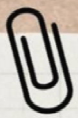

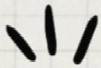

THE NEGRO IN AMERICAN FICTIONN

Sterling Allen Brown

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CHAPTER I
EARLY APPEARANCES

Early Fiction. When Americans started to write novels, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Negro was definitely part and parcel of American life. Colonial authors from Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall to Benjamin Franklin, Crèvecour and John Woolman had protested his enslavement. He was the rock upon which the constitution nearly split. In the North, there were still a few slaves and a growing body of freedmen, some of whom, like Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, Richard Allen, and Crispus Attucks, were more than locally known. The vast hordes of slaves, together with a good number of free Negroes, were a more integral part of southern society. They had cleared the forests and laid the roads, had built the fine houses and wrought the beautiful iron-work; had labored on the tobacco, rice, indigo and cotton plantations so that their masters could buy more slaves. Cotton was not yet king, the cotton-gin was not invented; but the broad backs of the slaves were still supporting a heavy load. Whether as house-servant grateful for easy favors, and contributing to the master's feeling of safety, or field-hand, or fugitive stealing away to the North, or intractable revolter, throwing both northern and southern communities into consternation, the Negro was recognizably part of the American scene.

But the first groping American novels were still tied to Mother England's leading strings. For all of their patriotism, the novelists were little concerned with American actualities. When the Negro character wasincluded, he was a shadowy figure in the background, an element of romantic side interest, closer to Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and Defoe's fiction than to what the novelists could have seen about them.

The earliest novels, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) and Mrs. Susannah Rowson's *The Inquisitor* (1794), true to their sentimental models, have antislavery feeling. Hugh Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792 to 1815) contains a good ironic attack upon the slave-trade, and a less successful character Cuff, whose jargon seems plucked out of Defoe:

> Now, shentiman, I say, dat de first man was da black a-man, an' de first woman was de black a-woman: get two-tree children; de rain vasha dese, an' de snow pleach, an' de coula came brown, yella, coppa coula, and at de last quite fite....

Royal Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797) deplores the "middle passage" horrors of the slave-trade in the sentimental mode: "I thought of my native land and blushed." Charles Brockden Brown's novels contain Negro characters only incidentally. There were no English models to make these early novelists aware that servitude and struggle could be subjects for fiction.

Irving. In the nineteenth century, interest in the Negro increased. In *Salmagundi* (1807)

Washington Irving, a brisk young man-about-town, records the Negro curiosities he finds, such as the "Negro wench, principal musician at a ball." He describes a dance in Haiti with unctuous ridicule:

> In the middle of the rout, when all was buzz, slip-slop, clack and perfume, who should enter but Tucky Squash! The yellow beauties blushed blue and the black ones blushed as red as they could ... for he was the pride of the court, the pick of all the sable fair ones of Hayti. Such breadth of nose, such exuberance of lip! his shins had the true cucumber curve; his face in dancing shone like a kettle.... When he laughed, there appeared from ear to ear a *chevaux de-frize* of teeth that rivaled the shark's in whiteness.... No Long Island Negro could shuffle you "double-trouble" or "hoe corn and dig potatoes" more scientifically.

Here we have the first comic Negro in American fiction, assured of long employment from Irving to Octavus Roy Cohen. *Salmagundi* likewise includes Caesar, a "weatherbeaten wiseacre of a Negro," who henpecks his masters, tell stories of ghosts, goblins and witches, and, like a good man Friday, accompanies his master to his sparking and dancing. Caesar is repeated in *The Knickerbocker History of New York* (1809) as an old crone who would croak:

> a string of incredible stories about New England witches—grisly ghost horses without heads,—and hairbreadth escapes, and bloody encounters among the Indians.

"Adventures of the Black Fisherman" in *Tales of A Traveler* (1824) tells us only that Black Sam or Mud Sam was "supposed to know

all the fish in the river by their christian names," and that he had a "great relish for the horrible," such as executions, and that all of the urchins felt free to play tricks upon him. Irving does not attempt to give his speech, much less his character.

Cooper. The first American novelist to aim at fullness in his presentation of American life, James Fenimore Cooper naturally included the Negro. Although limited in information and skill, he expanded and improved upon the slight sketches of his forerunners. He presents Negroes of many types. First of all, there is Caesar Thompson, the loyal retainer in *The Spy* (1821). True to the prevailing literary attitude of the gentry towards underlings, Cooper burlesques his appearance with what passed for humor in those days:

> But it was in his legs that nature had indulged her most capricious humor. There was an abundance of material injudiciously used. The calves were neither before nor behind, but rather on the outer side of the limb, inclining forward.... The leg was placed so near the center as to make it sometimes a matter of dispute whether he was not walking backward.

Nevertheless Caesar is shown as crafty, and courageous in the service of his family. Cooper's interest in Negroes is continued in *The Pioneers* (1823) in Agamemnon, not a slave but a legal ward, a man-of-all work whose deference does not keep him from mirth at his master's expense, and Abraham, a free black who shares in the rough frontier life.

A different type is the free Sailor, Scipio Africa, one of the heroes of *The Red Rover* (1827). In physique, seamanship, self-control, and intelligence he is superior to his sailing mates, but this does not shield him from their petty insults. There is pathos in the scene of his death:

> If he is not (a Christian) I don't know who the devil is. A man who serves his country, is true to his messmate, and has no sulk about him, I call a saint, so far as mere religion goes. I say, Guinea, my hearty, give the chaplain a grip of the fist.... A Spanish windlass would not give a stronger screw than the knuckle of that nigger an hour ago; and now, you see to what a giant may be brought!

In *The Last of The Mohicans* (1826), Cora Munro, the offspring of a mixed marriage, is shown to be resourceful and strong, above the usual run of Cooper's "females." It is worthy of note, since she is the first of a long line of "octoroons," that her end is tragic.

Cooper thus anticipates later creators of Negro characters, presenting the faithful house servant, the courageous man of action, and the octoroon doomed to tragedy. Though crudely recorded, his dialect rises above the usually impossible Negro speech in early novels. No abolitionist, Cooper still did not favor slavery, and honest observer that he was, he refuses to see the Negro, even when grotesquely described, as subhuman.

Simms. William Gilmore Simms, of South Carolina, differed from Cooper, his northern

model, in that he defended slavery ardently. In his fiction, however, Negroes are presented without excessive argument. They range from the obsequious house-servant to the brave freeman. Hector, in *The Yemassee* (1832) is a heroic slave, participating gallantly in the Indian warfare, volunteering for perilous service, warning blockhouses, and rescuing his master. He is extremely loyal and refuses to be freed.

> I d—n to h—-, maussa, if I gwine to be free.... 'Tis onpossible, maussa.... Enty I know wha' kind of ting freedom is wid black man? Ha! you make Hector free, he turn wuss more nor poor buckrah—he tief out of de shop—he git drunk and lie in de ditch....

This passage is the first and most influential example of a scene soon to be hackneyed. Caesar in *Guy Rivers* (1834) is subservient, but cunning and philosophical. *The Partisan* (1835) gains in interest because of the presence of Tom, who is such a good cook that Porgy, his gourmet master, will not brook his being abused. Tom repays by keeping his master fat and happy "so long as dere's coon and possum, squirrel, patridges and dub, duck in de ribber, and fish in de pond."

Simms' *Richard Hurdis* (1838) shows slaves accompanying their masters on the move to the Alabama frontier, dancing, singing, sometimes listening to a fellow slave's impromptu verses:

> In them he satirized his companions without mercy ... and did not spare his own master, whom he compared to a squirrel that had lived upon good corn so

long that he now hungered for bad in his desire for change.

In *The Forayers* (1855) Cato is a slave-driver, courageous and devoted to his family, and Benny Bowlegs, another driver, is

> a moral steam engine. He pushed his master as well as his brother slaves.... Push at the beginning, push in the middle, push at the end, and Ben's pushing made crops.

The Wigwam and The Cabin (1845) a collection of stories, is unusual in showing Negroes at the center of the picture. "The Loves of The Driver" casts side-lights upon plantation customs, and the "Lazy Crow" is the first to portray Negro superstition and folkways.

In numbers, and a certain rudimentary realism, the Negro characters in Simms' many novels go beyond those of any other early nineteenth century novelist. Simms bungles when he tries to record the Gullah dialect, but the effort is worthy of comment. Striving to be accepted as a southern gentleman, Simms shows his slaves, generally, to be well cared for and contented. Nevertheless, his urge to realism kept him from showing slavery to be an endless picnic. Masters held forth freedom as a reward for service; they knew, if the contented slaves did not. All in all, however, Simms is noteworthy more for the extensiveness of his gallery of Negroes than for any depth of characterization.

As Simms showed Negroes participating in the backwoods life and warfare of the South, so earlier writers of the westward movement

included sketches of Negroes. Paulding's *Westward Ho* (1832) deals with southerners leaving what romancers were to consider Arcadia for a better land. In this novel, Pompey, like Simms' Hector, refuses freedom. *Nick of The Woods* (1837) a melodrama of bloody Kentucky by Robert Bird, includes several Negroes. Emperor is most fully characterized: like Cooper's Caesar he is loyal, worshipful of quality, and, grotesque. Although his "natural" cowardice is insisted upon, his actions belie this, as he fights for his "little missie" and dies the death of a hero, "gored by numberless wounds, and trampled by the feet of his slayers."

The Virginians. Virginia is the setting for such novelists as W. A. Carruthers, Beverley and George Tucker, and John Esten Cooke. Their novels describe the gentry and their complaisant slaves who enter the books as unobtrusively as they entered the grand dining rooms to bring in sweet missives or decanters of old port. These mammies and butlers and coachmen are interchangeable, appearing in different books under different classical names, but always the same.

Toby in Poe's "The Journal of Julius Rodman" (1840) is "as ugly an old gentleman as ever spoke, having ... swollen lips, large white protruding eyes, flat nose, long ears, double head, pot-belly, and bow-legs." He is another of Poe's sad attempts at humor. Jupiter, in "The Gold-

Bug" (1843), traditionally refuses to leave his master, but threatens in all seriousness to beat him, a hot-blooded cavalier, with a big stick. His dialect, an attempt at Gullah, is language belonging with Poe's masterpieces, "out of space and out of time." Poe revealed that his southern upbringing had borne fruit, however, when, defending slavery from "the fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists" he writes that it is the will of God that the Negro should have a "peculiar nature," of which one characteristic is his tremendous loyalty to his master, "to which the white man's heart is a stranger." The master has a "reciprocal feeling of parental attachment to his humble dependent":

> he who is taught to call the little negro his in this sense and *because he loves him*, shall love him *because he is his*.

Melville. A greater writer than Poe in his grasp of character, Herman Melville was above this sophistry in dealing with human beings. A northerner, Melville did not know slavery at first hand; but a mariner, he did know Negro seamen. *Moby Dick* (1851) reveals this knowledge.

> [Daggoo] a gigantic coal-black negro ... retained all his barbaric virtues and erect as a giraffe, moved about the decks in all the pomp of six feet five in his socks. There was a corporeal humility in looking up at him; and a white man standing before him seemed a white flag come to beg truce from a fortress.

If Daggoo is the "noble savage," Pip, as sympathetically created, is of another breed.

Pip's cowardice is not considered racial but is naturally human.

> Poor Alabama boy! On the grim Pequod's forecastle ye shall see him, beating his tambourine, prelusive of the eternal time, when sent for to the great quarter-deck on high, he was bid strike in with angels and beat his tambourine in glory: called a coward here, hailed a hero there!

Negro sailors, generally courageous and praiseworthy, occur in Melville's other romances of the sea.

Benito Cereno (1855) is a masterpiece of mystery, suspense and terror. Captain Delano of the *Bachelor's Delight*, discovering a vessel in distress along the uninhabited coast of Chile, boards her to render aid. He is interested in the many Negroes he finds on the decks: "like most men of a good blithe heart he took to Negroes not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs." He is mystified, however, when the gamesome Negroes flare up in momentary rage, and especially by their continual clashing their hatchets together. Only when Don Benito, in desperation, escapes to Delano's ship, does the real truth dawn.

There had been a revolt on board the *San Dominick*; the Negro sailors and the slaves had killed many of the whites, and had kept the others alive only for their skill as navigators in order to reach a Negro country. The mutineers and revolters are overcome in a bloody battle, carried to Lima, and executed. The contrast between the reputed gentleness of Negroes "that makes them

the best body-servants in the world," and the fierceness with which they fight for freedom is forcibly driven home. Certain Negroes stand out: Babo who, resembling a "begging friar," engineered the revolt with great skill and is almost fiendish in his manner of breaking down Cereno's morale; Francesco, the mulatto barber; Don José, personal servant of a Spanish Don; and Atulfa, an untamed African chieftain, all filled with hatred for whites. Melville graphically pictures the slave mothers, "equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them"; the four old men monotonously polishing their hatchets; and the murderous Ashantees. All bear witness to what Melville recognized as a spirit that it would take years of slavery to break.

Although opposed to slavery, Melville does not make *Benito Cereno* into an abolitionist tract; he is more concerned with a thrilling narrative and character portrayal. But although the mutineers are blood-thirsty and cruel, Melville does not make them into villains; they revolt as mankind has always revolted. Because Melville was unwilling to look upon men as "Isolatoes," wishing instead of discover the "common continent of man," he comes nearer the truth in his scattered pictures of a few unusual Negroes than do the other authors of this period.

Frontier Humor. The southern humorists, thriving from the thirties to the sixties, introduce the Negro only incidentally in their picture of horse-swapping, gander-pulling, camp meetings,

fights, and political brawls. Because they were realistic, the "plantations" they show are most often backwood farms. The hard-fisted frontier squires, with a love of horse-play, and a callousness necessary for survival, treat their slaves as one would expect: they are neither Legrees nor American versions of Sir Roger de Coverly. In *Georgia Scenes* (1835), Longstreet non-committally shows a Southern backwoods "lady" knocking her servant around from mere habit. In *Adventures of Simon Suggs* (1846) Johnson Hooper gives good pictures of southern camp-meetings, at which Negroes and whites vie in religious hysteria, mingling indiscriminately in the hollow square, plunging and pitching about in the "jerks" and screaming "glory" in unsegregated chorus.

George Harris in *Sut Lovingood Yarns* (1867) tells of a rowdy whose antics include poking a hornet's nest into a Negro camp meeting. At another time, Sut removes a corpse and lays a snoring, drunken Negro in the coffin. When the slave preacher Simon comes to the coffin he yells:

> "Oh Goramighty massy on dis soul; de debil hesef on top of brudder Seize!..." Jis then I moaned out in a orful doleful vise, "Hiperkrit, cum tu hell, I has a claim ontu you fu holdin the bag while Seize stole co'n." He jes rar'd backwards, an' fell outen the door wif his hans locked, an' sed he in a weak ... sort of vise, "Please marster" an' jis fainted, he soon cum to a-runnin', fer I hearn the co'n crashin thru the big field like a in-gine were runnin' express thru hit. I hain't seen Simon ter this day.

Other humorists tell of frontier surgery upon slaves; if they were not ill before, they were near death's door after the barbarous operations.

The tone of the humorists is burlesque, which often sinks to the level of present-day "darky" jokes. Nevertheless, southern humor is significant. The assumption that Negroes are especially designed as butts for rough practical jokes is probably closer to the reality of the antebellum South than the sentimentality of more ambitious works.

True to the manner of cracker-box philosophers, Artemus Ward attacks the sentimentalized and the unconventional, and delivers many of the "common-man's" jibes at abolitionists and Negroes. "The Octoroon" is, at least, a refreshing departure from the shopworn tragic mode.

"Hush—shese a Octoroon!"

"No! sez I ... yu don't say so! How long she bin that way?"

"From her arliest infuncy," sed he.

"Wall, what upon arth duz she do it fur?" I inquired.

"She kan't help it.... It's the brand of Kane."

Oberlin College is lampooned for being rather "too strong on Ethiopians." Though a good Unionist in the war, Artemus Ward, unlike his successor Nasby, does not reveal any sympathy for the Negro.

Summary. Irving's tellers of mysterious legends, Cooper's house-servants, Melville's mates in the foc'sle, and the obsequious servants

of the Virginia cavaliers reflect their authors' interests and experience more than they interpret Negro life. Simms' blood and thunder melodramas and the farces of the frontier humorists give more varied types and experiences, with some crude realism. Melville's *Benito Cereno* goes more deeply into character. In the main, however, these subsidiary characters are not very convincing. They speak a pidgin English, closer to the speech of Robinson Crusoe's Friday than to that of nineteenth century Negroes. Cooper and Simms tried to record dialects; Simms is probably better since Gullah is nearer to pidgin English, but he is still inaccurate. Some authors presented the Negro with dignity and sympathy, but serious realism was still far off. It is worthy of note, however, that such favorite Negro characters as the fabler, the loyal servant, the buffoon, the tragic octoroon, the noble savage, and the revolter, appear in these early books.

Although in a few cases propaganda for or against slavery raises its head, these subsidiary characters are not made into walking arguments. Toward the end of this period, however, the slavery debate broke out, and, in the words of one critic, "the world of nature was lost in the world of controversy."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why were early American novels “tied to Mother England’s leading strings?”

2. What tradition of English literature might account for Irving’s and Cooper’s humorous treatment of the Negro?

3. Since Simms was proslavery, what is inconsistent about his showing Negroes being set free as reward for heroic services?

4. What historical incidents could have suggested Melville’s *Benito Cereno*?

5. What in Poe’s life might have occasioned his attitude toward the Negro?

6. In which of the works mentioned is the Negro character a foreground character?

CHAPTER II

THE PLANTATION TRADITION: PRO-SLAVERY FICTION

The Plantation Tradition. The growth and accuracy of the plantation tradition have been excellently studied in *The Southern Plantation* (1925) by Francis Pendleton Gaines. Gaines attributes the tradition's hold on America to a love of feudalism,(in spite of our profession of democracy), the charm of the Negro characters as "native" literary material, and a romantic wish for an Arcadian past. He proves that "the tradition omits much plantation truth and exaggerates freely certain attractive features of the old life." But the tradition goes on unabashed; over a century old, it still guarantees best selling fame.

The setting is familiar:

> The old plantation; a great mansion; exquisitely gowned ladies and courtly gentlemen moving with easy grace upon the broad veranda behind stalwart columns; surrounding the yard an almost illimitable stretch of white cotton; darkies singingly at work in the fields, Negro quarters, off on one side, around which little pickaninnies tumbled in gay frolic.

It is used in advertisements for coffee, pancake flour, phonograph records, and whiskey. It is a favorite American dream. The characters are as constant as the cotton bolls: the courtly planter, the one hundred per-cent southern belle, the duelling cavalier, the mammy or cook,

“broadbosomed ... with vari-colored turban, spotless apron, and beaming face,” the plantation uncle, black counterpart “of the master so loyally served and imitated,” and the banjo-plunking minstrel of the quarters.

Since the plantation tradition tells of a glory that must have no blemish, slavery is explained away as a benevolent guardianship, necessary for a childish people’s transition from heathendom to Christianity. By stressing festivities such as harvesting, corn-shucking, hunting, fishing, balls, weddings and holiday seasons, slavery was presented as “an unbroken Mardi Gras.” Since southerners, merely because they are born in the South, are a kindlier, gentler breed than other mortals, the possible abuses of slavery existed only in the minds of fanatical Yankees.

Plantation tradition fiction, reenforcing proslavery thought, was in turn reenforced by it. Occasionally southern economists admitted that slavery was the basis of southern commerce and civilization. But these dismal scientists were too outspoken for the sentimental romancers. Southern physiologists who proved that “by an unknown law of nature none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun,” justified the sippers of juleps on shaded verandahs. Theologians defended slavery as having Biblical support since Ham was cursed by God. In the main, however, the plantation tradition advanced less unfeeling arguments: the grown-up slaves

were contented, the pickaninnies were frolicking, the steamboat was hooting around the bend, God was in his heaven, and all was right with the world.

The Tradition Begins. Swallow Barn, the first example of the plantation tradition, appeared in 1832. J. P. Kennedy, the author, was skillful, but his picture relies upon Addison, Goldsmith, Walter Scott, and proslavery thought more than upon observation and understanding. His mouthpiece in these sketches is Littleton, a northerner (Kennedy himself was a Marylander, southern in upbringing), who comes South with an "inky intent" to see the worst of slavery, but remains to worship it. The southern aristocrats are not in love with the institution of slavery, but realize that it is necessary for the Negro who is

> essentially parasitical, dependent upon guidance for his most indispensable necessaries, without foresight or thrift of any kind.... I am quite sure they never could become a happier people than I find them here.... No tribe of people have ever passed from barbarism to civilization whose progress has been more secure from harm, more genial to their character, or better supplied with mild and beneficent guardianship adapted to the actual state of their intellectual feebleness, than the negroes of Swallow Barn.

In accordance with this ideal coloring, Negro children are shown "basking on the sunny sides of cabins [like] terrapins luxuriating on the logs of a mill-pond." Slaves seem to be kept busiest tending their own garden patches, of which they sell the produce. "I never meet a Negro man—unless he is quite old—that he is

not whistling; and the women sing from morning to night." Negroes are shown as ludicrous:

> And when to these are added a few, reverend, wrinkled decrepit old men, with faces shortened as if with drawing strings, noses that seemed to have run all to nostril, and with feet of the configuration of a mattock, my readers will have a tolerably correct idea of the negro-quarter.

Hardships come chiefly from meddling abolitionists: "We alone are able to deal properly with the subject." Kennedy shows how he can add sweetening to the bitter by explaining the breaking up of families (Tidewater fortunes were frequently based upon domestic slave-trading) as follows:

> All before Abe had been successively *dismissed* from Lucy's cabin, as they reached the age fit to render them serviceable, with that satisfied concern that belongs to a negro mother who trusts to the kindness of her master. [Italics mine.]

Kennedy admits that the recording of dialect was beyond him. A great deal more was beyond him, but that does not keep *Swallow Barn* from being influential upon literature about Negro life and character.

In his plays, especially *The Gladiator* (1831), Robert Montgomery Bird took an antislavery stand, but his satirical novel *Sheppard Lee* (1836) was proslavery. Part of the book deals with a Quaker philanthropist, confused and futile, who goes to the South to work for abolition. The slaves on the plantation are shown living happily under an indulgent

master until an antislavery tract changes them into burners, ravagers and murderers.

Proslavery Humorists. Although, for the sake of the record, Sam Slick, the comic character of T. H. Haliburton's *Yankee Stories* (1836) announces that he dislikes slavery, most of his comments justify it. He objects to enslaving white men for debt, but "those thick-skulled, crooked-shanked, flat-footed, long heeled, woolly headed gentlemen don't seem fit for much else but slavery ... they ain't fit to contrive for themselves." He ridicules the talk of

> broken hearted slaves killin' themselves in despair—task-master's whip acuttin' into their flesh—burnin' suns,—day o' toil—nights o' grief—pestilential rice grounds—chains—starvation—misery and death,—grand figurs them for oratory.

He is unwilling that abolitionists should be lynched, but they should learn how the cowskin feels. To prove slavery no hardship, he reasons that a married woman is a slave, and if she happens to get the upper hand, the husband is a slave, and leads a worse life than any Negro. Sam's brother, a lawyer in Charleston, S. C., forces an old white swindler to buy a Negro back into slavery, for the good of the Negro. These stories do not belong to the plantation tradition, for some mention "nigger-jockies," i.e., "gentlemen who trade in nigger flesh," and a planter who has "one white wife and fourteen black concubines." But they are proslavery in sympathy. Sam Slick is significant in that he represents a large number of northerners who

were never too fond of Negroes and strongly opposed abolition. Some of these became catchers of runaway slaves, and many expressed their hatred of the Civil War in the Draft Riots.

When William H. Thompson, Georgia humorist, sent Major Jones on his travels in the forties, he was able to get in many proslavery thrusts. Mary Jones wants to take along her slave Prissy, since she is unwilling to have white servants:

> I could never bear to see a white gall toatin' my child about, waiting on me like a nigger. It would hurt my conscience to keep anybody 'bout me in that condition, who was as white and as good as me.... A servant, to be any account as a servant, is got to have a different kind of spirit from other people; and anybody that would make a nigger of a white child, because it was pore, hain't got no Christian principle in 'em.

Uncle Ned believes that abolitionists have horns like billy-goats, eyes like balls of fire, and great forked tails like sea serpents. "Ugh, chile, dey wusser'n collery-morbus." When these fierce creatures get hold of Negroes, ruin is come; here is Major Jones describing the free Negroes of the North:

> Pore, miserable, sickly-lookin' creaters! it was enuff to make a abolitionist's hart ake to see 'em crawlin' out of the damp straw of the cellars, to sun themselves on the cellar-dores till they got able to start out to by or to steal sumthing to eat ... many of 'em was diseased and bloated up like frogs, and lay sprawlin' about like so many cooters in a mud-hole ... like lizards in a pile of rotten logs.... This, thinks I, is nigger freedom: this is the condition to which the philanthropists of the North wants to bring the happy black people of the South!

First Answers to Mrs. Stowe. In the three years following the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), there were at least fourteen proslavery novels published, besides numerous pamphlets, articles, and a long poem. W. L. G. Smith's *Life At The South*, or *Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is* (1852) was struck off while the iron was hot, borrowing illustrations from *Swallow Barn* and passages from *The Yemassee*. Uncle Tom, irked at being outdone in the fields by the younger, stronger Hector, and jealous of his master's favoritism, moodily listens to an abolitionist, and runs away. In Canada he finds real slavery; in Buffalo he sees the freedmen in wretchedness, discovering one frozen to death in a snow storm. Finally he begs his master to return him to the South, which that gentleman does out of Christian consideration and forgivingness. The following passage shows Dinah refusing to join Tom in seeking freedom:

Dinah: "... An' den wha' would be de feelin's of your own Dinah. She would curse de hour when she was born. No, no! I cannot consent to be a party to sich an arrangement."

Tom: "How silly you talk. You will do noffin yourself, an' you will let no one help. I begin to think, you hab revoked your decision.... Dere you hab it; you now know'd my feelin's."

Dinah did not know what to say in reply ... "there is something in this idea of being free that I cannot comprehend," she thought to herself.

This passed for Negro speech and psychology in proslavery novels. Hector likewise refuses to be free in a speech stolen from the

Hector of Simms' *Yemassee*. Allgood, a hypocritical philanthropist, and Bates, an abolitionist busybody, are types that later novels were to repeat.

In the same year, Caroline E. Rush sent forth her little book, *North and South*, or *Slavery and Its Contrasts*, to teach the Northern reader "boundless, illimitable love," that would make him "regret the necessary evils of the Slavery of the South, without bitter feelings towards those who are born amid the peculiar rights and duties of the slaveholders." The thousands of free Negroes in Philadelphia pain Mrs. Rush because of their lack of an "elegant degree of refinement and cultivation"; their poverty is racial debauchery, while the poverty of the whites is victimization. What are the abuses suffered by slaves

> to the real, bitter, oppression that in our own midst sweeps its thousands out of a life of penury into premature graves?

Tears should not be shed for Uncle Tom—"a hardy, strong and powerful Negro"—but should be reserved for helpless, defenseless, children—"of the same color as yourself." Writing of plantation Negroes she wishes that she too had "taken lessons of a colored professor, and was conversant enough with Negro dialect, to launch out boldly into their sea of beauties," but she is forced to leave the speech to her readers' imagination. Little is left to their imagination, however, when she describes the cabins of the field-hands, embowered in Cherokee roses. At

this point, the book's illustration resembles a suburban paradise adjoining the White House. When the slave-mistress gently patted a quadroon's head, she "intimated a freedom which is not often shown to the servants in the North." Mrs. Rush is correct here; there was a great deal of such freedom.

Mrs. Eastman's *Aunt Phyllis' Cabin* likewise appeared in 1852. This popular novel glorified slavery and denounced abolitionists, particularly Mrs. Stowe, but it did attempt to describe slave life. Bacchus prays hard and drinks harder; many of his antics—his love for cast-off finery, the banjo, and big words—could grace a minstrel show. Aunt Phyllis is one of the first to appear of the mighty race of "mammies." The title character of John W. Page's *Uncle Robin in His Cabin* (1853) puts the author's beliefs into dialect: he does not want freedom for himself, and the Negro who is dissatisfied should go back where he came from:

"Dis, sir, is no country for free black men: Africa de only place [for] he, sir...."

Sentimentality of The Old South. Mrs. Caroline Lee Hentz, a northerner married to a southern gentleman, turned out a number of blood-and-tears romances. In *Marcus Warland* (1852) and in *Linda* (1857) she celebrates the mammy:

Aunt Judy's African blood had not been corrupted by the base mingling of a paler strain. Black as ebony was her smooth and shining skin, on which the dazzling ivory of her teeth threw gleams bright as the moon at midnight.

Judy had loved—adored, reverenced her, as being of a superior, holier race than her own.

The Planter's Northern Bride (1854) by Mrs. Hentz shows the typically converted northern girl. After her appearance on the plantation has elicited rapturous cries of adoration from the slaves, she is won over to the peculiar institution. "Oh! my husband! I never dreamed that slavery could present an aspect so tender and affectionate!" The husband, though a perfect master, modestly says that he is "not as good as the majority of masters." His slaves are fat, sleek and good natured; on Sunday, at church, they are "fashionably attired" and there is "the rustle of tissues, the fluttering of muslin and laces, the waving of feathery fans, the glitter of jewelry." The planter proves that the Negro was divinely ordained for slavery since

> his skull has a hardness and thickness greater than our own, which defy the arrowy sunbeams ... and his skin secretes a far greater quantity of moisture and throws back the heat absorbed by us.

Crissy, misled by an abolitionist, crosses the Ohio and finds freedom too much for her—"the only slavery she had ever known." An incipient revolt is nipped by Moreland, who, appalled by "the intolerable burden of the slaves' treachery and ingratitude" says:

> I would rather, ten thousand times, cultivate these broad fields myself, than be served by faithless hand and false, hollow hearts. I have hands that can work. I would do it cheerfully; if labor was the portion God had assigned to me in the world. Better, far better, the toiling limbs

than the aching heart! He paused a moment in indescribable emotion.

The slaves, naturally, break down and weep. All are forgiven, except Vulcan, who had lifted his "rebel arm" against Moreland: "You must never more wield the hammer or strike the anvil for me.... Go—you are free!" Poor Vulcan....

Mrs. M. J. McIntosh in *The Lofty and The Lowly, or Good in All and None All-good* (1854), hopes for the solution of the most difficult problem: "how the slave may be elevated to the condition of an intelligent, accountable being, without detriment to the master's interest." Mrs. McIntosh is sure that the solution cannot come from the fanatical North; she hopes that the South "with its greater sympathy, love and understanding will awaken to its responsibilities." Daddy Cato, who has grown gray in faithful service at Montrose Hall, Savannah, is set free and given a little homeplace. He is not proud of his freedom; he will be proud only when he can read the Bible and is free of sin. Following his beloved family to the North, he is highly insulted when he is approached by Boston abolitionists.

Make me free! how can I free any more? Dem da nonsense people, and what dem want take me from Miss Alice for?... I wonder if I been sick and couldn't do any ting, ef dem would nuss me and take care o' me liken Miss Alice.... I tink dem crazy 'bout free. Free bery good ting, but free ent all; when you sick, free won't make you well, free won't gib you clo's, no hom'ny, let 'lone meat.

Needless to say, the other slaves at Montrose, away from these crazy people talking about "free," live their childish lives in happiness. *The Lofty and The Lowly* is full of piety toward southern divinity.

The Defense Sums Up Its Case. Mrs. Henry R. Schoolcraft's *The Black Gauntlet* (1860) is likewise a compendium of proslavery arguments. The comfortable, well-ventilated slave homes "with sitting and sleeping room" and a loft for storing provisions are compared with the dens, holes, cellars and tenements of poor whites in northern cities. Food is good and abundant, with game and fish caught in the slave's plentiful off time. Slaves were given an acre of ground for their own use and allowed to raise hogs and poultry, of which the produce was sold at full market price. That slaves were ever knocked senseless is "purest fiction," since "their skulls are so thick that it is doubtful whether any white man's strength could consummate such a feat."

> I am so satisfied that slavery is the school God has established for the conversion of barbarous nations, that were I an absolute Queen of these United States, my first missionary enterprise would be to send to Africa, to bring the heathen as slaves to this Christian land, and keep them in bondage until compulsory labor had tamed their beastliness....

Mrs. Schoolcraft was a bit late, however; for over two centuries countless ships had been sent, and millions of Africans had been brought "to school" in Christian lands.

Since "not a living man can swear that he has ever heard antislavery sentiment from a slave in the South," the suffering of the Negro, to Mrs. Schoolcraft, is a lie whipped up by northern politicians. Runaway slaves are always the good-for-nothing rowdies, who flee to escape work and discipline. The separation of slave husbands and wives is no tragedy, since all are polygamists as in Africa.

It is not believed by the author that such a monstrosity (babies sold from mothers) has ever occurred in South Carolina, as a mistress there usually takes more care of her little Negro property than a black mother ever does of her children.

Poetic justice is in the book: the poor dupe of abolitionists is betrayed into crimes that "destroyed and grieved her conscience," but the faithful mammy is well rewarded. *The Black Gauntlet* is an extreme case of special pleading, where vilification of the accursed Negro alternates with praise of his blessedness in slavery. It is noteworthy, however, that Mrs. Schoolcraft's use of Negro dialect, in this case the Gullah of the low country, is as good as that of any preceding writer.

Suggested by "a popular work of fiction, abusive of southern slavery," *The Yankee Slave Dealer* by a Texan (1860) has for its subtitle *An Abolitionist Down South*. The theme is hackneyed: a northerner attempts in vain to aid slaves to freedom, is won over to the proslavery cause, and winds up by becoming a confirmed

slave dealer, inhumane because he was born on the wrong side of the Ohio River. Justus, the Yankee, tries to lure three Negroes to freedom. Moses, the first, is a walking edition of *The Bible Defense of Slavery*:

> Well, heah's sump'n else, mastuh: we read in the book of Leviticus dat de childin of Isr'l was told dey should buy slaves. I marked de place, and I'll jes read it to you; doe I s'pose you's seed it many a time. It's in de twenty-fif' chapter, de forty-fif' and sixt' verse.

Truly religious, Moses says that he submits because the Bible tells him that such is his duty. Justus approaches the second Negro with ludicrous pomp: "Let an ardent desire to alleviate the woes of the suffering plead my excuse for the breach of decorum." To this the Negro responds: "What for massah make fun of puoh nigger dis way!" The third specimen, farthest down in the physical and mental scale, runs away with Justus, only to steal his horse and saddle-bags and return to his master. Justus soon learns the proslavery creed that freeing the Negro will merely "people the penitentiary or feed the gibbet."

> Nature, by their inferior capacity and cheerful submission to their lot, has so well fitted them for this position.... The lot of the serving classes in all countries imposes a burden.

Grief is expressed for the white working class of the North; the female slave finds no parallel to the degradation of northern prostitutes. Abounding in such arguments, *The Yankee Slave Dealer*, though poor in characterization and plot, was the type of novel that the South wanted.

Summary. Less novels than fictional arguments, the first books of the plantation tradition are strikingly similar. Frightened by the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, southern authors rushed counter-propaganda to the presses. To testify to their culture, they produced crude, ungainly works. They called Mrs. Stowe "a moral scavenger" and worse names; since she was a Yankee woman, the rules of chivalry could be suspended. The pattern seldom varied: scenes of bliss on the plantation alternated with scenes of squalor in the free North. The contented slave, the clown and the wretched freedman are the Negro stereotypes, who put into dialect the creeds of Chancellor Harper and Professor Dew in the *Pro-Slavery Argument*, and of the Reverend Priest in *The Bible Defense of Slavery*. A plantation with a kindly master was basis for generalizing about all plantations, of whatever type, in whatever sections. A pampered house-servant, who refuses uncertain freedom for a comparatively easy place, becomes *the* Negro slave; a poor unemployed wretch becomes *the* freedman.

The intractable, the ironic, the abused Negro is nowhere on these plantations. Congressmen might deplore in legislative halls the injuries done the South by the Underground Railroad, and southern newspapers might be filled with descriptions of runaways, some second offenders with branded scars on their

faces. But runaways in these books are generally flighty creatures and half-wits, and even they finally steal back to the South. Judicial records might be full of instances of brutality, but the occasional whippings are shown to be for due cause such as stealing a ham from a poor woman who could not spare it. Miscegenation is missing in spite of the proofs walking about in the great houses or in the fields or the slave-pens. Slavery is shown as a beneficent guardianship, never as a system of cheap and abundant labor that furnished the basis of a few large fortunes (and assured an impoverished, disfranchised class of poor whites).

In spite of the exaggerations and omissions, however, certain damning evidence creeps in. Though too kind to maltreat Negroes, the cavaliers are adept at tarring-and-feathering, riding on rails, and lynching abolitionist villains, probably out of consideration for the Negro's welfare. Slavery is sometimes considered as not the Negro's final state; at some indefinite time (probably after the planters had all become wealthy) he would be returned to Africa to bear witness to the civilization and Christianity he had seen in America. And lastly, the arguers are betrayed by their argumentative tactics: It isn't true; but since it is, you are worse. Thus: it isn't true that slavery is a bad system, it is really a fine thing—no worse than the northern and English system of wage-slavery, which is terrible. Proslavery authors were justified in protesting the

exploitation of northern factory workers, but to argue that therefore slavery was blessed, is to prove that a man's broken leg is not painful since another man has a broken arm.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe examples of the plantation tradition found in modern advertising.
2. List examples of the plantation tradition in popular songs.
3. Granting that *Swallow Barn* was the truthful picture of a Virginia plantation, why is its influence on literature dangerous?
4. What is damaging in Kennedy's admission that he could not record Negro speech?

5. List examples of what you consider the greatest exaggerations in the pictures of slavery given by these books, and state your reasons for so considering them.
6. List the similar situations and arguments of these books.
7. Which novelists defend slavery because of the physical traits of Negroes?

CHAPTER III
ANTISLAVERY FICTION

Growth of the Attitude. The opposition to slavery, which began almost as soon as the first slaves were brought here, found literary expression in colonial times and especially in the eighteenth century, when honorable voices denounced slavery as "the most unremitting despotism on the one hand, and degrading submissiveness on the other." It was not until the eighteen thirties, however, that the antislavery crusade took on full force, moving "from resistance to the slave power ... to death to slavery." In 1831, the year of Nat Turner's famous revolt, the Antislavery Society was established, and William Lloyd Garrison published the first number of his *Liberator*.

In addition to the pamphlets strewn on "the wayside, the parlor, the stage coach, the rail car and the boat deck," slave narratives became a literary weapon. The experiences of fugitive slaves intrigued abolitionists who took down their stories, sometimes for newspaper sketches such as Isaac Hopper's *Tales of Oppression*, and sometimes for fictionalized biographies such as *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* (1838), *Recollections of Slavery* (attributed to a runaway slave, 1838) and *The Narrative of James Williams* (1838). In 1839 Theodore Weld, as important in the

antislavery crusade as Garrison, produced *Slavery As It Is*, a book of facts "authenticated by the slave-holders themselves [yet containing] but a tiny fraction of the nameless atrocities gathered from the papers examined." Written to combat "the old falsehood that the slave is kindly treated that has lullabied to sleep four-fifths of the free North and West," this was the most popular antislavery publication before *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

When antislavery fiction appeared, therefore, it found an audience prepared, and the arguments, the characters and a literary form set up.

Before Uncle Tom's Cabin. The first antislavery novel was published anonymously in 1836 as *The Slave*, or *Memoirs of Archy Moore*. Enlarged in 1852, it was renamed *The White Slave*, and claimed by Richard Hildreth, the historian. Archy Moore, son of his master, Colonel Moore, marries an octoroon, Cassy. Forced to run away, since the colonel desires Cassy for himself, they are captured and sold to different masters. Archy is sold and resold, until in South Carolina he and Tom, an embittered rebel, take to the swamps, finding a colony of outlawed slaves. Ferreted out of there, Archy, because of his light color, manages to escape to the North; Tom becomes the wild scourge of the region. Archy goes to Europe, attains some education and wealth, and redeems his wife from slavery. Though written in highflown language,

and not so dramatic as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The White Slave* is still vigorous. Certain characters—the white slave, the octoroon girl, the insurrectionist, the unfeeling Yankee overseer, and the lustful planter—are to reappear in later novels. The arguments, though slowing up the action, are cogent and informed. Hildreth obviously studied the slaves in his sojourn: his delineation includes hypocritical humility, sullenness, vindictiveness, intractability, cunning, courage, the contempt of house-servants for field hands, and of mulattoes for darker Negroes. The loyalty of some slaves to their masters, and their treachery to their fellows, are explained largely as policy for gain. Although occasionally heightened and unfair, *The White Slave* is one of the most important novels of this controversial period.

Herman Melville's allegory *Mardi* (1849) has bitter antislavery protest and wise prophecy in the sections that describe Vivenza (the United States). A slave with red marks of stripes upon his back is observed hoisting a standard, correspondingly striped, over the Capitol, the temple dedicated to Liberty. Hieroglyphics read "All men are born free and equal;" minute hieroglyphics add "Except the tribe of Hamo." In the south of Vivenza, the strangers see

> Under a burning sun, hundreds of collared men ... toiling in trenches.... Standing grimly over these, were men unlike them; armed with long thongs, which descended upon the toilers.

After close scrutiny the strangers, in amazement, swear that the slaves are men. For this they are branded as "firebrands, come to light the flame of revolt." The southern spokesman exclaims: "The first blow struck for them dissolves the Union of Vivenza's vales. The northern tribes well know it." Melville warns northerners not to feel self-righteous, and does not malign southerners, since "the soil decides the man," and they have grown up with slavery. Some slaves even seem happy, but Melville adds significantly "not as men." Melville is perplexed about the solution, and fatalistically concludes that "Time must befriend these thralls," but he is certain that slavery is "a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell."

The first woman to turn the novel to antislavery uses was Emily Catherine Pierson, who felt that too few readers knew of the thousands of runaways who had gained freedom. *Jamie, The Fugitive* (1851) introduces the hero in a newspaper advertisement of a runaway, and takes leave of him in an invoice as one of "Ten Bales of Humanity, in a thriving condition, late from three plantations in Virginia." In between we get descriptions of life in the cabins and fields, of "nigger-buyers," slave sales, slave-pens and caravans, and of the hazards of the fugitive stealthily pursuing his way under the "eaves of the Alleghanies," befriended only by the North Star. Mrs. Pierson's book is pious

and sentimental, but her characters, though slightly sketched, are believable human beings.

The same author writes in *Cousin Franck's Household* (1852):

> Were we content to be an humble imitator, we know of no one whom we should be prouder to follow than the noble author of that wonderful work "Uncle Tom's Cabin." But we owe it to ourselves to say that our little book was projected before the publication of the latter; and our Jamie Parker, we think, had only one predecessor—and that we had not seen—in this species of literature.

Written as the letters of a northern woman visiting Virginia, *Cousin Franck's Household*, or *Scenes In The Old Dominion* is *Swallow Barn* in reverse. Slave-traders and fugitives are again described. In addition we have close observations of domestic life. Some of the slaves, with good right, resemble the master too much for his wife's comfort and she begs him to sell them or send them off to his Alabama plantation. A slave drover remarks:

> Fact is, I've got a specimen lot ... of Anglo-Saxon blood, I reckon they calls it; at any rate, I'm takin' ter market some of the best blood in the "Old Dominion".... Ingenus, ain't it now, for a body to tarn a body's own blood to sich account.

A Yankee overseer, who "calculates what a nigger is wuth, and how long he'll last on the hard drive plan;" a beautiful octoroon and her mother, crazy Millie, deranged by the tragedy of slavery, are types that will frequently be met with in later fiction. Although apologetic to "fastidious readers" who might object to her

recording "dialectal peculiarities," Mrs. Pierson kept voluminous notebooks "to secure accuracy in the nondescript vernacular of the cabin and the hut." She sees the social setting, likewise, with accuracy; she records what southern novelists preferred not to show: the poor whites, not an accident but a logical result of slavery; and the worn-out, profitless land, which brought it about that Virginia's best crop was the crop of slave children in the quarters.

Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1851, a little woman in Cincinnati sent the first chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin or The Man that Was a Thing* to the *National Era*. The daughter of a famed preacher, and the sister of another more famous for his antislavery sermons, Harriet Beecher Stowe had grown up in religious, humanitarian surroundings. Cincinnati, a border city, was a battleground for antislavery and proslavery forces; Dr. Bailey, abolitionist editor of the *National Era* was mobbed there, and Quakers spread the antislavery gospel in "sewing societies." Mrs. Stowe, whose home was at times a shelter for fugitives, had listened to pathetic or hair-raising stories of the South, and had written two antislavery sketches, "Immediate Emancipator" (1848) and "The Freeman's Dream" (1850). Her anger at the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law made her dissatisfied with such weak parables, and she set out to write a passionate protest. In preparation she read books like Weld's *Slavery As It Is*, and the

autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, of Lewis Clark, who suggested George Harris, and of Josiah Henson, who suggested Uncle Tom.

In 1852 when the completed serial was published in book form as *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among The Lowly*, its success was instantaneous. Over three hundred thousand copies were sold in America in the first year; in a very short time there were forty editions in England, and over a million and a half copies sold in the Empire. It was translated in many foreign languages, including Bohemian, Welsh and Siamese. It was acclaimed by George Sand, Dickens and Kingsley, who naturally were not annoyed by the sentimentality and melodrama; it set Heinrich Heine to reading the Bible; to Macaulay it was the greatest American literary achievement. Whittier rejoiced in the Fugitive Slave Law, since it gave occasion for the book. Lincoln later said to Mrs. Stowe, "So you are the little woman who brought on the great war." If this is overstatement, it is true that many of the voters who elected Lincoln in 1860 were greatly influenced by the household favorite. Tolstoy grouped it with the few masterpieces of the world, and Howells considered it the only great American novel produced before the Civil War. Detractors have for a long time been undermining its prestige, but it has probably been more widely read than any other novel in the world, and it is still popular.

In characterizing the Negroes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mrs. Stowe faced the dilemma of the propagandist. If she showed them as brutalized by slavery, she would have alienated her readers, whose preferences were for idealized heroes. If on the other hand, she made her characters too noble, her case against slavery would be weakened. She did this with Uncle Tom, and critics have stated: If slavery produced a Christian hero so far superior to free whites, then slavery is excellent. This dilemma was hardly recognized by Mrs. Stowe, however, as all of her training and inclinations were toward sentimental idealism. Eliza and George, if not models of Christian forgivingness, are still virtue in distress, to be saved by poetic justice. Eva's ethereal goodness, and Legree's cruelty are examples among the white characters of the same idealization. But Topsy must not be overlooked; although minstrel shows have made her into a Puck in blackface, Mrs. Stowe intended to show her as a pathetic victim of slave-trading as well. Sambo and Quimbo, the slave-drivers, had been dehumanized by the system; Cassy is the octoroon whose beauty has crushed her; and Chloe, while traditional, is made realistic by the little touches of a woman well acquainted with kitchen-lore. Mrs. Stowe has a wide range of Negro characters, and one southern critic finds in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* just about all of the traits he is willing to grant the Negro. High spirits are shown on Shelby's Kentucky plantation, but

tragedy lurks in the background. Mrs. Stowe handles the tragedy with the bold melodramatic strokes of Dickens; but she artfully blends the shocking with humor and pathos, with mystery and suspense; familiar domestic scenes with cotton-planting, steamboating on the river and gambling in New Orleans; pious moralizing with fascinating wickedness—all in all a successful recipe.

When Mrs. Stowe rattled the bones of the skeletons in southern closets, howls arose from the manors. A South Carolinian recorded the rumor:

> That the whole "nigger kingdom" of the South had been killed, smothered, torn to pieces by bloodhounds, ground up for bone manure; children dragged from mothers' breasts, and the whole plantations turned into slaughter-houses, we fully expected; and yet nobody had read it.

It is needless to say that no such pictures occurred in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, yet Mrs. Stowe was called a defamer, a hypocrite, "snuffling for pollution with a pious air," a plain liar.

A moralist and debater, Mrs. Stowe returned the lie. She published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book as long as the novel, giving sources for all of her charges. The *Key*, largely unread by the critics, remains unanswerable. Granting that such feats as Eliza's crossing the ice are sensational, although vouched for, in what did the lying in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* consist? Joel Chandler Harris goes too far in calling it a defense of American slavery as Mrs. Stowe

found it in Kentucky, but his comment has point. Shelby and St. Clair are kindly owners, in the plantation tradition, whose humanity was overpowered by the system. The two Yankees,—the vicious Legree and the priggish, unsympathetic Miss Ophelia are certainly in line with southern gospel. It is no lie that there were slave auctions, slave cellars such as the ones where the flies "got to old Prue," public whipping posts, mothers separated from their children, and slaves like Cassy whose beauty was their doom. With allowances for sentimentality and melodrama, essential truth is in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To argue against its artistic faults and to consider it incomplete representation are possible. The charge of lying, however, is confusing. Mrs. Stowe showed that slavery was a great wrong, and that Negroes are human. Is it here that critics believe that she lies?

Mrs. Stowe's second antislavery novel, *Dred, A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856) later published as *Nina Gordon*, was obscured by the lasting fame of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although many critics have preferred it. It lacks the pathos and sweep of the earlier work, but it adds pictures of the "poor whites" and of Negro outlaws in the Dismal Swamp. Harry Gordon is a fuller portrait of George Harris; another "white slave," he is the successful manager of a plantation while his white half-brother is a wastrel and carouser. His character is analyzed in conventional terms: "the rules about Ham do not pertain" to him, and at

times he plaintively wishes to be "a good, honest, black nigger, like Uncle Pomp." Lizette, his quadroon wife, is similar to Eliza. Traditional Negroes are Old Hundred, the coachman, and Tiff, who in his love for his little white charges is like Uncle Tom. Dred, a fanatical fugitive, the son of Denmark Vesey, is created somewhat after the model of Nat Turner. A new figure for Mrs. Stowe, she does not portray him very successfully. Devoted to the creed of "turning the other cheek," she shows Dred doing little other than rescuing the virtuous, or urging slaves to escape. He is less an insurrectionist than a Negro Robin Hood. His supernatural appearances recall Scott's novels, and his longwinded chants are more those of a Hebrew prophet. Other fugitives are more real: Hark, sullen and inflexible, and Jim, the clownish house-servant, pampered but wanting to be free, especially so that he can have a wife all his own. There is local color in scenes like the camp-meeting, but the book is written with a reformer's zeal, more concerned with urging emancipation and denouncing "the great Christianizing institution" than with re-creating social reality. Antislavery feeling is likewise in *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), a tale of New England. Candace, "a powerfully built, majestic black woman, corpulent, heavy," is traditional in her loyalty to her family, but she is proudly and volubly free: "I ain't a critter. I's neider huff nor horns. I's a reasonable being...."

Negro Novelists. Very shortly after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the first novel by an American Negro appeared. This was *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown, an antislavery agent. The book was popular enough for three editions; in the second and third, the heroine is changed to the daughter of "a great statesman." *Clotel* is not well written or well constructed, but these failings are common to its type. Scattered throughout the book are intimate glimpses that only one who had been a slave could get: a few dialect rhymes, certainly among the first in American literature, a few comic interludes, and some Negro jokes on the master. But such things are all too scarce. The story is melodrama, and the chief characters, though vouched for by the author, are hardly distinguishable in gentility from the heroines of "blood and tears" romances. Clotel's mother jumps into the Potomac, committing suicide to elude the slave hunters. Her aunt, after marriage with a white Vermont doctor, who neglects to file papers of manumission, is sold with her beautiful daughters on the block, and dies of the shame. The surpassingly beautiful Clotel is luckier. Sold from one place to another, she finally becomes maidservant for an angelic girl, and falls in love with a handsome black slave. Helping him to escape execution for resisting a white man, she disguises him in her clothes, and remains undetected in the cell. (She is nearly white, and he is black.) She is flogged for this and sold to

New Orleans, where an enraptured Frenchman steals her away. After his death, providential for the plot, she meets her former lover in Europe. Back in America, he dies leading a charge in the Civil War, and she becomes an Angel of Mercy to the Federal troops. The novel wanders far afield, and incidents that might have been impelling arguments are told too casually.

Two other Negro novelists took up the novel as their weapon. Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) takes place chiefly in Philadelphia. It has a new setting and problem, but is badly overwritten. Mr. Garie, a white man, has married a wife only partly white, and race prejudice makes the whole family suffer for it. In contrast, a Negro family lives a happier life in spite of hardships. Martin Delany, a versatile free Negro, began in 1859 a novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* in the *Anglo-African*, but the work was not completed. With a hero and heroine modelled upon George Harris and Eliza, and a number of horrors, *Blake* is an imitation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, best in the pictures of the Southwest which Delany had visited. In 1859 Frances Harper's "The Two Offers" appeared, telling of a white heroine who devotes her life to the antislavery cause. This is the first short story by a Negro author, but otherwise unimportant.

Other Successors. The Planter's Victim (1855) by W. W. Smith, republished five years later as the *Yankee Slave Driver*, is the

most gruesome antislavery novel. Richard Dudley, wishing his octoroon half sister for mistress, is infuriated when she marries a nearly white slave, George. He has Caroline flogged with one hundred and fifty lashes and George with four hundred. On such a scale are all the barbarities inflicted. Dudley smashes the skull of Caroline's baby and, when Caroline dies heartbroken, he insults her corpse. For many years he torments George, and finally after starving him in a New Orleans dungeon, stabs him. The slaves are extreme specimens, George being a "youthful and majestic Apollo in the full glow of masculine beauty and splendor," and Caroline being magnificently beautiful. Both speak highflown drivel. With all of his supposed manliness, George equals Uncle Tom in saintliness. The book hardly serves its purpose: the villains are too monstrous for belief, the hero too submissive for respect, and the incidents too uniformly gruesome for anything except a collection of horrors.

Among the antislavery authors who, like Mrs. Stowe, advocated colonization is H. L. Hosmer, author of *Adela, The Octoroon* (1860). Adela, a slave-mistress, though disliking abolitionist books which "merely ransack lawsbooks and newspapers for narratives of torture," condemns slavery as a fraud and curse. The misery of slaves on Mississippi plantations is pictured only a shade darker than the squalor of fugitives in the North. The happy opportunities of

life in Liberia are set in contrast, but without conviction. One of the full length characters is Tidbald, distinguished champion of southern rights, but seducer of his own slave daughter. A mysterious worker of the underground, "broadbrim" Quakers, and an octoroon who preferred to be a kept woman in New Orleans instead of a plantation drudge, could well have been further developed at the expense of the argumentation. Mention is made of the melodies of the slaves and the rhythm of their dancing, but other local color is missing and the dialect is false. Many of the Negroes are true steel, game to the core. At the end Adela is proved to be herself an octoroon. To save her, a loyal body-servant, Captain Jack, heads an insurrection and kills her would-be ravisher. Although disgruntled at slavery, courageous, and intelligent, Jack rebels only when his mistress is in danger. *Adela, The Octoroon* is confused, incredible, and tedious, with only occasional originality.

More popular among the Union soldiers, according to report, than even *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was a novel published in the Beadle Dime Novel Series, *Maum Guineas' Children*, by Mrs. M. V. Victor (1861). The author disclaims any political purpose, but her stress is antislavery. While planters and their families are shown in a sympathetic light, the abuses of slavery are told of in fuller measure. Maum Guinea, mysterious and embittered, has been deprived of her children and husband. She contrives the escape of

Hyperion and Rose, a beautiful slave who has been sold by the "kindly" master to a libertine. The novel deals with the Christmas week in the lives of the slaves. Barbecuing, dancing, singing, and hunting are described to show the brighter side, but the stories told around the fire are grim and rebellious. One slave's husband had been in the Nat Turner uprising; another had attempted to kill his mistress, because she had jealously hounded his mother to death. The novel is simply written and evidently based upon intimate knowledge. Mrs. Victor seems to look upon the pure African type as happy-go-lucky, and finds rebels only among the mixed bloods, and the happy ending is forced. Even with these failings, however, the novel belongs with the most readable and convincing of antislavery novels.

Written to enforce the antagonism of many northerners to the Fugitive Slave Law, since "a human critter's of more account than all the laws in Christendom," J. T. Trowbridge's *Neighbor Jackwood* (1856) is far more convincing in its pictures of Vermont than of the deep South. Camille, the daughter of a Frenchman and an octoroon *placée*, is "jest dark enough to be ra'al purty." Enslaved after her father's death, untimely as in so many abolitionist novels, she is sold and is subjected to her master's advances. Robert Greenwood, a northerner, enamored of her, helps her escape to the North; but unwilling to become his mistress, she runs away from him. In Vermont she finds honest love in Hector, who

marries her, and goes South to buy her freedom. Left in Vermont, she is hidden away by Neighbor Jackwood, until Robert, now a full-fledged scoundrel, tells the kidnappers where she is. She is rescued in the nick of time by Hector, who brings her papers of freedom. There is a great deal of mystery and suspense, Camille's hiding away in a haystack on a stormy night being vividly described. But the book is more sensational than revelatory of Negro life; and the southern scenes are hastily passed over and conventional.

The same author's *Cudjo's Cave* (1863), a stirring boys' book, tells of the conflicts between Unionists and Confederates in Eastern Tennessee in the first year of the war. Three Negro characters are prominent: Toby, the faithful servant; Cudjo, ape-like in appearance, but cunning, powerful, and vindictive, the unbroken African; and Pomp, "magnificently proportioned, straight as a pillar, and black as ebony, of noble features." Pomp has been educated abroad by an indulgent master. As usual in these novels, the benefactor dies, and the new master is tyrannical. Pomp escapes to the ravines of the Cumberland Mountains, and there meets Cudjo, whose scarred back was "the most powerful of antislavery documents." They eke out an existence in the cave, with the connivance of slaves who keep them posted; in their turn they help runaways, succor abolitionists is distress, and finally aid in overthrowing the Confederate guerrillas. The

Negroes and the Unionists are too good, and the Rebels too villainous, but the novel has the suspense of escape and capture, and throws light upon an interesting chapter of history.

In spite of its unwieldy plot, Epes Sargent's *Peculiar* (1863) is one of the most rewarding of antislavery novels. It is not a mere recounting of horrors. "It ain't de whippins ... dat make de wrong of slavery. De mos' kindest thing dey could do de slave would be ter treat him so he wouldn't stay a slave nohow," says one character. Another insists that if slaves were so brutalized as to be contented, slavery would be doubly cursed, and rejoices that "there is manhood in them to make them at least unhappy." The slave Peek, named for the "Peculiar Institution," has full share of this manhood, and is defiant, provident, intelligent, and, strangely for the antislavery gallery, skeptical of religion. Vance, the white hero, disguises himself as Gashface, a mulatto underground agent, out of hatred for the system that had killed his octoroon wife. He and Peek, as climax to their safeguarding the virtuous, and confounding wrong-doers, discover a beautiful white girl who had been sold into slavery, and rescue her from the lust of her master. The story is sensational, but Sargent shows an understanding of such historic matters as the kidnapping from northern States, the workings of the underground, and the easy acceptance of concubinage by southern society. He shows the

slaves to be secretive, relying on their "grapevine telegraph" for mutual protection; slyly humorous, waging their own guerrilla warfare against a stronger enemy. Sargent goes below the surface and gets at social causes, and because of this his book is frequently persuasive.

Summary. Antislavery fiction naturally concentrated upon the abuses that proslavery fiction left unmentioned: slave-sales, the breaking up of families, shameful practises at the slave-mart, slave jails and coffles, whippings, overwork and concubinage. Slave discontent was stressed. Negro insurrectionists, outlaws, fugitives and underground agents are favorite characters, and since they existed in large numbers, antislavery fiction makes a contribution here to realism. Unfortunately the rebellious and militant are generally shown to be of mixed blood, like George Harris, whereas the more African type is shown as docile, like Uncle Tom. Some novelists depart from this pattern, but the pattern persists and has remained wrongly influential. Moreover, the heroine is frequently a quadroon or octoroon, a concession, unconscious perhaps, to race snobbishness even among abolitionists. As one critic says:

> This was an indirect admission that a white man in chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed. Their most impassioned plea was in behalf of a person little resembling their swarthy protégés....

The plots are strained and melodramatic. Too often the kindly disposed master dies suddenly, without having chance to fulfill his promises of freedom. Too often, on the other hand, the slave's problems are solved by breaks of good luck at the book's end.

Antislavery fiction set up the stereotypes of "the victim", "the noble savage" sometimes "the perfect Christian," and the "tragic octoroon." The items of its denunciation are true enough to history, but they do not represent the real gamut of Negro life and character. The large plantation, where the abuses incidental to absentee ownership throve, is still the chief setting, and the smaller, more typical farm is neglected. The workaday life of the average slave, who, through fear, ignorance, loyalty or habit did not revolt or run away, and who learned to accommodate himself so that the whippings and penalties would be less, is missing. Often, too, antislavery fiction, by stressing physical punishments, underemphasizes the greater wrongs, the destruction of manhood, and the ugly code of morality that slavery fostered. Certain articles of the southern creed were accepted too easily, such as the belief that the slave-trader was a low boor, unaccepted socially by the aristocrats. Modern scholars, such as Frederic Bancroft in *Slave Trading in the Old South*, have shown how some of the "finest" southern families built up their wealth from slave dealing.

It might be expected in the "battle of the books" that proslavery authors would have an advantage in being on the scene. But full or even partial use was not made of this advantage, the dialect and local color of the proslavery authors being very little better than and frequently not so good as those of the abolitionists. Except for Mrs. Schoolcraft, Harriet Beecher Stowe writes better dialect than proslavery authors. Hildreth and Mrs. Victor obviously knew southern life. In their total presentation of social setting, the abolitionists have not been so one-sided as their detractors have made out. Many show good masters as well as bad, attacking a system rather than the people. For comic relief, or for honest realism, many present happier scenes, but wisely present these as holidays, not as the reality of slavery. Most important, however, is the difference in characterization. Lowell said that Mrs. Stowe's genius "instinctively goes right to the organic elements of human nature, whether under a white skin or black;" and at their best the other antislavery authors do like wise. When a mother is separated from her child, they show the grief of a bereft mother, not a mother of peculiar racial endowments who cannot love her children because she and they happen to be black. If she is not grief-stricken, they lay the blame upon the brutalizing of slavery, not on a racial characteristic that it soothed slave-holders to believe in. The antislavery authors may not ever have owned Negroes, but they started from the

premise that Negroes were human. Finally, it must be said that although both sides went in for melodrama and idealizing, the antislavery case was much more credible. Facts, even in spite of *Gone With the Wind*, are abolitionist.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What noted Americans outside of the novelists, were antislavery in sympathy?

2. What are probable reasons for the private first printing of *Memoirs of Archy Moore* and its later reissue and enlargement?

3. What might explain the fact that the first publisher approached turned down *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?

4. List the books that make use of the hero and heroine of mixed blood.

5. How did the use of these characters strengthen the antislavery argument? How did it weaken?

6. List the books making use of the pure African type as hero.

7. What, according to Melville, would cause Civil War in Vivenza?

CHAPTER IV

RECONSTRUCTION: THE GLORIOUS SOUTH

The Triumph of The Tradition. If *Uncle Tom's Cabin* triumphed in the antebellum "battle of the books," being widely remembered while its opponents are forgotten, the plantation tradition was to score a signal victory in the Reconstruction. Although no longer needed to defend a tottering institution, it was now needed to prove that Negroes were happy as slaves and hopelessly unequipped for freedom, so that slavery could be resurrected in practise though not in name. Ancestor worshippers, the sons of a fighting generation, remembering bitterly the deaths of their fathers, uncles, or brothers, the sufferings of their families and themselves, brought the passion of the defeated to their descriptions. Many, politically astute, used the plantation tradition to further their ambitions.

The authors of the reconstruction were better writers than their antebellum predecessors. Moreover, they were farther from slavery, and since their memories were often those of childhood, they idealized to a much greater degree. Some proslavery authors, like William Thompson, had admitted, for instance, that many slaves had the harshest kind of masters; others

unconsciously allowed facts to enter that their descendants considered too uncouth for mention. Nostalgic yearning brought it about that, according to Gaines:

> Slavery was softened until whatever may have been evil was regarded as accidental.... The scale of life was steadily enlarged, the colors were made increasingly vivid. Estates swelled in size and mansions grew proportionately great. Gentlemen were perfected in courtly grace, gay girls in loveliness, slaves in immeasurable devotion.

With the seductiveness of any past seen through "the golden haze of retrospect," with realism to the surface of Negro life, disarmingly affectionate references to Negroes of the old school, and a mastery of the tricks of fiction, the plantation tradition came into its own. The Negro was established as contented slave, entertaining child and docile ward, until misled by "radical" agitators, when he became a dangerous beast.

Local Color. Following Bret Harte's discovery of the picturesque and quaint in California's past, local colorists sprang up all over the nation. Many southern regions were staked out as claims worth mining. Charles Egbert Craddock in the Tennessee mountains, Mark Twain in the Mississippi valley, George Washington Cable in fabulous New Orleans brought the wealth of their discoveries to a literature that had fallen on lean years. Coincidentally with the rise of the local colorists, a new interest in the South, the scene of America's greatest war, was awakening.

Magazines, especially *Scribner's*, attempted to slake this curiosity. A great outburst of dialect stories resulted. Among the first of the writers to realize the picturesque interest of the southern Negro was Sherwood Bonner (Mrs. Katherine McDowell), a pioneer in local color fiction as Russell was in poetry (she had even written dialect poetry of the Negro before Russell's book appeared). Many of her *Dialect Tales* (1878) and *Suwanee River Tales* (1884) are about Negroes. They are interesting as first attempts, but they illustrate the chief weaknesses of local color: they reveal odd turns of speech and customs but the characterization is superficial and condescending. Southern local colorists were soon to sweep the North with a different formula; fidelity to speech and manners was to be combined with regret "for the dear dead days beyond recall."

Thomas Nelson Page. Most elegiac of these authors, and probably most persuasive in casting a golden glow over the antebellum South is Thomas Nelson Page. With a mastery of pathos and stirring melodrama, his *In Ole Virginia* (1887) sets a pattern that time has not been able to wear out. The three best known stories of this volume are "Marse Chan," "Meh Lady," and "Unc' Edinburg's Drownin'." They are told in the dialect of eastern Virginia, accurately recorded. The literary device used in all three stories is quite simple: an old Negro, garrulous in praise of the old days, tells a tale of

handsome cavaliers and lovely ladies, with stress upon the love between master and slave. Marse Chan saves a slave's life at the cost of his own sight; Uncle Edinburg is saved by his young master from a raging torrent; Uncle Billy defends his charges from marauding Yankee soldiers, and supports them after the war. The stories end in lovers' meetings; as in Shakespeare, the courtship of lord and lady is balanced by the comical courtship of the servants. Page has his three ventriloquist's dummies agreeing upon the blessedness of slavery. Sam says:

> Dem wuz good ole times, marster—de bes' Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac'! Niggers didn't hed nothing 'tall to do.... Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin'.

Uncle Edinburg seconds the emotion:

> Oh! nuttin' warn' too good for niggers dem times; an' de little niggers wuz runnin' roun' right 'stracted.... Dis nigger ain' nuver gwine forgit it."

And Uncle Billy:

> I wuz settin' in de do' wid meh pipe, an heah 'em settin' dyah on de front steps, dee voices soun'in low like bees, an' de moon sort o' mellow over de yard, an' I sort o' got to studyin' an' hit pear like de plantation live once mo', an' de ain' no mo' scufflin', an de ol times done come back agin....

"No Haid Pawn," a ghost story in the same volume, has a Negro character who differed from other slaves in that he was without amiability or docility, superstition or reverence. Page adds significantly, "He was the most brutal negro I ever knew." *The Negro: The Southerner's Problem* states Page's lavish praise for the "old time darky" and his virulent disgust at the "new

issue," ruined by emancipation; *Red Rock* (1898) embodies this hatred in fiction. The docile mastiffs have become mad dogs; the carriers of the rabies are Yankee soldiers and schoolmarms, carpet-baggers, and scalawags. Mammy Krenda, Waverly, Tarquin, and Jerry are sympathetically treated because they despise the northern interlopers, and stand hand-in-hand before quality. Less servile Negroes are called insolent swaggerers. Moses, a mulatto trick doctor, is the worst of these. He orates: "I'm just as good as any white man.... I'm goin' to marry a white 'ooman and meck white folks wait on me." Within a few pages he is likened to "a hyena in a cage," "a reptile," "a species of worm," "a wild beast." He attempts to assault one of the heroines, the daughter of an abolitionist mother; this Page considers a fit harvest for interference with the most chivalrous of civilizations. Page thus anticipates such authors as Thomas Dixon whose stock in trade is the brute Negro, and whose pat response to any assertion of Negro rights is the cry of intermarriage or rape.

Such a volume as *Pastime Stories* (1894) deals less with the good times than with Page's own days. The Negro characters are petty thieves and drunkards, but are dealt with jocularly. There is ridicule in Uncle Jack's "Views on Geography":

> You knows de way to de spring and de wood-pile, an' de mill, an' when you gits a little bigger I's gwine to show you de way to de hoe-handle, an' de cawn-furrer, an' dat's all de geog-aphy a nigger's got to know.

One story shows approvingly how a mulatto office-seeker is thwarted by a faithful Negro for the sake of his master's political advantage. *Bred in the Bone* (1904) adds nothing to Page's usual characterizations, dealing largely with the antics of comic menials.

Harris. It was from the slave quarters that Joel Chandler Harris started his trip to literary immortality. As a lonely boy, shy with people of his own race, he turned for companionship to the cabins on a Georgia plantation. There he met Uncle George Terrell, the original of Uncle Remus; there he started his long study of Negro lore, and there he learned something of the story-telling art and something of his wisdom. For years the slaves had been telling fables of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and Brer Terrapin, some of the stories having come from Africa. But no one had dug in this mine before Harris. A true artist, he recognized the value of what he found. He is more than a reteller, however; he altered, adapted, polished and sharpened until the products differ from folk tales. For all of the fascination of Brer Rabbit and company, the fabler is stressed more than the characters. Instead of being by the folk for the folk, Uncle Remus tells the stories to entertain a white child. Harris lost something authentic when he adopted this framework, but he gained Uncle Remus. And Uncle Remus is worth gaining. By no means the typical product of slavery, as Harris implies, he is still finely conceived: a venerable, pampered

Negro with a gift for quaint philosophizing and for poetic speech, having (or allowed to have) only pleasant memories, fortunate above his brothers—one of the best characters in American literature.

In folk-idiom, the tales are kept close to the people. No author before Harris had recorded Negro speech with anything like his skill. Walter Hines Page stated: "I have Mr. Harris' word for it that he can *think* in the Negro dialect. He could translate even Emerson, perhaps Bronson Alcott in it...." Any random excerpt will reveal this ability:

> Bimeby, one day, after Brer Fox bin doin' all dat he could fer ter ketch Brer Rabbit, en Brer Rabbit bin doin' all he could fer to keep 'im fum it, Brer Fox say to hisse'f dat he'd put up a game on Brer Rabbit, en he ain't mo'n got de wuds out'n his mouf twel Brer Rabbit come a lopin up de big road, lookin' des ez plump en ez fat, en ez sassy ez a Moggin hoss in a barley patch....
>
> "All right, Brer Fox, but you better holler fum whar you stan'. I'm monstus full er fleas dis mawnin'," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

Strewn through the stories is much local color, well-observed and true. Fine turns of speech reveal the slave's mind. The use of Brer Rabbit as the hero is noteworthy. Forced to pit his cunning against enemies of greater physical strength, he was perhaps a symbol for people who needed craft in order to survive. But whether victor over Brer Wolf, or victim to the Tar-baby, he is a likeable scamp, who has come loping lickety-split down the years.

Before finishing his long cycle of tales, Uncle Remus revealed himself more thoroughly than any preceding Negro character. But Harris was a journalist, as well as a writer of fiction, and he was called upon to give his version of the critical times. It was here that his ability to translate anything into Negro dialect was misused. He made Uncle Remus the mouthpiece for defending orthodox southern attitudes. Needless to say, Uncle Remus diminishes in stature; he becomes less a man, more a walking delegate. The old man keeps his hat in his hand too much. He defends the glory of the Old South, he admires his white folks, he satirizes education for Negroes:

> Hit's de ruinashun er dis country.... Put a spellin'-book in a nigger's han's, en right den en dar' you loozes a plow-hand.... What's a nigger gwineter 'larn outen books? I kin take a bar'l stave an' fling mo' sense inter a nigger in one minnit dan all de schoolhouses betwixt dis en de State er Midgigin.... Wid one bar'l stave I kin fa'rly lif' de vail er ignunce.

When Negroes migrated for better working conditions, or out of fear, Uncle Remus almost frantically begs them to "stay off them kyars." That an old Negro, spoiled by his white-folks, and patronized by southern journalists, might say what his hearers want to hear, and even believe it, is quite probable. But as racial adviser, Uncle Remus forfeits our trust in him; he is too fluently the mouthpiece of southern policy. He did better telling how Brer Rabbit fooled Brer Fox by slick talk, or when he said: "Watch out

we'en you'er gittin' all you want. Fattenin' hogs ain't in luck."

Many of Harris's other stories repeat usual characters in usual situations. In "Aunt Fountain's Prisoner" the old auntie saves a Yankee's life and presides over his successful courtship of a southern girl. "Mingo" tells of a slave of "meritorious humility," "a cut above" the Negroes who accepted freedom. In "Baalam and His Master," Baalam, of a "fearlessness rare among slaves" fights alongside his roistering master in tavern brawls and digs a hole in the wall of a jail to be near him. Although Ananias is mean-looking, his sacrifice for his master, ruined by the war, proves him to be an old familiar, merely with a new face. Like the typical southern authors of his time, Harris does not show the Negro who would fight or work or exercise his wits in his own cause.

A few runaways and freed Negroes attracted his attention. Free Betsey in *Sister Jane* and Mink in *On the Plantation* are as devoted to their little missy and massa, however, as Uncle Remus. "Free Joe" is the pathetic story of a freed Negro, feared by the whites and avoided, but hardly envied, by the slaves. After his wife was sold by a master well nicknamed Old Spite, and his faithful little dog was killed by Old Spite's hounds, he dies, heartbroken. Humane and intelligent, Harris uses "Free Joe" to attack the popular notion that Negroes always "grin at trouble." The forces making a free Negro

an outcast are clearly indicated. But dyed-in-the-wool southerners could use Joe's shiftlessness to prove that a freed Negro could not stand alone, and Harris's picture of the laughing, singing slaves who despised Free Joe might bear them out. Joe is certainly not a typical free Negro, but the sympathy in his portrait is deeper than any of Harris's contemporaries dared show.

"Mom Bi" tells of an unusual mammy. In spite of her withered arm, Mom Bi is a black Amazon, with eyes that "shone like those of a wild animal not afraid of the hunter." She was not religious:

> Ef de Lawd call me in de chu'ch I gwine, ef he no call I no gwine, enty? I no yerry him call dis long time....

Whoever crossed her—white or black, old or young—got a piece of her mind. She outspokenly scorns the South Carolina "sandhillers" or "tackies," and laughs at them for going to war to "fight for rich folks' niggers." In the Civil War she is a grim prophet of Yankee victory, and therefore is considered a lunatic. Again, however, Harris cannot shake off the heavy hand of tradition. Mom Bi forgives the sale of her daughter Maria, but is grieved that her young master Gabriel was killed in battle, fighting alongside of poor white folks. Emancipated, she goes down to live with Maria, her daughter; when smallpox kills off Maria and her children, she returns (as do most of the Negroes whom Harris likes) to the old homeplace. "I done bin come back," says she. "I bin come back fer stay, but I free, dough!"

Like “Mom Bi,” “Blue Dave” promises much more than it gives. Dave, an inky black powerfully built runaway, has become a legend before the story opens for fearlessness and terrorism. In the story proper, however, we merely get a Hercules devoted to a family because the young master resembles a former Virginian owner. Dave has said over and over again that slavery “ain’t no home for me,” but he is bought by the family he has served, and lives happily ever after as a model slave. “Where’s Duncan,” more than any other of Harris’s stories, touches upon the sinister and repellent. A swarthy dark-bearded vagabond fiddler tells mysteriously of a planter who sold his son to a trader. The last scene, recalling Poe’s effects, shows an old mansion afire; in the light of the flames, a mulatto woman cries out “Where’s Duncan?” and stabs the white father of her son with a carving knife. Crooked-leg Jake saw Duncan, the fiddler, sitting in a corner, seemingly enjoying the spectacle.

The last story shows that Harris saw in slavery something more than a perpetual Mardi Gras; he knew that there was hatred as well as mutual affection, the ugly as well as the pleasant. Harris promised “scenes such as have never been described in any of the books that profess to tell about life in the South before the war.” But with all of his value as a realist, Harris never came fully to grips with the reality of the South or of Negro experience. He was a kindly man, and

wished the wounds of war bound up. He could give some praise to Negroes struggling to achieve property and education. But he was a southerner, living in vexatious times, and therefore his fiction almost always glorified the faithful self-denying slave of the old South, for whom the old ways of slavery were the best. He achieved a fine portrait in Uncle Remus, but Uncle Remus had brothers and children of a different stamp, whom Harris touched gingerly, if at all. Harris came a good distance down the road toward fairness if compared with Thomas Nelson Page. But compared with George Washington Cable and Mark Twain, he still lagged behind.

Harris recorded some of the folk-lore of the "saltwater" Negroes with success, but it remained for Charles C. Jones to do the fuller job in *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast* (1888). These tales are worthy to stand by those of Uncle Remus and, lacking the editorializing, are closer to the originals. They are told in the unique lingo of the rice-field and sea-island Negroes. The first in the "untrodden field of the swamp region of Georgia and the Carolinas," Jones discovered what later folk-lorists like Samuel Stoney, Gertrude Shelby and Ambrose Gonzales have found attractive.

Edwards. Harry Stillwell Edwards belongs to the long line of Georgians from Longstreet down to Erskine Caldwell who write of the Old South with more realism and less worship. His Major Crawford Worthington, for instance, is a

portly, profane, self-willed sportsman who considers the Negro an unfailing source of amusement. Worthington's slave Isam is an annual runaway, not because slavery is harsh, but because he likes vacations. "The Two Runaways" tells of a vacation on which master and slave, boon companions, live high on stolen corn and melons. They enjoy seeing each other in difficulties. When a buck deer and the fat major are wrestling, Isam, a safe, happy ringsider, cries out:

> Stick ter 'im Mass Craffud, stick ter 'im! Hit's better fer one ter die den bofe! Hole 'im Mass Craffud.... Wo' deer! Stick ter 'im, Mass Craffud, steddy!

Tables are turned in "The Woodhaven Goat" when a goat, maddened by bees, butts and drags Isam all over the yard. From beneath the house, the Major

> looked out through tears with a sudden delight at the negro's predicament, sobbing and choking with emotion ... he frantically beat the dry soil about him with his fist for some moments. "Better for one to die than two.... Stick to him, Isam.... Whoa, goat!"

"Aeneas Africanus" (1920) humorously tells of a black Eneas, who confused by the duplication of town-names, covered 3350 miles through seven states, over a period of eight years, trying to get back to his quality whitefolks. Like his Major, Edwards seemed to have studied the Negro only on his amusing side. But he was willing to poke fun at some of the absurdities of the Old South, and his robust horseplay is a relief from sentimentality.

F. Hopkinson Smith. Few authors dealt with a rough-and-ready friendship between a swearing master and a none-too-obsequious slave in the manner of Edwards. More typical is the sentimental, genteel treatment of mutual affection as in *Colonel Carter of Cartersville* by F. Hopkinson Smith (1891), a portrait of a quixotic Virginia gentleman and his devoted servant, Chad. Chad exists only to prepare choice dishes of canvas-back duck and terrapin for his moneyless but epicurean master, to support the colonel's hospitality with his pitiful stored earnings, to be a bulwark against the harsh Yankee world, and to express his disdain for people who are "not quality." With his wife Henny, a similar model of loyalty, he furnishes comic relief and glorifies the "good old days." *Colonel Carter's Christmas* (1903) adds little to the characterization of the sentimental pair.

James Lane Allen. Sentimentalist and idealist, James Lane Allen could find little blemish in the antebellum South according to "Uncle Tom At Home in Kentucky", his refutation of Mrs. Stowe. "Two Gentlemen of Kentucky" (1888) tells of the great affection between a sweet Kentucky Colonel—so unworldly that when he runs a store he chivalrously gives away the wares—and his faithful servant, Peter Cotton. Peter is completely self-forgetful, but must be made ludicrous as well. His blue-jeans coat, with very long and

spacious tails, is embroidered with scriptural texts, the word "Amen" being located just "over the end of Peter's spine." The master's death is followed in a year by Peter's. The world after the Civil War was no fit place for these two, which is no great reflection, since too often they act like halfwits. In "King Solomon of Kentucky" (1891) a free Negro woman, who has made some money selling cakes and pies, buys a white vagabond on the block, because he was a friend of her dead Virginia master. The vagabond is regenerated and becomes the town hero in a cholera epidemic. The introduction of the auction block is almost unmatched in plantation tradition literature, but it is significant that a white man is the one sold from it.

Grace King and Kate Chopin. In resentment at Cable's attacks upon the plantation tradition, discussed in the next chapter, many southerners set up Grace King and Kate Chopin as more truthful observers of Louisiana. Undoubtedly both are more traditional. Few troubles fret the slaves in Grace King's stories, except in the case of octoroons who grieve that they are not white. "Monsieur Motte" tells of a Negro woman, Marcelite, who supports in a fashionable school the daughter of her dead mistress, pretending that money comes from a non-existent uncle, Monsieur Motte. In *Balcony Stories* (1893), Joe is likewise the devoted servant, begging to be sold because his master's widow is in need of money. "A Crippled Hope"

tells of a Negro girl, whose value as a nurse for sick slaves in the auction mart keeps her from being sold to "delicate ladies," whom she would have loved to serve. When freedom comes she does not want it; she only wants to succor the ailing. "The Little Convent Girl" is about a sad-faced girl, who is suddenly discovered to have a negro mother. The girl drowns, escaping her fate. Even at the age of twelve, a tragic octoroon! Negroes not octoroons have a merry time:

> And then what a rolling of barrels, and shouldering of sacks, and singing of Jim Crow Songs, and pacing of Jim Crow steps; and black skins glistening through torn shirts, and white teeth gleaming through red lips, and laughing, and talking ... bewildering, entrancing!

Kate Chopin was a sensitive, skillful teller of tales. Her *Bayou Folk* (1894) is a collection laid in and around Natchitoches Parish near Red River, of which she presents the local customs and patois admirably. But the Negroes she portrays are still models of loyalty and self-denial. In "A No Account Creole," La Chatte, a broad black mammy, is guardian over the love affairs of the white creoles. "In and Out of Old Natchitoches" shows a fiery plantation owner who for a time flouts the community taboo of consorting with mulattoes. "In Sabine" depicts Uncle Mortimer protecting a white woman who is abused by her hard drinking husband. "Beyond the Bayou" shows a gaunt, black woman overcoming her extreme fear of the bayou to carry home a little white child whom she loves. "The Benitou's Slave" pictures extreme devotion.

"Desirée's Baby", probably Mrs. Chopin's best known work, deals with a young creole husband and wife to whom is born a child who gives evidence of Negro blood. The outraged husband sends his wife away in disgrace. He then, discovers, through an old letter, that the Negro blood came from his own mother; she was thankful, she said, that her son would never know.

Of the numerous short stories defending the Old South space forbids more than mention of a selected few. Maurice Thompson in "Ben and Judas" (1889) wrote a good story of a mutual affection between owner and owned. In "The Balance of Power," Thompson has a crafty Negro, who walks on "bofe sides of de fence," managing it so that the young man wins the beautiful girl while her father is conceded the election. The story is inconsequential, but it does show the colonel winning political support by stating that his rival is supported by Negroes. Of a different type is "An Incident" by Sarah Barnwell Elliott, which dramatizes the terror at the "brute" Negro, and is concerned with "what answer the future would have for this awful problem."

Summary. Plantation tradition fiction of the Reconstruction added realism of speech and custom, but with few exceptions, this realism was subordinated to the purpose of showing the mutual affection between the races which the North had partly destroyed in a foolish war.

Negro characters, at their best, are shown only in relationship with kindly southern whites; at their worst, in relationship with predatory Yankees. They are never shown in relationship to themselves. They are confined to the two opposite grooves of loyalty or ingratitude. The authors, remembering their childhood when it is likely that they had Negro playmates as boon companions, made slavery a boyish romp. It was flattering to believe that their fathers and mothers were objects of universal love and worship. It was charming for a man accustomed to deference and submission to believe these to be ordained in heaven. It was uncomfortable to believe that irony, or shrewd appraisal could lurk behind the bland smile, the pull on the forelock, the low curtsey. Perish the thought! A kindly critic of the South paraphrases the legend:

> Way down upon the Suwanee River the sun shines bright on my old Kentucky home, where, bound for Louisiana, Little Eva has a banjo on her knee, and Old Black Joe, Uncle Remus and Miss Sally's little boy listen to the mocking-bird and watch a sweet chariot swing low one frosty mornin'. The gallant Pelham and his comrades bend forever over the hands of adorable girls in crinoline; under the duelling oaks Colonel Carter of Cartersville and Marse Chan blaze away at each other with pistols by the light of the silvery moon on Mobile Bay ...

And we might add: the happy slaves are forever singing in the beautiful fields of white cotton, and forever black mammies fondle their little marses and missies and exude love for all the rich folks in Dixie, and body servants rescue the perishing, care for the dying, serve their

beloved masters until death let them depart in peace, to serve in heaven, forever and ever.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was the earlier plantation tradition fiction less persuasive than that written in Reconstruction?

2. What were reasons why the "brute" Negro was seldom mentioned in antebellum fiction, and so frequently mentioned in Reconstruction?

3. What in the testimony of Page's three Uncles supports the fact that Virginia was a slave-breeding state?

4. Compare Harris and Page.

5. Why is Edwards closer to the "frontier humorists" than to Allen?

6. Since instances of mutual affection in slavery could undoubtedly be found, why should not literature celebrating it be considered a trustworthy guide to the Old South?

7. List the runaways and "bad Negroes" mentioned in this chapter, with the authors' characterizations of them.

8. Account for the absence of characters of mixed blood.

CHAPTER V

RECONSTRUCTION: THE NOT SO GLORIOUS SOUTH

Cable. Although he had served as an officer in the Confederate Cavalry, George Washington Cable was aware of much that was wrong in the old South and the new. His *The Silent South* and *The Negro Question* are antidotes to Page's dangerous drugs; against the convict lease system, for instance, Cable wrote with startling pertinence even for our own day. Cordially hated in the South, he took up residence in Massachusetts, but though in "exile" he kept close to his heart the best interests of his section.

Praised as the first southerner to include just and sympathetic recognition of the Negro, Cable portrays Negroes or the background of slavery in most of his novels. For our purposes *Old Creole Days* (1879) and *The Grandissimes* (1880) are most important. *Old Creole Days* re-creates, with vivid local color, early nineteenth century Louisiana. In "Posson Jone", a faithful servant outwits the sharpers who were preying upon his master; if the situation is old, the details are sharply observed. Less kindly pictures of slavery appear in "'Tite Poulette" and "Madame Delphine", stories of octoroons of a warm seductive beauty, cultivated with care so that they may be "protected" by some Louisiana

grandee. This “protection” does not keep tragedy from their lives, however. To these women, says Cable, “every white man in this country is a pirate.” Therefore, both mothers in these stories pretend that their daughters are not really theirs, in order that the girls may get around the law that rigorously forbade marriage of octoroons to “pure whites.” Bitterly acquainted with what faces her lovely daughter, Delphine cries out against the law “to keep the two races separate”: “A lie, Pere Jerome! Separate! No-o-o! They do not want to keep us separated; no, no! But they *do* want to keep us despised!”

In *The Grandissimes*, a long novel of old Louisiana, we have the background of slavery well worked in, and in the foreground, individualized Negro characters, far more convincing than the abolitionist victims. Outstanding is Honoré Grandissime, “free man of color,” educated, successful in business but an ineffectual victim of caste. Though true to New Orleans history, his type has been neglected in fiction for the more fascinating octoroon heroine. Palmyre is one of the best characterized octoroons in fiction.

> This woman had stood all her life with dagger drawn, on the defensive against what certainly was to her an unmerciful world.... And yet by inexorable decree, she belonged to what we used to call “the happiest people under the sun.” We ought to stop saying that.

Under domineering and insult, Palmyre is shown as silent; “and so,” says Cable,

"sometimes is fire in the wall." Clemence, illiterate and superstitious, has folk-shrewdness:

> You mus'n b'lieve all dis-yeh nonsense 'bout insurrectionin'; all fool-nigga talk. W'at we want to be insurrectionin' faw? We de happiest people in de God's worl'! Yes, we is; you jis oughteh gimme fawty an' lemme go! Please gen'lemen!

Her cunning does not help, however, in this drastic case; she is told to run, and is coolly shot, stone dead.

One of the most unusual figures is the gigantic Bras Coupé, captured king of the Jaloffs, a legendary figure with counterpart in Louisiana history. He is contemptuous of whites, and kills the Negro driver who first tells him to work. Driven to the swamps for striking down his master, he puts a curse on the plantation. When he is captured he is "hamstrung", in accordance with the *Code Noir*. When the name of his worst enemy falls upon his ears, even though dying, he spits upon the floor; when he is begged to forgive, he merely smiles. "God keep thy enemy from such a smile", says the author.

Cable's fiction shows full acquaintance with folk-songs, speech, lore and superstition, but unlike his contemporaries, Page and Harris, he does not use the material to support old traditions. He makes clear-eyed, telling observations on the South. A blow, punishable in a white offender by a small fine or conviction, assured Bras Coupé the death of a felon, by the old Code Noir.

(We have a Code Noir now, but the new one is a mental reservation, not an enactment).... The guests stood for an instant as if frozen, smitten stiff with the expectation of insurrection, conflagration and rapine (just as we do today whenever some poor swaggering Pompey rolls up his fist and gets a ball through his body)....

"It seems to be one of the self-punitive characteristics of tyranny, whether the tyrant be a man, a community, or a caste, to have a pusillanimous fear of its victims." But Cable does not over-idealize the Negro. He is sharp toward the mulatto caste—"the saddest slaves of all."

Your men, for a little property, and your women, for a little amorous attention let themselves be shorn even of the virtue of discontent.... I would rather be a runaway in the swamp than content myself with such a freedom.

Although Cable helped to establish the tragic mulatto stereotypes, his portraits of this caste are drawn from a specific situation in the past, more pronounced in New Orleans though widespread in the South. The stereotype has fascinated later writers who have fallen under Cable's charm. But they are without his information and sympathy, and are therefore less truthful. All in all, Cable is one of the finest creators of Negro character in the nineteenth century.

Twain. Like Cable, Twain was of southern birth and upbringing, and fought in the Confederate army (but for a short time only, in a spirit of horseplay, learning only how to retreat). The two men lectured together. Both had sympathies for the underdog and both attacked the sham chivalry of the South. Mark Twain

insisted that he was almost completely without race prejudice and that the color brown was "the most beautiful and satisfying of all the complexions vouchsafed to man." He loved the spirituals best among music. In his youth he grew up with slave boys as playmates; in his manhood he paid a Negro student's way through Yale, as "part of the reparation due from every white to every black man."

Twain's first treatment of Negroes in *The Gilded Age* (1873), however, is largely traditional, unlike "A True Story (Repeated Word For Word As I Heard It)" which is a bitter memory of cruelty and separation, contradicting Thomas Nelson Page's formula stories.

In *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) the callousness of the South to the Negro is indicated briefly, without preaching, but impellingly. Huck informs Aunt Sally that a steamboat blew out a cylinder head:

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky because sometimes people do get hurt...."

In this book Twain deepens the characterization of Jim, who, like Tom and Huck and the rest of that fine company, was drawn from life. He is no longer the simple-minded, mysterious guide in the ways of dead cats, doodle-bugs and signs of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Running away from old Miss Watson, who, though religious, "pecks on" him all the time, treats him "pooty rough" and wants a

trader's eight hundred dollars for him, Jim joins Huck on the immortal journey down the Mississippi. His talks enlivens the voyage. He is at his comic best in detailing his experience with high finance—he once owned fourteen dollars. But the fun is brought up sharp by Jim's

> Yes, en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn't want no mo'.

But he did want more. He wanted to get to a free state and work and save money so he could buy his wife, and then they would both work to buy their children, or get an abolitionist to go steal them. Huck is "frozen at such thoughts;" torn between what he had been taught was moral and his friendliness for an underdog. Jim is the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave (not the tragic mulatto or the noble savage), illiterate, superstitious, yet clinging to his hope for freedom, to his love for his own. And he is completely believable, whether arguing that Frenchman should talk like people, or doing most of the work on the raft, or forgiving Huck whose trick caused him to be bitten by a snake, or sympathizing with the poor little Dauphin, who, since America has no kings, "cain't git no situation." He tells of his little daughter, whom he had struck, not knowing she disobeyed because she had become deaf from scarlet fever:

> ... En all uv a sudden I says pow! jis' as loud as I could yell. She never budge! Oh, Huck, I bust out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, "Oh, de po' little

thing! De Lord God Almighty forgive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to forgive hisself as long's he live!" Oh, she was plumb deef en dumb, Huck, plum deef en dumb—en I'd been a-treatin' her so!

From the great tenderness and truth of this portrait *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), Twain's last novel concerning Negroes, falls a great way. In violent, ugly Dawson's Landing a fantastic tale is set. Roxana, only one-sixteenth Negro, a handsome earthy Amazon, is the mother of a son, Valet de Chambre, fathered by a gentleman of the F.F.V's. This baby was born on the same day as her master's son, Thomas à Becket Driscoll, and looks exactly like him. In order to save the baby from slavery, Roxy exchanges the two. The boys grow up with their positions reversed; the false Valet is ruined by slavery, and Tom, ruined by pampering, becomes a liar, coward, gambler, thief and murderer. In desperate straits, he tricks his mother and sells her down the river. Although Tom's character could be attributed to a rigid caste system that granted excessive power to petty people, Twain leaves many readers believing that he agrees with Roxy who, astounded by her son's worthlessness, muttered: "Ain't nigger enough in him to show in his finger-nails, en dat takes mighty little, yit dey's enough to paint his soul." Twain has little good to say for slavery in this book. Roxy's terror of being sold "down the river," and her experiences there under a vicious Yankee overseer are grimly realistic. Roxy is a first-rate preliminary sketch. By no means faultless, a petty thief and a liar, she

is capable of sacrifice, and has intelligence, pride, and courage. If Twain had spent more time in developing her portrait, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* would have been a better novel.

Humorists. One of those humorists whose misspellings and satiric temper pleased Abraham Lincoln, Petroleum V. Nasby (David Ross Locke), wrote *Nasby: Divers Views, Opinions and Prophecies* (1866) and *Ekkoes From Kentucky* (1868), both showing post-war attitudes to the Negro. Pretending to be a Copperhead postmaster, Nasby reveals himself as an ignorant, besotted politician, forever dragging in the race question for personal gain. Some of Nasby's shafts could well be used at southern rabble-rousers today. Nasby shows how the cry of Negro domination and amalagmation rose whenever the slightest effort was made for justice to the freedmen. Severely satirical of southern chivalry, Nasby shows the white daughters of John Guttle, a gentleman of Mobile, fighting against their Negro half-sisters over their father's tomb, and concludes that "there wuz some disadvantages attending the patriarkle system." To those who saw the Negro as unfit for freedom he wrote:

> Three hundred niggers ... wuz wrencht from paternal care to starve, which the most uv 'em are industriously doin' at about $3 per day.

He advises the legislatures to forbid Negroes to leave their country, and then to pass laws setting up a maximum wage for Negroes of five dollars a month. Thousands of Negroes will

then die by midwinter and the rest will beg to be reenslaved.

> We kin ... pint 2 their bodies and say in a sepulkered tone: 'Wen niggers wuz wuth $1500, they wuz not allowed to die thus—behold the froots uv Ablishun philanthropy.'

For all of his burlesque, Nasby saw clearly and prophesied sanely. A whole school of southern writers came along and did in dead earnest what he had counselled in bitter jest.

Samantha On The Race Problem by Marietta Holley counsels colonization even so late as 1892, recounts the tragedies of a few superior mulattoes, and most important, shows the Florida Ku Klux Klan at its work of burning schools and terrorizing Negroes who were forging ahead.

Northern Novelists. John William DeForest's realistic novels of the South immediately after the Civil War, *Miss Ravenal's Conversion From Secession to Loyalty* (1867) and *Kate Beaumont* (1872), contain minor Negro characters, but these are generally typical. In 1867, Rebecca Harding Davis wrote the dramatic, sympathetic *Waiting For The Verdict*, the first novel to deal with the dilemma of the fair Negro who attains a superior position without being suspected of having Negro blood. Constance Fenimore Woolson's short stories of the South, written in the eighties, have been praised for their sane balance. In "Rodman The Keeper" she describes with sympathy the freedmen—bent, dull-eyed and ignorant, singing

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot" on their way to the graves of Federal Soldiers "who had done something wonderful for them and their children." Generally, however, Miss Woolson is irritated by the freedmen, reserving her liking for those who are traditionally loyal to their white-folks, and seeing little in "the glories of freedom" except the "freedom to die." "King David" shows a Northern educator who gives up in the face of "universal, irresponsible ignorance." Miss Woolson recognizes the shiftlessness and chauvinism of the planter class, but keeps her sharpness for the "misguided and untimely idealism" of northerners. She tries so hard to be just to the fallen ex-planter that she is less than just to the rising ex-slaves. In these grievous times, the second stood in the greater need of justice.

Tourgée. Albion Tourgée differed from Miss Woolson sharply in his discoveries. He had a good chance for observation. He was an officer in the Union Army, and after the war remained in North Carolina as a judge. If he is a typical example of a carpetbagger, then his class has met with grave underestimation. He was thoughtful, considerate, courageous and honest. Like Miss Woolson, he recognized the gravity of the problem facing the South. Unlike her, however, he did not believe that the problem existed only because the freedmen were irresponsible, ignorant and unready for citizenship. He had seen too often what she omitted from her picture: the

mob violence of the Regulators and the Ku Klux Klan, the determination to restore slavery, the ostracism of the "misguided" school teachers, the burning of the schools. He was a humane man, and he could not hold his peace. But he spoke on the unpopular side, and today he is barely mentioned in histories of American literature.

A Fool's Errand, by "One of the Fools" (1879), is largely autobiographical, and has been called "The Uncle Tom's Cabin of Reconstruction." Colonel Servosse, an officer of the Federal Army, took up residence in the South, foolishly believing that, with the end of the war, the North-South hostility would end. He soon learns better; for lending aid to Negroes in need he is called a "nigger lover," for making a speech urging justice to Negroes he barely escapes being horsewhipped. Yankee schoolmarms are insulted. When northern troops are withdrawn, terrorization of Negroes quickly follows. A Union League organizer is killed by the Klan, which is composed of prominent southerners. Negroes are shown hard at work, struggling to make their living, enthusiastically welcoming schools, lurking about the edges of crowds at political meetings, listening intently to the speeches, or organizing for protection. In a section hotly intent that there shall be no "nigger witnesses, no nigger juries, no nigger voters," all of this is insolence and insult.

Jerry is the type of uncle not before met with in American fiction. He is religious and

devoted to Servosse, not out of loyalty of slave to master, but out of gratitude that Servosse was helping his people to true freedom. Jerry has his dignity; when whites ridicule his church services he says:

> An' when you all laughs at us, we can't help tinkin' dat we mout a done better ef we hadn't been kep' slaves all our lives by you uns.

But in one of his sermons, he tells too much about the Klan's most recent murder, and he is swung from a tree to prove that "It don't do fer niggers to know too much." Another different Negro is the blacksmith, Bob Martin, who makes such a good living that he becomes a marked man for the night riders. He scornfully ridicules the superstition that the Klan is ghostly, showing his scarred back as proof of the Klan's "humanity." He tells a shocking story of his own beating, the abuse of his wife and daughter, the death of his baby, and the destroying of his home, all supposed to teach him to be more respectful of white folks and less anxious to vote for radicals. Bob is of the stuff of heroes, however; he was in the Union Army at Fort Wagner, and he doggedly swears that "ef dere's any mo' Kluckers raidin' roun' Burke's Corner, dar'll be some funerals too." Later editions of *A Fool's Errand* included documentary evidence of the sinister workings of the Klan, a key to the truth something like the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The title *A Fool's Errand* lays blame only on the folly of rash hopes for improvement in the

South, not on the effort to get justice. *Bricks Without Straw* (1880) is a more developed attempt to show the desperate problem, to prove that without support from the rest of the country, those few who were struggling were "making bricks without straw." Nimbus, the outstanding Negro character, is uneducated, but he fought in the Civil War, and is a man of courage and good, hard sense. Industrious and thrifty, he is disliked by the whites because he has a good house, a tobacco barn, a fine crop and valuable stock, and a church and schoolhouse on his place. He adds to these injuries the insult of wanting pay for his wife's services, and schools and the vote for all of his people. When the Klansmen, among whom are many aristocrats—"the freedmen's best friends"—come after him, Nimbus, aided by his wife Lugena, who fights with an axe, resists fiercely, and finally gets away. Returning years later, broken in health but not in spirit after experiencing riots, peonage and prison camps, Nimbus will not stay, but leads an exodus to Kansas. Elijah Hill, the schoolteacher, and Berry Lawson, good-natured avoider of trouble, but wily and loyal to Nimbus, are interesting minor figures.

Tourgée's other books on the Negro are not so valuable as these. *A Royal Gentleman* (1881), written earlier as *Toinette*, is pretentious, with a crowded plot. Mabel, mother of Toinette, is crazed by her unhappy life as the mistress of a white slave owner, and tries to

murder those who would inflict upon her daughter the same fate. But Toinette, a refined olive-skinned beauty, is in love with, and beloved by her owner. Since he is a "royal gentleman," marriage cannot take place, and tragedy follows. The characters are idealized, and the incidents far-fetched. *Hot Plowshares* (1883) is a historical novel on the state of the nation preceding the Civil War. Great attention is paid to the rise of antislavery sentiment and the Underground Railroad. *Pactolus Prime* (1890) shows the economic hardships faced by Negroes in Washington, D. C. Pactolus is the father of a girl whom he disclaims in order that she may live as white, may be lifted "from shame to honor." Upon her discovery of the real truth, she takes the vows as Sister Pactola, and dedicates her life to her race. The story is not completely convincing, but Tourgee again reveals himself as well conversant with problems faced by Negroes. These novels have more argument than characters in action, but the argument is what has been too easily forgotten today.

Hearn. To Lafcadio Hearn the southern novel was "gushy-floriated English—written in bad taste, wishy-washy trash." With his sympathy for the underdog, strengthened by his connection with the quadroon Althea Foley, he admired Cable's defense of the Negro. Nevertheless, Hearn did not censure the South openly. He held stock beliefs such as that the Negro would disappear in freedom—"dependent

like the ivy, he needs some strong oak-like friend to cling to"—and that it was only the mulatto influence that made slaves unmanageable. Always attracted by the unusual and picturesque, Hearn became an authority on Louisiana lore, making friends with the *bonnes vielles negresses*, who sold homemade sweetmeats in New Orleans, and the mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau. But the teeming levees come to life only in sketches like "Dolly, an Idyl of the Levee" and "Banjo Jim's Story" (1876). In the West Indies Hearn was struck by the "appetizing golden bodies of the Martinique Quadroons, sensuous but childlike," gossiped with the washerwomen and treasured their soft slurring talk; and watched

> the *porteuses* on their way to market in the early morning, huge baskets of fruit and vegetables balanced on their heads, their skirts tucked into a belt in front, showing the shapely muscled bronze of their legs, as they walked with all the lithe feline grace of some wild animal.

Youma, "La Giablesse" and "Un Ravenant" are good fiction of the West Indies, but the wealth of Hearn's sensitive observation appears in his travel reporting. He was better in describing settings than in presenting character.

Howells. The serious phase of Negro life that William Dean Howells thought worthy of inclusion in his canvas of the American scene was the age-worn tragedy of the octoroon. In *An Imperative Duty* (1892), Rhoda, the beautiful daughter of a northern physician and an accomplished octoroon, bore no evidence of Negro blood. On the eve of her marriage, she is

told her lineage by her duty-bound aunt. Later, passing for an Italian and happily married to a man who is undisturbed by her lineage, she is still wretched at her "disgrace." The novel is sympathetic, but there were graver, less romantic problems of Negro life that a novelist of Howells' scope and ability might have presented.

Negro Novelists. Two Negro authors who had given their best energies to the antislavery struggle turned to fiction in the post-Civil War years. William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home* (1880) included sketches of southern Negro folklife, before the successes of Page and Harris. Frances Harper, whose antislavery poetry was popular, now defended her race in *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Iola, granddaughter of a Creole planter, has the experiences usual to fiction of the beautiful "white slave." She is kept ignorant of her race, and educated in the North. When her white father's marriage to her quadroon mother is called illegal, she is sold as a slave. After indignities in slavery, she is rescued, and serves as a nurse in a Civil War hospital. She rejects the love of a white New England physician, who, though knowing her race, wishes to marry her. With her brothers and long-lost uncle, all of whom refuse to "pass for white," she dedicates herself to her people. The book is "uplifting" but is far from convincing in incident, speech, and characterization. Iola is another of the octoroon heroines too angelic for acceptance. Some of the

minor characters are better, but they cannot redeem the novel.

Dunbar. Dunbar has aptly described the typical setting for his fiction:

> Happy Hollow.... Wherever Negroes colonize in the cities or villages, North or South, wherever the hod-carrier, the porter, and the waiter are the society men of the town; wherever the picnic and the excursion are the chief summer diversion, and the revival the winter-time of repentance.... Wherever laughter and tears rub elbows by day, and the spirit of labour and laziness shake hands, there—there—is Happy Hollow.

In Old Plantation Days (1903) repeats the Thomas Nelson Page formula. Negro house servants comically ape the "quality," or intervene in lovers' quarrels, or in duels between cavaliers. One slave deceives his beloved master into believing that the good times of slavery still prevail. The planters, highbred and chivalrous, and the slaves, childish and devoted, rival each other in affection and sacrifice. These anecdotes of slavery, but a step above minstrel jokes, are all too happy for words, and too happy for truth.

The harshness of Reconstruction and of Dunbar's own time is likewise conventionally neglected in his other volumes of short stories: *Folks From Dixie* (1898), *The Strength of Gideon* (1900), and *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904). Freedmen discover that after all their best friends are their kindly ex-masters. In "Nels Hatton's Revenge," an upstanding Negro gives his hard-earned money and best clothes to his destitute master, who had abused him when a

slave. The venality of Reconstruction politicians, which certainly existed, is satirized; but the gains of Reconstruction, which certainly exist, are understressed. Probably with due cause, Dunbar feared the rising poor-whites; therefore, like many Negro spokesmen of the period, he idealized the ex-planter class, the "aristocrats," *without* due cause.

Dunbar's fiction veers away from anything more serious than laughter or gentle tears. "At Shaft 11" shows the difficulties of Negro strikebreakers; but, afraid of organized labor, Dunbar idealized owners, operators, and staunchly loyal Negro workers who get to be foremen, thus carrying over the plantation tradition formula into the industrial scene. "The Ordeal at Mt. Hope" faces the loose-living of a "Happy Hollow," and then is lost in sentimental compromise. Dunbar wrote two stories of lynching, "The Lynching of Jule Benson" and the unusually ironic "The Tragedy at Three Corners." But Dunbar usually places the hardships of Negro life in the city, as in "Jimsella," with pastoral distrust of the city and faith in rural virtue. Fast livers, quacks, politicians and hypocritical race leaders are occasionally attacked.

The Sport of the Gods (1902), Dunbar's most ambitious novel, is the only one that is chiefly about Negroes. The first of the book is trite, but the latter section, though confused and melodramatic, has a grimness that Dunbar

seldom showed. Berry, the innocent victim of a degenerate white man's crime in the South, and his family, the victim of hostile New York, are treated somewhat in the manner of Hardy's tragic laughing-stocks. The book has serious weaknesses, but it gives promise that Dunbar, but for his untimely death, might have become a prose writer of power. Judged by his accomplishment, however, Dunbar in fiction must be considered as one who followed the leader, not as a blazer of new trails.

Chesnutt. Charles Waddell Chesnutt, however, deserves to be called a pioneer. Writing to counter charges such as those made by Page in *Red Rock*, Chesnutt is the first to speak out uncompromisingly, but artistically, on the problems facing his people. One careful critic has stated that Chesnutt "was the first Negro novelist, and he is still the best," and another has said that his books contain early drafts of about all of the recent Negro novels.

In Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, seven tales based upon Negro superstitions, Uncle Julius recalls Uncle Remus and Page's Uncle Billy, but differs from them in his craftiness. He tells his stories not merely to entertain, or to bewail the beautiful past, toward which he is ironic, but to gain his point in the present. His dialect is worked out in great detail, but is not so readable as that of Uncle Remus. There is good local color throughout, and some interesting characters emerge.

The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line (1899) deals mainly with problems of race. The title story tells of a successful Negro in Groveland (Cleveland), the "dean" of the "Blue-Veins," who, on the eve of his engagement to a beautiful widow, theatrically acknowledges a little old black woman who had been his wife in slavery days and had helped him to freedom. A Negro mother denies her octoroon daughter in order for her to marry a New Englander of Mayflower lineage in "Her Virginia Mammy," a story like Cable's "Madame Delphine" but less convincing and gripping. In "The Sheriff's Children" a mulatto prisoner, falsely accused of murder, is defended from a mob by a sheriff who turns out to be his father. Desperate and cynical, the son is about to kill his father to escape when he is shot by the sheriff's daughter. In "The Web of Circumstance" a Negro blacksmith, falsely accused of stealing a whip, is sentenced to five years in the penitentiary on the same day that a white murderer is sentenced to one year. "The Passing of Grandison" shows a cunning slave, pretending to despise the abolitionist North, returning to his "understanding" master. He does so, however, only to manage the escape of all his kith and kin. "A Matter of Principle" satirizes the color line within the race: Clayton, an uppercrust near-white Negro, who "declined to associate with black people," pretends that his house is quarantined in order to keep a black

Congressman from calling on his daughter. The Congressman turns out to be a mulatto, "well worthy" of Clayton's daughter.

The House Behind the Cedars (1900), Chesnutt's first novel, is concerned likewise with the color line. Rena, another octoroon heroine, is insulted by whites and oppressed by her mother and a mulatto suitor. Honorable devotion comes to her only through an upstanding black hero, but this cannot forestall her pathetic death. *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), less conventional, is better. White characters range from the aristocratic General Delamere to his debauched grandson Tom; Major Carteret, demagogue for white supremacy; and McBane, ex-slave driver who knows one solution: "Burn the nigger." Negro characters range from Dr. Miller, a skillful physician, to the militant Josh Green; the loyal Sandy, and Jerry, a "white man's nigger." Sandy is framed for a murder in the first part of the book. A bloody riot, based on the one at Wilmington, N. C., is described in the second part. The white demagogues whip up the mob to fury, because a Negro newspaper has denounced lynching. Josh Green, who is willing to die rather than be shot down like a dog, who puts aside "fergetfulness and fergiveness," leads the aroused Negroes, when the upper-class Negroes believe that nothing can be done. The novel closes, however, on a note of forgetting and forgiving: Dr. Miller, whose own child was killed in the riot, goes to the home of his wife's white half-

sister, to save her child with his very great medical skill. With all of its melodrama, the story has power; badly plotted, it still tells a great deal about social life in the South. Chesnutt idealizes some Negro characters, but candidly faces the weaknesses in others. Most important, however, is his going beneath the surface to social causes.

Chesnutt's last novel was *The Colonel's Dream*. Colonel French, an ex-Confederate officer of "family," dreams of resurrecting his native section and bringing it into the ways of prosperity and justice. As in so many novels of the time, his dream is not realized. He has opposed to him William Fetters, convict labor contractor, mortgage shark and political boss, together with the reactionary traditions and the inertia of the South. When the casket of his aged Negro slave, who had given his life for the Colonel's son, is dug up from the family burial plot and placed on his porch with a K.K.K. warning that the color line must continue even in death, he sees that his crusade is doomed. After this novel Chesnutt fell into an almost unbroken silence. Perhaps he felt the doom of his own crusade to bring about justice.

Whether he was pessimistic about his crusade or not, his achievements in fiction were worthy. Answering propaganda with propaganda, he might be expected to have certain faults. He was overinclined to the melodramatic, to mistaken identity, to the lost document turning up at the right or wrong moment, to the nick of time

entrance. His characters are generally idealized or conventional. His "better class Negroes" speak too literary a language and are generally unbelievable models in behavior. Although attacking the color line within the race, he makes great use of the hero or heroine of mixed blood, and at times seems to accept the traditional concepts of Negro character. Even so, however, his characters stand nearer to the truth than those of Thomas Page or Thomas Dixon; he does not force them into only two grooves. There is no gainsaying his knowledge of the southern scene, or of the Negro upper class in northern cities. Unlike Dunbar he is opposed to the plantation tradition, sharply critical of southern injustice, and aware of the sinister forces at work in Reconstruction. Deploring the abuses of that era, he still sees, like Tourgée, that the story of a South victimized by carpet-baggers and scalawags is only a convenient half-truth. He gives high praise to the Yankee schoolmasters and schoolmarms who swarmed over Dixie to lift a second bondage from the freedmen. He shows exploitation, riots and lynching mobs, as well as the more refined exercising of prejudice. Often pompous and roundabout, in the manner of his times, he nevertheless knew how to hold a reader's interest. We must concede that he was melodramatic in plotting, but evidences of a skillful master's hand can still be found. He knew a great deal, and all things considered, he told it well.

Summary. Deriving somewhat from the abolitionists, the best of the authors of this chapter attacked the plantation tradition, but with the sharper weapons of the growing realism. Twain's Jim and Roxana, Tourgée's Nimbus, Chesnutt's Josh Green, and even Cable's Bras Coupé and Madame Delphine (though they belong to a nearly legendary past) are far more convincing than Uncle Tom, Topsy and Hildreth's Archy Moore. Unlike their more popular contemporaries who defended the plantation tradition, these authors, at a risk, recorded the injustice that Negroes met with everywhere in "the tragic era." They knew that worshipful house-servants or depraved freedmen were not the sole actors in the story, and as lovers of truth and justice they wanted the full story told.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was Cable considered untrue to the Old South?

2. In what respects is Bras Coupe unusual in fiction about Negroes?

3. Compare the octoroons in antislavery novels with those in novels by Cable, Twain, and Tourgée.

4. Since Twain characterizes Jim as superstitious and illiterate, how can Twain be considered sympathetic?

5. Why are Hearn's beliefs about Negroes termed "stock"?

6. Compare William Wells Brown's *Clotel* with Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*.

7. Compare Dunbar and Chesnutt.

8. What new characters appear in this chapter?

CHAPTER VI
OLD PATHS

Beautiful, Amusing Servitude. In the early twentieth century, under the influence of Thomas Nelson Page, a legion of writers wept over the vanished glory of the old plantation and presented Negroes of extreme devotedness to their masters. One writer in her book of sketches grieved:

> Aunt Phebe, Uncle Tom, Black Mammy, Uncle Gus, Aunt Jonas, Uncle Isom, and all the rest—who shall speak all your virtues or enshrine your simple faith and fidelity? It is as impossible as it is to describe the affection showered upon you by those whom you called 'Marster and Missis.'

Impossible though it may have been, countless authors attempted it, turning back time in its flight to sweetness and splendor that belong to another world than this.

Of the short stories in abundance that idealized the Negro, *in his place*, a few examples must serve. Betty Reynolds Cobb, in "The Coward" shows little Nemi conquering his great fears, and facing a raging torrent in order to get a doctor for "li'l Missy." (Cf. Kate Chopin's "Beyond The Bayou.") In Will Harben's "The Sale of Uncle Rastus", a nearly dead slave shams perfect health in order to fetch a better price for his bankrupt owner. His heroism reconciles his beloved master to an estranged brother, who bids two thousand dollars for him. "Dem boys done

made up, en I fotch two thousand dollars! Whooee!" croaks Uncle Rastus at death's door. "Abram's Freedom," by Edna Turpin, shows Emmaline, who has struggled to buy her husband's freedom, saying: "Me an' Abram ain't got nothin' to do in dis worl' but to wait on you an' master." These are merely duplicates of stories by more talented Reconstruction authors, with names and settings changed. Their authors have little to say, but say it over and over.

Ruth McEnery Stuart rises a notch above these. Although she glorified the past in *The River's Children* (1903) most of her work was local color of the deep South. In such works as *Napoleon Jackson* (1902), *George Washington Jones* (1903) and *The Second Wooing of Salina Sue* (1905), Negro life in the picturesquely shabby towns is quaint and droll, an unending source of mirth and satisfaction for the white-folks. Napoleon Jackson, the gentleman of the plush rocker, whose mother swore that he should never lay hand to a plow, worships old Marse and is therefore charming in Mrs. Stuart's sight. His wife Rose Ann, a visionary, is astonished that people pity Negroes since "we see mo'n white folks sees." Marital difficulties and burlesques of Negro church services furnish much of the drollery. Salina Sue, forced to marry her common-law husband, speaks of her fifteen-year old daughter: "Hit'll be a mighty good an' 'ligious thing for her to remember in after-years.

Tain't every yo'ng gal dat kin ricollec' her pa an' ma gittin' married."

Better known writers preserving the tradition include the gifted Sarah Orne Jewett, whose *The Mistress of Sydenham Plantation* is like Constance Woolson's *East Angels* in showing a northern woman's respect for a servant's loyalty; Frank Stockton, who turned his facile invention to the Negro in *The Cloverfield's Carriage* and *The Late Mrs. Null*; and Booth Tarkington who invests the old picture with charm in *Penrod and Sam*. All of these are superior writers to such southern writers as Mrs. Burton Harrison, Opie Read and Marion Harland, but they give no new interpretation. Some authors, like Virginia Frasel Boyle in *Devil Tales* (1900), followed Harris into the fertile field (and the wilderness) of folklore. Ed Mott's *The Black Homer of Jim Town* (1900) is a collection of folk tales from the Cape Fear country of North Carolina. Most of them are trite. Slavery is remembered as a good time, and in one of the tallest of the tales, a Negro in the Federal army arrives at the battle just in time to intercept a bullet intended for his Confederate master, in whose arms he dies.

Women writers of the South have been particularly attracted to literary exercises about the legendary chivalry, the perfect masters and slaves. In their prefaces, they seem to consider it their duty to "interpret the Negro race" and to lecture upon the modern Negro's deficiencies.

Among these might be mentioned Emma Speed Sampson for *Mammy's White Folks* (1919) and *Miss Minerva On The Old Plantation* (1923); Jane Baldwin Cotton for *Wall-Eyed Caesar's Ghost* (1925) and Virginia McCormick for *Charcoal and Chalk* (1931). Pity for "the child who never had a fat, brown mammy with elastic lap and warm enfolding arms," alternates with beaming appreciation of happy-hearted pickaninnies living an endless picnic. "A real understanding of our colored people" generally amounts to having great fun out of them. The dialect is often carefully recorded, but the Negroes say about the same things that Page had them say long ago, to flatter their white-folks and to make them laugh.

Although willing to poke gentle fun at his native South, O. Henry kept to its old tradition about Negro character. Uncle Bushrod in "The Guardian of The Accolade", remembering Miss Lucy's words for Marse Robert: "a little child but my knight, pure and fearless and widout reproach," prevents Robert from absconding with what he thinks to be the cash of the bank, but what turns out to be two quarts of old silk velvet Bourbon. "The Fourth in Salvador" has a

> buck coon from Georgia who had drifted down there from a busted-up colored colony that had been started on some possumless land in Mexico. As soon as he heard us say barbecue he wept for joy and groveled on the ground.

"The Emancipation of Billy" has an ancient body-servant, Old Jeff, a member of "de

fambly," who despises "Yankee rascality enduring' the war," speaking "de fambly's" language *to a T*. "A Municipal Report" shows a faithful Negro coachman, Uncle Caesar, who supports his impoverished mistress, and kills her worthless husband (a professional southerner) for robbing her. A master of surprises, O. Henry has no surprises for us when he handles Negro characters. They belong to an endless line.

Irvin Cobb and The Professional Humorists. Irvin Cobb, whom some consider heir to the roving shoes of O. Henry, once had a favorite character declaim: "I ain't no problem, I'se a pusson. I craves to be so reguarded." But when Cobb regards Jeff Poindexter, he sees little more than a loyal and ridiculous servant, who says the right things. Jeff advises a white moving picture producer as follows:

> Ef you kin git hold of a crowd of cullid actors w'ich is willin' to ack lak the sho'nuff ole time cullid an' not lak onbleached imitations of w'ite folks, it seems lak to me the rest of it oughter be plum easy. Mostly I'd mek the pitchers comical, ef I wuz you. You kin do 'at an' still not hurt nobody's feelin's, w'ite nur black. Ef you wants to perduse a piece showin' a lot of niggers gittin' skinned, let it be another nigger w'ich skins em.... Then, w'en at the last, they gits even wid him it'll still be nigger ag'inst nigger. An' ef, oncet in awhile, you meks a kind of serious pitcher ... 'at ought to fetch there yere new-issue cullid folks w'ich is seemingly become so plentiful up Nawth. But mainly I'd stick to the laffin' line ef I wuz you. An' whatever else you does, don't mess wid no race problem.

Irvin Cobb takes Jeff's advice, fondly affectionate toward the "old time cullid," derisive of the new-issue "onbleached imitations of w'ite folks," unwilling to hurt the feelings of any of his large white audience. As a result, his books such as *J. Poindexter, Colored* and those about Old Judge Priest rise little above the joke-book level when dealing with Negroes, in spite of Cobb's undoubted knowledge of his native Kentucky. McBlair's *Mister Fish Kelly* (1924) is similarly traditional, with some surface truth to comic elements in Negro life, but too set upon tickling America.

But that is a well paying business, as such writers as Hugh Wiley, Arthur Akers, Octavus Roy Cohen and E. K. Means have discovered. Belonging to light entertainment literature, their stories would hardly deserve serious attention, were it not for their undoubted social influence. With situations ranging from the improbable to the unreal, the comedy, the farce are not "pure," but are mixed all up with propaganda for Negro inferiority and subordination. These authors stem from Page and the Reconstruction: although they stress the comical, they likewise urge the mutual affection between funny Negroes and their fine white-folks, and bear witness to the sunny life of the South. Guy Johnson has written that there is a sort of

> folk attitude of the white man toward the Negro.... He must have his fun out of the Negro, even when writing serious novels about him.

How much more fun the professional marketmen of humor have out of the Negro is apparent when one reads the stories of Wiley, Akers, and Cohen, to name only three who write for wide circulation magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and the *Red Book*. With the help of the radio, these family magazines see to it that there is a comic Negro in every middle class home.

Hugh Wiley in the twenties presented Wildcat, inseparable from Lady Luck, his unsavory goat. Like O. Henry, Wiley uses outrageous metaphors, but one does not have to believe the language to be Negro merely because it is amusing. Pet expressions are such as "crematized or secluded in de ground" for burial rites, "paraphernalia of chance" for dice, and other minstrel joke-book relics. The humor is broad, concerned with perspiring three-hundred pound black Amazons, "battling brunettes," a goat outsmelling creation, whose butting causes Wildcat to "skid over the curb in a pose which cost his army pants half of their seating capacity." Wildcat is a "champion ration battler," barely making it on four meals a day, lazy except at the irresistible crap game, where he wins fabulous sums with other-worldly luck. Characters are named Miss Cuspidora Lee, Vitus Marsden, Honey Tone, Dwindle Daniels, Punic Hunter, Presidump Ham Grasty, Festus Roach. There are many jobs (generally unwelcome) and a great deal of money and food in circulation; the

law is loud-mouthed but gentle; things are "hotsy-totsy" down in Dixie, Lady Luck and the whitefolks will see to that. It all strives very hard, but it could be more amusing.

Of these professionally funny men, Octavus Roy Cohen is probably most widely known and industrious. Cohen and his large following are entranced by the comedy of what Cobb called "onbleached imitations of white folks." The idea of Negro doctors, lawyers, bankers, movie-magnates and society belles in Birmingham is too funny, but not too funny for words. Some of his annual books are *Assorted Chocolates* (1922), *Dark Days and Black Knights* (1923), *Bigger and Blacker* (1925), *Black and Blue* (1926) and *Highly Colored* (1921). All are highly colored: he names his characters Orifice Latimer, Callous Deech, Magnolius Ricketts, Excelsior Nix, Forcep Swain, Exotic Hines, Unit Smith, Jasper De Vord, Chromo Bridal and Atlas Brack. His dialect is one unheard on land or sea: "Got to ain't has got;" "I ain't sawn her right recent;" "Does anybody discover that I ain't you, you is suddenly gwine to become ain't;" "salisfried, straduced, light bombastic, applicatin, foolisment; oh, whoa is me!" The plots and counterplots generally turn around the axis of money or love; the honest hero defeats the slickers, the boy gets the girl. Florian Slappey, in Harlem, is fleeced in the cold winter by two Harlem number men, but the happy ending is

usual. The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, The Enter Paradise In Style Life and Death Sassiety, and The Over The River Buryin' Sassiety figure prominently. There seems to be a great deal of money in Negro Birmingham, but when Cohen speaks of a Negro star being paid one hundred dollars a week by a Negro movie company, he reveals his myth-making powers. One of Cohen's recent heroes, Epic Peters, is a pompously talking Pullman porter, proud of his service to "quality white folks" whom he can tell at a glance, happy, amusing, and about as real as his speech: "Goodness, goshness, Miss Agness, Mr. Foster—I suttinly thought I was gwine see you become ain't."

Arthur K. Akers' world is less unreal, but equally droll. Jeff thus explains his connubial woes:

> Hit's on account of me bein' weak in de'rithmetic. Dat's huccome I cain't ricollect is I got two weddin's and three d'voces, or three weddin's an' two d'voces. Emmline come in dar somewhar.

Akers has a fondness for names like Shakespeare Shackleford, Columbus Collins, Aspirin Edwards and Halfportion. His intricate plots invariably end happily for the dull-witted, inept heroes such as Gladstone Smith who is "numb from the neck up." Ipecac Ignalls, looking like "something dark that had been left under a tent—an orange-colored tent with LIFE GUARD lettered across it" does not know how to swim, but he saves the life of a belle by letting her stand on him while he is on the bottom of the pool

drowning. Other comedy is furnished by lodge-life and financial high-jinks performed by the Worthymost Master Samson Bates and Horace Tombs, who are Get Rich Quick Wallingfords in blackface.

E. K. Means, whose stories were collected in volumes called *E. K. Means*, *More E. K. Means*, and *Further E. K. Means*, insists that he wrote out of a whimsical fondness for the Negro "to whom God has given two supreme gifts—Music and Laughter." He seems to agree with one of his white characters, however, that the Negro "has a one-cylinder mind and a smoky spark-plug." Nigger-Heel Plantation, Hen Scratch Saloon, Shoofly Methodist Church, Tickfall and Dirty Six are treated with a mixture of true local color and far-fetched tom-foolery. The characters have ludicrous names like Whiffletree Bone, Limit Lark, Vakey Vopp, Dazzle Zenor, Coco Ferret, Ready Rocket, Vinegar Atts, Skeeter Butts. Means attacks conventional dialect, yet he makes use of invented phrases: "explavacatin", "permittunce," "coming wid a looseness," "de orgies" (for church services), "ax her inquirement," "ain't right in her intellectuals," "I warn't studyin' how to save by grace; I was ponderin' how to save my grease." Means regrets that the good life lived by these naïve villagers is departing; "Ethiopia is stretching out her hands after art, science, literature and wealth," Negroes are becoming "play-like white folks." He wishes to leave a record of the "sable sons of laughter

and song, in Fiction's beautiful temple of dreams." The laughter, however, is chiefly the haw-hawing of the white folks; the dreams are practical jokes. Something of the sinister and ugly is recognized; Negroes at their Uplift League election wrench legs off of tables in a free-for-all, shot-guns and razors are frequently used, but the picture remains quaint and comical. In almost every story we have panic-stricken Negroes "skedaddling," their "ponderous feet beating a wild tattoo of panicky retreat upon the sodded turf;" oddly enough, one cause for fright never mentioned is a southern mob.

These authors contrive a rapid-fire dialogue, now near to life (as in Akers) and now to the minstrel show (as in Cohen). The white folks are tolerant, until tenants burn the porches off their homes, or servants mix up affairs too much, when they wax comically profane. The Negroes are superstitious, helpless, cowardly, utterly ridiculous children. Life is easy and indolent except for shrewish wives and scheming crooks; the razors do not cut, the scantlings used by white masters on their menials never hurt, since they strike the head, and the "law" is only a mythical threat. What could be pathos and tragedy sets off laughter. The settings are supposed to be found in Demopolis or Birmingham or other southern cities, but they belong to a *never-never*, cloud-cuckoo land. All in all these stories reveal far less of Negro life

and character than of middle class American taste.

The Rising Tide of Color. But there were others who took the Negro in dead earnest. Negroes were becoming educated, getting property, leaving the South, and asking for civil rights; they constituted, therefore, a menace. Southern civilization sought to preserve itself by peonage, disfranchisement, segregation, and lynching. The authors aided and paralleled the politicians, who confounded attempts at democracy by dragging the herring of intermarriage over the countryside. In proportion as Negroes showed themselves as seeking economic advancement and civil rights, authors portrayed them as insulting brutes and rapists.

This stereotype shot up to full growth in these first decades of the twentieth century. But the seeds, as we have seen, had been sown long before. Answering abolitionist onslaughts, the *Bible Defense of Slavery* had "proved" that Sodom and Gomorrah were strongholds of *Negro* vice, and that "the baleful fire of unchaste amour rages through the Negro's blood more fiercely...." Hinton Helper, in *Nojoque* (1867), had set up black and beastly as synonyms. *The Negro A Beast* (1900) by Charles Carroll which proves the Negro to be "a beast, created with articulate speech, that he may be of service to the White man," brought this type of book to a rabid climax. As already pointed out, Page in *Red Rock* and *The Negro,*

The Southerner's Problem had shown Reconstruction to be a holiday for Negro brutes.

Thomas Dixon. After Page, the best known author of Ku Klux Klan fiction is the Reverend Thomas Dixon. *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*, because of their sensationalism (cf. chapter titles "The Black Peril," "The Unspoken Terror," "A Thousand Legged Beast," "The Hunt For the Animal") seemed just made for the mentality of early Hollywood, where D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* made for Dixon a dubious sort of immortality, and finally fixed the stereotype in the mass-mind.

The Leopard's Spots (1902) is Dixon's masterpiece of hatred. This long novel has its share of sugary love affairs done in the best southern tradition, but is chiefly important for its political bearings. Characters are brought in from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; Legree quits drink for the greater vice of becoming a scalawag and a mill owner. Eliza's son, George Harris, is educated at Harvard, falls in love with Senator Lowell's daughter and is ordered from the abolitionist home. Tim Shelby, a silk-hatted Negro politician, boasts that he will one day marry a white woman and is lynched as "Answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to Negro lips that dare to pollute with words the fair womanhood of the South." Dick, an imbecile, crushes with a rock the head of a white child and then attacks her. The assaulted child and the burning of the Negro are described with gusto. Drunk Negro soldiers

drag white brides from their homes; criminal Negroes rove the countryside, forcing whites to take to the cities. Included in the list of hateful outragers of the fair Southland are the Yankee schoolmarms, whom Dixon would like to see shipped back to Boston in glass cages like rattlesnakes. The Negro is not to be educated, not even industrially, for this drives him to crime or suicide. A few Negroes like old Nels obey their white-folks, but Dixon is surprised to find no Negroes in the mob that lynched Dick. Negro "dominion" and the threat that "the South will become mulatto instead of Anglo-Saxon" are overthrown when the Red-Shirts ride.

The Clansman (1905) is another hymn of hate. President Lincoln, considered pro-southern, is fearful lest "mulatto citizenship be too dear a price to pay even for emancipation." Stoneman, a libellous portrait of Thaddeus Stevens, is shown in the toils of Lydia Brown, a mulatto of extraordinary animal beauty. Other villains are Silas Lynch, a mulatto, "with the head of a Caesar and the eyes of the jungle," Augustus Caesar, "whose flat nose with enormous perpetually dilating nostrils, sinister head and enormous cheekbones and jaws reminded one of the lower order of animal," and Yankee soldiers whom faithful ex-slaves obligingly knock down. "A new mob of onion-laden breath, mixed with perspiring African odour, became the symbol of American democracy." Against this reign of terror, culminating in a rape, painstakingly

described, the knights of the Ku Klux Klan rise in righteous wrath. Gus, whose image was discovered upon the retina of the dead mother's eye by strange southern science, is not lynched, but "executed by the Grand Turk who flung his body on the lawn of the black Lieutenant-Governor of the State." In this way civilization was restored. Reconciliation is exemplified in northern-southern love affairs, but only when the Negro is returned to serfdom can there be true reunion.

The School of Page and Dixon. Emory's *A Maryland Manor* (1901) is important only as a sign of the trend. The slaves are shown as lighthearted, needing compulsion to teach them good habits. Chloe, who runs away frequently, is obeying an inherited love for the woods: "It was often the case ... fugitives fled from those they loved best." From emancipation "the negroes suffered most of all, sinking into a condition little short of their original barbarism." Caesar is too intelligent to accept freedom, "What you take me fur, anyhow?", etc. As a reward he is allowed burial in the family graveyard, at his master's blessed feet.

In *The Northerner* (1905) by Nora Davis, a reconciliation novel, Falls, a Yankee businessman, establishes the Tennessee Valley Improvement Company to develop electric power in the South, and wins the Alabama belle in the meanwhile. Falls and Watson, a southern aristocrat, battle a mob to save an innocent but

craven Negro, who, given a pistol to defend his life, thinks only: “Lawdy, don’t I wisht I had er piece er M’lindy’s cawn bread.” Miscegenation is a great concern of the author, who calls it the “Curse of Dixie,” “The Nameless Shame,” “The Hidden Pain.” Watson, in his cavalier youth, had been seduced by the brown Lesby, “a snake in the grass.” He loathes his beautiful quadroon daughter, Rosebud. Miss Davis has him say: “Every drop of blood in my body turns cold with disgust at the thought—the sight of her!” And to his daughter, before she is relegated to the future in store for one “cursed with the black drop,” he declaims:

> You should be just, child, to this man—try to see how he is placed. He has done, and he will do, his duty by you as God gives it to him to see it.... That was a sin of the flesh, you know, and in the flesh will he repay. But in the spirit, in all those things which belong to his higher nature, you can have no part.... He could not love you, cherish you: his very nature would recoil. It is instinct, child, blood!”

Rose meekly concurs. Some comic use is made of Pete, a state Congressman in Reconstruction, now happier as a valet for his white-folks.

Robert Lee Durham is even more concerned over the “Hidden Shame” in *The Call of The South* (1908). John Hayward, the central figure, is of barely perceptible Negro blood. Of fine ancestry on the white side, he is a first-rate student and athlete at Harvard before he leaves for heroic service in the war in Cuba. Becoming

footman for a president who champions liberal democracy, he is thrown in contact with the president's daughter. After rescuing her from a runaway horse, and revealing his heroic past at Harvard and in battle, he wins her, like a modern Othello, by tales of dangers overcome. They marry secretly, platonically. Up to this point the novelist has been sympathetic toward Hayward's undoubted abilities and undeserved rebuffs. But the platonic husband and wife, waylaid in a storm, are forced to seek refuge in a hut.

> In a flash of light she sees his face—distorted: with a shriek of terror she wildly tries to push him from her; but the demon of the blood of Guinea Gumbo is pitiless, and against the fury of it, as against the storm, she fights and cries in vain.

The tragedy rushes on: Helen is delivered of a very dark child, explained as a "recession"; her father dies of heart failure; she goes mad. A South Carolina cavalier points the moral and adorns the tale:

> How shall sickly sentimentality solace your shame if in the blood of your mulatto grandchild the vigorous red corpuscles of some savage ancestor shall overmatch your gentle endowment?

For "however risen, redolent of newly applied polish," the leopard cannot change his spots, nor the Ethiopian his skin. It seems that the skin must be changed for him. Even so, the fundamental savagery is still there, lurking. Social equality means the "mongrelization of the superior breed," of which one "blood deep

characteristic is chivalrous respect for women." So rings out the Call of the South.

Although a much later book, Jean Sutherland's *Challenge* (1926) is equally fantastic and insidious. The Polish-English Prince Kareninoff, who is famous as an opponent of race-mixture, has had a son by a woman who, unknown to him, was part Negro. The son, however, does the proper thing; he shuts himself in a monastery to save his aristocratic fiancée from pollution, and then, like his octoroon sisters, goes to Africa to help his people.

Negro characters in John Trotwood Moore's novels such as *Ole Mistis* and *The Bishop of Cottontown* are in the mildewed tradition. Mammy, in the second of these, has a new mission: she keeps the children of her impoverished master from the cotton mills.

> You're down heah preachin' one thing for niggahs and practisin' another for yo' own race; yo' hair frizzles on yo' head at th'ort of niggah slavery, whilst all the time you're enslavin' the po' little whites that's got yo' own blood in their veins.... I come for my child!

Frenzied at the wrongs of the cotton factory, she sets fire to the "Sodom." For this she is nearly lynched, but is saved by the heroes of the novel. "Thirteen dead men lay, and the back-bone of lynching had been broken forever in Alabama." This was written in 1906. Moore condones lynching as

> the result of the sudden emancipation of ignorant slaves, who, backed by the bayonets of their liberators ... perpetuated an unnameable crime as part of their system

of revenge for years of slavery.... And is not the honor of a white woman more than the hide of a broncho?

Inconsistently, he goes on:

And so these people flocked to the burning—the Negro haters, who had never owned a slave and had no sympathy—no sentiment for them.

In one scene a group of Negro night-riders, instigated by the villains of the Union League and a mulatto politician, terrorize the faithful Negroes. The latter, who had been overseers, had "absorbed many of the virtues of the best class of whites," while the Negroes who wished to vote were "but a few generations removed from the cowardice of darkest Africa." Lushly overflowing with love for the poor millhands, Moore has a kind word for the Negro only as serf.

Summary. These authors urged reconciliation of North and South, *but on southern terms*. They shuddered at the rising tide of bad Negroes, dreading amalgamation, but too often "bad Negroes" to them were the educated, or the propertied, or the militant. Their books seem to be conceived in fear and written with hate. They reflected the thought of the South of their day, from planter aristocrat and political boss down to the poor-white on the farm or in the mills. They wanted the South left alone to deal with the Negro in its own way, and this way, since the Negro was needed as ignorant laborer and scapegoat, was the way of exploitation and cruelty. These authors merely transferred melodrama of action into written melodramas.

They were sometimes vicious, sometimes stupid, and as in the case of Dixon, sometimes mob inciters rather than novelists. But still, be it recorded to democracy's shame, they got what they wanted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Account for the vogue of Thomas Nelson Page at the beginning of the century.

2. Why was Cobb anxious to show "Negroes always skinned by Negroes"?

3. What is significant in the fact that after Jeff Poindexter makes his greatest speech he is given ten dollars?

4. In the recent filibuster on the Anti-Lynching Bill, what arguments were advanced that are to be found in this chapter?

5. What is the relationship of Page's *Red Rock* to the problem fiction of this chapter?

6. What were the chief problems that concerned southern authors in this chapter?

7. In what respects do the comic writers and the melodramatists of this chapter agree?

CHAPTER VII

COUNTER-PROPAGANDA—BEGINNING REALISM

Negro Apologists.—Aroused by the libels of Thomas Nelson Page and his school, Negro novelists stepped forward with race defense and glorification. Explaining weaknesses as the heritage of slavery and oppression, they wished to hold up to the world "the millions of honest, God-fearing, industrious, frugal, respectable and self-respecting Negroes, who are toiling on for the salvation of their race." They urged what Kelly Miller wrote in "An Open Letter to Thomas Dixon, Jr." (1905):

> Within forty years of only partial opportunity ... the American Negro has cut down his illiteracy by over fifty per cent; has produced a professional class, some fifty thousand strong ... some three thousand Negroes have taken collegiate degrees, over three hundred being from the best institutions in the North and West.... Negro inventors have taken out four hundred patents ... scores of Negroes ... take respectable rank in the company of distinguished Americans.

And, as another put it,—"This farm land that they own and operate if put acre to acre would make a strip of land five miles wide ... from New York to San Francisco." They believed that the Negro who had succeeded in the American way should have his day in court. Some agreed with Booker Washington, more with DuBois, but all stressed the Negro's persecution and his achievement. The times

demanded propaganda of them, they felt; and propaganda they gave, in good measure. The race was their hero, and preaching a solution their business, upon which they were grimly intent.

Sutton Griggs, one of the earliest, assured the readers of *Unfettered* (1902) that neither angels nor demons, but mere human beings made up his cast of characters. But this is not so. Morlene is described:

> A wealth of lovely black hair crowning a head of perfect shape and queenly poise; a face, the subtle charm of which baffles description; two lustrous black eyes, wondrously expressive, presided over by eyebrows that were ideally beautiful; a neck which, with perfect art, descended and expanded so as to form a part of a faultless bust; as to form, magnificently well proportioned; when viewed as a whole, the very essence of loveliness....

It is no wonder then, that she speaks to one of the villains: “Sir, it takes no prophet to foretell that terrible sorrows await you.” The hero, Dorlan Warthell, is likewise faultless: “As to color he was black, but even those prejudiced as to color forgot that prejudice when they gazed upon this ebony-like Apollo.” Dorlan, a power in politics, deserts the Republican party for betraying his race, and incurs the hatred of the white Congressman Bloodworth. The ills heaped upon ills of the southern Negro, a very idealized love affair, long discussions of the race problem, and Dorlan’s plan to solve it (partly worked out on a balloon ride) make the book a hodgepodge. The prose is trite and pompous.

Griggs' *The Hindered Hand* (1905) is also a bad novel. The characters are models of decorum. In a passionate love scene at the end, the hero Ensal takes one of Tiara's hands in his, and then overwhelmed, takes the other:

> We fain would draw the curtain just here.... They were married that night, and the next day set out for Africa, to provide a home for the American Negro.

All of the darker phases of the South appear in the book, but melodramatically, unrealistically. The action is slowed up by long dissertations on "the problem," including a review of Thomas Dixon's *Leopard's Spots*. Even the two heroines are race orators. George McClellan's *Old Greenbottom Inn* (1906) is subtler propaganda. Most of the stories tell of the pathetic love affairs of beautiful Negro girls, but there is some rewarding local color of the Tennessee Valley and of the earliest Negro schools.

An argument in the guise of fiction is J. W. Grant's *Out of the Darkness* or *Diabolism and Destiny* (1909). Answering Booker T. Washington's conciliatory school of thought, the author writes "What are houses, land and money to men who are women?" But the mettle of the author deserves a better novel. His chief characters—the orator, the salutatorian and the valedictorian of their college class—become noted as preacher, statesman, and physician respectively. The physician discovers a cure for yellow fever, saves a beautiful white girl's life, and is lynched before the love affair between

them ripens. He is nearly white and bitter towards the white world; his two classmates are likewise militant. The author continually stresses the grace, refinement, wealth, palatial homes and property of upper class Negroes, decries the masses, and demands that the Negro be measured not by his worst but by his best. Needless to say the wrongs of the Negro are listed in full, but are seldom shown movingly. *As We See It* (1910) by Robert L. Waring deals with a young black hero, Abe, who leaves scholastic and athletic honors at Oberlin College to avenge the lynching of his mother and sister. There is a Damon-Pythias bond between Abe and a white boy, Malcolm, and between their two fathers, one an Alabama aristocrat and the other his body-servant. The aristocratic class of the South is praised highly, while the poor-whites are treated with contempt and hatred. Waring's generalizations about the "cracker" are very much like Dixon's about Negroes.

From Superman to Man (1917) by J. A. Rogers has only a thin thread of narrative running through long discussions of the race problem, in which a Pullman porter embarrasses and refutes white passengers with his anthropological and sociological information. Quips such as "The white man's burden is composed largely of plunder" and "'To educate the Negro is only to make him unhappy' really means 'Do not educate the Negro and make the white man

unhappier'" carry force, but the book is more pamphlet then novel.

The apologist whom these authors praised for his uncompromising attitude was W. E. B. DuBois. His fiction, superior to theirs in literary value, is similar in many respects. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) is part fantasy, part propaganda. Zora, who sees visions of the "little people of the swamps," rises from a degraded environment to become a race leader, fit companion for Bles Alwyn, a noble black boy from Georgia who becomes a force in politics. The plot is unconvincing; the characters are stiff and talk stiltedly: "Bles, thou almost persuadest me to be a fool." But DuBois' social understanding gives the novel value. The New England schoolmarms, the southern attack upon the schools, the scheming to get control of Negro education to render it harmless, the tie-up of Northern capital with cotton barons, the shame of Negro treatment, the conniving of political Negroes,—all of these are revealed by a keen social analyst. DuBois sees how poor-whites are used "to keep niggers in their place, and the fear of niggers to keep the poorer whites in theirs." One white character says "Derned if I don't think white slaves and black slaves had ought ter git together." But this radical lead is not followed up; the novel is too taken up with a priggish hero and an unbelievable heroine, and social reality is subordinated to symbolism. It is a significant book, however, and if DuBois answered Dixon's

melodrama in kind, it was at least melodrama pleading for humanity and blasting injustice.

DuBois' *Darkwater: The Twentieth Century Completion of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (1919) contains five tales in a prose that echoes the Bible and medieval romance. Two modern fairy-tales attack race-hatred and oppression. "The Second Coming" tells of the birth of a black child in a Georgia stable while three bishops—"the wise men"—look on. "Jesus Christ in Texas," like Upton Sinclair's "They Call Me Carpenter," deals with the return of Christ to a hate-ridden community, where he is unrecognized by the preacher, but is known to the despised and rejected. Like H. G. Wells, DuBois, in "The Comet," makes use of pseudo-science to drive home social ideas. When Manhattan is destroyed by the gases of a comet, only two people survive, one a Negro bank messenger, and the other a white girl, "rarely beautiful and richly gowned, with darkly-golden hair and jewels." Alone on earth, the "Bride of Life" and "great All-Father of the race to be" are broken in upon and returned to the world of prejudice by the crass "honk-honk" of rescuers from the world outside of New York City. These stories are without the usual drive of DuBois' work; even within the frame of allegory and fantasy, they lack conviction.

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912) (first published anonymously) urges that

log-cabins and plantations and dialect speaking 'darkies' are perhaps better known in American literature than any other single picture.... [Too little known] are coloured people who live in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture.

The hero, a sensitive, light-skinned Negro, expresses an upper-class snobbishness toward the Negro masses:

The unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion.

Ashamed of "being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals," he decides to "pass" for white. He travels widely through the South, to New York and to Europe, mingling generally with artistic people. Economic security and a happy marriage with a white woman do not quiet his regret, however, and he calls himself a "coward, a deserter ... [with] a strange longing for my mother's people." Although the central figure is complex and interesting, the novel seems to exist primarily for the long discussions of race, and the showing of the Negro in different milieus. The descriptions of the "big meeting" and of Bohemian life in New York are valuable realism. *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* was a ground-breaking novel in its dealing with the "aristocratic" mulatto, the problem of "passing," the Negro artistic world, the urban and European scene, and its subtler assertion of points where Negroes "are *better* than anybody else."

Summary. After the long years of caricature and contempt, it was natural that Negro novelists of the first generation after slavery should write as apologists. Not literary men, with the exception of DuBois and Johnson, but most often preachers and teachers, they had a charge to keep instead of a story to be told. They resented the use of the "Jim-Crow Negro," seen in Harris and Page, Dunbar and Chesnutt. DuBois reveals a refreshing faith in the people at times, but they all preferred the "talented tenth," at its most genteel. The heroines are modest and beautiful, frequently octoroon; the heroes are handsome and priggish, frequently black. Their characters have high-flown names like Dorlan Warthell, Ensal Ellwood, Tiara and Bles Alwyn; between these and comic names like Shakespeare Shackleford, Vakey Vopp, and Epic Peters there is little to choose. The villains are too often poor-whites. The incidents are romantic and often fantastic. The injuries of the Negro are seldom conveyed with full power; like the abolitionists, these novelists felt that listing could make up for rendering. The race problem, at the core of their work, turns their novels into tracts. Acceptance of certain traits as racial, such as optimism, loyalty and faith, and underestimation of the Negro masses invalidate much of their discussion. All are concerned with refutation of Thomas Dixon and his school. They were fighting in a good cause, but the novel was not their weapon.

The Tradition of The Abolitionists. Negro apologists found allies among northern white liberals who joined in the struggle for Negro rights. Mary White Ovington, one of the important figures in the National Association For The Advancement of Colored People, wrote persuasive propaganda fiction. *The Shadow* (1920) makes out a case for Negroes against the white world. A white girl, abandoned by her aristocratic family, is brought up as colored, until a letter informs her of her lineage. Her experiences in the white world, complicated by coincidental meetings with her Negro "brother," disillusion her, and she says:

> White people are wicked.... They hate goodness.... And they say they're so good!... We black people, we are bad.... Well, I want to be with bad people. I've been with good people as long as I can bear....

The novel is worked out romantically. Its pattern and many of its situations, however, have been taken over by later novelists. Miss Ovington is likewise the author of *Hazel* (1913), a story of a little colored heroine, and the much better *Zeke* (1931), which is an informed and sympathetic novel of the life of Negro boys in a southern school. Her "The White Brute" has been called one of the most memorable stories against lynching.

Dorothy Canfield's *The Bent Twig* (1915) refers to race prejudice in a midwestern town. When two shy, well-bred girls are discovered to have Negro blood, their schoolmates taunt them

gleefully. An intelligent liberal—grieved at the humiliation—feels like gathering up his family and going away from the intolerable question, to Europe, but his wife grimly remarks: "And what we shall do is, of course, nothing at all."

Typical of the many works urging the solution of the race problem by applied Christianity is *Of One Blood* (1916) by Charles Sheldon, the author of the religious best-seller *In His Steps*. Sheldon admits that he has pictured the "heroic, the beautiful and the great of each race," but insists that he has not done them justice. The Negro hero is shown as triumphant college orator, great athlete, and finally agricultural expert instructing his people. Although nearly lynched in the South, being rescued melodramatically by a southern member of the "World Brotherhood," he will not be "angry, sullen, bitter or revengeful." The author concludes that race hatred would be abolished if "all the white men in the United States were like Abraham Lincoln and all the black men like Booker Washington," a hope as extreme as his characterization and plot. Likewise full of praise for Booker Washington, *The Testing Fire* by Alexander Corkey (1911) optimistically prophesies a redeemed South.

Early Southern Liberalism.—Groping and hesitant liberalism found expression in the work of some of the southern novelists. Some were aware of the heavy hand of the dead past and wanted to shake it off, others wanted to set down

honestly what they saw about them. *The Southerner* (1909) first appeared as a serial, *The Autobiography of a Southerner Since the Civil War*, by Nicholas Worth, whom readers soon identified as Walter Hines Page. The attack of this book upon the "mummified" South, its dedication to the laying of the three ghosts of "The Confederate Dead, of Religious Orthodoxy and of Negro Domination," shows how opposed Walter Hines Page of North Carolina was to the ghost-ridden Thomas Nelson Page of Virginia. The novel is long and tract-like. Negro characters play an important part. Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Maria, worshippers of their white family, remember slavery as a happy state. Balancing these are Sam Worth, the runaway slave who becomes head of an industrial school; Lissa, another tragic mulatto, who bears a child to the future governor of the state; the Rev. Doctor Snodder, meek hang-dog "teacher of the oppressed"; John Marshall, an intelligent Hampton graduate; gullible office seekers, and a murderer of a Confederate firebrand. The author of *The Southerner* had, for his time, advanced ideas regarding education, civil rights, and democracy, and these are reflected in his characterizations of Negroes, which, though not done at full-length, are suggestive departures from the old and outworn.

Ellen Glasgow, who "carried realism across the Potomac" to the interpretation of her beloved Virginia, naturally pays attention to the

Negro. He appears, however, as part of the social background, not as central character. He is viewed with shrewd insight: in *The Miller of Old Church* (1911) a Negro farmer, told to be thankful for his crop instead of complaining, responds:

> Dar ain't nuttin' 'tall ter be thankful fur in dat, suh, case de Lawd He ain't had no mo ter do wid dat ar co'n den old Marse Hawtrey. I jes ris dat ar co'n wid my own han' right down de road at my front do', and po'd de water on hit outer de pump at my back un. I'se monstrous glad ter praise de Lawd for what he done done, but I ain't gwine to gin 'im credit fur de wuk er my own fis' en foot.

Barren Ground (1925) contains some honest pictures of Negroes, not greatly different from the impoverished whites of the broomsedge, except that they are better and thriftier farmers. With courage Miss Glasgow introduces the common-law wife of old man Graylock. Once a handsome Negro woman, she is now slatternly and smoulderingly resentful, especially when the old man in a drunken fit takes a horsewhip to his mulatto brood.

The Negro character as a very different sort of background appears in *Hagar's Hoard*, by George Kibbe Turner (1920). This gripping novel tells of the horror of yellow fever as it came to the close-shuttered houses of Memphis. Negroes serve as a mysterious, sinister chorus. Memphis is conjured vividly before the reader: "that long ragged line of old brick blocks—that rendezvous of niggers and thieves—the bad niggers, and the murderers and the nigger thieves." Then there are

the sanctified Negroes, "The Hollering Saints," who are certain that the yellow fever is "the punishment of God acomin' down on Memphis." Individualized Negroes are Arabella, the faithful house servant, fanatically awaiting the coming of the Lamb; Make Haste Mose, the driver of the dead wagon, and a saddle-colored Negro with an immense scar, lying in wait to rob. All of these, according to the southern boy who tells the story, are unfathomable:

> All white folks knew was what they generally know about niggers—that bowing and scraping; those brown masks—those faces with all their muscles trained since the sin of Ham in the Bible; since they went out in slavery and subjection—to lie still and show nothing. And those old brown eyes, watching, watching.

Under the pen name of "George Madden Martin," Mrs. Atwood R. Martin wrote many stories of southern Negro life. "Her Husband" concerns a lynching. When Edith Thornberry, a white woman of gentle birth, discovers that her husband, a poor white, has reverted to type and led the lynchers, she is set against him. She was "bracketed with those thousands of southern men and women who speak a universal language of decency," but her husband was bracketed with "a pusillanimous multitude, skulkers ever behind the decent South, lynchers, night-riders, white caps, Ku Klux." Unfortunate in its connection of heredity with decency, the story is still significant for the sharp protest of an intelligent southern woman against mob-violence. *Children of The Mist* (1920) decries the work of agitators upon

Negroes, but is by no means merely Thomas Nelson Page brought up to date.

Stirrings of Realism.—When, at the turn of the century, authors showed a willingness to deal seriously with uneasy segments of American life, the Negro made his demand upon them. It is significant that most of the early figures prominent in the history of twentieth century realism dealt in some measure with the Negro. Among them are Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser and Gertrude Stein.

Stephen Crane's work was generally too advanced for the sentimental readers of his age, and "The Monster" (1897) was particularly so. This story of horror lashes out at the stupidity and heartlessness of a small American town. Henry Johnson, a Negro hostler, rescues a small boy from a fire. Falling, overcome by the fumes in the burning laboratory, he has his face eaten away by acid. The boy's father, Dr. Trescott, exercises his best skill and keeps Henry alive. When Henry was thought to be dying, he was lauded as hero and martyr; but kept alive, a faceless imbecile, he meets with terror and hatred, among the better class as well as in Watermelon Alley. "The Monster" is more a sharp satire of a small town's intolerance than a study of Negroes, but it has secondary meanings that pertain to Negro life in what it tells of service, sacrifice, and false affection that goes over into revulsion. The few pictures of Negro life here and in *Whilomville Stories* are

done with the vividness to be expected from Stephen Crane.

Negro characters in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905) are only incidental, but they are drawn in grim earnest. He shows Negroes as strikebreakers, brought into Packingtown from the levees or the country districts of the far South on promises of five dollars a day and board, with special rates from railroads. The harsh life of scabs makes them surly and dangerous; most of them have knives, ground to fine points, hidden in their boots. "Whiskey and women were brought in by the carload and sold to them, and hell was let loose in the yards." After the strike, these "green" Negroes, together with foreigners and criminals, are turned loose in thousands upon Chicago. This sketch of the Negro worker, denied admission to unions and thereby forced to the role of strikebreaker, anticipates much of present-day proletarian fiction.

Carl Van Vechten considers Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" in *Three Lives* (1909) to be "perhaps the first American story in which the Negro is regarded ... not as an object for condescending compassion or derision." "Melanctha" is a slowly unwound character study of a "subtle, intelligent, half-white girl, Melanctha Herbert," who "always wanted peace and quiet, and always she could only find new ways to get excited." Her chief love affairs are painstakingly set forth. The characters talk in a mannered dialogue; they all sound like each

other, and like the white people in the other two stories. Gertrude Stein speaks of "the wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow to negro sunshine," but her major characters do not have it. The people she calls "decent," she likewise calls unmoral and promiscuous or shows them in razor brawls. White blood in one character "made her see clear," and gave "her grit and endurance and vital courage," but the power and breakneck courage in Melanctha came to her from her big black virile father. In spite of these dubious generalizings, "Melanctha" is important. Though not realistic in the usual sense, it gives a convincing portrait of a mysterious, uncertain girl, "wandering in her ways," doomed to tragedy, a Negro Madame Bovary or Esther Waters.

Setting out early to chart "tragic America," Theodore Dreiser wrote "Nigger Jeff" (1918) about a lynching. Dreiser does not make the Negro innocent, but he shows with somber power the mob hysteria in a town ironically called Pleasant Valley, the bravery of the sheriff, the horror of the captured Negro, and the final hanging to the bridge. And then he goes farther, to the mother and sister of the victim, and without sentimentality shows their grief. "I'll get it all in," exclaimed the young reporter who covered the case. And Dreiser got it all in, to make one of his best stories.

Again The Tragic Mulatto.—Two writers of some repute returned to the theme of the tragic

mulatto. Less romantic than their predecessors, they still cling to old stereotypes. Margaret Deland's "A Black Drop" (1908) tells of Lily, who, although brought up in Nigger Hill, a section of a midwestern town, by Mammy, a fair Negro woman, "cushiony and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds," is considered white. Lily's love affair with Framely Stone, son of abolitionists, is broken up. Miss Wales, his New England Sunday School teacher, points out proof of the girl's Negro blood, clinching her case by mentioning her use of "heavy perfumery." Miss Deland believes that intermarriage is forbidden by disgust, "a race protest, a race horror ... organic, biological." Instinct, it seems, revolts at intermarriage, but not at liaisons. Confusing and unconvincing, "A Black Drop" is still not entirely without sympathy and insight.

In the short story "Carter" (1921) Don Marquis is likewise concerned with one of the many mulattoes who in fiction tragically yearn "oh to be white, white, white!" After "passing" for a short while in New York, he returns to Atlanta, resolved to live and die among Negroes. He arrives there at the time of a riot, and witnesses "the conflict which was forever active in his own nature." He is happy when he is taken for a white man of the better class by his own white half-brother, but is plunged into misery when, dying, he is re-identified as "a yaller nigger." Carter's abjectness, and the flattery of whites are laid on a bit too heavily. Although the

story abounds in clichés about mulatto character, it does approach Negro life, especially the Atlanta riot, with seriousness.

John Bennett's *Madame Margot* (1921) is the legend of a golden Creole who, in order to keep her ivory daughter from dishonor and betrayal, "to keep her white to all eternity," sells herself to Satan. Margot's sultry beauty turns to grotesqueness. As old Mother Go-go, in the dirty Negro quarters, black now instead of ruddy gold, she is claimed by the devil. An other-worldly romance, *Madame Margot*, for all of its imaginative remoteness, conveys something of what women like Madame Margot knew in bitter actuality.

Summary. The tendencies seen in this chapter are diverse, ranging from the race-glorification of Negro apologists to social realism by important American novelists. At times, as in the case of the tragic mulatto, the work seems conventional, but in the main we notice that authors are beginning to take the Negro seriously, revising earlier stereotypes, and breaking the ground for later realism. The work that they did is little known, but it is important in the evolution of the Negro character in American fiction.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why are the weaknesses of the Negro apologists to be expected?

2. Why do novels of the "talented tenth" fail to overthrow the plantation tradition?

3. Why are novels by southerners included in this chapter?

4. In what respects is Gertrude Stein's story traditional?

5. What similarities are in all of the stories of mulattoes written by white authors?

6. Compare DuBois, Chesnutt, and Johnson.

7. What is significant in the final quotation from *Hagar's Hoard*?

CHAPTER VIII
REALISM AND THE FOLK

Sociological Realism.—T. S. Stribling's *Birthright* (1922) brought something new in the treatment of Negro life. The novel looks back in its problem and its preaching, and has its share of superstitions about "race" such as that Negroes howl their agony aloud and white men bottle up their grief, and that "to a white man absolute idleness is impossible ... he must ... do something to burn up the accumulating sugar in his muscles." Peter Siner is not completely credible: a Harvard graduate, he comes back South talking like a dictionary, urging "autonomous development" of his people, and yet he is easily swindled by a white banker. His marriage to Cissie, light-fingered and ruined by a white lout, is strained, to say the least. His opposite, Tump Pack, is caricatured. But Stribling does protest against the southern belief that all Negroes are carefree and happy. His description of Negro lodges, funerals, and workaday life are authentic. Most important of all, *Birthright* places the Negro at the center of the picture, attempts to show the influence of environment upon character, is ironic at the vaunted southern understanding of Negroes, and attacks injustice. The following description is quite different from the pastoral shabbiness that

delighted Ruth McEnery Stuart, E. K. Means, and Paul Laurence Dunbar:

> On the edge of Hooker's Bend, drawn in a rough semi-circle around the Big Hill, lies Niggertown.... The grimy cabins lean at crazy angles, some propped with poles.... Up and down its streets flows the slow negro life of the village.... The public well itself lies at the southern end of this miserable street, just at the point where the drainage of the Big Hill collects.... [To this hole in soft clay, where occasionally pigs fall in and drown] come the unhurried colored women, who throw in their buckets, and with dexterity that comes with long practice draw them out full of water.... The inhabitants of Niggertown suffer from divers diseases; they develop strange ailments that no amount of physicking will overcome.... About once a year the state health officer visits Hooker's Bend and forces the white soda-water dispensers on the other side of the hill to sterilize their glasses in the name of the sovereign State of Tennessee.

Nigger by Clement Wood (1922) compresses a very great deal into its less than three hundred pages. This, too, is a sociological novel, picturing a Negro family from its origins in slavery to modern life in Birmingham. After freedom, Jake's burden of debt on his little place grows heavier each year. Forced to flee when white hoodlums run rampant on a periodic lynch-fest, Jake takes his seven grandchildren to Birmingham, to realize the "emancipation" he has heard of so often. But one son, Pink, dies in France, a hero; another, Louis, decorated in France for bravery is shot down by the law; Tom, embittered and violent, becomes a criminal, and Dave's love of learning is dulled by the steel mills. The daughters fare no better. The

characters are completely convincing: the trustful Jake is balanced by Jim Gaines who kills a white man to defend his daughter. Reverend Elisha Kirkman—"who had seen slavery ... was weazened and sharp-tongued and wise; black and white feared the sting that hung in his words"—is new in books about Negroes, but is not, because of that, unconvincing. Even the "bad Negroes" are not Dixon's brutes; having seen lynchings and the flagrant hypocrisy of the law, they are desperadoes through complete cynicism. Wood presents his characters with great knowledge and sympathy; the little family's anguished but doomed efforts to get along are tragically moving. There is humor in the book, but it is mainly grim. Louis, called upon by white examiners to recite the Constitution before he can vote, orates Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The examiner is amazed and half apologetic: "I'm damned. I didn' think you knew it ... I didn' think any nigger knew it."

White and Black (1922) by H. A. Shands gives a realistic picture of Texas plantation life, where instead of kindly whites and affectionate uncles and mammies, there are landlords struggling to get money, and Negroes at work in the Johnson and Bermuda grass trying to get a bare living. Joe Williams, an aspiring Negro share-cropper tries to bring up his daughters decently and is almost frenzied when Ella is seduced by the planter's son. Ulysses Mulberry who "ain't done a thing except lay around ever

since he's been back and has been runnin' me down to the niggers and stirrin' em up about the low wages paid on the farm, and jes' playin' the big Ike gen'r'lly," is lynched for outraging a poor-white girl, in a scene powerfully presented. Richard Sanders, the preacher, starts as a new character, forward-looking and thoughtful, if over-academic in his language, but ends up typically, finding his Bathsheba in a fast woman who affects penitence. The revived Ku Klux Klan is shown punishing Henry Thompson, a white man who openly acknowledges his Negro children, although its ranks are filled with men having clandestine affairs with Negro women. Shands has gleams of irony, but he does not let his sympathies develop to fullness, and his book therefore lacks drive. Dorothy Scarborough's *In The Land of Cotton* (1923) also deals with Texas, containing snapshots of Negro life and some fine folk-songs, presented with the sympathetic approach of a folk-lorist. The picture is generally pastoral. Realistic pictures of Negroes in turpentine camps help to redeem Vara Majette's *White Blood* (1924), but the melodrama of the swamp octoroon is still traditional and unconvincing.

South Carolina Folk. The work of Ambrose Gonzales, begun at the end of the last century but mainly accomplished in the nineteen-twenties, is an example of southern anecdotage. Gonzales writes as two people: one, intent upon pugnaciously defending the lost cause, and the

other, keenly interested in the little dramas of the Gullah folk of South Carolina. *The Black Border* (1922) contains a passage on Thomas Nelson Page's failure to deal fully with Negro life, but this book and *The Captain* (1924) are merely extensions of works like Page's *Pastime Stories* and go in no new directions. The hunting and fishing, the marital irregularities, the hog and chicken stealing of the black-border Negroes are told with gusto, but hardships and tragedies are glossed over. Gonzales gets closest to realism in his care for the language. He has studied the Gullah dialect with so much zeal that the reader's task is uneasy. *With Aesop Along The Black Border* is a sly, witty rendition of the old fables into the odd speech; the following concludes "The Fox And The Grapes":

> Bumbye 'e git up en' 'e walk off, en' 'e walk berry sedate. Attuwhile 'e biggin fuh grin. 'E suck 'e teet, en' 'e say to 'eself, 'e say, "Me yent hab time fuh w'ary me bone en' t'ing fuh jump attuh no sour grape lukkuh dem. Soon es Uh smell' 'um Uh know dem *done* fuh sour! No, suh! Ef Uh haffuh chaw t'ing lukkuh dat, Uh gwine hunt green possimun...." Buh Fox smaa't!

At the same time that Gonzales was publishing, DuBose Heyward, sensitive and sympathetic, was taking notes upon Negro life in Charleston to appear as *Porgy* (1925). This novel is rightly influential. In a poem at the outset Heyward pleads for "great hearts to understand." His characterization is admirable; he knows a great deal, and he sees the pity as well as the laughter. His hero is Porgy, a crippled beggar,

whose love for Crown's Bess regenerates her. The setting, Catfish Row, a squalid tenement; the saucer-burial scene, the spirituals and the folk-speech, the steamboat picnic, the furtive fear of the "white" law are conveyed with brilliant poetic realism. One of the best bits of writing is the description of the September storm when Catfish Row sends out its doomed riders to the sea. The finale of the novel, presenting a Negro as *tragic hero* is worth quoting:

> The keen autumn sun flooded boldly through the entrance and bathed the drooping form of the goat, the ridiculous wagon, and the bent form of the man in hard satirical radiance. In its revealing light, Maria saw that Porgy was an old man. The early tension that had characterized him, the mellow mood that he had known for one eventful summer, both had gone; and in their place she saw a face that sagged wearily.... She looked until she could bear the sight no longer; then she stumbled into her shop and closed the door, leaving Porgy and the goat alone in an irony of morning sunlight.

The same willingness to see Negroes as heroic is also in *Mamba's Daughters* (1925). "Libel on the South—nothing less than plain libel.... Who, in pity's name, from a section which is famous for its aristocracy, elected to go and hunt up Negroes to be sung about?" are the words of one of the novel's patrician ladies. Heyward so elects, giving us a heart-warming chronicle of two women, Mamba and Hagar, whose selfless devotion to Lissa transcends the usual characterization of Negroes. Mamba is the untraditional mammy: sly, ironic and ambitious for her own. Hagar, an illiterate and grotesque

Amazon, attains nobility in her fierce laboring and fighting for her daughter. Lissa, who owes her career as a singer to Mamba's generalship and Hagar's sacrifices, does not reach the stature of these, but is nevertheless a new figure in the gallery of Negro characters. Heyward's setting—Catfish Row, the phosphate mines, upper Negro circles striving for gentility, are conveyed with authenticity, if not finality. Despite a few incidents of exaggerated humor, such as Mamba's appropriating the Judge's false teeth, the tone is serious. The exploitation in the mines and the travesty of justice meted out to the Negro are dispassionately noted. Heyward's "The Half-Pint Flask" (1927), one of America's best stories of terror, is skillfully set against a background of Gullah superstitions, authentically handled.

Another South Carolinian, Julia Peterkin, is like DuBose Heyward in her intimacy with her material, and her dealing with Negroes as foreground *characters* and not as background *types*. Only occasionally do white people enter her narratives: here are Negroes seen in terms of their own quite important lives. Mrs. Peterkin, who is the mistress of a plantation like the "Blue Brook Plantation" of her fiction, insists about her Negro characters: "I like them. They are my friends, and I have learned so much from them." *Green Thursday* (1924) bore witness to the liking for these people. It is a simple and touching group of connected short stories. Kildee, the central figure, with his growing love

for Missie; Rose, cross in her perplexity, but human; Maum Hannah who burned the new house of the "po' buckra" who was dispossessing her, all are pictured with tenderness and insight. Folk-beliefs and ways are set down without condescension; the speech is Gullah, but modified from Gonzales' phonetic transcriptions; and the description of natural scenery is done with beauty and originality. *Green Thursday* is, all in all, a minor classic.

Black April (1927) differs. Here the colors are stronger. Although the upbringing of the boy Breeze has the simplicity and poetry of *Green Thursday*, the other half of the novel is at times violently primitive. In spite of the church, Blue Brook Plantation is amoral. The foreman, Black April, is a great man for working and fighting, and a greater for love affairs, his "outside" children far outnumbering what he calls his "yard children." The book furnishes a storehouse of folk-lore; long catalogues of signs and folk-cures alternating with scenes of hunting, fishing, fighting, conversion, and love-making. For all of its horror Black April's death scene approaches the heroic. Dying after his feet have rotted off from gangrene, he forces out these words:

"Bury me in a man-size box—You un'erstan?... I—been—six feet—fo'—Uncle—six feet—fo'!" The blaze in his eyes fell back, cold, dim. A long shudder swept over him. The tide had turned.

Scarlet Sister Mary (1928) won for Mrs. Peterkin the Pulitzer Prize. There is no denying the grasp of her material nor the power of certain

scenes in this work and the succeeding *Bright Skin* (1932), but something just as noticeable is the increasing accent upon exotic primitivity. Sister Mary, abandoned by July, who is wild and footloose, becomes the scarlet woman of the quarters, having love-affairs and love-children with startling regularity. Mary's pagan freedom endears her to Mrs. Peterkin, who deplores Puritan hypocrisy. Nevertheless the book has lapses into condescension; "Unex" for "unexpected" is one of the children's names, and Mary has twins the same night that her unmarried daughter bears her child in a woodshed. This is belaboring with a vengeance. *Bright Skin* is not so concerned with the plantation birth-rate as with the death-rate, which is very high from violent causes. A quiet death in bed seems as unusual for these folk as for the ancient Anglo-Saxons. Mrs. Peterkin is much less sympathetic to Cricket, "the bright-skin," and to bizarre Harlem, than to Blue, the pure type Negro, and primitive Blue Brook.

What these two books leave suspect *Roll Jordan, Roll* (1933) brings out into the open. Acclaimed by her publishers as the "outstanding chronicler of the American black man's life," Mrs. Peterkin in this book advances trite generalizations that go back to *Swallow Barn*, contradicts her own evidence, and is more concerned with apologetics for white southerners than with revelations of Negro character. The picture she gives is one of Arcadian simplicity

and happiness, away from the evils of industrialism. Negroes are superior to whites: "Better to be poor and black and contented with whatever God sends than to be vast-rich and restless." Since Negro school-children will come into their legacy of "ancient earthly wisdom" it is no tragedy that Negro schools are open only from harvest to planting time. Poverty, ignorance, disease and exploitation are lightly touched upon or omitted.

> Plantation days may be hard sometimes if *the moon gets contrary*.... Their stories and songs teach the children to look for victory from the disadvantages *to which life has sentenced them*, when death takes their souls to heaven. (Italics mine.)

The Negro's fear of the chain-gang is airily waved away: "Courtesy and kindliness are the law of the land." It does Mrs. Peterkin disservice to consider her *the* interpreter of *the Negro*. She is, instead, a plantation mistress who sees with sympathy and intimacy a few characters in a restricted segment of South Carolina, from a highly specialized point of view.

The recorder of another section of South Carolina, not so far off, has a different tale to tell. A slim volume called *Congaree Sketches* (1927) was immediately recognized as one of the most faithful representations of Negro folk life. The author, E. C. L. Adams, a physician of Columbia, S. C., kept out of the scene, and allowed his Negro characters to speak for themselves. The result was neither sentimentality nor clowning. In a poetic dialect, Tad and Scipio and other

spokesmen built up a most convincing picture of Negro life and character "down in de big swamps, down in de land of mosquito, down on de Congaree." There are folk-tales, sermons and prayers, but chiefly stories in dialogue dealing with dances, hot suppers, wakes, bootlegging, church services, farming, and the chain gang. The tone varies from rich comedy, such as that of the Hopkins Negro who throws heaven into an uproar, and of Ole Sister who does the same for hell, down to the restrained but powerful satires of southern justice:

"After while ole man Hall walk up to Noah an' bus' him over de head wid er axe halve and beat him up ... an' Jedge Foolbird axe ole man Hall what de nigger do ... an' ole man Hall say 'He ain't do nuthin', but he look like he goin' say sumpin,' and Jedge Foolbird fined Noah one hunnerd dollars."

Voice: "What did he do wid ole man Hall?"

Perk: "He fine him fi' dollars...."

Dr. Adams' second book, *Nigger to Nigger*, is fuller and even more forceful. The title suggests the method. Here Negroes are assumed to be talking to themselves, without any eavesdroppers, although the author reveals that he has listened closely, and has been privileged with confidences. As a result the humor is true folk humor, and the bitterness at social injustice is undiluted. There is fine laughter in "The Telephone Call," but most of the tales are tragic. "Fifteen Years" is the Negroes' brooding summary of the "Ben Bess Case" where a Negro, envied by white neighbors, was framed on a rape

charge. “A Damn Nigger” is one of the harshest stories to come out of the new realism.

Jake was a nigger. De judge were a kind judge—a good man—wuh ain’ b’lieve in too severe punishment for white folks when a nigger is kilt, ain’ matter wha’ kind er white folks—And de solicitor wha’ prosecute an’ see dat de criminal git he full jues is a merciful man. An’ he got great ideas er bein’ light in punishment of dem white mens.

Some of the sketches deal with slavery, in a manner far removed from the plantation tradition. The unusual chorus of Tad and Scipio and their fellows reveals that though they may be unlettered, they are cynical realists, and are certainly not being fooled. When Reverend Hickman urges Christian forbearance he is met with taunts:

Dere ain’ no use. De courts er dis land is not for niggers. Ain’ nothin’ but for’em but a gun an’ a knife in a white man’s hand, an’ den de grave, an’ sorrow an’ tear for he people. De Bible say, “De Lord watcheth de fall of every sparrow,” an’ I says: “Why ain’t He take He eye off sparrow an’ luh ’em rest some time on bigger game?”

Nigger to Nigger gets more of the true picture of Negro life in the South than do most other books combined. And the picture, for all of Dr. Adams’ mastering of humor, is not a pleasant one to linger over.

Acquainted with Gullah Negroes and dialect from their earliest days, Samuel Gaillard Stoney and Gertrude Mathews Shelby have retold in *Black Genesis* (1930) the charming fables of guileful Br’ Rabbit and foiled Br’ Wolf, short-tempered Br’ Wasp, Br’ Alligator, Br’ Frog, Br’

Partridge and Sis' Nanny Goat, together with free biblical reinterpretations of the creation of the world, of Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel, and the beginning of the race problem. In one of the best stories, Br' Rabbit pesters God for a longer tail; God assigns him difficult tasks to get rid of him. Smart and cocky, Br' Rabbit turns up again with his tasks completed, surprising and throwing God out of patience:

'Bout dat time, God in de Big House look out de window to see how dat t'under an' lightnin' he send fix dat bowdacious Br' Rabbit, so he won't be pesterin' roun' no mo'. An' he see a little somet'ing jis' a-skeedaddlin' down de Abenue.... He lean out de window, an' he put he two hands to be mout', an he holler: "Ah-hah! Ah-hah!! AH-HAH!! You so *drat* smart! Well, GIT A LONG TAIL YO'SELF!"

Folk of the Deep South. R. Emmet Kennedy speaks of the Louisiana Negroes he knows so well as "unlettered folk who have not lost the gracious charm of being natural: wonderfully gifted and fairly tingling with poetic tendencies." His enthusiasm accounts for good essays upon their music and their patois. But *Black Cameos* (1924), Kennedy's first book, is more marked by picturesque dialect and songs than by penetration into character. *Mellows*, a collection of folk "melodies" includes charming vignettes of life along the dusty roads of the delta.

In *Gritny People* (1927) Kennedy goes deeper. His aim is to portray a community opposite New Orleans. The plan is an old one:

people of different types gather at old Aunt Susan Smiley's cook-shop, and tell their stories, or are told about. A cross section of rural life results: there is tragedy as well as comedy, and the life-story of Gussie is especially moving. *Red Bean Row* (1929) is an episodic novel; Kennedy's abilities, like those of earlier local colorists, seem best fitted for the short story. The narrative is partly a satire of a philandering elder, and a traditional story of old Gramma Veenia's devotion to a weakling white man of "quality." Kennedy faithfully conveys a way of life. Here and there he shows the injustices of the section; the fire company is indifferent to the burning Negro shanty, and one woman speaks almost like Dr. Adams' Tad: "But white folks has a seecut way of handlin' the law to suit their own mind, and a poor simple nigger has to take just what comes along." All in all, however, *Red Bean Row* does not match *Gritny People*.

With a Negro for a nurse and Negroes for playmates, having paid devoted attention to Negroes in the fields, in the levee camps, on the river, in church, at picnics and funerals, Roark Bradford is, as his publishers state, amply qualified to write about the Negro. Their further assertion (duplicate of her publishers' claim for Mrs. Peterkin) "that Roark Bradford is perhaps better fitted to write of the southern Negro than anyone in the United States" is hardly attested by his work. In a foreword to "*Ol' Man Adam An' His Chillun*" (1928) Bradford repeats the

platitudes about Negro character that have been used to sanction injustice since proslavery days. There is no indication from later books that Bradford has changed: his Negroes are nothing but easy-come, easy-go children, creatures of laughter and of song. What other observers have recorded, Bradford, for all his wide experience, has not yet seen.

Ol' Man Adam An' His Chillun is rip-roaring burlesque, a book of tall tales told by an imaginative humorist in the fine tradition of Mark Twain. A mythical preacher of the old school brings Biblical stories down from heaven to the realistic setting of the delta:

> Well, a long time ago things was diffrunt. Hit wa'nt nothin' on de yearth 'cause hit wa'nt no yearth. And hit wa'nt nothin' nowheres and ev'day was Sunday. Wid de Lawd r'ared back preachin' all day long ev'y day. 'Ceptin' on Sadday, and den ev'ybody went to de fish fry.... So one day ev'ybody was out to de fish fry, eatin' fish and biled custard and carryin' on, to all at once de Lawd swallowed some biled custard which didn't suit his tase....

For all the truth to idiom, this is obviously not Negro religion. The difference between the personified God in the spirituals, and God with a fedora upon his head and a ten-cent segar in his mouth should be apparent to anyone in the least familiar with Negro believers and their dread of sacrilege. *The Green Pastures*, suggested by *Ol' Man Adam An' His Chillun*, did something toward getting reverence and awe back into the material, but here it is pure farce. *King David and*

the Philistine Boys (1930) repeats this formula, with flagging powers.

This Side of Jordan (1929) is naturalistic local color. Elder Videll, muddy-colored like the river (Bradford does not like mulattoes), is a lustful villain. He is killed by Scrap in a scene that sheds more light on Bradford than on Negro character: "The blade of a razor flashed through the air.... *Her Negro blood sent it unerringly between two ribs. Her Indian blood sent it back for an unnecessary second and third slash.*" One surmises that her refusal to be chilled with horror might be attributed to her Esquimo blood. *John Henry* (1932), for all of its amusing folk-speech and lore, belittles the hero. He is changed, not for the better, from a steel driving railroad man to a cotton-toting roustabout, from a great working class hero to a woman's fool. Bradford has taken undue liberties with folk stuff of dignity and power. The best of Bradford's many short stories have been collected in *Let the Band Play Dixie* (1935). Some, like "Child of God" have ingenuity and tenderness, others are first-rate folklore and mulelore, and some show exotics in honkey-tonks going native with a vengeance. The characterization is conventional; for all of his comic genius, Bradford too often merely brings the plantation tradition up to date.

In 1928, Howard Odum, one of America's leading sociologists, turned to fiction. Dr. Odum had already interpreted the Negro in his collaboration with Guy Johnson on *The Negro*

and His Songs and *Negro Workaday Songs*. *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* is an attempt to render fiction sociological. The hero, Left Wing Gordon, is a garrulous roustabout, rambling from job to job, and from one teasing brown to another. Left Wing Gordon tells us of his boyhood, his work-life, his love-life, his "jamborees." Vividly written passages interpret the experiences. There is no gainsaying the thorough grasp of the material, nor the picaresque fascination of its handling. The book is so crammed with folk-sayings and blues, however, that it seems "made-up," and both story and hero get lost. Nevertheless, *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* is a valuable case study, done without flattery or concern for delicate feelings, white or black, humorous without being minstrel, tragic without being sentimentalized. And Left Wing Gordon is one of the best folk-characters of recent realism.

Wings On My Feet (1929) takes Left Wing overseas in the World War. It is told in the same racy idiom, as authentic as thorough investigation can make it. One of the few treatments of the Negro in the war, it is valuable for what it shows of a stevedore's reaction to Armageddon. It is a compound of humor, pathos, and tragedy.

> Me an' war same thing. Want me to fight; I been doing it all my life.... White buddies mighty funny, too, sometimes. Sometimes we sorry for 'em, sometimes we jes' have to laugh at 'em. Sometimes we don't keer if some white boys, meaner'n devil, have hard time, Lawd, we don't keer, Lawd we don't keer. Been treatin' us

wrong, been hard on colored soldiers. White man been fightin' colored man. Now fightin' selves.... Boys laugh at' em cause didn't want salute officers. Colored soldiers salutin' all time.... Maybe war got him, didn't get me. He's big captain an' I'm high private in rear rank, but I gets there just the same.... Buddy so worried in mind. Germans got him, blowed him clean to pieces. Wa'n't necessary for him to go but nobody couldn't tell him nothin'. He wus gonna save little child. And so he gave his life for little French child. Made me sad an' I kept hollerin', "Say, Buddy, is you hurt, is you killed?" Knowed he wus but jes' kept hollerin to him....

Cold Blue Moon (1931) is the last and least of this trilogy dealing with Left Wing Gordon. In this book the hero is among the stable boys in a shed, telling ghost stories. When his turn comes, he launches, great tale-teller that he is, into a series of legends on the Old South. Some of them dispute the plantation tradition, but in the main they run true to what Odum has called the Grandeur that Was, and the Glory that Was Not. Left Wing is not at his best in these: he is too far from the center of the picture.

One of the best twentieth century examples of the Uncle Remus tradition is John B. Sales' *The Tree Named John* (1929), a collection of Mississippi folk-lore in authentic dialect. Aunt Betsey plants an elm tree—a quick budder, a fast grower and tough—as a name tree for the grandchild of Ole Miss. Then she presides over his upbringing, giving him lessons in folk-cures, nature study and in "spe'ence" ("whut you gits w'en you won't larn by lis'enin to whut de old folks tells you"). She and Aunt Polly and Uncle

Alvord tell him tales of animals of old days. One story, "Ghos'es," is a bitter story of a master who was kind until he got drunk, when he became vicious. But *The Tree Named John* stresses the affection between the white family and its servants, and "the better and gentler side of the Negro ... a phase of Negro life which is fast being swallowed up in the 'Harlem movement.'"

In his *Juneteenth* (1932), J. Mason Brewer is likewise concerned "about how unrepresentative of his people in the South and Southwest the loudly-heralded Negro literature of Harlem is—how false both in psychology and language." It is not clear why one should expect the treatment of Harlem to be representative of Brazos Bottom. One of the first collections of old-time tales by a Negro, *Juneteenth* is generally amusing. In a few tales the tables are turned on old "Massa," but there are none so harsh as Sales' "Ghos'es" or the memories of slavery found in E. C. L. Adams. A few good additions to the Brer Rabbit cycle, and some interesting folk-tales called "White Man's Nigger: I," "White Man's Nigger: II," "The Tale of the Stud Nigger" and "Railroad Bill" are included in Carl Carmer's *Stars Fell on Alabama* (1934) which, true to its title, concentrates upon the strange and mysterious. Vincent McHugh's *Caleb Catlum's America* (1937) brings Uncle Remus and John Henry together with American folk-heroes in a fine yarn.

Summary. Whether sociological realism or folklore or partaking of both, the books considered in this chapter have been marked by a close and often sympathetic study of the Negro. Even in the case of Bradford's comics and Julia Peterkin's exotics, authenticity has been carefully sought. This regard for realism, even when incomplete, has meant the discarding of traditional estimates. Occasionally as in Wood and Heyward, and especially in Adams, concern for complete truth has resulted in the recording of tragedies which no Negro folk group, however isolated, has been so fortunate as to escape. With new information and insight these authors have brought the Negro into the mainstream of American realism.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Trace the growing criticism of the South in this chapter. What is significant about this?
2. How does the place of the Negro in the picture in this chapter, differ from his place in the work of Kennedy, Page, Harris, Cable and Twain?
3. Compare Harris and Adams in their treatment of the folk.
4. Which authors seem closest to the plantation tradition?
5. Read Bradford's "Foreword" to *Ol' Man Adam and His Chillun* and relate to Thomas Nelson Page.
6. Compare the authors of folk-realism with the apologists of the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER IX
THE URBAN SCENE

The Harlem School.—Before 1925 there was little in American fiction about Negro life in northern cities. But when "the peasant moved cityward" in the great sweeps of migration, books about the urban Negro multiplied. The numbers of Negroes in northern cities grew by leaps and bounds from 1916 on. Although various cities beckoned—Pittsburgh with its steelmills, Chicago with its stockyards, Detroit with its automobile factories—it was Harlem that became the Mecca for the southern Negro, the West Indian, and the African. One historian of Harlem states that it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth. Harlem became a Mecca likewise for white pleasure seekers from downtown and abroad, who, hunting the new thrill with the desperate eagerness of the post-war generation, rushed to what they considered a place of primitive abandon, of unfailing "joy of life." Cabarets sprang up like mushrooms; putting on a big time became a major industry. In revolt against Victorian prudishness and repression, and machine-age standardization, writers and artists escaped to dark Harlem for vicarious joy, and discovered an "exotic, savage world," only a nickel's subway ride from the heart of an over-

civilized city. The Harlem Boom was useful to Negro writers, who were influenced by the growing race-consciousness of the "greatest Negro city in the world." Some accepted the downtown version of pagan Harlem as gospel, others put in disclaimers, but all made eager contact with the literary world.

Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1925) was the first novel to exploit this newly discovered territory, and has remained the most influential. The author, already known for sophisticated fiction, was attracted by the high spirits and piquant contrasts of Harlem. Running through the descriptions of cabarets, wild parties, and sensational orgies is the story of Byron, an "intellectual" wastrel. He is loved by Mary, a girl superior to the fast set, but he cannot resist the wiles of Lasca, "a gorgeous brown Messalina of Seventh Avenue." Byron's character cracks under the strain of fast living. His last gesture is one of typical futility: in a fit of jealous and drunken rage, he empties his gun into the body of his rival, who was already dead, while the police approach.

Nigger Heaven presented a setting and type of life that were little known to American fiction except for *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*. The gin-mills and cabarets, the kept men and loose ladies of Harlem's bohemian fringe, have surface accuracy and the appeal of the unfamiliar. Van Vechten in a short space of time observed closely. But like a discoverer, he

was partial to exotic singularities. That these exist does not validate the claim of the publishers that "Herein is caught the fascination and tortured ecstasies of Harlem.... The author tells the story of modern Negro life." Modern Negro life is not in *Nigger Heaven*; certain selected scenes to prove Negro primitivism are.

Claude McKay's *Home To Harlem* (1926) has for its setting the speak-easies, buffet flats and "tonsorial parlors" of a pagan Harlem. The characters are longshoremen, dining car cooks and waiters, and members of sporting circles. Casual love affairs are their main pursuits. Jake, an ex-soldier, recently returned from the World War, meets and loses a marvelous brown charmer on his first night in Harlem. His picaresque adventures and those of his cronies take up the rest of the book, until he finds the long-lost beauty at the end. Working conditions on the railroad are described with some grimness, but *Home To Harlem* lacks McKay's sharpest protest. McKay's nearest approach to his poetry is in the ecstatic worship with which Jake looks upon the abandon of the gay Mecca.

McKay's *Banjo* (1929) is related to the Harlem school of fiction, describing the life of stevedores, tramps, sailors and panhandlers in the "Ditch" at Marseilles. Ray, a vagabond intellectual from *Home To Harlem*, does much of the talking; savoring color, joy and beauty wherever he finds it, he is attracted to the primitive and violent longshoremen.

> Educated Negroes ashamed of their race's intuitive love of color ... ashamed of Congo-sounding laughter, ashamed of their complexion (bleaching out), ashamed of their strong appetites. No being ashamed for Ray. Rather than lose his soul, let intellect go to hell and live instinct!

To Ray, "A black man, even though educated, was in closer biological kinship to the swell of primitive earth life." Anti-bourgeois and anti-imperialist, seeing the "civilized world" from the bottom, Ray is nevertheless a racialist, not a radical. And such, in *Banjo*, is the author's position. He has been praised for dealing with the proletariat, but the beachcombers here can hardly be so considered. It is hard to see how reliance upon instinct will improve the lot of the submerged and the defeated.

The Harlem stories in *Gingertown* (1932) return us to blues singers, "sweet backs," entertainers, longshoremen, railroad men, barbers, chambermaids, bellhops, waiters and beautiful "brownskins." All of these are called by McKay the "joy-lovers" of the belt, but their stories do not reveal great joy. In "Brownskin Blues" and "Mattie and Her Sweetman" McKay bitterly scores color prejudice among Negroes themselves; in "Highball" he scores prejudice among the whites. "Near-White" tells conventionally of the unhappy "passer." In "Truant," a dining car waiter, married to a social climber, throws up his menial job like a Sherwood Anderson hero. The stories are done

with unabashed realism, but they do not cover a wide range.

McKay's stories of his native Jamaica in *Gingertown* and his third novel *Banana Bottom* (1933), though realistic, have a pastoral quality. A setting and way of life are skillfully and affectionately conveyed in both books and we are spared preachments on "the problem." In *Banana Bottom* especially, character development is uppermost. The story of Bita Plant, educated in England, is simple and winning. Minor characters like Squire Gensir, Jubban, Anty Nommy and Crazy Bow are memorable, not idealized, but emerging with dignity and warm flesh-and-blood humanity.

Although these are perhaps McKay's best fiction, the greater part of his work deals with American Negroes, particularly in Harlem. McKay has denied that he was influenced by Van Vechten, stating that *Home To Harlem* was about completed before *Nigger Heaven* was published. There are points of agreement, however; McKay, like Van Vechten, believes in "the inexpressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race," and therefore seeks in the main the colorful aspects of "the joy-belt." There are differences as well. Having worked as dining car waiter, porter and longshoreman, McKay knew the unskilled Negro worker at first hand, not from an outside view. "I created my Negro characters without sandpaper and varnish." Because of this, his people are not the quaint,

artless innocents endeared to so many authors and readers. They live hard lives, and are consequently hardened: they may be ignorant, but they are not naïve. In dealing with the urban worker, McKay opened a new field. But the Harlem he portrayed still seems too close to the Harlem of a popular literary fashion. And the "inner lives" he knows so well have not yet been shown with the depth of understanding that one might expect of Claude McKay.

Rudolph Fisher portrays Harlem with a jaunty realism. *The Walls of Jericho* deals with types as different as piano-movers and "race-leaders." The antics of Jinx and Bubber are first-rate slapstick, and though traces of Octavus Roy Cohen appear, most of the comedy is close to Harlem side-walks. Fisher is likewise master of irony. Miss Cramp, the philanthropist, who believes that mulattoes are the result of the American climate, is caricatured, but the picture of the Annual Costume Ball of the G.I.A. (General Improvement Association) is rich comedy of manners. He deftly ridicules the thrill-seekers from downtown who find everything in Harlem "simply marvelous." Satiric toward professional uplifters, *The Walls of Jericho* still has the New Negro militancy. Merrit is an embittered "New Negro"; he believes that the Negro should let the Nordic do the serious things, and spend his time in "tropic nonchalance, developing nothing but his capacity for enjoyment," and then take complete possession

through force of numbers. Fisher likewise shows the spirit of racial unity between the "dicties" and the masses—"Fays don' see no difference 'tween dickty shines and any other kind o' shines. One jig in danger is ev'y jig in danger." It is significant, however, that the wrecking of a Negro's house in a white neighborhood is the work of a disgruntled Negro, the villain of the book.

But Fisher was less interested in the "problem" than in the life and language of Harlem's poolrooms, cafes, and barber shops. *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), the first detective novel by a Negro, brings Jinx and Bubber back to the scene to help solve one of Harlem's grisliest murders. A high-brow detective, an efficient Negro police sergeant and an erudite doctor of voodoo are interesting new characters. The novel is above the average in its popular field and was followed by a Harlem tenement murder mystery solved by the same detective.

Before his untimely death, Fisher became one of the best short story writers of the New Negro movement. "The City of Refuge," containing a good description of the southern migrant's happy amazement at Harlem, and "Blades of Steel" are first-rate local color of the barber shops, dance-halls and cafes. "Vestiges" and "Miss Cynthie," for all of their light touch, have an unusual tenderness and fidelity to middle class experience. Fisher was an observer with a

quick eye and a keen ear, and a witty commentator. At times his plots are too neat, with something of O. Henry's trickery. His Harlem is less bitter than McKay's, but it exists; and his realism, as far as it goes, is as definite as that of any of the numerous writers who took Harlem for their province.

In Countee Cullen's *One Way To Heaven* (1932), Sam Lucas, a one-armed gambler and vagabond, practices a racket around the churches, pretending to be saved at revivals and thereby collecting money. His testimony in a Harlem church converts Mattie, who falls in love with him. Alternately vicious and sentimental, Sam makes Mattie's life miserable until his pretended death-bed vision of salvation brings happiness to the religious girl. Mattie's working for Constancia Brown, an upper-class Negro, serves as an excuse to bring in the artistic-bohemian Harlem. Cullen's pictures of this set are almost cartoons. He lampoons the back-to-Africa movement, the philistines who form Book-Lovers' Societies, the public reciters and the extreme New Negro racialists. But Constancia, who refuses to "pass," speaks the New Negro creed:

> Enjoyment isn't across the line. Money is there, and privilege, and the sort of power which comes with numbers but as for enjoyment, they don't know what it is.... I have seen two Negroes turn more than one dull party, where I was longing for home and Harlem, into a revel which Puck himself would find it hard to duplicate.

The best part of the novel is the portrayal of the Negro church. This is fresher material, presented with understanding.

Purpose Novels. More realistic than his earlier fiction, *Dark Princess* (1928) by W. E. B. DuBois, is still part fantasy, and part mordant social criticism. As editor of the *Crisis*, DuBois had urged a union of the darker races of the world. *Dark Princess* is an allegory driving home the same message. In its last chapter Matthew Towns, the Negro hero, flies to his homeplace in rural Virginia where his wife, Kautilya, Her Royal Highness of Bwodpur, India, has just given birth to a son, Matthew or Madhu. The son is acclaimed "King of the Snows of Gaurisaukar, Grand Mughal of Utter India, Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!" Kautilya explains:

> There had to be a Maharajah in Bwodpur of the blood royal; else brown reaction and white intrigue had made of it a footstool of England. If I had not borne your son ... Bwodpur and Sindrabad, India, and all the Darker World [would have been lost.]

Less fantastic are the sections dealing with America, in which Matthew Towns meets with galling insults, lack of opportunity on every hand, and the smooth chicanery of Negro politicians. Two interesting characters are Perigua, a Negro anarchist, and Sara, a striving Negro woman, who plays the political game. There are plots and counterplots in the manner of E. Phillips Oppenheim. DuBois speaks of the novel as "rich and colored gossamer of a dream

which the Queen of Faerie lent to me for a season." But the fusion of dream and social realism is not achieved; the novel falls between the two.

A prominent figure in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Walter White has made use of the novel for social protest. *The Fire In The Flint* (1925) tells the tragedy of a better-class, aspiring Negro family in a Georgia town. Bob Harper kills two white men who raped his sister. Tracked down by a lynching mob, he shoots himself with his last bullet. His brother Kenneth, a promising young physician, is lynched in the ensuing hysteria for "assaulting a white woman" whom he had been called in to attend. *The Fire In The Flint* contains sardonic comment upon the backwardness of the South. The millhands of Factoryville have only "one strong conviction—the inherent and carefully nurtured hatred of the 'nigger'." Like the earlier apologists, White makes use of well educated heroes, avoids dialect in the main, concentrates the injustices of the South into fairly small compass, and has bitter contempt for the "cracker" and the Klan. But *The Fire In The Flint* has more of an impact than the earlier books on lynching.

Although Walter White's *Flight* (1926) describes the Atlanta riot, it is principally a novel about "passing." Mimi Daquin, a New Orleans octoroon of distinguished lineage, has an unfortunate love affair with an upper class Negro

in Atlanta, and goes to the North. Seeking security for her child she marries a white broker, but remains essentially unhappy. Her husband has no love for Negroes. Even as a child, Mimi had believed that Creoles of Negro blood had something "tangible, yet intangible ... a warmth, a delicate humanness" that white Creoles did not have. As a woman, she believes that Negroes alone "can laugh and ... enjoy the benefits of the machine without being crushed by it." A furtive trip to Harlem makes her wonder if her somber cynical white companions, "whose unhappiness shone through all they did or said," were worth the price she was paying. When she hears a great Negro artist singing spirituals, she is set free, and returns to her own.

Bourgeois Realism.—Continuing the earlier apologist tradition, with propaganda a little less direct, certain novelists have set out to prove the presence of a Negro upper-class, and to deplore the injustices of its lot. Their standards are bourgeois; they respect characters in ratio to their color, breeding, gentility, wealth and prestige. "Realism" is perhaps a misnomer, if these novels are judged by their plots, which are seldom very life-like; the realism is chiefly in the settings.

Gertrude Sanborn's *Veiled Aristocrats* (1923) reveals the type. The "aristocrats under the veil" are mulatto descendants of southern aristocrats—"the souls of worthy men and women caught by a mad fate

in a prison of prejudice!" A sentimental white youth is brought into contact with these fine people, especially with Carr McClellan, a World War hero, and a great sculptor. Carr is beloved by the beautiful daughter of a white financier. At the right time she is revealed to be colored too, another "veiled aristocrat," so everything ends happily. There are many incredible coincidences. Though well-meaning, the author is still condescending. Her protest concludes lamely: "Fact of the matter, most of us are not giving our colored brothers a square deal."

Zona Gale, introducing Jessie Fauset's third novel, states inaccurately: "Wherever the American Negro has appeared in fiction, only the uneducated Negro has been pictured." She is on surer ground when she writes that Negroes of education and substance "merit the awareness of their fellow countrymen." In her own foreword, Jessie Fauset reveals her bent to "the colored American who is not pressed too hard by the Furies of Prejudice, Ignorance, and Economic Injustice," and who has his own caste lines.

> As naturally as his white compatriot he speaks of his "old Boston families," "old Philadelphians," "old Charlestonians." And he has a wholesome respect for family and education and labor and the fruits of labor ... sufficiently conservative to lay a slightly greater stress on the first two of these four.

There Is Confusion (1924) has as central characters Joanna Marshall, an ambitious dancer, whose "success and fame were instant," and Peter Bye, a brilliant, sensitive medical student.

The home-life of middle-class Philadelphia receives some attention, but the love story receives far more. The "problem" is never far off. In a pageant, Joanna represents America. Forced by great applause to unmask, she speaks:

> I hardly need tell you that there is no one in the audience more American than I am. My great grandfather fought in the Revolution, my uncle fought in the Civil War, and my brother is 'over there' now.

Joanna refuses to marry a Negro whom she found "charming and sympathetic ... [but] too white. She did not want a marriage which would keep the difficulties of color more than ever before her eyes." *Plum Bun* (1929) is greatly concerned with "passing." Believing that "the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only," Angela goes "over the line." After a disillusioning liaison with a rich white man, "which left no trace on her moral nature," she falls in love with Anthony Cross, and fears to reveal her secret. But love will find a way: he reveals that he too is of Negro parentage, "passing" because his father was lynched by a mob. So now they can marry, as in *Veiled Aristocrats*. The beautiful brown sister, for whom life has been evenly pleasant, likewise marries happily at the book's end.

The Chinaberry Tree (1931) is again concerned less with the unspectacular drama of the Negro middle class, than with the melodrama of the octoroon. The two heroines are illegitimate. Laurentine is the daughter of Aunt

Sal and Colonel Halloway, who loved Sal devotedly but could not marry her. In contrast to Laurentine's love affair, there is a great deal of confusion in the life of Melissa, who is saved only in the nick of time from marrying her half-brother. There are valuable glimpses of Negro community life in Red Brook, the characters ranging from Mrs. Ismay, a Bostonian of "innate gentility," to young pool-room sports. But the complications springing from the "mystery of birth" make what could have been realism into old-fashioned romance. Olivia Cary, who dominates *Comedy, American Style* (1933) is obsessed by the need to be white, not out of shame for her blood, but because of the things which the white world possesses. She persecutes her husband and drives her daughter into a loveless marriage and her son to suicide. The bitter comedy of race-prejudice is ultimately blamed. With random flashes of power, *Comedy, American Style* is without satiric drive, and manages to be sentimental instead of tragic.

Jessie Fauset has been called by one critic the American woman most worthy "to wear the mantle of Jane Austen's genius." This comparison is not apt: Jane Austen's satiric approach to her people and setting and her neatly logical plots are not evident in Miss Fauset's four novels. Miss Fauset is sentimental, and regardless of her disclaimers, is an apologist. She records a class in order to praise a race. Favorite characters are chauvinists, condemning "the dastardly

American whites," believing that Negro blood is "the leaven that will purify this Nordic people of their cruelty and their savage lust of power." Having courageously set herself to chart the class of Negroes she knows, Jessie Fauset, at her best, succeeds in a realism of the sort sponsored by William Dean Howells. Too often, however, instead of typical Negro middle class experience we get the more spectacular "passing," and exceptional Negro artists and cosmopolitans. Miss Fauset has written:

> To be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation. The elements of the play fall together involuntarily; they are just waiting for Fate the producer to quicken them into movement,—for Chance the Prompter to interpret them with fidelity.

But her novels rely too much upon Fate and Chance.

The Tragic Mulatto Passes For White. Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) covers a great deal of ground, from Georgia to Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and finally a small southern town. Upper class Negroes are her main characters, and their snobbishness is revealed (both consciously and unconsciously). Helga Crane is buffeted about, but does not attain tragic stature. The attempt to reveal a self-centred, harassed personality is commendable, but is not helped by scenes like the one in which the sophisticated heroine attends a church meeting, and there, overwhelmed by the frenzy, begins to yell like one insane, and to weep torrents of tears. She felt "a supreme aspiration toward the

regaining of simple happiness ... unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known." In *Passing* (1930) Mrs. Larsen is anxious to set before us the refinement and good taste of wealthier Negroes. Clare, who "passes," is unhappy, and frequently visits Harlem. "You don't realize, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh." Says the author's spokesman, "they always come back." Discovered in Harlem by her Negro-hating husband, Clare falls from a sixth story window—death solves her problems. Her friend, Irene, who would not "pass," lives in contrast a happy, respectable life.

White novelists rushed into print with a different version. Vara Caspary's *The White Girl* (1929) and Geoffrey Barnes' *Dark Lustre* (1932) are so alike in essentials that they should be considered together. Both of the heroines are repelled by Negro life and Negro suitors. Both because of their exotic beauty become artistic models, and both have tragic love affairs with white men. In *The White Girl*, Solaria's secret is revealed by the coincidental appearance of her brown-skinned brother. Desperate, and believing that she is growing darker, she drinks poison. In *Dark Lustre* Aline's dilemma is solved by having her die in childbirth, but her whiter baby lives to continue "a cycle of pain." Both books advance the old superstitions. Solaria at a wild party is thus explained: "It was

the colored blood in her, the heritage from some forgotten ancestor, that released these warm wild winds of passion." Aline is thus explained: "There was too much nigger in her to follow a line of reasoning when the black cloud of her emotions settled over it." It is all so sad.

Hallie Dickerman's *Stephen Kent* (1935), on the other hand, takes up the cudgel for her mulatto hero's superiority, but he is made too superior, winning prizes and acting nobly at every turn. There is much mystery about "tainted blood," about the reappearance of colored blood "unto the third and fourth generations." A sympathetic plea for justice, *Stephen Kent* is still hard to credit. *Imitation of Life* (1933) by Fannie Hurst was well meaning, perhaps, but it, too, perpetuated old stereotypes. Peola longs to be white: "I won't be a nigger! I won't be a nigger!" Her black mother is philosophical about it: "It may be mixed up wid plenty of white blood ... but thin out chicken gravy wid water an' it remains chicken gravy, only not so good." When Peola meets with problems:

> Lord git de white horses drove out of her blood. Kill de curse—shame de curse her light-colored pap lef' for his baby. Chase it, rabbit's foot. Chase de wild white horses trampin' on my chile's happiness.... It's de white horses dat's wild, a-swimmin' in de blood of mah chile....

It is no wonder that, longing to be stable, Peola "passes" and marries on the other side. Delilah, with a "rambunctious capacity for devotion," is the old contented slave, brought up to date, worshipful of her white Miss Honey Bea,

to whom her drudgery has brought wealth. The statement is clear: black Negroes, contented with serving and worshipping whites; mixed Negroes, discontented, aspiring, and therefore tragic. Alas, the poor mulatto!

We have thus seen that the mulatto who "passes" has been a victim of opposing interpretations. Negro novelists urge his unhappiness, until he is summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full-throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways. One of Wallace Thurman's characters says:

> My dear, you've been reading novels. Thousands of Negroes cross the line and I assure you that few, if any, feel that fictional urge to rejoin their own kind.... Negroes who can and do pass are so glad to get away they probably join the K.K.K. to uphold white supremacy.

But this is heresy: a mystical bond must be shown, the cutting of which produces grief, since the white world is "pallid and to be pitied."

White novelists insist upon the mulatto's unhappiness for other reasons. To them he is the anguished victim of a divided inheritance. Mathematically they work it out that his intellectual strivings and self-control come from his white blood, and his emotional urgings, indolence and potential savagery come from his Negro blood. Their favorite character, the octoroon, wretched because of the "single drop of midnight in her veins," desires a white lover above all else, and must therefore go down to a tragic end. The white version is nearly a century

old; the Negro version sprang up recently. Both are examples of race flattery. Divided between conflicting attitudes, the poor mulatto finds added unhappiness in his interpreters.

In Opposition. But the idealism seen in the apologistic, the bourgeois, and the "passing" novels found a gleeful critic in George Schuyler, of the H. L. Mencken school of satirists. *Black No More* (1931) tells how Dr. Crookman discovers a drug that will turn Negroes white. Negroes rush to use it, even the chauvinists who had preached pride of race. Schuyler lampoons both sides, the professional "race-men" who were tremendous gainers from the "problem," and the spokesman of the Knights of Nordica who, though totally ignorant, discussed over the radio "anthropology, psychology, miscegenation, cooperation with Christ, getting right with God, and curbing Bolshevism...." Telling blows are landed on statisticians, rhetorical windbags, pretentious strivers and hat-in-hand Negroes, but *Black No More* is farce rather than satire, in the last analysis—provoking more mirth than thought. It was, however, refreshingly different. *Slaves Today* (1932) is an attack upon the mistreatment of the natives in Liberia by the upper-class Americo-Liberians. Schuyler's narrative sketches in such magazines as *The American Mercury* are told with terseness and point.

Wallace Thurman is likewise the "devil's advocate" in his two novels. Emma Lou in *The*

Blacker The Berry (1929) is another defeated heroine, not because she is an octoroon, however, but for precisely the opposite reason. Well-educated, she is unable to get suitable positions and social life because she is black. She goes around for a time with the "New Negro intellectuals," but is ill at ease with them. Scorned and rejected, she sinks deeper and deeper into drabness. Thurman thus puts his finger upon one of the sorest points of the Negro bourgeoisie, its color snobbishness, "its blue vein circle," "aspiring to be whiter and whiter every generation." His descriptions of Harlem rent parties and the like are of Van Vechten's school, but the theme of his novel deserves attention. Unfortunately the writing is slipshod, and the steady decline of his central character is less tragic than depressing. His heroine is as morbidly sensitive about color as any tragic octoroon, and shows as little fight.

The Infants of The Spring (1932) shows Thurman taking less seriously his coterie of Harlem artists. Young in years and achievement, they flatter themselves as "a lost generation," and like Van Vechten's Byron, seek escape in dissipation. One cynical character speaks:

> Being a Negro writer in these days is a racket and I'm going to make the most of it while it lasts. I find queer places for whites to go in Harlem ... out-of-the-way primitive churches, side street speakeasies and they fall for it. About twice a year I manage to sell a story.... I am a genius in the making. Thank God for this Negro Literary Renaissance! Long may it flourish!

Debunking the Bohemian futility of the intellectuals, Thurman is just as severe on the bourgeois idealists and the various race-messiahs. *Infants of The Spring* is at times peevish, at times angry, crudely written, and not always well thought out. But like Thurman's first novel, it had something to say.

Black Sadie (1928) by T. Bowyer Campbell is an irritated southerner's attempt to debunk the Harlem that lured jaded Bohemians. From "corn-field nigger" Sadie rises to be model for the New Negro exaltation of *Africa victrix*, and the toast of artistic New York. Even in her affluence, however, Sadie is a kleptomaniac. After causing a murder, she returns to happy Virginia. "Easy come, easy go, niggers" are Campbell's closing words. Campbell's satire has point, but he is too vexed to get it across. It is obvious, also, that the stereotype he prefers is that of the comic menial.

Dark Surrender by Ronald Kirkbride (1933), after describing South Carolina plantation life in the manner of Julia Peterkin, delivers an attack upon the "New Negro." Having deserted a wife on the plantation, who promptly becomes a Scarlet Sister Mary, Tom goes to the North, graduates from Harvard with athletic and scholastic honors, visits Europe, and becomes a great poet. But he gives it all up as "imitation of the accomplishments of the white man," and returns to the soil. To the white owner of the plantation he states that Negroes

who have aspirations and yearn to be great ... are fools in the sense that they are not true negroes.... To live from day to day in simple enjoyment, with no cares nor worries, with no great attempts, to be something which you are not ... that is life, the true life.... The negro has his place in the present, in the simple life, with no desires but of the body, with no yearnings for the future nor for the past....

Maxwell Bodenheim, with a naturalist's approach, could not see in Harlem only a place of joy-filled Negroes. In *Naked On Roller Skates* (1931) he shows the harsher, truculent aspects of Harlem dives. In *Ninth Avenue* (1926) he shows the seamy aspects of Manhattan. His white heroine in this book marries a Negro, a better man than any of the Ninth Avenue set. Contrary to O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* this intermarriage is not doomed to failure. In *Deep River* (1934) Clement Wood does not have the regret, disdain, or anxiety with which most southern novelists look upon Harlem and the "New Negro." This chronicle of the marriage of a noted Negro singer to a white woman is frankly done, exploiting a subject generally taboo. But it is hardly worthy to stand alongside Wood's earlier novel *Nigger*.

Summary. The fiction of urban realism was valuable for introducing new characters in a new milieu. Whether created by Negro or white authors, the characters are race-conscious, and at times militant. But the old stereotypes by no means disappeared. Carl Van Vechten has a

noted magazine editor comment on the possibilities of Negro literature:

> Nobody has yet written a good gambling story; nobody has gone into the curious subject of the divers tribes of the region.... Nobody has ever done the Negro servant-girl, who refuses to live in. Washing dishes in the day-time, she returns at night to Harlem where she smacks her daddy in the jaw or else dances and makes love. On the whole I should say she has the best time of any domestic servant in the world.... The Negro fast set does everything the Long Island fast set does ... but it is vastly more amusing ... for the simple reason that it is *amused*.

Most authors took this to heart. What resulted was a search for the exotic and an insistence that Negroes were peculiarly marked by a "joy of living." Dance-halls, rent-parties, gambling, sprees, casual love-affairs crowded out more serious realism. The cabin was exchanged for the cabaret, but Negroes were still described as "creatures of joy." Even Negro propagandists urged this, seeking to find some superior "racial gift." To look for the true life of a Negro community in cabarets, most often run by white managers for white thrill-seekers, is like looking for the truth about slavery in the off-time banjo-plunking and capers before the big house. Focusing upon carefree abandon, the Harlem school, like the plantation tradition, neglected the servitude. Except for brief glimpses, the drama of the workaday life, the struggles, the conflicts, are missing. And such definite features of Harlem as the lines of the unemployed, the overcrowded schools, the delinquent children headed straight

to petty crime, the surly resentment—all of these seeds that bore such bitter fruit in the Harlem riot—are conspicuously absent.

Bourgeois realists did "apprise white humanity of the better classes among Negro humanity," but this is a value apart from the values of fiction. Their upper-class characters too often seem to serve as window-display. "Passing for white" is made a much more acute and frequent problem that it is in ordinary Negro middle class experience. With discerning satire, Martha Gruening sums up the argument of Negro bourgeois realism:

> I am writing this book because most white people still believe that all Colored People are cooks called Mandy or Pullman porters called George—but they aren't. They think we all live in cotton field cabins or in city slums, but actually some of us live on Edgecomb Avenue or Chestnut Street. We don't all shout at Camp Meeting or even all belong to the Baptist or Methodist church. Some of us are *Episcopalians*. If you were privileged to visit our homes (which you aren't, for we are just as exclusive as you are) you would find bathtubs, sets of the best authors and etchings! That's how refined we are. We have class distinctions, too.... The daughters of our upper classes are beautiful and virtuous and look like illustrations in *Vogue* ... far more attractive than white girls of the same class, for they come in assorted shades.... Joy isn't on your side of the line, nor song, nor laughter.

There is certainly place in American fiction for treatment of the Negro middle-class. The precarious situation of this small group could well attract a realist of vision, not only to satirize its pretense, but also to record its dogged struggling. But to approve it in proportion to its

resembling white middle-class life, is not the way of important realism.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What earlier fiction dealt with the Negro in northern cities?

2. How is the Van Vechten tradition similar to the plantation tradition?

3. List the authors who consider the Negro to be a "creature of joy."

4. Why have the novels of "bourgeois realism" been called "prospectuses to sell the white world the idea of a Negro middle class?"

5. Why are the opposing attitudes to "passing" examples of race flattery?

6. What northern cities with large Negro populations are as yet untreated by novelists?

7. What is race-chauvinism? Point out examples in the fiction discussed.

CHAPTER X
SOUTHERN REALISM

Mystics and Poets. In his *Notebook* (1926) Sherwood Anderson tells of a Mississippian who showed the ear of a lynched Negro as a symbol of "white superiority." Anderson seldom mentions such gruesome facts of Negro experience; like Van Vechten and Julia Peterkin he is attracted to the Negro's elemental exoticism. In "I Want To Know Why," the white hero is drawn to Negro jockeys, cooks and stable boys; in *Dark Laughter* (1925) Anderson himself is fascinated by the Negro's superiority to dull, standardized whites.

> Niggers on the docks, niggers in the city streets, niggers laughing. A slow dance is going on.... A brown woman having thirteen children—a different man for every child—going to church too, singing, dancing, broad shoulders, broad hips, soft eyes, a soft laughing voice.... Negroes singing had sometimes a way of getting at the ultimate truth of things.

This chorus of happy sensualists mocking repressed whites may explain "ultimate truth" to Anderson, but a great deal of truth about their lives escapes his penetrating interest. Harassed by Puritanism and industrialism, Anderson has found elements that bring him peace, rather than interpretation of a people.

Waldo Frank looks upon *Holiday* (1923) as his story of "one of the greatest of American dramas—the struggle in the South between the

white race and the black ... *each of which ... needs what the other possesses*." Like his fellow mystic Anderson, Frank sees Niggertown to be full of warm song and happy, ironic laughter, free from the strain of money-making, repressed White-town. But he likewise sees insult, exploitation and struggle. "Chokin' is de black man's life," says one old woman, who knows the South too well. The passive cruelty of White Nazareth is introduced when a Negro deckhand drowns and no one makes an effort to save him. We see the active cruelty when John Cloud, ambitious and manly young Negro, and Virginia, "weary of her whiteness," of being incessantly sheltered, step out from the pattern. In a spell of drought and revivals, John and Virginia meet by accident in the woods above Nazareth. Though "boss-girl" and "servant-man," they have been drawn from mutual respect into desire. When Virginia returns to Nazareth, the meeting is misunderstood, and the men, already whipped up by religious hysteria, quickly form a mob. Shocked from her dream of escape, Virginia sinks back into southern conventionality and half-remorseful inertia, and does not speak. At dusk, John is burned in the Square of Nazareth.

Frank sees that White-town, assuring itself that the "nigger will stay in his place," is still forever suspicious of "the muttering, the stirring." More boldly than others, Frank reveals

what he considers the deepest cause of much of the fear:

'Good mo'nin ... I have been walkin' by yo' side all of this street. An' yo' didn't see me.' He gives these words with a prophetic dryness. John feels the ominous threat.... '*I've watched you, nigger*,' they say, '*I've watched you lookin' at my daughter. How dare you look at my daughter? Nigger, that look in yo' eyes means murder in our land. How dare you nigger, look so hard at my daughter that you forget to salute the white man at yo' side?*'

When Virginia, who knows how free her brother is with Negro women, laughs at the "fanatical obsessions" of her men-folk, she adds flame to the tinder. Symbolic and difficult, *Holiday* is still a true, powerful and different version of race relations in the South. In *The Death and Birth of David Markand* (1933), however, the brief treatment of the Negro falls below the penetration of *Holiday*.

Deriving in part from Anderson and Waldo Frank, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) has much greater intimacy with Negro life, dealing equally well with the black belt of Georgia and bourgeois Washington. Toomer is master of fluid, evocative prose; some of his stories are prose-poems.

The sun is hammered to a band of gold. Pine-needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow. No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves. Over in the forest, across the swamp, a sawmill blows its closing whistle. Smoke curls up.... Curls up and spreads itself pine-high above the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley. A black boy ... you are the most sleepiest man I ever seed, Sleeping Beauty ... cradled on a

gray mule, guided by the hollow sound of cowbells, heads for them through a rusty cotton field.

His faithfully portrayed Georgia landscape Toomer has peopled with faithfully drawn characters, such as Fern, the shiftless, ignorant beauty of the Georgia Pike, and Becky, a white outcast, who bears two Negro children. “Blood Burning Moon” tells of the rivalry between a Negro and a white man for a Negro girl, that ends in a murder and a lynching. Not propaganda in the manner of the apologists, it is tragic realism at its best.

Neither debunking Negro society nor glorifying it, Toomer pictures Washington with the thoroughness of one who knew it from the inside. The futile, and in the story of “Avey,” the drably tragic revolt against the smugness of a rising middle-class, are brilliantly set before us. Toomer was sharply criticized by Negroes for his “betrayal”; his insight and tenderness seemed to escape them. “Kabnis” is a long, occasionally obscure story of a northern Negro teaching school in Georgia. No one has done so well as Toomer the hypocritical school principal, a petty, puritanical tyrant who truckles to the whites. Laymon, a preacher-teacher who “knows more than would be good for anyone other than a silent man”; Halsey, a self-assured, courageous artisan; and Kabnis, a weakling idealist driven to cynicism and dissipation until he discovers, mystically, the strength of his people, are similarly well drawn. Toomer reveals in “Kabnis” an insight that makes his failure to

write a novel about Negro life one of the undoubted losses of contemporary literature.

In another brilliant first book, *Tropic Death* (1926), Eric Walrond is as conversant with his native West Indian life as Toomer was with that of Georgia. Like Toomer he stressed the tragedy and pain in his milieu rather than the joy-of-living stressed by the Harlem school. Gifted with a power of description, Walrond gives us, for the first time, a vivid sense of Negro life in the tropics below the Gulf stream.

All of the stories deal with death, which to these peasants, sailors and workers does not come easily, but violently, often horribly. One child, in the droughts, eats marl; her stomach distended like "a wind-filling balloon." Another dies, poisoned by *obeah*. Two "wharf rats" who dive for the coins flung by bored tourists are killed by a shark. The approach is unapologetically naturalistic; life in the tropics is not pleasant to Walrond, and he has not idealized it. He seems completely familiar with the divers West Indian dialects and with his characters' ways of life, whether they are underpaid workers on the Big Ditch, or truck gardeners in Barbadoes, or waiters and cooks on the old vessels that plow the Spanish Main. "Subjection" tells of the murder of a Negro laborer by a marine, for interference when the marine was beating a sick worker on a road-gang. With the exception of this story, Walrond writes little of social protest. He is sardonically aware of the

way imperialism is made to work, but his chief purpose is to make the reader "see," to give him sense impression of a unique, interesting world. The prose of *Tropic Death* is sometimes overwritten, sometimes too oblique for clarity. But it revealed uncommon powers that, regrettably, Walrond has not used further.

Langston Hughes' first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), one of the best by a Negro author, is set in a small Kansas town, a transplanted bit of the South. Sandy's mother, Annjee, works in the white-folks' kitchen and his grandmother, Aunt Hager, takes in washing so that Sandy shall have his chance, in spite of his irresponsible father, Jimboy. A life poor in the world's goods is shown to be "not without laughter": there are great colored tent meetings, carnivals, barbecues, dances, and guitar concerts by the beloved vagabond Jimboy. At their best, however, these enjoyments are poor reliefs from the day's hard work for the white-folks. Prejudice lies all around Sandy; going to the carnival on Children's Day, he is ordered away with "I told you little darkies this wasn't your party." For Sandy's pretty, joyful Aunt Harriet, there was nothing in Stanton after awhile but street-walking to the great grief of old, tired Aunt Hager. Excepting Aunt Tempy, who is sharply satirized as a high-toned striver, all of the characters are treated with sympathy. Here, done with poetic realism, is a good novel of boyhood.

God Sends Sunday (1931), the first novel of another Negro poet, Arna Bontemps, deals with sporting life at the turn of the century. Born on a Red River plantation, little Augie, a lover of horses, becomes a famous jockey in such racing towns as San Antonio, New Orleans, Louisville, and St. Louis. At the height of his fame he was "a treat to casual eyes."

> "I'se gonna git me a two-gallon high-roller hat dat won't do. Gonna git me a box-back coat an' a milk white ves' wid red roses painted on it."... His high-roller had twenty naked women worked in the eyelets in the crown. His shirts had two-inch candy stripes of purple, pink, green or orange.... His shoes had mirrors in the toes and dove-colored uppers with large pearl buttons....

Women flocked to him, especially Della and Florence, whom he loved "worse than a horse loves corn." But his luck turns, and Lil Augie says:

> I ain't nobody. I ain't nuthin. I's jes a po picked sparrow. I ain't big as a dime, an' I don't worth a nickel.

With all his bravado and vanity, Lil Augie is courageous as a bantam, always ready "to try anybody one barrel." *God Sends Sunday* is not pretentious, but it is a well-done portrait of a winning character.

Against Southern Charm. Three of the most intelligent women of the southern literary renaissance have had their say about the South's vaunted charm. In Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927) the heroine discovers that she is half-sister to Stiggins, a Negro stable boy, who is the half-witted butt of the town, and to two Negro women. Frustrated and desperate,

she turns more and more to furtive companionship with her sullen half-sisters. The incidental Negroes who work in boarding house kitchens, or take in washing, or do the heavy manual labor of the Kentucky town are far from the quaintly funny folk of Irvin Cobb and Ruth McEnery Stuart.

A roughly similar situation appears in Isa Glenn's *A Short History of Julia* (1928), an incisive attack upon the upper caste South. While Julia is being brought up as a hot-house plant, her servant Cynthia has a full and loose love-life. Both end up unhappily, with nothing to look forward to. Patty, one of the most believable mammies in fiction, brings up her white charges most decorously, but neglects her attractive and rebellious daughter. Chivalry is summed up by Negro characters as "white women jes' lying and lying to theirselves." The aristocratic men-folk, old topers, who, untrue to one "southern tradition," often get drunk, declaim that "a pure and virtuous lady is the finest work of the Almighty." But they keep Negro mistresses, and, in their dotage, unlike the earlier gentlemen, "forget to cover up."

Emily Clark's *Stuffed Peacocks* (1927) is affectionately ironic toward the F. F. V's. In "Chocolate Sponge," a servant calmly states that she is a lady, because her grandfather was Colonel Ashton Wycherly. Since Negroes did not usually mention such facts, she is "frightfully uncomfortable to have around." In spite of the

mask of servility, which the cleverest house-servants "are careful never to let slip," there are others who produce discomfort. Mammy Sally

> had been separated, as a young woman, from her first husband, whom she loved, and transplanted in another country.... Her ancient eyes were inscrutable and not altogether pleasant when she was questioned about it.

Similarly aloof, unconventional and forbidding are two other mammies, who disdain both Negro hilarity and white sentimentality. In "Fast Color," a Negro butler, almost a "stage darky," kept his thoughts carefully guarded. Knowing Negro servants in "their dining-room work, the most gracious form of labor," Miss Clark likewise knows that "their swiftest and simplest ways to impromptu gratuities" are not their only ways.

Regionalism. Less ambitious than the mystics and less probing than the critics of southern caste, a number of regionalists have followed the lead of DuBose Heyward, Howard Odum and Julia Peterkin. Nearly a decade ago a southern critic wrote that "the southerner has had to turn to the Negro when he wanted to paint life as it is"; and although less pertinent today, this partly explains the rush to describe the Negro. Many had new stories to tell, and they told them honestly and sincerely; many others offered twice-told tales. Their coverage of the South is widespread, and to follow them from Virginia to Louisiana is as good a plan as any.

Pernet Patterson's *The Road to Canaan* (1931), a collection of eight stories,

deals with Negro life in Richmond and the nearby country. Some are farcical, as the story where a visiting anthropologist, seeking to measure heads, spreads terror; some are pathetic. "Conjur" is a good tale of black magic; "Shoofly," one the best, re-creates life in a tobacco factory; and "Buttin' Blood" tells convincingly of the friendship of white and Negro boys. With no social protest and more than a trace of condescension, often engineered to end happily, Patterson's stories still show understanding.

Paul Green's few sketches of Negroes in *Wide Fields* (1928) do not have the power of his plays of Negro life, but they are sympathetic and true. There is bitterness in the stories of Arthur Loring, humble and hardworking "synonym for what the white folks thought Negroes ought to be," and of Lalie Fowler, the mother of a child by a white farmer. Hardworking tenant farmers, "flash" sports and bad men are convincingly shown in this book as well as in Green's novel *The Body of This Earth* (1935). It is significant that Green made over a story of poor-whites into a Negro farce, *The Man Who Died At Twelve O'clock*, with hardly any changes in idiom, characterization, and incident. A different Carolina locale and type of life are in R. H. Harriss' *The Foxes* (1936), a good hunting novel which includes well described Negro stable-boys, dog trainers, and old servants.

South Carolina. A new locale of South Carolina and a new type of people are discovered in *Po' Buckra* (1930) by Gertrude Shelby and Samuel Stoney, the authors of *Black Genesis*. In a community of quality white folks, "crackers," Negroes and "Brass-Ankles," Barty attempts to rise out of the last despised group, a mixture of Portuguese-Indian-Negro and American white stocks. But suspicion and gossip dog him about, and he becomes a drunkard and murderer. Minor Negro characters are well handled.

But where the authors of *Po' Buckra* stand on their own feet, Mrs. L. M. Alexander in *Candy* (1934) seems to lean heavily upon Julia Peterkin. Trouble visits only rarely the love-free, carefree pagans of Mimosa Hill Plantation, and then it is such trouble as jealousy. *Candy* won a ten thousand dollar prize. *Don't You Weep, Don't You Moan* (1935) did not win a literary prize, but it did win for its author, Richard Coleman, the distinction (bandied about by so many publishers) of being one who in a single book presented "the true Southern Negro." Needless to say Coleman approves the old dogmas such as "A nigger ... like de cotton fiel' bettuh den any othuh place in de worl' ..." and omits from his novel of exotic primitives any mention of insult and injustice.

Florida. Unlike Mrs. Alexander and Coleman, Zora Neale Hurston has no need to rely upon either DuBose Heyward or Julia Peterkin. Her short stories "Drenched With Light,"

"Spunk" and "The Gilded Six Bits" showed a command of folklore and idiom excelled by no earlier Negro novelist. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) recounts the rise of handsome, stalwart John Buddy from plowboy to moderator of the Baptists of Florida. But his flair for preaching and praying is exceeded by his weakness for women; even when he is married to the devoted Lucy who is "pretty as a speckled pup," he still cannot hold his straying feet. His fall is as abrupt as his rise. Loosely constructed, the novel presents authentic scenes of timber camps, railroad gangs with the "hammer-muscling men, the liars, fighters, bluffers and lovers," and the all-colored towns of Florida. The folk-speech is richly, almost too consistently, poetic. The characters are less developed than the setting; and the life they live is self-contained and untroubled. Nevertheless, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* contains the stuff of life, well observed and rendered.

A trained anthropologist as well as a native of Florida, Zora Neale Hurston has made in *Mules and Men* (1935) the first substantial collection of folk-tales by a Negro scholar. Zestful towards her material, and completely unashamed of it, she ingratiated herself with the tellers of tall tales in turpentine camps, or on store porches, and with the preachers of tall sermons in backwoods churches. Whether of the folk hero John, or of Brer Dog, Brer Snail, and Brer Gator, or of more contemporary people and

activity, Miss Hurston's "big old lies" are a delight to read. Miss Hurston writes:

> The Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and do not say to our questioner: 'Get out of here!' We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person, because, caring so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing.... 'He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind.'

Unfortunately, *Mules and Men* does not uncover so much that white collectors have been unable to get. The tales ring genuine, but there seem to be omissions. The picture is too pastoral, with only a bit of grumbling about hard work, or a few slave anecdotes that turn the tables on old marster. The bitterness that E. C. L. Adams recorded in *Nigger to Nigger* is not to be found in *Mules and Men*.

Miss Hurston's second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is informed and sympathetic. After unfortunate marriages—the first husband, a grubbing farmer, looked like "some old skull-head in de graveyard," and the second was intent only upon being the "big voice" in Eatonville—Janie Sparks is whirled into an idyllic marriage with high-spirited Tea Cake. There are good sketches of the all-colored town where comic-serious debates and tall tales are told on the mayor's store porch. But the love story and the poetic folk-speech are the chief interests. The people, "ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor," who swarm upon the "muck" for short-time jobs, do not get much

attention. Life in the all-colored town is fairly easy, with enough money and work to go around. Here and there social protest is evident: in the aftermath of the hurricane the conscripted grave-diggers are ordered to make sure of the race of the victims, since the whites are to get pine coffins, and the Negroes, quick lime.

> They's mighty particular how dese dead folks goes tuh judgment. Look lak they think God don't know nothin' 'bout de Jim Crow law.

The pine barrens and the swamps of Florida are the setting of Edwin Granberry's *Strangers and Lovers* (1928) in which the mutual hostility of the Negroes and "crackers," the brutality and the violence are skillfully detailed. In Theodore Pratt's *Big Blow* (1936) a poor white girl who lives by herself in the waste-land is protected by Clay, a giant Negro. When a "cracker" forces his attention upon her, Clay saves the girl, apologetically but firmly. The "cracker" is astounded that Clay has "put hand to a white man." Clay is strung up by a mob, and it is only by the greatest luck that he is saved.

Georgia. In *Glory* (1932), Nan Bagby Stephens, dealing with Negro life in a small southern Georgia town, is as intimate as Julia Peterkin with Negro speech and folkways. But her people, not the unmoral pagans of Blue Brook plantation, are earnest, self-reliant workers, in whose lives the church plays a very important part. The new minister, though not an Elmer Gantry, brings grief to the community by

seducing Leah, one of the finest girls of his congregation. Roseanne, her sister, in a melodramatic scene confronts him with news of the girl's death, and revenge is swift. Although the seduction scenes are unconvincing, the setting and characters are well drawn. Roseanne, shrewd about human nature until hypnotized by the preacher, is like Heyward's Mamba and Hughes' Aunt Hager, laboring and sacrificing so that the young will have a chance. Other characters are interesting: the railroad men, the charcoal peddler, the hair-dresser who says, "I puts 'em in and I takes 'em out," meaning that she marcels on one side of the railroad tracks and straightens hair on the other. And the Ladies Aid Society, pathetically caring for their little church and worshipful of the preacher, is much more representative of Negro religion than the usual scenes of revival frenzy.

Death Is A Little Man (1936) by Minnie Hite Moody likewise deals with a hard-working, sacrificial heroine of strict morality who, living in the Atlanta Bottoms, has more than her share of trials and tribulations. The overfrequent violence becomes melodramatic, much that affects the life of the Bottoms is left out, and Fate is blamed too often. But the insight into character, the true local color and the skillful prose, entirely in the cadence and idiom of southern Negro speech, bear witness to an informed and sympathetic observer.

The Black Belt. Earth Born by Howard Snyder (1929) records the superstitions, songs, dances and church services of tenant farmers in the cotton belt. Parson Robinson, the Negro plantation owner, the wanton Malindy, her lover Big Jim Mississippi, and the violence and loose love making of an isolated community, are in the tradition of Julia Peterkin. So is *Ollie Miss* (1935) by George Wylie Henderson, the first Negro novelist to deal with sharecroppers. But the heroine, whether working her crop like a man, or restlessly hankering after the old days with her lover, or planning a farm for herself and her child, is well drawn, and the novel is a work of faithful realism.

Reuben Davis' *Butcher Bird* (1936), another story of Negro sharecroppers, likewise centers attention upon a woman, "a butcher bird ... one of these here womens that gobbles up all the mens she can, then sticks the rest of them around on thorn trees and barb wire till she gets hongry again." This wanton brings trouble to the hard-working hero until his quiet dependability makes a new woman of her and she sacrifices her life for his. Written out of considerable knowledge of folk-life, *Butcher Bird* excels local color like *Earth Born* by its sympathetic characterization.

George Lee's *River George* (1936) is less concerned with free love affairs that end in violence, and more with the troubles of sharecropping life disclosed by recent studies. In

the first part, as good a picture of sharecropping as any Negro author has achieved, George is a good worker, but since he is educated, knows when he is cheated, and teaches organization, he is a "bad Negro." He becomes worse when the Negro paramour of a white man falls in love with him. Forced to run away to Memphis after shooting the white man, he becomes the legendary man of the river, told of in the author's earlier *Beale Street*. Unreasonably, he returns to his native section and is lynched upon arrival. The second part of the book contains too much, but the first is truthful and therefore bitter. Its grimness stands in no need of the final less credible lynching.

The Delta. Evans Wall writes in *The No-Nation Girl* (1929) of Précieuse, the daughter of a white swamp-dweller and a Negro woman. It is the conventional story of the mulatto, who "had no right to be born," falling in love with a white "outsider" and when abandoned, drowning herself in Suicide Basin, convenient for "no-nation girls." The primitive goings-on are often halted for dogmas about the mulatto. Whenever she is decent, it is because of the inheritance from her father, who was a degraded outcast. But in moments of passion, her mother's inheritance rules:

> The girl's half-heritage of savagery rose in a flood that washed away all trace of her father's people except the supersensitiveness imparted by her taut nerves. She must dance or scream to relieve the rising torrent of response to the wild, monotonous rhythm.

In *Love Fetish* (1933) Wall deals with a "no-nation boy" in similar fashion.

Gulf Stream (1930) by Marie Stanley has more sympathy for the Creole heroine, but drives home the same thesis—that you "can't hide from God and Affaca." Adele, with "cream-ivory, magnolia petal skin" is easily seduced by a white man to whose home she delivers laundry. When her child is born, she refuses to look at it, fearing it will be black. Years later when she discovers that her daughter is milky-white, she becomes a devoted mother. The daughter, broadened by education, becomes engaged to a dark Negro. Adele cannot endure this, and walks into the bay to commit suicide, but love for her daughter makes her renounce the usual gesture of the tragic octoroon. Mille Fleurs Island, below Mobile, the home of mulatto Creoles of wealth and culture, is new to fiction, as is Adele's final tirade against the father of her child. But there is also much of the usual trite generalizing about the tragedy of mixed blood.

Louisiana. Barry Benefield's *Short Turns* (1926) includes two stories of Negro life. In "Ole Mistis" Old Jeff, one of the many "slaves of legal documents and ruthless legal machinery," loses his crops and farm, and would have lost his horse, "Ole Mistis," but for a landlord's last-minute kindheartedness. "Sugar Pie" tells of the terror in a northern Louisiana town when Negroes are burned out, tarred and feathered, and hanged upon telegraph poles.

Sugar Pie leaves the hate-ridden town, carrying the corpse of her nearly white baby. *Green Margins* by E. P. O'Donnell (1936) is a poetic book of the life in the delta below New Orleans, the melting pot of Slavonian, Filipino, French, Italian, Cajan and Negro fishermen, trappers and smugglers. Outstanding among the strange characters are the mulatto girl, Unga January, and Bonus, a mad Negro murderer. O'Donnell's short stories about Negro life such as "Jesus Knew" are informed, bitter realism.

Elma Godchaux' *Stubborn Roots* (1936) has a weird Negro character in Zero, who, although he insists upon wearing woman's clothing, is the dynamic foreman on a sugar cane plantation. The respect and liking between Zero and the planter is persuasively conveyed. Other Negroes are convincingly shown at their work of planting and grinding cane and repairing the Mississippi levees. The same fidelity is in Miss Godchaux' "The Horn That Called Bambine" and "Chains," which contain sympathetic characterizations of Negro life along the river, with recognition of the brutality.

Lyle Saxon has brought to his novel *Children of Strangers* (1937) the skill and authority of his studies of New Orleans. Contrary to the usual procedure, the Negroes are treated with seriousness, and the patronizing whites who see Negroes "as the happiest people in the world" are ridiculed. Famie, the beautiful descendant of the free mulattoes who once, cultured and

wealthy, owned vast plantations on Cane River, is the tragic heroine. After a traditional love affair with a white outlaw, Famie devotes herself to her child. Poverty-stricken, she sells some of the ancient heirlooms, then she becomes a servant for whites. These are violations of the caste-tabus, whereas having a child by a white man was not. When, in her loneliness, she turns to black people, and finally accepts the attention of Henry Tyler, she cuts the last family tie. *Children of Strangers* reveals a little known locale and people, the last of a

> delicate race of Latins which had lived too near the sun.... The very old were curiously erect, their shoulders back, their chins up. They were sad, but they had dignity.... The boys and girls were handsome, their skins cream-colored or light tan....

Almost as interesting as Famie is Henry Tyler, a "shut mouth nigger—studying to himself all the time, wanting to learn to read letters." The only socially conscious character in the book says to Henry:

> It has always been like this in the South ... white men leaning on black men ... from the beginning. We made slaves of you.... You made us rich.... In rising, we pushed you further away from us.... Black men began to think, to move about, to go away.... That is why I couldn't get you out of my mind as I watched you sweating in the field working for something that can never be yours because I have taken it from you.

Short story writers have industriously added to this new regionalism, in such numbers that even mention of their names is impracticable. Wilbur Daniel Steele, however,

should be mentioned for his grasp of folklore and types apparent in such stories as "Sooth" and "Conjure." Other stories of distinction are James Boyd's "Bloodhound," Vernon Sherwin's "Nigger-Lover," from the many good stories of Negro life published in *Story Magazine*, and Louis Paul's "No More Trouble For Jedwick." The liberal and radical magazines are publishing informed and sincere fiction of Negro life. *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, Negro magazines, have published many good interpretations "from the inside." Skill and penetration mark such stories as "Symphonesque" by Arthur Huff Fauset, "The Flyer" by Cecil Blue, "Swamp Moccasin" and "Fog" by John F. Matheus, and the work of Henry Jones.

An admittedly inadequate word might be included here on children's books. In a long line from *Little Black Sambo* to the newest *Ezekiel* by Elvira Garner (1937) Negro children have generally been written of in the same terms as their mothers and fathers, as quaint, living jokes, designed to make white children laugh. Against this tradition of comic condescension, Eva Knox Evans, in *Araminta* (1935) and *Jerome Anthony* (1936), has written with sincere and informed sympathy. The same qualities are in the children's stories of Arna Bontemps, one of the most versatile Negro authors, who collaborated with Langston Hughes on *Popo and Fifina* (1933) a story of Haitian children, and has

written *You Can't Pet A Possum* (1936) and *Sad Faced Boy* (1937).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Sherwood Anderson resemble Julia Peterkin and Van Vechten?

2. Account for the growing revolt on the part of southern women against the tradition of "southern charm."

3. What is regionalism? How does it differ from local color?

4. What states seem to be as yet uncovered by regionalists?

5. Compare the work of the regionalists with the plantation tradition.

6. What authors include pictures of southern injustice?

7. In what respects are *The No-Nation Girl*, *Gulf Stream* and *Children of Strangers* similar?

CHAPTER XI
NEW ROADS

The Pattern of Violence. Although we have seen that such authors as Wood, Heyward, Adams and Frank revealed southern injustice to the Negro, it has remained for a later group of writers to register the fullest social protest. They know the land of the jasmines and myrtles; but they know a great deal more about it than those gentle symbols. Aware that one southern tradition—that of violence—is as long-standing as any, they have added darker color to the picture of the regionalists and folk-lorists, who often in their search for the peculiar and amusing, overlooked harsh and socially significant facts. They record what, according to the formula of taboos and restrictions, should be unmentioned. In spite of the chorus of comfortable and ostrich-like people who insist that in their state "the problem has been solved," they reveal a widespread pattern of violence.

Sweet Man (1930) by Gilmore Millen tells of John Henry, the son of a white plantation agent who could not let Negro women alone. John Henry launches out as a "sweet man," attractive to women, on the plantations and in Memphis, and finally becomes the paramour of a wealthy white woman in California. When, unbalanced by jealousy, she tries to frame him for rape, he kills her, then himself. The early

chapters give a good, naturalistic picture of plantation life; the last chapters, even though sensational, are convincing.

Amber Satyr by Roy Flannagan (1932) is similar in some respects. Luther, strong and handsome, of Negro-Indian stock, has caution enough to resist the open advances of the love-sick farm wife for whom he works. But through her brazenness, the affair is discovered, and Luther is killed by her two brothers-in-law. The newspaper report is the usual one: Luther was killed by an unknown mob. In ironic contrast, one of Luther's murderers is the father of a child by Luther's daughter, and at the time of the tragedy a special session of the Virginia legislature is considering the "racial-integrity" bill. *Amber Satyr* is shot through with sardonic humor, but its chief impact is tragic.

Less spectacular, Welbourn Kelley's *Inchin' Along* (1932) deals with Dink Britt, whose enterprise and endurance make him a dangerous example to the croppers, white and black, who must be kept brow-beaten and shiftless. A marked man, he narrowly escapes being lynched. *Inchin' Along* has some traditional and silly comments about racial characteristics, but the sympathy for the plugging hero and the picture of the hard lot of the tenant farmer, show Kelly to be clear-eyed and courageous.

Robert Rylee is well informed about life in delta Mississippi, and deeply concerned with its

injustice. In *Deep Dark River* (1935) Mose Southwick, a share-cropper, protests against his wife's carryings-on with the plantation manager. In self defense Mose kills a bad Negro, hired to kill him. When Mose is captured and framed, a liberal white woman lawyer takes his case, but cannot defeat the concerted line-up. Mose is dependable, sober, self-contained, with grim, double-edged humor, and burdened by the miseries of his people even more than by his own. So Mose must be put out of the way. *Deep Dark River* is unconvincing where Rylee makes his hero a symbol of Christian resignation and attachment to the soil, and is conventional in such statements as "Mose had the mystic singing and intuitiveness of the black race and the intelligence of the white race." The white characters here are less intelligent than stupid and vicious. Although humane, Rylee does not idealize the Negro; he includes sketches of Negro highjackers, bootleggers, easy women, and toadies for white folks. His second novel *St. George of Weldon* (1937) is a character study of a sensitive southern youth, and the harsh treatment of the Negro is an important element in his education.

In *Death in The Deep South* (1936) by Ward Greene, a novel of southern injustice, the use of the third degree to exact confessions from Negroes is powerfully depicted. Theodore Strauss' *Night At Hogwallow* (1937) is a hair-raising narrative. A Negro laborer is falsely

accused of rape. This results in a battle between a northern road crew and the aroused southern townsmen, a beating by the Klan, the burning of the Negro section, and a gruesome lynching. It is a dark melodrama, as life in towns like Hogwallow too often is.

Jim Tully's *Circus Parade* (1927) tells the story of "Whiteface," a Negro who rose from stake-driver to clown, and who was burned at the stake by a mob on the rampage because a Negro had stepped in front of a white woman in the ticket line. "A Negro Girl" is likewise grim naturalism; the girl, caught sneaking into the circus, is assaulted by the circus roughnecks. In *Violence, A Story of Today's South* by Marcet and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius (1928) a Negro boy, in terror of exposure after a love affair, kills a white girl. He is saved from a lynching mob, but is electrocuted. In contrast, a philandering white minister who commits murder is freed.

Exceptional Negroes. Sinclair Lewis was one of the first to break with the preconceptions of the Negro held by Main Street. In *Arrowsmith* (1925) he includes a capable Negro scientist who, though a minor character, stands out from the ruck of the petty, grasping victims of Lewis' satire. In *Work of Art* (1934) the attractive, intelligent and bookish Tansy Quill illustrates the "common tragedy of the superior Negro ... laden with all the complexities of twentieth century America heaped upon the dark burden lugged up from old Africa's abyss." Her

suicide is conventional, but it gives Lewis a chance to satirize authors who, from a casual acquaintance with a hotel maid, build up masterpieces about Negro psychology and the voodoo of the swamps.

Come In At The Door (1934) by William March is merciless in its exposure of certain elements of southern life, and original in its treatment of Negro characters. A Negro woman, Mitty, bears six children to the "aristocrat" Robert Hurry, who, gone to seed, is now going with the wind in the waste land of the delta country. Mitty is wily but superstitious, loyal but self-centered, kindhearted but capable of fierce hate. The traditional Aunt Hatty and Jim are well observed. Most striking of the Negro characters is Baptiste, an educated Creole, a vagabond philosopher, whose tragedy is to haunt forever the southern boy whom he tutored.

The portrait of Baptiste indicates that as southern realists look more closely at life, they too become aware of exceptional Negroes. T. S. Stribling has complained that "White educated Southerners are completely cut off from black educated Southerners by the inherited attitudes of master and slave, and the one really does not know the other exists." Lack of contact and ignorance still handicap honest realists, but their attempt at a complete cast of characters is noteworthy.

To James Saxon Childers, "White men and black men have long ago walked out of their

color and are only men." *A Novel About A White Man and A Black Man In The Deep South* (1936) deals with Gordon Nicholson, a white man, and Dave Parker, a Negro, educated at the same northern school. When Dave, a talented musician, visits his friend, the southern town is alarmed, since Gordon has a sister Anne. Dave is accused of a crime for which there is not a shred of evidence. He is acquitted, but Anne's end is tragic, merely because Dave visits her brother. Irritated by northern interference as much as by southern injustice, Childers believes that the "problem" will gradually be solved by men of good will. His Negro characters, like most of the educated Negroes in propaganda novels, are nearly faultless. The novel is unusual in its sympathy, but it is jumbled, coincidental and not always plausible.

One of the South's most promising novelists, Hamilton Basso included recognizable Negro characters in *Relics and Angels* (1929). *Cinnamon Seed* (1934) shows deeper understanding of Negroes, both in slavery and in the present; Horace, the old family servant; Sam, ambitious, resentful and therefore doomed, and Lance who rises to be a world famous "trombone player in a band" are especially well done. In *Courthouse Square* (1936) which deals mainly with the plight of a justice-loving liberal in a southern town, Basso's pictures of Negro life are even more

authentic and sympathetic. Of Niggertown, which the Negroes called High Rent, he writes:

> Poverty ran through the section like a plague, hunger was a frequent visitor or permanent boarder in almost every house, but the inhabitants of High Rent, merging a simple philosophy with the terrible patience of the poor, complained but little and trusted in the humanity of a singularly inhumane and white-faced God for eventual succor and release.

An unusual character is Alcide Fauget, who is "like the reverend and respected head of a tribe: banker, counsellor, physician, friend." So fair that he had attended a white southern medical school, he serves the darker half of his people. Neither obsequious nor arrogant, he goes his own way. But when he wishes to buy an old house, falling to rack and ruin, for a much-needed Negro hospital, he has stepped over his bounds, and is driven away by a mob of his inferiors. An intelligent, humane realist, Basso has unobtrusively but memorably conveyed the tragedy of Negro life in the South.

The "Multiple" Novel: Many writers have attempted to give cross-sections of the life of southern towns by using many characters on all levels. Margaret Sperry's *Portrait of Eden* (1934) shows a Florida town which, after the boom, sinks back into lethargy and intolerance. The Negroes are generally shown as exotic primitives, especially at their shouting services in "The Church of Jesus Colored." But the picture has social understanding as well:

> Aunt Melissie danced, tangling her feet in a bitter tune against all the days she'd spent serving white folks,

walking their ways, and all her children born to do bidding to white men. She danced and fell reeling at last, her shoes flung to the darkness....

Outstanding is the educated Negro, John Marquis, a native of the section, who, hated by whites and double-crossed by Negroes, wants to start a school for Negro children. He is lynched, and a white liberal, his best friend, is murdered. *Portrait of Eden* has some exaggeration, but what it records is not too spectacular in a state where the Klan still rides.

Less directly intent upon revealing intolerance and injustice than Basso and Miss Sperry, other novelists still include these since they wish truthful pictures. *Siesta*, by Berry Fleming (1935), is one of the finest examples. Cotton brokers, cotton farmers, plaintively wasting "aristocrats," society folk and crackers, in "Georgetown," Alabama, in the long drought of summer, are unforgettably set before us. Negro characters, an important part of the town's life, are as authentically handled. Laney Shields, ambitious and decent, is trapped in a sordid love affair with the young white doctor for whom she is office girl. A little boy's going after the laundry becomes a dangerous odyssey in the bullying town. Mattie Small, the "obsteprician"; a famed faith-healing Bishop and his blind stooge, are similarly well drawn. In *Siesta* the best talkers refer to the Negro's tragic mask, and say that southern whites can know of the Negro only what he wants them to know. This is wise:

Fleming's recognition of the tragic mask helps him to get beneath it.

South, by Frederick Wight (1935) attempts a panoramic view of a South Carolina city. Negro characters are only slightly sketched domestics or levee workers. Mob terror threatens the Negro section at one point, but is averted when the victim is discovered to be a light-colored Negro woman. The manufacturing town of "Tuttle," North Carolina, comes to life in *Where the Weak Grow Strong* by Eugene Armfield (1936). Negro characters are drawn with attention to truth more than to tradition. A servant asking for her six weeks back pay of twelve dollars, is called an "ungrateful nigger" and is ordered from the house.

> Miss Evelyn, you ain't got no call to talk to me like that. I only ast you for what I worked for. I may be a nigger like you says. The Lord made me the color I is. But I ain't never done nobody out of the money that's coming to them.

A white mother resents the reserving of the carnival merry-go-round for Negroes, during the supper hour for the whites: "They ought not let them do it." A love affair between a Negro man and a white woman is told with quiet, tragic realism.

Incidental Characters, But Real. In George Milburn's sharply observed *Oklahoma Town* (1930), "The Nigger-Lover" tells of a lawyer who earned his nickname by urging Negroes to vote, who violated taboos such as handing a Negro boy a glass of water from a soda

fountain, and who is among the first victims in a race riot. In "The Nigger Doctor" the educated physician makes the town uneasy by his quietly defiant manner and his scientific skill. *No More Trumpets* (1933) contains a story "white Meat" in which a boarding house keeper gets her greatest delight in baiting Negroes and describing a lynching she saw as a girl. Deserted by her resentful daughters, she reveals that their father had Negro blood. In Milburn's novel *Catalogue*, the lynching of a Negro is shown to be one of the holiday excitements for Oklahoma yokels.

James T. Farrell, in his trilogy *Studs Lonigan* (1935), has old man Lonigan commenting on Amos and Andy:

> You would have laughed yourself sick at them. They're so much like darkies. Not the fresh northern niggers, but the genuine real southern darkies, the good niggers ... with long names and honors, just like in real life.... Golly, Bill, they sure are a card.

In bitter contrast, however, Farrell shows the anger of the Chicago Irish to the encroaching black belt. Studs Lonigan believes that "they ought to hang every nigger in the city to telephone poles." Fellow victims of poverty, the Negroes and Irish have fierce street fights of which the riot of 1919 was a natural climax, although Farrell describes the present as similarly explosive. Except in a few stories, Farrell does not present individual Negroes, but he has given powerful and grimly true pictures of northern prejudice, which seems to be little different from the lynch-spirit of the South.

William Faulkner's *Sartoris* (1929) has many minor but ably individualized Negro characters. Uncle Simon's dismaying first automobile ride, and his difficulties as treasurer of the church board—"he jes put de money out, sort of,"—are well described. Simon rebukes his son Caspy, who, home from the World War is bragging too much: "What us niggers want ter be free fer, anyhow. Ain't we got ez many white folks now ez we kin suppo't?" The servants of the tragic family in Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* (1920)—Aunt Dilsey, hobbling about her kitchen, impudent and bullying, with her temper worn short by the bickering and turmoil, Uncle Job, and Luster, who is guardian to Benjy, the idiot of the family—are likewise convincing. The Negroes are generally described from the point of view of their harassed white folks:

> Like I say the only place for them is in the field, where they'd have to work from sunup to sundown.... They got so they can outguess you about work before your very eyes.... Shirking and giving you a little more lip and a little more lip until some day you have to lay them out with a scantling or something....

The Negroes themselves are an unflattering chorus in this drama of the fall of a family. One of them expresses their surliness: "I works to suit de man whut pays me Sat'day night. When I does dat, it don't leave me a whole lot of time to please other folks." Insolent just up to the breaking point, contradicting their white-folks without apologies, these servants are miles away from the plantation tradition menials. If

familiarity has not bred contempt, it has at least bred rough irony in place of worship.

These Thirteen (1931) contains "That Evening Sun," one of the best of Negro stories. A Negro woman is shown waiting in dread suspense, certain that her husband is going to kill her. Nancy is truculent and cynical about humanity whether white or black. Her husband is likewise desperate:

> I can't hang around white man's kitchen. But white man can hang around mine. White man can come in my house, but I can't stop him. When white man wants to come in my house, I ain't got no house. I can't stop him, but he can't kick me outen it. He can't do that.

"Dry September" is a powerful lynching story, but the stress is less upon the victim than upon the psychology of the mob, especially of the leader. No one knows whether the assault happened or was imagined, but the mob gets its man.

In *Sanctuary* (1929) the incidental picture of a jailed Negro murderer is striking:

> He would lean in the window in the evening and sing. After supper a few Negroes gathered along the fence below—natty, shoddy suits and sweat-stained overalls shoulder to shoulder—and in chorus with the murderer, they sang ... "Fo days mo! Den dey ghy 'stroy de bes' ba'ytone singer in Nawth Mississippi!"

Light in August (1932) has as its most interesting character Joe Christmas. A foundling, the son of a white mother and a Negro father, he is raised by his fanatical grandfather. Taken for white until the mystery of his birth is cleared up, he is silent, friendless and proud. After he

murders a sex-obsessed Yankee woman, a relic of Reconstruction, he is pursued and killed. Although one character imputes his tragedy to the warfare in him of white and black, there is sufficient reason to see him as a victim of a hostile environment. He is more complex than Faulkner's other Negroes, fully characterized, and one of Faulkner's most memorable creations.

Faulkner is a naturalist, and sees humanity in a harsh light. Like the weak, mean, and degenerate white characters whom he has set before us, his Negro characters are shown unflatteringly. House-servants and farmers, loose women and murderers; whether in rocking ecstasy in church, or getting the third degree from a sheriff, or fearing to help out in an accident—"White folks be sayin' we done it"—they are all equally convincing. Faulkner records Negro speech with complete accuracy, but more important, he gets into character with the uncanny penetration that makes him one of the most significant of the new novelists. His Negroes are a long way from happy-go-lucky comics. If they agree in anything, it is in their surly understanding of the bitter life that they are doomed to live in a backward, hate-ridden South. He does not write social protest, but he is fiercely intent upon the truth, and the truth that he sees is tragic.

In *Tobacco Road*, after a Negro has been run down by the crazy-driving of a poor-white, Jeeter philosophizes: "Wal, niggers will get kilt."

The same callousness is depicted in Caldwell's first book, *American Earth* (1931). "Saturday Afternoon" tells of a mob's filling a Negro "so full of lead that his body sagged from his neck where the trace-chain held him up." The Negro was too smart a farmer. "Savannah River Payday" is even more gruesome. A Negro sawmill hand, killed in an accident, is being carried to the town's undertaker. The drunk "crackers" driving the car hammer out his gold teeth and fight over them. Arriving in town, they go into a pool room and forget all about the corpse. *We Are The Living* (1933) contains Negro cotton-pickers, and servants whose attractiveness is a household problem. The stories are frequently humorous but the laughter of the Negroes is ironic at perplexed and inept "superiors."

"Candy Man Beechum" in *Kneel To The Rising Sun* (1935) is about a travelling boy with flapping feet, who, on his way to see his gal, is shot down for nothing by a white policeman. "Blue Boy" is the ugly anecdote of a Negro idiot whose grotesque tricks entertain a group of satiated "high class ladies and gentlemen." "Kneel To The Rising Sun", probably Caldwell's greatest short story, portrays the misery of short-rationed sharecroppers, the sadism of ignorant, bored landlords, the crushing force of an unjust system. Lonnie, a white man, made a whining coward by years of share-cropping slavery, betrays Clem, who has befriended him, to their

mutual enemy the landlord, and his mob of lynchers. Clem is a doggedly courageous Negro, willing to take only so much before rebelling.

> All Arch asked ... was for Clem Henry to overstep his place just one little half inch, or to talk back to him with just one little short word, and he would do the rest. Everybody knew what Arch meant by that, especially if Clem did not turn and run. And Clem had not been known to run from anybody, after fifteen years in the country.

Caldwell is convinced that "much of the matter about the southern Negro and the southern white man has been a garbled mixture of romance and mis-statement," and the authoritative fiction he writes about his native sharecropping country bears this out.

Proletarian Realism. Caldwell's "Kneel To The Rising Sun" represents one of the most important trends in contemporary fiction. The Negro is at last being discovered as part of the working class. Radical novelists now stress the exploitation of the Negro masses, and urge that it is only by the solidarity of all workers that a new social order can be achieved. In spite of the overstress of propaganda, these writers contribute a great deal to realism. Seeing many of the so-called Negro characteristics as class disabilities, aware of much that is common in the lives of the poor, they have been able to get close to their characters, without condescension and without idealizing. They start from the basic beliefs that the Negro has been a great factor in building up America, that he has been miserably underpaid, that he is growing steadily more conscious of,

and restive under exploitation, and that he can get nowhere without the white worker, nor the white worker without him. These are all truths that have long needed to be told. By themselves, they do not guarantee good fiction, but they cannot be neglected without falsity to Negro experience, and the contemporary American scene.

Scott Nearing's *Free-Born* (1932), "unpublishable by any commercial concern," is as well documented as his *Black America*, a sociological exposé of exploitation and persecution. The title is ironic: the "freeborn" Negroes are landless sharecroppers, kept from "jumping contracts" by a patrol system. One southern judge threatens to adjourn court and "attend to the matter himself" if there are not enough "he-Americans" to do a job of lynching. Jim, the hero, sees the burning of the Rosenwald school and the lynching of his mother and father (one of the most gruesome ever recorded in fiction and taken from actuality). His sweetheart is raped and murdered. In Chicago he is caught up in the race-riot. Embittered and desperate, he is taught by a communist that "t'aint cause you'se black that you'se exploited," and that only by fighting shoulder to shoulder with white workers will there ever be a "free world under working class control." Rebuffed by labor leaders, Jim nevertheless sticks to his new-found cause. Jailed for leading a strike, he dedicates himself to black and white slaves "who never were freed ... who keep your high and mighty

world a-goin'." *Free-Born* crowds too much upon the shoulders of its young hero, and is unconvincing in such details as Jim's continued dialect after he has read Upton Sinclair, Marx and Lenin. But it is significant as the first revolutionary novel of Negro life.

Georgia Nigger (1932) is another exposure, attacking the convict-lease system and the chain-gang, with thorough documentation based upon visits, prison records and photographs. Spivak describes such devices of punishment as the iron collar, spikes, double-shackles, the stocks, the whipping post, the Georgia rack, where convicts are tortured by stretching, and the "sweat-box, a coffin of thick wood standing upright." The convicts who rot their lives away in the filthy cages may be robbers and killers, or they may just as often be like David, a mere lad, picked up on petty charges to do the county's hard work. Arrested in a round-up because Mr. Deering, in cahoots with the sheriff, has a lot of cotton to be picked, David is "redeemed" by the planter. Escaping from Deering's armed camp, where Negroes who die from overwork are weighted and buried in the swamp, David is rearrested as a vagrant, and this time chooses the chain gang in preference to peonage, exchanging hell for hell. Throughout *Georgia Nigger* the Negro is shown to be a catspaw; vicious and murderous guards, landlords and sheriffs nullify the half-hearted interference of the better-disposed whites. But it

contains more than the shocking; the heartbreaking struggle of David's family against poverty is conveyed with deep feeling.

In Myra Page's *Gathering Storm* (1932) the hill-people who have become underpaid, hungry "lint-heads," doomed to shameful living, and the Negroes whose wretchedness is even greater, come together because of common suffering. Marge, a child of hill-people, reaches out to Negro workers "across the miles", denounces the old way of hatred and bitterness, and urges the new way of solidarity. She and a Negro organizer are forerunners of the "gathering storm." Like *Free-Born* in many respects, covering too much ground, *Gathering Storm* is even more of a thesis novel. But Miss Page's sympathy with her Negro characters goes deep.

Dealing with a similar setting, *Call Home The Heart* contains but few scenes involving Negroes. Ishma, a mountain woman, saves a Negro organizer from a lynch mob but is revolted by close contact with Negroes: "Mountain people are always white." A matured radical, recognizing the strength of her long-bred prejudice, patiently tries to persuade her that unless the workers of both races stand together, they will continue to be clubbed, driven and starved. Miss Burke's *A Stone Came Rolling* (1935) contains more about the Negro. The "kindliness" of the past is satirized in an excellent description of a slave-trading. The present is desperate: a Negro woman says: "I

ain't had what you could call work in six months—not a tap at a snake." An educated Negro, brought in as a safe speaker at a political rally, waits until white hearers have left, and then attacks the conservative speechmakers and urges Negroes to organize. Unemployed whites and Negroes march together, singing militant words to hymn tunes. In such a crisis, the city fathers, churchmen, and sheriff must have a victim. Stomp Nelson, a tireless, fearless, Negro organizer is selected, but by a ruse, his white comrades of the Unemployed Council save him from the mob. Negro characters are not major actors, but the Negro is shown as an important participant in the stirring of southern labor. The use of race prejudice by the overlords to prevent workers' solidarity is clearly indicated.

In *Now In November* (1934) and *Winter Orchard* (1935) Josephine Johnson occasionally describes the harshness of Negro life. Her *Jordanstown* (1937) records a fight for better living conditions for the jobless and the underpaid in a small midwestern town. Anna Mosely, "a tall, mammoth Negress ... too articulate and brooding for her own people, too proud to be popular with employers ... alien in the bitter gifts of intelligence and race" is an interesting person, whether in her married life with Ham, or talking in meetings, or writing the song for the disinherited, or leading the march, or lying unconquered in jail, or inspiring the young white leaders: "Not till we do something all

together ... we won't change mo' than a stitch in the world."

The bitterness and understanding of Grace Lumpkin's "White Man" (1927), the story of a Negro girl seduced by her employer, reappears with added power in *A Sign For Cain* (1935). A small southern community is well realized: the well meaning but weak liberals, resenting any interference with their "contented nigras"; the respectable judge (bought and paid for); the bootlegging and pandering leader of the American Legion who is the defender of law and order; the white men with their Negro women; the high-school boys ripe for violence; and the sheriff who keeps the Negroes "scared to raise their voices too high." Nevertheless, when Denis, a young organizer returns home, he finds allies ready to join his struggle for justice. Denis is slowly but surely bringing about the union of underpaid white and black workers, when a few leaflets are lost, and traitors sell him out. Framed for the murder of a wealthy white woman, Denis is shot by the real murderer, who fears investigation by the northern lawyers. Denis is quiet but strong, humble only before the great work he has set himself to do; in jail, attacked by the deputies, he cries out "I've got no rights as a citizen. Then I stand on my rights as a man." Other Negroes are well done: Mum Nancy, whose long years of meekness bring a sorry inheritance; Selah, the bound-out slavey, awaking to courage and hatred; Brother Shadrack

Morton whose sermon on submissiveness in lynch-time is drowned out by groans, and Ficents, easy-going, but insisting "I got some fight in me yet; if there's something to fight for." Most interesting after Denis is old Ed Clarke, whose memory of his lynched father is still burning, a hard worker, unlearned but manly, leaving one master because he could do with "less kindness and more cash," and contemptuous of "white-folks' niggers." The old plantation record furnishes ironic asides: one entry reads, "Sold Negro $1,200. Beautiful day"; another reads, "Candies for little Negroes ... 25 cents worth."

Negro Novelists On New Roads. Except for a few cartoons, such as *Two Black Crows in the A.E.F.*, the Negro in the World War has been scarcely mentioned. Victor Daly's *Not Only War* (1932) "dedicated to the army of disillusioned," attempts to do justice to the record of Negro troops. There is less about warfare, however, than about the workings of race prejudice. A southern white officer, who has carried on a flirtation with a Negro girl in the states, "breaks" a Negro non-commissioned officer for visiting a French girl. In a big drive the white officer is wounded; the Negro soldier tries to save his life. They are found the next morning, "face downward, their arms about each other." Coincidences are too much relied upon, and the novel follows the apologist pattern, but the aim to deal seriously with what has been

caricatured is noteworthy. *Greater Need Below* (1936) by O'Wendell Shaw deals with the life of a southern Negro college, but the characters are too idealized, and the plot is forced. The subject deserves a better novel.

Langston Hughes, in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), his first collection of short stories, shows far superior artistry. All of the stories deal with manifestations of white prejudice. Hughes states that by white folks he really means "some white folks," but the stories which turn the tables of caricature and contempt often seem inclusive. "Slave On the Block" and "The Blues I'm Playing" satirize the people "who went in for Negroes—a race that was too charming and naive and lovely for words." "A Good Job Gone" shows the break-up of a wealthy white man who, fascinated by a golden-brown wanton, is jilted for a Negro elevator boy. "Rejuvenation Through Joy" farcically tells of a colony of effete whites who listen to lectures by a Negro, passing for white, who preaches the occult value of primitive rhythm. "Cora," one of the most successful stories, attacks small town puritanism. In "Home" a world renowned artist returns home to be lynched as an "uppity nigger." In "Father and Son," from which the play *Mulatto* was taken, the son of Colonel Norwood and his housekeeper, determined not to be "a white folks' nigger," chokes his father to death after a quarrel and is lynched. In this not always convincing story, Hughes looks forward to the time when

the cotton will blaze and the cabins will burn and the chains will be broken, and men, all of a sudden, will shake hands, black men and white men, like steel meeting steel.

Hughes does not often strike this radical note in *The Ways of White Folks*; most of his stories protest jim-crow insults and injustice. In "Professor," one of his latest stories, he attacks the compromising race "leader." Hughes' stories exist largely for the theses, but they are skillfully done, realistic in detail and bitingly ironic.

One of the most promising explorations of a new road is Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home," which appeared in *The New Caravan* (1936). The portrait of the gang of Negro boys in the South is done with robust understanding. Swimming in a pool posted "No Trespassing," which meant "No dogs and niggers allowed," the boys are caught by a white man. In a fight after one of the boys has been shot, Big Boy gets possession of the man's rifle, and when the white man lunges for it, Big Boy shoots him. His pal, Bobo, is caught and lynched. The terror of the community before Big Boy is spirited away is graphically conveyed. "Big Boy Leaves Home" is well informed realism, rendered with power and originality.

Without the distinction of Wright's technique, Waters Edward Turpin's *These Low Grounds* (1937) is still extremely promising. For the first time a Negro novelist tells the story of four generations of Negroes. Thoroughly conversant with the life of the farmers and

crabbers and oyster shuckers of the Eastern Shore, Turpin has had the courage to handle this life without idealization, without shame, but with full sympathy. The story has its bitterness and sharp protest. Poverty is omnipresent, and oppression. The town of Shrewsbury is really Salisbury, ill-famed because of a recent lynching, and Turpin describes this tragedy. His characters, for all of their illiteracy and squalor, have dogged courage. Less successful in his hasty sketches of the life of better off Negroes in the big cities, Turpin's novel still belongs with the best novels by Negro authors.

Summary. If many of the foregoing books have contained lynchings, this may partly be explained as a natural reaction to books that have stressed the contented, comical or quaintly picturesque Negro in a sunny South which "understands him." It is important that American novelists are revealing the tragic in Negro experience. This has been present from the earliest, and honest observers know that it has been met with fortitude and struggle. Some novelists have recorded the brutality and shame as part of a tragic America; others show the Negro resisting heroically; and still others, hoping for social justice, are urging solidarity of all of the oppressed. They indicate a new and momentous trend in modern literature. It is a trend that makes the way easier for Negro novelists who, coming of age in technique and

understanding, will find an audience ready for the important stories that still must be told.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What subjects tabooed in the South are treated in the novels of this chapter?

2. Why is it natural to expect that many southern novels would stress violence?

3. What is the advantage of the "multiple novel" in setting forth a community's life?

4. List the "exceptional" negroes in the books of this chapter.

5. What differentiates the radical novelists from the realists who show the pattern of violence?

6. Compare the newer realists among Negroes with the apologist and the Harlem school.

CHAPTER XII
HISTORICAL FICTION

The present vogue of historical fiction has given new impetus to the long-standing interest in the Old South and the Negro. The African slave-trade, the antebellum and the reconstruction South are popular hunting grounds. Some novelists continue the plantation tradition, some, the antislavery tradition, and many others, in the spirit of regionalism, seek the truth of their sectional pasts, without apology and without indictment.

The Slave Trade. The ghastly middle passage, the shackled mobs below the hatches, the lack of water, the plagues, are background for novels like Mary Johnston's *The Slave Ship* (1924), and George King's *The Last Slaver* (1936). Deeper pity and understanding inform *The Trader's Wife* (1930) by Jean Kenyon McKenzie. A sheltered Newport girl confronted by the traffic—"Wretched blacks at sea, packed in trays like dead fish, stinking like fish, some of them to die ... and to be cast in the sea"—is broken in Africa by the misery of the barracoon. As her last gesture before she dies she sets free a contingent of slaves.

> With the dawn there came a wailing on the river—as the canoes multiplied at the landing—the high desolate wailing that is the voice of the sorrows of Africa.... It was the slaves come down the river into the barracoon.

Hervey Allen's *Anthony Adverse* (1933) describes the barracoons through which "Africa was poured into America," the serpent-like line

> composed of hundreds of naked, human bodies rubbed slimy for their approaching sale with palm oil and rancid butter.... Bamboo withes stretched from one tight neck-fork to another.... Hovering about it, and along its flanks were white-robed Arabs with rhinoceros-hide whips.

The bartering, with slaves coquettish, or compliant, or sullen, or tiger-like, the inspections and the packing on the slave-ships are fully pictured, obviously after a great deal of research. But it strikes one as historical pageantry rather than tragedy.

In *Babouk* (1934), Guy Endore concentrates upon the shocking features of the slave-trade: the captives "lying shoulder to shoulder, feet pointing toward the center, not only chained in pairs, but each pair attached to a great chain—a gigantic necklace of blacks"; the separated tribesmen forced to sing and dance—"a centipede dancing, chains clanking"; opthalmy and other epidemics ravaging the hold. "Nigger-tasters," telling the slaves' condition by their sweat, and other connoisseurs of black flesh winnowed out the drugged, the doctored; only the finest were fit to be slaves. After horrible life on San Domingo plantations the slaves revolt. Based upon considerable research, convincing in its descriptions of the slave-trade, of African tales and customs, and of West Indian plantations, *Babouk* is still more than a historical

romance. It is a revolutionary novel, bitterly opposed to imperialism and the contemporary slavery of any race.

The Plantation Tradition. But Endore is unusual; Joseph Hergesheimer is much more typical. In *Quiet Cities* (1927) he yearns for the return of the past, based on slavery—for which "I'd be happy to pay—with everything, everything the wasted present holds." In his picture slaves do little other than raise soft staves of song, or play quoits, or fiddle, or sleep. The only ugly feature is an ill-smelling slave-den, for which a transplanted northerner is responsible. Emancipation was a failure since "a free Negro is more often wretched than not." Reconstruction was ignominious: Negro legislators dared to utter shouts of laughter, with "incredible feet elevated on the desks" in southern state capitols. Mingo Harth, a vicious Negro politician worthy of Thomas Dixon, is called a "symbol of Union, a black seal on the fate of South Carolina."

Most of the historical romances repeat these patterns with little variation. Dealing with the times of George Washington, *Princess Malah* (1933), by a Negro author, John H. Hill, subscribes in the main to the plantation tradition of humaneness, mutual affection and lavishness. Frances Griswold's *The Tides of Malvern* (1930) and Caroline Gordon's *Penhally* (1931) recount the long history of southern families with Negro characters in the background, where they stay correctly. A few step out of the picture after

Sherman's march, but the majority will not be moved. In Mary Johnston's *Miss Delicia Allen* (1933) both Negro slaves and white owners are conventionally drawn.

Somewhat similar to Cable's *Madame Delphine* is E. Laroque Tinker's *Toucoutou* (1928). After being married to a white man, Toucoutou is proved in court to be partly Negro. In bitter envy, Negroes satirize her in street-songs; whites condemn her because her marriage means that "a black flood will rush through the crevasse that will sully white purity and retard our civilization a thousand years." The picture of New Orleans is not idyllic; the yellow fever epidemic, the exotic *bamboula*, *calinda* and *counjaille* danced in the *Place Congo*, and other customs of New Orleans are vividly described. With some sympathy for his heroine, Tinker yields at times to the doubtful traditions about the mulatto. *Old New Orleans* (1931) by E. Laroque Tinker and Frances Tinker presents minor and familiar Negro characters. Life on the lower Mississippi, in a later period is in Edna Ferber's *Show-Boat* (1926), which has a few Negroes singing the plaintive songs of their "wronged race," and a melodramatic scene involving an octoroon.

Look Back to Glory (1933) by Herbert Ravenel Sass is worshipful of the duelling cavaliers and glamorous women of low-country South Carolina, "a paradise ... the proud, the knightly South." Slavery is called a godsend to

elevate the Negro from barbarism. The subtle poison of slavery was the "inevitable" miscegenation, "invited nine-tenths of the time" by Negro girls, and guaranteeing "the purity of the southern women of education and family." Best characterized of the Negroes is Vienna, a beautiful quadroon, to whom "curtsying did not come easy." The others are conventional, grateful for the godsend.

The Civil War has long been a favorite subject for historical novelists, but earlier novels like Winston Churchill's *The Crisis* (1901), Upton Sinclair's *Manassas* (1904) and Mary Johnston's *The Long Roll* (1911) and *Cease Firing* (1912) are little concerned with deepening the characterization of the Negro. *The Battleground* (1902) by Ellen Glasgow, has many of the standbys of the plantation tradition—the noble hero who deplores slavery, the wretched free Negro and the giant slave who rescues his master (one of the most familiar battle activities from "Marse Chan" to *So Red The Rose*.) Recent Civil War novels like Caroline Gordon's *None Shall Look Back* (1936) and Clifford Dowdey's *Bugles Blow No More* (1936) are skillfully written and based upon research, but the latter does not particularly extend to Negro characters.

The slaves in *Old Miss* (1929) by T. Bowyer Campbell are "like children, trusting, expecting, receiving everything as a matter of course from their masters." The hero is

proslavery, only because of altruism: "What would the poor things do without us to care for them, and see that they pass peaceful, useful lives?" When Aunt Christian is told that she is free, she angrily hits her informant with a stick, like the ancient tyrants upon hearing bad news. Roark Bradford's *Kingdom Coming* (1933) likewise carries the thesis that freedom was a mistake. Aunt Free buys her freedom and then does not want it; Telegram is set free by a Yankee firing squad; free Negroes die like flies in concentration camps. There is an interesting account of the "blind Underground" which held out false hopes of freedom that ended in murder. That the freed Negro is little better off than the slave is true in sections that Bradford should know very well, but it hardly seems a defense of slavery. Promising "the true story of slavery and the true story of freedom," *Kingdom Coming* merely gives some good local color of plantation life and voodoo, to support the century-old beliefs advanced in *Swallow Barn*.

Stark Young has shown a knowledge of certain types of Negroes in sketches like "The Poorhouse Goes to The Circus" (1929) and *Heaven Trees* (1926). His best seller, *So Red The Rose* (1934), is a melancholy recital of the folk-tales that southerners heard in their youth. The war blown along by northern and southern windbags destroys "a gracious system of living that has seldom seen its equal." Negroes, in spite of "fetid ... old maid idealism" had their best

place in that system. A typical old faithful, William Veal, seeks his dead master on the battlefield at night; he felt the hair of the corpses until he found him: "he knew him by his hair; you know how fine it was." In contrast are the Negro soldiers—grog-filled burners and looters—and the ingrates who run off to the Yankees and are stricken with plagues. Written in skillful, disarming prose, *So Red The Rose* nevertheless remains a thrice-told tale.

Elliot Crayton McCants in *White Oak Farm* (1928) gives the traditional picture of Reconstruction, though with less rancor than Page and Dixon. *Bottom Rail On Top* (1935) by H. J. Eckenrode is a less orthodox novel, not in the "bloody-shirt" tradition. Negroes scatter after emancipation and learn fast in reconstruction. The hero is often shown siding with the Negroes and radicals in the brawling.

Not fooled by all of the hallowed creeds of the South, Margaret Mitchell in the best-selling *Gone With The Wind* (1937) accepts whole-heartedly the traditional estimate of the Negro. "Slaves were neither miserable nor unfortunate.... There never had been a slave sold from Tara and only one whipping." Mammy, Dilcey, Toby and the other house-servants, proud of their quality white-folks, disdainful of field hands, "free issues" and poor whites, have been with us time and time again. Slaves who were different were "mean." The "least energetic, trustworthy and intelligent and most vicious and

brutal" were the ones who left the plantation to enjoy a long "carnival of idleness and theft and insolence" interrupted only by plagues in crowded Atlanta. Negro insults range from "looking impudent" and being "uppity to a lady" to assuming Anglo-Saxon prerogatives:

> In the legislature ... they spent most of their time eating goobers and easing their unaccustomed feet into and out of new shoes. They frolicked....

But the intelligent house-servants, the highest caste, spoke the correct, heart-warming lines:

> Ah done had nuff freedom. Ah wants somebody to feed me good vittles reglar an' tell me what ter do an' what not ter do, an' look affer me when Ah gets sick.

Needless to say, the Klan is as knightly here as in *The Authentic History of the Ku Klux Klan*, an authentic hymn of praise.

Summary. DuBose Heyward has written: "This relationship [between master and slave] has been sentimentalized and utilized *ad nauseam* in writing of the slave period." The plots of the foregoing books are uninventive, and the characters and situations are repeated over and over. Aristocrats and house-servants still monopolize attention, as if the many "yeoman" farmers and field-hands had not existed. With the hindsight of the present, secession is admitted to have been bad, but although most of the aristocrats detested slavery (in principle), the intelligent Negroes detested freedom (in principle and practise) and the romancers agree with the

Negroes. The very infrequent floggings are the work of uncouth overseers, who are knocked down by blooded cavaliers. Fugitive slaves have been spirited away from these books. Faithful servants bring back dead heroes from battlefields, bury the silver, despise the Yankees and prefer to work for their ex-masters without wages. Unfaithful slaves, corrupted from their childish virtue, run away to die in concentration camps, or loot, insult and rape. Negroes who bought land, rushed to schools and proved freedom to be no mistake, are non-existent, in spite of the record. An unpartisan historian writes:

> These Reconstruction governments erected public school systems; democratized local and county units, created public social services, and sought to distribute tax burdens equitably.

But in these books the legislatures are composed of a few depraved Northerners, and a mob of Negroes who did little else but put their feet upon desks and "eat peanuts by the peck." The Freedmen's Bureau is villainous, the Klan reproachless, organized to preserve chastity, not for political and economic control.

It is wrong to assume that these books are merely pageants of a departed past; they definitely further attitudes that justify the worst kind of contemporary reaction. Their popularity is a dangerous sign. Based on the principle that the many must be kept "in their place" for the good of the few, they encourage slavery in a world where slaves are still too numerous.

The Anti-Slavery Tradition. But there is a party of opposition which, like Emerson, has cried "fiddle-faddle to the Old South." In the tradition of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Albion Tourgée, some twentieth century authors have described the tragedy of slavery, and have dealt with heroes and heroines who would not buckle under.

Rowland E. Robinson, in *Out of Bondage and Other Stories* (collected posthumously in 1936) records the heroism and drama of the Underground Railroad in Vermont where slaves on their way to Canada were hidden in loaded sleighs and wagons, or stowed away in attics or barnlofts or deserted sugar-houses. John E. Paynter's *Fugitives of the Pearl* (1930) one of the few historic romances by Negro authors, deals with the escape of seventy-seven Negroes from Washington aboard the *Pearl*, whose captain was an abolitionist. A Negro informer gave away their plot, and they were captured down the Potomac. Of the old school in technique, *Fugitives of the Pearl* is more fictionalized history than a re-creation of characters and settings. But the precarious life of Negroes in antebellum Washington, "the seat and center of the slave trade" is truthfully presented.

The Railroad to Freedom (1932) by Hildegarde Swift is the fictionalized biography of Harriet Tubman, the most famous agent of the Underground Railroad, and a nurse and scout with the Union troops. Supposed to be a story for

children, *The Railroad to Freedom* is still one of the best records of an important movement and a fascinating heroine of American history. One of America's finest historical novels, *God's Angry Man* (1933) by Leonard Ehrlich re-creates the life and times of John Brown. There is unusual sympathy in the treatment of the Negro characters. These are Frederick Douglass, who is willing to use violence against slavers but not against a government arsenal, realizing bitterly that too many Negroes, broken by slavery, wanted only "hot yams and a roof and not to be beaten"; "Emperor" Green, who, in spite of Douglass' logic, says the historic "I b'lieve I go wid de ole man"; Harriet Tubman, the splendid, wanted "dead or alive, and ten thousand dollars would be paid for the body"; William Still, who knew more about the "underground" than any man in the land, saying to Brown "You free them, I'll lead them out"; John Copeland, mulatto student at Oberlin, who left his garret lamp of learning for an even finer light, and Dangerfield Newby, killed in action, with a wife in the far South who was never to be redeemed. All of these are brought to life in a moving book.

Black Thunder (1936) by Arna Bontemps likewise bears witness to a staunch desire to be free—a fact of the Negro's past that most of the historical romancers have not cared to record. *Black Thunder* deals with Gabriel's Rebellion in the Virginia of 1800. Gabriel, the

strongest slave of Henrico county, is courageous as well:

> I been studying about freedom a heap, me. I heard a plenty folks talk and I listened a heap.... Something keep telling me that anything what's equal to a gray squirrel wants to be free.

Stimulated by the example of Touissant in Haiti and by the propaganda of the *Amis des Noirs* and exasperated by an act of cruelty, Gabriel leads eleven hundred slaves upon Richmond. A storm postpones the attack, and the treachery of Pharaoh and Ben does the rest. The leaders are hanged, Gabriel's sweetheart Juba is sold to the deep South, and Ben goes on driving the cariole for the aristocrats. In addition to Gabriel, other Negroes are excellently characterized: Ben, the docile, gray-headed house-boy; Melody, the quadroon darling of rich planters' sons; Juba, handsome and spirited, sole woman on the march; Mingo, whose personal freedom is not enough; and Bundy, who "kept drinking up all that rum because he couldn't get up enough nerve to make his get-away." *Black Thunder* does not have the urgent passion of *God's Angry Man*; it is elegy rather than a tocsin of revolt, but it is a fine American historical novel.

Realism. In *Look Homeward, Angel* Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical hero decries

> The romantic halo ... the whole fantastic distortion of that period where people were said to live in mansions and slavery was a benevolent institution, conducted to a

constant banjo-strumming, the strewn largesses of the colonel and the shuffle-dance of his happy dependents, where all women were pure, gentle, beautiful, all men chivalrous and brave, and the Rebel horde a company of swagger, death-mocking cavaliers. Years later, when he could no longer think of the barren spiritual wilderness ... when their cheap mythology, their legend of the charm of their manners, the aristocratic culture ... made him writhe ... so great was his fear of the legend, his fear of their antagonism, that he still pretended the most fantastic devotion to them.

Many other southerners of Wolfe's generation, as seen in the previous chapter, have recognized the barren spiritual wilderness; others have repudiated or at least humanized the legend.

John Peale Bishop, although not so outspoken as Wolfe and Faulkner, approaches the legend realistically in *Many Thousands Gone* (1930), stories of the Civil War and postwar years. Just as the southerners are not marvels of gallantry and beauty, the Negroes, while certainly not flattered, are recognizable products of slavery. One old woman while her mistress lies dead is more worried about her promised freedom than grief-stricken; a sullen girl blazes forth her hatred of her carping mistress, and leaves to cook for the Yankees, for whose love-making she has been prepared by her experiences with southern gentlemen. In one symbolic story, Bones, a marvelous cook, gives two old Virginia ladies a feeling of security; in reality a lunatic, he is submissive and devoted, and they are willing to live in terror as long as

they can live in the tradition, their dear "obsession."

Christopher Ward's *Jonathan Drew, A Rolling Stone* (1932), and *A Yankee Rover* (1932) carry the Yankee hero all over early nineteenth century America. One dramatic section shows Drew saving two slaves from border ruffians who were running a "blind underground" and fomenting a slave insurrection in order to plunder the countryside. *A Yankee Rover* deals more fully with slavery; one of the episodes involves Tommy, the little "white nigger," whose aristocratic father does not leave him free.

> What d'ye say to a nigger that ain't no color at all cause he's white ... as white as any on ye an' whiter than most ... with straight silky hair, no kinks at all, an yaller hair at that, golden yaller, an' blue eyes? Ef that ain't jest a natural curiosity.... Pass up lot 56, Mr. Barnes.

As we have seen the "blind underground" intrigues both the realists and the defenders of the Old South, who traditionally isolate criminals as the agents of the underground railroad. The "blind underground" did exist as a profitable enterprise for such gangs as Murrel's, but this hardly explains the neglect of the genuine underground that carried thousands of slaves to the North. The workings of this system appear incidentally in MacKinlay Kantor's *Arouse and Beware* (1936). In this impartial and accurate narrative we have most interesting descriptions of the "Right Sort of People," "The Sons of America," both whites and Negroes, who with their grips and passwords and secret hiding

places enable three fugitives to get to the Union lines. One slave woman, in a low tone, gives them valuable information, and then, to fool her curious children, curses them. The narrator says:

> There was a canniness about these slaves which I had never imagined before. I had thought them barbaric or stupid or lazy ... and doubtless many of them were. And many others, too, were loyal to their masters and the Confederacy; but somehow I cannot hear jubilee singers chanting of Moses, and bondage and their freedom from it, without thinking of this thin, brown-faced wench, with her high shoulders and long straight arms....

Andrew Lytle's "Mister McGregor" (1936) is a first-rate story of slavery. Rhears, "no common field-hand, but proud, black and spoiled" had "fretted and sulled" over McGregor's whipping his wife Bella, and rather than run away, he decides to have it out with his owner. In one of the best fights of "frontier" realism, Rhears is stabbed by his master. The teller says of Rhears

> I never seen such guts in nobody, nigger or white man.... Rhears spoke so low you could hardly hear him: "Marster, if you hadn't got me, I'd a got you."

In Lytle's *The Long Night* (1936) Negroes are only incidental, but the organized stealing of slaves by a band of frontier criminals is important to the plot.

A young southerner muses disgustedly in Evelyn Scott's *Migrations* (1927): "How close we come to the niggers without knowing anything about them." Being aware that merely "coming close" is not knowledge, Mrs. Scott presents convincing Negro characters. Silas is

filled with hatred for the white father of his sweetheart Fanny's baby. But conditioned to respect his master, as Fanny had done to her sorrow, he persuades himself that the overseer was responsible. His sullen disobedience causes him to be lashed and he takes to the woods. Bosh is a less successful runaway; a half-wit, he frightens a white girl and is caught by a mob and burned to death. Of a very different type is Eugenia De Negre Blair, a brilliant and handsome adventuress, who has a trace of Negro blood. Without the emphasis of the abolitionists, Mrs. Scott still records the uneasy and tragic aspects of slavery.

In *The Wave* (1929), a series of chronicles of the Civil War, the stories of Eugenia and Silas are continued. One of the best sections shows the Negroes swarming to Sherman's army; Aunt Nancy, to whom the army means food but who has given too much strength to slavery to live to see the promised land of freedom; Dilsy, who hopes that life-long drudgery is over; Lou, apologetic because her religious master had influenced her; Anna, bold and ready; and Uncle Vic, who has been sold to one "mean piece uv trash after another." When the Federals, realizing that the horde of fugitives is more than they bargained for, tear up the pontoon bridges, they discover that the horde still presses on to freedom. "Gawd, you gotta shoot 'em to stop 'em." There is symbolism in both the despairing cry of the Negroes left on the bank: "My home is

ovah Jawdon," and the callousness of the Yankee who thinks: "If we could only let them drown. Dam 'em, they get over their Jordan, but we have to carry 'em."

In *A Calendar of Sin* (1931), Mrs. Scott re-creates the Reconstruction: the Klan, determined to return the Negro to slavery—where was the tobacco to come from?—flogging Negroes, destroying schools, hounding Yankees; and the carpet-baggers, more intent on wealth and politics than on helping the impoverished, ignorant and often shiftless Negroes—both pretending high idealism to cover up lurking meanness. Good comedy is in the episode of the old Auntie, who suspicious of Yankees anyway, leaves the new school in high dudgeon because, instead of learning to read the Bible right-off, she is started on the alphabet. There is a powerful narrative about a mulatto lynched for assault. Some Negroes, taught by "the raw-hide whip on their naked backs" betray the Union League and deny that they want the vote and book-learning. Others show a grasp of the developing folk-belief that everything mean and bad in the South "comes to us fru de Yankees." Although the narratives are called "American Melodramas," Mrs. Scott portrays neither villains nor heroes but sensitively understood human beings. And that is why, for truth to an era and a section, her work is immeasurably superior to such real melodramas as *Gone With the Wind*.

T. S. Stribling's earlier *Birthright* is excelled by his trilogy of a southern family: *The Forge* (1931), *The Store* (1933) and *Unfinished Cathedral* (1934). In *The Forge*, the pictures of slave life and character are among the most convincing in American fiction. The plantation tradition gets short shrift. Old man Vaiden runs a one-horse, two-mule farm, but calls himself a "gentleman" since he owns five Negroes. A hard-fisted, hard drinking, bull-headed, irascible Primitive Baptist, blustering in north Alabama dialect instead of in cultured phrases, he wins some liking and, more important, is a credible human being. To Vaiden, as to so many farmers "on the make," slavery meant "working the daylight out of slaves." The slaves' food is little more than corn-dodgers and bacon, and the boasted medical care is what "would be given a sick calf." Attached to the family and farm by lifelong ties, the slaves still want freedom. While George is being praised as devoted, he is nursing hatred against his master.

Gracie Vaiden stands out. Although friendly with her white half-sisters, she broods over slavery. She feels that the flogging of her husband

> transformed her from a kind of tentative wife of Solomon into a brood mare ... changed Solomon into a stud; and her child, if she and Solomon had a child, into a little animal.

She reasons correctly; she is ravished by Miltiades Vaiden who does not know that he is her half-brother. On the eve of secession she

would have been sold to clear up her father's debts if she had not escaped to the Yankee lines. Stribling's pictures of the Reconstruction, especially of the Klan, are likewise unorthodox and authentic.

In *The Store* Gracie Vaiden, who has been the mistress first of the Yankee lieutenant who becomes governor of Alabama, and then of a white merchant, a pillar of the church, works so that her octoroon son can escape the shame she has met with as a Negro. From the start, however, we see that Touissaint is doomed. "The most despisable nigger in Florence," he will not run from bullying white boys, hates shining shoes, and insists upon honest dealing in the store, standing up for a whole pound when "everybody knows a nigger pound is about twelve ounces." Come of age, he tries to vote, but his blue eyes and blond hair do not prove that his grandfather was free; and he fights a "cracker" who insults his mother. Just as his mother was put on the block because her white half-sisters and brothers ran up bills at the store, so Touissaint loses all of his year's work because his landlord (and father) messes up a business deal. As an end to his rebellious career he is lynched. While Gracie is cutting down his body, "A dozen drunken voices in the mob broke into laughter at the downfall of the Negro mother and her dead son." His father furnishes the mules and wagon to carry him away. Other Negro characters are surly, cunning and aware of what is being done to them: "If dey

shawt weight you too much, wras'le wid de Lawd about hit in prayah".... "If a white man di'n fly into uh niggah tull he done somepin to him, all us niggahs be settin' in easy chairs." Stribling presents with fine sympathy the Negro urchin who announced the miracle: "I can write my name...." Lucy, Touissaint's wife, prefers farming to domestic service. She thereby astounds the ex-planters to whom these "uppish" Negroes who want independence and education are "unnatural, highly affected and utterly absurd ... the new uncomfortable colored people."

In *Unfinished Cathedral* the Negro characters are shown to be more and more progressive and educated, but still subjected to indecency from both upper-class and hoodlum whites. Militant Negroes are now in the picture; even beneath their grotesque robes, the lodge brothers carry guns. There is a frame-up very similar to the Scottsboro case; the bankers, realtors, sheriffs, judges, and even clergy are shown to be closely related to lynching mobs. One of the boys hustled off a train is Gracie's great-grandson. To Miltiades Vaiden, now eminently respectable, Gracie cries out:

> What colored relations? I was born to my mother, old Hannah, long after Old Pap sold off her husband Jericho! I'm not white for nothing! Aunt Creasy told me long ago that my father was Old Pap, the same as yours! Toussaint, the son I had by you, was nothing but a Vaiden on both sides. The child Lucy had by Toussaint, the son you hanged, I named Marcia; and Marcia's boy you're holding in jail this minute. Who would my grandchild come back to see except white people, Miltiades?

To these words the old Colonel replies: "Shame on you, Gracie ... talking disrespectfully like this." In spite of some faults, such as the stretched coincidences, this trilogy is remarkable for the honesty, courage and sympathy with which a southern author has faced the past.

William Faulkner's "The Raid" (1934) describes the blowing up of the bridges to destroy the Negroes following Sherman's army, a scene relished by southerners as symbolic, but the slave boy Ringo and the doggedly marching contrabands are excellently done. Thoroughly conversant with the old South, Faulkner has created in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) a credible and powerful, if at times fantastic novel out of "a few old mouth-to-mouth tales" and old letters. From the bleak hills of western Virginia where the cabins were "boiling with children," Thomas Sutpen comes to frontier Mississippi, "a country of lawless opportunity." Naked, plastered over with muck against mosquitoes, he and his "wild Negroes tore a plantation out of the wilderness ... dragged a house and garden out of the virgin swamp." But the Sutpen line is doomed. Charles Bon, Sutpen's son by a woman in Haiti, who was discarded because she had a "spot of Negro blood," is murdered to keep him from marrying Sutpen's daughter (the incest was less abhorred than the miscegenation). The Sutpen fortunes decline, until at the last we see Jim Bond, Charles Bon's mulatto grandson, lurking around the ashes of the destroyed mansion. A Mississippi "Fall of

the House of Usher," *Absalom, Absalom!* seems in part an allegory of slavery. Negro characters, whether the savages so like their wild master, or Clytie, Sutpen's mulatto daughter, who could be neither tamed nor freed, or Charles Bon, most elegant cavalier and yet of Negro blood; or Charles' son, who in self-laceration turns completely to Negroes, are original and convincing, "living creatures, living flesh to feel pain and writhe and cry out."

Conclusion. A northerner in *Absalom, Absalom!* ironical at the tyranny of the southern legends, says:

> What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air?... A kind of entailed birthright ... of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your children's children produce children you won't be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?

Faulkner himself has felt the fascination of the plantation birthright, but he determined to be honest in spite of tradition. Of a different order of genius, he still belongs with his fellow southerners Stribling and Evelyn Scott, who are trying above all else to give a truthful reinterpretation of the old South, and therefore of the Negro. Their work is by no means completely adequate, but together with the work of other honest, sympathetic writers, northern and southern, Negro and white, historical novelists or recorders of contemporary America, it gives promise that the Negro character in fiction may

meet with the justice that has been so long deferred.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Since slavery has been abolished, what social policy is served by the continued defense of the plantation tradition?

2. List similar characters and incidents in the plantation tradition novels of this chapter.

3. Describe the antislavery heroes mentioned as the plantation tradition would characterize them.

4. Why are so many southern aristocrats in these books shown as opponents of slavery?

5. Account for the best-selling qualities of *So Red the Rose* and *Gone With The Wind*.

6. Defend, attack, or qualify: "Since these historical romances are based on research, they must be truthful about Negro life and character."

7. What are the contributions of Stribling and Evelyn Scott to the southern historical novel?

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