

**THE  
CHRONIC LOAFER**

BY  
**NELSON LLOYD**



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# CONTENTS.

## CHAPTER

- I. [The Reunion](#)
- II. [The Spelling Bee](#)
- III. [Absalom Bunkel](#)
- IV. [The Missus](#)
- V. [The Awfullest Thing](#)
- VI. [The Wrestling Match](#)
- VII. [The Tramp's Romance](#)
- VIII. [Ambition—An Argument](#)
- IX. [Bumbletree's Bass-Horn](#)
- X. [Little Si Berrybush](#)
- XI. [Cupid and a Mule](#)
- XII. [The Haunted Store](#)
- XIII. [Rivals](#)
- XIV. [Buddies](#)
- XV. [Joe Varner's Belling](#)
- XVI. [The Sentimental Tramp](#)
- XVII. [Hiram Gum, the Fiddler](#)
- XVIII. [The "Good Un"](#)
- XIX. [Breaking the Ice](#)

- XX. [Two Stay-at-Homes](#)
- XXI. [Eben Huckin's Conversion](#)
- XXII. [A Piece in the Paper](#)

**THE CHRONIC LOAFER.**

## ***CHAPTER I.***

### ***The Reunion.***

In the center of one of the most picturesque valleys in the heart of Pennsylvania lies the village and at one end of its single street stands the store. On the broad porch of this homely and ancient edifice there is a long oak bench, rough, and hacked in countless places by the knives of many generations of loungers. From this bench, looking northward across an expanse of meadows, a view is had of a low, green ridge, dotted here and there with white farm buildings. Behind that rise the mountains, along whose sides on bright days play the fanciful shadows of the clouds. Close by the store is the rumbling mill, and beyond it runs the creek, spanned by a wooden bridge whose planking now and then resounds with the beat of horses' hoofs, so that it adds its music to the roar of the mill-wheels and ring of the anvil in the blacksmith shop across the stream.

One July day the stage rattled over the bridge, past the mill and drew up at the store. The G. A. R. Man, the only passenger, climbed out of the lumbering vehicle, dragging after him a shapeless, battered carpet-bag. He limped up the steps in the wake of the driver, who was helping the Storekeeper with the mail-pouch, and when on the porch stopped and nodded a greeting to the men who were sitting on the bench kicking their heels together—the Patriarch, the School Teacher, the Miller, the Tinsmith and the Chronic Loafer. The loungers gazed solemnly at the new arrival; at his broad-brimmed, black slouch hat, which though drawn down over his left temple did not hide the end of a band of court-plaster; at his blue coat, two of its brass buttons missing; at his trousers, in which there were several rents that had been clumsily sewed together.

The silence was broken by the School Teacher, who remarked with a contemptuous curl of the nose, "So you've got home from Gettysburg,

have you? From your appearance one would judge that you had come from a battle instead of a reunion.”

“Huh! A good un—a good un!”

All eyes were turned toward the end of the bench, where sat the Chronic Loafer. He was a tall, thin, loose-jointed man. Thick, untrimmed locks of tawny hair fell from beneath his ragged, straw hat, framing a face whose most prominent features were a pair of deep-set, dull blue eyes, two sharp, protruding cheek-bones and a week’s growth of red beard. His attire was simple in the extreme. It consisted of a blue striped, hickory shirt, at the neck-band of which glistened a large, white china button, which buttoned nothing, but served solely as an ornament, since no collar had ever embraced the thin, brown neck above it. A piece of heavy twine running over the left shoulder and down across the chest supported a pair of faded, brown overalls, which were adorned at the right knee by a large patch of white cotton. He was sitting in a heap. His head seemed to join his body somewhere in the region of his heart. His bare left foot rested on his right knee and his left knee was encircled by his long arms.

“A good un!” he cried again.

Then he suddenly uncoiled himself, throwing back his head until it struck the wall behind him, and swung his legs wildly to and fro.

“Well, what air you so tickled about now?” growled the G. A. R. Man.

“I was jest a-thinkin’ that you’d never come outen no battle lookin’ like that,” drawled the Loafer.

He nudged the Miller with his elbow and winked at the Teacher. Forthwith the three broke into loud fits of laughter.

The Patriarch pounded his hickory stick vigorously on the floor, pulled his heavy platinum rimmed spectacles down to the tip of his nose and over their tops gazed in stern disapproval.

“Boys, boys,” he said, “no joshing. It ain’t right to josh.”

“True—true,” said the Loafer. He had wrapped himself up again and was in repose. “My pap allus use to say, ‘A leetle joshin’ now an’ then is relished be the wisest men—that is, ef they hain’t the fellys what’s bein’ joshed.’”

The G. A. R. Man had been leaning uneasily against a pillar. On this amicable speech from his chief tormenter, the frown that had been playing over his face gave way to a broad grin, three white teeth glistening in the open space between his stubby mustache and beard.

“Yes,” he said, “I hev come home afore my ’scursion ticket expired.” He removed his hat and disclosed a great patch of plaster on his forehead. “Ye see Gettysburg was a sight hotter fer me yesterday than in ’63. But I’ve got to the eend o’ my story.”

“So that same old yarn you’ve ben tellin’ at every camp-fire sence the war is finished at last. That’s a blessin’!” cried the Miller.

“I never knowd you was in the war. I thot you jest drewed a pension,” interrupted the Loafer.

The veteran did not heed these jibes but fixed himself comfortably on the upturned end of his carpet-bag.

“Teacher, I’ve never seen you at any of our camp-fires,” he began. “Consekently the eend o’ my story won’t do you no good ’less you knows the first part. So I’ll tell you ’bout my experience at the battle o’ Gettysburg an’ then explain my second fight there. I was in the war bespite the insinooations o’ them ez was settin’ on that same bench in the day o’ the nation’s danger. I served as a corporal in the Two-hundred-and-ninety-fifth Pennsylvany Wolunteers an’ was honorable discharged in ’63.”

“Fer which discharge he gits his pension,” the Loafer ventured.



“That ain’t so. I cot malarly an’ several other complaints in the Wilterness that henders me workin’ steady. It was no wonder, either, fer our retchment was allus fightin’. We was knowd ez the Bloody Pennsylvany retchment, fer we’d ben in every battle from Bull Run on, an’ hed had some wery desp’rate engagements. ’Henever they was any chargin’ to be done, we done it; ef they was a fylorn hope, we was on it; ef they was a breastwork to be tuk, we tuk it. You uns can imagine that be the eend o’ two years sech work, we was pretty bad cut up. ’Hen the army chased the rebels up inter this state we was with it, but afore the fight at Gettysburg it was concided that sence they wasn’t many of us, we’d better be put to guardin’ baggage wagons. That was a kind o’ work that didn’t take many men, but required fighters in caset the enemy give the boys in front a slip an’ sneaked een on our rear.”

The School Teacher coughed learnedly and raised a hand to indicate that he had something to say. Having secured the floor, he began: “When Darius the First invaded Europe he had so many women, children and baggage wagons in his train that——”

“See here,” cried the Patriarch, testily. “Dar’us was afore my time, I allow. We don’t care two snaps o’ a ram’s tail ’bout Dar’us. We wants to know ’bout them bloody Pennsylvanians.”

The pedagogue shook his head in condemnation of the ignorance of his companions, but allowed the G. A. R. Man to proceed.

“Durin’ the first day’s engagement our retchment, with a couple of others, an’ the trains, was ’bout three mile ahint Cemetary Hill, but on the next mornin’ we was ordered back twenty mile. It was hard to hev to drive off inter the country ’hen the boys was hevin’ it hot bangin’ away at the enemy, but them was orders, an’ a soldier allus obeys orders.

“The fightin’ begin airly that day. We got the wagons a-goin’ afore sun-up, but it wasn’t long tell we could hear the roar o’ the guns, an’ see the smoke risin’ in clouds an’ then settlin’ down over the country. We felt pretty blue, too, ez we went trampin’ along, fer the wounded an’ stragglers

was faster 'an we. They'd come hobblin' up with bad news, sayin' how the boys was bein' cut up along the Emmettsburg road, an' how we'd better move faster, ez the army was losin' an' the rebels 'ud soon be een on us. Then they'd hobble away agin. Them wasn't our only troubles, either. The mules was behavin' mean an' cuttin' up capers, an' the wagons was breakin' down. Then we hed to be continual watchin' fer them Confederate cavalry we was expectin' was a-goin' to pounce down on us.

“Evenin' come, an' we lay to fer the night. The fires was started, an' the coffee set a-boilin', an' we had a chancet to rest a while. The wounded an' the stragglers that jest filled the country kep' comin' in all the time, sometim's alone, sometim's in twos an' threes, some with their arms tied up in all sorts o' queer ways, or hobblin' on sticks, or with their heads bandaged; about the miserablest lot o' men I ever see. The noise of the fight stopped, an' everything was quiet an' peaceful like nawthin' hed ben happenin'. The quiet an' the dark an' the fear we was goin' to meet the enemy at any minute made it mighty onpleasant, an' what with the stories them wounded fellys give us, we didn't rest wery easy.

“I went out on the picket line at ten o'clock. Seemed I hedn't ben there an hour tell I made out the dark figure of a man comin' th'oo the fiel's wery slow like. Me an' the fellys with me watched sharp. Sudden the man stopped, hesitated like an' sank down in a heap. Then he picked himself up an' come staggerin' on. He couldn't 'a' ben more'n fifty yards away 'hen he th'owed up his hands an' pitched for'a'd on his face. Me an' me buddy run out an' carried him inter the fire. But it wasn't no uset. He was dead.

“They was a bullet wound in his shoulder, an' his clothes was soaked with blood that hed ben drippin', drippin' tell he fell the last time. I opened his coat, an' in his pocket foun' a letter, stamped, an' directed apparent to his wife—that was all to tell who he was. So I went back to me post thinkin' no more of it an' never noticin' that that man's coat 'ud 'a' fit two of him.

“Mornin' come, an' the firin' begin over toward Gettysburg. We could see the smoke risin' agin an' hear the big guns bellerin' tell the ground beneath

our feet seemed to swing up an' down. I tell you uns that was a grand scene. We was awful excited, fer we knowd the first two days hed gone agin us, an' more an' more stragglers an' wounded come limp'in' back, all with bad news. I was gittin' nervous, thinkin' an' thinkin' over it, an' wishin' I was where the fun was. Then I concided mebbe I wasn't so bad off, fer I might 'a' been killed like the poor felly I seen the night before, an' in thinkin' o' the man I remembered the letter an' got it out. I didn't 'tend to open it, but final I thot it wasn't safe to go mailin' letters 'thout knowin' jest what was in 'em, so I read it.

“The letter was wrote on a piece o' wrappin' paper in an awful bad handwrite, but 'hen I got th'oo it I set plumb down an' cried like a chil'. It was from John Parker to his wife Mary, livin' somewhere out in western Pennsylvany. He begin be mentionin' how we was on the eve of a big fight an' how he 'tended to do his duty even ef it come to fallin' at his post. It was hard, he sayd, but he knowd she'd ruther hev no husban' than a coward. He was allus thinkin' o' her an' the baby he'd never seen, but felt satisfaction in knowin' they was well fixed. It was sorrerful, he continyerd, that she was like to be a widdy so young, an' he wasn't goin' to be mean about it. He allus knowd, he sayd, how she'd hed a hankerin' after young Silas Quincy 'fore she tuk him. Ef he fell, he thot she'd better merry Silas 'hen she'd recovered from the 'fects o' his goin'. He ended up with a lot o' last 'good-bys' an' talk about duty to his country.

“Right then an' there I set down an' wrote that poor woman a few lines tellin' how I'd foun' the letter in her dead husban's pocket. I was goin' to quit at that, but I concided it 'ud be nice to add somethin' consolin', so I told how we'd foun' him on the fiel' o' battle, face to the enemy, an' how his last words was fer her an' the baby. That day we won the fight, an' the next I mailed Mrs. Parker her letter. It seemed about the plum blamedest, saddest thing I ever hed to do with.”

“I've allus ben cur'ous 'bout that widdy, too,” the Chronic Loafer remarked.

The Teacher cleared his throat and recited:

“Now night her course began, and over heaven

Inducing darkness grateful truce imposed,

And silence on the odious din of war;

Under her cloud——”

“No poetry jist yet, Teacher,” said the veteran. “Wait tell you hear the sekal o’ the story.”

“Yes, let’s hev somethin’ new,” growled the Miller.

Having silenced the pedagogue, the G. A. R. Man resumed his narrative.

“I never heard no more o’ Widdy Parker tell last night, an’ then it come most sudden. Our retchment hed a reunion on the fiel’ this year, you know, an’ on Monday I went back to Gettysburg fer the first time sence I was honorable discharged. The boys was all there, what’s left o’ ’em, an’ we jest hed a splendid time wisitin’ the monyments an’ talkin’ over the days back in ’63. There was my old tent-mate, Sam Thomas, on one leg, an’ Jim Luckenbach, who was near tuk be yaller janders afore Petersburg. There was the colonel, growed old an’ near blind, an’ our captain an’ a hundred odd others.

“Well, last night we was a lot of us a-settin’ in the hotel tellin’ stories. It come my turn an’ I told about the dead soldier’s letter. A big felly in a unyform hed ben leanin’ agin the bar watchin’ us. ’Hen I begin he pricked up his ears a leetle. Ez I got funder an’ funder he seemed to git more an’ more interested, I noticed. By an’ by I seen he was becomin’ red an’ oneasy, an’ final ’hen I’d finished he walks acrosst the room to where we was settin’ an’ stands there starin’ at me, never sayin’ nawthin’.

“A minute passed. I sais, sais I, ‘Well, comrade, what air you starin’ so fer?’

“Sais he, ‘That letter was fer Mary Parker?’

“True,’ sais I, surprised.

“Dead sure?’ sais he.

“Sure,’ sais I.

“Then he shakes his fist an’ yells, ‘I’ve ’tended most every reunion here sence the war hopin’ to meet the idjet that sent that letter to my wife an’ wrote that foolishness ’bout findin’ my dead body. After twenty-five years I’ve foun’ you!’

“He pulls off his coat. The boys all jumps up.

“I, half skeert to death, cries, ‘But you ain’t the dead man!’

“Dead,’ he yells. ‘Never ben near it. Nor did I ’tend to hev every blame fool in the army mailin’ my letters nuther. Because you finds a man with my coat on, that hain’t no reason he’s me. I was gittin’ to the rear with orders ez lively ez a cricket an’ th’owed off that coat jest because it was warm runnin’.’

“Hen I seen what I’d done I grabs his arm, I was so excited, an’ cries, ‘Did she merry Silas Quincy?’

“‘It wasn’t your fault she didn’t,’ he sais, deliberate like, rollin’ up his sleeves. ‘I got home two days after the letter an’ stopped the weddin’ party on their way to church.’”

## **CHAPTER II.**

### ***The Spelling Bee.***

The Chronic Loafer stretched his legs along the counter and rested his back comfortably against a pile of calicoes.

“I allus held,” he said, “that they hain’t no sech things ez a roarinborinallus. I know some sais they is ’lectric lights, but ’hen I seen that big un last night I sayd to my Missus, an’ I hol’ I’m right, I sayd that it was nawthin’ but the iron furnaces over the mo’ntain. Fer s’pose, ez the Teacher claims, they was lights at the North Pole—does you uns believe we could see ’em all that distance? Well now!”

He gazed impressively about the store. The Patriarch, the Miller and the G.A.R. Man were disposed to agree with him. The School Teacher was sarcastic.

“Where ignorance is bliss ’twere folly to be wise,” he said. He tilted back on two legs of his chair and adjusted his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, so that all eight of his long quivering fingers seemed to be pointing in scorn at the man on the counter.

The Loafer rolled slowly over on one side and eyed the pedagogue.

“Ben readin’ the almanick lately, hain’t ye?” he drawled.

“If you devoted less time to the almanac and more to physical geography,” retorted the Teacher, “you’d know that the Aurora Borealis hain’t a light made on *terra firma* but that it is a peculiar magnetic condition of the atmosphere. And the manner in which you pronounce it is exceedingly ludicrous. It’s not a roarinborinallus. It is spelled *A-u-r-o-r-a B-o-r-e-a-l-i-s.*”

The Loafer sat up, crossed his legs and embraced his knee, thus forming a natural fortification behind which he could collect his thoughts before

hurling them at his glib and smiling foe. He gazed dully at his rival a moment; then said suddenly, "My pap was a cute man."

"He hasn't left any living monument to his good sense," said the Teacher.

The Loafer looked at the Storekeeper, who was sitting beneath him on an empty egg-crate. "Do you mind how he use to say that Solerman meant 'teacher' 'hen he sayd 'wine'; how Solerman meant, 'Look not upon the teacher 'hen he is read,' fer a leetle learnin' leaveneth the whole lump an' puffs him up so——"

The pedagogue's chair came down on all four legs with a crash. His right thumb left the seclusion of his waistcoat, his right arm shot out straight, and a trembling forefinger pointed at the eyes that were just visible over the top of the white-patched knee.

"See here!" he shouted. "I'm ready for an argyment, but no callin' names. This is no place for abuse."

The Loafer resumed his reclining attitude and fixed his gaze on the dim recesses of the ceiling.

"I hain't callin' no one names," he said slowly, "I was jest tellin' what my pap use to say."

"Tut-tut-tut, boys," interrupted the Patriarch, thumping the floor with his stick. "Don't git quarrelin' over sech a leetle thing ez the meanin' o' a word. Mebbe ye's both right."

The Tinsmith had hitherto occupied a nail keg near the stove, unnoticed. Now he began to rub his hands together gleefully and to chuckle. The Teacher was convinced that his own discomfiture was the cause of the other's mirth.

"Well, what are you so tickled about?" he snapped.

“Aurory Borealis. Perry Muthersbaugh spelled down Jawhn Jimson on that very word. Yes, he done it on that very word. My, but that there was a bee, Perfessor!”

“Now ’fore you git grindin’ away, sence you’ve got on spellin’,” said the Chronic Loafer, “I want to tell a good un——”

“Let him tell us about Perry Muthersbaugh,” said the Teacher in decisive tones. The title “professor” had had a softening effect, and he repaid the compliment by supporting the Tinsmith’s claim to the floor.

Compelled to silence, the Chronic Loafer closed his eyes as though oblivious to all about him, but a hand stole to his ear and formed a trumpet there to aid his hearing.

“Some folks is nat’ral spellers jest ez others is nat’ral musicians,” began the Tinsmith. “Agin, it’s jest ez hard to make a good speller be edication ez it is to make a good bass-horn player, fer a felly that hain’t the inborn idee o’ how many letters is needed to make a word’ll never spell no better than the man that hain’t the nat’ral sense o’ how much wind’s needed to make a note, ’ll play the bass-horn.”

“I cannot wholly agree with you,” the Teacher interrupted. “Give a child first words of one syllable, then two; drill him in words ending in *t-i-o-n* until——”

“We won’t discuss that, Perfessor. It don’t affect our case, fer Jawhn Jimson was a nat’ral speller. You never seen the like. Give him a word o’ six or seven syllables an’ he’d spell it out like it was on a blackboard right before him. ’Hen he was twenty he’d downed all the scholars in Happy Grove an’ won about six bees. Then he went to Pikestown Normal School, an’ ’hen he come back you never knowd the beat. He hed stodied Lating an’ algebray there, but I guesst he must also ’a’ spent considerable time a-brushin’ up his spellin’, fer they was only one felly ’bout these parts could keep with him any time at all. He was my frien’ Perry Muthersbaugh, who tot up to Kishikoquillas.



“You uns mind the winter we hed the big blizzard, ’hen the snow covered all the fences an’ was piled so high in the roads that we hed to drive th’oo the fiel’s. They was a heap sight goin’ on that year—church sosh’bles, singin’ school an’ spellin’ bees. Me an’ Perry Muthersbaugh was buddies, an’ not a week passed ’thout we went some’eres together. Fore I knowd it him an’ Jawhn Jimson was keepin’ company with Hannah Ciders. She was jest ez pretty ez a peach, plump an’ rosy, with the slickest nat’ral hair an’ teeth you uns ever seen. She was fond o’ education, too, so ’hen them teachers was after her she couldn’t make up her min’. She favored both. Perry was good lookin’ an’ steady an’ no fool. He’d set all evenin’ along side o’ her an’ never say nawthin’ much, but she kind o’ thot him good company. It allus seemed to me that Jimson was a bit conceity an’ bigitive, but he was amusin’ an’ hed the advantage of a normal school edication. He kind o’ dazzled her. She didn’t know which of ’em to take, an’ figured on it tell well inter the winter. Her color begin to go an’ she was gittin’ thin. Perry an’ Jawhn was near wild with anxiousness an’ was continual quarrelin’. Then what d’ye s’pose they done?”

“It’ll take a long time fer ’em to do much the way you tells it,” the Chronic Loafer grumbled.

“She give out,” continued the Tinsmith, not heeding the interruption, “that she’d take the best edicated. That tickled Jawhn, an’ he blowed around to his frien’s how he was goin’ to send ’em invites to his weddin’. Perry jest grit his teeth an’ sayd nawthin’ ’cept that he was ready. Then he got out his spellin’ book an’ went to sawin’ wood jest ez hard an’ fast ez he could.”

“That there reminds me o’ my pap.” The Chronic Loafer was sitting up again.

“Well, if your pap was anything like his son,” said the Teacher, “I guess he could ’a’ sawed most of his wood with a spellin’ book.”

The author of this witticism laughed long and loud, having support in the Miller and the G.A. R. Man. The Patriarch put his hand under his chin and dexterously turned his long beard upward so that it hid his face. In the

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