



# SUBURBAN SKETCHES

W. D. HOWELLS

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WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

*Suburban Sketches, W. D. Howells*  
*Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck*  
*86450 Altenmünster, Loschberg 9*  
*Deutschland*

*ISBN: 9783849657260*

*[www.jazzybee-verlag.de](http://www.jazzybee-verlag.de)*  
*[admin@jazzybee-verlag.de](mailto:admin@jazzybee-verlag.de)*

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## MRS. JOHNSON

It was on a morning of the lovely New England May that we left the horse-car, and, spreading our umbrellas, walked down the street to our new home in Charlesbridge, through a storm of snow and rain so finely blent by the influences of this fortunate climate, that no flake knew itself from its sister drop, or could be better identified by the people against whom they beat in unison. A vernal gale from the east fanned our cheeks and pierced our marrow and chilled our blood, while the raw, cold green of the adventurous grass on the borders of the sopping sidewalks gave, as it peered through its veil of melting snow and freezing rain, a peculiar cheerfulness to the landscape. Here and there in the vacant lots abandoned hoop-skirts defied decay; and near the half-finished wooden houses, empty mortar-beds, and bits of lath and slate strewn over the scarred and mutilated ground, added their interest to the scene. A shaggy drift hung upon the trees before our own house (which had been built some years earlier), while its swollen eaves wept silently and incessantly upon the embankments lifting its base several feet above the common level.

This heavenly weather, which the Pilgrim Fathers, with the idea of turning their thoughts effectually from earthly pleasures, came so far to discover, continued with slight amelioration throughout the month of May and far into June; and it was a matter of constant amazement with one who had known less austere climates, to behold how vegetable life struggled with the hostile skies, and, in an atmosphere as chill and damp as that of a cellar, shot forth the buds and blossoms upon the pear-trees, called out the sour Puritan courage of the currant-bushes, taught a

reckless native grape-vine to wander and wanton over the southern side of the fence, and decked the banks with violets as fearless and as fragile as New England girls; so that about the end of June, when the heavens relented and the sun blazed out at last, there was little for him to do but to redden and darken the daring fruits that had attained almost their full growth without his countenance.

Then, indeed, Charlesbridge appeared to us a kind of Paradise. The wind blew all day from the southwest, and all day in the grove across the way the orioles sang to their nestlings. The butcher's wagon rattled merrily up to our gate every morning; and if we had kept no other reckoning, we should have known it was Thursday by the grocer. We were living in the country with the conveniences and luxuries of the city about us. The house was almost new and in perfect repair; and, better than all, the kitchen had as yet given no signs of unrest in those volcanic agencies which are constantly at work there, and which, with sudden explosion, make Herculaneums and Pompeiis of so many smiling households. Breakfast, dinner, and tea came up with illusive regularity, and were all the most perfect of their kind; and we laughed and feasted in our vain security. We had out from the city to banquet with us the friends we loved, and we were inexpressibly proud before them of the Help, who first wrought miracles of cookery in our honor, and then appeared in a clean white apron, and the glossiest black hair, to wait upon the table. She was young, and certainly very pretty; she was as gay as a lark, and was courted by a young man whose clothes would have been a credit, if they had not been a reproach, to our lowly basement. She joyfully assented to the idea of staying with us till she married.

In fact, there was much that was extremely pleasant about the little place when the warm weather came, and it was not wonderful to us that Jenny was willing to remain. It was very quiet; we called one another to the window if a

large dog went by our door; and whole days passed without the movement of any wheels but the butcher's upon our street, which flourished in ragweed and butter-cups and daisies, and in the autumn burned, like the borders of nearly all the streets in Charlesbridge, with the pallid azure flame of the succory. The neighborhood was in all things a frontier between city and country. The horse-cars, the type of such civilization—full of imposture, discomfort, and sublime possibility—as we yet possess, went by the head of our street, and might, perhaps, be available to one skilled in calculating the movements of comets; while two minutes' walk would take us into a wood so wild and thick that no roof was visible through the trees. We learned, like innocent pastoral people of the golden age, to know the several voices of the cows pastured in the vacant lots, and, like engine-drivers of the iron age, to distinguish the different whistles of the locomotives passing on the neighboring railroad. The trains shook the house as they thundered along, and at night were a kind of company, while by day we had the society of the innumerable birds. Now and then, also, the little ragged boys in charge of the cows—which, tied by long ropes to trees, forever wound themselves tight up against the trunks, and had to be unwound with great ado of hooting and hammering—came and peered lustfully through the gate at our ripening pears. All round us carpenters were at work building new houses; but so far from troubling us, the strokes of their hammers fell softly upon the sense, like one's heart-beats upon one's own consciousness in the lapse from all fear of pain under the blessed charm of an anaesthetic.

We played a little at gardening, of course, and planted tomatoes, which the chickens seemed to like, for they ate them up as fast as they ripened; and we watched with pride the growth of our Lawton blackberries, which, after attaining the most stalwart proportions, were still as bitter as the scrubbiest of their savage brethren, and which,

when by advice left on the vines for a week after they turned black, were silently gorged by secret and gluttonous flocks of robins and orioles. As for our grapes, the frost cut them off in the hour of their triumph.

So, as I have hinted, we were not surprised that Jenny should be willing to remain with us, and were as little prepared for her desertion as for any other change of our moral state. But one day in September she came to her nominal mistress with tears in her beautiful eyes and protestations of unexampled devotion upon her tongue, and said that she was afraid she must leave us. She liked the place, and she never had worked for any one that was more of a lady, but she had made up her mind to go into the city. All this, so far, was quite in the manner of domestics who, in ghost stories, give warning to the occupants of haunted houses; and Jenny's mistress listened in suspense for the motive of her desertion, expecting to hear no less than that it was something which walked up and down the stairs and dragged iron links after it, or something that came and groaned at the front door, like populace dissatisfied with a political candidate. But it was in fact nothing of this kind; simply, there were no lamps upon our street, and Jenny, after spending Sunday evening with friends in East Charlesbridge, was always alarmed, on her return, in walking from the horse-car to our door. The case was hopeless, and Jenny and our household parted with respect and regret.

We had not before this thought it a grave disadvantage that our street was unlighted. Our street was not drained nor graded; no municipal cart ever came to carry away our ashes; there was not a water-butt within half a mile to save us from fire, nor more than the one thousandth part of a policeman to protect us from theft. Yet, as I paid a heavy tax, I somehow felt that we enjoyed the benefits of city government, and never looked upon Charlesbridge as in any way undesirable for residence. But when it became



necessary to find help in Jenny's place, the frosty welcome given to application at the intelligence offices renewed a painful doubt awakened by her departure. To be sure, the heads of the offices were polite enough; but when the young housekeeper had stated her case at the first to which she applied, and the Intelligencer had called out to the invisible expectants in the adjoining room, "Anny wan wants to do giner'l housewark in Charlsbrudge?" there came from the maids invoked so loud, so fierce, so full a "No!" as shook the lady's heart with an indescribable shame and dread. The name that, with an innocent pride in its literary and historical associations, she had written at the heads of her letters, was suddenly become a matter of reproach to her; and she was almost tempted to conceal thereafter that she lived in Charlesbridge, and to pretend that she dwelt upon some wretched little street in Boston. "You see," said the head of the office, "the gairls doesn't like to live so far away from the city. Now if it was on'y in the Port...."

This pen is not graphic enough to give the remote reader an idea of the affront offered to an inhabitant of Old Charlesbridge in these closing words. Neither am I of sufficiently tragic mood to report here all the sufferings undergone by an unhappy family in finding servants, or to tell how the winter was passed with miserable makeshifts. Alas! is it not the history of a thousand experiences? Any one who looks upon this page could match it with a tale as full of heartbreak and disaster, while I conceive that, in hastening to speak of Mrs. Johnson, I approach a subject of unique interest.

The winter that ensued after Jenny's departure was the true sister of the bitter and shrewish spring of the same year. But indeed it is always with a secret shiver that one must think of winter in our regrettable climate. It is a terrible potency, robbing us of half our lives, and threatening or desolating the moiety left us with

rheumatisms and catarrhs. There is a much vaster sum of enjoyment possible to man in the more generous latitudes; and I have sometimes doubted whether even the energy characteristic of ours is altogether to be praised, seeing that it has its spring not so much in pure aspiration as in the instinct of self-preservation. Egyptian, Greek, Roman energy was an inner impulse; but ours is too often the sting of cold, the spur of famine. We must endure our winter, but let us not be guilty of the hypocrisy of pretending that we like it. Let us caress it with no more vain compliments, but use it with something of its own rude and savage sincerity.

I say, our last Irish girl went with the last snow, and on one of those midsummer-like days that sometimes fall in early April to our yet bleak and desolate zone, our hearts sang of Africa and golden joys. A Libyan longing took us, and we would have chosen, if we could, to bear a strand of grotesque beads, or a handful of brazen gauds, and traffic them for some sable maid with crisped locks, whom, uncoffling from the captive train beside the desert, we should make to do our general housework forever, through the right of lawful purchase. But we knew that this was impossible, and that, if we desired colored help, we must seek it at the intelligence office, which is in one of those streets chiefly inhabited by the orphaned children and grandchildren of slavery. To tell the truth these orphans do not seem to grieve much for their bereavement, but lead a life of joyous and rather indolent oblivion in their quarter of the city. They are often to be seen sauntering up and down the street by which the Charlesbridge cars arrive,—the young with a harmless swagger, and the old with the generic limp which our Autocrat has already noted as attending advanced years in their race. They seem the natural human interest of a street so largely devoted to old clothes; and the thoughtful may see a felicity in their presence where the pawnbrokers' windows display the forfeited pledges of improvidence, and subtly remind us

that we have yet to redeem a whole race, pawned in our needy and reckless national youth, and still held against us by the Uncle of Injustice, who is also the Father of Lies. How gayly are the young ladies of this race attired, as they trip up and down the side walks, and in and out through the pendent garments at the shop doors! They are the black pansies and marigolds and dark-blooded dahlias among womankind. They try to assume something of our colder race's demeanor, but even the passer on the horse-car can see that it is not native with them, and is better pleased when they forget us, and ungentlely laugh in encountering friends, letting their white teeth glitter through the generous lips that open to their ears. In the streets branching upwards from this avenue, very little colored men and maids play with broken or enfeebled toys, or sport on the wooden pavements of the entrances to the inner courts. Now and then a colored soldier or sailor—looking strange in his uniform, even after the custom of several years—emerges from those passages; or, more rarely, a black gentleman, stricken in years, and cased in shining broadcloth, walks solidly down the brick sidewalk, cane in hand,—a vision of serene self-complacency, and so plainly the expression of virtuous public sentiment that the great colored louts, innocent enough till then in their idleness, are taken with a sudden sense of depravity, and loaf guiltily up against the house-walls. At the same moment, perhaps, a young damsel, amorously scuffling with an admirer through one of the low open windows, suspends the strife, and bids him, “Go along now, do!” More rarely yet than the gentleman described, one may see a white girl among the dark neighbors, whose frowzy head is uncovered, and whose sleeves are rolled up to her elbows, and who, though no doubt quite at home, looks as strange there as that pale anomaly which may sometimes be seen among a crew of blackbirds.

An air not so much of decay as of unthrift, and yet hardly of unthrift, seems to prevail in the neighborhood, which has none of the aggressive and impudent squalor of an Irish quarter, and none of the surly wickedness of a low American street. A gayety not born of the things that bring its serious joy to the true New England heart—a ragged gayety, which comes of summer in the blood, and not in the pocket or the conscience, and which affects the countenance and the whole demeanor, setting the feet to some inward music, and at times bursting into a line of song or a child-like and irresponsible laugh—gives tone to the visible life, and wakens a very friendly spirit in the passer, who somehow thinks there of a milder climate, and is half persuaded that the orange-peel on the sidewalks came from fruit grown in the soft atmosphere of those back courts.

It was in this quarter, then, that we heard of Mrs. Johnson; and it was from a colored boarding-house there that she came out to Charlesbridge to look at us, bringing her daughter of twelve years with her. She was a matron of mature age and portly figure, with a complexion like coffee soothed with the richest cream; and her manners were so full of a certain tranquillity and grace, that she charmed away all out will to ask for references. It was only her barbaric laughter and her lawless eye that betrayed how slightly her New England birth and breeding covered her ancestral traits, and bridged the gulf of a thousand years of civilization that lay between her race and ours. But in fact, she was doubly estranged by descent; for, as we learned later, a sylvan wildness mixed with that of the desert in her veins: her grandfather was an Indian, and her ancestors on this side had probably sold their lands for the same value in trinkets that bought the original African pair on the other side.

The first day that Mrs. Johnson descended into our kitchen, she conjured from the malicious disorder in which

it had been left by the flitting Irish kobold a dinner that revealed the inspirations of genius, and was quite different from a dinner of mere routine and laborious talent. Something original and authentic mingled with the accustomed flavors; and, though vague reminiscences of canal-boat travel and woodland camps arose from the relish of certain of the dishes, there was yet the assurance of such power in the preparation of the whole, that we knew her to be merely running over the chords of our appetite with preliminary savors, as a musician acquaints his touch with the keys of an unfamiliar piano before breaking into brilliant and triumphant execution. Within a week she had mastered her instrument; and thereafter there was no faltering in her performances, which she varied constantly, through inspiration or from suggestion. She was so quick to receive new ideas in her art, that, when the Roman statuary who stayed a few weeks with us explained the mystery of various purely Latin dishes, she caught their principle at once; and visions of the great white cathedral, the Coliseum, and the "dome of Brunelleschi" floated before us in the exhalations of the Milanese *risotto*, Roman *stufadino*, and Florentine *stracotto* that smoked upon our board. But, after all, it was in puddings that Mrs. Johnson chiefly excelled. She was one of those cooks—rare as men of genius in literature—who love their own dishes; and she had, in her personally child-like simplicity of taste, and the inherited appetites of her savage forefathers, a dominant passion for sweets. So far as we could learn, she subsisted principally upon puddings and tea. Through the same primitive instincts, no doubt, she loved praise. She openly exulted in our artless flatteries of her skill; she waited jealously at the head of the kitchen stairs to hear what was said of her work, especially if there were guests; and she was never too weary to attempt emprises of cookery.

While engaged in these, she wore a species of slightly handkerchief like a turban upon her head and about her person those mystical swathings in which old ladies of the African race delight. But she most pleased our sense of beauty and moral fitness when, after the last pan was washed and the last pot was scraped, she lighted a potent pipe, and, taking her stand at the kitchen door, laded the soft evening air with its pungent odors. If we surprised her at these supreme moments, she took the pipe from her lips, and put it behind her, with a low mellow chuckle, and a look of half-defiant consciousness; never guessing that none of her merits took us half so much as the cheerful vice which she only feigned to conceal.

Some things she could not do so perfectly as cooking, because of her failing eyesight; and we persuaded her that spectacles would both become and befriend a lady of her years, and so bought her a pair of steel-bowed glasses. She wore them in some great emergencies at first, but had clearly no pride in them. Before long she laid them aside altogether, and they had passed from our thoughts, when one day we heard her mellow note of laughter and her daughter's harsher cackle outside our door, and, opening it, beheld Mrs. Johnson in gold-bowed spectacles of massive frame. We then learned that their purchase was in fulfillment of a vow made long ago, in the life-time of Mr. Johnson, that, if ever she wore glasses, they should be gold-bowed; and I hope the manes of the dead were half as happy in these votive spectacles as the simple soul that offered them.

She and her late partner were the parents of eleven children, some of whom were dead, and some of whom were wanderers in unknown parts. During his life-time she had kept a little shop in her native town; and it was only within a few years that she had gone into service. She cherished a natural haughtiness of spirit, and resented control, although disposed to do all she could of her own

motion. Being told to say when she wanted an afternoon, she explained that when she wanted an afternoon she always took it without asking, but always planned so as not to discommode the ladies with whom she lived. These, she said, had numbered twenty-seven within three years, which made us doubt the success of her system in all cases, though she merely held out the fact as an assurance of her faith in the future, and a proof of the ease with which places were to be found. She contended, moreover, that a lady who had for thirty years had a house of her own, was in nowise bound to ask permission to receive visits from friends where she might be living, but that they ought freely to come and go like other guests. In this spirit she once invited her son-in-law, Professor Jones of Providence, to dine with her; and her defied mistress, on entering the dining-room, found the Professor at pudding and tea there,—an impressively respectable figure in black clothes, with a black face rendered yet more effective by a pair of green goggles. It appeared that this dark professor was a light of phrenology in Rhode Island, and that he was believed to have uncommon virtue in his science by reason of being blind as well as black.

I am loath to confess that Mrs. Johnson had not a flattering opinion of the Caucasian race in all respects. In fact, she had very good philosophical and Scriptural reasons for looking upon us as an upstart people of new blood, who had come into their whiteness by no creditable or pleasant process. The late Mr. Johnson, who had died in the West Indies, whither he voyaged for his health in quality of cook upon a Down-East schooner, was a man of letters, and had written a book to show the superiority of the black over the white branches of the human family. In this he held that, as all islands have been at their discovery found peopled by blacks, we must needs believe that humanity was first created of that color. Mrs. Johnson could not show us her husband's work (a sole copy in the library

of an English gentleman at Port au Prince is not to be bought for money), but she often developed its arguments to the lady of the house; and one day, with a great show of reluctance, and many protests that no personal slight was meant, let fall the fact that Mr. Johnson believed the white race descended from Gehazi the leper, upon whom the leprosy of Naaman fell when the latter returned by Divine favor to his original blackness. "And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow," said Mrs. Johnson, quoting irrefutable Scripture. "Leprosy, leprosy," she added thoughtfully,—"nothing but leprosy bleached you out."

It seems to me much in her praise that she did not exult in our taint and degradation, as some white philosophers used to do in the opposite idea that a part of the human family were cursed to lasting blackness and slavery in Ham and his children, but even told us of a remarkable approach to whiteness in many of her own offspring. In a kindred spirit of charity, no doubt, she refused ever to attend church with people of her elder and wholesomer blood. When she went to church, she said, she always went to a white church, though while with us I am bound to say she never went to any. She professed to read her Bible in her bedroom on Sundays; but we suspected, from certain sounds and odors which used to steal out of this sanctuary, that her piety more commonly found expression in dozing and smoking.

I would not make a wanton jest here of Mrs. Johnson's anxiety to claim honor for the African color, while denying this color in many of her own family. It afforded a glimpse of the pain which all her people must endure, however proudly they hide it or light-heartedly forget it, from the despite and contumely to which they are guiltlessly born; and when I thought how irreparable was this disgrace and calamity of a black skin, and how irreparable it must be for ages yet, in this world where every other shame and all manner of wilful guilt and wickedness may hope for covert



and pardon, I had little heart to laugh. Indeed, it was so pathetic to hear this poor old soul talk of her dead and lost ones, and try, in spite of all Mr. Johnson's theories and her own arrogant generalizations, to establish their whiteness, that we must have been very cruel and silly people to turn her sacred fables even into matter of question. I have no doubt that her Antoinette Anastasia and her Thomas Jefferson Wilberforce—it is impossible to give a full idea of the splendor and scope of the baptismal names in Mrs. Johnson's family—have as light skins and as golden hair in heaven as her reverend maternal fancy painted for them in our world. There, certainly, they would not be subject to tanning, which had ruined the delicate complexion, and had knotted into black woolly tangles the once wavy blonde locks of our little maid-servant Naomi; and I would fain believe that Toussaint Washington Johnson, who ran away to sea so many years ago, has found some fortunate zone where his hair and skin keep the same sunny and rosy tints they wore to his mother's eyes in infancy. But I have no means of knowing this, or of telling whether he was the prodigy of intellect that he was declared to be. Naomi could no more be taken in proof, of the one assertion than of the other. When she came to us, it was agreed that she should go to school; but she overruled her mother in this as in everything else, and never went. Except Sunday-school lessons, she had no other instruction than that her mistress gave her in the evenings, when a heavy day's play and the natural influences of the hour conspired with original causes to render her powerless before words of one syllable.

The first week of her service she was obedient and faithful to her duties; but, relaxing in the atmosphere of a house which seems to demoralize all menials, she shortly fell into disorderly ways of lying in wait for callers out of doors, and, when people rang, of running up the front steps, and letting them in from the outside. As the season

expanded, and the fine weather became confirmed, she modified even this form of service, and spent her time in the fields, appearing at the house only when nature importunately craved molasses. She had a parrot-like quickness, so far as music was concerned, and learned from the Roman statuary to make the groves and half-finished houses resound,

*“Camicia rossa,  
Ove t' ascondi?  
T' appella Italia,—  
Tu non respondi!”*

She taught the Garibaldi song, moreover, to all the neighboring children, so that I sometimes wondered if our street were not about to march upon Rome in a body.

In her untamable disobedience, Naomi alone betrayed her sylvan blood, for she was in all other respects negro and not Indian. But it was of her aboriginal ancestry that Mrs. Johnson chiefly boasted,—when not engaged in argument to maintain the superiority of the African race. She loved to descant upon it as the cause and explanation of her own arrogant habit of feeling; and she seemed indeed to have inherited something of the Indian's hauteur along with the Ethiop's supple cunning and abundant amiability. She gave many instances in which her pride had met and overcome the insolence of employers, and the kindly old creature was by no means singular in her pride of being reputed proud.

She could never have been a woman of strong logical faculties, but she had in some things a very surprising and awful astuteness. She seldom introduced any purpose directly, but bore all about it and then suddenly sprung it upon her unprepared antagonist. At other times she obscurely hinted a reason, and left a conclusion to be inferred; as when she warded off reproach for some

delinquency by saying in a general way that she had lived with ladies who used to come scolding into the kitchen after they had taken their bitters. "Quality ladies took their bitters regular," she added, to remove any sting of personality from her remark; for, from many things she had let fall, we knew that she did not regard us as quality. On the contrary, she often tried to overbear us with the gentility of her former places; and would tell the lady over whom she reigned, that she had lived with folks worth their three and four hundred thousand dollars, who never complained as she did of the ironing. Yet she had a sufficient regard for the literary occupations of the family, Mr. Johnson having been an author. She even professed to have herself written a book, which was still in manuscript, and preserved somewhere among her best clothes.

It was well, on many accounts, to be in contact with a mind so original and suggestive as Mrs. Johnson's. We loved to trace its intricate yet often transparent operations, and were perhaps too fond of explaining its peculiarities by facts of ancestry,—of finding hints of the Powwow or the Grand Custom in each grotesque development. We were conscious of something warmer in this old soul than in ourselves, and something wilder, and we chose to think it the tropic and the untracked forest. She had scarcely any being apart from her affection; she had no morality, but was good because she neither hated nor envied; and she might have been a saint far more easily than far more civilized people.

There was that also in her sinuous yet malleable nature, so full of guile and so full of goodness, that reminded us pleasantly of lowly folk in elder lands, where relaxing oppressions have lifted the restraints of fear between master and servant, without disturbing the familiarity of their relation. She advised freely with us upon all household matters, and took a motherly interest in whatever concerned us. She could be flattered or caressed

into almost any service, but no threat or command could move her. When she erred, she never acknowledged her wrong in words, but handsomely expressed her regrets in a pudding, or sent up her apologies in a favorite dish secretly prepared. We grew so well used to this form of exculpation, that, whenever Mrs. Johnson took an afternoon at an inconvenient season, we knew that for a week afterwards we should be feasted like princes. She owned frankly that she loved us, that she never had done half so much for people before, and that she never had been nearly so well suited in any other place; and for a brief and happy time we thought that we never should part.

One day, however, our dividing destiny appeared in the basement, and was presented to us as Hippolyto Thucydides, the son of Mrs. Johnson, who had just arrived on a visit to his mother from the State of New Hampshire. He was a heavy and loutish youth, standing upon the borders of boyhood, and looking forward to the future with a vacant and listless eye. I mean that this was his figurative attitude; his actual manner, as he lolled upon a chair beside the kitchen window, was so eccentric, that we felt a little uncertain how to regard him, and Mrs. Johnson openly described him as peculiar. He was so deeply tanned by the fervid suns of the New Hampshire winter, and his hair had so far suffered from the example of the sheep lately under his charge, that he could not be classed by any stretch of compassion with the blonde and straight-haired members of Mrs. Johnson's family.

He remained with us all the first day until late in the afternoon, when his mother took him out to get him a boarding-house. Then he departed in the van of her and Naomi, pausing at the gate to collect his spirits, and, after he had sufficiently animated himself by clapping his palms together, starting off down the street at a hand-gallop, to the manifest terror of the cows in the pastures, and the confusion of the less demonstrative people of our