Charles Waddell Chesnutt, an African American, was born in Ohio just before the Civil War. After the war, his parents returned to their native North Carolina and opened a grocery store. Chesnutt launched a successful teaching career in the newly established public schools for blacks in the area, but in 1883 he returned to the state of his birth. He established a successful business in Cleveland and began to publish fiction. Much of his work revolved around themes of race in the contemporary South. In essays, he urged African Americans to organize, to vote, and to speak out so as to reveal “a country where prejudice has usurped the domain of law.” Although he had some critical success, sales were disappointing, and within a few years he gave up writing.

His novel, The Marrow of Tradition, was inspired by the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, where the Republican Party maintained political control with the help of the black vote despite Democratic dominance in the rest of the state. A white mob led by a former congressman and Confederate officer killed fourteen African Americans, burned the building housing the local African-American newspaper, and deposed the elected city government. The national press reported those events as the product of black lawlessness and the failures of black enfranchisement, and Chesnutt intended the novel to be a literary response to authors like Thomas Nelson Page and William Dixon who were romanticizing white violence. The Marrow of Tradition tells the story of William Miller, an African-American doctor who has returned to his hometown of “Wellington,” North Carolina, and Major Carteret, a white newspaper editor and advocate of Jim Crow. At the end of the novel, Carteret finds himself pleading for the aid of Miller to save the life of Carteret’s baby, even as Miller is grieving the death of his own child who was killed in the riot that Carteret helped to incite. Chesnutt had hoped that the novel would lay bare the growing violence of white supremacists in the South and the complexities of race relations in the Jim Crow era, but the novel seemed to fall on deaf ears.

A pivotal chapter near the end of the book chronicles the start of the riot and a meeting on the road of Miller and Josh Green, a local African-American laborer. Green and Miller had met twice before in the novel. The character of Miller blended W. E. B. DuBois’s model of the “talented tenth” who could uplift the African-American community and Booker T. Washington’s strategic posture of accommodation to Jim Crow. Green, on the other hand, represented the strategy of violent resistance to white supremacy. Where Miller admitted that he had largely forgotten the Ku Klux Klan raids that occurred in his childhood, Green could never forget that the KKK had killed his father. Whereas Miller advised, “You’d better be peaceable and endure a little injustice, rather than run the risk of a sudden and violent death,” Green retorted, “I expec’s ter die a vi’lent death in a quarrel wid a w’ite man . . . an’ fu’thermo, he’s gwine ter die at the same time, er a little befo’.” Ultimately, Green is killed in a final confrontation with a

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white mo, and does manage to kill one of its leaders—the man who had killed Green’s father years before—in his last act.

... The Wellington riot began at three o’clock in the afternoon of a day as fair as was ever selected for a deed of darkness. The sky was clear, except for a few light clouds that floated, white and feathery, high in air, like distant islands in a sapphire sea. A salt-laden breeze from the ocean a few miles away lent a crisp sparkle to the air.

At three o’clock sharp the streets were filled, as if by magic, with armed white men. The negroes, going about, had noted, with uneasy curiosity, that the stores and places of business, many of which closed at noon, were unduly late in opening for the afternoon, though no one suspected the reason for the delay; but at three o’clock every passing colored man was ordered, by the first white man he met, to throw up his hands. If he complied, he was searched, more or less roughly, for firearms, and then warned to get off the street. When he met another group of white men the scene was repeated. The man thus summarily held up seldom encountered more than two groups before disappearing across lots to his own home or some convenient hiding-place. If he resisted any demand of those who halted him—But the records of the day are historical; they may be found in the newspapers of the following date, but they are more firmly engraved upon the hearts and memories of the people of Wellington. For many months there were negro families in the town whose children screamed with fear and ran to their mothers for protection at the mere sight of a white man.

Dr. Miller had received a call, about one o’clock, to attend a case at the house of a well-to-do colored farmer, who lived some three or four miles from the town. ... As he neared the town on his way back, he saw ahead of him half a dozen men and women approaching, with fear written in their faces, in every degree from apprehension to terror. Women were weeping and children were crying, and all were going as fast as seemingly lay in their power, looking behind now and then as if pursued by some deadly enemy. At sight of Miller’s buggy they made a dash for cover, disappearing, like a covey of frightened partridges, in the underbrush along the road.

Miller pulled up his horse and looked after them in startled wonder.

“What on earth can be the matter?” he muttered, struck with a vague feeling of alarm. A psychologist, seeking to trace the effects of slavery upon the human mind, might find in the South many a curious illustration of this curse, abiding long after the actual physical bondage had terminated. In the olden time the white South labored under the constant fear of negro insurrection. Knowing that they themselves, if in the negroes’ place, would have risen in the effort to throw off the yoke, all their reiterated theories of negro subordination and inferiority could not remove that lurking fear, founded upon the obscure consciousness that the slaves ought to have risen. Conscience, it has been said, makes cowards of us all. There was never, on the continent of America, a successful slave revolt, nor one which lasted more than a few hours, or resulted in the loss of more than a few white lives; yet never was the planter quite free from the fear that there might be one.

On the other hand, the slave had before his eyes always the fear of the master. There were good men, according to their lights—according to their training and environment—among the Southern slaveholders, who treated their slaves kindly, as slaves, from principle, because they recognized the claims of humanity, even under the dark skin of a human chattel. There was many a one who protected or pampered his negroes, as the case might be, just as a man fondles his dog—because they were his; they were part of his estate, an integral part of the entity of property and person which made up the aristocrat; but with all this kindness, there was always present, in the consciousness of the lowest slave, the knowledge that he was in his master’s power, and that he could make no effectual protest against the abuse of that authority. There was also the knowledge, among those who could think at all, that the
best of masters was himself a slave to a system, which hampered his movements but scarcely less than those of his bondmen.

When, therefore, Miller saw these men and women scampering into the bushes, he divined, with his slumbering race consciousness which years of culture had not obliterated, that there was some race trouble on foot. His intuition did not long remain unsupported. . . .

“Is dat you, Doctuh Miller?”

“Yes. Who are you, and what’s the trouble?”

“What’s de trouble, suh? Why, all hell’s broke loose in town yonduh. De w’ite folks is riz ‘gins’ de niggers, an’ say dey ‘re gwine ter kill eve’y nigger dey kin lay han’s on.”

. . . He had read in the Morning Chronicle, a few days before, the obnoxious [anti-lynching] editorial quoted from the Afro-American Banner, and had noted the comment upon it by the white editor. He had felt, as at the time of its first publication, that the editorial was ill-advised. It could do no good, and was calculated to arouse the animosity of those whose friendship, whose tolerance, at least, was necessary and almost indispensable to the colored people. They were living, at the best, in a sort of armed neutrality with the whites; such a publication, however serviceable elsewhere, could have no other effect in Wellington than to endanger the truce and defeat the hope of a possible future friendship. The right of free speech entitled Barber to publish it; a larger measure of common-sense would have made him withhold it. . . .

. . .

As he neared the town, dashing forward at the top of his horse’s speed, he heard his voice called in a loud and agitated tone, and, glancing around him, saw a familiar form standing by the roadside, gesticulating vehemently.

. . . The colored lawyer, Watson, came up to the buggy. . . .

“What’s the matter, Watson?” . . .

“Matter!” exclaimed the other. “Everything’s the matter! The white people are up in arms. They have disarmed the colored people, killing half a dozen in the process, and wounding as many more. They have forced the mayor and alderman to resign, have formed a provisional city government a la francaise, and have ordered me and half a dozen other fellows to leave town in forty-eight hours, under pain of sudden death. As they seem to mean it, I shall not stay so long. . . . I knew you were out here, however, and I thought I’d come out and wait for you, so that we might talk the matter over. I don’t imagine they mean you any harm, personally, because you tread on nobody’s toes; but you’re too valuable a man for the race to lose, so I thought I’d give you a warning. . . .”

. . . [Said Watson] “I never saw anything like it. Yesterday I had a hundred white friends in the town, or thought I had—men who spoke pleasantly to me on the street, and sometimes gave me their hands to shake. Not one of them said to me today: ‘Watson, stay at home this afternoon.’ I might have been killed, like any one of half a dozen others who have bit the dust, for any word that one of my ‘friends’ had said to warn me. When the race cry is started in this neck of the woods, friendship, religion, humanity, reason, all shrivel up like dry leaves in a raging furnace.”

. . .

Watson was climbing down from the buggy, when a small party of men were seen approaching, and big Josh Green, followed by several other resolute-looking colored men, came up and addressed them.

“Dr. Miller,” cried Green, “Mr. Watson,—we’re lookin’ fer a leader. De w’ite folks are killin’ de niggers, an’ we ain’ gwine ter stan’ up an’ be shot down like dogs. We’re gwine ter defen’ ou’ lives, an’ we ain’ gwine ter run away f’m no place where we’ve got a right ter be; an’ woe be ter de w’ite man w’at lays han’s on us! Dere’s two niggers in dis town ter eve’y w’ite man, an’ ef we’ve got ter be killt,
we’ll take some w’ite folks ‘long wid us, ez sho’ ez dere’s a God in heaven—ez I s’pose dere is, dough He
mus’ be ‘sleep, er busy somewhar e’se ter-day. Will you-all come an’ lead us?”

“Gentlemen,” said Watson, “what is the use? The negroes will not back you up. They haven’t the
arms, nor the moral courage, nor the leadership.”

“We’ll git de arms, an’ we’ll git de courage, ef you’ll come an’ lead us! We wants leaders—dat’s
w’y we come ter you!”

“What’s the use?” returned Watson despairingly. “The odds are too heavy. . . . If I died, I should
get no glory and no reward, and my family would be reduced to beggary—to which they’ll soon be near
enough as it is. This affair will blow over in a day or two. The white people will be ashamed of
themselves tomorrow, and apprehension of the consequences for some time to come. Keep quiet, boys,
and trust in God. You won’t gain anything by resistance.”

“God he’ps dem dat he’ps demselves,” returned Josh stoutly. “Ef Mr. Watson won’t lead us,
will you, Dr. Miller?” said the spokesman, turning to the doctor.

For Miller it was an agonizing moment. He was no coward, morally or physically. Every manly
instinct urged him to go forward and take up the cause of these leaderless people, and, if need be, to
defend their lives and their rights with his own—but to what end?

“Listen, men,” he said. “We would only be throwing our lives away. Suppose we made a
determined stand and won a temporary victory. By morning every train, every boat, every road leading
into Wellington, would be crowded with white men—as they probably will be anyway—with arms in
their hands, curses on their lips, and vengeance in their hearts. In the minds of those who make and
administer the laws, we have no standing in the court of conscience. They would kill us in the fight, or
they would hang us afterwards—one way or another, we should be doomed. . . . Alive, I may be of some
use to you, and you are welcome to my life in that way—I am giving it freely. Dead, I should be a mere
lump of carrion. Who remembers even the names of those who have been done to death in the
Southern States for the past twenty years?”

“I ’members de name er one of ‘em,” said Josh, “an’ I ’members de name er de man dat killt ‘im,
an’ I s’pec’ his time is mighty nigh come.”

“My advice is not heroic, but I think it is wise. In this riot we are placed as we should be in a war:
we have no territory, no base of supplies, no organization, no outside sympathy—we stand in the
position of a race, in a case like this, without money and without friends. Our time will com—the
time when we can command respect for our rights; but it is not yet in sight. Give it up, boys, and wait. Good
may come of this, after all.”

Several of the men waivered, and looked irresolute.

“I reckon that’s all so, doctuh,” returned Josh, “an’, de way you put it, I don’ blame you ner Mr.
Watson; but all dem reasons ain’ got no weight wid me. I’m gwine in dat town, an’ ef any w’ite man
’s stubs me, dere’ll be trouble—dere’ll be double trouble—I feels it in my bones!”

“Come along, boys! Dese gentlemen may have somethin’ ter live fer; but ez fer my pa’nt, I’d
ruther be a dead nigger any day dan a live dog!”