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“A Journey Southward”

Ch. 5 of *The Marrow of Tradition* (novel)

1901 — Excerpts*

Fayetteville State Univ.



As the south-bound train was leaving the station at Philadelphia, a gentleman took his seat in the single sleeping-car attached to the train, and proceeded to make himself comfortable. He hung up his hat and opened his newspaper, in which he remained absorbed for a quarter of an hour. When the train had left the city behind, he threw the paper aside, and looked around at the other occupants of the car. One of these, who had been on the car since it had left New York, rose from his seat upon perceiving the other's glance, and came down the aisle.

“How do you do, Dr. Burns?” he said, stopping beside the seat of the Philadelphia passenger.

The gentleman looked up at the speaker with an air of surprise, which, after the first keen, incisive glance, gave place to an expression of cordial recognition.

Why, it's Miller!” he exclaimed, rising and giving the other his hand, “William Miller — Dr. Miller, of course. Sit down, Miller, and tell me all about yourself, — what you're doing, where you've been, and where you're going. I'm delighted to meet you, and to see you looking so well — and so prosperous.”

“I deserve no credit for either, sir,” returned the other, as he took the proffered seat, “for I inherited both health and prosperity. It is a fortunate chance that permits me to meet you.”

The two acquaintances, thus opportunely thrown together so that they might while away in conversation the tedium of their journey, represented very different and yet very similar types of manhood. A celebrated traveler, after many years spent in barbarous or savage lands, has said that among all varieties of mankind the similarities are vastly more important and fundamental than the differences. Looking at these two men with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent, for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly

* Full text at Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/chesnuttmarrow/chesmarrow.html>

speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states as a “visible admixture” of African blood.¹

Having disposed of this difference, and having observed that the white man was perhaps fifty years of age and the other not more than thirty, it may be said that they were both tall and sturdy, both well dressed, the white man with perhaps a little more distinction; both seemed from their faces and their manners to be men of culture and accustomed to the society of cultivated people. They were both handsome men, the elder representing a fine type of Anglo-Saxon, as the term is used in speaking of our composite white population; while the mulatto’s erect form, broad shoulders, clear eyes, fine teeth, and pleasingly moulded features showed nowhere any sign of that degeneration which the pessimist so sadly maintains is the inevitable heritage of mixed races. . . .

Several hours were passed in pleasant conversation while the train sped rapidly southward. They were already far down in Virginia, and had stopped at a station beyond Richmond, when the conductor entered the car.

“All passengers,” he announced, “will please transfer to the day coaches ahead. The sleeper has a hot box, and must be switched off here.”

Dr. Burns and Miller obeyed the order, the former leading the way into the coach immediately in front of the sleeping-car.

“Let’s sit here, Miller,” he said, having selected a seat near the rear of the car and deposited his suitcase in a rack. “It’s on the shady side.”

Miller stood a moment hesitatingly, but finally took the seat indicated, and a few minutes later the journey was again resumed.

When the train conductor made his round after leaving the station, he paused at the seat occupied by the two doctors, glanced interrogatively at Miller, and then spoke to Dr. Burns, who sat in the end of the seat nearest the aisle.

“This man is with you?” he asked, indicating Miller with a slight side movement of his head, and a keen glance in his direction.

“Certainly,” replied Dr. Burns curtly, and with some surprise. “Don’t you see that he is?”

The conductor passed on. Miller paid no apparent attention to this little interlude, though no syllable had escaped him. He resumed the conversation where it had been broken off, but nevertheless followed with his eyes the conductor, who stopped at a seat near the forward end of the car, and engaged in conversation with a man whom Miller had not hitherto noticed.

¹ In medical school, Dr. William Miller had been the only “colored” student of the white physician Alvin Burns. With Burns’s support, Miller had won a scholarship to study medicine in Paris and Vienna.

As this passenger turned his head and looked back toward Miller, the latter saw a broad-shouldered, burly white man, and recognized in his square-cut jaw, his coarse, firm mouth, and the single gray eye with which he swept Miller for an instant with a scornful glance, a well-known character of Wellington, with whom the reader has already made acquaintance in these pages. Captain McBane wore a frock coat and a slouch hat; several buttons of his vest were unbuttoned, and his solitaire diamond blazed in his soiled shirt-front like the headlight of a locomotive.

The conductor in his turn looked back at Miller, and retraced his steps. Miller braced himself for what he feared was coming, though he had hoped, on account of his friend's presence, that it might be avoided.

"Excuse me, sir," said the conductor, addressing Dr. Burns, "but did I understand you to say that this man was your servant?"

"No, indeed!" replied Dr. Burns indignantly. "The gentleman is not my servant, nor anybody's servant, but is my friend. But, by the way, since we are on the subject, may I ask what affair it is of yours?"

"It's very much my affair," returned the conductor, somewhat nettled at this questioning of his authority. "I'm sorry to part *friends*, but the law of Virginia does not permit colored passengers to ride in the white cars. You'll have to go forward to the next coach," he added, addressing Miller this time.

"I have paid my fare on the sleeping-car, where the separate-car law does not apply," remonstrated Miller.

"I can't help that. You can doubtless get your money back from the sleeping-car company. But this is a day coach, and is distinctly marked 'White,' as you must have seen before you sat down here. The sign is put there for that purpose."

He indicated a large card neatly framed and hung at the end of the car, containing the legend, "White," in letters about a foot long, painted in white upon a dark background, typical, one might suppose, of the distinction thereby indicated.

"You shall not stir a step, Miller," exclaimed Dr. Burns wrathfully. "This is an outrage upon a citizen of a free country. You shall stay right here."

"I'm sorry to discommode you," returned the conductor, "but there's no use kicking. It's the law of Virginia, and I am bound by it as well as you. I have already come near losing my place because of not enforcing it, and I can take no more such chances, since I have a family to support."

"And my friend has his rights to maintain," returned Dr. Burns with determination. "There is a vital principle at stake in the matter."

“Really, sir,” argued the conductor, who was a man of peace and not fond of controversy, “there’s no use talking — he absolutely cannot ride in this car.”

“How can you prevent it?” asked Dr. Burns, lapsing into the argumentative stage.

“The law gives me the right to remove him by force. I can call on the train crew to assist me, or on the other passengers. If I should choose to put him off the train entirely, in the middle of a swamp, he would have no redress — the law so provides. If I did not wish to use force, I could simply switch this car off at the next siding, transfer the white passengers to another, and leave you and your friend in possession until you were arrested and fined or imprisoned.”

“What he says is absolutely true, doctor,” interposed Miller at this point. “It is the law, and we are powerless to resist it. If we made any trouble, it would merely delay your journey and imperil a life at the other end. I’ll go into the other car.”

“You shall not go alone,” said Dr. Burns stoutly, rising in his turn. “A place that is too good for you is not good enough for me. I will sit wherever you do.”

“I’m sorry again,” said the conductor, who had quite recovered his equanimity, and calmly conscious of his power, could scarcely restrain an amused smile; “I dislike to interfere, but white passengers are not permitted to ride in the colored car.”

“This is an outrage,” declared Dr. Burns, “a d – d outrage! You are curtailing the rights, not only of colored people, but of white men as well. I shall sit where I please!”

“I warn you, sir,” rejoined the conductor, hardening again, “that the law will be enforced. The beauty of the system lies in its strict impartiality — it applies to both races alike.”

“And is equally infamous in both cases,” declared Dr. Burns. “I shall immediately take steps” —

“Never mind, doctor,” interrupted Miller, soothingly, “it’s only for a little while. I’ll reach my destination just as surely in the other car, and we can’t help it, anyway, I’ll see you again at Wellington.”

Dr. Burns, finding resistance futile, at length acquiesced and made way for Miller to pass him.

The colored doctor took up his valise and crossed the platform to the car ahead. It was an old car, with faded upholstery, from which the stuffing projected here and there through torn places. Apparently the floor had not been swept for several days. The dust lay thick upon the window sills, and the water-cooler, from which he essayed to get a drink, was filled with stale water which had made no recent acquaintance with ice. There was no other passenger in the car, and Miller occupied himself in making a rough calculation of what it would cost the Southern railroads to haul a whole car for every colored passenger. It was expensive, to say the least; it would be cheaper, and quite as considerate of their feelings, to make the negroes walk.

The car was conspicuously labeled at either end with large cards, similar to those in the other car, except that they bore the word “Colored” in black letters upon a white background. The author of this piece of legislation had contrived, with an ingenuity worthy of a better cause, that not merely should the passengers be separated by the color line, but that the reason for this division should be kept constantly in mind. Lest a white man should forget that he was white, — not a very likely contingency, — these cards would keep him constantly admonished of the fact; should a colored person endeavor, for a moment, to lose sight of his disability, these staring signs would remind him continually that between him and the rest of mankind not of his own color, there was by law a great gulf fixed.

Having composed himself, Miller had opened a newspaper, and was deep in an editorial which set forth in glowing language the inestimable advantages which would follow to certain recently acquired islands by the introduction of American liberty, when the rear door of the car opened to give entrance to Captain George McBane who took a seat near the door and lit a cigar. Miller knew him quite well by sight and by reputation, and detested him as heartily. He represented the aggressive, offensive element among the white people of the New South, who made it hard for a negro to maintain his self-respect or to enjoy even the rights conceded to colored men by Southern laws. McBane had undoubtedly identified him to the conductor in the other car. Miller had no desire to thrust himself upon the society of white people, which, indeed, to one who had traveled so much and so far, was no novelty; but he very naturally resented being at this late day — the law had been in operation only a few months — branded and tagged and set apart from the rest of mankind upon the public highways, like an unclean thing. Nevertheless, he preferred even this to the exclusive society of Captain George McBane.

“Porter,” he demanded of the colored train attaché who passed through the car a moment later, “is this a smoking car for white men?”

“No, suh,” replied the porter, “but they comes in here sometimes, when they ain’ no cullud ladies on the kyar.”

“Well, I have paid first-class fare, and I object to that man’s smoking in here. You tell him to go out.”

“I’ll tell the conductor, suh,” returned the porter in a low tone. “I’d jus’ as soon talk ter the devil as ter that man.”

The white man had spread himself over two seats, and was smoking vigorously, from time to time spitting carelessly in the aisle, when the conductor entered the compartment.

“Captain,” said Miller, “this car is plainly marked ‘Colored.’ I have paid first-class fare, and I object to riding in a smoking car.”

“All right,” returned the conductor, frowning irritably. “I’ll speak to him.”

He walked over to the white passenger, with whom he was evidently acquainted, since he a[d]dressed him by name.

“Captain McBane,” he said, “it’s against the law for you to ride in the nigger car.”

“Who are you talkin’ to?” returned the other. “I’ll ride where I damn please.”

“Yes, sir, but the colored passenger objects. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to go into the smoking-car.”

“The hell you say!” rejoined McBane. “I’ll leave this car when I get good and ready, and that won’t be till I’ve finished this cigar. See?”

He was as good as his word. The conductor escaped from the car before Miller had time for further expostulation. Finally McBane, having thrown the stump of his cigar into the aisle and added to the floor a finishing touch in the way of expectoration, rose and went back into the white car.

Left alone in his questionable glory, Miller buried himself again in his newspaper, from which he did not look up until the engine stopped at a tank station to take water.

As the train came to a standstill, a huge negro, covered thickly with dust, crawled off one of the rear trucks unobserved, and ran round the rear end of the car to a watering-trough by a neighboring well. Moved either by extreme thirst or by the fear that his time might be too short to permit him to draw a bucket of water, he threw himself down by the trough, drank long and deep, and plunging his head into the water, shook himself like a wet dog, and crept furtively back to his dangerous perch.

Miller, who had seen this man from the car window, had noticed a very singular thing. As the dusty tramp passed the rear coach, he cast toward it a glance of intense ferocity. Up to that moment the man’s face, which Miller had recognized under its grimy coating, had been that of an ordinarily good-natured, somewhat reckless, pleasure-loving negro, at present rather the worse for wear. The change that now came over it suggested a concentrated hatred almost uncanny in its murderousness. With awakened curiosity Miller followed the direction of the negro’s glance, and saw that it rested upon a window where Captain McBane sat looking out. When Miller looked back, the negro had disappeared.

At the next station a Chinaman, of the ordinary laundry type, boarded the train, and took his seat in the white car without objection. At another point a colored nurse found a place with her mistress.

“White people,” said Miller to himself, who had seen these passengers from the window, “do not object to the negro as a servant. As the traditional negro, — the servant, — he is welcomed; as an equal, he is repudiated.”

Miller was something of a philosopher. He had long ago had the conclusion forced upon him that an educated man of his race, in order to live comfortably in the United States, must be either a philosopher or a fool; and since he wished to be happy, and was not exactly a fool, he had cultivated philosophy. By and

by he saw a white man, with a dog, enter the rear coach. Miller wondered whether the dog would be allowed to ride with his master, and if not, what disposition would be made of him. He was a handsome dog, and Miller, who was fond of animals, would not have objected to the company of a dog, as a dog. He was nevertheless conscious of a queer sensation when he saw the porter take the dog by the collar and start in his own direction, and felt consciously relieved when the canine passenger was taken on past him into the baggage-car ahead. Miller's hand was hanging over the arm of his seat, and the dog, an intelligent shepherd, licked it as he passed. Miller was not entirely sure that he would not have liked the porter to leave the dog there; he was a friendly dog, and seemed inclined to be sociable.

Toward evening the train drew up at a station where quite a party of farm laborers, fresh from their daily toil, swarmed out from the conspicuously labeled colored waiting-room, and into the car with Miller. They were a jolly, good-natured crowd, and, free from the embarrassing presence of white people, proceeded to enjoy themselves after their own fashion. Here an amorous fellow sat with his arm around a buxom girl's waist. A musically inclined individual — his talents did not go far beyond inclination — produced a mouth-organ and struck up a tune, to which a limber-legged boy danced in the aisle. They were noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty, and malodorous. For a while Miller was amused and pleased. They were his people, and he felt a certain expansive warmth toward them in spite of their obvious shortcomings. By and by, however, the air became too close, and he went out upon the platform. For the sake of the democratic ideal, which meant so much to his race, he might have endured the affliction. He could easily imagine that people of refinement, with the power in their hands, might be tempted to strain the democratic ideal in order to avoid such contact; but personally, and apart from the mere matter of racial sympathy, these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train. Surely, if a classification of passengers on trains was at all desirable, it might be made upon some more logical and considerate basis than a mere arbitrary, tactless, and, by the very nature of things, brutal drawing of a color line. It was a veritable bed of Procrustes, this standard which the whites had set for the negroes. Those who grew above it must have their heads cut off figuratively speaking, — must be forced back to the level assigned to their race; those who fell beneath the standard set had their necks stretched, literally enough, as the ghastly record in the daily papers gave conclusive evidence.

Miller breathed more freely when the lively crowd got off at the next station, after a short ride. Moreover, he had a light heart, a conscience void of offense, and was only thirty years old. His philosophy had become somewhat jaded on this journey, but he pulled it together for a final effort. Was it not, after all, a wise provision of nature that had given to a race, destined to a long servitude and a slow emergence therefrom, a cheerfulness of spirit which enabled them to catch pleasure on the wing, and endure with equanimity the ills that seemed inevitable? The ability to live and thrive under adverse

circumstances is the surest guaranty of the future. The race which at the last shall inherit the earth — the residuary legatee of civilization — will be the race which remains longest upon it. The negro was here before the Anglo-Saxon was evolved, and his thick lips and heavy-lidded eyes looked out from the inscrutable face of the Sphinx across the sands of Egypt while yet the ancestors of those who now oppress him were living in caves, practicing human sacrifice, and painting themselves with woad - and the negro is here yet.

“Blessed are the meek” quoted Miller at the end of consoling reflections, “for they shall inherit the earth.’ If this be true, the negro may yet come into his estate, for meekness seems to be set apart as his portion.”

The journey came to an end just as the sun had sunk into the west.

Simultaneously with Miller’s exit from the train, a great black figure crawled off the trucks of the rear car, on the side opposite the station platform. Stretching and shaking himself with a free gesture, the black man, seeing himself unobserved, moved somewhat stiffly round the end of the car to the station platform.

“Fo de Lawd!” he muttered, “ef I had n’ had a cha’m’ life, I’d ‘a’ never got here on dat ticket, an’ dat’s a fac’ - it sho’ am! I kind er ‘lowed I wuz gone a dozen times, ez it wuz. But I got my job ter do in dis worl’, an’ I knows I ain’ gwine ter die ‘tel I ‘ve ‘complished it. I jes’ want one mo’ look at dat man, an’ den I’ll haf ter git somethin’ ter eat; fer two raw turnips in twelve hours is slim pickin’s fer a man er my size!²

² Josh Green, the “dusty tramp,” had vowed to kill Capt. George McBane, the leader of a Klan mob who had murdered his father years earlier. At the end of the novel, Green and McBane kill each other simultaneously. Chesnutt comments: “One of the two died as the fool dieth. Which was it, or was it both? ‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the Lord, and it had not been left to Him. But they that do violence must expect to suffer violence.”