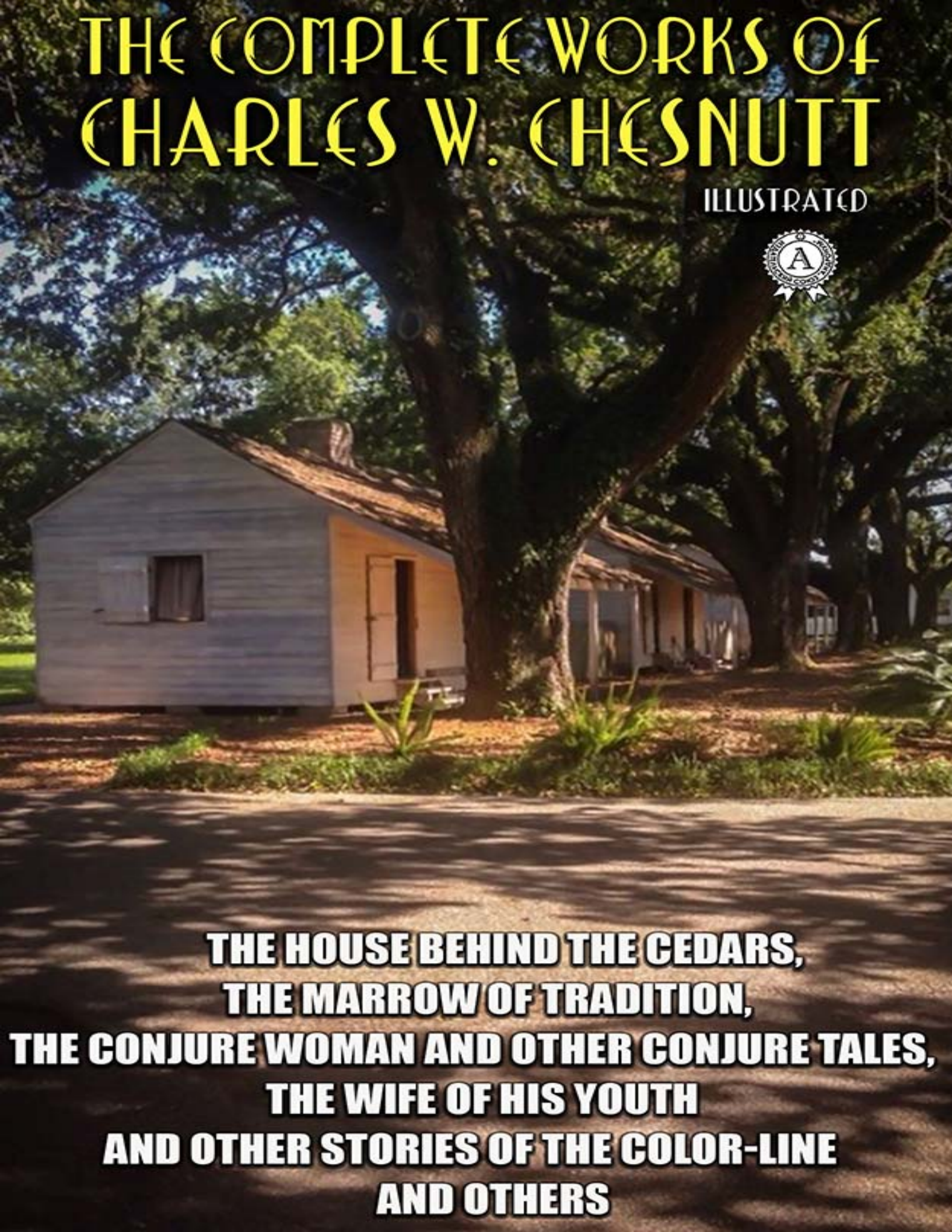
THE COMPLETE WORKS OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

ILLUSTRATED



THE HOUSE BEHIND THE CEDARS,
THE MARROW OF TRADITION,
THE CONJURE WOMAN AND OTHER CONJURE TALES,
THE WIFE OF HIS YOUTH
AND OTHER STORIES OF THE COLOR-LINE
AND OTHERS

The Complete Works of Charles W. Chesnutt:

The House behind the Cedars, The Marrow of Tradition, The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line and others

Illustrated

Charles Waddell Chesnutt best known for his novels and short stories exploring complex issues of racial and social identity in the post-Civil War South. He became active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, writing articles supporting education as well as legal challenges to discriminatory laws.

Following the Civil Rights Movement during the 20th century, interest in the works of Chesnutt was revived.

In style and subject matter, the writings of Charles Chesnutt straddle the divide between the local color school of American writing and literary realism.

While Julius's tales recall the Uncle Remus tales published by Joel Chandler Harris, they differ in that Uncle Julius' tales offer oblique or coded commentary on the psychological and social effects of slavery and racial inequality. While controversy exists over whether Chesnutt's Uncle Julius stories reaffirmed stereotypical views of African Americans, most critics contend that their allegorical critiques of racial injustice took them to a different level.

THE NOVELS
The House behind the Cedars
The Marrow of Tradition
The Colonel's Dream

THE SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS
The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales
The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line
Uncollected Stories

THE NON-FICTION
Frederick Douglass
The Disfranchisement of the Negro
Uncollected Essays

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The Novels

The House behind the Cedars (1900)

I. A STRANGER FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

TIME TOUCHES ALL things with destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but a brief mockery, to be surely and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age, the dry leaves and bare branches of winter. And yet there are places where Time seems to linger lovingly long after youth has departed, and to which he seems loath to bring the evil day. Who has not known some even-tempered old man or woman who seemed to have drunk of the fountain of youth? Who has not seen somewhere an old town that, having long since ceased to grow, yet held its own without perceptible decline?

Some such trite reflection — as apposite to the subject as most random reflections are — passed through the mind of a young man who came out of the front door of the Patesville Hotel about nine o'clock one fine morning in spring, a few years after the Civil War, and started down Front Street toward the market-house. Arriving at the town late the previous evening, he had been driven up from the steamboat in a carriage, from which he had been able to distinguish only the shadowy outlines of the houses along the street; so that this morning walk was his first opportunity to see the town by daylight. He was dressed in a suit of linen duck — the day was warm — a panama straw hat, and patent leather shoes. In appearance he was tall, dark, with straight, black, lustrous hair, and very clean-cut, high-bred features. When he paused by the clerk's desk on his way out, to light his cigar, the day clerk, who had just come on duty, glanced at the register and read the last entry: —

"'JOHN WARWICK, CLARENCE, SOUTH CAROLINA.'

“One of the South Ca’lina bigbugs, I reckon — probably in cotton, or turpentine.” The gentleman from South Carolina, walking down the street, glanced about him with an eager look, in which curiosity and affection were mingled with a touch of bitterness. He saw little that was not familiar, or that he had not seen in his dreams a hundred times during the past ten years. There had been some changes, it is true, some melancholy changes, but scarcely anything by way of addition or improvement to counterbalance them. Here and there blackened and dismantled walls marked the place where handsome buildings once had stood, for Sherman’s march to the sea had left its mark upon the town. The stores were mostly of brick, two stories high, joining one another after the manner of cities. Some of the names on the signs were familiar; others, including a number of Jewish names, were quite unknown to him.

A two minutes’ walk brought Warwick — the name he had registered under, and as we shall call him — to the market-house, the central feature of Patesville, from both the commercial and the picturesque points of view. Standing foursquare in the heart of the town, at the intersection of the two main streets, a “jog” at each street corner left around the market-house a little public square, which at this hour was well occupied by carts and wagons from the country and empty drays awaiting hire. Warwick was unable to perceive much change in the market-house. Perhaps the surface of the red brick, long unpainted, had scaled off a little more here and there. There might have been a slight accretion of the moss and lichen on the shingled roof. But the tall tower, with its four-faced clock, rose as majestically and uncompromisingly as though the land had never been subjugated. Was it so irreconcilable, Warwick wondered, as still to peal out the curfew bell, which at nine o’clock at night had clamorously warned all negroes, slave or free, that it was unlawful for them to be abroad after that hour, under penalty of imprisonment or whipping? Was the old

constable, whose chief business it had been to ring the bell, still alive and exercising the functions of his office, and had age lessened or increased the number of times that obliging citizens performed this duty for him during his temporary absences in the company of convivial spirits? A few moments later, Warwick saw a colored policeman in the old constable's place — a stronger reminder than even the burned buildings that war had left its mark upon the old town, with which Time had dealt so tenderly.

The lower story of the market-house was open on all four of its sides to the public square. Warwick passed through one of the wide brick arches and traversed the building with a leisurely step. He looked in vain into the stalls for the butcher who had sold fresh meat twice a week, on market days, and he felt a genuine thrill of pleasure when he recognized the red bandana turban of old Aunt Lyddy, the ancient negro woman who had sold him gingerbread and fried fish, and told him weird tales of witchcraft and conjuration, in the old days when, as an idle boy, he had loafed about the market-house. He did not speak to her, however, or give her any sign of recognition. He threw a glance toward a certain corner where steps led to the town hall above. On this stairway he had once seen a manacled free negro shot while being taken upstairs for examination under a criminal charge. Warwick recalled vividly how the shot had rung out. He could see again the livid look of terror on the victim's face, the gathering crowd, the resulting confusion. The murderer, he recalled, had been tried and sentenced to imprisonment for life, but was pardoned by a merciful governor after serving a year of his sentence. As Warwick was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, he could not foresee that, thirty years later, even this would seem an excessive punishment for so slight a misdemeanor.

Leaving the market-house, Warwick turned to the left, and kept on his course until he reached the next corner. After another turn to the right, a dozen paces brought him in

front of a small weather-beaten frame building, from which projected a wooden sign-board bearing the inscription: —

ARCHIBALD STRAIGHT, LAWYER.

He turned the knob, but the door was locked. Retracing his steps past a vacant lot, the young man entered a shop where a colored man was employed in varnishing a coffin, which stood on two trestles in the middle of the floor. Not at all impressed by the melancholy suggestiveness of his task, he was whistling a lively air with great gusto. Upon Warwick's entrance this effusion came to a sudden end, and the coffin-maker assumed an air of professional gravity.

"Good-mawnin', suh," he said, lifting his cap politely.

"Good-morning," answered Warwick. "Can you tell me anything about Judge Straight's office hours?"

"De ole jedge has be'n a little onreg'lar sence de wah, suh; but he gin'ally gits roun' 'bout ten o'clock er so. He's be'n kin' er feeble fer de las' few yeahs. An' I reckon," continued the undertaker solemnly, his glance unconsciously seeking a row of fine caskets standing against the wall,— "I reckon he'll soon be goin' de way er all de earth. 'Man dat is bawn er 'oman hath but a sho't time ter lib, an' is full er mis'ry. He cometh up an' is cut down lack as a flower.' 'De days er his life is three-sco' an' ten' — an' de ole jedge is libbed mo' d'n dat, suh, by five yeahs, ter say de leas'."

"'Death,'" quoted Warwick, with whose mood the undertaker's remarks were in tune, "'is the penalty that all must pay for the crime of living.'"

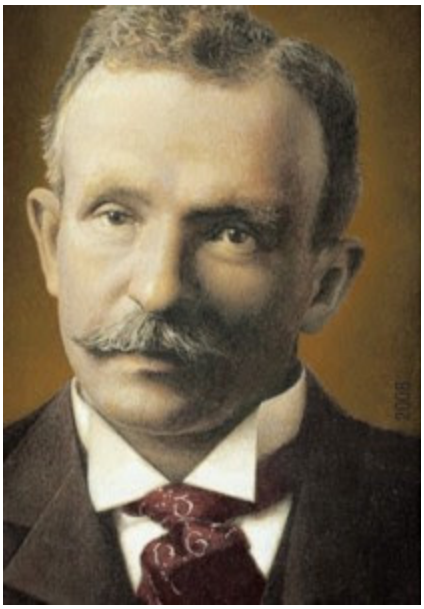
"Dat 's a fac', suh, dat 's a fac'; so dey mus' — so dey mus'. An' den all de dead has ter be buried. An' we does ou' sheer of it, suh, we does ou' sheer. We conduc's de obs'quies er all de bes' w'ite folks er de town, suh."

Warwick left the undertaker's shop and retraced his steps until he had passed the lawyer's office, toward which he threw an affectionate glance. A few rods farther led him past the old black Presbyterian church, with its square

tower, embowered in a stately grove; past the Catholic church, with its many crosses, and a painted wooden figure of St. James in a recess beneath the gable; and past the old Jefferson House, once the leading hotel of the town, in front of which political meetings had been held, and political speeches made, and political hard cider drunk, in the days of “Tippecanoe and Tyler too.”

The street down which Warwick had come intersected Front Street at a sharp angle in front of the old hotel, forming a sort of flatiron block at the junction, known as Liberty Point, — perhaps because slave auctions were sometimes held there in the good old days. Just before Warwick reached Liberty Point, a young woman came down Front Street from the direction of the market-house. When their paths converged, Warwick kept on down Front Street behind her, it having been already his intention to walk in this direction.

Warwick’s first glance had revealed the fact that the young woman was strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered. As he walked along behind her at a measured distance, he could not help noting the details that made up this pleasing impression, for his mind was singularly alive to beauty, in whatever embodiment. The girl’s figure, he perceived, was admirably proportioned; she was evidently at the period when the angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence. Her abundant hair, of a dark and glossy brown, was neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column that rose straight from a pair of gently sloping shoulders, clearly outlined beneath the light muslin frock that covered them. He could see that she was tastefully, though not richly, dressed, and that she walked with an elastic step that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health. Her face, of course, he could not analyze, since he had caught only the one brief but convincing glimpse of it.



The young woman kept on down Front Street, Warwick maintaining his distance a few rods behind her. They passed a factory, a warehouse or two, and then, leaving the brick pavement, walked along on mother earth, under a leafy arcade of spreading oaks and elms. Their way led now through a residential portion of the town, which, as they advanced, gradually declined from staid respectability to poverty, open and unabashed. Warwick observed, as they passed through the respectable quarter, that few people who met the girl greeted her, and that some others whom she passed at gates or doorways gave her no sign of recognition; from which he inferred that she was possibly a visitor in the town and not well acquainted.

Their walk had continued not more than ten minutes when they crossed a creek by a wooden bridge and came to a row of mean houses standing flush with the street. At the door of one, an old black woman had stooped to lift a large basket, piled high with laundered clothes. The girl, as she passed, seized one end of the basket and helped the old woman to raise it to her head, where it rested solidly on the cushion of her head-kerchief. During this interlude, Warwick, though he had slackened his pace measurably, had so

nearly closed the gap between himself and them as to hear the old woman say, with the dulcet negro intonation: —

“T’anky’, honey; de Lawd gwine bless you sho’. You wuz alluz a good gal, and de Lawd love eve’ybody w’at he’p de po’ ole nigger. You gwine ter hab good luck all yo’ bawn days.”

“I hope you’re a true prophet, Aunt Zilphy,” laughed the girl in response.

The sound of her voice gave Warwick a thrill. It was soft and sweet and clear — quite in harmony with her appearance. That it had a faint suggestiveness of the old woman’s accent he hardly noticed, for the current Southern speech, including his own, was rarely without a touch of it. The corruption of the white people’s speech was one element — only one — of the negro’s unconscious revenge for his own debasement.

The houses they passed now grew scattering, and the quarter of the town more neglected. Warwick felt himself wondering where the girl might be going in a neighborhood so uninviting. When she stopped to pull a half-naked negro child out of a mudhole and set him upon his feet, he thought she might be some young lady from the upper part of the town, bound on some errand of mercy, or going, perhaps, to visit an old servant or look for a new one. Once she threw a backward glance at Warwick, thus enabling him to catch a second glimpse of a singularly pretty face. Perhaps the young woman found his presence in the neighborhood as unaccountable as he had deemed hers; for, finding his glance fixed upon her, she quickened her pace with an air of startled timidity.

“A woman with such a figure,” thought Warwick, “ought to be able to face the world with the confidence of Phryne confronting her judges.”

By this time Warwick was conscious that something more than mere grace or beauty had attracted him with

increasing force toward this young woman. A suggestion, at first faint and elusive, of something familiar, had grown stronger when he heard her voice, and became more and more pronounced with each rod of their advance; and when she stopped finally before a gate, and, opening it, went into a yard shut off from the street by a row of dwarf cedars, Warwick had already discounted in some measure the surprise he would have felt at seeing her enter there had he not walked down Front Street behind her. There was still sufficient unexpectedness about the act, however, to give him a decided thrill of pleasure.

"It must be Rena," he murmured. "Who could have dreamed that she would blossom out like that? It must surely be Rena!"

He walked slowly past the gate and peered through a narrow gap in the cedar hedge. The girl was moving along a sanded walk, toward a gray, unpainted house, with a steep roof, broken by dormer windows. The trace of timidity he had observed in her had given place to the more assured bearing of one who is upon his own ground. The garden walks were bordered by long rows of jonquils, pinks, and carnations, inclosing clumps of fragrant shrubs, lilies, and roses already in bloom. Toward the middle of the garden stood two fine magnolia-trees, with heavy, dark green, glistening leaves, while nearer the house two mighty elms shaded a wide piazza, at one end of which a honeysuckle vine, and at the other a Virginia creeper, running over a wooden lattice, furnished additional shade and seclusion. On dark or wintry days, the aspect of this garden must have been extremely sombre and depressing, and it might well have seemed a fit place to hide some guilty or disgraceful secret. But on the bright morning when Warwick stood looking through the cedars, it seemed, with its green frame and canopy and its bright carpet of flowers, an ideal retreat from the fierce sunshine and the sultry heat of the approaching summer.

The girl stooped to pluck a rose, and as she bent over it, her profile was clearly outlined. She held the flower to her face with a long-drawn inhalation, then went up the steps, crossed the piazza, opened the door without knocking, and entered the house with the air of one thoroughly at home.

“Yes,” said the young man to himself, “it’s Rena, sure enough.”

The house stood on a corner, around which the cedar hedge turned, continuing along the side of the garden until it reached the line of the front of the house. The piazza to a rear wing, at right angles to the front of the house, was open to inspection from the side street, which, to judge from its deserted look, seemed to be but little used. Turning into this street and walking leisurely past the back yard, which was only slightly screened from the street by a china-tree, Warwick perceived the young woman standing on the piazza, facing an elderly woman, who sat in a large rocking-chair, plying a pair of knitting-needles on a half-finished stocking. Warwick’s walk led him within three feet of the side gate, which he felt an almost irresistible impulse to enter. Every detail of the house and garden was familiar; a thousand cords of memory and affection drew him thither; but a stronger counter-motive prevailed. With a great effort he restrained himself, and after a momentary pause, walked slowly on past the house, with a backward glance, which he turned away when he saw that it was observed.

Warwick’s attention had been so fully absorbed by the house behind the cedars and the women there, that he had scarcely noticed, on the other side of the neglected by-street, two men working by a large open window, in a low, rude building with a clapboarded roof, directly opposite the back piazza occupied by the two women. Both the men were busily engaged in shaping barrel-staves, each wielding a sharp-edged drawing-knife on a piece of seasoned oak clasped tightly in a wooden vise.

“I jes’ wonder who dat man is, an’ w’at he ‘s doin’ on dis street,” observed the younger of the two, with a suspicious air. He had noticed the gentleman’s involuntary pause and his interest in the opposite house, and had stopped work for a moment to watch the stranger as he went on down the street.

“Nev’ min’ ‘bout dat man,” said the elder one. “You ‘ten’ ter yo’ wuk an’ finish dat bairl-stave. You spen’s enti’ely too much er yo’ time stretchin’ yo’ neck atter other people. An’ you need n’ ‘sturb yo’se’f ‘bout dem folks ‘cross de street, fer dey ain’t yo’ kin’, an’ you’re wastin’ yo’ time both’in’ yo’ min’ wid ’em, er wid folks w’at comes on de street on account of ’em. Look sha’p now, boy, er you’ll git dat stave trim’ too much.”

The younger man resumed his work, but still found time to throw a slanting glance out of the window. The gentleman, he perceived, stood for a moment on the rotting bridge across the old canal, and then walked slowly ahead until he turned to the right into Back Street, a few rods farther on.

II. AN EVENING VISIT

TOWARD EVENING OF the same day, Warwick took his way down Front Street in the gathering dusk. By the time night had spread its mantle over the earth, he had reached the gate by which he had seen the girl of his morning walk enter the cedar-bordered garden. He stopped at the gate and glanced toward the house, which seemed dark and silent and deserted.

“It’s more than likely,” he thought, “that they are in the kitchen. I reckon I’d better try the back door.”

But as he drew cautiously near the corner, he saw a man’s figure outlined in the yellow light streaming from the open door of a small house between Front Street and the cooper shop. Wishing, for reasons of his own, to avoid observation, Warwick did not turn the corner, but walked on down Front Street until he reached a point from which he could see, at a long angle, a ray of light proceeding from the kitchen window of the house behind the cedars.

“They are there,” he muttered with a sigh of relief, for he had feared they might be away. “I suspect I’ll have to go to the front door, after all. No one can see me through the trees.”

He retraced his steps to the front gate, which he essayed to open. There was apparently some defect in the latch, for it refused to work. Warwick remembered the trick, and with a slight sense of amusement, pushed his foot under the gate and gave it a hitch to the left, after which it opened readily enough. He walked softly up the sanded path, tiptoed up the steps and across the piazza, and rapped at the front door, not too loudly, lest this too might attract the attention of the man across the street. There was no response to his rap. He put his ear to the door and heard

voices within, and the muffled sound of footsteps. After a moment he rapped again, a little louder than before.

There was an instant cessation of the sounds within. He rapped a third time, to satisfy any lingering doubt in the minds of those who he felt sure were listening in some trepidation. A moment later a ray of light streamed through the keyhole.

“Who’s there?” a woman’s voice inquired somewhat sharply.

“A gentleman,” answered Warwick, not holding it yet time to reveal himself. “Does Mis’ Molly Walden live here?”

“Yes,” was the guarded answer. “I’m Mis’ Walden. What’s yo’r business?”

“I have a message to you from your son John.”

A key clicked in the lock. The door opened, and the elder of the two women Warwick had seen upon the piazza stood in the doorway, peering curiously and with signs of great excitement into the face of the stranger.

“You ‘ve got a message from my son, you say?” she asked with tremulous agitation. “Is he sick, or in trouble?”

“No. He’s well and doing well, and sends his love to you, and hopes you’ve not forgotten him.”

“Fergot him? No, God knows I ain’t fergot him! But come in, sir, an’ tell me somethin’ mo’ about him.”

Warwick went in, and as the woman closed the door after him, he threw a glance round the room. On the wall, over the mantelpiece, hung a steel engraving of General Jackson at the battle of New Orleans, and, on the opposite wall, a framed fashion-plate from “Godey’s Lady’s Book.” In the middle of the room an octagonal centre-table with a single leg, terminating in three sprawling feet, held a collection of curiously shaped sea-shells. There was a great haircloth sofa, somewhat the worse for wear, and a well-filled bookcase. The screen standing before the fireplace was covered with Confederate bank-notes of various

denominations and designs, in which the heads of Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders were conspicuous.

“Imperious Caesar, dead, and turned to clay,

Might stop a hole to keep the wind away,”

murmured the young man, as his eye fell upon this specimen of decorative art.

The woman showed her visitor to a seat. She then sat down facing him and looked at him closely. “When did you last see my son?” she asked.

“I’ve never met your son,” he replied.

Her face fell. “Then the message comes through you from somebody else?”

“No, directly from your son.”

She scanned his face with a puzzled look. This bearded young gentleman, who spoke so politely and was dressed so well, surely — no, it could not be! and yet —

Warwick was smiling at her through a mist of tears. An electric spark of sympathy flashed between them. They rose as if moved by one impulse, and were clasped in each other’s arms.

“John, my John! It IS John!”

“Mother — my dear old mother!”

“I didn’t think,” she sobbed, “that I’d ever see you again.”

He smoothed her hair and kissed her. “And are you glad to see me, mother?”

“Am I glad to see you? It’s like the dead comin’ to life. I thought I’d lost you forever, John, my son, my darlin’ boy!” she answered, hugging him strenuously.

“I couldn’t live without seeing you, mother,” he said. He meant it, too, or thought he did, although he had not seen her for ten years.

“You’ve grown so tall, John, and are such a fine gentleman! And you ARE a gentleman now, John, ain’t you — sure enough? Nobody knows the old story?”

“Well, mother, I’ve taken a man’s chance in life, and have tried to make the most of it; and I haven’t felt under any obligation to spoil it by raking up old stories that are best forgotten. There are the dear old books: have they been read since I went away?”

“No, honey, there’s be’n nobody to read ’em, excep’ Rena, an’ she don’t take to books quite like you did. But I’ve kep’ ’em dusted clean, an’ kep’ the moths an’ the bugs out; for I hoped you’d come back some day, an’ knowed you’d like to find ’em all in their places, jus’ like you left ’em.”

“That’s mighty nice of you, mother. You could have done no more if you had loved them for themselves. But where is Rena? I saw her on the street to-day, but she didn’t know me from Adam; nor did I guess it was she until she opened the gate and came into the yard.”

“I’ve be’n so glad to see you that I’d fergot about her,” answered the mother. “Rena, oh, Rena!”

The girl was not far away; she had been standing in the next room, listening intently to every word of the conversation, and only kept from coming in by a certain constraint that made a brother whom she had not met for so many years seem almost as much a stranger as if he had not been connected with her by any tie.

“Yes, mamma,” she answered, coming forward.

“Rena, child, here’s yo’r brother John, who’s come back to see us. Tell ’im howdy.”

As she came forward, Warwick rose, put his arm around her waist, drew her toward him, and kissed her affectionately, to her evident embarrassment. She was a tall girl, but he towered above her in quite a protecting fashion; and she thought with a thrill how fine it would be to have such a brother as this in the town all the time. How proud she would be, if she could but walk up the street with such a brother by her side! She could then hold up her head before all the world, oblivious to the glance of pity or contempt. She felt a very pronounced respect for this tall gentleman

who held her blushing face between his hands and looked steadily into her eyes.

“You’re the little sister I used to read stories to, and whom I promised to come and see some day. Do you remember how you cried when I went away?”

“It seems but yesterday,” she answered. “I’ve still got the dime you gave me.”

He kissed her again, and then drew her down beside him on the sofa, where he sat enthroned between the two loving and excited women. No king could have received more sincere or delighted homage. He was a man, come into a household of women, — a man of whom they were proud, and to whom they looked up with fond reverence. For he was not only a son, — a brother — but he represented to them the world from which circumstances had shut them out, and to which distance lent even more than its usual enchantment; and they felt nearer to this far-off world because of the glory which Warwick reflected from it.

“You’re a very pretty girl,” said Warwick, regarding his sister thoughtfully. “I followed you down Front Street this morning, and scarcely took my eyes off you all the way; and yet I didn’t know you, and scarcely saw your face. You improve on acquaintance; to-night, I find you handsomer still.”

“Now, John,” said his mother, expostulating mildly, “you’ll spile her, if you don’t min’.”

The girl was beaming with gratified vanity. What woman would not find such praise sweet from almost any source, and how much more so from this great man, who, from his exalted station in the world, must surely know the things whereof he spoke! She believed every word of it; she knew it very well indeed, but wished to hear it repeated and itemized and emphasized.

“No, he won’t, mamma,” she asserted, “for he’s flattering me. He talks as if I was some rich young lady, who lives on

the Hill," — the Hill was the aristocratic portion of the town, — "instead of a poor."

"Instead of a poor young girl, who has the hill to climb," replied her brother, smoothing her hair with his hand. Her hair was long and smooth and glossy, with a wave like the ripple of a summer breeze upon the surface of still water. It was the girl's great pride, and had been sedulously cared for. "What lovely hair! It has just the wave that yours lacks, mother."

"Yes," was the regretful reply, "I've never be'n able to git that wave out. But her hair's be'n took good care of, an' there ain't nary gal in town that's got any finer."

"Don't worry about the wave, mother. It's just the fashionable ripple, and becomes her immensely. I think my little Albert favors his Aunt Rena somewhat."

"Your little Albert!" they cried. "You've got a child?"

"Oh, yes," he replied calmly, "a very fine baby boy."

They began to purr in proud contentment at this information, and made minute inquiries about the age and weight and eyes and nose and other important details of this precious infant. They inquired more coldly about the child's mother, of whom they spoke with greater warmth when they learned that she was dead. They hung breathless on Warwick's words as he related briefly the story of his life since he had left, years before, the house behind the cedars — how with a stout heart and an abounding hope he had gone out into a seemingly hostile world, and made fortune stand and deliver. His story had for the women the charm of an escape from captivity, with all the thrill of a pirate's tale. With the whole world before him, he had remained in the South, the land of his fathers, where, he conceived, he had an inalienable birthright. By some good chance he had escaped military service in the Confederate army, and, in default of older and more experienced men, had undertaken, during the rebellion, the management of a large estate, which had been left in the hands of women and

slaves. He had filled the place so acceptably, and employed his leisure to such advantage, that at the close of the war he found himself — he was modest enough to think, too, in default of a better man — the husband of the orphan daughter of the gentleman who had owned the plantation, and who had lost his life upon the battlefield. Warwick's wife was of good family, and in a more settled condition of society it would not have been easy for a young man of no visible antecedents to win her hand. A year or two later, he had taken the oath of allegiance, and had been admitted to the South Carolina bar. Rich in his wife's right, he had been able to practice his profession upon a high plane, without the worry of sordid cares, and with marked success for one of his age.

"I suppose," he concluded, "that I have got along at the bar, as elsewhere, owing to the lack of better men. Many of the good lawyers were killed in the war, and most of the remainder were disqualified; while I had the advantage of being alive, and of never having been in arms against the government. People had to have lawyers, and they gave me their business in preference to the carpet-baggers. Fortune, you know, favors the available man."

His mother drank in with parted lips and glistening eyes the story of his adventures and the record of his successes. As Rena listened, the narrow walls that hemmed her in seemed to draw closer and closer, as though they must crush her. Her brother watched her keenly. He had been talking not only to inform the women, but with a deeper purpose, conceived since his morning walk, and deepened as he had followed, during his narrative, the changing expression of Rena's face and noted her intense interest in his story, her pride in his successes, and the occasional wistful look that indexed her self-pity so completely.

"An' I s'pose you're happy, John?" asked his mother.

"Well, mother, happiness is a relative term, and depends, I imagine, upon how nearly we think we get what we think

we want. I have had my chance and haven’t thrown it away, and I suppose I ought to be happy. But then, I have lost my wife, whom I loved very dearly, and who loved me just as much, and I’m troubled about my child.”

“Why?” they demanded. “Is there anything the matter with him?”

“No, not exactly. He’s well enough, as babies go, and has a good enough nurse, as nurses go. But the nurse is ignorant, and not always careful. A child needs some woman of its own blood to love it and look after it intelligently.”

Mis’ Molly’s eyes were filled with tearful yearning. She would have given all the world to warm her son’s child upon her bosom; but she knew this could not be.

“Did your wife leave any kin?” she asked with an effort.

“No near kin; she was an only child.”

“You’ll be gettin’ married again,” suggested his mother.

“No,” he replied; “I think not.”

Warwick was still reading his sister’s face, and saw the spark of hope that gleamed in her expressive eye.

“If I had some relation of my own that I could take into the house with me,” he said reflectively, “the child might be healthier and happier, and I should be much more at ease about him.”

The mother looked from son to daughter with a dawning apprehension and a sudden pallor. When she saw the yearning in Rena’s eyes, she threw herself at her son’s feet.

“Oh, John,” she cried despairingly, “don’t take her away from me! Don’t take her, John, darlin’, for it’d break my heart to lose her!”

Rena’s arms were round her mother’s neck, and Rena’s voice was sounding in her ears. “There, there, mamma! Never mind! I won’t leave you, mamma — dear old mamma! Your Rena’ll stay with you always, and never, never leave you.”

John smoothed his mother’s hair with a comforting touch, patted her withered cheek soothingly, lifted her tenderly to her place by his side, and put his arm about her.

“You love your children, mother?”

“They’re all I’ve got,” she sobbed, “an’ they cos’ me all I had. When the las’ one’s gone, I’ll want to go too, for I’ll be all alone in the world. Don’t take Rena, John; for if you do, I’ll never see her again, an’ I can’t bear to think of it. How would you like to lose yo’r one child?”

“Well, well, mother, we’ll say no more about it. And now tell me all about yourself, and about the neighbors, and how you got through the war, and who’s dead and who’s married — and everything.”

The change of subject restored in some degree Mis’ Molly’s equanimity, and with returning calmness came a sense of other responsibilities.

“Good gracious, Rena!” she exclaimed. “John ‘s be’n in the house an hour, and ain’t had nothin’ to eat yet! Go in the kitchen an’ spread a clean tablecloth, an’ git out that ‘tater pone, an’ a pitcher o’ that las’ kag o’ persimmon beer, an’ let John take a bite an’ a sip.”

Warwick smiled at the mention of these homely dainties. “I thought of your sweet-potato pone at the hotel to-day, when I was at dinner, and wondered if you’d have some in the house. There was never any like yours; and I’ve forgotten the taste of persimmon beer entirely.”

Rena left the room to carry out her hospitable commission. Warwick, taking advantage of her absence, returned after a while to the former subject.

“Of course, mother,” he said calmly, “I wouldn’t think of taking Rena away against your wishes. A mother’s claim upon her child is a high and holy one. Of course she will have no chance here, where our story is known. The war has wrought great changes, has put the bottom rail on top, and all that — but it hasn’t wiped THAT out. Nothing but death can remove that stain, if it does not follow us even beyond

the grave. Here she must forever be — nobody! With me she might have got out into the world; with her beauty she might have made a good marriage; and, if I mistake not, she has sense as well as beauty.”

“Yes,” sighed the mother, “she’s got good sense. She ain’t as quick as you was, an’ don’t read as many books, but she’s keerful an’ painstakin’, an’ always tries to do what’s right. She’s be’n thinkin’ about goin’ away somewhere an’ tryin’ to git a school to teach, er somethin’, sence the Yankees have started ’em everywhere for po’ white folks an’ niggers too. But I don’t like fer her to go too fur.”

“With such beauty and brains,” continued Warwick, “she could leave this town and make a place for herself. The place is already made. She has only to step into my carriage — after perhaps a little preparation — and ride up the hill which I have had to climb so painfully. It would be a great pleasure to me to see her at the top. But of course it is impossible — a mere idle dream. YOUR claim comes first; her duty chains her here.”

“It would be so lonely without her,” murmured the mother weakly, “an’ I love her so — my las’ one!”

“No doubt — no doubt,” returned Warwick, with a sympathetic sigh; “of course you love her. It’s not to be thought of for a moment. It’s a pity that she couldn’t have a chance here — but how could she! I had thought she might marry a gentleman, but I dare say she’ll do as well as the rest of her friends — as well as Mary B., for instance, who married — Homer Pettifoot, did you say? Or maybe Billy Oxendine might do for her. As long as she has never known any better, she’ll probably be as well satisfied as though she married a rich man, and lived in a fine house, and kept a carriage and servants, and moved with the best in the land.”

The tortured mother could endure no more. The one thing she desired above all others was her daughter’s happiness. Her own life had not been governed by the