

Transcribed from *Literary Club Papers 11, 1892, April 30 to June 25*

INFORMAL

by
George W Ryan April 30, 1892

A Cincinnati Japhet. by C. B. Wilby

Thirty years ago when most of the business between Cincinnati and the South was done by river every body, who had been to New Orleans, knew Aunt Susan, the stewardess of the ladies cabin on the most popular of the many fine boats which were then devoted to this traffic.

She was a fine looking mulatto woman of large frame with heart to match and nothing that Susan Tinsley could do, to add to the comfort of the women and children who made the long trip in her cabin as she called it, was ever wanting. Mothers with wakeful babies were relieved in the long watches of the night by her tender hand tireless arms; her strong hand helped the invalids to a sunny seat on the guards and her fingers did every thing for every body from sewing on a button to making a poultice. Her watchfulness and constant thoughtfulness of her passengers was not unappreciated nor unrewarded and in time she purchased with her savings a small brick house on the north side of Seventh street just east of John, where in warm weather, when at home between trips, she was proud to sit on the stone steps which projected onto the sidewalk and shed her kindly smile on all passers by.

With her lived her daughter who married the Burnet house barber and before long aunt Susan's front steps swarmed with the lot of well fed little grandchildren.

In those days I lived on Seventh Street below Mound and like all others whose daily walk took by her door and, I was struck by the air of peace, content and plenty which hung about it.

One evening in May 1872 the boat was at the landing and Aunt Susan was sitting on the door step with a grandchild or two in her ample lap. It was getting dark when a rapidly driven carriage with drawn curtains stopped suddenly before the house. A gentleman got out and came up the steps. Taking off his hat he addressed her and asked if he might have a little conversation with her indoors. When they were seated in the parlor which was lighted by the fading daylight which came in at the open door, the gentleman said he wanted to ask a great favor of her: he and his wife, who he said was in the carriage at the door, were unexpectedly called out of town by the death of a near relative and they wished

to leave their six weeks old baby with Aunt Susan for a few days until their return; that they were then on their way to the railway station (pointing to the trunk strapped up behind the carriage) and they had their child with them and would leave it then and there if Aunt Susan was willing to take charge of it, and without waiting for her answer he stepped out to the carriage and a moment later placed in her hands a baby boy, laid a bundle of linen by her side, pressed a small roll of bills into her hands, thanked her, ran down the steps, slammed the door of the carriage was driven rapidly away in the darkness, and Aunt Susan never saw heard of him again.

When the old woman collected herself, she called her daughter, who brought a light and I believe, like good women, they took a look at the baby before they counted the roll. The former was a fine little boy but as Aunt Susan says not a day over a week old – and the latter contained just thirty dollars.

The well-worn family cradle was called down from its temporary and periodical rest in the garret and the new comer was tenderly cared for by the motherly Ann, while Aunt Susan went on her long trips. In time it grew to be a beautiful child, with fair skin, fine features and handsome blue eyes, and they called him Harry.

In 1875 Aunt Susan sold her property on Seventh Street and bought a house in the far West End, on Sherman avenue. At that time she came to get me to attend to the legal details of these transactions. We had our office then in the old Masonic Temple, and Grandfather Coppock, who had his office across the hallway, represented one of the parties, either the man who bought the Seventh street house he who sold the other. That is a long time ago but I remember father Coppock looked if anything much older than he does today. I remember also that Aunt Susan rewarded me by a present of a young mocking bird, which she brought to the office one day in a cage filled with bits of yolk of egg and much bad smell, all of which I got rid of with difficulty without hurting her feelings.

Harry, of course, went to Sherman avenue with the family for he was one of them. Whatever the rest had he had. Aunt Susan and her daughter loved him as their own. He had been named Harry because that was a name that Aunt Susan liked and she had not been permitted to give it to any of her real grandsons. He had gone to school with others at the public school, which is inconsistently set apart for colored children, in the lower grade of which no notice was taken of his fairer skin. All of Aunt Susan's family were light mulattos and he was permitted to go with the rest and when he was given a last name was called by that of his foster-father, but in 1880 when he was eight years old and ready to enter a higher grade, the new teacher saw that he was of different blood and making some inquiries, he was sent to another school house. The little fellow toddled home one day and said to her who had been the only mother he had known "Teacher wants to know my name". I told her Harry, but she said you must tell me the other name.

The poor woman caught him in her arms and wept over him at this new reminder that he was not her own – but the question had to be answered and as his color forbade his taking her own name she gave him the name of the then candidate for the vice-presidency and he became Harry Arthur. At last, a year or two later the dread, which had always haunted her, became a fact.

In 1886 when he was fourteen a childless woman living in the neighborhood, attracted by his beauty, had learned what the neighborhood gossips had to tell of his history and determined to steal him.

Like the serpent she tempted him and whispered in his ear that he was too good to live any longer with “them niggers.”

Heartbroken the poor woman, who deserved his gratitude came to me but the law could not help her. She had no legal right to enjoy any longer the results of her tender care. The Judge had to leave it to the boy to decide, and he forgot all that he owed and went with the white woman.

From that time I heard nothing of him until a month or two ago a young man of nineteen or twenty came into the office and asked rather mysteriously if he could see me alone. When the door of my room was closed he said at once, “I want you to help me find out who I am. You know that I go by the name of Harry Arthur.”

I sat for a moment looking at him for he had a remarkably handsome face. Every feature was good, fine well set blue eyes shaded by long lashes, glistening piece; thin rather aquiline nose; small flat ears; a rather patrician mouth and a high color made up a good picture of manly beauty which was however clouded when he spoke, for he did not follow Linley Murray closely.

He told me that he was a horse jockey over in the blue grass region; that he had been taking care of himself since he was fifteen and was trying to save money enough to quit work for a while and find out who he was.

Every holiday or day off for years he had spent in Cincinnati following pointers, and a curious lot of pointers he seemed to have had.

Aunt Susan forgivingly told him the little she knew which was of no help to him. In the dim light of her parlor she had not even been able to see the features of the man who had put the boy into her arms on that evening twenty years ago.

The baby linen left with him had borne no marks of any kind. From Aunt Susan he had turned to follow, with what seemed almost pitiful perseverance, every

story of an illegitimate birth of about that time, which he had been able to pick up.

A circus man, who was in Kentucky buying horses, had told him of a girl who had a baby about then down on Cutter street and the poor boy had tried vainly to find traces of that girl.

A man in a barbershop knew an old mid-wife who used to live on Clark street and he had located her, and then learned that she had been dead many years.

A man who was working in a stable on Fifth street had a friend, a detective in the Arcade, who had a tip but he wanted \$25.00 before he would give it up.

He had run down all sorts of alleged clues picked up from everywhere but all ending in nothing. Thinking to dissuade him from his hopeless search, I reminded him gently that his parents, if living, had evidently no desire to claim him for they had always known where to look for him and had never done so, and that as an illegitimate child he would have no rights in any property belonging to his father if he succeeded in finding him. To which he answered quickly "I don't want no money - I want to know who I am." After he had risen to go he stopped and said "There was one more, I almost forgot, a man who tends a bar on Fifth street opposite Carney's stable told me, it would pay me to hunt up a man named H , who used to live on Seventh.

The moment he spoke the name the likeness occurred to me. I had known that man when he was one of the older boys at Chickering's school 30 years ago. His family was one of the oldest and wealthiest in the City. He had grown up an idler, good for nothing. He was tall and handsome, fond of and successful with women, and the face of the boy before me reminded me of him. The same high color and the same thin nose. I asked "Well, what did you learn from him?"

"Oh I can't find him, they say he's dead." was the answer.

I knew that the man named, had for many years, been living in New York, but I let the boy go without saying anything further. He had been to the office once or twice since, but in my absence.

I may be entirely wrong but I have constantly recurring suspicion, which I can't get rid of, that the boy has named his father. The date of the boy's birth would agree with the time when the man referred to was generally supposed to be flourishing in the role of an accomplished libertine. Two or three years later he married the daughter of a well known citizen of large fortune, but there was in two or three years more a scandal and a separation and then divorce. She was no better than he and went to the bad and died. He had a child by her, a boy for whom the man never seemed to have any natural feeling of affection, but left him

with his sister when he moved to New York and I've been told has never seen him since.

If my suspicion is well founded, Harry, the illegitimate son could hope for no better treatment than the other has received. If the man did not choose to acknowledge him, he has no proof of any sort to compel an acknowledgment of his parentage, nor could he get any so far as I can see.

Moreover, the poor boy's mind is wrought up to such a pitch that I hesitate to raise his hopes, by what is mere suspicion, for fear the result might be serious should my suspicions proved groundless or unavailing. I have thought that I would have the boy see one or two old Cincinnatians who knew the man, and if they recognized the same likeness which has struck me I might give him this pointer as he would call it. Mr. Venable and Dr. Walton both know the man, perhaps I shall call on them.

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