

# **The Complete Works of Charles W. Chesnutt:**

**The House behind the Cedars, The  
Marrow of Tradition, The Conjure  
Woman and Other Conjure Tales,  
The Wife of His Youth and Other  
Stories of the Color-Line and  
others**

**Illustrated**

**The Novels**

**The House behind the Cedars (1900)**

## **I. A STRANGER FROM SOUTH CAROLINA**

TIME TOUCHES ALL things with destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but a brief mockery, to be surely and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age, the dry leaves and bare branches of winter. And yet there are places where Time seems to linger lovingly long after youth has departed, and to which he seems loath to bring the evil day. Who has not known some even-tempered old man or woman who seemed to have

drunk of the fountain of youth? Who has not seen somewhere an old town that, having long since ceased to grow, yet held its own without perceptible decline?

Some such trite reflection — as apposite to the subject as most random reflections are — passed through the mind of a young man who came out of the front door of the Patesville Hotel about nine o'clock one fine morning in spring, a few years after the Civil War, and started down Front Street toward the market-house. Arriving at the town late the previous evening, he had been driven up from the steamboat in a carriage, from which he had been able to distinguish only the shadowy outlines of the houses along the street; so that this morning walk was his first opportunity to see the town by daylight. He was dressed in a suit of linen duck — the day was warm — a panama straw hat, and patent leather shoes. In appearance he was tall, dark, with straight, black, lustrous hair, and very clean-cut, high-bred features. When he paused by the clerk's desk on his way out, to light his cigar, the day clerk, who had just come on duty, glanced at the register and read the last entry:

—  
“JOHN WARWICK, CLARENCE, SOUTH CAROLINA.”

“One of the South Ca'lina bigbugs, I reckon — probably in cotton, or turpentine.” The gentleman from South Carolina, walking down the street, glanced about him with an eager look, in which curiosity and affection

were mingled with a touch of bitterness. He saw little that was not familiar, or that he had not seen in his dreams a hundred times during the past ten years. There had been some changes, it is true, some melancholy changes, but scarcely anything by way of addition or improvement to counterbalance them. Here and there blackened and dismantled walls marked the place where handsome buildings once had stood, for Sherman's march to the sea had left its mark upon the town. The stores were mostly of brick, two stories high, joining one another after the manner of cities. Some of the names on the signs were familiar; others, including a number of Jewish names, were quite unknown to him.

A two minutes' walk brought Warwick — the name he had registered under, and as we shall call him — to the market-house, the central feature of Patesville, from both the commercial and the picturesque points of view. Standing foursquare in the heart of the town, at the intersection of the two main streets, a "jog" at each street corner left around the market-house a little public square, which at this hour was well occupied by carts and wagons from the country and empty drays awaiting hire. Warwick was unable to perceive much change in the market-house. Perhaps the surface of the red brick, long unpainted, had scaled off a little more here and there. There might have been a slight accretion of the moss and lichen on the shingled roof. But the tall tower, with its four-faced clock, rose as majestically and

uncompromisingly as though the land had never been subjugated. Was it so irreconcilable, Warwick wondered, as still to peal out the curfew bell, which at nine o'clock at night had clamorously warned all negroes, slave or free, that it was unlawful for them to be abroad after that hour, under penalty of imprisonment or whipping? Was the old constable, whose chief business it had been to ring the bell, still alive and exercising the functions of his office, and had age lessened or increased the number of times that obliging citizens performed this duty for him during his temporary absences in the company of convivial spirits? A few moments later, Warwick saw a colored policeman in the old constable's place — a stronger reminder than even the burned buildings that war had left its mark upon the old town, with which Time had dealt so tenderly.

The lower story of the market-house was open on all four of its sides to the public square. Warwick passed through one of the wide brick arches and traversed the building with a leisurely step. He looked in vain into the stalls for the butcher who had sold fresh meat twice a week, on market days, and he felt a genuine thrill of pleasure when he recognized the red bandana turban of old Aunt Lyddy, the ancient negro woman who had sold him gingerbread and fried fish, and told him weird tales of witchcraft and conjuration, in the old days when, as an idle boy, he had loafed about the market-house. He did not speak to her, however, or give her any sign of

recognition. He threw a glance toward a certain corner where steps led to the town hall above. On this stairway he had once seen a manacled free negro shot while being taken upstairs for examination under a criminal charge. Warwick recalled vividly how the shot had rung out. He could see again the livid look of terror on the victim's face, the gathering crowd, the resulting confusion. The murderer, he recalled, had been tried and sentenced to imprisonment for life, but was pardoned by a merciful governor after serving a year of his sentence. As Warwick was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, he could not foresee that, thirty years later, even this would seem an excessive punishment for so slight a misdemeanor.

Leaving the market-house, Warwick turned to the left, and kept on his course until he reached the next corner. After another turn to the right, a dozen paces brought him in front of a small weather-beaten frame building, from which projected a wooden sign-board bearing the inscription: —

**ARCHIBALD STRAIGHT, LAWYER.**

He turned the knob, but the door was locked. Retracing his steps past a vacant lot, the young man entered a shop where a colored man was employed in varnishing a coffin, which stood on two trestles in the middle of the floor. Not at all impressed by the melancholy suggestiveness of his task, he was whistling a lively air with great gusto. Upon Warwick's entrance

this effusion came to a sudden end, and the coffin-maker assumed an air of professional gravity.

“Good-mawnin’, suh,” he said, lifting his cap politely.

“Good-morning,” answered Warwick. “Can you tell me anything about Judge Straight’s office hours?”

“De ole jedge has be’n a little onreg’lar sence de wah, suh; but he gin’ally gits roun’ ‘bout ten o’clock er so. He’s be’n kin’ er feeble fer de las’ few yeahs. An’ I reckon,” continued the undertaker solemnly, his glance unconsciously seeking a row of fine caskets standing against the wall,— “I reckon he’ll soon be goin’ de way er all de earth. ‘Man dat is bawn er ‘oman hath but a sho’t time ter lib, an’ is full er mis’ry. He cometh up an’ is cut down lack as a flower.’ ‘De days er his life is three-sco’ an’ ten’ — an’ de ole jedge is libbed mo’ d’n dat, suh, by five yeahs, ter say de leas’.”

““Death,”” quoted Warwick, with whose mood the undertaker’s remarks were in tune, “is the penalty that all must pay for the crime of living.””

“Dat ‘s a fac’, suh, dat ‘s a fac’; so dey mus’ — so dey mus’. An’ den all de dead has ter be buried. An’ we does ou’ sheer of it, suh, we does ou’ sheer. We conduc’s de obs’quies er all de bes’ w’ite folks er de town, suh.”

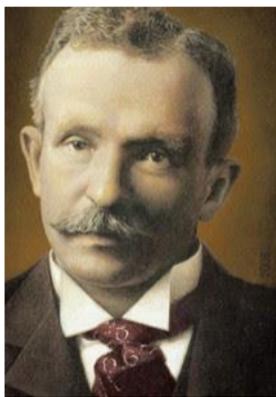
Warwick left the undertaker’s shop and retraced his steps until he had passed the lawyer’s office, toward which he threw an affectionate glance. A few rods farther led him past the old black Presbyterian church,

with its square tower, embowered in a stately grove; past the Catholic church, with its many crosses, and a painted wooden figure of St. James in a recess beneath the gable; and past the old Jefferson House, once the leading hotel of the town, in front of which political meetings had been held, and political speeches made, and political hard cider drunk, in the days of "Tippecanoe and Tyler too."

The street down which Warwick had come intersected Front Street at a sharp angle in front of the old hotel, forming a sort of flatiron block at the junction, known as Liberty Point, — perhaps because slave auctions were sometimes held there in the good old days. Just before Warwick reached Liberty Point, a young woman came down Front Street from the direction of the market-house. When their paths converged, Warwick kept on down Front Street behind her, it having been already his intention to walk in this direction.

Warwick's first glance had revealed the fact that the young woman was strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered. As he walked along behind her at a measured distance, he could not help noting the details that made up this pleasing impression, for his mind was singularly alive to beauty, in whatever embodiment. The girl's figure, he perceived, was admirably proportioned; she was evidently at the period when the angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence. Her abundant hair, of a dark and glossy brown, was neatly plaited and coiled

above an ivory column that rose straight from a pair of gently sloping shoulders, clearly outlined beneath the light muslin frock that covered them. He could see that she was tastefully, though not richly, dressed, and that she walked with an elastic step that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health. Her face, of course, he could not analyze, since he had caught only the one brief but convincing glimpse of it.



The young woman kept on down Front Street, Warwick maintaining his distance a few rods behind her. They passed a factory, a warehouse or two, and then, leaving the brick pavement, walked along on mother earth, under a leafy arcade of spreading oaks and elms. Their way led now through a residential portion of the town, which, as they advanced, gradually declined from staid respectability to poverty, open and unabashed. Warwick observed, as they passed through the respectable quarter, that few people who met the girl

greeted her, and that some others whom she passed at gates or doorways gave her no sign of recognition; from which he inferred that she was possibly a visitor in the town and not well acquainted.

Their walk had continued not more than ten minutes when they crossed a creek by a wooden bridge and came to a row of mean houses standing flush with the street. At the door of one, an old black woman had stooped to lift a large basket, piled high with laundered clothes. The girl, as she passed, seized one end of the basket and helped the old woman to raise it to her head, where it rested solidly on the cushion of her headkerchief. During this interlude, Warwick, though he had slackened his pace measurably, had so nearly closed the gap between himself and them as to hear the old woman say, with the dulcet negro intonation: —

“T’anky’, honey; de Lawd gwine bless you sho’. You wuz alluz a good gal, and de Lawd love eve’ybody w’at he’p de po’ ole nigger. You gwine ter hab good luck all yo’ bawn days.”

“I hope you’re a true prophet, Aunt Zilphy,” laughed the girl in response.

The sound of her voice gave Warwick a thrill. It was soft and sweet and clear — quite in harmony with her appearance. That it had a faint suggestiveness of the old woman’s accent he hardly noticed, for the current Southern speech, including his own, was rarely without a touch of it. The corruption of the white people’s speech

was one element — only one — of the negro's unconscious revenge for his own debasement.

The houses they passed now grew scattering, and the quarter of the town more neglected. Warwick felt himself wondering where the girl might be going in a neighborhood so uninviting. When she stopped to pull a half-naked negro child out of a mudhole and set him upon his feet, he thought she might be some young lady from the upper part of the town, bound on some errand of mercy, or going, perhaps, to visit an old servant or look for a new one. Once she threw a backward glance at Warwick, thus enabling him to catch a second glimpse of a singularly pretty face. Perhaps the young woman found his presence in the neighborhood as unaccountable as he had deemed hers; for, finding his glance fixed upon her, she quickened her pace with an air of startled timidity.

“A woman with such a figure,” thought Warwick, “ought to be able to face the world with the confidence of Phryne confronting her judges.”

By this time Warwick was conscious that something more than mere grace or beauty had attracted him with increasing force toward this young woman. A suggestion, at first faint and elusive, of something familiar, had grown stronger when he heard her voice, and became more and more pronounced with each rod of their advance; and when she stopped finally before a