THE RAG PICKERS OF NEW YORK.

THE Rhine is a river that has awakened the softest melodies of the musician's heart, and the wildest rhapsodies of the poet's brain. The land through which it pours its blue waters is one wherein the philosopher has dreamed and the apostle hoped—Old and Young Germany—the one the parent of the freebooter and the knight, the other of the tender enthusiast of love and home.

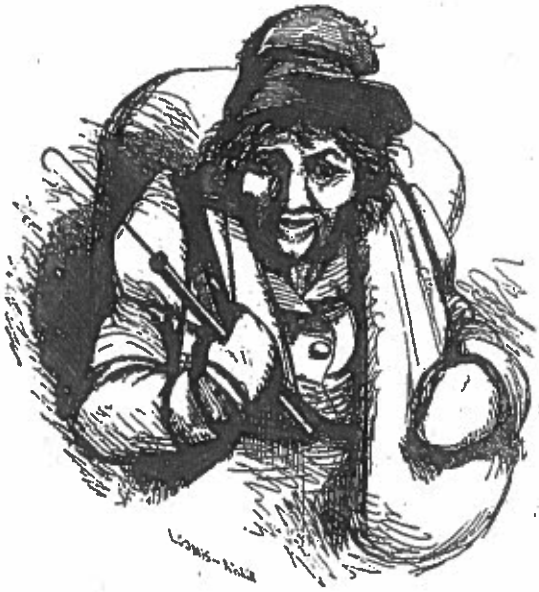
The famous river, the river that is of itself a great line of the world's poetry, passes by mountains covered with hoary forests, by banks beetling with ruined castles, and clustered with youthful vineyards, is not only a line of the world's poetry, but a volume of the world's history. The world is ignorant of its youth, feels its prime, but as yet dreams not of its decay, except in the associations of those gray towers, that hold their memories from the time of the feudal past. Still sparkling on, it pours its brimming flood by the fields of glory, the villas of opulence, the cities of busy population, by villages filled with an industrious poor, by hovels emptied of an exiled race, whose brains still reëcho to the words of fatherland, forced to leave the land they loved to strive and struggle where fields are as green as the gentle meadows of their Rhine, and where city streets are to many El Dorados of rags.

Hear the peasant's song, when as a boy he drives down the hill-side path the lowing kine, and how sweet is it in its truthful and tasteful expression of the German poets' lines, and the German composers' strains, wedded by him in one symphony of simple eloquence. Health in his limbs, he wanders downward to the valley cot, and around him are clustering vines and purple grapes; and above him on the hight, the gray old tower, sphynx-like, utters no truth to the ignorant peasant boy, but stands there a granite banner for his country's bards or the foreign tourist's wonder. Down in the valley is his father's humble cot where he was born, and where a sad mother sits moping now, with small means of life at hand and small chance of human joy save in the doomed lad whose voice she hears, away amid the viny path, driving her taxed wealth home, for even the common feeder of the poor and rich, the honest and the gentle cow, is in those Rhine lands subjected to the government; and while she yields the milk to the peasant's pot, gives her cream to the ruler's goblet. The widow sits by the smoldering hearth, and muses over her husband, killed, perhaps, at the bridge of Lodi, or slain at Waterloo, and now of the heavy debt of taxes imposed upon the families of those countless heroes whom Charles invoked against Napoleon, and prepares to leave her fatherland with her son, and find a refuge here. It is hard work to leave even her poverty-stricken cot, but neighbors like herself join in the general thought, and straightway every thing yields to the great idea of emigration. Down that blue Rhine, whose every wave is poetry, float the barks, whose every berth and every deck-plank are crowded with fleeing poverty. The winds of ocean afterward fan the huge sails of other ships that hold in their crowded steerages the exiles of Austria, of Prussia, of Germany proper, of Bavaria, of all the Principalities, while from France, from Piedmont, from Italy, from all the world come to this country the exiles of want and taxation. It is said that the Jews, under their Theocracy, had few or no mendicants; but from the time of their kings, from the reign of David, their monarchs were oppressive, and ground the face of the poor. History records the same terrible characteristic as belonging to the Babylonish, the Persian, and the Roman emperors. The extortions of their publicans and their governors was such that the census of mendicancy increased in a frightful degree, and opulent families, actuated by a feeling that should have been common to the rulers, devoted a tenth of their income to the support of their paupers. England does that noble act of charity in our day. Poverty is oft-times the result of idleness, though the rule is not invariable, and it is well known that Draco, upon conviction of willful poverty, punished the convicted with death. What chance of justice was there then, perhaps is there now, for a mendicant in a public court? But the gentle Plato, instead of agreeing with Draco and Solon, and others, would have them only banished. Only *banished?* Is there nothing in that? Let the gutteral foreigners from the middle of Europe; let the soft-toned inhabitant of Southern Europe, who have been exiled, not by an actual provision of law, but by the effect of impost, answer that question.

But it is not our purpose upon this occasion

to enter into a discussion of the question of poverty. Poverty and a desire to be better has sent these people to our shores—those countless throngs entering into all the minor occupations of life, and spreading themselves over the Republic in industrial swarms, planting wherever they can the memory-reviving grape, tilling the sterile or the fertile soil with patient integrity, shaving our beards, cutting our hair, vending and inventing new medicines for old complaints, and creating a great feature in our cities, a feature novel and picturesque, that all who get up early in the morning can see—THE RAG PICKER. That's the feature, so droll, so grotesque, so dirty, so up-in-the-morning-earlyish, so silent, so head-bent, so patient, so investigating; some people call them GUTTER SNIPES.

We drew a brief picture of the Rhine cow-driver as he descended the vine-clad hill, with the gray tower above him, the castle of the dim feudal ago, chanting his song, his mother sad by the desolate hearth stone waiting him. And now let us look at another, (perhaps it is the same boy grown older.) With the early light, when the dawn, aye, earlier than that, when the light is Rembrandtish, we pray you arise and go into any street you please of this great city. The milk man is not yet around, but he soon will be; that busy and noisy peddler of doubtful nutriment, and lo! you will see this face in the dim dawning.



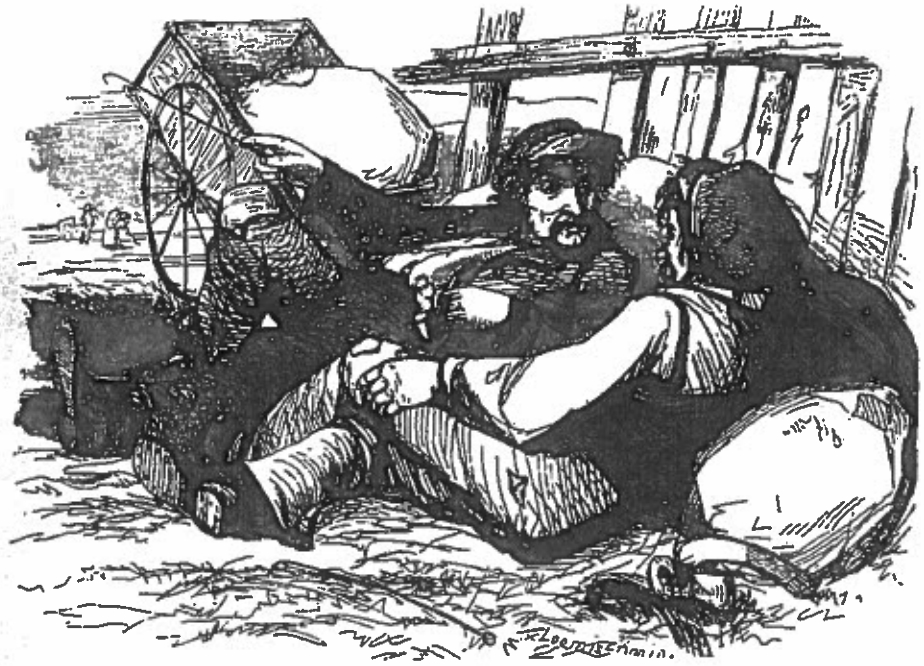
THE RAG PICKER.

It is all foreign, or rather it is all dirt, and bag, and crook, and stoop, and eagerness. The bag is a fearful looking thing, greasy and glossy, with its mouth wide open, waiting with a greedy gloom its food of filth. Not a word says this portrait that you meet to you, and you cannot speak to it. There is no time for that. In the middle of the street plods this specter of uncleanliness, never stepping upon the pavement, but with persistent energy keeping between the rich gutters that line the two side-walks. A wreck of wrinkles is the face, a continent of anxiety is the whole countenance, and revolutions seem to have passed over this being, and left him with the offals of its convulsion to wander upon the streets of the mighty world, apparently without a joy, a comfort, or a home. But even this mud wanderer, this exile from the blue Rhine, from the mountain pathway, from the romance of ruined tower neighborhood, has a home, as we will presently behold; has joys and hopes, and even fears, the last result of degraded humanity, for there is a point in crushed manhood when the heart ceases to understand the terror of something worse. At present let us follow him through all the stages of his daily occupation. Now he is on the hunt, and for what? On either side of the foot-way, or side-walk, are deposited little heaps of rubbish, and if you follow this filthy friend you will see him stoop over each pile, and with a dexterity that you, being well-dressed, could never hope to reach, he pokes his crook in the collection, and of a sudden, like a flash of greased lightning, up flies the stick, and over the shoulder goes it, and the great swelling, puffing, hungry bag opens its mouth, and with a gulp grabs the thing from the hook, and swallows it. The feeder, or chiffonier, or rag picker, or gutter snipe, whatever you choose to call him, never turning his head to see if the bag-monster behind has swallowed the morsel, or is preparing to swallow him. The bag being a tame monster, and being kept well fed, is of course like Van Amburg's lions, perfectly harmless to its keeper. Having taken what he could get out of the pile, he turns short upon his tracks, and you will see him, still bending, still seeking, cross to your side of the street, where another precious pile is exposed to his speculative investigation. Again he feeds by the same quick jerk the insatiate ogre that holds fast around his neck, like the Old Man of the Sea who rode Sinbad the Sailor. Up the whole street goes

the rag picker, and you will see him sidling from one side to the other, seeking what he may find and his bag devour, until finally he vanishes in the dim distance, and leaves scarce a spot of grease behind, differing in that particular from the gentle maidens of Kilkenny. If you tarry long enough you will see other specters with their crooked scepters following in the footsteps of the first, zig-zagging as he did, and each of them will take something from the same heaps, for all bags have not the same tastes, and what will not suit one will suit another. By eight o'clock, at furthest, the heaps, the grease, the garbage, and the beings who made the morning hideous have vanished, and for the day are seen in those walks no more; but wait till to-morrow!

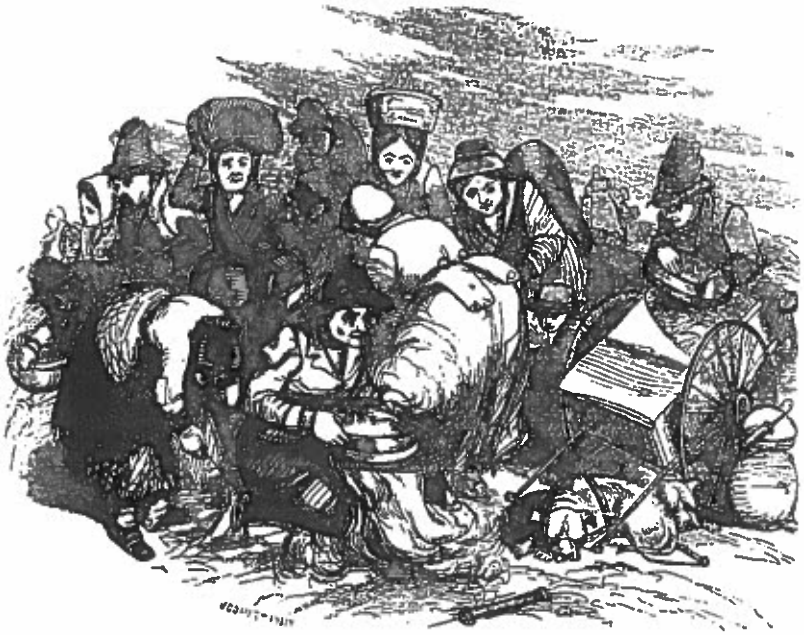
"Whither have they flitted?"

In the neighborhood of the place wherein the author of these pages has his home there is a spot that all the summer long is full of shade. Trees grow on one side of the vacant place, and on the other are rude sheds and battered dwellings—no fair view at best, but in truth, as sweet foliage waves its plumes there as can be found on this fine island of the rivers and the bay. This place is one of many where the rag picker seeks his noon-day rest; and many a time has the writer, wandering by this shady estuary, (for it runs back from a leading street, and of itself leads no where, except it may be to a deserted hovel or a blooming pig sty,) seen these Bedouins of uncleanliness, stretched in the shade, gazing in appreciative silence upon the gables and falling, in sides of the hovels we have spoken of. Around them are their sacks, those plethoric sacks, and some have carts with teams of dogs, and should some stranger foot approach, mark how "the dog star rages." These animals are attached to the under part of the vehicle, and help the owners to get it through the mud. They are all a dirty crew together, and when a woman is among them, and generally there is more than one, we wonder if those queer things of rags, and bags, and tags, sitting with their crooked grabbers in their hands, with eyes bleared by early rising, and long stooping, and perhaps great troubles, are of the sex that fill the books of poetry with themes. Perhaps they think of vineyards on the Rhine, or cabins on the Loire. Thus rest they from their long morning walks and works, until, with renewed vigor, they plod on to the trysting-place of their garnered goods



THE NOONING

This place is generally an open spot of ground, remote from the dwellings of the clean. There are no trees here, but upon the arid ground, amid broken rocks and deep wheel tracks cut in cross roads, they settle in various groups, and unbag the fox, or, in

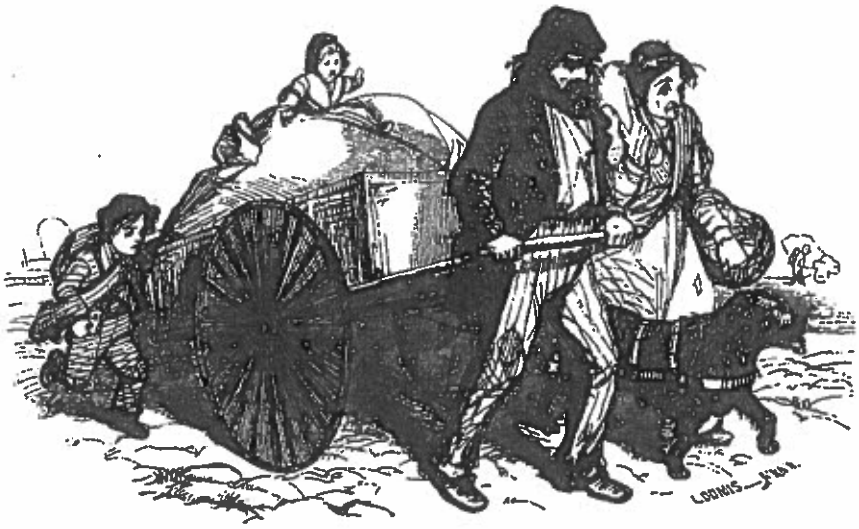


THE GATHERING.

plainer parlance, pour out upon the genial soil the unbought wealth of a city's refuse. This is a scene well worth your seeing. Old age is here, and swarth manhood and young womanhood, and all the rags, and bones, and pieces of paper, and scraps that beggars would not hold a moment in their dainty hands. The black-eyed Italian is here, Dutch in his dirt, and all of Europe is represented in this motley group of industrious sifters. The work is one of great nicety. The precious things are sifted from the worthless, and carefully bestowed either in the bags, or, by the more opulent, who can afford to keep their hand-carts, in their vehicles. Silence does not altogether reign here, for many a tale is told that, if uttered elsewhere, would cause confusion in mansions that lift their heads proudly above the gutter. It was in such a place that the German witness who figured so largely in connection with a recent criminal trial first told his knowledge of Cancemi's guilt and of Anderson's murder, and many a laugh goes round among that begrimed gathering at stories that we will not mention here. Having sifted the wheat from the chaff, the crowd breaks up, but even here the rag picker's instinct does not leave him. Some tarry to glean the field of the gutter snipes, and many a bone is thus saved that afterward we may have handled at my lady's drawing-room, when the waiter gives us a knife to carve our pheasant with; and even this paper on which we pen these sketches may have been rags, saved by the economical from the profuse leavings of the spendthrift rag picker, who was too rich to carry them to the market.

All finished, the crowd disperses, and "homeward bound" is the word. Few are the denizens of the affluent streets who see these sights, nor is it much their need to see them, but, as nothing in this world is unimportant, it is just as well that these things should be seen, if only once.

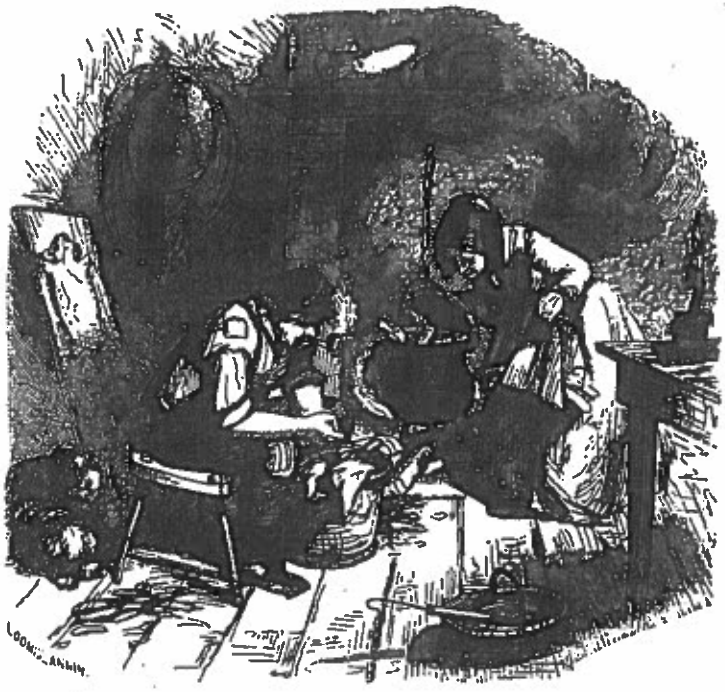
The careful father now hitches himself to his hand-cart, and bends his course to a place he calls his home. By his side plods his wife, one of the same we saw sitting in the shade, and on the pageant golgotha that loads the cart sits the last product of the noble pair. Pushing hard behind, taking their first lesson in "push along, keep moving," perhaps you see two sturdy lads, helping their bony parents to the haven of their rest and rags. The faithful dog, who never needs a bone to gnaw, is in his harness too, and with a steady step keeps time to the human animals that are toiling in the shafts. Let the wind blow on his gray moustache and grizzly beard, let the wind blow and the rain fall on her shaggy, uncombed locks, let the elements beat upon their brats, this happy family is bound for home and happiness. Silent, unobservant, patient, and without the appearance of any other feeling than that of selfish gain, careless of the proud man's scorn, the street urchin's con-



HOMEWARD BOUND.

tumely, they plod onward, and at length arrived, they safely stow away their goods, and soon the rag picker's wife is plunged in her household work.

"Home, *sweet* home!" so sang the poet, and so sings the world; nor does our chiffounier let pass the song. His home is as queer as himself. Generally he lives in some tenement house where others of his profession have their lodgings. There is a dwelling in a street in this city where, if you get intimate with one of the gentry we have been describing, you can see a grand sight. Entering by a narrow passage, not redolent of the sweetest odors, you first come to one door—keep back, else your legs will suffer contact with the teeth of dog "sharp as a serpent's fang," for a whole team is tied to the entrance. But your friend will keep



THE RAG PICKERS AT HOME.

them back with his pronged weapon, the tool of his trade. Look in the room and you will see the *pater familias*, and the mother, and all the offspring busily engaged arranging for the paper market or the bone buyer the different objects appertaining to those trades. There are in this building upward of sixty families, and one family is like unto the other in appearance and in occupation.

Sir Francis Head, in his "Faggot of French Sticks; or, Paris in 1851," relates an interview he had with one of the chiffouniers of that city. He had made an appointment with one of them to visit him at his rooms. "As I was sitting in my room writing," he says, "a hard, lean knuckle struck my door, and on my calling out 'Entrez,' there appeared at it my commissionaire, dressed in his usual suit of blue velvet, and a slight, thin, erect old man in a blouse, whom he informed me was the chiffounier I wanted. The introducer, with a slight bow, instantly retired, shutting the door, close to which the poor man remained standing. 'Come forward, my friend,' I said to him, pointing to a chair beside me. For a time he appeared very unwilling to do so; at last I prevailed upon him to sit down; and as he was evidently alarmed at the sight of me, my papers, my pens, and my ink, I talked to him about the weather, and about the fête, until by degrees he became comparatively at his ease. His manner was exceedingly modest, mild and gentle, and although he was poorly dressed, he had under his faded blouse a white and almost a clean shirt. He told me he was fifty-nine years of age—he looked seventy—and that fourteen years ago, having sustained an injury which incapacitated him from heavy work, he purchased from the police, for forty sous, the plaquet of a chiffounier, which was on his breast, and to which he pointed. My principal object was to ascertain what were the articles they obtained, and, although I fully expected my friend would be very eloquent and well-informed on the subject, I had the greatest possible difficulty in extracting it from him.

"'But what do you get from those heaps?' I repeated to him for the third time.

"'Tout ce que il y a! mounsieur,' (all that there is) he replied in a faint and gentle voice.

"'And of what is that composed?' I repeated, also for the third time.

"'All sorts of things,' he answered, and when pressed for an explanation he again added, with a shrug of despair, as if I was torturing him with most difficult questions, 'In short, sir, I pick up all that there is.'

"At last, by slow degrees, I extracted from him that 'all sorts of things' was composed of the following articles: Bones, scraps of paper, rags of linen, rags of cloth, bits of iron, broken glass, brass, broken China, old shoes, old clothes, corks of wine bottles, sold to the chemists, who cut them into phial corks. The rest of the rubbish, consisting principally of salad, cabbage, beans, refuse of vegetables, straw, ashes, cinders, &c., considered by chiffouniers to be of no value, is, about eight o'clock, carried away in the carts of the police.

"He told me that chiffouniers sometimes picked up things of great value, which they are required to return to the houses from which the rubbish had proceeded, in failure of which the police deprives them of their plaquet. A few weeks since he had restored to a lady a silver spoon, thrown away with the salad in which it had lain concealed. Some years ago a chiffounier, he said, found and restored to its owner a portfolio containing bank bills amounting in value to 20,000 francs. If they find coin they keep it." (Sensible that.) "He informed me that on an average he found a silver ten cent (sou) piece about once a fortnight. 'But,' said he, very mildly, and with a light shrug, 'that depends upon Providence.'

"I asked him how much the chiffouniers gained per day. He replied that the value of the refuse depended a good deal on the district, and that accordingly they gained from ten to thirty sous per day. He added, that for several years he himself had gained thirty sous a day, but that since the departure of Louis Philippe he had not, on an average, gained fifteen. 'In the month of February,' he said, 'we did nothing, because everybody had left.'

"'But now that tranquillity is restored,' said I, 'how comes it that you do not gain your thirty sous as before?' 'Sir, since the revolution people have become more economical; the consumption in their kitchens is less; people throw less bones and paper into the streets. If tranquillity comes we shall, perhaps, do something; but when there is no luxury we can do nothing.'"

Sir Francis seemed to think his chiffounier, with pale, sunken cheeks and thin whiskers, had uttered an immense idea when he spoke the above three lines, and he makes it the text of a short sermon upon the importance of the wealthy enjoying themselves that the poor may be benefited.

It happened to be the writer's fate to be in Paris in the month of February alluded to by the polite French rag picker; and he saw enough to convince him that these same rag pickers were not unequal to the task, with the rest of their fellow-citizens, of building barricades and fighting behind them afterward, and many a rag picker has he seen, in the awful interval

between the King's flight and establishment of the Provincial Government, standing guard at the gate of the Tuilleries, armed as never was Ajax armed, or any other hero of ancient or modern days. Never can he forget one "ragged rascal" whom he had often seen before, with his professional bag upon his back, standing at the gate that leads from the Rue de Rivoli into the gardens of the palace. He was no dirtier than he had ever been, but there was the fierce glare and the tremendous walk of the French conqueror in that little man. He had a musket upon his shoulder, a brace of pistols in his belt, a sword by his side, and had he only had the familiar bag upon his back he would have been in truth a finished specimen of a Parisian Revolutionist, for the rag picker kept watch and ward over a garden where kings and queens had walked, and where he had then made up his mind they should walk no more. We have no doubt that very fellow, rag picker, gutter snipe as he was, was ultimately shot by Louis Napoleon, when in June he swept the Boulevards with his terrible fusillade.

That luxury helps the rag picker there can be no doubt, and in this metropolis he should grow rich in a few years. Indeed, we know of a case where a well-to-do undertaker found out that the rag picker's business was better than his, and so he forthwith joined the honorable brotherhood of the Knights of the Morning. Another man, who belonged to a large paper manufactory down town, abandoned his legitimate business, went into the gutter, picked up rags, sold them to his former associates, and realized a good property.

In fine, though they do not as a class ornament the metropolis, or add a splendor to our civic parades, they are a quiet race of men, disturbing no one, enjoying their own society, and Heaven knows they may be as exclusive as they please, marrying among themselves, enjoying their own amusements of studying the anatomy of rags and bones, and all other waifs that other people do not care to mix with; and perhaps among their goodly company there are some poor but honest wits, who still remember the great lands they came from, with an exile's enthusiasm and joy, in the hope of treading once more the mountain path by the borders of the Rhine, revel in the glorious scenery of beautiful Sicily, or wander and dance to the sound of the violin in the gardens of their beloved France. Perhaps they do not, as a body, look upon our flags as rags, upon our chartered rights as rags, upon our rich ladies' dresses as rags (until they become rags), upon the Constitution as a rag which they can tear to pieces and sell to the *paper* makers; still, to them, the great staple of the country is rags. They are not only Christians, but they are our unwashed brothers. They help us to contrast our condition with theirs, and teach us to thank Heaven for our better fate. They help us to knife handles and combs, and such a lot of useful things, and then they pick up the vestiges of creation, and when the noonday comes not a rag is to be seen, not a square foot of filthy paper, not a pair of old boots, not a worthless pair of breeches, not even the 'kerchief that a lady dropped when she stepped from the gilded opera house, and gave her empty hand to her empty-hearted lover. There are dogs who clean the streets in Constantinople, but believe us, there are no "hounds" who attend to the thoroughfares of this great city. Oh! that those in authority for purposes of municipal cleanliness would follow the bright example of the rag picker, and, rising with the dawn, take the rag off the city by sunrise, and clear out its gutters before breakfast. At the next public banquet to which we are invited we intend to propose the health of the rag pickers of New-York and their cornucopia.