

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT
DEAN MCWILLIAMS

The Quarry



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THE QUARRY

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Charles W. Chesnutt

*Edited with introduction
and notes by
Dean McWilliams*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE QUARRY

"POST-BELLUM—PRE-HARLEM" is the title that Charles W. Chesnutt gave to an autobiographical sketch written late in his career. But in this title, as in much else, Chesnutt was too modest. If we wish a phrase that describes the unique trajectory of Chesnutt's life—and the special perspective it offers on black American history—we might better write "*Pre-Bellum—Post-Harlem*." Chesnutt's seven decades, which began in 1858 and ended in 1932, carried him from before the Civil War through the rise and decline of the Harlem Renaissance. Paul Laurence Dunbar, Chesnutt's co-pioneer in the creation of black literary art, had been dead for a quarter of a century when Chesnutt passed on. W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Charles S. Johnson, the elders of the Harlem Renaissance, were, respectively, ten, twenty-seven, and thirty-five years Chesnutt's junior. And yet, Chesnutt remained active and sharply alert until the last, seeking publication for a new novel in his seventy-second year. He failed to secure publication for the manuscript, as he had failed to place another novel seven years earlier. His failure to

find publication for these texts is unfortunate, for, as a consequence, African American literary history records an oddly truncated picture of his literary activity, telling us virtually nothing about Chesnutt's writings during the last third of his long career.

Chesnutt was born in 1858 in Cleveland, Ohio, where his parents, both free Negroes, had migrated from North Carolina in the late 1850s. Chesnutt's father and mother decided to return to their native state after the Civil War, and thus Chesnutt spent his late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in the area around Fayetteville, North Carolina. Chesnutt decided, while still in his teens, that he wanted to become a writer, and, with that end in mind, he trained himself in Latin, German, and French and read widely in the world's literature. He was able to support himself as a schoolteacher, but sensing that this profession might not provide an adequate livelihood, he also taught himself stenography. In 1883, after the failure of Reconstruction, Chesnutt found it increasingly difficult to live in the South, so with his wife and children, he moved back to Cleveland. There he read law and passed the state bar with the highest score in his group. However, he found his hope of practicing law blocked by prejudice, and so he started a profitable career as a legal stenographer.

Chesnutt had not, however, forgotten his literary aspirations, and in the mid 1880s his stories and sketches began to appear in print. In August 1887 *The*

Atlantic Monthly published his story "The Goophered Grapevine," and in 1899 Houghton Mifflin brought out his collection of stories *The Conjure Woman*. These two dates mark signal events in African American literary history. Novels and stories written by black Americans had been published as early as the mid-nineteenth century, but these narratives were primarily polemical in purpose, and they were read and discussed in the context of the national debates on Abolition and Reconstruction. Before Chesnutt's, no fiction written by a Negro had received serious attention from America's white literary establishment. "The Goophered Grapevine" and *The Conjure Woman* were hailed as fictions of a high order, and the praise was justified, for these stories combined sensitive portraiture of American blacks with considerable literary skill. Chesnutt's historic publications helped African American fiction develop beyond social polemics into a self-conscious literary art form.

Chesnutt followed these path-breaking publications quickly with four additional volumes: another story collection, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), and three novels, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). And then silence—or so it seemed. Chesnutt published a few essays and several more stories, but there were no more book-length publications before his death in 1932.

It is frequently believed that Chesnutt abandoned

fiction after the commercial failure of his third novel in 1905. Chesnutt, it is true, was discouraged by his inability to support his family by his writing, and after the disappointing returns on *The Colonel's Dream*, he turned his energies to his practice as a legal stenographer. But he did not give up fiction entirely, and pursued a number of fictional projects; the most important of these were two novels, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* and *The Quarry*, which he submitted for publication in the 1920s. Unfortunately, both were turned down.

Chesnutt submitted *The Quarry* to Alfred Knopf, Inc., in 1928 and to Houghton Mifflin Company in 1930. We do not have the letter of rejection sent by Harry Bloch, an editor for Alfred Knopf, but Chesnutt's answering letter to Bloch recapitulates the reader's criticisms. "I note what you say," Chesnutt wrote, "about the central idea in the story, and my failure to carry it out, and the lifelessness of the characters and the 'priggishness' of the hero. I suspect you are right about all of this, and in the light of your criticism I shall before I submit the book elsewhere, see if I can put some flesh on and some red blood in the characters" (Helen Chesnutt 307). Ferris Greenslet, responding for Houghton Mifflin, remarked that the book had "rather the color of a thesis novel and does not, therefore, quite succeed in making the reader lose himself in a complete illusion."

Modern readers will probably agree with Bloch and Greenslet's criticisms of Chesnutt's last novel. Students

of American literature will, however, find that the book has considerable biographical and historical interest. Chesnutt was entering his eighth decade when he finished this manuscript, and it is very much the product of a Negro writer and activist looking back over the past, surveying the present, and trying to help plan the future. *The Quarry* was completed in 1928, at the high-water mark of the Harlem Renaissance, and its characters dramatize some of the political and aesthetic controversies of this movement. Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey are among the figures who appear, slightly fictionalized, in Chesnutt's last novel. The book's optimistic tone captures the spirit of a unique and very brief moment in the history of black America. *The Quarry* also gives us Chesnutt's last extended reflection on racial identity. Throughout his career, Chesnutt was associated with the "assimilationist" position. He argued that racism would not disappear until the distinctions between the races were blurred by increased marriage across racial lines. This is essentially the solution proposed by the anthropologist Franz Boas, who appears in the novel as Donald Glover's mentor. Boas argued that Negroes and Jews should join the American melting pot. But, as George Hutchinson has shown, Boas's position was complex. At the same time that Boas argued for Negro "assimilation," he also promoted pride in the African American cultural heritage. The same complexity can be seen in Chesnutt's position in *The Quarry*. Donald Glover

takes pride in the achievements of Negro Americans. He and his Jewish friend Isidore Rovelsky move easily in New York's cosmopolitan, multiracial intellectual circles, but neither is willing to renounce his ethnic identity.

Donald is clear and emphatic in his racial loyalty. He is tempted five times to renounce his Negro identity—by Mr. Seaton, by Amelia Parker, by Moe Silberstein, by Mr. Bascomb, and again by Mr. Seaton—and five times he refuses. The strength of Chesnutt's stand against passing in this novel can be seen even more clearly when it is read against James Weldon Johnson's fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, first published in 1912 but reissued to a wider audience in 1927, when Chesnutt was preparing *The Quarry*. Johnson's anonymous protagonist is a mulatto who despairs of his situation as a Negro and decides to live as a white man. Johnson, of course, did not write the novel to encourage mulattoes to quit the black race but rather to express his disappointment in a America where a talented young African American would feel driven to do so.

Chesnutt's story echoes Johnson's in several ways. Both protagonists are talented, light-skinned males. Both begin life in the north, go south to study at Atlanta University, come north to Harlem, and travel to Europe with wealthy white patrons, who encourage them to pass as white. Johnson's protagonist narrates his story retrospectively, and he tells us that he has

successfully passed over the line. However, he offers this sad confession in the novel's last line: "I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage." Chesnutt liked and admired Johnson, but he rejected the pessimism of Johnson's fictional *Autobiography* in his own narrative. The last line of Chesnutt's novel, in the Ohio University manuscript, is Mr. Seaton's concession to Donald: "I'm not at all sure that you haven't chosen the better part." Chesnutt changed this sentence in the Fisk manuscript to read "I'm not at all sure that you didn't make the wise choice," but the echo of Johnson's conclusion is still audible. Johnson's biblical metaphor occurs elsewhere in Chesnutt's novel in Isidore Rovelsky's refusal to abandon his Jewish heritage "for a mess of pottage." Rovelsky's decision, of course, anticipates Donald's own refusal to surrender his black identity.

The Quarry, which might well be subtitled "The Biography of an Ex-White Man," turns the novel of passing on its head by recounting the story of a white man who decides to be colored. Assimilation, in Chesnutt's last novel, does not mean blacks becoming white as much as it does whites becoming black. In this novel, Donald Glover, a genetic European American, renounces a white identity for a colored one. Indeed, the logic of Chesnutt's assimilationism requires that whites must first become blacks before blacks can become white. Whites must be persuaded to enter the black

world, morally and spiritually, to see the black condition from inside. This spiritual metamorphosis of whites is essential. Until it happens, whites will never understand blacks, and they will never allow blacks to enter white-dominated society as equals.

Whites *can* become black: this is the drama enacted in Chesnutt's last novel, and it is the paradoxical hope that animated Chesnutt's literary career from its beginnings. Chesnutt decided very early that he wanted to write about the black condition for a white audience. A journal entry by the young Chesnutt records what was to become a key strategy in that writing: "Nothing," he wrote, "will sooner show us the folly and injustice of prejudice than being ourselves subjected to it" (96). He believed that if whites could truly understand the black situation—could live it vicariously from within—they could be moved to change it.

Heretofore, the body of Chesnutt's published fiction has stood at six volumes: the five books Chesnutt saw into print and the volume of his previously uncollected stories, which Sylvia Lyons Render edited in 1974. Charles Hackenberry's recent edition of *Mandy Oxendine* gives us what was probably Chesnutt's first novel. The publication of Chesnutt's 1921 novel *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.*, by Princeton University Press and the University Press of Mississippi, and this edition of Chesnutt's last novel expand Chesnutt's published corpus of fiction by nearly a third, extending it through

the final decades of his career. Publication of Charles Chesnutt's last novel helps us see the full achievement of an African American literary pioneer who remained engaged in the concerns of his community until the end of his life.

The Quarry exists in two manuscripts. The first is in Ohio University Library's Special Collections. It was given to the University by Carr Liggett, a friend of Chesnutt and an Ohio University alumnus. The second is in the collection of Chesnutt materials donated by Chesnutt's daughter Helen to Fisk University. The Ohio manuscript is 404 typed pages, triple-spaced, with hand-written corrections and changes. These hand-written changes are legible and fairly numerous, but, for the most part, of little consequence for the novel's meaning. The Fisk text, 276 typed pages, double-spaced, is the same as the Ohio manuscript, re-typed and incorporating the handwritten changes. It seems likely that the Ohio text was the penultimate draft, and that the Fisk version was the one submitted for publication.

Chesnutt submitted *The Quarry* to Alfred Knopf in late 1928 and to Houghton Mifflin December 29, 1930. There was time for Chesnutt to have significantly revised the manuscript between submissions, but he was in very poor health during this period, and he also completed a volume of children's stories, which he submitted to Houghton Mifflin in 1930. It is quite

likely that the manuscript Chesnutt submitted to Houghton Mifflin was the one returned by Knopf.

I have taken the Fisk manuscript as the basis for my edition of the novel. In editing the manuscript I have treated it as a manuscript submitted for publication, and I have confined myself to correcting inaccuracies and inconsistencies in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I have explained the most significant of my corrections in my notes at the back of this volume. I also note changes in the Ohio manuscript when these changes help to clarify Chesnutt's references.

I have many individuals and institutions to thank for help in bringing these manuscripts to print. First, I wish to thank John Chesnutt Slade, Chesnutt's grandson, for permission to publish the manuscripts and quote from other unpublished Chesnutt materials. I wish also to acknowledge the assistance of the following: Gary Hunt and George Bain of Ohio University's Alden Library; Beth Howse of Fisk University's Erastus Milo Cravath Memorial Library; Susan Crowl and Vattel Rose of Ohio University, and Michel Perdreau, formerly of Ohio University; Etienne De Planhard of the Université de Toulouse—Le Mirail; Roy Rosenstein of the American University in Paris; and George Hutchinson of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I would also like to express my gratitude to Ohio University for a Research Committee grant and for a faculty fellowship; this support provided some of the resources and

the time from teaching which enabled me to do most of my research. Finally, and most important, I am once again in debt to my wife, Alvi, for her help, encouragement, and good humor.

I dedicate this edition to my niece and nephew, Holly and Luke Stowell.

THE QUARRY

CHAPTER I



ONE SPRING DAY early in the present century a small red two-cylinder automobile, one of the earliest models developed, turned into the yard of the Columbus City Hospital and drew up before the main entrance. The structure which faced the occupants of the car was built of dark red brick, pointed with black mortar. Along the cornice ran a terra cotta frieze set with metopes containing portraits in bas relief of Aesculapius, Hippocrates, Galen, Harvey, Jenner, Pasteur and others of the world's great healers. The city was very proud of its new hospital, which had recently been erected at large expense and furnished with the latest and most approved equipment.

Angus Seaton, who first descended from the car, was a tall, rather slender man with a kindly face, sharp features, grey eyes and sandy hair. The lady whom he helped out of the car was a handsome woman in the early thirties, of medium height, with well-rounded contours, dark hair and eyes, and quick movements which suggested a nervous or neurotic temperament.

Angus and Grace Seaton had been married nearly six years but were still childless. They had been fellow students at the State University. Theirs had been a love match, and they had lived together in the perfect intimacy of happy married life. They had very much desired children, had looked forward to them and had been greatly disappointed as the years rolled on and did not bring them. Experts whom they consulted declared them perfectly fit—there was no physical reason why they should not have children. But they did not, and the fact had begun to prey upon Mrs. Seaton's mind. She felt herself a born mother and her maternal instincts clamored for expression.

Mrs. Seaton had not given up the hope of offspring without a struggle. She had read all the books she saw advertised as "Advice to Young Married Women," "Hints to Expectant Mothers," and others of a similar nature, and found them either of no merit whatever, or mere appeals to a morbid curiosity, or applying to a condition which did not yet exist in her case, but which she never ceased to hope for, and for which she wished to be prepared when it arrived.

She had gone to Cincinnati and had herself psycho-analyzed by an eminent practitioner of that esoteric art, which was then in its infancy. She told him her dreams, which were largely of children, and he made a weird diagnosis which embraced suppressed sexual desires, and a lot of other things which certainly had never en-

tered her conscious mind. He advised a temporary separation from her husband and for a couple of months they slept in different rooms, but all to no avail.

At the suggestion of a friend of the family, and without the knowledge of her husband, who was above all things a practical man, and would not have approved of it, she consulted a well-known psychic and seeress, with a local vogue, who pumped her dry and then told her that the thing she wanted most in the world was a child, and that she would have one within a year. A condition of success was that she should believe the prediction. However, perhaps from lack of faith, the year passed without any favorable auguries.

A well-educated and sophisticated woman friend to whom she voiced her desire suggested that she read Maupassant's *L'Héritage*, which she procured in a translation, read through to the clever, cynical and immoral solution of the problem presented, which was her own with a different motivation, then threw it into the fire and struck her friend's name off her calling list for a long time, indeed until she became a mother in the conventional way.

Of course, the idea of adopting a baby had been discussed in the household, but only as a last resort. Marriages for a long time sterile had sometimes proved fruitful later on. Mrs. Seaton's desire was a child of her own on whom she could pour out the flood of starved mother love which surged through her heart.

Seaton, on his part, knew from the memory of his own upbringing, in a household of narrow means, what it meant to rear a child, and he, too, much preferred that the longed-for baby should be their own. But finally, out of love for his wife and concern for her health and happiness, he agreed with her that since it seemed extremely unlikely that they would ever have a child of their own, they should accept the alternative and adopt a baby. And as they wanted a child with no strings on it, no parents or relations in the background who might claim it or grieve because they could not claim it, they picked out the Infants Ward of the City Hospital as the most likely place to find a suitable candidate.

The visitors mounted the stone steps to the door, which stood invitingly open, after the manner of hospital doors in good weather. Near the front of the long and wide hall which extended toward the rear, there was a desk, and behind the desk an attendant in nurse's uniform, of whom they asked if they might see the superintendent. The young woman ushered them into a waiting room to the right of the entrance.

"Pray be seated," she said, "and I'll call him."

After a lapse of about ten minutes, a very capable-looking man in the forties came in, of typically professional appearance. He had dark hair greying slightly on the edges, wore a pince-nez secured by a long cord, and his manner was at once suave and businesslike.

The attendant introduced him as Dr. Freeman, the superintendent in charge.

"And how can I serve you?" he demanded, after they had given their names and exchanged greetings.

"We wish," said Mr. Seaton, "to consult you about adopting a baby. Have you some very young children we could select from? My wife is childless, and would like to assume all the responsibilities of a mother. If the child is old enough to be taken away, the younger the better."

"You're the sort of visitors we welcome," Dr. Freeman replied. "It is easy enough to get the babies—there are so many of them that nobody wants! Our problem is to dispose of them. By the way, would you care to visit the nursery? We keep the babies for a short time, until they are either adopted or ready to be sent to the orphan asylum. It isn't the best practice to admit visitors to the nursery, but we have been putting in some new equipment which you might find interesting. We have the most up-to-date hospital in the Middle West.

They assented and the doctor led them back through the hall, past the open door of the lying-in department to the nursery beyond, which they entered by another door from the corridor. The tiled floors, the whitewashed walls, the furniture and fittings, of the latest sanitary type, were all immaculately clean. On one side, at the front end of the large room, stood half a dozen couveuses or incubators, where, in a scientifi-

cally regulated atmosphere, prematurely born babies were encouraged to live and breathe. Dr. Freeman explained the method, which was quite interesting, and gave some statistics to show to what extent the law of the survival of the fittest was defied and nature's efforts to keep down the population thwarted.

Another section of the room held a row of bassinets containing newborn babies and a little farther along a line of little cribs with infants of one to two months old. Most of these looked more or less alike, but now and then there was one of marked individuality. For instance, in one bed there was a solemn-looking Negro baby, the whites of its big eyes looking soberly out from its little black face.

"How's young Booker T. getting along today?" asked Dr. Freeman of the nurse in charge.

"Fine," was the reply. "He's very well behaved."

"Do you get many colored children?" asked Seaton.

"A few," answered the superintendent. "Many of the mothers come here for delivery, but most of them take the babies away, even under circumstances where white mothers would leave them. Negroes are very fond of their children, though they often neglect them because of wretched home surroundings. We don't really care to have them leave them, because the orphan asylums dislike to take them—they are harder to get rid of."

"Oh, what a beautiful baby!" exclaimed Mrs. Seaton, as they paused beside a certain bed. The infant thus

characterized was a boy about two months old, a well-developed child for its age. There was a rather thick thatch of dark brown curly hair on its finely molded head. Its features were, for a baby of its age, clean-cut and well-defined. Its complexion was a clear olive, suggesting a possible Latin strain. Its mouth was a little Cupid's bow, and there was a dimple in its diminutive chin. Even at its early age there was a perceptible twinkle in its dark brown eyes.

"He's smiling at me," exclaimed Mrs. Seaton. "I think he likes my looks, the little darling."

"How could he help it?" said the doctor gallantly. "He's an intelligent baby, as well as strong, healthy and promising in every way."

"Is he open for adoption?" asked Seaton.

"Oh, please say yes," exclaimed Mrs. Seaton. "May I have him? Let me hold him a moment."

The attendant nurse lifted the baby from its crib and placed it in the visitor's arms. Mrs. Seaton rocked it to and fro and cooed over it. The child exhibited pronounced signs of pleasure, kicking its little feet and clinging tenaciously with one hand to the finger Mr. Seaton extended.

"I guess it'll be all right," said Dr. Freeman, "but we'll first have to look up his pedigree and see whether he's the kind of child you want. We have a perfect recording system and you can rely on it implicitly. Ours is a very mixed population and most of these children are of foreign extraction. We have Italians, Greeks, only

rarely a Jew, and all the Eastern European types, besides our own English, Scotch-Irish and German mixture. I don't think we have ever had a full-blooded Chinese or Japanese child left for adoption, although an occasional Eurasian child is delivered here."

"Is it necessary to look any further, doctor?" asked Mrs. Seaton. "I want a child that is all my own. I don't attach a great deal of importance to heredity. This is a good and beautiful baby and I'm willing to take him on faith. I don't see how he could have anything but a good heredity. We'll give him a happy home in a good environment, and I'm sure the little angel will turn out all we could desire."

"Very well," rejoined Dr. Freeman. "The risk is yours, but I don't think there is any. I don't know his history without looking it up, but there are no strings to him. He'll be all yours. No one will ever claim him."

And so it was decided. They were to make the necessary arrangements to receive the child in their home, and were to call for him in a day or two.

"You can take him on trial," said the superintendent, "and if you decide that you don't want to keep him, we'll take him back within a reasonable time, though I hope we won't have to."

CHAPTER II



THE REARING OF a modern infant is a complicated, and, for those who can afford it, an expensive process. Little Donald—they named him after Seaton's grandfather—had all the attention any young child needed. The science of babiculture had not developed, at that time, to its present advanced stage. The specialist who comes to the house once a week with his little black bag, looks the baby over, makes suggestions as to diet and clothing and sanitation, vaccinates it for all imaginable diseases from infantile paralysis to senile dementia, and leaves each time with his minimum fee of five dollars, was as yet unknown in the city; but the family doctor, who knew little about serums or vitamins or calories, with fewer visits and for a smaller fee did all that was considered necessary. The modern prepared baby foods were not yet invented, but mothers learned how to sterilize and otherwise prepare the milk for the baby's bottle. Young Donald was fed on schedule, his B.M.'s and P.M.'s were watched and regulated, his hours of sleep fixed. He was a good baby and con-

formed to these rules quite as well as most infants. If he did not always eat or sleep at the proper time, he always got enough food and sleep. Whatever further care he needed was supplied in ample measure.

Mrs. Seaton could not have nursed him more devotedly or loved him more dearly had he been of her own flesh. In caring for him she found a healthy outlet for the hitherto repressed maternal instinct which was so strong an element of her character.

Some three months after little Donald was taken into the household, Seaton moved to Cleveland. He was the inventor, patentee and manufacturer of the Seaton carburetor, an automobile appliance which was destined, with the increasing development of the automobile industry, to make the inventor a wealthy man. He had decided that Cleveland offered a better market for his commodity, and he moved his family to that already large and rapidly growing city.

All the conditions of the time were favorable to rapid economic progress. McKinley had come and gone; Roosevelt was sitting in the saddle, riproaring and swinging the big stick. The high tariff and the steel trust had made the country safe for plutocracy and were filling it up with new types of immigrants who lowered our living standard while they increased our production and our markets. Mr. Bryan, a voice fated to futility, was still chasing rainbows. Locally, Tom L. Johnson, having cleaned out the Augean stables of the city council, was riding high on his hobby horse of

three-cent railroad fare, with Newton D. Baker, pipe in hand, argent of tongue and ardent of spirit, holding on to his leader's stirrup straps until he could get into his own stride.

The Seatons took up their residence in a suburban neighborhood on the West Side, in an eight-room house on Ethel Avenue, a pleasant, shaded side street, off Lorain Avenue. They added a sleeping porch and a sun room, and were able to live comfortably, with a room for a servant and plenty of space for the baby to play in.

Young Donald grew like a weed, and proved a most precocious infant. At six months he could babble a simple musical phrase. At twelve months he could pronounce simple syllables. At fifteen months he could make his wants intelligibly known. At eighteen months he could form simple sentences. When he was a year old he could walk. He reacted instinctively to musical sounds and at fifteen months could stagger through what would be called in these degenerate days a Charleston—an epileptic terpsichorean orgy to the formlessness of which the tender limbs and soft muscles of a growing child easily lent themselves.

He developed a Gargantuan appetite—not sixty cows' milk but part of one's was his daily portion. It was the day of one cow's milk. Pasteurization was in its infancy, and the organization of great dairy companies which monopolize the milk products industry and exploit both producer and consumer impartially had not