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White Weeds

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

STUDENTS of Danforth University during the late Nineties may remember the remarkable events following the death of Professor Carson of that institution.

At three o'clock one afternoon Professor Carson left his own apartments in Merle Hall and crossed the university campus toward the president's house. It was obvious to the few students whom he encountered during his short walk that Professor Carson was deeply absorbed in thought, because, ordinarily a model of politeness, upon this occasion he either passed them as though unaware of their presence, or responded to their respectful salutations with a very palpable perfunctoriness. There was reason enough, the students knew, for a certain degree of preoccupation on the part of Professor Carson, but hardly sufficient to account for an agitation so extreme as not only to disturb his usually grave and composed countenance but to make him forget his punctilious manners. A man might well be absent-minded upon his wedding day, but he need not look as though he were under sentence of death and straining every effort to secure a reprieve. For Professor Carson, as everyone knew, was to be married at 7 o'clock in the evening to Miss Marian Tracy, by common consent of the university faculty and the student body the most beautiful woman of her years in Attica.

It was a noble campus that Professor Carson crossed. Founded by a wealthy merchant of a past generation, before the days of colossal and burdensome fortunes, the university had never been regarded as a medium of self-advertisement, but as the contribution of an enlightened philanthropist to the training of youth and the advancement of science. There was a broad quadrangular sweep of velvety turf, crossed by two intersecting avenues of noble elms, while distributed symmetrically around the square were a dozen stately stone buildings, some ivy-clad, others beginning already to show, though the institution was only fifty years old, the markings of frost and snow and sun and rain which in a strenuous Northern climate so soon simulate the mellowness of age.

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Professor Carson found the president at home and was ushered into his presence. President Trumbull of Danforth University was a suave and learned gentleman of fifty, in whom a fine executive mind had not overborne a zeal for scholarship, in which he had achieved deserved renown before assuming the cares of administration. A more striking contrast than that between the two men it would be difficult to imagine; physically they were almost the antitheses of each other. Professor Carson was tall and slender with fair hair, which he wore much longer than most men; the president was sturdy and his hair dark, with a very slight sprinkling of white, and ruddy of complexion. The professor's forehead was high and narrow, the president's lower but broader. The president's eye was gray, keen and steady; the professor's blue, weak and wavering. The one was the face of a man of affairs, who welcomed responsibilities as a fit exercise for high powers; the other that of a man lacking resolution and prone, in the crises of life, to seek the support and direction of stronger minds. It was, indeed, Dr. Trumbull's well-known decision of character which had brought Professor Carson, torn by conflicting emotions, across the campus to the president's house. Both were men of striking appearance, not to say handsome men, Professor Carson's manner being marked by a certain distinction, accounted for in some measure by his consciousness that he was of an old and distinguished ancestry. He was deeply wedded to his work, and punctiliously conscientious in its performance; he was professor of mathematics, a science governed by exact rules and requiring little exercise of judgment or imagination. He had been connected with the school longer than President Trumbull and was loyal to its ideals and traditions, with the tenacity of a vine which has thrust its slender roots into the interstices of a rock.

President Trumbull was in his study, in company with his daughter Marcia, a handsome and intelligent child of twelve who sat beside a window reading, while her father wrote at his desk. At a glance from his visitor, the president, with another glance, dismissed Marcia. Professor Carson, murmuring a request for permission, closed the door of the room and sat, or rather sank into a chair near the president.

"Well, Professor Carson, what can I do for you? I see that you have something on your mind."

"Dr. Trumbull," said the other, "I am in the greatest trouble of my life."

"Bless me, Professor! What can it be? Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Serious is hardly the name for it—it is more than serious. It is a matter that concerns my whole future—almost a matter of life and death. As you know, I am—I was to be married tonight."

"Yes, and to an exceedingly beautiful and charming lady."

This statement was made in all sincerity, and not without a certain degree of regret. Dr. Trumbull was a widower of less than a year's standing. Had Professor Carson waited a while longer, he would not have been without a formidable rival.

"Exactly," said Professor Carson, extending his hand with a gesture unconsciously tragic, "and an hour ago I received this letter."

Dr. Trumbull took the letter, and as he read it an air of astonishment overspread his features.

"An extraordinary statement," he exclaimed, "most extraordinary! But surely it is not true—surely you cannot believe it?"

"I—don't—know what to believe. It is possible—most things are possible."

"But, my dear sir, this is an anonymous letter—the weapon of malice—the medium of slander."

"I know it, sir. In the ordinary affairs of life I should have tossed it into the fire. But this is a matter vital to my happiness. And there is always the possibility that someone might wish to tell another the truth, without seeming to do an unkind thing. An anonymous letter *might* be written with the best of motives."

"The method throws suspicion on the motive. Is there no clue to the writer? Have you any enemy?"

"None that I know of," replied Professor Carson promptly. "I don't know of a man in the world who should wish me other than well."

"Or a woman?"

"Or a woman," came the reply with equal promptness.

"It is more calculated to injure the lady than you," said the president reflectively. "*She* may have enemies."

"She is the soul of candor, and popular with her own sex."

"She is beautiful, and popular with the other sex—sufficient reasons why she might be the object of envy or malice."

"The letter is from another city. It is postmarked 'Drexel.'"

"Drexel is forty miles away," returned the president. "One might take the ten o'clock train from here, post the letter at Drexel, and be back here by twelve o'clock. The letter would be here for afternoon delivery."

Professor Carson examined the envelope.

"It was post-marked at Drexel at eleven o'clock. The receiving stamp shows it delivered at the post office here at 12:15. It reached me in the afternoon delivery. It is typewritten, so there is no penmanship to afford a clue."

"I have passed the point of concern about its origin," returned Professor Carson. "It is the fact itself that worries me. The mere suggestion is torture. If the statement be true, it means the ruin of my happiness. If it be false—and pray God it is—I have no time, before the hour set for the wedding, to ascertain the fact. I must decide now, with such light as I have. As my friend and superior in office, what would you advise me to do?"

"Why not ask the lady?"

"I could not do it. If it were true, I could not marry her."

"Nor, as I understand, would you wish to. And if it were false, your mind would be at ease."

"But if I should ask her, she might not marry me; and if it is false, I would not lose her for the world."

"You would trust her word?"

"Implicitly. She is too proud to lie."

"Then, my dear Professor Carson, if you feel that way. . . ."

"Then you would advise me?"

"Is it so important?" asked the president, perplexed. "The world would never know it, even if it were true."

"Someone knows it—if it be true," returned the other. "And then, I should wish to have children, and it is of them I should have to think—it would be criminal not to think of them. The time is so short that I don't know what to do nor where to turn. I thought you might advise me—you are so

prompt, so resourceful. I should wish to adopt a course that would protect myself, and yet in no way reflect upon the lady, or upon the university, or impair my usefulness here."

"Such delicacy was to be expected of you, Professor Carson. If it were my own affair, I could decide it promptly, but unless I could put myself exactly in your place, as perhaps I should be unable to do, I should hesitate to advise a man upon a matter so vital. Your problem is a difficult one from your own point of view—perhaps from any man's. You are engaged to be married, within a few hours, to a most charming woman, in whose worth and worthiness you have had entire confidence. The wedding preparations are made, the guests invited. Even now, in all probability, the bride is dressing for the wedding. At this moment you receive an anonymous letter, purporting to convey information which, if true, renders the lady ineligible for marriage with you. I see but three courses open to you as a gentleman—and those who know you would expect you to consider the subject first from that point of view. You can take the letter to the lady, ask her frankly if the charge be true, and marry her or not, as she may answer. A less frank but at least forgivable step would be to postpone the marriage on account of sudden indisposition—you are looking far from well just now. If she confirmed the statement of the letter, you would have to make some such excuse, in order to spare her feelings. A third course, which a man—some men at least—who loved the lady well enough would follow, would be to throw the letter into the fire and marry her."

"But which do you think—" began Professor Carson desperately, "which do you think—"

"I think," said the president, interrupting him, "that you had better choose between the three. A gentleman of your character and antecedents can hardly fail to select a course consistent with—"

"With honor," murmured the poor professor. "Thank you, sir," he added with dignity, "I shall trouble you no further. But whatever course I decide upon, I may ask you to hold in strict confidence all that I have said, and the contents of this letter?"

"You need hardly ask it. It is not a matter to be repeated.

Whether the marriage take place or no, we should have no right to compromise the lady."

At 7 o'clock the same evening the marriage of Professor John Marshall Carson to Miss Marian Tracy took place at the latter's residence. Miss Tracy was alone in the world, having neither parents nor near relatives living. She had been a teacher in a ladies' seminary, and made her home with a distant connection who lived in the town. To the college world the event was a notable one. Professor Carson was, if not exactly popular, at least very highly esteemed by his colleagues. If he seemed at times to hold himself aloof from the other professors, his attitude was instinctively ascribed to a natural reserve rather than to undue self-esteem. If any new-fledged tutor or professor ever attempted to be familiar with the professor of mathematics, he was brought back to the conventional by a tact so delicate, a courtesy so refined, that no offense was taken, and respect took the place of what, at a ruder rebuff, might easily have been dislike. The wedding was attended by all of the professors and their wives, as well as by many of the townspeople.

The house was decorated for the wedding with red and white roses. Festoons of smilax ran from the chandeliers in the center to the corners of the rooms. The floors were covered with white canvas. Gorman and McAlee's orchestra, screened behind palms in the back hall, played a varied program of classical and popular music, ranging from Mendelssohn to ragtime. These details are mentioned because they are important to the remainder of the story. The bride,

"Clothed in white samite,
Mystic, wonderful,"

as Dr. Trumbull murmured when the vision dawned upon him—was radiant in the well-preserved beauty of thirty years, for Miss Tracy was no longer in her first youth. When she entered the front parlor upon the arm of her cousin, to the strains of the wedding march, there was not a man present who did not think Professor Carson an extremely lucky man. It was observed, however, by those who paid the bridegroom any attention, that he did not seem as happy as the occasion demanded; that the voice with which he spoke the irrevocable

vows had not the vibrant ring that might be expected from the virile man united to his mate; that the hand which he gave to those who congratulated him was limp and cold; that while from time to time during the evening his eyes sought the bride's face with a look of longing, behind this lay a haunting distrust—that he seemed to be seeking something which he did not find; that at other times his manner was *distrain* and his smile forced; and that when the last guests were departing, his expression alternated between anticipation and dread. President Trumbull, the most distinguished guest, responded at the supper table to a toast in which he wished the couple every felicity. At no time during the evening did Professor Carson allude to the interview of the afternoon, nor did the president mention it to him then or thereafter. There had been no scandal, no sensation, and Dr. Trumbull had no disposition to pry into another's secrets.

If there were any lingering curiosity on Dr. Trumbull's part concerning which of the two possible courses open to him besides postponement of the marriage Professor Carson had adopted, it was not lessened by his observation of the married couple during the succeeding months. He went to Europe for the summer, but upon his return in the autumn to his duties, he met Professor Carson daily, in the routine of the university work, and the lady from time to time in the social life of which the university was the center. Only a few meetings were necessary to convince him that neither husband nor wife was happy. Professor Carson, at the end of what should have been a restful vacation, had visibly declined in health. Always slender, he had become emaciated. His natural gravity had developed into an almost sepulchral solemnity, his innate reserve into a well-nigh morbid self-absorption. The rare smile which had at times flickered upon his features seemed to have gone out forever.

His efforts to overcome this melancholy were at times very apparent. Mrs. Carson was fond of society, and they often went out together. On such occasions their bearing towards one another was perfect, of its kind. Professor Carson was the embodiment of chivalrous courtesy—a courtesy so marked that in the bearing of any other man toward his own wife it would have provoked a smile. The lady, in her demeanor

toward her husband responded in a manner so similar as to seem at times ironical. In a free and familiar society of intimates they were, when together, conspicuous. The lady when alone could unbend; but Professor Carson after his marriage never appeared in society alone.

In spite, however, of this elaborate deference toward one another, more than one observer besides Dr. Trumbull suspected that their union was not one of perfect happiness. Dr. Trumbull wondered, more than once, whether Carson had asked her, before their marriage, the question suggested by the anonymous letter, and, receiving a negative answer, had had his faith shaken after marriage, or whether he had loyally burned the letter, but had been unable to divest himself of the hateful doubt it had engendered, which was slowly sapping his vitality. That some cause was producing this unfortunate result became more and more apparent, for before the next summer vacation came around, Professor Carson took to his bed, and, after a brief illness, was enrolled among the great majority.

The number of those who were interested in the Carsons' household was largely increased during the two days succeeding the professor's death. Announcement was duly made that the funeral services would take place on Saturday afternoon—Professor Carson had died on Thursday—and were to be conducted by old Dr. Burridge, rector emeritus of St. Anne's. This in itself was a novelty, for Dr. Burridge was purblind and hard of hearing, and rarely performed any priestly function except some service where sight and hearing were not prime essentials. Some surprise being expressed that Dr. McRae, the rector in charge, had not been requested to officiate, it was learned that Dr. Burridge would act by special request of the widow.

This, however, was a trivial preliminary. The real surprise began when those who entered the house shortly before the hour fixed for the service, found none of the customary trappings of woe, but on the contrary, a house decked as for a wedding ceremony. It required only a moment for those who had been present at Professor Carson's marriage a few months before to perceive with a sort of dazed wonder, that an effort had seemingly been made to reproduce, as near as the plan of

the rooms would permit, the decorations upon that occasion. Roses, white and red, were banked in the corners; long streamers of smilax ran from the chandeliers to the corners of the room, and were twined around the stair railing. Where, at the wedding ceremony a floral altar had been reared, the body of Professor Carson, in immaculate evening dress, lay upon a bier, composed of a casket the sides of which were let down so as to resemble more a couch than the last narrow house of a mortal man.

The troubled wonder of the funeral guests was still further augmented when in the rear hall, behind a screen of palms. Gormand and McAlee's orchestra began to play Wagner's "O du mein holder Abendstern." For a moment, while the gathering audience were realizing that a band associated only with pleasure parties was playing music, which, while not exactly profane, was certainly not religious—for a few moments the audience was silent, and then the room was as murmurous with whispered comment as a wheat-field shaken by the wind.

One of the professors spoke to the undertaker, who was hovering, like a bird of prey, around the hall.

"What is the meaning," he asked, "of this extraordinary performance?"

"Don't ask me, sir. It is the widow's orders. I don't approve of it, sir, but business is business with me. It is the widow's orders, and, as the person chiefly interested, the widow's wishes are sacred."

While Dr. Burridge, in full canonicals, having taken his place before the bier, to which he was led by one of the ushers, was reading the first part of the beautiful Episcopal service for the burial of the dead, there was opportunity for those present to reach in some degree the frame of mind befitting so solemn an occasion. At that point, following the first lesson, where a hymn is sung or an anthem, the discomfort returned with even greater force when a hired quartet, which some of those present recognized as belonging to the neighboring town of Drexel, began to sing, to a soft accompaniment by the orchestra, not the conventional and the expected "Abide with Me" or "Lead, Kindly Light," but Graben Hoffman's exquisite love song, "Der schoenste Engel." As the words were German only a few understood them, but in the

bosoms of the rest there was a vague intuition that the song was of a piece with the other unusual features of the occasion.

Good old Dr. Burrige, however, to whose dull hearing all music was the same, had neither seen nor heard anything to mar the solemnity of the service. He repeated the Creed, in which he was joined by those who were sufficiently collected, and added the fitting prayers. When he had concluded the portion of the service which could be performed at the home, and the undertaker had announced that the remainder of the service would take place at the cemetery, the guests instead of rising returned to their seats as though by a common premonition that there was something more to happen. Nor were they disappointed, for almost immediately the orchestra struck up the "Wedding March" from *Lohengrin*, and Mrs. Carson, clad not in widow's weeds but in bridal array, her face set in a tragic smile, entered the back parlor and moved in time to the music down the narrow lane which had been left between the chairs, and pausing before the bier took off her wedding ring and placed it in her dead husband's hand; took off her wreath of orange blossoms and laid it among the flowers by his side. Then, turning, she left the room by the side door. A few moments later, when the casket had been closed and the body was ready for sepulture, she came downstairs dressed in an ordinary street costume of dark cloth, took her place in the mourner's carriage, and followed the remains to the grave, by the side of which she stood like any ordinary spectator until ashes had been consigned to ashes, and dust to dust, after which she immediately entered her carriage and was driven away, leaving the mystified throng morally certain that nothing but a pronounced mental aberration on the part of Mrs. Carson could account for so extraordinary, not to say shocking a funeral. To more than one the mad scene in Hamlet occurred as at least a distant parallel, though no one of them had ever dreamed that the stately Mrs. Carson had loved her middle-aged husband so deeply as, like Ophelia, to go mad for love of him.

So paralyzed with amazement had been everyone at the funeral, and brief had been Mrs. Carson's appearances, that not anyone had uttered a word of condolence or spoken to her during the afternoon. That very night she left Attica. Her

house was closed and her affairs settled by her distant cousin, and it was learned that she had gone abroad for an indefinite sojourn. By the will of Professor Carson, which was presented for probate shortly after his decease, he left to his widow the whole of his estate, which amounted to some \$20,000 in money and securities.

A little more than a year after Professor Carson's death, at the close of the school year, Dr. Trumbull, accompanied by his daughter Marcia—he had been a widower now for three years—left home to spend the summer in Europe. A few weeks later, upon stepping aboard the steamer at Mainz for the trip down the Rhine, he saw seated upon the deck, at a little distance, a lady whose outlines, though her face was turned away, seemed familiar. Having seen his daughter comfortably seated and their hand baggage placed, he went over to the lady, who, upon his addressing her by name, looked up with a start, and then extended both her hands.

“Why, Dr. Trumbull, what a surprise! You are the last person whom I should have expected to see!”

“And, I suppose, the one whom it gives you the least pleasure to see?”

“By no means! Indeed, I am glad to see you. One's home friends are never so welcome as when one meets them in a foreign land.”

“Yes, I believe it is understood that a mere bowing acquaintance at home becomes an intimate friend abroad.”

“Now, doctor, I shall not follow your very palpable lead; you must take my friendship at its face value.”

“My dear Mrs. Carson, I am only too glad to do so, and am sincerely delighted, on my part, that our paths have met.”

The president's daughter, finding herself deserted, and recognizing Mrs. Carson, came over at this juncture, and was duly hugged and kissed.

“How tall you are growing, dear!” said the lady. “It is only about a year since I saw you, and you look three years older.”

“My dresses are longer,” said Marcia ingenuously. “Oh, I'm so glad we've met you. You know, I always liked you, Mrs. Carson, even before you were married.”

“You dear child! And as for you, who could help loving

you? But, there, how selfish I am! In my pleasure at our meeting, I had forgotten all about Professor and Mrs. Gilman. I'm traveling with them, you know. Professor Gilman has had his 'sabbatical year,' and I've been with them ever since they came over last July. At school Mrs. Gilman was my dearest friend, and they have been very good to me."

"And you never give up your friends?"

"Never! So long as they are good to me. But excuse me a moment, and I will look them up."

She returned shortly with her friends. The two gentlemen were old acquaintances and former intimates. Professor Gilman, an authority on medieval history, had been a colleague of Dr. Trumbull's at Brown, many years before. After the exchange of cordial greetings, the ladies, accompanied by Marcia, went over to the side of the boat, leaving the gentlemen together.

They spoke of their work and their travels, and then the conversation turned on Mrs. Carson.

"She is looking well," said President Trumbull.

"A fine woman," returned Professor Gilman, "a woman of character, capable of forming a definite purpose, and of carrying it out; and yet not at all hard, and in some ways exceedingly feminine. My wife loves her dearly, and we have enjoyed having her with us."

"I never thought," said Dr. Trumbull, "that she was quite happy with Carson."

"Happy! Far from it! I suppose, after Carson's remarkable funeral, that all Attica imagined her out of her mind?"

"Her conduct was unusual, certainly, and in default of explanation, such a suspicion might really have seemed charitable."

"Did it ever occur to you that there might be a reasonable explanation, without that hypothesis?"

"Frankly, yes, though I could never have imagined what it was. I happened to know something of Carson's antecedents, and of certain events preceding his marriage, which I have thought might in some obscure way have accounted for Mrs. Carson's eccentric conduct upon that occasion. But the knowledge came to me in such a manner that I shall probably never know any more about it."

“Did it concern a letter?”

“Yes.”

“An anonymous letter?”

“Yes.”

“Then I know it already. Mrs. Carson is my wife’s other self—even I play only second fiddle. They have no secrets from one another. I know that Mrs. Carson values your good opinion, and since you know so much, I imagine she would not be unwilling for you to know all the facts—if you could dream them, say. Indeed, you ought to know them.”

It was a warm day. Their cigars were good. The ladies left them alone for half an hour. The steamer glided smoothly down the Rhine. Two gentlemen in middle life, upon their vacation, might have dozed and might have dreamed. At any rate, before the ladies rejoined them, each knew all that the other knew of Mrs. Carson’s story, and what they did not know required no supernatural wisdom to divine it.

When, after the wedding, the guests had departed and the wedded pair were left alone, the bride observed that Professor Carson was ill at ease, and that his embarrassment was serious. For a while he wandered about the room. At length he sat down beside her and began to speak.

“Marian,” he said, “I have a very painful duty to perform. This afternoon, only a few hours ago, I received through the mail an anonymous letter, containing a certain statement with reference to yourself.”

To say that his wife was surprised is a mild statement. She was not a child, but a mature woman, and the inference seemed plain; a wedding, an anonymous letter upon the eve of it. That he had not believed the statement, whatever it had been, was apparent, for he had married her. But right upon the heels of this conviction came the first false note in her conception of Professor Carson’s character—a doubt of his taste. She had considered him the flower of courtesy—had looked upon his chivalrous deference for women as a part of his Southern heritage. It was this attribute of his, which, more than anything else, had attracted her. That having loyally ignored such a letter, he should now tell her of it was hardly to have been expected of him.

“I could not believe the statement,” he went on, “and

therefore, as honor required of me, I threw the letter into the fire, and fulfilled my contract."

Again the lady winced. It hardly required a sensitive mind to infer, from his language, that he had married her because of their previous engagement. His choice of words was at least unfortunate.

"I am sorry," she said with spirit, "that you should have felt under any compulsion."

"There was none," he replied, "except that of my love. And I did not believe the story."

"Then why mention it?"

"Because I must know," he replied, "and yet I dared not run the risk of losing you. Had I asked you the question before our marriage, your pride, which in my eyes is one of your greatest charms, might have made you refuse to marry me."

"Quite likely," she replied, with rising anger. "But, since you ignored the letter, and disbelieve the story, why, oh, why, do you tell me now?"

"Because," he said wildly, "because I love you, and because my happiness is so bound up in you, and because this charge is of such a nature, that I can never shake off its memory until I learn from your own lips that it is false. I know it is false—I am sure it is false—it must be false; but I want your lips to give it the lie. Whatever you say, I shall believe."

She was a woman, and for a moment curiosity replaced indignation.

"And what," she asked, "is this terrible charge which I must meet, this crime I must deny?"

"It is a monstrous calumny. Could anyone, looking at your fair face, at your clear eye, your frank and noble countenance, believe that one drop of Negro blood coursed through your veins? Preposterous!"

His words were confident, but his voice scarcely rang true, and she could read the lingering dread in his eyes. This, then, that some unknown person had said of her, was the offense with which she was charged!

She was silent. He watched her anxiously.

"Suppose," she answered with a forced smile, "suppose, for the sake of the argument, it had been true—what then?"

"Ah, dearest," he replied, reassured by her smile, and drawing nearer to her, while she retreated behind a convenient chair. "I should have suffered a severe shock. For the sake of the university, and to avoid scandal, I should have lived with you, had you been willing, and to the outer world we should have been husband and wife; but to ourselves the relationship would have existed in name only."

"And you married me," she said coldly, "with such a doubt in your mind, and with such a purpose, should the doubt be wrongly resolved? It seems scarcely fair to me. I might have answered yes."

He explained his state of mind, or at least endeavored to make it clear, plainly surprised that he should find it necessary; for to his mind, the mere statement of the fact was its own explanation.

His father had been a planter, with wide estates and numerous slaves. His mother had suffered deeply in her pride and her affections, because of some poor unfortunate of color. With his mother's milk he had drunk in a deadly antipathy to the thought of any personal relation between white people and black but that of master and servant. The period of his adolescence had coincided with the tense years during which the white South, beaten on the field, had sought in a fierce and unreasoning pride a refuge from the humiliation of defeat, and with equal unreason, but very humanly, had visited upon the black pawns in the game, who were near at hand, the hatred they felt for their conquerors. Most of this feeling Professor Carson had overcome, but this one thing was bred in the bone.

"It is part of me," he said. "Nothing could ever make me feel that the touch of a Negress was not pollution. Beside my mother's deathbed I swore a solemn vow that this sin should never be laid at my door."

His bride was not flattered by the suggestion. She, a Negress, to whom his vow might apply!

"How white," she asked, "must one be, to come within the protection of the code of Southern chivalry?"

"There are no degrees," he explained. "To me, and those who think like me, men and women are either white or black. Those who are not all white are all black. Were I married in fact to a woman even seemingly as white as you, yet not

entirely white, I should feel guilty of mortal sin. I should lie awake at night, dreading lest my children should show traces of their descent from an inferior and degraded race. I should never know a moment's happiness."

"Pardon my curiosity," she said, "but this is interesting—at least. What, may I ask, was to have been—my attitude in this marriage? In this state there would have been no legal objection to our union. We are both Episcopalians, and our church looks upon divorce with disfavor. Was I to have submitted without protest to a plan which left me married, yet no wife?"

"It would have been for you to say," he replied. "I could not blame you for concealing your antecedents. For me to seek a divorce would have been to reveal your secret, which honor would scarcely have permitted, and the same reason, I imagined, might constrain you. But, let us thank heaven! I am spared the trial, and with your assurance that all is well we shall be happy all the rest of our lives."

He moved toward her to take her in his arms.

"You forget," she answered quickly, and still evading him, "that I have given you no such assurance."

Professor Carson turned white to the lips. She thought he would have fainted at her feet; he clutched the table beside him for support. She would have pitied him, had she despised him less.

"What," he faltered, "can it be possible?"

"I shall certainly not deny it," she replied.

And she never did. They lived together according to his program. He was never certain, and in his doubt he found his punishment. When he died, she yielded to a woman's weakness. She was not a widow, but a bride. She owed Professor Carson no affection and felt for him no regret. He had outraged her finest feelings, and she had stooped to a posthumous revenge, which had satisfied her mind, while it only mystified others; indeed, she had cared very little, at the time, for what others might think. That having known her, and loved her, and married her, a prejudice which reflected in no wise upon her character, her intelligence or her beauty could keep them apart, was the unpardonable sin. She must be loved for what she was.

"It is curious," said Dr. Trumbull, reflectively, "how the

fixed idea dominates the mind. Perfectly reasonable and logical and fair-minded upon every other topic, upon one pet aversion a man may skirt the edge of mania. Nature has set no impassable barrier between races. A system which, assuming the Negro race to be inferior, condemns Mrs. Carson, because of some remote strain of its blood, to celibacy and social ostracism, or throws her back upon the inferior race, is scarcely complimentary to our own. The exaggerated race feeling of men like Carson is more than a healthy instinct for the preservation of a type; it is more than a prejudice. It is an obsession."

"A disease," returned Professor Gilman. "In all probability, had she given Professor Carson the answer he wanted, it would never have satisfied him. The seed had been planted in his mind; it was sure to bring forth a harvest of suspicion and distrust. He would in any event have worried himself into a premature grave. His marriage, while the doubt existed, was a refinement of Quixotry—and of unconscious selfishness; to spare the feelings of the possible white woman, and to save her for himself, he deliberately contemplated the destruction of the happiness of the possible—Negress."

Across the deck, Dr. Trumbull studied the graceful contour of Mrs. Carson's figure, the fine lines of her profile. A widow, and yet no wife! It was interesting. It would be a brave man who would marry her—but surely she had never loved Carson.

Dr. Trumbull had always admired her, since he had known her. Had she been willing, and had she waited a little longer, she might have been spared the somewhat tragic interlude with Carson.

"I had always wondered," he said, reflectively, "which of the three courses open to Carson he adopted—to postpone the marriage—to burn the letter—or to ask her frankly whether its contents were true. It seems that he did all three—he asked whether or not the statement was true; he burned the letter and married her without mentioning it; and—he deferred the marriage—the real marriage. It was the order in which he did them that destroyed his happiness and shortened his life."

"And all," said Professor Gilman, "for nothing, absolutely

nothing. What malicious mind conceived and wrote the letter, Mrs. Carson never learned, but there was not a word of truth in it! Her blood is as entirely pure as Professor Carson's could have been. My wife knew her people, and her line of descent for two hundred years is quite as clear, quite as good, as that of most old American families. But here come the ladies."

"Oh, papa," cried Marcia, "you and Professor Gilman have been so busy talking that you have missed the most beautiful scenery—the Lorelei, and Bingen, and Ehrenbreitstein, and—oh, my! If it hadn't been for Mrs. Carson, who has been telling me all the legends, I shouldn't have known anything about them."

"I saw you with her and Mrs. Gilman, dear, and knew it was all right. Perhaps Mrs. Carson will show them to me—some other time."