

Darkwater Voices From Within The Veil

by
W. E. B. Du Bois

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**Darkwater: Voices From Within The
Veil Pdf**

By

W. E. B. Du Bois



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DARKWATER

VOICES FROM WITHIN THE VEIL

ANNOTATED EDITION

W.E.B. DU BOIS




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At the *Exposition Universelle* (Paris World Fair) of 1900, where a “Negro Exposition,” partly organized by Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, aimed to show the world the positive contributions of Black people.



INTRODUCTION

BY R. L'HEUREUX LEWIS

Darkwater: *Voices from within the Veil* is rarely listed among Du Bois's critical works in the world of sociology, history, or Africana studies. Yet *Darkwater* is one of his most significant works and should be included in the Du Bois canon alongside *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Philadelphia Negro* and *Black Reconstruction*. Whenever *Darkwater* is not included in discussions of Du Bois's work, a central puzzle piece is missing in his intellectual and social evolution. The issues that he covered – such as racism, whiteness, globalization, the Black family, gender, and immigration – are as relevant today as they were then. Du Bois was a man of ever-changing conviction, but undying passion. He began his career advocating that Black people take on the cultural practices of white Americans in order to gain full citizenship and benefits from the United States. He could have been considered what later scholars would call an “assimilationist.”

Yet over time, he moved from this perspective to embracing more radical views and ultimately dying a Pan-Africanist in Ghana, where he'd given up his American citizenship to live. *Darkwater*, as a book, captures him turning the corner between these two perspectives. Like other towering scholars of the African experience, DuBois's own studies shifted his approach to how he viewed the world and how he worked everyday to change it. Make no mistake, Du Bois's contribution to the world was far greater than scholarly writings alone. In fact, Du Bois¹ seems to have used his writings as a means to connect oppressed people of color throughout the world – “Black, brown, and yellow” as he described them – and develop a subtle, yet meaningful, resistance

movement to global European hegemony. Of course, this is not the story normally told about Du Bois.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois's most celebrated work, we learn that he was raised in a school where both Black and white students attended. It was in this school where he first noticed the "veil" that divided Black and white. "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness," he wrote, "that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil." His realization of this racial divide immediately changed the way he approached school, sports, and any other competition. He continued, "That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine." While so many would have shrunk to the lower expectations of Black people of the day, Du Bois refused to be imprisoned psychologically by their expectations. From a young age, he was determined to outpace his white peers. With this fervor, he graduated at the top of his high school class, pursued a college degree at Fisk University, a premier historically Black college, and was then admitted into Harvard University. Once he arrived at Harvard, he was required to complete another undergraduate college degree – as was the custom of the day for Black students entering elite white schools – before he could begin his graduate school work in history. Unflinchingly, Du Bois pressed past the hatred and low expectations that were heaped upon young "colored" men of the time. He was so pressed for greatness that he travelled to Germany and studied with the leading global scholars of the newly formed field of sociology and returned to the United States to become the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. His dissertation was turned into a book and was the first serious piece of scholarship on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and remains celebrated to this day.

Yet, even with these accomplishments, Du Bois remained a Black man in a world that did not value Black intelligence or care to understand Black life. After earning his doctorate, he became a faculty member at Wilberforce College and soon that after traveled to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, he was not offered a

professorship – despite his overwhelming qualifications – because he was Black. Instead the University of Pennsylvania created a position for him called “Assistant to Sociology.” At this post, he produced *The Philadelphia Negro* which was published in 1899. It was the first comprehensive study of a Black community that did not start with the question, “What is wrong with Black people?” The conventional answer to this question at that time was, “Black people are their own problem.”² Instead he asked, “What has happened to Black people and what can be done to change their condition?”

When he wrote *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois advocated for changing Black cultural habits to fit those of white Americans. In this sense, his early writing could be called highly Eurocentric. He held onto these beliefs as he wrote throughout his early career and through the publication of *The Souls of Black Folks* in 1903. While *The Souls of Black Folk* is hailed as his canonical work for its diversity of analysis: historical, social, and cultural, the book’s target audience was primarily the white people whom he wanted to enlist in the improvement of conditions for Black people, particularly in the South where he’d observed the worst disparities. This is not to suggest Du Bois did not include a critical analysis of the deep structural issues that produced the color line and the “veil,” but he did so in a very diplomatic way that concentrated on creating white allies in the mission of uplifting the Black race.

It was within this framework that Du Bois engaged his activism. He worked with the Pan African Congress, helped found the multiracial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and founded the NAACP’s journal *The Crisis*. During these years, he tirelessly studied the conditions of Black people and published his work in books, journals, newspapers. As his awareness grew, the tone of his writings shifted, and his suggestions for change became decreasingly assimilationist and Eurocentric and increasingly radical and Afrocentric. He did this all while serving as a faculty member and holding offices in multiple organizations. Many of these organizations – particularly the NAACP – began to take issue with Du Bois’s new direction.

While Du Bois did not consider himself a revolutionary, his thinking would become part of Black radical thought and

activism throughout the United States and the continent of Africa during the latter half of the 20th century.

Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil was eventually published as a set of collected essays in 1920, though portions of it appeared previously in various publications. In *Darkwater*, Du Bois took on a very different tone in his writing about race than he had in previous writing. Whereas *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk* often had a conciliatory and apologetic tones, *Darkwater's* themes were much more pointed towards the wrongdoing of white people in the creation of the global racial order. Du Bois begins the book with an autobiography infused with social commentary, and from its second chapter “The Souls of White Folk” onward, Du Bois delves in the psychological dimensions of white privilege and global manifest destiny. He thoroughly explains and questions how whiteness has become the norm and the image that men strive to achieve, calling into question his own past attitudes. In plain language, he tells readers that it is not because of white accomplishment, but because of purposeful suppression, that Blacks endure in the worst of conditions with little to show for it. He pulls no punches in demonstrating that global white supremacy is a recent arrival to the world and must be dismantled if the greatness of humanity is to be seen.

To understand Du Bois’s voice and concerns, one must understand the preceding Bloody Summer of 1919.³ That summer, at least 26 race riots erupted throughout the United States. The draft of World War I, the return of soldiers – both Black and white – from the war, and the economic turmoil of the era together created a perfect racial powder keg.⁴ With minimal provocation, in the majority of the race riots, whites had attacked Blacks, the victims ranging from swimmers at segregated beaches to Black military units. These painful clashes haunted Du Bois’s thoughts and set the tone for his scathing statements about the failure of race relations in the United States. But Du Bois did not limit his indictments to the conditions of the U.S. alone. In *Darkwater*, he takes on the effects of European hegemony throughout the world, and presents a more global perspective reflecting his travels and work with the Pan African Congress and other international movements.

Darkwater's approach is frank, varied, and fast paced. Between longer chapters, Du Bois provides shorter stories, poems, and

other brief reflections. The first time I read the book, these breaks between the text jolted me like the first time I encountered skits on the Hip-Hop album “Three Feet High and Rising” (1989) by De La Soul. Both presented a non-conventional way of tying together themes that were separate but connected to a larger whole. As a text, *Darkwater* shares other parallels with the work of today’s Hip Hop generation, as Du Bois “remixes” several essays with the goal of reaching wider and different audiences. While *Darkwater* was met with negative reviews from white and Black critics of the time, and written off by many as “bitter” or “teaching violence,” it met great success among the Black masses Du Bois had hoped to reach. Thousands of Blacks, many of them illiterate, sent in two dollars to get their hands on a copy. In fact, *Darkwater* sold more copies than *The Souls of Black Folks* in its first eight years in press, but received less than half the press. Few were able to deny the quality and insights of the book, but there were concerns with its tone. At the time of its publication, Du Bois had become a household name and was known for his political activism but this book marked a turning point, where unbridled disdain and frustration with white privilege and the continued poverty of Black and brown people bled through the pages of *Darkwater*.

The book’s hostile reception in the early 20th century may be the reason why it remains relatively obscure in the 21st century. While Du Bois, like most Black figures, tends to be sanitized in popular presentations, his complexity, the evolution of his viewpoint, and his dissatisfaction with notions of progress are undeniable upon reading any chapter of this work. In the book’s pages, Du Bois found the space to tell truths that he was unable to do as a professor even in the halls of a historically Black College – Atlanta University. In “Of Work and Wealth” he writes,

I tried to be natural and honest and frank, but it was bitter hard. What would you say to a soft, brown face, aureoled in a thousand ripples of gray-black hair, which knells suddenly: “Do you trust white people?” You do not and you know that you do not, much as you want to; yet you rise and lie and say you do; you must say it for her salvation and the world’s; you repeat that she must trust them, that most white folks are honest, and all the while you are lying and every level, silent eye there know you are

lying, and miserable you sit and lie on, to the greater glory of God.

Du Bois's words remind readers of the constant balance that Black scholars and citizens are required to present to retain viability in the eyes of United States institutions, including those that serve predominantly Black people. Before the term 'public intellectual' was in vogue, Du Bois was writing books, in journals, in newspapers and to audiences globally, yet he retained a level of distance in most of his writing. *Darkwater* intentionally broke this pattern and challenged readers to meet the realities that Black people faced by lifting the proverbial veil between the worlds of white and Black, to reveal haggard truths that span the past to the present day.

Beyond revealing the clear patterns of racism and classism towards Black and poor people, Du Bois also challenged Eurocentric historical and theological claims. In "The Souls of White Folk" he wrote, "Europe has never produced and never will in our day bring forth a single human soul who cannot be matched and over-matched in every line of human endeavor by Asia and Africa." Du Bois goes on to list some great personages of Africa and Asia like Nefertari, Mohammed, and Jesus Christ. He fearlessly pointed to the African roots of contemporary civilization and placed the greatest examples of civility and political organization squarely outside of Europe. His claims struck controversy as he explained throughout the book that the "greatness" of Europe and her colonies was achieved on the back of Africans and those on the other side of the color line.

His writing often alluded to or directly referenced the role of the Black church and Black spiritual traditions. While Du Bois saw the value of the church as a social and organizational space, he often questioned the ways that the Black church served to make Black people too docile in the face of oppression. In his personal correspondence, Du Bois very rarely refers to any religious sentiments, and scholars have suggested he became a freethinker during his stay in Europe. Yet, in *Darkwater*, Du Bois appears to use spiritual themes as a medium to engage the masses, perhaps in emulation of what Marcus Garvey was doing with the U.N.I.A. at the time. In many ways, Du Bois's presentation bears an early semblance of Black liberation theology, but also places the focus of his spiritual paradigm squarely on the shoulders of man himself. In so doing, he later

describes the Buddha walking with Christ, and the Qur'an as on par with the Bible – one of the means by which Du Bois hoped to introduce a message of unity to the diverse people of his now global audience. In essence, Du Bois regarded liberation as a great equalizer, much as he uses death and apocalypse as the other great equalizer in his fictional chapter, “The Comet.”

In “The Prayers of God,” Du Bois appeals to Elohim, to Allah, and to the divine nature of man himself, drawing perhaps on the Books of Psalms, chapter 82 – a verse that would be familiar to sympathizers of the Ethiopia movement like Du Bois. In multiple occasions in *Darkwater*, Du Bois refers to the second coming of the messiah and he identifies this messiah as Black. In “Jesus Christ in Texas” he shows how the messiah is recognized by his spirit but unfamiliar to whites because of his skin tone. In contrast, the Black characters recognize and respond to the savior by changing their ways. In the end, the messiah is nearly captured by a lynch mob who can only see race. Decades before popularized images of a Black savior would come to be more widely recognized because of groups like The Nation of Islam, The Nation of Gods and Earths, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church – and decades before J. Edgar Hoover, as director of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program, would issue a memorandum about preventing the rise of a Black messiah – Du Bois envisioned a savior that looked like him (quite literally, in the sense that Du Bois listed his complexion as mulatto and described the Christ in similar terms). Using messianism as his medium, Du Bois painted a portrait of a world not ready for such a revelation...and the desperate hope that such a revelation would come nonetheless.

Du Bois, an early proponent of women’s rights, also challenged readers on gender issues. In “The Damnation of Women” he argues that women are ‘damned’ in American society because they are forced to trade their intelligence and productivity for the job of bearing children. While many authors, both Black and white, have argued the value of women lie in producing more children for a community, Du Bois patently rejects this as women’s value. He writes, “... In the great rank and file of our five million women we have the upworking of new revolutionary ideals, which must in time have vast influence on the thought and action of this land.” By chronicling the work of women from Harriet Tubman to Louise De Mortie he lays claim

to a legacy of activism that transcends the homefront. At the same time, he is careful to mention that women will define their position in the Black community and its future by quoting Anna Julia Cooper, though not by name. This is one of Du Bois's few public references to Cooper's scholarship and work, though they were contemporaries. He quotes her from her book *A Voice from the South* (1892) saying, "Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood...'" Both Cooper and Du Bois's messages from the 19th and 20th century remain pertinent in the 21st century, as the Black community continues to grapple with issues of family structure (e.g. single headed households), employment challenges (e.g. unemployment and underemployment), and wage inequality (e.g. the gender gap in pay).

In *Darkwater* you see the beginnings of Du Bois's strong emphasis on self-reliance and disenchantment with waiting for whites to make good on the promises of equality. In the ten year anniversary of the publication of *Crisis* in 1920, Du Bois wrote, "We are no longer depending on our friends. We are depending on ourselves." He continued:

The secret of our new progress and success lies largely in our new self discovery. There are still a few of us who are running away to avoid each other with the vague feeling that we shall thus lose ourselves in the world and be free. But the mass of Black folks have made the Great Discovery: they have discovered each other.

Throughout his career, Du Bois remained a staunch critic of structural inequality, whether critiquing the Transatlantic Slave Trade or governmental response to poverty and public education. At the same time, he developed a strong belief in self-determination and community transformation. *Darkwater* brings this realization front and center as he advocates for Black people to no longer wait on the benevolence of others, and instead to hold others accountable while doing for self. In a short time, Du Bois moved from an accommodating integrationist to a global "race man."⁵ In later years, Du Bois would forge alliances with a diverse array of people representing the world's nonwhite populations and the oppressed, ranging from Mao Tse Tung and Japan's Hikida Yasuichi to Pan-African leaders like Algeria's Ben Bella and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah.⁶ While Du Bois had once clashed publicly with Marcus Garvey, and played a significant role

in attacking his work, much of his ire appeared rooted in jealousy over Garvey's ability to engage the Black masses in his movement, rather than fundamental differences in ideology.⁷ But Du Bois, perhaps through the broader approach he employed in later years – and particularly through his work building consensus among intellectuals of color throughout the world – had loftier goals in mind. Rather than build an organization of immense size, Du Bois appears to have been working towards engineering a point of critical mass in the world at large – a turning point wherein enough of the world's nonwhite intellectuals would share consensus about the nature of European capitalist hegemony – and then come together to create a different world. This is what led Du Bois at first to the Pan-African Congress, then to Socialism, much later to Communism (he joined the Communist Party at age 91), and ultimately to joining President Nkrumah in Accra where he died a Ghanaian citizen at age 95.⁸

The most transformative moments of this journey are the ones uniquely captured in the pages of *Darkwater*. A treasure too long ignored, but thankfully recoverable by this volume's publication.

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POSTSCRIPT

These are the things of which men think, who live: of their own selves and the dwelling place of their fathers; of their neighbors; of work and service; of rule and reason and women and children; of Beauty and Death and War. To this thinking I have only to add a point of view: I have been in the world, but not of it. I have seen the human drama from a veiled corner, where all the outer tragedy and comedy have reproduced themselves in microcosm within. From this inner torment of souls the human scene without has interpreted itself to me in unusual and even illuminating ways. For this reason, and this alone, I venture to write again on themes on which great souls have already said greater words, in the hope that I may strike here and there a half-tone, newer even if slighter, up from the heart of my problem and the problems of my people.

Between the sterner flights of logic, I have sought to set some little alightings of what may be poetry. They are tributes to Beauty, unworthy to stand alone; yet perversely, in my mind, now at the end, I know not whether I mean the Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought, or why the book trails off to playing, rather than standing strong on unanswering fact. But this is always—is it not?—the Riddle of Life.⁹

Many of my words appear here transformed from other publications and I thank the Atlantic, the Independent, the Crisis, and the *Journal of Race Development* for letting me use them again.

W. E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS. New York, 1919.

CREDO

I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.

Especially do I believe in the Negro Race: in the beauty of its genius, the sweetness of its soul, and its strength in that meekness which shall yet inherit this turbulent earth.¹⁰

I believe in Pride of race and lineage and self: in pride of self so deep as to scorn injustice to other selves; in pride of lineage so great as to despise no man's father; in pride of race so chivalrous as neither to offer bastardy to the weak nor beg wedlock of the strong, knowing that men may be brothers in Christ, even though they be not brothers-in-law.

I believe in Service—humble, reverent service, from the blackening of boots to the whitening of souls; for Work is Heaven, Idleness Hell, and Wage is the “Well done!” of the Master, who summoned all them that labor and are heavy laden, making no distinction between the black, sweating cotton hands of Georgia and the first families of Virginia, since all distinction not based on deed is devilish and not divine.

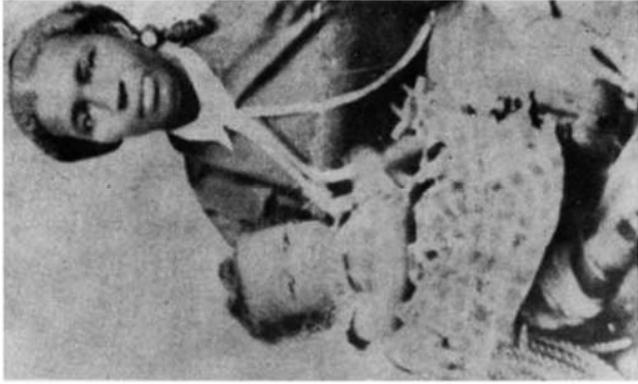
I believe in the Devil and his angels, who wantonly work to narrow the opportunity of struggling human beings, especially if they be black; who spit in the faces of the fallen, strike them that cannot strike again, believe the worst and work to prove it, hating the image which their Maker stamped on a brother's soul.

I believe in the Prince of Peace. I believe that War is Murder. I believe that armies and navies are at bottom the tinsel and braggadocio of oppression and wrong, and I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength.

I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.

I believe in the Training of Children, black even as white; the leading out of little souls into the green pastures and beside the still waters, not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth; lest we forget, and the sons of the fathers, like Esau, for mere meat barter their birthright in a mighty nation.

Finally, I believe in Patience—patience with the weakness of the Weak and the strength of the Strong, the prejudice of the Ignorant and the ignorance of the Blind; patience with the tardy triumph of Joy and the mad chastening of Sorrow.



Baby Du Bois and mother



At age 4 (1872)



At age 19 (1887)



THE SHADOW OF YEAR

I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The house was quaint, with clapboards running up and down, neatly trimmed, and there were five rooms, a tiny porch, a rosy front yard, and unbelievably delicious strawberries in the rear. A South Carolinian, lately come to the Berkshire Hills, owned all this—tall, thin, and black, with golden earrings, and given to religious trances. We were his transient tenants for the time.

My own people were part of a great clan. Fully two hundred years before, Tom Burghardt had come through the western pass from the Hudson with his Dutch captor, “Coenraet Burghardt,” sullen in his slavery and achieving his freedom by volunteering for the Revolution at a time of sudden alarm.¹¹ His wife was a little, black, Bantu woman,¹² who never became reconciled to this strange land; she clasped her knees and rocked and crooned:

“Do bana coba—gene me, gene me!

Ben d’nuli, ben d’le—”

Tom died about 1787, but of him came many sons, and one, Jack, who helped in the War of 1812.¹³ Of Jack and his wife, Violet, was born a mighty family, splendidly named: Harlow and Ira, Cloë, Lucinda, Maria, and Othello! I dimly remember my grandfather, Othello,—or “Uncle Tallow,”—a brown man, strong-voiced and redolent with tobacco, who sat stiffly in a great high chair because his hip was broken. He was probably a bit lazy and given to wassail. At any rate, grandmother had a shrewish

tongue and often berated him. This grandmother was Sarah—”Aunt Sally”—a stern, tall, Dutch-African woman, beak-nosed, but beautiful-eyed and golden-skinned. Ten or more children were theirs, of whom the youngest was Mary, my mother.

Mother was dark shining bronze, with a tiny ripple in her black hair, black-eyed, with a heavy, kind face. She gave one the impression of infinite patience, but a curious determination was concealed in her softness. The family were small farmers on Egremont Plain, between Great Barrington and Sheffield, Massachusetts.¹⁴ The bits of land were too small to support the great families born on them and we were always poor. I never remember being cold or hungry, but I do remember that shoes and coal, and sometimes flour, caused mother moments of anxious thought in winter, and a new suit was an event!

At about the time of my birth economic pressure was transmuting the family generally from farmers to “hired” help. Some revolted and migrated westward, others went cityward as cooks and barbers. Mother worked for some years at house service in Great Barrington, and after a disappointed love episode with a cousin, who went to California, she met and married Alfred Du Bois and went to town to live by the golden river where I was born.¹⁵

Alfred, my father, must have seemed a splendid vision in that little valley under the shelter of those mighty hills. He was small and beautiful of face and feature, just tinted with the sun, his curly hair chiefly revealing his kinship to Africa. In nature he was a dreamer,—romantic, indolent, kind, unreliable. He had in him the making of a poet, an adventurer, or a Beloved Vagabond, according to the life that closed round him; and that life gave him all too little. His father, Alexander Du Bois, cloaked under a stern, austere demeanor a passionate revolt against the world. He, too, was small, but squarish. I remember him as I saw him first, in his home in New Bedford,—white hair close-cropped; a seamed, hard face, but high in tone, with a gray eye that could twinkle or glare.

Long years before him Louis XIV drove two Huguenots, Jacques and Louis Du Bois, into wild Ulster County, New York.¹⁶ One of them in the third or fourth generation had a descendant, Dr. James Du Bois, a gay,¹⁷ rich bachelor, who made his money in the Bahamas, where he and the Gilberts had plantations. There

he took a beautiful little mulatto slave as his mistress, and two sons were born: Alexander in 1803 and John, later. They were fine, straight, clear-eyed boys, white enough to “pass.” He brought them to America and put Alexander in the celebrated Cheshire School, in Connecticut. Here he often visited him, but one last time, fell dead. He left no will, and his relations made short shrift of these sons. They gathered in the property, apprenticed grandfather to a shoemaker; then dropped him.

Grandfather took his bitter dose like a thoroughbred. Wild as was his inner revolt against this treatment, he uttered no word against the thieves and made no plea. He tried his fortunes here and in Haiti, where, during his short, restless sojourn, my own father was born. Eventually, grandfather became chief steward on the passenger boat between New York and New Haven; later he was a small merchant in Springfield; and finally he retired and ended his days at New Bedford. Always he held his head high, took no insults, made few friends. He was not a “Negro”; he was a man! Yet the current was too strong even for him. Then even more than now a colored man had colored friends or none at all, lived in a colored world or lived alone. A few fine, strong, black men gained the heart of this silent, bitter man in New York and New Haven. If he had scant sympathy with their social clannishness, he was with them in fighting discrimination. So, when the white Episcopalians of Trinity Parish, New Haven, showed plainly that they no longer wanted black Folks as fellow Christians, he led the revolt which resulted in St. Luke’s Parish, and was for years its senior warden.¹⁸ He lies dead in the Grove Street Cemetery, beside Jehudi Ashmun.¹⁹

Beneath his sternness was a very human man. Slyly he wrote poetry,—stilted, pleading things from a soul astray. He loved women in his masterful way, marrying three beautiful wives in succession and clinging to each with a certain desperate, even if unsympathetic, affection. As a father he was, naturally, a failure,—hard, domineering, unyielding. His four children reacted characteristically: one was until past middle life a thin spinster, the mental image of her father; one died; one passed over into the white world and her children’s children are now white, with no knowledge of their Negro blood; the fourth, my father, bent before grandfather, but did not break—better if he had. He yielded and flared back, asked forgiveness and forgot why,

became the harshly-held favorite, who ran away and rioted and roamed and loved and married my brown mother.

So with some circumstance having finally gotten myself born, with a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, but (thank God!) no “Anglo-Saxon,” I come to the days of my childhood.

They were very happy. Early we moved back to Grandfather Burghardt’s home,—I barely remember its stone fireplace, big kitchen, and delightful woodshed. Then this house passed to other branches of the clan and we moved to rented quarters in town,—to one delectable place “upstairs,” with a wide yard full of shrubbery, and a brook; to another house abutting a railroad, with infinite interests and astonishing playmates; and finally back to the quiet street on which I was born,—down a long lane and in a homely, cozy cottage, with a living-room, a tiny sitting-room, a pantry, and two attic bedrooms. Here mother and I lived until she died, in 1884, for father early began his restless wanderings. I last remember urgent letters for us to come to New Milford, where he had started a barber shop. Later he became a preacher. But mother no longer trusted his dreams, and he soon faded out of our lives into silence.

From the age of five until I was sixteen I went to a school on the same grounds,—down a lane, into a widened yard, with a big choke-cherry tree and two buildings, wood and brick. Here I got acquainted with my world, and soon had my criterions of judgment.

Wealth had no particular lure. On the other hand, the shadow of wealth was about us. That river of my birth was golden because of the woolen and paper waste that soiled it. The gold was theirs, not ours; but the gleam and glint was for all. To me it was all in order and I took it philosophically. I cordially despised the poor Irish and South Germans, who slaved in the mills, and annexed the rich and well-to-do as my natural companions. Of such is the kingdom of snobs!

Most of our townfolk were, naturally, the well-to-do, shading downward, but seldom reaching poverty. As playmate of the children I saw the homes of nearly every one, except a few immigrant New Yorkers, of whom none of us approved. The homes I saw impressed me, but did not overwhelm me. Many were bigger than mine, with newer and shinier things, but they

did not seem to differ in kind. I think I probably surprised my hosts more than they me, for I was easily at home and perfectly happy and they looked to me just like ordinary people, while my brown face and frizzled hair must have seemed strange to them.

Yet I was very much one of them. I was a center and sometimes the leader of the town gang of boys. We were noisy, but never very bad,—and, indeed, my mother's quiet influence came in here, as I realize now. She did not try to make me perfect. To her I was already perfect. She simply warned me of a few things, especially saloons. In my town the saloon was the open door to hell. The best families had their drunkards and the worst had little else.

Very gradually,—I cannot now distinguish the steps, though here and there I remember a jump or a jolt—but very gradually I found myself assuming quite placidly that I was different from other children. At first I think I connected the difference with a manifest ability to get my lessons rather better than most and to recite with a certain happy, almost taunting, glibness, which brought frowns here and there. Then, slowly, I realized that some folks, a few, even several, actually considered my brown skin a misfortune; once or twice I became painfully aware that some human beings even thought it a crime. I was not for a moment daunted,—although, of course, there were some days of secret tears—rather I was spurred to tireless effort. If they beat me at anything, I was grimly determined to make them sweat for it! Once I remember challenging a great, hard farmer-boy to battle, when I knew he could whip me; and he did. But ever after, he was polite.

As time flew I felt not so much disowned and rejected as rather drawn up into higher spaces and made part of a mightier mission. At times I almost pitied my pale companions, who were not of the Lord's anointed and who saw in their dreams no splendid quests of golden fleeces.

Even in the matter of girls my peculiar phantasy²⁰ asserted itself. Naturally, it was in our town voted bad form for boys of twelve and fourteen to show any evident weakness for girls. We tolerated them loftily, and now and then they played in our games, when I joined in quite as naturally as the rest. It was when strangers came, or summer boarders, or when the oldest girls grew up that my sharp senses noted little hesitancies in public and

searchings for possible public opinion. Then I flamed! I lifted my chin and strode off to the mountains, where I viewed the world at my feet and strained my eyes across the shadow of the hills.

I was graduated from high school at sixteen, and I talked of “Wendell Phillips.”²¹ This was my first sweet taste of the world’s applause. There were flowers and upturned faces, music and marching, and there was my mother’s smile. She was lame, then, and a bit drawn, but very happy. It was her great day and that very year she lay down with a sigh of content and has not yet awakened. I felt a certain gladness to see her, at last, at peace, for she had worried all her life. Of my own loss I had then little realization. That came only with the after-years. Now it was the choking gladness and solemn feel of wings! At last, I was going beyond the hills and into the world that beckoned steadily.

There came a little pause,—a singular pause. I was given to understand that I was almost too young for the world. Harvard was the goal of my dreams, but my white friends hesitated and my colored friends were silent. Harvard was a mighty conjureword in that hill town, and even the mill owners’ sons had aimed lower. Finally it was tactfully explained that the place for me was in the South among my people.²² A scholarship had been already arranged at Fisk, and my summer earnings would pay the fare. My relatives grumbled, but after a twinge I felt a strange delight! I forgot, or did not thoroughly realize, the curious irony by which I was not looked upon as a real citizen of my birth-town, with a future and a career, and instead was being sent to a far land among strangers who were regarded as (and in truth were) “mine own people.”

Ah! the wonder of that journey, with its faint spice of adventure, as I entered the land of slaves; the never-to-be-forgotten marvel of that first supper at Fisk with the world “colored” and opposite two of the most beautiful beings God ever revealed to the eyes of seventeen. I promptly lost my appetite, but I was deliriously happy!

As I peer back through the shadow of my years, seeing not too clearly, but through the thickening veil of wish and after-thought, I seem to view my life divided into four distinct parts: the Age of Miracles, the Days of Disillusion, the Discipline of Work and Play, and the Second Miracle Age.

The Age of Miracles began with Fisk and ended with Germany. I was bursting with the joy of living. I seemed to ride in conquering might. I was captain of my soul and master of fate! I *willed* to do! It was done. I *wished!* The wish came true.

Now and then out of the void flashed the great sword of hate to remind me of the battle. I remember once, in Nashville, brushing by accident against a white woman on the street. Politely and eagerly I raised my hat to apologize. That was thirty-five years ago. From that day to this I have never knowingly raised my hat to a Southern white woman.

I suspect that beneath all of my seeming triumphs there were many failures and disappointments, but the realities loomed so large that they swept away even the memory of other dreams and wishes. Consider, for a moment, how miraculous it all was to a boy of seventeen, just escaped from a narrow valley: I willed and lo! my people came dancing about me,—riotous in color, gay in laughter, full of sympathy, need, and pleading; darkly delicious girls—”colored” girls—sat beside me and actually talked to me while I gazed in tongue-tied silence or babbled in boastful dreams. Boys with my own experiences and out of my own world, who knew and understood, wrought out with me great remedies. I studied eagerly under teachers who bent in subtle sympathy, feeling themselves some shadow of the Veil and lifting it gently that we darker souls might peer through to other worlds.

I willed and lo! I was walking beneath the elms of Harvard,—the name of allurements, the college of my youngest, wildest visions! I needed money; scholarships and prizes fell into my lap,—not all I wanted or strove for, but all I needed to keep in school. Commencement came and standing before governor, president, and grave, gowned men, I told them certain astonishing truths, waving my arms and breathing fast! They applauded with what now seems to me uncalled-for fervor, but then! I walked home on pink clouds of glory! I asked for a fellowship and got it. I announced my plan of studying in Germany, but Harvard had no more fellowships for me. A friend, however, told me of the Slater Fund and how the Board was looking for colored men worth educating.²³ No thought of modest hesitation occurred to me. I rushed at the chance.

The trustees of the Slater Fund excused themselves politely. They acknowledged that they had in the past looked for colored

boys of ability to educate, but, being unsuccessful, they had stopped searching. I went at them hammer and tongs! I plied them with testimonials and mid-year and final marks. I intimidated plainly, impudently, that they were “stalling”! In vain did the chairman, Ex-President Hayes, explain and excuse. I took no excuses and brushed explanations aside. I wonder now that he did not brush me aside, too, as a conceited meddler, but instead he smiled and surrendered.

I crossed the ocean in a trance. Always I seemed to be saying, “It is not real; I must be dreaming!” I can live it again—the little, Dutch ship—the blue waters—the smell of new-mown hay—Holland and the Rhine. I saw the Wartburg and Berlin; I made the Harzreise and climbed the Brocken; I saw the Hansa towns and the cities and dorfs of South Germany; I saw the Alps at Berne, the Cathedral at Milan, Florence, Rome, Venice, Vienna, and Pesh; I looked on the boundaries of Russia; and I sat in Paris and London.²⁴

On mountain and valley, in home and school, I met men and women as I had never met them before. Slowly they became, not white folks, but folks. The unity beneath all life clutched me. I was not less fanatically a Negro, but “Negro” meant a greater, broader sense of humanity and world-fellowship. I felt myself standing, not against the world, but simply against American narrowness and color prejudice, with the greater, finer world at my back urging me on.

I visited great castles in Spain and lived therein. I dreamed and loved and wandered and sang; then, after two long years, I dropped suddenly back into “nigger”-hating America!

My Days of Disillusion were not disappointing enough to discourage me. I was still upheld by that fund of infinite faith, although dimly about me I saw the shadow of disaster. I began to realize how much of what I had called Will and Ability was sheer Luck! *Suppose* my good mother had preferred a steady income from my child labor rather than bank on the precarious dividend of my higher training? *Suppose* that pompous old village judge, whose dignity we often ruffled and whose apples we stole, had had his way and sent me while a child to a “reform” school to learn a “trade”? *Suppose* Principal Hosmer had been born with no faith in “darkies,” and instead of giving me Greek and Latin had taught me carpentry and the making of tin pans?²⁵ *Suppose* I had