

TONY, THE BATH-CHAIRMAN.



ABOUT four years ago, I became acquainted with a poor African who earned his daily bread as a Bath-chairman. Day by day he stood, with his companion chairmen, at the entrance to Kensington Gardens, patiently waiting until he was wanted; and then he would wheel the chair, especially if occupied by an invalid, with a care and attention which none could excel.

William Antonio—or “Tony,” as he used to be called—was, at the age of seven, captured by a slave-

dealer, and with many others of his race carried to Brazil. He spoke often of his early days, and well remembered the crowding of the big ship that bore him away from all he loved, and his childish fear of being killed and eaten by the white man. On arriving in Brazil, he was bought by a Portuguese, and again sold to an English gentleman, who treated the slave boy with great kindness, gave him his freedom, brought him to England, and at his death left him a token of remembrance.

In the year 1834 he entered the service of a family, where he gave great satisfaction and was much esteemed. He married, and had two children; but both wife and little ones died, and Antonio was left once more alone in the world. After this he took to Bath-chair work, and at this the writer found him in January, 1867. He was then a stranger to the simple truth of the gospel; nevertheless, although a poor ignorant man, and unable to read and write, he was intelligent, industrious, and of a kindly disposition. By the grace of God, his heart was at length touched with higher life, and Divine light broke in upon his soul.

Late in the winter of 1867, when the roads were for a short time like glass from the sudden changes of thaw and frost, a lady hired his chair to take her to an evening party. So great was the exertion

needed to make any way, that the poor man became very warm, and afterwards, by exposure, got so sudden a chill as to be confined to his bed with severe rheumatism.

The illness was not immediately dangerous ; but, unused to sickness in any form, and made restless and sleepless by pain, poor Tony became greatly alarmed. Believing himself near dying, he turned over in his mind the little he had ever heard about religion. It was very little, evidently ; for, ere long, his anxiety fixed itself on the fact of his inability to read : his fear was that he should not be admitted into heaven after death if he could not read. No doubt this strange alarm, unaccompanied as it was by any consciousness of having deserved banishment from heaven because of his sins, proved how ignorant the sick man was of all that related to the soul and eternity—to heaven and hell. Yet this very ignorance, and the dread arising from it, were made use of by the Holy Spirit in leading the poor African to the Saviour of sinners.

While lying in pain and distress of mind, Tony was visited by a Christian friend who had heard of his illness and mental distress. To this friend the poor black complained, in his own peculiar broken and imperfect English, that because he could not read he should be lost for ever.

“ I cannot read, so I cannot get to heaven. . I was

a bad boy at school when I might have been taught. I was all cry, cry; no learn."

He was told by the friend that he had made a mistake altogether. And seeing probably that the mind of poor Tony was unable to grasp more than one or two simple ideas at a time, the visitor contented himself at this time with speaking a little about the love of God. "And here is something for you to repeat as you lie in bed unable to sleep—only three words:—'God—is—love.' Try and remember those words, Tony."

A few days after, when this friend called again, Tony, with great satisfaction to himself, repeated the words, "God—is—love." He was now taught another lesson, which he considered more difficult: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." When he came to the last word he said, with much displeasure—

"Who is that?"

"You, Antonio, and I," was the answer.

"Why do you say so?" said he; "I am no sinner. There is a great difference: some people have bad feelin'—kill, hurt, murder!—not me—not me: me never feel so."

"Well, Antonio, God says we are sinners."

"There now," he quickly interrupted; "He no make mistakes; people say, too much rain, too hot;

I say, God know best. What He says about everything is a true word."

He seemed now to accept God's statement of his case, and repeated his text with much feeling very often afterwards. And as he received new light into his soul from the Scriptures read to him from day to day, a sense of his own sinful and lost condition as a transgressor of God's law took the place of his previous self-satisfaction. He was quite broken down at the thought of the Lord Jesus Christ coming into the world to save the lost, and being born a babe in a manger. When he heard repeated to him the sweet story of Bethlehem, tears would roll down his cheeks while he exclaimed, "There now! that is beautiful! beautiful! I wish I could read the Bible."

He was told on these occasions that, if he were too old to learn (he was nearly sixty), he might listen while others read, and thus carry much away.

"Yes—yes," said he; "me carry it here!" with his hand on his heart. When telling others he was "a sinner, saved by grace," he always spoke of himself as a silly sheep that had wandered from the fold a

* Dr. Crowther, the coloured Bishop of Sierra Leone, when last visiting England, took great interest in Tony, and tried to teach him to read the Bible in his own language, but without success on account of his age.

great many years; but he would add: "The Lord Jesus, He seek me and find me; He put me on His shoulder and save me. I was so miserable before, even when I went after pleasure; now I'm so happy, thank God!"

On his partial recovery from illness and his return to his former occupation, he began to think seriously about his former ways and habits of life. He entirely gave up all amusement and indulgences which he felt to be contrary to the spirit of the gospel; and he also stedfastly refused to go out with his chair on the Lord's day. He used previously to take a lady out regularly on Sunday, and when asked how he explained to her his change of purpose, he said, "I touch my hat and I say, 'Beg your pardon, ma'am! I be glad to take you out the six days; but on the Sunday I do what the Lord tell me. I enjoy that more than all things. Jesus save me. Jesus love me first, and then I love Him and do what He tell me.'"

His companions often twitted him for his consistency, or what they would have called his stupidity, saying he was foolish to lose a day's earnings; but he stood firm, saying the while, "It is true I made the money; but I was always so tired: all work, work. Now I hear about the Lord—that better than all money—than everything."

Thus poor Tony rapidly improved in the understanding of Divine things as unfolded to him; he grew in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. At the same time it became apparent to all who knew him that his health was breaking down; and it was soon with difficulty that he could walk: so he parted with his Bath-chair. But his malady advanced with swift strides and confined him to his bed. From the first he said, "I am not afraid to die. Jesus has saved me. If the Lord take me, I shall not fret." But time was fast passing away, and he himself said, "The spirit in me tells me I am going! Jesus calls me!" And added, with great emphasis, "Them that Jesus holds, he keeps!"

Again, the day following: "I'se so tired. I want to be quiet. I just wait for the Lord. He will take me!" Later on: "I forgive all: I forgive every one. Good-bye! Good-bye! Love to all the dear children of God." At four o'clock next morning, after being silent for three hours, he clasped his hands to his bosom, and distinctly ejaculated, "Peace! peace! peace!" This was his last song; his triumph over death and the grave. The pallor of death, plainly discernible through the dark skin, told all around his bed that he was "absent from the body; present with the Lord."

A few friends assembled at Willesden Lane Cemetery shortly after, and saw all that remained of happy "Tony" laid in the grave, there to lie "until the trumpet sounds, and the dead in Christ rise first."

"Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed church of God
Be saved to sin no more."

This simple narrative is given to show that great intellects or attainments are not needed to enable a person to believe and receive the gospel, and to rejoice in it. "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth," our Saviour said, "that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight."

It is true that even the greatest powers of mind in man, and the highest degree of education, are insufficient for the comprehension of all the mysteries of redeeming love. But, on the other hand, we know that the way of salvation is so plain, that "the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.