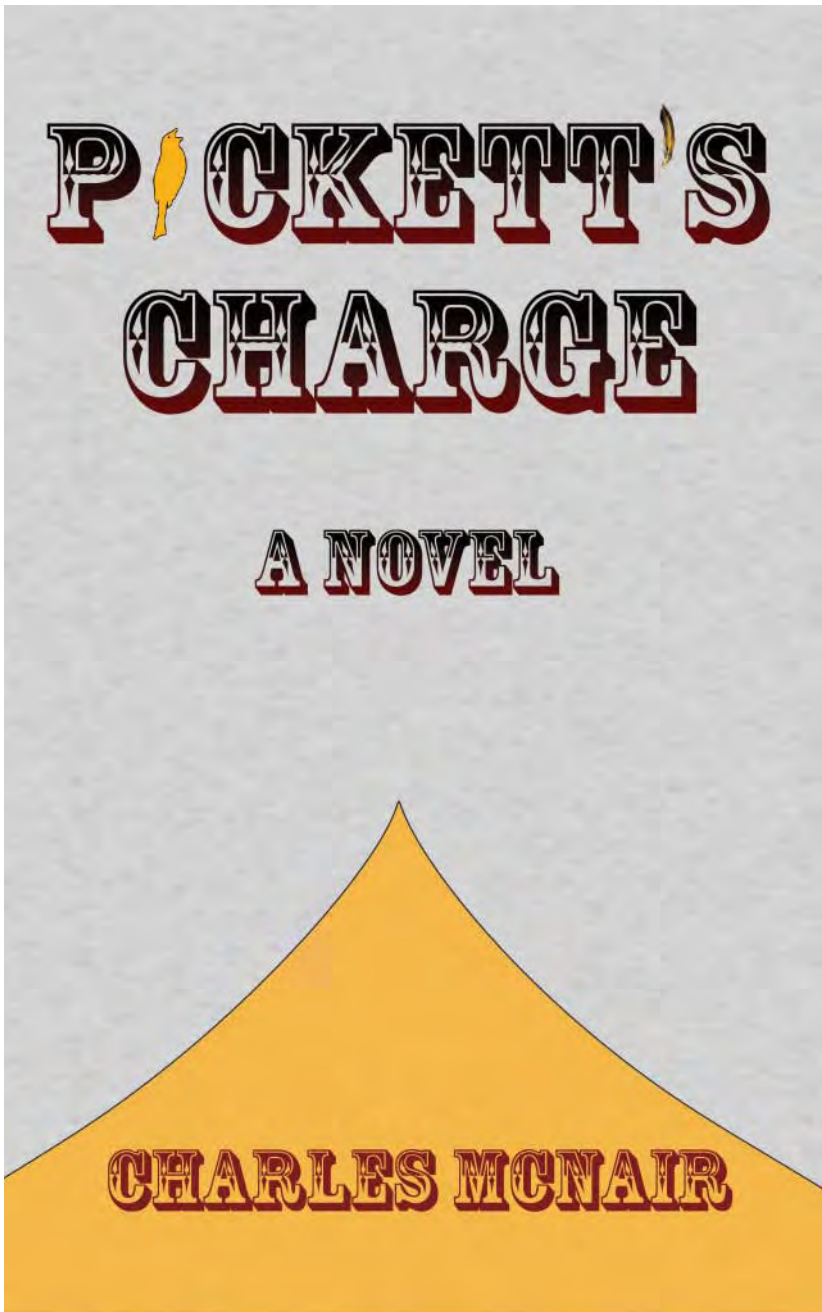


Available September 20, 2013, from the acclaimed author of [Land O' Goshen](#), a stirring and hilarious tale of the final battle of the American Civil War.

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PICKETT'S CHARGE

a novel

CHARLES MCNAIR

**LIVINGSTON PRESS
THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA**

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isbn 13: 978-1-60489-120-1, hardcover

isbn 13: 978-1-60489-121-8, trade paper

isbn: 1-60489-120-3, hardcover

isbn: 1-60489-121-1, trade paper

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013944733

Printed on acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America by

United Graphics

Hardcover binding by: Heckman Bindery

Typesetting and page layout: Joe Taylor

Proofreading: Joe Taylor, Emma Kay McClung, Verdie Coleman III, Alison Law

Cover design and layout: Emily Mills Burkett

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Livingston Press is part of The University of West Alabama,
and thereby has non-profit status.
Donations are tax-deductible.

first edition

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Chapter 1, A Visitor

Summer 1964 – Room 13, Mobile Sunset Home, Mobile, Alabama

In the yellow dark of an Alabama nursing home, an old, old man opened two remarkable eyes.

“Brother! Wake up! You burnin’ daylight!”

It had been a difficult night.

After curfew, a great booming Gulf Coast thunderstorm rattled the world. Threadgill Pickett’s long colorful dream stopped cold when the lightning flashed. It felt like the moment when the attendants at Mobile Sunset Home tweaked a little knob on the TV set and all the 1960s picnic people and white houses and happy dogs funneled down into one small bright white light, and – *ffff!* – passed away.

For an instant, dreamy voices and memories spun around the room, a gossamer gunsmoke. Morning leaked in under cheap Venetian blinds.

Ah, me, the old man thought bitterly, staring at the ceiling. *To live and die in Dixie.*

Out of weary habit, Threadgill stretched a sere hand toward his bedpost. A floppy gray hat hung there, mostly invisible, a permanent part of the shadows.

He fit the hat securely onto his head, snugged it down. A faded yellow-hammer feather jutted from the crown.

Threadgill relaxed. His hat hid his head. The only important task of the day was now accomplished.

He settled back into a sour pillow, counting his heartbeats under musty bedcovers.

For all the pyrotechnics and rolling thunder, it hadn’t rained much in the night. Easy to tell. After a really big downpour, the brown watermark in the plaster ceiling spread and darkened. This morning, the splotch looked about the same as the last few weeks, vaguely like a map of the eastern United States.

A stagnant-water puddle browned Maine. Spiders webbed New Jersey, and Indiana crumbled piecemeal, chunk by little chunk, onto the linoleum floor at the foot of Threadgill’s bed. Down south, Florida drooped like an old

sad penis into a yellow ocean.

No, the map hadn't grown. Threadgill was sure. Alert. After ten watchful years in the rest home, he could instantly spy new territory.

The stain started at about South Carolina, the year Threadgill turned 104 and first arrived at Mobile Sunset Home after his long refuge on Goat Island. Year after lonely year, discoloration spread slowly through the plaster, annexing new frontiers. Texas and Minnesota most recently joined. The old man secretly wondered if he'd live long enough to see California a part of the map.

He would be right here, waiting.

Waiting for his moment.

"Pitiful," sighed a voice in the gloom. "Pitiful, pitiful. Threadgill, it's terrible what all y'all have to go through down here."

Threadgill Pickett twisted on his creaky bed. He felt a kind of sudden terror.

He hadn't dreamed it.

Who else was in his room?

A lanky young man, barely more than a boy, sat before the window. He was nicely backlit by the strip of dawn beneath the shade. Threadgill could make out a mass of tousled hair, a cotton blouse, homespun trousers.

"Don't go all flippity, brother," the visitor grinned. "I got good tidings."

"Land O' Goshen!" Threadgill breathed weakly. "Ben?"

An unearthly blue light glowed in the visitor's face. But something seemed far from brotherly in that aspect. Threadgill never imagined an angel would look so ... well, rough. What angel had a black eye, a scab on the chin, a swollen lip?

"Brother?"

"It's really me, Gill. It is."

Threadgill began to tremble. Something nearly broke inside him. A cry, sheer and elemental, welled from his heart and scalded a path up his throat, out his mouth.

"Oh!" Threadgill wailed. "Help! Help me, nurses!" The old man shouted and thrashed on the squeaky bed, sheets and pillow flying. No one seemed to hear.

As Threadgill convulsed, Ben nonchalantly produced a fresh lemon from

his blouse. In the morning sunlight, it seemed to Threadgill like the yellowest thing on earth.

Ben's sharp fingernail knifed a circle through the bright citrus peel. The youngster brought the lemon to his lips, hesitated.

"Go on and yell, Threadgill. You always were hard-headed. Just yell till you're ready to hear me." Ben took a suck of the lemon. His face twisted. "Aw, shoot! At's *good!*"

Threadgill did yell. Bloody, holy murder. He screeched till he went hoarse. He kicked the bedcovers into the air. He toppled a bedside stack of Dixie cups, and his bedpan clanged across the room.

Ben worked the lemon. *Suck, suck, suck.*

Threadgill carried on. He threw a vase at the door. He tipped over a metal IV tree. He raged. He roared.

At last, Threadgill fell still, shuddering. His heart kicked at its bony stall, a frightened horse in a burning barn. He wanted to panic and run – right through the window and out splashing into Mobile Bay. He could do it! He was still a strong man! He'd kept himself hard and fit for all these years, counting down the hours, the years, to a day of final reckoning.

Threadgill's heartbeat shook the entire bed.

"Ahhh!" sighed Ben. He tossed the empty lemon – *bong!* – into a metal trash can. He gritted his teeth in satisfaction. "At's *mighty* fine!"

Threadgill's twin brother, long gone from the world but here this morning by some miracle or hallucination, wiped the back of long fingers across his wet mouth.

"I ain't going!" Threadgill croaked. "I still got a mite of business, Ben! I ain't ready to leave this vale! Don't take me!"

The visitor tut-tutted.

"Threadgill, listen. I ain't here to haul you off to glory. Pay attention, hard-head."

So Threadgill did. Finally. Not one toe twitched. He closed his eyes. The country music on the Philco down the hall – Buck Owens, *Together Again* – grew dim and distant.

The young man in the chair leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Threadgill Pickett, it's time."

The old man sharply drew in his breath.

“Ain’t but one Yankee left now, Gill. Just one. He’s up in Bangor, Maine, and he lives in the biggest house you ever saw. He’s a millionaire ... and he lives all by himself. You hearing me? Hear what I’m sayin’?”

Oh yes.

Threadgill heard.

He listened fiercely to his visitor now, and did not move a muscle.

A new light gleamed in Threadgill Pickett’s eyes.

A cold sun.

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