue portion of the work upon their adversaries. The position of “gin’r’l”

a negro man standing up on a pile of corn, holding in his hand an ear of corn and shouting the words on the next page, and you will have pictured the “corn gin’r’l.” It is a prime requisite that he should be ready in his improvisations and have a good voice, so that he may lead in the corn-song. The corn-song is almost always a song with a chorus, or, to use the language of corn-shuckers, the “gin’r’ls give out,” and the shuckers “drone.” These songs are kept up continuously during the entire time the work is going on, and though extremely simple, yet, when sung by fifty pairs of lusty lungs, there are few things more stirring.

The most common form is for the generals to improvise words, which they half sing, half recite, all joining in the chorus. As a specimen of this style of corn-song, the following will answer:

First Gen. "Here is yer corn-shucker."
All Hands. "Oh ho ho ho ho."
Second Gen. "Here is yer nigger ruler."
All Hands. "Oh ho ho ho ho."
Both Gens. "Oh ho ho ho ho."
All Hands. "Oh ho ho ho ho."
First Gen. "Don't yer hyer me holler?"
All Hands. "Oh ho ho ho ho."
Second Gen. "Don't yer hyer me lumber?"
All Hands. "Oh ho ho ho ho," etc.

In this the generals frequently recount their adventures, travels and experiences. The writer knew of a negro who went down to the sea-coast, and when he returned, carried by storm a corn-shucking of which he was general, with the words: "I've bin ter de ilund."

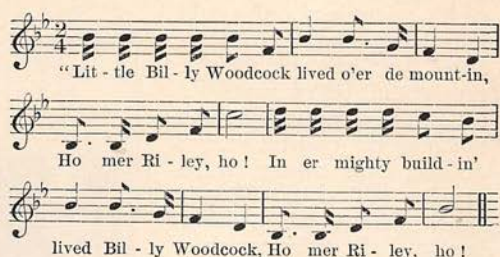
Of course "Brer Rabbit" must come in for his share of the honor, as he does in the following song, which is illustrative of the negro's appreciation of rabbit cunning. It is sung just as the other was, the generals and shuckers alternating:

Gen. "Rabbit in de gyordin."
Cho. "Rabbit hi oh."
Gen. "Dog can't ketch um."
Cho. "Rabbit hi oh."
Gen. "Gun can't shoot um."
Cho. "Rabbit hi oh."
Gen. "Mon can't skin um."
Cho. "Rabbit hi oh."
Gen. "Cook can't cook um."
Cho. "Rabbit hi oh."
Gen. "Folks can't eat um."
Cho. "Rabbit hi oh," etc.

Any reader who has followed so far, may by courtesy be called a corn general, and is therefore at liberty to add indefinitely to the verses, or repeat them as he pleases. Any words at all may be taken and twisted into a chorus, as is illustrated in the following:

Gen. "Slip shuck corn little while."
Cho. "Little while, little while."
Gen. "Slip shuck corn little while."
Cho. "Little while, I say."
Gen. "I'm gwine home in little while," etc.

The finest corn-song of them all is one in which the chorus is, "Ho mer Riley ho." The words here given were some of them picked up in South-west Georgia, and some in other portions of the State. Competent judges say there is really music in this song, and for this reason, as well as to give readers who have never heard the corn-song an idea of the tunes to which they are sung, the notes of this song are given below. No full knowledge of the way in which the song is rendered can be conveyed by notes, but it is believed that the tune is properly reported.



"Lit - tle Bil - ly Woodcock lived o'er de mount-in,
 Ho mer Ri - ley, ho! In er mighty build - in'
 lived Bil - ly Woodcock, Ho mer Ri - ley, ho!

"Little Billy Woodcock got er mighty long bill.
 Ho mer Riley ho.
 He stuck it through de mountin and clinch it on
 tother side.
 Ho mer Riley ho.

"Possum up de gum stump, Raccoon in de holler.
 Ho mer Riley ho.
 Rabbit in de ole feel fat ez he kin waller.
 Ho mer Riley ho.

"Nigger in de wood-pile can't count seb'n.
 Ho mer Riley ho.
 Put him in de fcedder bed he thought he wuz in
 Heb'n.
 Ho mer Riley ho.

"Did yer ever see er gin sling made outer brandy?
 Ho mer Riley ho.
 Did you ever see er yaller gal lick 'lasses candy?
 Ho mer Riley ho."

There is one more very short song which is sung by all hands. The work of finishing the shucking of the last few ears is called "rounding up" the corn-pile, and is almost invariably in the following words:



"Round up, dub - ble up, round up corn;
 Round up, nub - bins up, round up corn."

These words are repeated, over and over, until the last of the corn is shucked, and the work finished.

An amount of work which would astonish the shuckers themselves, and which, if demanded of them in the day-time would be declared impossible, is accomplished under the excitement of the corn-song. They shuck the corn by hand, sometimes using a sharp stick to split open the shuck, but most commonly tearing them open with the fingers. As the feeling of rivalry grows more and more intense, they work faster and faster, stripping the shuck from the ears so fast that they seem to fly almost constantly from their hands.

A staid New-England farmer and his friends, gathered in a comfortable, well-lighted barn, quietly doing the laborious part

of his "husking-bee," would think they had been transferred to pandemonium if they could be conveyed to a Georgia corn-shucking and see how our colored farmers do the same work; and I imagine the social gathering which follows the husking-bee, and the frolic which is the after-piece of the corn-shucking, resemble each other as little as do their methods of work.

It is no rare occurrence for a corn-shucking to terminate in a row instead of a frolic. If one side is badly beaten, there is almost sure to be some charge of fraud; either that the rail has been moved, or part of the corn of the successful party thrown over on the other side "unbeknownst" to them, or some such charge. These offenses are common occurrences, and are aided by the dimness of the light. If any of these charges can be proved, a first-class row ensues, in which ears of corn fly thick and fast, and sometimes more dangerous weapons are used. The owner of the premises can always stop them, and does so. Negroes have great respect for proprietorship, and yield whenever it is asserted.

It is most often the case, however, that the race has been about an equal one, and that good humor pre-

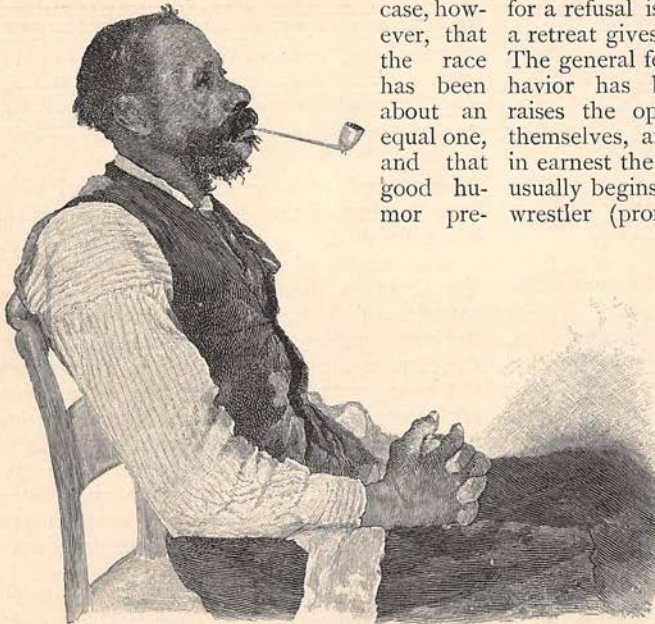
tune, the chorus of which is

"Walk away, walk away!" This honor, though of questionable comfort, or rather most unquestionable discomfort, must be undergone, for a refusal is considered most churlish, and a retreat gives too much license to the guests. The general feeling that most handsome behavior has been shown toward the host, raises the opinion the guests entertain for themselves, and they are prepared to begin in earnest the sports of the occasion. The fun usually begins by some one who is a famous wrestler (pronounced "rasler") offering to

throw down anybody on the ground, accompanying the boast by throwing aside his coat and swaggering round, sometimes making a ring and inviting "eny gemman ez warnts ter git his picter tuk on de groun'," to come in. The challenge is promptly accepted, and the spectators gather around, forming a ring, so that they may be in a position to watch, and, at the same time, encourage and advise their friends. They keep up a continual stream of talk during the



THE WALK AROUND.—THE WRESTLE.



A RETIRED GIN'R'L.

vails amid the great excitement.

The first thing in order is to express thanks for the entertainment, which is done by taking the host, putting him on the shoulders of two strong men, and then marching around, while all hands split their throats to a

whole time, and not unfrequently come to blows over the merits of the wrestlers.

The "rasler's" account of his performance is as much unlike his real conduct as can well be imagined. The fellow who swaggers around boastfully at the shucking will make himself out the most modest person in the world, in recounting his adventures next day. There is a famous corn-shucker and wrestler who is a tenant of the writer,

here ef he didn't git up en swor it wuz er dog-fall.* Gemini! den I got mer blood up. I sed, I did: 'Jest buckle round me.' En no sooner en he tuk his holt, en gin de word ter cut mer patchin, den I tuk him up wid de ole h'ist, en flung him clean over mer shoulder, right squar on top of his hed. De wust uv it wuz, arter dat he wanted ter go fite An' Kal-line's little Jim, kase he sed: 'Dat jarred de gemman.' I tole him ef he toch dat chile, I



THE DANCE.

named Nathan Mitchell, more commonly known in the neighborhood as "An' Fran's Nath." He loves to go over his adventures generally in about these words: "Mars Dave, yer know dis hyer Ike Jones whar live down Mr. Brittels'? Well, sir, I went down ter Miss Marfy Moore's night erfore las'. Dey had er little corn-shuckin' down dar, en arter we got done wid de shuckin', Ike he kermenced cuttin' up his shines, 'lowed he cud fling down anything ter his inches on de ground, en ef dey didn't b'lieve it, all dey had ter do wuz ter toe de mark. De boys dey all wanted me fer ter try 'im, but I wudn't do it, kase I knowed p'intedly ef I tuk holt er dat nigger he wuz bound ter git hurt. When he seed me sorter hol'in' back, he got wusser en wusser, twell finerly I sed: 'Beenst how yer so manish, I'll take one fall wid yer, jest ter give yer sattifacshun.' Wal, sir, I flung dat nigger so hard I got oneasy 'bout him; I wuz nattally feared I had kilt him, and I aint

gin de wust whippin' ever he toled. I don't like dat nigger, nohow."

I happened to hear this same man telling one of his companions about some corn-"gin'r'l," who "got up on de corn-pile en kep' singin' en gwine on twell I got tired, en took him berhine de year wid er year er corn en axed him down"; from which I inferred he had been guilty of the misconduct of throwing at the generals, which has already been mentioned, and which he was sufficiently ashamed of to try and hide from me.

A corn-shucking which is to be considered in the light of a finished performance should end with a dance. Of late years, colored farmers who are "members" frequently give corn-shuckings where no dancing is allowed, but it is common for the party to have a dance before they disperse. These dances take place either in one of the houses, or else

* *I. e.*, a drawn battle, both striking the ground at the same moment.

out of doors on the ground. The dance of late years is a modification of the cotillon, the old-time jig having given place to this, just as in the cities the German and the others have ousted the old-time dances. There is a great deal of jig-dancing in these cotillons, and the man who cannot "cut the pigeon-wing" is considered a sorry dancer indeed; but still it purports to be a cotillon. Endurance is a strong point in the list of accomplishments of the dancer, and, other things being equal, that dancer who can hold out the longest is considered the best. The music is commonly made by a fiddler and a straw-beater, the fiddle being far more common than the banjo, in spite of tradition to the contrary. The fiddler is the man of most importance on the ground. He always comes late, must have an extra share of whisky, is the best-dressed man in the crowd, and unless every honor is shown him he will not play. He will play you a dozen different pieces, which are carefully distinguished by names, but not by tunes. The most skilled judge of music will be unable to detect any difference between "Run, Nigger, Run," "Arkansaw Traveler," "Forky Deer," and any other tune. He is never offended at a mistake which you may make as to what piece he is playing; he only feels a trifle contemptuous toward you as a person utterly devoid of musical knowledge. The straw-beater is a musician, the description of whose performances the writer has never "read or heard repeated." No preliminary training is necessary in this branch of music; any one can succeed, with proper caution, the first time he tries. The performer provides himself with a pair of straws about eighteen inches in length, and stout enough to stand a good smart blow. An experienced straw-beater will be very careful in selecting his straws, which he does from the sedge-broom;

this gives him an importance he could not otherwise have, on account of the commonness of his accomplishment. These straws are used after the manner of drumsticks, that portion of the fiddle-strings between the fiddler's bow and his left hand serving as a drum. One of the first sounds which you hear on approaching the dancing party is the *tum tee tum* of the straws, and after the dance begins, when the shuffling of feet destroys the other sounds of the fiddle, this noise can still be heard.

With the cotillon a new and very important office, that of "caller-out," has become a necessity. The "caller-out," though of less importance than the fiddler, is second to no other. He not only calls out the figures, but explains them at length to the ignorant, sometimes accompanying them through the performance. He is never at a loss, "Gemmen to de right!" being a sufficient refuge in case of embarrassment, since this always calls forth a full display of the dancers' agility, and gives much time.

The corn-shucking is one of the institutions of the old plantations which has flourished and expanded since the negroes were freed. With the larger liberty they enjoy there has come increased social intercourse, and this has tended to encourage social gatherings of all kinds. Then, too, the great number of small farmers who have sprung up in the South since the war necessitates mutual aid in larger undertakings, so that at this time the corn-shucking, as an institution, is most flourishing. No doubt with improved culture its features will be changed, and, in time, destroyed. Indeed, already it is becoming modified, and the great improvement which the negro race is continually manifesting indicates that in time their simple songs and rough sports must yield to higher demands.

David C. Barrow, Jr.

THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

In dull, dead heaviness of sleep,
The earth lies weak and worn.
The haggard night forgets to keep
Her weary watch for morn.

A numbness slowly seems to creep
On river, field, and hill.
The gloom falls momentarily more deep,
The stillness grows more still.

And over all there steals, intense,
A strangeness chill and gray,
A stolid, dull indifference,
The night's despair of day.

Robertson Trowbridge.