

JESSIE REDMON FAUSET

COMEDY: AMERICAN STYLE

Introduction by
THADIOUS M. DAVIS

G.K. HALL & CO.
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster Macmillan
New York

Prentice Hall International
London Mexico City New Delhi Singapore Sydney Toronto

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN
WOMEN WRITERS,
1910-1940**

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TO

My Sisters

CAROLINE, ANNA AND BEATRICE FAUSET

“ . . . loved long since,
And lost awhile.”

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE PLOT	3
II. THE CHARACTERS	33
III. TERESA'S ACT	69
IV. OLIVER'S ACT	187
V. PHEBE'S ACT	229
VI. CURTAIN	321

I
THE PLOT

CHAPTER I

ONCE, before Olivia had attained to that self-absorption and single-mindedness which were to stamp her later life, she had remarked a text in Sunday School which had given her considerable pause. It read: "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth." She had gazed at it with unimaginative and wholly preoccupied concentration, struck for the moment with the solemnity and awfulness inhering in the words. After a few moments' reflection she came to the conclusion—she was nine at the time—that "the little fire" was a match and "the great matter" of course was a great fire. The Bible had such a roundabout way of saying things!

It is likely that never again in her whole life did she consider that text. For it was not many years later that a little fire kindled for her a great matter with which she was destined to combat all her life. But she herself did not know that she was engaged in any struggle nor was she oftener than once even dimly aware of the vastness and extent of the conflagration.

The little fire was really kindled by two events. The first took place one glacial January afternoon when a snowball aimed none too adroitly by her small tawny hand found a more direct mark than she anticipated. The girl whom she had hit lived in the same block with her, but had never before spoken to her little colored neighbor. Now she

turned and called out with raucous fury: "Don't you ever hit me again with a snowball, you nasty little nigger!"

The other children had been perfectly cognizant of Olivia's bronze-brown father with his crisp black hair and his merry eyes. But Olivia and her pleasant-spoken mother had been so completely like themselves in appearance that they had not let all the implications creep into their minds. Now suddenly awareness came upon them. Some withdrew, glancing at her aloofly. Others went on with their play apparently oblivious and yet contriving with some show of ostentation to leave her out. But one little girl as nut-brown and as curly-haired as Olivia herself, placed a warm tender hand on hers. "Olivia," she whispered with an insight far beyond her years, "it doesn't make any difference."

Olivia could brook neither the insult nor the pity. Brushing aside her playmate's hand she rushed into the house where she brooded long and bitterly over this awful thing which had happened to her. To be considered different! . . . All ignorant as she was of the laws of heredity she knew that her father's original brownness was in some way responsible for her own. . . . He was lying ill then with pneumonia in an adjoining room . . . her mother, wan and pale and drooping with the apprehension entailed upon her by the illimitable love which she bore him, hung mutely, despairingly over him. . . .

Olivia almost hated them both with a flaring intensity no less violent for the immaturity of the heart which engendered it. How could they—how *could* they have made her colored? How could they lead the merry, careless life that was theirs with this hateful disgrace always upon them? . . . A question which she was never able to answer, since

neither at nine nor at thirty-nine was she ever able to comprehend, much less experience, the perfection of rapture which may spring from human relationships.

Within a month her father had died, their little household was broken up and her mother, suddenly destitute but unresentful, had moved Olivia and her slender effects to another Massachusetts town in which there was a possibility of work in a mill. By chance she found a tiny house skirting an Italian neighborhood and sent her daughter to school within the district. And it was thus that the second event added its own contribution to "the great fire."

If only a god could have intervened! If he could have set his stern lips to the rosy ear of Olivia's new, young and completely unobservant teacher. If he could have said to her with the awful gravity of a god: "Refrain from those words, for in them lie Pain, Death, Weariness and Utter Futility!"

But either he was totally dumb or she totally deaf, for as the line was passing her room she called out: "Here, that little girl right there, come here a moment." They were all little girls and they were all "right there," so that Olivia, for whom the words were intended, kept serenely on. Miss Baer, continuing in the somewhat raucous voice which she reserved for stupid pupils, called again: "Come here, you; that little Italian girl, I mean."

Olivia, now more than ever unsignalled, was blandly pursuing her way when she felt her two shoulders grasped firmly by the strong Polack girl behind her, and found herself propelled toward the irate instructor.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed Miss Baer. "My goodness me! Don't you know enough to come when you're called?"

Before Olivia could open her bewildered mouth the tute-

lary Polack rushed to her defense. "She's new, teacher; she don't mean nothin'."

"Wait a moment," said the teacher. "Take this note to Miss Sawyer in Room 17." Unexpectedly she found herself moved by the aspect of the forlorn little girl in the black dress. "You didn't mind my speaking of your being an Italian, did you? You know," said Miss Baer, whose grandfather under a difficult name ending in *ewski* was at that moment painfully tilling a field in a far-off town in Poland, "you know I think that you Italian children are quite as good as us Americans. You didn't mind, did you?" she asked again anxiously, for her heart was, at bottom, as kind as her head was empty.

Olivia, looking at her unblinkingly, assured her with great firmness that she had not minded in the least. She was, she said, proud to be an Italian.

Over the chocolate soda which had occasioned the note, Miss Baer discussed the matter with her friend, Miss Sawyer.

"And you should have seen the change which came over her face when I told her I considered Italians just as good as the rest of us Americans. I always believe in straightening these things out. Poor little tyke!"

The poor little tyke could hardly wait for her mother to return from the mill. Never a demonstrative child, she surprised her parent from the settled depression, from the almost complete obliviousness to extraneous matters in which long brooding on a happy vanished past had enveloped her. For a brief moment about her heart she experienced a feeling of warmth. Perhaps this cool, small daughter of hers had awakened. Perhaps between them there would spring something of the affection of which one

reads between mother and child—an affection which as yet Olivia had never exhibited.

But she was wary. She said nothing. For her daughter, up to this point within her experience, had been like a cunningly fashioned instrument without, so to speak, a sounding-board. Touch it, play on her feelings ever so cleverly, and the response was nil. There was nothing there with which to afford an answer. Some inkling of this even in Olivia's most childish days had penetrated to the minds of her father and mother.

Like a picture film a certain memory swept in panorama over Mrs. Blanchard's mind. For the first time she and her husband had taken a complete "day off from the baby," then a child of four. With another couple who also had left their two children in the care of a kind but none too familiar aunt, they had gone to a beach. All through the lovely drowsy hours the parents had worried. "We shouldn't have left her without either of us, Lee," Mrs. Blanchard had kept repeating. "Oh, she'll be all right, Janet," he had retorted. But she had known that he was distracted.

As the four entered the aunt's house the two little Porter children dropped a medley of sticky books, blocks and crackers and with loud cries of "Mummy and Daddy!" had fallen upon their gratified parents. But Olivia had not even turned around. Instead she had taken this opportunity to annex a small, brightly colored booklet belonging to the older Porter boy. Earlier in the day he had fought her and her predatory efforts most doughtily. But now from the coign of his father's shoulder he was coldly indifferent.

Lee and Janet had taken Olivia home, laughing—but then they were always doing that—at their own discomfiture. "It appears to me," Lee said, glancing at the child sleeping

placidly, lying straight and prim in her little bed, "it appears to me that your child isn't so fond of us."

For once without laughter Janet looked at him. "I'm just wondering, Lee, how she can be the child of either one of us. Do you know she's never hung around us or clung to us the way that little Porter boy clung to his mother to-night."

"The more reason why we should cling to each other, then," Lee had replied with his ready laughter. But presently in the moments between his trips on the train—he was a graduate of a medical school working as a railroad porter for the money to purchase his equipment—and in those brief interims when they were not completely engrossed in the wonderment of their perfect companionship, they fell to considering her with a mingling of amazement and wistfulness, of a somewhat wry humor and of no little chagrin.

"She's a changeling," Lee said and thereafter to themselves they frequently referred to her as "C."

All this and much more was passing through Janet Blanchard's nimble mind as Olivia waited on her with unusual and thoughtful ministrations. "Perhaps she is going to be a real daughter," she thought, leaning back in the shabby rocker which Olivia had drawn forward for her. She let her weary aching feet relax in the grateful roominess of old and tried slippers, which her daughter had amazingly slipped on for her.

A momentary flash of her old whimsicalness returned. "Perhaps she's going to become unchanged." For a sad sweet moment she fell to musing on how completely satisfying and compensating a child of Lee should be. There was that girl whom she had met only last week on her way

to this soul-destroying mill, a girl who had looked up to greet a rather ordinary woman advancing toward her down the street.

"There's my mother!" she had called out in an ecstasy of joy. "Oh, Moth!" she had cried. "Oh, Moth!" The sweet intimacy of the little abbreviation had almost brought the tears to Janet's eyes. Suppose Olivia should greet her like that!

Olivia made the final gesture; she brought her mother the glass of cool tart lemonade which her parched throat so craved. "Now," the child thought beneath her unrevealing exterior, "now she certainly must be rested enough for me to talk to her." She plumped on a stool at her mother's feet. Of all the things which Janet had hoped her daughter might say she surely had never anticipated this.

"Mother," said little Olivia, "have you ever told anybody in this town we are colored?"

"What!" said her mother, startled even out of her initial disappointment. "What are you talking about? No, I've never told anybody I am colored. Don't suppose I have to. Why?"

Olivia proceeded carefully, feeling her way. If she couldn't gain her mother's consent or at least her silence, her own dimly worked out plans might be entirely shattered. "I don't think anybody around here *thinks* we're colored, because nobody *knows* we're colored. I think, Mother," said Olivia, struggling with an idea destined to become the cornerstone of many a latter-day cult, "that if you really are one way and people see you another way, then it's just as easy for you to be their way as your way."

"Well, what about it?" said Janet coldly, thinking what an intensely irritating child this was. "I hope you're not getting any silly notions in your head. Color doesn't mean

anything, anything at all. It's what you are." She was talking ineptly and knew it. "There are many white people in the world who are no better off than we today. You're too young to understand all this just now, Olivia, but you'll find out that you'll have a much better time as a colored girl who eventually will come to know some of the best people of her group than as an ordinary white girl who will always know and go with ordinary white people.

"I come of ordinary colored people myself, Olivia. I was a maid in a hotel in a summer resort when fortunately I met your dear father. He was working his way through medical school . . . but he would marry me . . . where was I? Now *he* was from a fine family. His father knew men like Booker Washington and John Durham. Fellows in school with him are already making names as teachers and doctors and business men. When we got on our feet we were going to Boston. We might have remained in moderate circumstances for years, but we could have mingled always with the best."

But neither then nor at any other time did Olivia have any taste for such mingling. Much of what her mother had said was beyond her, but she could always see the facts which would support the cause of her immediate espousal. So she only said with no slightest trace of the triumphant winner in her tone: "Mother, do the people at the mill know you're colored?"

"No," said Janet shortly. She would have little chance to earn even this pittance, she knew, if her color were guessed at.

"Well, then," Olivia finished, coming to her point, for her clear mind told her no further discussion was necessary, "since the girls, and the teachers too, at school think I'm white, don't you think I'd better be white?"

CHAPTER II

JANET BLANCHARD always traced her determination to marry a second time back to that conversation with her daughter. Her heart cried to her not to forget Lee. . . . "As though I could," she murmured at night into her feverish pillow. But her head told her she could not forever endure this awful loneliness which her daughter's presence rendered, paradoxically enough, so palpable. She had no friends and as she was of the type of colored people who look with scorn on what they call with special intention "poor whites," she made no attempt to mingle with the mill-hands about her. As she was always courteous and sufficiently approachable her attitude caused no rancor. Indeed, her aloofness, coupled with a certain innate refinement, obtained for her respect and at length a measure of appreciation.

Her work was rapid and accurate and brought with it an annual slight increase which she, with much more insight than she had ever shown during her life with Lee, placed in a savings bank. She, too, could plan. Finally a harassed foreman, noting that she had a way with her with the foreigners by whom the place was overrun and commenting to himself that here was an "honest-to-God" American who might be able to get some sense into the heads of these "wops," made her an assistant forewoman. And saw to it that she received not only better hours but an appreciable difference in wage.

And now, between this mother and daughter a strange contest began—a contest, however, of which only the former was aware. Olivia, with little or no thought as to the class of people with whom she was associating, was daily cherish-

ing within herself the idea of emerging into a world which knew nothing of color. On the other hand, within her heart Janet was nursing the image of the day when she could break with all this sordidness of occupation and people and return to her own. She would migrate to a college town—to Boston or even to Cambridge itself.

How well, through Lee, she knew the type of man that there she might possibly meet. She could picture, as completely as though he were standing before her, the rather serious, slightly over-earnest Southerner desperately pursuing a belated education. She hoped she would not be apportioned by the gods to a type such as that. He might so easily be un-humorous and self-important!

Of course there were others. Men coming back for research and graduate work. Some of them already with scholarships in pursuit of other scholarships to carry them abroad in their quest for further knowledge. . . . "But such men would hardly glance at me and my ignorance," she told herself with her honest, clear-sighted candor. "Lee, darling Lee, what shall I do?" For always she communed with him thus, feeling no disloyalty to him in the ideas that she was contemplating. Lee, she knew, would be the first to want his girl guarded safe and warm with the strength even of another man's arm.

And immediately the answer came to her. She had kept her husband's books—many from his high-school days and all those he had used in his undergraduate college years. Everything else, even his clothes, she had sold during those first black weeks, but the books, despite the problem they presented in weight and expense, she had clung to, knowing how he had cherished them.

At night now, not so weary as she had once been, she read, she made notes, she remembered. Some remarks of

Lee and her own clear sense showed her that history, a wide range of English reading, a little geography, a very elemental book or two in psychology and biology would best serve her purpose. She was amazed and thrilled to find that systematic study which, in her inmost heart, she had thought would appeal only to the talented few, met a response in her. She enjoyed the English reading, especially the poetry and the essays. But what especially captured her awakening and now curious mind was her little textbook on psychology.

How she pored over this new and fascinating interest! How wonderful to be able to understand the workings of another's mind, to anticipate another's reactions. It gave one a god-like quality, she thought; and she wondered why not everybody profited by it. Of course later she was to discover that all that had happened was that by great good luck she had stumbled on the type of interest that just suited her style of mind. Also she came to realize that it was neither easy nor natural to keep constantly about one in ordinary encounters one's academic attitude. Furthermore there were frequently cases which her meager knowledge was unable to gauge. There was always Olivia. . . .

The town library was pitifully equipped, but a sympathetic librarian was able to tell this eager neophyte of extension courses at Harvard; courses not only in psychology but on other subjects sure to appeal to the inquiring mind of this caliber. The trip to Cambridge by the interurban trolley though long was not tedious and the new life after the worry of enrollment had passed was rich and revealing.

Twice a week for two years, she went, receiving a rather mediocre but, to her, definitely stimulating pabulum of popular psychology, Greek art, and the current events of a day long before the radio. She loved and enjoyed every

bit of it. And behind and through all that enjoyment was the constant realization that she was not standing still; that certainly she was not the same woman in whose arms poor Lee had died and that somehow, somewhere, something was bound to happen.

Naturally all this activity cured her physical loneliness. Yet never had she felt so completely, so spiritually apart as on the day, five years from the date of Lee's death, when she and her sullen daughter set out for Cambridge to embark on her grand adventure. . . . She had had a frightful scene with Olivia, who, with that strange undemanding complacency which so distinguished her from both her parents, had been spending five happy years in the company of shop-girls, soda-water jerkers, small seamstresses . . . who were white.

Janet had met them from time to time, treating them with courtesy and gentleness not only for her daughter's sake and safety but also for the maintenance of her own economic position. She knew—as what colored person thirty years ago did not?—the rancor of the poor small-town white who saw in his Negro working competitor only the menace of the wanton interloper.

The thought of going again to a colored church, of playing a quiet game of whist in a decent colored parlor with its family album and what-not; of gradually working one's way into membership of small committees, of receiving the polished, if not always grammatical, gallantries of colored men—all these things bore for Janet's imagination the same charm that the sight of fresh water might bear to a shipwrecked sailor.

To Olivia, however, all this meant nothing. "But," said Janet, "do you really like these people, Olivia? Or is it

just because they are white? And if that is why you're so anxious to remain with them do you mean to tell me you're willing all your life to sail under false pretenses? Good heavens, Olivia, you wouldn't want to marry one of these rats, would you? Why, Olivia, think of the decent, kindly cultivated fellows you'll be meeting in Boston! The worst of them would be better than that horrid little Janska you had here last night."

Olivia, it appeared, had thought of the young men whom she might meet in Boston. "All of them black or brown," she raged, "and all of them looked down on! If you think I want my children to feel toward their father as I felt toward—"

She stopped then, realizing that she had gone too far. Janet finished the sentence for her. "As you felt toward your father! Toward Lee Blanchard, the best and finest man that ever lived!" How horrible this was, she thought, to almost hate one's own child.

"Listen, Olivia. I'm going to Boston. I'm going to live there with my own people as completely colored as though I were the color of coal. If you want to stay here and work in the mills—well, you're seventeen, and you may do as you choose. But if you want food and warmth and shelter and decency you'll come with me. And as long as you live under my roof you'll treat my friends—and I mean to have plenty of them, all colored—with respect."

Olivia did not want to work in the mills.

The Harvard Extension course brought results not listed in the catalogue. It had taught Janet her way about Cambridge; and the intelligence of her answers made her name immediately recognizable to the professor when she went to consult him about her little project of opening a rooming-

house for colored students. The problem of housing them was just sufficiently acute to make her proposition worthy of attention. In the end Professor Inness allowed her to use his name both in order to obtain a house and as security for credit.

"Since you're going into this business," he told her wisely, "you might just as well operate on a worthwhile scale. Better get yourself some good furniture while you're at it. Cheap stuff never pays."

She was astounded at his generosity. "But you know nothing about me," she reminded him. "You can't possibly know whether I'm honest or not."

"I know you've told me you are a colored woman when you might just as well have let me think you white. That assures me that you may be foolish but you certainly are honest," he told her dryly. After this encounter she thought better of white people.

For a time everything worked miraculously and magically just as she had planned it. She found the house, an old-fashioned roomy one with four large bedrooms and three small ones. Two of the small ones were next to each other on the second floor. These she took for herself and her daughter. But almost from the start she realized that she would have to abandon her scheme of taking graduate students only. In those days there were probably fewer than a dozen colored graduate students in the whole United States. Certainly if there were any at Harvard they made no application to her, nor were they sent to her. But the four large double rooms went very quickly.

Her lodgers were all over age—their entrance into, or their continuance within, college represented to each one of them a definite struggle and sacrifice. But this effort,

this determination to attain an end, brought with it a steadfastness and a reliableness which resulted in tangible benefits for Janet. None of these serious, earnest young men would ever cheat her—she could tell that. And if a man fell into arrears she never dunned him. Instead she hunted up some extra piece of work for which sooner or later she would have had to call in carpenter or painter and turned it over to the delinquent.

In this way she was able to pull through that first difficult semester not only without debt but even with a very slight surplus to her credit. Her young men tended the furnace, painted the whole interior of the house, swept the heavy carpets, cleaned windows and jointly and collectively took the place of the best hired man that money could have secured.

And not one of them after the first week or two ever glanced at, or, apparently, ever thought of Olivia. But then Olivia herself had a hand in this. On the contrary, it was no unusual thing to find two or three of them grouped about Janet in her quaint comfortable parlor in the evenings, in those first comfortable relaxing hours of what had been for many of them a tense and gruelling day.

On Sunday evenings, especially, the boys sought her; sometimes they brought with them the feminine attraction of the moment. Occasionally on a stormy New England night almost all of them would be there. Janet would play the hymns which most of them, children of praying, god-fearing parents, had heard in their youth; or from time to time she would dash off into a captivating waltz or one of the stirring marches of the day.

No matrimonial material here. But Janet, happy and comfortable for the first time since her husband's death,

was uncaring. Indeed, secretly, she rather rejoiced, since it meant that the memories of Lee still held full sway in her heart. All in all a happy six months' interim in her life; a pleasant backwater of usefulness; increasing knowledge and comfort where she would, perhaps, spend the rest of her days.

The third small room on the top floor was still untenanted. Janet was pondering the idea of fixing it up as a small private study whither one or even two of her boys could retreat when in need of extra quiet and seclusion. But at the beginning of the second semester Professor Inness sent her a note which she coned in the quiet of her little room. The bearer, declared her former instructor's concise missive, was an older man who had just come through an intense emotional and spiritual strain.

"I think the atmosphere of your house may do something to restore him, Mrs. Blanchard. I'll esteem it a personal favor if you'll contrive to make room for him. I think he'll be best off by himself."

She was not anxious to give up the extra room; she was no longer even anxious for another student, but in the case of Professor Inness refusal was, of course, impossible. Rather slowly she went down to see her caller.

"My goodness," she said to herself as soon as, rather languidly, he began to speak, "here's my real Southerner!" And at first sight he seemed to run more truly to type than the type itself—so gaunt he was, so serious, even to sadness, so insistent on absolute seclusion and quiet because his work was so important. Impishly she ventured a pleasantry or so, but he was in no mood for pleasantries. Without demur he accepted her terms, informed her that he would move in late that afternoon, asked for a door-key and was

off without further delay to complete his program and to procure his luggage.

Later in the week she passed him in the hall and on Sunday morning he drifted into her little office, which she had converted from a pantry, and made some trifling inquiry. He was, she found, a man of perhaps thirty-eight, about three years older than herself, of her own general complexion, bluish-grey eyes, tall, thin almost to emaciation and with marks of real suffering in his face.

It was two months before he joined the boys at her little Sunday gathering and even then he brought with him a sense of not so much seeking company as trying to avoid his own. By summer, in spite of the sparseness of the actual words between them, Janet began to feel in his presence a certain satisfaction and more than that an actual lack if he were not there. A certain expression in his eyes, the merest turn of one of his brief remarks, a lingering quality about his unwilling withdrawals gave her the belief that this satisfaction was felt and returned.

When the summer came her boys scattered. They were all of them now Sophomores and Juniors. All of them elected to return. Some of them, obtaining jobs as porters on New England trains or as bell-hops on the big coast-wise steamers, opined that they would be in from time to time to rest during their brief lay-overs. Blake, however, made no attempt to leave. In answer to Janet's question as to his need for a brief vacation he told of his desire to spend it there in her house in Boston if it did not inconvenience her.

Inevitably the two were drawn together. Before long he had told her of his youth, of his ambition to study medicine, of his graduation with distinction from Atlanta University.

"In those days, Janet, I had about me a sense of consecration. I suppose all of us young colored fellows of that day took ourselves too seriously. Education was and still is such a novel possession. So although I wanted to come North and study medicine, when a call came for a man to take charge of a new struggling school in a small Alabama town I listened to the insistent urging of one of my professors and went there.

"You never saw such benighted people as there were in that town, both black and white. I married a classmate to whom I had become engaged during my junior year and the two of us, heads and hearts high, set out—poor, little puny fools—to attempt a reform at which the angel Michael might well have blanched.

"The colored people there, poor things, wanted the school because they thought there was necromancy in higher education. That it would bring palpable and material results. Of course a few of them saw beyond that. The white people didn't want the school because they were afraid it might make their 'nigras uppity' and they didn't mean to stand for that. Yet they realized the benefit to the town.

"Well, we were young and brave and dead sure not only that we could succeed but that we were genuine crusaders embarked on a holy cause. I won't burden you with the details, Janet. You read the papers. But after fifteen years of heart-breaking work, after seeing a school turn from a little elementary primary institution into an academy of high-school rank—after going about hat in hand half over the country to gain funds with which to construct new buildings—after all this I came home from one of these expeditions two years ago to find my school a mass of still smoking ruins; my wife at death's door; all hope of our

baby gone; my life's work vanished; and the vandals laughing, jesting, skulking like jackals among the debris."

"Oh," said Janet, "and I thought you were just a self-conscious, belated student. I thought you had no sense of humor. What did you do, Ralph? Where did you live during those years before you came here? How have you been existing?"

"I tell you, Janet, I hardly know what I did. My wife and I had about a thousand dollars saved in a bank in New York. And I had, thank God for it, always carried heavy insurances for both her and myself. A classmate of mine spirited me away, helped me collect and bank my insurance and sent word to the professor at Atlanta through whom I had first undertaken the building of the school. He was, by the way, an uncle of your Professor Inness. For two years I've been wandering up and down the country, working at whatever came my way, provided only it induced sufficient weariness.

"I've worked on great Western farms, on forest reservations, even in mining camps, talking to as few people as possible, making no friends, seeking only sleep and forgetfulness. Recently I've felt some slight stirrings of my old desires to be useful. As wretched as I have been I've come across others in still worse condition—though I doubt if any of them had gone through experiences as harrowing as mine.

"Professor Inness' uncle had wound up my affairs in Alabama. I shall never return there. Indeed, my only desire is to stay in this section of the world and to be quietly and unnoticeably useful. And," he finished simply, "I should like very much to be near you."

Janet looked at him smiling, but with tears in her eyes. "Do you think you could learn to laugh?"

"I used to be a great hand at it. If I learn again, will you let me stay near you?"

"I think so."

"For ever and ever?"

"For ever and ever. . . . Oh, Ralph, you won't mind if I keep a little place in my mind, in my heart, for Lee? . . . I loved him so . . . we were so happy."

"My dear girl, of course. . . . If we can just help each other not so much to forget the past—as to endure what life has left . . . that would be incalculable. And you might like to know I love you. If you ever love me, will you tell me?"

"I love you now."

Many weeks later he asked her: "What about your daughter? You know she's around so little. I see her so rarely. Do you think she'll mind our marriage?"

Janet's face went wry. "Ralph, if you could only guess how little she'll mind! I am the least cog in Olivia's wheel. She has only one consuming ambition. I suppose she'll hardly know she has a stepfather. But in any event, I think she likes you."

"She always speaks to me pleasantly, and I notice that's more than she does to any of the other men in the house except to young Christopher Cary."

"That's because you're the only ones that in any sense fulfill her requirements."

"What requirements?"

"It's all so silly! Olivia is simply hipped on color. She wouldn't speak to her own grandfather on the street, I believe, if he showed color."

"Absurd!"

"Of course, but absurdly truthful!"

"You mean she wouldn't marry fellows like Stephens and Hall"—he mentioned two of Janet's most promising roomers—"simply because they're brown?"

"My dear, she wouldn't marry you or Chris Cary or any other colored man, no matter how little he showed his Negro blood. My daughter, your future stepchild, is a confirmed Negro-hater. She thinks there is no health in us."

"You don't mean she's willing to marry a white man?"

"I told you she had one consuming ambition and that is to be white. I suppose the easiest way to attain to that estate is to marry white. . . . Though I don't see how on earth she's going to accomplish it."

"Do you think it will do any good for me to speak to her? Suppose I were to tell her about those inhuman devils that I met in Alabama?"

"I don't think you could make her understand what you were talking about. . . . You see, her argument would be that none of this would have happened to you if they hadn't known you were colored. . . ."

"Therefore an additional reason for being white! Oh, Lord, whoever heard of such a girl? . . . You poor child, you must have had a simply terrible time with her."

"You can't imagine how much she *hasn't* been a daughter. And I wanted one so . . . !"

"Oh, well," he comforted her, "there are daughters and daughters."

They planned to marry the following Christmas. But as the crisp fall weather closed in, as each became surer and surer that here was haven, security and love, they fell to thinking of the uselessness of a continued separate existence. And suddenly one misty, chilly November morning he came for her from one of his classes and they were married