A Matter of Principle

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

I

What our country needs most in its treatment of the race problem,” observed Mr. Cicero Clayton at one of the monthly meetings of the Blue Vein Society, of which he was a prominent member, “is a clearer conception of the brotherhood of man.”

The same sentiment in much the same words had often fallen from Mr. Clayton’s lips,—so often, in fact, that the younger members of the society sometimes spoke of him—among themselves of course—as “Brotherhood Clayton.” The sobriquet derived its point from the application he made of the principle involved in this oft-repeated proposition.

The fundamental article of Mr. Clayton’s social creed was that he himself was not a negro.

“I know,” he would say, “that the white people lump us all together as negroes, and condemn us all to the same social ostracism. But I don’t accept this classification, for my part, and I imagine that, as the chief party in interest, I have a right to my opinion. People who belong by half or more of their blood to the most virile and progressive race of modern times have as much right to call themselves white as others have to call them negroes.”

Mr. Clayton spoke warmly, for he was well informed, and had thought much upon the subject; too much, indeed, for he had not been able to escape entirely the tendency of too much concentration upon one subject to make even the clearest minds morbid.

“Of course we can’t enforce our claims, or protect ourselves from being robbed of our birthright; but we can at least have principles, and try to live up to them the best we can. If we are not accepted as white, we can at any rate make it clear that we object to being called black. Our protest cannot fail in time to impress itself upon the better class of white people; for the Anglo-Saxon race loves justice, and will eventually do it, where it does not conflict with their own interests.”
Whether or not the fact that Mr. Clayton meant no sarcasm, and was conscious of no inconsistency in this eulogy, tended to establish the racial identity he claimed may safely be left to the discerning reader.

In living up to his creed Mr. Clayton declined to associate to any considerable extent with black people. This was sometimes a little inconvenient, and occasionally involved a sacrifice of some pleasure for himself and his family, because they would not attend entertainments where many black people were likely to be present. But they had a social refuge in a little society of people like themselves; they attended, too, a church, of which nearly all the members were white, and they were connected with a number of the religious and benevolent associations open to all good citizens, where they came into contact with the better class of white people, and were treated, in their capacity of members, with a courtesy and consideration scarcely different from that accorded to other citizens.

Mr. Clayton’s racial theory was not only logical enough, but was in his own case backed up by substantial arguments. He had begun life with a small patrimony, and had invested his money in a restaurant, which by careful and judicious attention had grown from a cheap eating-house into the most popular and successful confectionery and catering establishment in Groveland. His business occupied a double store on Oakwood Avenue. He owned houses and lots, and stocks and bonds, had good credit at the banks, and lived in a style befitting his income and business standing. In person he was of olive complexion, with slightly curly hair. His features approached the Cuban or Latin-American type rather than the familiar broad characteristics of the mulatto, this suggestion of something foreign being heightened by a Vandyke beard and a carefully waxed and pointed mustache. When he walked to church on Sunday mornings with his daughter Alice, they were a couple of such striking appearance as surely to attract attention.

Miss Alice Clayton was queen of her social set. She was young, she was handsome. She was nearly white; she frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely so. She was accomplished and amiable, dressed in good taste, and had for
her father by all odds the richest colored man—the term is used with apologies to Mr. Clayton, explaining that it does not necessarily mean a negro—in Groveland. So pronounced was her superiority that really she had but one social rival worthy of the name,—Miss Lura Watkins, whose father kept a prosperous livery stable and lived in almost as good style as the Claytons. Miss Watkins, while good-looking enough, was not so young nor quite so white as Miss Clayton. She was popular, however, among their mutual acquaintances, and there was a good-natured race between the two as to which should make the first and best marriage.

Marriages among Miss Clayton’s set were serious affairs. Of course marriage is always a serious matter, whether it be a success or a failure, and there are those who believe that any marriage is better than no marriage. But among Miss Clayton’s friends and associates matrimony took on an added seriousness because of the very narrow limits within which it could take place. Miss Clayton and her friends, by reason of their assumed superiority to black people, or perhaps as much by reason of a somewhat morbid shrinking from the curiosity manifested toward married people of strongly contrasting colors, would not marry black men, and except in rare instances white men would not marry them. They were therefore restricted for a choice to the young men of their own complexion. But these, unfortunately for the girls, had a wider choice. In any State where the laws permit freedom of the marriage contract, a man, by virtue of his sex, can find a wife of whatever complexion he prefers; of course he must not always ask too much in other respects, for most women like to better their social position when they marry. To the number thus lost by “going on the other side,” as the phrase went, add the worthless contingent whom no self-respecting woman would marry, and the choice was still further restricted; so that it had become fashionable, when the supply of eligible men ran short, for those of Miss Clayton’s set who could afford it to go traveling, ostensibly for pleasure, but with the serious hope that they might meet their fate away from home.

Miss Clayton had perhaps a larger option than any of her associates. Among such men as there were she could have
taken her choice. Her beauty, her position, her accomplish-
ments, her father’s wealth, all made her eminently desirable. 
But, on the other hand, the same things rendered her more
difficult to reach, and harder to please. To get access to her
heart, too, it was necessary to run the gauntlet of her parents,
which, until she had reached the age of twenty-three, no one
had succeeded in doing safely. Many had called, but none had
been chosen.

There was, however, one spot left unguarded, and
through it Cupid, a veteran sharpshooter, sent a dart. Mr.
Clayton had taken into his service and into his household a
poor relation, a sort of cousin several times removed. This
boy—his name was Jack—had gone into Mr. Clayton’s ser-
vice at a very youthful age,—twelve or thirteen. He had
helped about the housework, washed the dishes, swept the
floors, taken care of the lawn and the stable for three or four
years, while he attended school. His cousin had then taken
him into the store, where he had swept the floor, washed
the windows, and done a class of work that kept fully im-
pressed upon him the fact that he was a poor dependent.
Nevertheless he was a cheerful lad, who took what he could
get and was properly grateful, but always meant to get
more. By sheer force of industry and affability and shrewd-
ness, he forced his employer to promote him in time to a
position of recognized authority in the establishment. Any
one outside of the family would have perceived in him a
very suitable husband for Miss Clayton; he was of about the
same age, or a year or two older, was as fair of complexion
as she, when she was not powdered, and was passably good-
looking, with a bearing of which the natural manliness had
been no more warped than his training and racial status had
rendered inevitable; for he had early learned the law of
growth, that to bend is better than to break. He was some-
times sent to accompany Miss Clayton to places in the
evening, when she had no other escort, and it is quite likely
that she discovered his good points before her parents did.
That they should in time perceive them was inevitable. But
even then, so accustomed were they to looking down upon
the object of their former bounty, that they only spoke of
the matter jocularly.
“Well, Alice,” her father would say in his bluff way, “you’ll not be absolutely obliged to die an old maid. If we can’t find anything better for you, there’s always Jack. As long as he doesn’t take to some other girl, you can fall back on him as a last chance. He’d be glad to take you to get into the business.”

Miss Alice had considered the joke a very poor one when first made, but by occasional repetition she became somewhat familiar with it. In time it got around to Jack himself, to whom it seemed no joke at all. He had long considered it a consummation devoutly to be wished, and when he became aware that the possibility of such a match had occurred to the other parties in interest, he made up his mind that the idea should in due course of time become an accomplished fact. He had even suggested as much to Alice, in a casual way, to feel his ground; and while she had treated the matter lightly, he was not without hope that she had been impressed by the suggestion. Before he had had time, however, to follow up this lead, Miss Clayton, in the spring of 187–, went away on a visit to Washington.

The occasion of her visit was a presidential inauguration. The new President owed his nomination mainly to the votes of the Southern delegates in the convention, and was believed to be correspondingly well disposed to the race from which the Southern delegates were for the most part recruited. Friends of rival and unsuccessful candidates for the nomination had more than hinted that the Southern delegates were very substantially rewarded for their support at the time when it was given; whether this was true or not the parties concerned know best. At any rate the colored politicians did not see it in that light, for they were gathered from near and far to press their claims for recognition and patronage. On the evening following the White House inaugural ball, the colored people of Washington gave an “inaugural” ball at a large public hall. It was under the management of their leading citizens, among them several high officials holding over from the last administration, and a number of professional and business men. This ball was the most noteworthy social event that colored circles up to that time had ever known. There were many visitors from various parts of the country. Miss
Clayton attended the ball, the honors of which she carried away easily. She danced with several partners, and was introduced to innumerulous people whom she had never seen before, and whom she hardly expected ever to meet again. She went away from the ball, at four o’clock in the morning, in a glow of triumph, and with a confused impression of senators and representatives and lawyers and doctors of all shades, who had sought an introduction, led her through the dance, and overwhelmed her with compliments. She returned home the next day but one, after the most delightful week of her life.

II

One afternoon, about three weeks after her return from Washington, Alice received a letter through the mail. The envelope bore the words “House of Representatives” printed in one corner, and in the opposite corner, in a bold running hand, a Congressman’s frank, “Hamilton M. Brown, M. C.” The letter read as follows:

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
WASHINGTON, D. C., March 30, 187—.

MISS ALICE CLAYTON, GROVELAND.

DEAR FRIEND (if I may be permitted to call you so after so brief an acquaintance),—I remember with sincerest pleasure our recent meeting at the inaugural ball, and the sensation created by your beauty, your amiable manners, and your graceful dancing. Time has so strengthened the impression I then received, that I should have felt inconsolable had I thought it impossible ever to again behold the charms which had brightened the occasion of our meeting and eclipsed by their brilliancy the leading belles of the capital. I had hoped, however, to have the pleasure of meeting you again, and circumstances have fortunately placed it in my power to do so at an early date. You have doubtless learned that the contest over the election in the Sixth Congressional District of South Carolina has been decided in my favor, and that I now have the honor of representing my
A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

native State at the national capital. I have just been appointed a member of a special committee to visit and inspect the Sault River and the Straits of Mackinac, with reference to the needs of lake navigation. I have made arrangements to start a week ahead of the other members of the committee, whom I am to meet in Detroit on the 20th. I shall leave here on the 2d, and will arrive in Groveland on the 3d, by the 7:30 evening express. I shall remain in Groveland several days, in the course of which I shall be pleased to call, and renew the acquaintance so auspiciously begun in Washington, which it is my fondest hope may ripen into a warmer friendship.

If you do not regard my visit as presumptuous, and do not write me in the mean while forbidding it, I shall do myself the pleasure of waiting on you the morning after my arrival in Groveland.

With renewed expressions of my sincere admiration and profound esteem, I remain,

Sincerely yours,

HAMILTON M. BROWN, M. C.

To Alice, and especially to her mother, this bold and flowery letter had very nearly the force of a formal declaration. They read it over again and again, and spent most of the afternoon discussing it. There were few young men in Groveland eligible as husbands for so superior a person as Alice Clayton, and an addition to the number would be very acceptable. But the mere fact of his being a Congressman was not sufficient to qualify him; there were other considerations.

“I’ve never heard of this Honorable Hamilton M. Brown,” said Mr. Clayton. The letter had been laid before him at the supper-table. “It’s strange, Alice, that you have n’t said anything about him before. You must have met lots of swell folks not to recollect a Congressman.”

“But he was n’t a Congressman then,” answered Alice; “he was only a claimant. I remember Senator Bruce, and Mr. Douglass; but there were so many doctors and lawyers and politicians that I could n’t keep track of them all. Still I have a faint impression of a Mr. Brown who danced with me.”
She went into the parlor and brought out the dancing programme she had used at the Washington ball. She had decorated it with a bow of blue ribbon and preserved it as a souvenir of her visit.

“Yes,” she said, after examining it, “I must have danced with him. Here are the initials—‘H. M. B.’”

“What color is he?” asked Mr. Clayton, as he plied his knife and fork.

“I have a notion that he was rather dark—darker than any one I had ever danced with before.”

“Why did you dance with him?” asked her father. “You were n’t obliged to go back on your principles because you were away from home.”

“Well, father, ‘when you ’re in Rome’—you know the rest. Mrs. Clearweather introduced me to several dark men, to him among others. They were her friends, and common decency required me to be courteous.”

“If this man is black, we don’t want to encourage him. If he’s the right sort, we’ll invite him to the house.”

“And make him feel at home,” added Mrs. Clayton, on hospitable thoughts intent.

“We must ask Sadler about him to-morrow,” said Mr. Clayton, when he had drunk his coffee and lighted his cigar. “If he’s the right man he shall have cause to remember his visit to Groveland. We ’ll show him that Washington is not the only town on earth.”

The uncertainty of the family with regard to Mr. Brown was soon removed. Mr. Solomon Sadler, who was supposed to know everything worth knowing concerning the colored race, and everybody of importance connected with it, dropped in after supper to make an evening call. Sadler was familiar with the history of every man of negro ancestry who had distinguished himself in any walk of life. He could give the pedigree of Alexander Pushkin, the titles of scores of Dumas’s novels (even Sadler had not time to learn them all), and could recite the whole of Wendell Phillips’s lecture on Toussaint l’Ouverture. He claimed a personal acquaintance with Mr. Frederick Douglass, and had been often in Washington, where he was well known and well received in good colored society.
“Let me see,” he said reflectively, when asked for information about the Honorable Hamilton M. Brown. “Yes, I think I know him. He studied at Oberlin just after the war. He was about leaving there when I entered. There were two H. M. Browns there—a Hamilton M. Brown and a Henry M. Brown. One was stout and dark and the other was slim and quite light; you could scarcely tell him from a dark white man. They used to call them ‘light Brown’ and ‘dark Brown.’ I didn’t know either of them except by sight, for they were there only a few weeks after I went in. As I remember them, Hamilton was the fair one—a very good-looking, gentlemanly fellow, and, as I heard, a good student and a fine speaker.”

“Do you remember what kind of hair he had?” asked Mr. Clayton.

“Very good indeed; straight, as I remember it. He looked something like a Spaniard or a Portuguese.”

“Now that you describe him,” said Alice, “I remember quite well dancing with such a gentleman; and I’m wrong about my ‘H. M. B.’ The dark man must have been some one else; there are two others on my card that I can’t remember distinctly, and he was probably one of those.”

“I guess he’s all right, Alice,” said her father when Sadler had gone away. “He evidently means business, and we must treat him white. Of course he must stay with us; there are no hotels in Groveland while he is here. Let’s see—he’ll be here in three days. That isn’t very long, but I guess we can get ready. I’ll write a letter this afternoon—or you write it, and invite him to the house, and say I’ll meet him at the depot. And you may have carte blanche for making the preparations.”

“We must have some people to meet him.”

“Certainly; a reception is the proper thing. Sit down immediately and write the letter and I’ll mail it first thing in the morning, so he’ll get it before he has time to make other arrangements. And you and your mother put your heads together and make out a list of guests, and I’ll have the invitations printed to-morrow. We will show the darkeys of Groveland how to entertain a Congressman.”

It will be noted that in moments of abstraction or excitement Mr. Clayton sometimes relapsed into forms of speech not entirely consistent with his principles. But some allowance
must be made for his atmosphere; he could no more escape from it than the leopard can change his spots, or the— In deference to Mr. Clayton’s feelings the quotation will be left incomplete.

Alice wrote the letter on the spot and it was duly mailed, and sped on its winged way to Washington.

The preparations for the reception were made as thoroughly and elaborately as possible on so short a notice. The invitations were issued; the house was cleaned from attic to cellar; an orchestra was engaged for the evening; elaborate floral decorations were planned and the flowers ordered. Even the refreshments, which ordinarily, in the household of a caterer, would be mere matter of familiar detail, became a subject of serious consultation and study.

The approaching event was a matter of very much interest to the fortunate ones who were honored with invitations, and this for several reasons. They were anxious to meet this sole representative of their race in the —th Congress, and as he was not one of the old-line colored leaders, but a new star risen on the political horizon, there was a special curiosity to see who he was and what he looked like. Moreover, the Claytons did not often entertain a large company, but when they did, it was on a scale commensurate with their means and position, and to be present on such an occasion was a thing to remember and to talk about. And, most important consideration of all, some remarks dropped by members of the Clayton family had given rise to the rumor that the Congressman was seeking a wife. This invested his visit with a romantic interest, and gave the reception a practical value; for there were other marriageable girls besides Miss Clayton, and if one was left another might be taken.

III

On the evening of April 3d, at fifteen minutes of six o’clock, Mr. Clayton, accompanied by Jack, entered the livery carriage waiting at his gate and ordered the coachman to drive to the Union Depot. He had taken Jack along, partly for company, and partly that Jack might relieve the Congressman of any trouble about his baggage, and make himself useful in case of
emergency. Jack was willing enough to go, for he had foreseen in the visitor a rival for Alice’s hand,—indeed he had heard more or less of the subject for several days,—and was glad to make a reconnaissance before the enemy arrived upon the field of battle. He had made—at least he had thought so—considerable progress with Alice during the three weeks since her return from Washington, and once or twice Alice had been perilously near the tender stage. This visit had disturbed the situation and threatened to ruin his chances; but he did not mean to give up without a struggle.

Arrived at the main entrance, Mr. Clayton directed the carriage to wait, and entered the station with Jack. The Union Depot at Groveland was an immense oblong structure, covering a dozen parallel tracks and furnishing terminal passenger facilities for half a dozen railroads. The tracks ran east and west, and the depot was entered from the south, at about the middle of the building. On either side of the entrance, the waiting-rooms, refreshment rooms, baggage and express departments, and other administrative offices, extended in a row for the entire length of the building; and beyond them and parallel with them stretched a long open space, separated from the tracks by an iron fence or grille. There were two entrance gates in the fence, at which tickets must be shown before access could be had to trains, and two other gates, by which arriving passengers came out.

Mr. Clayton looked at the blackboard on the wall underneath the station clock, and observed that the 7.30 train from Washington was five minutes late. Accompanied by Jack he walked up and down the platform until the train, with the usual accompaniment of panting steam and clanging bell and rumbling trucks, pulled into the station, and drew up on the third or fourth track from the iron railing. Mr. Clayton stationed himself at the gate nearest the rear end of the train, reasoning that the Congressman would ride in a parlor car, and would naturally come out by the gate nearest the point at which he left the train.

“You’d better go and stand by the other gate, Jack,” he said to his companion, “and stop him if he goes out that way.”

The train was well filled and a stream of passengers poured
through. Mr. Clayton scanned the crowd carefully as they approached the gate, and scrutinized each passenger as he came through, without seeing any one that met the description of Congressman Brown, as given by Sadler, or any one that could in his opinion be the gentleman for whom he was looking. When the last one had passed through he was left to the conclusion that his expected guest had gone out by the other gate. Mr. Clayton hastened thither.

“Did n’t he come out this way, Jack?” he asked.

“No, sir,” replied the young man, “I have n’t seen him.”

“That ‘s strange,” mused Mr. Clayton, somewhat anxiously. “He would hardly fail to come without giving us notice. Surely we must have missed him. We ’d better look around a little. You go that way and I’ll go this.”

Mr. Clayton turned and walked several rods along the platform to the men’s waiting-room, and standing near the door glanced around to see if he could find the object of his search. The only colored person in the room was a stout and very black man, wearing a broadcloth suit and a silk hat, and seated a short distance from the door. On the seat by his side stood a couple of valises. On one of them, the one nearest him, on which his arm rested, was written, in white letters, plainly legible,—

“H. M. BROWN, M. C.

“Washington, D. C.”

Mr. Clayton’s feelings at this discovery can better be imagined than described. He hastily left the waiting-room, before the black gentleman, who was looking the other way, was even aware of his presence, and, walking rapidly up and down the platform, communed with himself upon what course of action the situation demanded. He had invited to his house, had come down to meet, had made elaborate preparations to entertain on the following evening, a light-colored man,—a white man by his theory, an acceptable guest, a possible husband for his daughter, an avowed suitor for her hand. If the Congressman had turned out to be brown, even dark brown, with fairly good hair, though he might not have desired him as a son-in-law, yet he could have welcomed him as a guest.
But even this softening of the blow was denied him, for the man in the waiting-room was palpably, aggressively black, with pronounced African features and woolly hair, without apparently a single drop of redeeming white blood. Could he, in the face of his well-known principles, his lifelong rule of conduct, take this negro into his home and introduce him to his friends? Could he subject his wife and daughter to the rude shock of such a disappointment? It would be bad enough for them to learn of the ghastly mistake, but to have him in the house would be twisting the arrow in the wound.

Mr. Clayton had the instincts of a gentleman, and realized the delicacy of the situation. But to get out of his difficulty without wounding the feelings of the Congressman required not only diplomacy but dispatch. Whatever he did must be done promptly; for if he waited many minutes the Congressman would probably take a carriage and be driven to Mr. Clayton’s residence.

A ray of hope came for a moment to illumine the gloom of the situation. Perhaps the black man was merely sitting there, and not the owner of the valise! For there were two valises, one on each side of the supposed Congressman. For obvious reasons he did not care to make the inquiry himself, so he looked around for his companion, who came up a moment later.

“Jack,” he exclaimed excitedly, “I’m afraid we’re in the worst kind of a hole, unless there’s some mistake! Run down to the men’s waiting-room and you’ll see a man and a valise, and you’ll understand what I mean. Ask that darkey if he is the Honorable Mr. Brown, Congressman from South Carolina. If he says yes, come back right away and let me know, without giving him time to ask any questions, and put your wits to work to help me out of the scrape.”

“I wonder what’s the matter?” said Jack to himself, but did as he was told. In a moment he came running back.

“Yes, sir,” he announced; “he says he’s the man.”

“Jack,” said Mr. Clayton desperately, “if you want to show your appreciation of what I’ve done for you, you must suggest some way out of this. I’d never dare to take that negro to my house, and yet I’m obliged to treat him like a gentleman.”
Jack’s eyes had worn a somewhat reflective look since he had gone to make the inquiry. Suddenly his face brightened with intelligence, and then, as a newsboy ran into the station calling his wares, hardened into determination.

“Clarion, special extra ‘dition! All about de epidemic er dipt’eria!” clamored the newsboy with shrill childish treble, as he made his way toward the waiting-room. Jack darted after him, and saw the man to whom he had spoken buy a paper. He ran back to his employer, and dragged him over toward the ticket-seller’s window.

“I have it, sir!” he exclaimed, seizing a telegraph blank and writing rapidly, and reading aloud as he wrote. “How’s this for a way out?”—

"Dear Sir,—I write you this note here in the depot to inform you of an unfortunate event which has interfered with my plans and those of my family for your entertainment while in Groveland. Yesterday my daughter Alice complained of a sore throat, which by this afternoon had developed into a case of malignant diphtheria. In consequence our house has been quarantined; and while I have felt myself obliged to come down to the depot, I do not feel that I ought to expose you to the possibility of infection, and I therefore send you this by another hand. The bearer will conduct you to a carriage which I have ordered placed at your service, and unless you should prefer some other hotel, you will be driven to the Forest Hill House, where I beg you will consider yourself my guest during your stay in the city, and make the fullest use of every convenience it may offer. From present indications I fear no one of our family will be able to see you, which we shall regret beyond expression, as we have made elaborate arrangements for your entertainment. I still hope, however, that you may enjoy your visit, as there are many places of interest in the city, and many friends will doubtless be glad to make your acquaintance.

“With assurances of my profound regret, I am

“Sincerely yours,

“Cicero Clayton.”
“Splendid!” cried Mr. Clayton. “You’ve helped me out of a horrible scrape. Now, go and take him to the hotel and see him comfortably located, and tell them to charge the bill to me.”

“I suspect, sir,” suggested Jack, “that I’d better not go up to the house, and you’ll have to stay in yourself for a day or two, to keep up appearances. I’ll sleep on the lounge at the store, and we can talk business over the telephone.”

“All right, Jack, we’ll arrange the details later. But for Heaven’s sake get him started, or he’ll be calling a hack to drive up to the house. I’ll go home on a street car.”

“So far so good,” sighed Mr. Clayton to himself as he escaped from the station. “Jack is a deuced clever fellow, and I’ll have to do something more for him. But the tug-of-war is yet to come. I’ve got to bribe a doctor, shut up the house for a day or two, and have all the ill-humor of two disappointed women to endure until this negro leaves town. Well, I’m sure my wife and Alice will back me up at any cost. No sacrifice is too great to escape having to entertain him; of course I have no prejudice against his color,—he can’t help that,—but it is the principle of the thing. If we received him it would be a concession fatal to all my views and theories. And I am really doing him a kindness, for I’m sure that all the world could not make Alice and her mother treat him with anything but cold politeness. It’ll be a great mortification to Alice, but I don’t see how else I could have got out of it.”

He boarded the first car that left the depot, and soon reached home. The house was lighted up, and through the lace curtains of the parlor windows he could see his wife and daughter, elegantly dressed, waiting to receive their distinguished visitor. He rang the bell impatiently, and a servant opened the door.

“The gentleman did n’t come?” asked the maid.

“No,” he said as he hung up his hat. This brought the ladies to the door.

“He did n’t come?” they exclaimed. “What’s the matter?”

“I’ll tell you,” he said. “Mary,” this to the servant, a white girl, who stood in open-eyed curiosity, “we shan’t need you any more to-night.”

Then he went into the parlor, and, closing the door, told
his story. When he reached the point where he had discovered the color of the honorable Mr. Brown, Miss Clayton caught her breath, and was on the verge of collapse.

“That nigger,” said Mrs. Clayton indignantly, “can never set foot in this house. But what did you do with him?”

Mr. Clayton quickly unfolded his plan, and described the disposition he had made of the Congressman.

“It’s an awful shame,” said Mrs. Clayton. “Just think of the trouble and expense we have gone to! And poor Alice ’ll never get over it, for everybody knows he came to see her and that he’s smitten with her. But you’ve done just right; we never would have been able to hold up our heads again if we had introduced a black man, even a Congressman, to the people that are invited here to-morrow night, as a sweetheart of Alice. Why, she would n’t marry him if he was President of the United States and plated with gold an inch thick. The very idea!”

“Well,” said Mr. Clayton, “then we’ve got to act quick. Alice must wrap up her throat—by the way, Alice, how is your throat?”

“It’s sore,” sobbed Alice, who had been in tears almost from her father’s return, “and I don’t care if I do have diphtheria and die, no, I don’t!” and she wept on.

“Wrap up your throat and go to bed, and I’ll go over to Doctor Pillsbury’s and get a diphtheria card to nail up on the house. In the morning, first thing, we’ll have to write notes recalling the invitations for to-morrow evening, and have them delivered by messenger boys. We were fools for not finding out all about this man from some one who knew, before we invited him here. Sadler don’t know more than half he thinks he does, anyway. And we’ll have to do this thing thoroughly, or our motives will be misconstrued, and people will say we are prejudiced and all that, when it is only a matter of principle with us.”

The programme outlined above was carried out to the letter. The invitations were recalled, to the great disappointment of the invited guests. The family physician called several times during the day. Alice remained in bed, and the maid left without notice, in such a hurry that she forgot to take her best clothes.
Mr. Clayton himself remained at home. He had a telephone in the house, and was therefore in easy communication with his office, so that the business did not suffer materially by reason of his absence from the store. About ten o’clock in the morning a note came up from the hotel, expressing Mr. Brown’s regrets and sympathy. Toward noon Mr. Clayton picked up the morning paper, which he had not theretofore had time to read, and was glancing over it casually, when his eye fell upon a column headed “A Colored Congressman.” He read the article with astonishment that rapidly turned to chagrin and dismay. It was an interview describing the Congressman as a tall and shapely man, about thirty-five years old, with an olive complexion not noticeably darker than many a white man’s, straight hair, and eyes as black as sloes.

“The bearing of this son of South Carolina reveals the polished manners of the Southern gentleman, and neither from his appearance nor his conversation would one suspect that the white blood which flows in his veins in such preponderating measure had ever been crossed by that of a darker race,” wrote the reporter, who had received instructions at the office that for urgent business considerations the lake shipping interest wanted Representative Brown treated with marked consideration.

There was more of the article, but the introductory portion left Mr. Clayton in such a state of bewilderment that the paper fell from his hand. What was the meaning of it? Had he been mistaken? Obviously so, or else the reporter was wrong, which was manifestly improbable. When he had recovered himself somewhat, he picked up the newspaper and began reading where he had left off.

“Representative Brown traveled to Groveland in company with Bishop Jones of the African Methodist Jerusalem Church, who is en route to attend the general conference of his denomination at Detroit next week. The bishop, who came in while the writer was interviewing Mr. Brown, is a splendid type of the pure negro. He is said to be a man of great power among his people, which may easily be believed after one has looked upon his expressive countenance and heard him discuss the questions which affect the welfare of his church and his race.”
Mr. Clayton stared at the paper. “The bishop,’ “ he repeated, “is a splendid type of the pure negro.’ I must have mistaken the bishop for the Congressman! But how in the world did Jack get the thing balled up? I’ll call up the store and demand an explanation of him.

“Jack,” he asked, “what kind of a looking man was the fellow you gave the note to at the depot?”

“He was a very wicked-looking fellow, sir,” came back the answer. “He had a bad eye, looked like a gambler, sir. I am not surprised that you didn’t want to entertain him, even if he was a Congressman.”

“What color was he—that’s what I want to know—and what kind of hair did he have?”

“Why, he was about my complexion, sir, and had straight black hair.”

The rules of the telephone company did not permit swearing over the line. Mr. Clayton broke the rules.

“Was there any one else with him?” he asked when he had relieved his mind.

“Yes, sir, Bishop Jones of the African Methodist Jerusalem Church was sitting there with him; they had traveled from Washington together. I drove the bishop to his stopping-place after I had left Mr. Brown at the hotel. I didn’t suppose you’d mind.”

Mr. Clayton fell into a chair, and indulged in thoughts unutterable.

He folded up the paper and slipped it under the family Bible, where it was least likely to be soon discovered.

“I’ll hide the paper, anyway,” he groaned. “I’ll never hear the last of this till my dying day, so I may as well have a few hours’ respite. It’s too late to go back, and we’ve got to play the farce out. Alice is really sick with disappointment, and to let her know this now would only make her worse. Maybe he’ll leave town in a day or two, and then she’ll be in condition to stand it. Such luck is enough to disgust a man with trying to do right and live up to his principles.”

Time hung a little heavy on Mr. Clayton’s hands during the day. His wife was busy with the housework. He answered several telephone calls about Alice’s health, and called up the store occasionally to ask how the business was getting on.
After lunch he lay down on a sofa and took a nap, from which he was aroused by the sound of the door-bell. He went to the door. The evening paper was lying on the porch, and the newsboy, who had not observed the diphtheria sign until after he had rung, was hurrying away as fast as his legs would carry him.

Mr. Clayton opened the paper and looked it through to see if there was any reference to the visiting Congressman. He found what he sought and more. An article on the local page contained a résumé of the information given in the morning paper, with the following additional paragraph:—

“A reporter, who called at the Forest Hill this morning to interview Representative Brown, was informed that the Congressman had been invited to spend the remainder of his time in Groveland as the guest of Mr. William Watkins, the proprietor of the popular livery establishment on Main Street. Mr. Brown will remain in the city several days, and a reception will be tendered him at Mr. Watkins’s on Wednesday evening.”

“That ends it,” sighed Mr. Clayton. “The dove of peace will never again rest on my roof-tree.”

But why dwell longer on the sufferings of Mr. Clayton, or attempt to describe the feelings or chronicle the remarks of his wife and daughter when they learned the facts in the case?

As to Representative Brown, he was made welcome in the hospitable home of Mr. William Watkins. There was a large and brilliant assemblage at the party on Wednesday evening, at which were displayed the costumes prepared for the Clayton reception. Mr. Brown took a fancy to Miss Lura Watkins, to whom, before the week was over, he became engaged to be married. Meantime poor Alice, the innocent victim of circumstances and principles, lay sick abed with a supposititious case of malignant diphtheria, and a real case of acute disappointment and chagrin.

“Oh, Jack!” exclaimed Alice, a few weeks later, on the way home from evening church in company with the young man, “what a dreadful thing it all was! And to think of that hateful Lura Watkins marrying the Congressman!”

The street was shaded by trees at the point where they were passing, and there was no one in sight. Jack put his arm around her waist, and, leaning over, kissed her.
“Never mind, dear,” he said soothingly, “you still have your ‘last chance’ left, and I’ll prove myself a better man than the Congressman.”

Occasionally, at social meetings, when the vexed question of the future of the colored race comes up, as it often does, for discussion, Mr. Clayton may still be heard to remark sententiously:—

“What the white people of the United States need most, in dealing with this problem, is a higher conception of the brotherhood of man. For of one blood God made all the nations of the earth.”