American Literature by Negro Authors

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To My Daughter, Vivian Emma,
A Student and Teacher of English,
I Dedicate This Book

Preface

THIS VOLUME is intended primarily for use as a textbook. Accordingly much realistic material, though regarded by some as showing artistic skill, has been omitted as unsuitable for classroom use. The aim has not been to cover the entire field, but to present representative authors and some of their works, in order to show how Negro writers have treated each type of American literature.

The range of writings is from the age of Phillis Wheatley to current times. The book is divided into nine sections: folklore, poetry, letters, biography and autobiography, essays, addresses, short stories, novels, and plays.

This text can be made to serve several purposes. It can introduce students to most of the classic and better-known Negro authors and to many rising authors who are talented but who at present may not be nationally known. It offers some idea as to how the Negro has thought in the past and how he thinks today. The selections will show also how American Negroes have adapted themselves to the American way of life in their effort to solve their problems. The text demonstrates how Negroes have interpreted life. The selections reveal also the aspiration and the idealism of the Negro. Finally, the book will show to what extent the Negro is a literary artist.

As to how the book is to be used, each teacher's own plan is best for his class. No method can be stated which would suit every class, since the personality of each class is different from that of any other. However, some suggestions may be offered here for the teacher to incorporate into his plans.

First, the biographical approach can be effective. A knowledge of the life of an author often is sufficient to inspire the student to read that author's works.

Next, the historical approach sometimes is necessary, because the pupil can not appreciate a literary work when he does not know the background out of which it was created. If the teacher discovers that

his class does not have the background for the appreciation of a work, he would do well to see to it that the student acquires the background before the work is presented for study or appreciation.

The comparative method is also effective in the study of literature. For example, if a student reads several poems by one author which employ dialect, he can understand and appreciate the use of dialect in a poem better than he could if he studied only one. The same is true if he reads dialect poems of several authors; he would thus be helped by the comparisons he would make. For example, one might consider Lowell's "The Courtin'." In it Lowell uses dialect to portray the character of a Yankee suitor in an old New England setting. The student might then turn to Robert Burns' "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and see how he portrays in dialect the character of the humble Scotch farmer. Or the student might make a comparison with Paul Laurence Dunbar's portrayal of a Negro tenant farmer in "Little Brown Baby." The comparisons here are apt, since each poet is using dialect to portray an aspect of rural life.

Burns and Dunbar could be extensively compared as to their lives, their aspirations, their writings, their friends, their romances, and their rise to fame. They could even be compared with reference to the subjects upon which they wrote and their treatment of them.

Teachers might take such a theme as death and immortality and show by comparison the different ideas of the poets on these subjects and their different ways of treating the same general idea. If Paul Laurence Dunbar should be the focal poet, the teacher might present the following poems of Dunbar on these themes: "A Death Song," "Ships That Pass in the Night," and "When All Is Done." For comparative purposes he might use Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Goodbye" and "Terminus" and Alfred (Lord) Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." These suggestions reveal the opportunity to develop appreciation for literature and to stimulate wide reading. The comparative method is a valid one for arousing the curiosity of the student and deepening his love for literature. However, these are merely suggestions; for any best method of teaching literature must be determined by the teacher and the personality of each particular class.

For the privilege of reprinting the works presented in this collection we are indebted to the generosity of those who felt that a work of this sort would be generally helpful to all. These literary works may bring

pupils to see that the Negro's culture is an American culture; that the Negro's aspirations are the aspirations of an American citizen.

Where the authors no longer dwell among us, their relatives put their works at our disposal and welcomed our use of them. The publishers, too, were generous in allowing us to have the selections we desired. To all these we are especially indebted. Our gratitude extends also to Mr. Ulysses S. Donaldson, a teacher of English at Sumner High School, and to Miss Helen Flowers, Chairman of the English Department of Stowe Teachers College, who assisted in the reading of the manuscript. To these and all others who in any way contributed to the preparation of this book, the author expresses his thanks.

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General Introduction

IN ORDER to appreciate better the work of the Negro author, one would do well to consider how he arose. This can best be understood by considering the source from which he came. The American Negro is a composite or mixture of African Negro, European Caucasian, and American Indian.[1]

His basic stock, however, is African; that is, his physique. The home of the "true Negro," as described by A. C. Haddon in his *Races of Mankind,* is West Africa. Although some Negroes were brought to the United States from East and South Africa, most of them came from West Africa, since that region was nearest to America. Hundreds of different dialects were spoken by those who came.

The many dialects contributed to the delay of more than a hundred years in the appearance of a representative Negro author. Since the Negroes of Africa were warlike, as indicated by such leaders as Chaka, Soni Ali, Mohammed Askia,[2] and Cetawayo,[3] it became the policy of slave traders to place on a single plantation a group of Negroes speaking not one dialect but many dialects. This difficulty of intercommunication reduced insurrections and made easier the subjugation of the Negro. By the time all had learned to speak a common language, English, they had become somewhat docile and more inclined to accept their enforced condition. Literature is a social product requiring an audience or group of readers who can see in the literary artist one who understands their problems, sympathizes with them, and inter-

[1] Melville Hertskovits' *The American Negro,* a summary of his *Anthropometry of the American Negro,* a study based upon the measurements of parts of the bodies of thousands of living American Negroes, African Negroes, Caucasians, and American Indians.
[2] Chaka, a Zulu, a race fanatic like Adolph Hitler, a great general of the eighteenth century, who lived in South Africa and sought to destroy all peoples but his own; Soni Ali, a despotic king of North Africa, who ruled a territory almost as large as Europe; Mohammed Askia, a Negro king of North Africa, who ruled a territory larger than Europe for twenty-four years. Cf. Gollock, *Sons of Africa.* Cf. C. G. Woodson, *African Heroes and Heroines.*
[3] A South African king, who held the English at bay until 1895. H. R. Haggard, *Cetawayo and His White Neighbors.*

prets their experiences suitably for them and for others. Thus the literary artist is supposed to be a specialist, a person of leisure, to muse, to meditate, to dream, and to interpret the soul of humanity.

Slavery, however, does not inspire literary production; in fact, slavery discourages it. The laws of the various slave states forbade teaching a Negro to read or write under severest penalties; yet many slaves did learn to read and write. The wife of the master of Frederick Douglass taught him to read while instructing her own son. When she informed her husband of the rapid progress of the Negro slave, he forbade further instruction, saying these immortal words, "Education is incompatible with slavery. If you educate a person, you make him love freedom; if you are to enslave, you must not educate." The mother of Paul Laurence Dunbar learned to read and write during slavery by stopping the master's children on their way to school, when she talked with them about their spelling, their exercises, and their copy books. Many a slave was taught by a Quaker or by some minister or priest, not in the open but clandestinely. For instance, Reverend John Berry Meachum, the first pastor of First Baptist Church of Saint Louis, Missouri, conducted a clandestine school in the basement of his church.[1] Mrs. Wheatley taught her slave, Phillis, not only to read and write English, but to read Latin as well. Generally speaking, however, the facts that several dialects were spoken on a plantation and that it was forbidden to teach Negroes to read and write were partly responsible for the long delay in the rise of a prominent Negro author.

Despite this, the Negro author did arise. In his ascent he was helped and inspired by his natural gifts and by his literary heritage. His bodily rhythms, the beating of his pulse and his heart, the swinging of his arms as he walked or ran, and the regular motion of his legs as he moved from place to place gave him the basis for appreciating and creating the rhythms of poetry. Curiosity led him into adventure. These experiences, tempered with emotions of love, joy, sympathy, hate, or revenge, stirred his imagination and led to the expression of his feeling in proverbs, poetry, and folk tales.

Lord Rattray of England collected and published hundreds of proverbs of the people of Ashanti.[2] Illustrative of these proverbs are the following: "When you are courting, always keep both eyes open; but after you get married, always keep one eye shut," and "Death has the

1 George E. Stevens, *History of the Central Baptist Church.*
2 A small country in West Africa.

key that opens the miser's chest." Blaise Cendrars [1] collected and published a group of folk tales, prose and poetical charms, and proverbs that he called *The African Saga.* Barker and Sinclair [2] published an interesting collection of African folk tales that they called *The Anansi Stories.* Elephantine and Dayrell [3] published a collection which they called *Folk Tales of West Africa.* This folk literature is an important heritage, a part of which the Negro brought to America. This can be recognized by comparing some of the stories published as collections of folklore of Negro Americans by Joel Chandler Harris [4] in his *Nights with Uncle Remus* with some of the tales in *The Anansi Stories.*

The literature produced before 1865 came almost entirely from free Negroes, many of whom had been taught by indentured white servants and religious leaders, white and black. This was rarely literature motivated by the spirit of art for art's sake; it was chiefly literature with a purpose, and that purpose was the full rights of citizenship for free Negroes and immediate emancipation of all slaves. The same aspiration underlay all the types of literature that arose before 1865, whether it was poetry, autobiography or biography, the sermon, the address, the news article or editorial, the letter, the essay, or history.

A few writers may be listed as representative of the period before the War Between the States. The first poet was Jupiter Hammon, a slave, who in 1760 published "An Evening Thought." This was just one hundred and forty-one years after 1619, when the first Negro slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia. Then other important writers followed: Phillis Wheatley in 1773 published *Poems on Various Subjects;* Gustavus Vasa, his *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiana, or Gustavus Vasa, the African,* in 1789. In 1827, Samuel Cornish, a minister, and John B. Russworm, the first Negro to graduate from an American college—his school was Bowdoin College—published the first Negro newspaper in America. Here was the formal beginning of the editorial writing of the Negro. In 1794 Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his colleague, Absalom Jones, published a pamphlet entitled "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown upon Them in Some Publications." One of the earliest published ad-

1 A French writer.
2 English scholars.
3 English scholars.
4 An eminent author from the South.

dresses was William Whipper's "Eulogy on William Wilberforce," in 1833. Many of the addresses of Charles Lenox Remond, the most prominent Negro orator before Frederick Douglass, were published in the *Liberator,* which was edited by William Lloyd Garrison. William Wells Brown, who escaped from slavery, was one of the most prolific writers of this period. Among his important writings before 1865 were *The Black Man,* a collection of biographies of distinguished Negroes in various parts of the world, and his novel, *Clotelle,* both of which were published in 1863.

Such was the beginning of the Negro author. With the coming of freedom for all and public education, the Negro began to produce bountifully and to make a substantial contribution to American literature. This book presents a few types of these contributions and supplies a bibliography for those interested in going beyond the scope of this work in the study of the Negro American author.

The spirit of the Negro author is reflected in the theme-poem of the book of poems published by The Scribes, a literary club of college people interested in encouraging the writing of poetry. The writer keeps the title of the poem, which is the same as that of the book, *Sing, Laugh, Weep;* but he changes the order of the stanzas, to reflect the attitude that is most characteristic of the Negro and the Negro author.

Weeping is the beginning, the recognition of a difficulty the Negro faces; as the Negro weeps, he thinks, he plans a way out of his trouble. As he works, he laughs. Many a joke he has created as he worked. He uses his laughter to lighten the burden of his labor. When he has overcome his difficulty, he bursts out in song. All three of these moods are characteristic of the Negro; but the most important of these is expressed by his song, because his songs express his hope, his faith, his optimism. With song he moves from sorrow to joy, from defeat to victory. Thus he weeps, laughs, and sings.

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PART VII

The Short Story

Introduction Though short stories are almost as old as man, the short story as a type was first defined by Edgar Allan Poe, the American essayist and father of the short story. This literary form can boast of some great masters: for instance, Rudyard Kipling of England, who wrote "The Jungle Book" and "Soldiers Three"; Robert Louis Stevenson, author of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "Will o' the Mill," and "Sire de Maletroit's Door"; Guy de Maupassant, author of "The Necklace" and "A Piece of String"; Edgar Allan Poe, author of "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Murders of the Rue Morgue"; and Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of "The Great Stone Face," "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," and "Dr. Rappoccini's Daughter."

The Negro author has mastered this literary form as evidenced by the collections of Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Folks from Dixie* and *The Strength of Gideon,* and Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" and "The Conjure Woman," as well as the stories of more recent writers.

In writing fiction, the author may write as a realist showing the good and the bad side of life, as a pessimist portraying only the worst side, or as an idealist portraying life as he hopes it will be. Both Dunbar and Chesnutt are realists without the obscenity and vulgarity of modern realists.

The student should understand that the short story is not just a narrative that is short, so far as length is concerned, but that it is a

definite literary form. It is a prose narrative with only one major climax; that is, with one important incident, which decides the fate of the chief character or chief characters for better or for worse. There may be any number of characters in the short story; but the short story is at its best when it contains only a few outstanding characters and all the others are shadowy in the background. For instance, in Dunbar's "The Strength of Gideon" there are only two outstanding characters: Gideon and the girl he loved. In Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" there are only three outstanding characters: Mr. Ryder and two women.

There are several ways in which the short story may effectively begin. It may start with description or exposition applied to the setting or to an important character. It may begin with an incident or with dialogue. Early in the narrative the chief character or characters should be introduced. For the short story, a character is not introduced unless he speaks or acts. After the chief character is introduced, another character should be introduced by an incident to complicate the action of the early incident that introduced a problem to be solved. The story should then proceed to a major incident, the climax, which is the turning point of the story and decides the fate of the chief character or characters. To be effective, shortly after the climax, with a paragraph or a few sentences, the story must come to an end.

This technique is well observed by each story included in this volume. In "There Will Always Be Hope," by Colleen Williams, this technique is closely followed. There are only two important characters, Judith Trent and Dr. John Paul. Judith opens the story and Dr. Paul appears early in a big incident that complicates the plot. Then follow several other incidents of importance, each more important than the previous one. A big incident closes the story, deciding the fates of the two chief characters. Immediately thereafter the story comes to an end.

As to the length of the story in words or time, there is no set rule, provided there is unity of impression. "The Strength of Gideon" covers a number of years, but the story is well knit together by the integrity of Gideon. This is the one great impression that gives unity to the story.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* mentions three principles observed by the

ancient Greeks in the composition of their dramas that can effectively be used to give unity to a short story or to a one-act play. They are called the three classic unities: the unity of time, the unity of place, the unity of mood. According to the unity of time, all the incidents allowed to occur on the stage in the case of a Greek drama should occur within twenty-four hours. According to the unity of place, the scene should not change. Finally, the unity of mood requires the play to be all comedy or all tragedy; that is, there should be no intermingling of comedy and tragedy.

Any one of these classic unities, if observed by a writer of the short story, will produce compression and help give unity of impression. If he can observe two of the classic unities or all three, he will be even more likely to attain the desired unity of impression.

The events of a short story should proceed rapidly once the main action is started. Description and exposition can retard the progress of a story; therefore, if a paragraph of either is to be introduced into the story, it should come well before the main action starts. Otherwise, it should be blended with the narrative by scattered phrases in sentences carrying the action. Robert Louis Stevenson so handles his description and exposition in "Sire de Maletroit's Door."

The speed or momentum of a story may be accelerated by the use of dialogue. The greatest possible speed for a story is obtained by direct narration; that is, by the author's relating the story without the use of description or exposition, or by the use of what some critics call pure narration.

There are several ways in which an author may handle his plot. For the most part, only two methods are used. According to one method, the chief character may begin with a problem to be solved, as is true of "The Wife of His Youth" and "There Will Always Be Hope," with the author devoting the story to a solution of that problem. On the other hand, the story may begin with no problem. In such a case, the problem is created early in the story for the chief character, and the author devotes the rest of his story to an effort to solve that problem. This is the technique of Dunbar in "The Strength of Gideon."

As to types of the short story, "The Strength of Gideon" is a combination of the love story and the character sketch, with the character

sketch predominating. Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" is a char-
acter sketch blended with romantic adventure. Colleen William-
"There Will Always Be Hope" is a love story. "The Wife of His
Youth" also has the technique of a story within a story, as is char-
teristic of the detective stories of Poe ("The Purloined Letter," "The
Murders of the Rue Morgue") and Kipling's "The Courting of Dinah
Shadd." The stories in this volume are sufficient to give a general idea
of the technique of the Negro author of the short story.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

(See page 26.)

THE STRENGTH OF GIDEON [1]

Old Mam' Henry, and her word may be taken, said that it was "the
powerfulles' sehmont she ever had hyeahd in all huh bo'n days." She
was saying a good deal, for the old woman had lived many years on
the Stone place and had heard many sermons from preachers, white
and black. She was a judge, too.

It really must have been a powerful sermon that Brother Lucius
preached, for Aunt Doshy Scott had fallen in a trance in the middle
of the aisle, while "Merlatter Mag," who was famed all over the place
for having white folks' religion and never "waking up," had broken
through her reserve and shouted all over the camp ground.

Several times Cassie had shown signs of giving way, but because
she was frail some of the solicitous sisters held her with self-congratu-
latory care, relieving each other now and then, that each might have
a turn in the rejoicings. But as the preacher waded out deeper and
deeper in the spiritual stream, Cassie's efforts to make her feelings
known became more and more decided. He told them how the spoils of
the Midianites had "clashed upon de shields of de Gideonites, an' which
while, wid de powah of de Lawd behin' him, de man Gideon triumphed

1 From *The Strength of Gideon*, by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Copyright, 1900, 1928, by Mathilde Dunbar.

mightily," and swaying then and wailing in the dark woods, with grim
branches waving in the breath of their own excitement, they could
hear above the tumult the clamor of the fight, the clashing of the
spears, and the ringing of the shields. They could see the conqueror
coming home in triumph. Then when he cried, "A-who, I say, a-who
is in Gideon's ahmy today?" and the wailing chorus took up the note,
"A-who!" it was too much even for frail Cassie, and, deserted by the
solicitous sisters, in the words of Mam' Henry, "she broke a-loose,
and faihly tuk de place."

Gideon had certainly triumphed, and when a little boy baby came
to Cassie two or three days later, she named him Gideon in honor of
the great Hebrew warrior whose story had so wrought upon her. All
the plantation knew the spiritual significance of the name, and from the
day of his birth the child was as one set apart to a holy mission on
earth.

Say what you will of the influences which the circumstances sur-
rounding birth have upon a child, upon this one at least the effect was
unmistakable. Even as a baby he seemed to realize the weight of re-
sponsibility which had been laid upon his little black shoulders, and
there was a complacent dignity in the very way in which he drew upon
the sweets of his dirty sugar-teat when the maternal breast was too
far away, bending over the sheaves of the field.

He was a child early destined to sacrifice and self-effacement, and
as he grew older and other youngsters came to fill Cassie's cabin he
took up his lot with the meekness of an infantile Moses. Like Moses
he was, too, leading his little flock to the promised land, when he grew
to the age at which, bare-footed and one-shifted, he led or carried his
little brothers and sisters about the quarters. But the "promised land"
never took him in the direction of the stables, where the other picka-
ninnies worried the horses, or into the region of the hen-coops, where
eggsucking was a common crime.

No boy ever rolled or tumbled in the dirt with a heartier glee than
did Gideon, but no warrior, not even his illustrious prototype himself,
ever kept sterner discipline in his ranks when his followers seemed
prone to overstep the bounds of right. At a very early age his shrill
voice could be heard calling in admonitory tones, caught from his

She went away from him, but she or someone else got word to young Captain Jack Griswold of the near-by camp that there was an excellent servant on the plantation who only needed a little persuading, and he came up to see him.

"Look here," he said, "I want a body-servant. I'll give you ten dollars a month."

"I've got to stay here."

"But, you fool, what have you to gain by staying here?"

"I'm goin' to stay."

"Why, you'll be free in a little while, anyway."

"All right."

"Of all fools," said the Captain. "I'll give you fifteen dollars."

"I do' want it."

"Well, your girl's going, anyway. I don't blame her for leaving such a fool as you are."

Gideon turned and looked at him.

"The camp is going to be moved up on this plantation, and there will be a requisition for this house for officers' quarters, so I'll see you again," and Captain Griswold went his way.

Martha going! Martha! Gideon could not believe it. He would not. He saw her, and she confirmed it. She was going as an aid to the nurses. He gasped, and went back to mind the women-folks.

They did move the camp up nearer, and Captain Griswold came to see Gideon again, but he could get no word from him, save "I'm goin' to stay," and he went away in disgust, entirely unable to understand such obstinacy, as he called it.

But the slave had his moments alone, when the agony tore at his breast and rended him. Should he stay? The others were going. He would soon be free. Everyone had said so, even his mistress one day. Then Martha was going. "Martha! Martha!" his heart called.

The day came when the soldiers were to leave, and he went out sadly to watch them go. All the plantation, that had been white with tents, was dark again, and everywhere were moving blue-coated figures.

Once more his tempter came to him. "I'll make it twenty dollars," he said, but Gideon shook his head. Then they started. The drums tapped. Away they went, the flag kissing the breeze. Martha stole up to say good-bye to him. Her eyes were overflowing, and she clung to him.

"Come, Gidjon," she plead, "fu' my sake. Oh, my God, won't you come with us—it's freedom." He kissed her, but shook his head.

"Hunt me up when you do come," she said, crying bitterly, "fu' I do love you, Gidjon, but I must go. Out yonder is freedom," and she was gone with them.

He drew out a pace after the troops, and then, turning, looked back at the house. He went a step farther, and then a woman's gentle voice called him, "Gideon!" He stopped. He crushed his cap in his hands, and the tears came into his eyes. Then he answered, "Yes, Mis' Ellen, I's a-comin'."

He stood and watched the dusty column until the last blue leg swung out of sight and over the grey hills the last drum-tap died away, and then turned and retraced his steps toward the house.

Gideon had triumphed mightily.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt

The first Negro to write the short story and the novel, aware of the techniques of these literary forms as genuine art, was Charles Waddell Chesnutt, who was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1858 and educated there largely during the Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. Having been brought up in an atmosphere of culture, he could appreciate the great distance between his intellectual attainment and that of the large numbers of Negroes who came immediately out of the South to Cleveland as a city of refuge or a sort of heavenly Promised Land. There also came to Cleveland some mulattoes, who regarded themselves as superior to the blacks who had worked in the fields.

These contrasts in attitudes and expectations interested Chesnutt and caused him to

study the different types of Negroes carefully. His interpretation of the unsophisticated Negro appears in "The Goophered Grapevine," which was published by the Atlantic Monthly Magazine in 1887, and in "The Conjure Woman," which first appeared in 1899. His treatment of the Negro who had had some intellectual training appears in his short story, "The Wife of His Youth," and in his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*.

For nine years he taught in the public schools of North Carolina, culminating his career as a teacher as the Principal of the State Normal School at Fayetteville, North Carolina. While in that state, he had the opportunity of studying the primitive American Negro at close range in large numbers and to observe some of the conflicts and dilemmas of the color line that he portrayed in his novels. In 1887 he gave up teaching, as he was licensed to practice law in Ohio. He continued in this field until his death in 1932.

In 1900 there appeared the novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, the story of a mulatto girl faced with the dilemma of deciding when to pass for white and when to acknowledge her colored origin. *The Marrow of Tradition*, his next novel, appeared in 1901. It deals with the problems of the color line in the same family and uses as its setting the year 1898, the time of the race riots at Wilmington, North Carolina. His last novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, which was published in 1905, deals with the efforts of a colonel of the Confederate Army to improve the relations between white and colored in the South.

His other important work is *The Life of Frederick Douglass*.

As a literary artist producing short stories and novels comparable to the works of other writers of American fiction, Chesnutt deserves a high place. In 1928, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People awarded him the Spingarn Medal for his eminence as a literary artist depicting the life, struggles, and aspirations of the American Negro to rise unto great place.

THE WIFE OF HIS YOUTH [1]

Mr. Ryder was going to give a ball. There were several reasons why this was an opportune time for such an event.

Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins. The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a certain Northern city shortly after the war. Its purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement. By accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more white

[1] From *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories*. Reprinted by permission of Helen M. Chesnutt.

than black. Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not of the favored few, and since that time the society, though possessing a longer and more pretentious name, had been known far and wide as the "Blue Vein Society," and its members as the "Blue Veins."

The Blue Veins did not allow that any such requirement existed for admission to their circle, but, on the contrary, declared that character and culture were the only things considered; and that if most of their members were light-colored, it was because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership. Opinions differed, too, as to the usefulness of the society. There were those who had been known to assail it violently as a glaring example of the very prejudice from which the colored race had suffered most; and later, when such critics had succeeded in getting on the inside, they had been heard to maintain with zeal and earnestness that the society was a life-boat, an anchor, a bulwark and a shield—— a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, to guide their people through the social wilderness. Another alleged prerequisite for Blue Vein membership was that of free birth; and while there was really no such requirement, it is doubtless true that very few of the members would have been unable to meet it if there had been. If there were one or two of the older members who had come up from the South and from slavery, their history presented enough romantic circumstances to rob their servile origin of its grosser aspects.

While there were no such tests of eligibility, it is true that the Blue Veins had their notions on these subjects, and that not all of them were equally liberal in regard to the things they collectively disclaimed. Mr. Ryder was one of the most conservative. Though he had not been among the founders of the society, but had come in later, his genius for social leadership was such that he had speedily become its recognized adviser and head, the custodian of its standards, and the preserver of its traditions. He shaped its social policy, was active in providing for its entertainment, and when the interest fell off, as it sometimes did, he fanned the embers until they burst again into a cheerful flame.