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Forgotten Manuscripts: The Short Fiction of George Wylie Henderson

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Source: *African American Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter, 2005), pp. 491-499

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of African American Review (St. Louis University)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40033688>

Accessed: 25-01-2019 09:19 UTC

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## FORGOTTEN MANUSCRIPTS

**Editor's Note:** AAR is pleased to present a new feature column, "Forgotten Manuscripts." Because so much of African American literary, print, and cultural production remains unknown and/or ignored, and so much scholarly attention (even within these very pages) is yet devoted to the most canonical texts and topics of black literary and cultural heritage, AAR will occasionally publish short complete or excerpted texts, long neglected but noteworthy. We hope that the fresh circulation of these never-published or neglected manuscripts of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and autobiography will both stimulate new conversations about African American expressive cultures and generate lively appreciations of the lost genius they represent.

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## The Short Fiction of George Wylie Henderson

Historians of African American literature remember George Wylie Henderson (1904-1965) for his two novels, *Ollie Miss* (1935) and *Jule* (1946). *Ollie Miss*, the story of an Alabama sharecropper who finds a "farm of her own," received widespread critical acclaim; the less-successful sequel, *Jule*, tells of her son's migration to Harlem and his achievement of success as a union printer. In my research for a book chapter on Henderson's novels, I discovered that Henderson also published extensively in the periodical market. In the 1930s and 1940s, he published 17 stories in the *New York Daily News* and *Redbook* magazine. Despite their widespread circulation (the *Daily News* claimed the largest in the US at the time), these periodicals are infrequently indexed and are available in only a few major research libraries—on microfilm. I established the first published list of these stories using scattered references, unattributed clippings, microfilms of the periodicals, and the author's correspondence (Nicholls, "George Wylie Henderson"). These findings compel a re-evaluation of Henderson's status in African American letters: far from being a minor novelist, as some literary historians have claimed, Henderson enjoyed a readership in the periodical market that surpassed many of his peers'. The two stories following appear in my new critical edition, *Harlem Calling: The Collected Stories of George Wylie Henderson*.

Readers of Henderson's novels will recognize aspects of his biography in his fiction. Born near Tuskegee, Alabama, Henderson graduated from the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Training Institute in 1922 with training as a printer. He subsequently migrated to New York City and found work as a linotype operator at the *Daily News*, where he would eventually publish many stories. Henderson's fiction is typically set in either rural

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Alabama or New York City, and addresses concerns of black Americans during the Great Migration. He draws thematically from the Tuskegee ethos, emphasizing the virtues of hard work and traditional values. His characters are often poor, yet they respond to the Great Depression with equanimity. Like much fiction from the era, Henderson's stories involve melodramatic plots, but the strains of emotion are muted by his quiet, sure tone. The novels and stories draw characters from the same fictive community: in Alabama, Old Lucy, Aunt Liza, and Uncle Ben make frequent appearances; in the city, Jake Simmons, Jimmy, and Minnie are persistent presences. Henderson often used the circumstances from one story to provide the impetus for another, and characters would frequently find significant aspects of their lives changed to accommodate the needs of Henderson's newest fictive creation; this shifting was particularly true (as I have argued elsewhere) for Ollie Miss, whose life story was revised to allow the emergence of her son's life in *Jule* (Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk*).

The selection here provides a look at Henderson's achievement in short fiction. The first story, "'Thy Name Is Woman'" (1932), shows that Ollie Miss is herself a revised version of an earlier fictive creation; the generically-designated Daughter is clearly a prototype for the heroine of Henderson's first novel. Henderson would place whole

passages from this story in the opening chapters of *Ollie Miss*, but he would also significantly change details of plot and characterization. The second story, "Time for a Dance" (1937), explores the ambivalence that many blacks felt about migration: its hero wins the numbers and uses his prize money to take a trip back South, to Memphis, to see what he has left behind. What he finds, though, is a future with a girl from Harlem and a South that is settling into dusk. The first story was published in the *New York Daily News*; the second appeared in *Redbook*.

In his 1958 study *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone placed Henderson with Zora Neale Hurston in a section on "Aspects of the Racial Past." While Hurston has deservedly received extensive critical attention in the intervening years, Henderson has been only rarely discussed. With the reissue of these forgotten stories from the periodical market, the scholarly community has an opportunity to reassess Henderson's marginal status in African American literary history. Henderson carried his memories of rural Alabama and the ethos of Tuskegee with him on his migration to New York. As someone who found continuing work in the printing trade and published steadily in the literary market, Henderson is an extremely interesting figure. For historians of the literary response to the Great Migration, his work is indispensable.

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## "Thy Name Is Woman"

They told Alex not to let her stay. They told Alex that she was one of those swamp women, and that she wasn't fit to stay around decent people. "You gwine be sorry, Alex," they said, "you gwine be sorry to yo' dyin' day, ef you let dat gal stay heah on dis place."

But Alex let her stay. Cotton needed chopping and corn needed plowing. Cotton got grassy. Corn got grassy, too. But cotton came first, because cotton was king. King cotton! You had to work cotton fast! . . .

Sure; Alex let her stay. She could plow. She could hoe and wield an ax.

She appeared—this woman—at Alex's place one evening at dusk. Alex and Caroline were out on the porch in the early June twilight. It had rained, and the approaching night was a study in solitude. Purple mists; a hushed stillness; and the rain-drenched sweetness of a lingering tropic dusk! . . .

Alex sat with his chair tilted backwards against the wall of the house, his short, chubby legs propped upon the rounds, and Caroline was stretched to her full length upon a bench that stood along the edge of the porch, puffing gently upon the reed of her pipe, and pausing now and then to say a word, or to listen to the drip, drip of the water as it fell into puddles under the eaves.

The woman came slowly up the path that led from the main road. In one hand she carried a small bundle, knotted to her wrist, and in the other there was the trunk part of a young sapling which she used for a walking stick. She came within 10 feet of the porch and paused, and Alex and Caroline could see that her feet were bare and kind of large, the toes spreading apart and flat against the ground. The skirt of her dress was mere threads of rags that dangled from a

band about her hips.

Alex looked at her feet. He looked at the fragment of her skirt about her waist and at the somber mask that was her face. In repose, her face held something of the silent, enigmatic simplicity of the swamp, and there was something of the swamp's slow, savage grace in the tilt of her body, too.

Her eyes were frozen spheres of white flame, except for the vivid black of her pupils; and, watching them, Alex could see something of the wretched hunger, something of the primitive—almost pleading—misery that lurked just beyond their stony depths.

The woman spoke, and her voice was so slow, so still, in the quietness there that Alex had to lean forward in his seat to catch the sense of her words.

The woman said: "Is y'all got er day's plowin, fer a hand? I means is y'all got anyt'ing a body kin do to git er ration o' victuals? I ain't et since day 'fore yestidy. Not eben one mouthful."

Alex stood up, and the pipe stem in Caroline's mouth slipped from the clutch of her teeth.

Alex said, "Kin you sweep cotton?"

"Sho', I kin sweep cotton, Mister."

"Good hand wid a hoe, too?"

"I kin do anything," the woman said softly, almost eagerly. "Only Ise jes er li'l bit hongry right now."

Alex looked at Caroline. Caroline said: "Daughter, I go in de kitchen an' fix you some victuals. But, fust, come jes er li'l closer so us kin see you—see whut you look like, honey."

The woman took a step or two forward and paused, a bit fearfully, at the foot of the steps. She seemed much larger now and more pitiful, too.

Thus she stood there, this woman, a sort of giantess against the backdrop of a setting summer's dusk. And within her eyes, there was the mixture of fear and hunger—the wretched

hunger of her soul. She asked for bread. But was bread the only thing she needed? Alex didn't know. Caroline didn't know either.

But Caroline gave her bread and meat and sorghum and buttermilk, too. And the woman ate and quenched her thirst, and yet she was still hungry. Her eyes were hungry. You could see her eyes. They were the eyes of something that had lived and suffered and died, even while it was young.

The next morning, Nan and Mae Jane and old Sue came down to the "yard" to get milk and to look at this woman that Alex had hired. They got their milk and then they looked at the woman. They looked at her eyes. They told Alex to let that gal go. Nan said, "You let dat gal go on 'bout her business, Alex. Ef you don't you gwine be sorry."

But Alex didn't let her go. He gave her a plow instead. And when the plowing was caught up, he gave her a hoe. Alex was kind of stubborn that way.

The woman worked from sun to sun, and she was a good hand. In the evenings, when she came from the field, she'd chop firewood and clean out the stalls for the mules, or help with the dishes around the kitchen.

No. Alex wouldn't let her go, and that's what made Nan and Mae Jane and old Sue mad. Then, for a whole week, Nan didn't come to the "yard" to get milk and nobody knew exactly where Nan had gone. Nobody, that is, but Mae Jane and old Sue, and neither of them would tell.

So, bright and early one Monday, some three weeks after this woman started to work for Alex, Nan and Mae Jane and old Sue came down to the "yard" to get milk as usual. Only it wasn't quite as usual as formerly, for Nan, it was plain to see, had something very special on her mind.

The night before, which was a Sunday, it had rained and the fields

were still wet and not yet ready for plowing. So Alex and this woman were down by the lot, sharpening "sweeps" and tightening and adjusting the bolts on the plows, which was the spot where Nan and Mae Jane and old Sue found them.

Nan said, "Daughter" — Nan was speaking to the woman — "is you evah done anyt'ing wrong?"

For an instant, the woman didn't speak. Then she said, "I nevah done nothin' I gwine be shamed of."

"I ain't ast you ef you done sunthin' you gwine be 'shamed of, gal," Nan said sharply. "I is astin' you ef you done anyt'ing dat wuz wrong — dat wuz natch'ly wrong!"

The woman looked at Nan and her lips quivered, but she didn't say anything.

Nan said, "Is you gwine answer me, gal — or ain't cha?" And Alex said slowly, without looking up from his task: "'Speck y'all bettah git 'long back to th' house, Nan, 'for y'all git to med-dlin' in somethin' dat ain't none o' y'all's business."

Nan turned to one side to spit, then took a step closer to the woman, as though she hadn't heard Alex at all.

Nan said now: "You is fum dat black-bottom, down yonder on dat swamp — ain't you, gal?"

The woman hesitated, said, "Yes'm." She said it slowly, cautiously.

"Knowed a man down der name o' Callie Tiner, too, ain't yer?"

The woman hesitated again. She said, "Yes'm, I knowed — Callie."

Once again, Alex said, "Bettah git 'long back to th' house, Nan, I keep tellin' you. Bettah git —"

"'Oman," Nan demanded suddenly, "is Callie Tiner dead, or ain't he?"

For the fractional part of a second, the woman's eyes blazed, but she said calmly enough: "I don't know 'zackly ef he's dead or no."

Nan savored this with a fresh dip of snuff, and Mae Jane and old Sue sighed knowingly.

Nan said accusingly: "You tuck an' shot Callie Tiner seben times right through de heart wid er forty-fo', but you ain't knowed if he's dead or no— huh? An' on top o' all dat, you an' dis Callie—you an' him wuz—"

Before Nan could finish, Alex had clamped his hand over her mouth and was in the act of carrying her bodily back to the house, when this woman— this hired hand from black-bottom, down on the swamp— touched his shoulder and restrained his efforts.

Then this woman said, with something of pity and compassion in her voice: "Dat's all right, Mister Alex"— and even as she spoke, a car had turned off the main road and was coming toward them now—"dat's all right. Let her stay; let her talk—"

"Hit's true, Mister Alex! I killed Callie, an' I reckon I'd kill him agin ef he wus livin' . . . I jes' couldn't help hit. De good Lawd knowd I didn't mean to, Mister Alex. I never done nobody no harm. But I loved Callie. Loved him hard. An' I thought he loved me. He told me so.

"Us wus plannin' to git married. Had my weddin' dress all laid out. Already tried hit on. Guess dat's wus de trouble. Dey say hit's bad luck but I was so happy—'cause us gonna git married. Den Callie run off and married dat yella gal, Sooky, from 'cross de swamp yonder. You see, Mister Alex, hit warn't jes' dat.—But Callie, he promised to marry me 'fore—'fore my li'l—li'l bab—"

The car stopped abruptly in front of the little group. The woman knew the car. It was the sheriff's car. The woman dropped her tools and stood up quite straight. She said simply, "Ise comin', Mister Sheriff."

Then she looked back with all the forgiveness of her soul at Nan and Mae Jane and old Sue, too.

## Time for a Dance

It was funny, the way she felt things. It was as though everything inside of her got mixed up all at once, and spilled out over her face and eyes. Her face didn't show anything, save a mute kind of helplessness; but her eyes looked as though they had fire in them, with tiny holes piercing their centers and going down into their depths, like shafts of light. But one didn't see the holes. One only saw the depths where the holes might have been. . . .

They were sitting in a barbeque joint off Beale Street, she and the boy, eating a rib sandwich. The joint wasn't much to look at. There were booths and white-topped tables and stiff-backed chairs, and a cold bright light swinging from a low ceiling. The room smelled of burned barbecue, and a player-piano blared soulfully.

The boy (she called him Pete) sat across from her with his elbows resting on the table. He could, if he chose, look straight into her eyes. But he didn't look at her eyes. He just sat there, staring out over the room and listening to the music, and watching the couples as they came straggling in. Couples from the delta along the Mississippi, with the brightness of moon-washed cotton-fields gleaming in their eyes.

The girl said: "You—you just got to go back t'night? You can't stay till t'morrow?"

She said it simply, as though it were just a thought; and the boy turned to look at her. He looked at her face and eyes, and at the greasy tips of her fingers resting on the table. But he didn't say anything. He just stared at her; and he could see it all there in her countenance, etched with the sharpness of print on paper. The thing, whatever it was, didn't seem so terribly important. Merely it kept bubbling up out of her eyes and spilling over her face, staining it, like a raw flame.

The boy's face tightened a little then, and he glanced away.

Couples had begun to dance now, piano-keys ringing quick and loud. He stood there listening to the music and watching the couples, and he knew now why he had come. It was all there in their faces, in their laughter, and in their dancing, too. Their laughter rose free and loud and clumsy. It breathed of the spacious warmth of cotton-fields, and rolled out over the room, filling it with the incessant roaring he used to hear along Swamp Creek, when the wind was high in the tree-tops. But their dancing flowed on and on, rhythmically, with the ease and grace of rivers. And standing there, he could feel it all—the throbbing tightness of it—beating through him, like an ache in the pit of his throat. It was the thing he had come to see: a kind of living he had once known, but which since had escaped him.

He turned sharply to look at the girl; and something in his face had changed—grown older.

"Yeh, I got to go back," he said. "Got to go back to Harlem t'night! They got a job waitin' for me—a job on relief. They tol' me to be on hand day after t'morrow, so I kin go to work—an' I aint worked none for nine months! . . . So I guess I jes' got time for a dance, 'cause the bus leaves in a hour."

He reached out and caught the girl's hand and helped her from the chair; and the girl stood there clutching his fingers and looking at his face, her nails cutting into his flesh. Then the sides of her face began to twitch, a strange, quiet look coming into her eyes. She said: "Just time for a dance!" and a brief smile quivered on her lips. . . .

So the piano went on playing and the boy called Pete began to dance, the girl held tightly in his arms. For he knew now how it was, how it all had begun. . . .

Three nights ago in Harlem, sleeping on a bench in a park. He had slept there every night for weeks, except when it rained—then he would sneak into the subway. But this particular night it hadn't rained, and he had slept out there under the stars, with seven pennies in his pocket. And the next morning, when he woke up, he put all seven of the pennies on a "number" he had dreamed about two nights in succession. And that afternoon the number came out.

He collected his winnings, and saw that he had more money than he had seen for a whole year. He had it all there in his pocket in one-dollar bills, and he kept taking it out and looking at it; and the sight of it gave him a queer feeling. His first impulse was to buy food and gin, and rent a room to sleep in. All at once, he was filled with consuming hunger and a thirst. He simply wanted to eat and drink and have a good time, then go to sleep in a bed with clean sheets and a pillow on it. But he did neither.

On his way down Seventh Avenue he had stopped before a storefront labeled "*Bus Terminal*." He didn't know why he had stopped. He only knew that he was standing there gazing at a card he saw in the window, and that the card said: "*Low Round-Trip Fares to Points South*." And he continued to stand there until his eyes fell on the column marked "*Memphis, Tenn.*"—the nearest stop to his home. He hadn't been home for over 10 years, and that was before his mother had died.

He stood there a moment longer, staring at the card and thinking about the money in his pocket, counting it out and weighing the importance of it in his mind. And all the while, he could feel a queer lump welling up in the pit of his throat.

He thought, "I—I wants to go home," and turned and walked through the door into the office.

When he got off the bus in Memphis, he took the money out of his pocket and counted it, and saw he had only seven dollars left. So he walked down to the foot of Beale Street and stood there a moment, looking out over the river. But he didn't see any wharves, or cotton-boats either. He didn't see anything but the river, and small pleasure-boats cruising about on the surface of the water. Years ago, he remembered, his pa used to fetch him to town and let him stand there and watch the cotton-boats docked at the wharves, while roustabouts sang and unloaded the cotton, and piled it in stacks as tall as houses. But now there were no roustabouts; no cotton, no boats, and no singing either. Just the river and those tiny boats cruising around!

He turned and went back up the hill and down Beale Street, and he felt a little sick in the pit of his stomach. Everywhere he could see how things had changed. The streets, the houses, the people—everything.

"There aint no use to go on now," he told himself fiercely. "There aint no use, 'cause hit's jes' like bein' on Lenox Avenue up in Harlem! People don't sing an' unload cotton no mo'! They don't do nothin' like they used to!"

He stopped at a soda fountain and ordered a drink, and sat there on a stool, breathing hard and looking around. And it was there that he met the girl. She had served him, and was standing there with her sleeves rolled up, mopping off the counter and watching his face.

The girl said: "You a stranger in town?" She spoke quietly, as though she just wanted to be friendly and nice.

The boy looked at her, and his eyes opened wide. "Yeh—yeh—I guess that's right," he said. "I guess I'm jes' a stranger! I come on the bus this afternoon, an'—an' goin' back t'night!" He emptied the glass with a gulp, and placed it on the counter; and there was silence.

"Where you from?" the girl said then. "I mean, where's yo' home?"

The boy glanced at her again. He said slowly: "My home's down the river in Mississippi, but now I aint goin', 'cause it aint no use. I come all the way down from Harlem jes' to see somethin'—people an' things I used to know; but there aint nuthin' to see. There aint—"

"Harlem?" She whispered it, staring at his face. "You from Harlem?"

"Yeh—from Harlem," the boy said. "Know where that is? . . . I'm goin' back t'night!"

The girl was silent, a strange hotness charging up into her face. She stood there fully a minute, staring at the boy, and her lips began to tremble.

She cried: "Oh—but can't you stay over t'night? I come from Harlem too—was born an' raised there, an' went to school! I lived on 140<sup>th</sup> Street, just off Lenox. . . . Can't you stay over? I—I just want to talk to you. I aint seen nobody from home in so long, I could cry—"

She broke off, her breath catching in her throat, and everything inside of her seemed bottled up there in her face.

The boy continued to look at her. He looked at her kind of hard now, his eyes sweeping over her. Then he shook his head slowly, and said: "Can't stay. Got to go back t'night!"

The girl just stood there then, and her face looked tight and helpless. Then she said: "Well, could you come back round six-thirty? I'll be off then, an' we could go somewhere an' talk for a while. Just sit an' talk an' sort of be with one another. Could you? . . . My name is—is Gene."

The boy stood up then, and placed two dimes on the counter. "An' mine's Pete," he said.

So they had gone to this barbecue joint on a side-street, and ordered sandwiches; and the girl began telling him how it was that she had come South.



She used to be in a show, she explained—one of the “Blackbird” shows. She was 18 then, but the show didn’t last long. And when the run ended, she had found it hard to get another job. She did chorus work for a while, she said, in some of the theaters around Harlem. But the pay kept getting smaller and smaller, and finally some of the theaters had to close up altogether. Then she couldn’t find anything to do at all, the way everything was.

She said that she had thought about doing a lot of things then, because her people weren’t working much either. Besides, they hadn’t wanted her to go on the stage in the first place. They had said it wasn’t lady-like; and she didn’t want to go on living off what little they were making, the way they felt and all. So she packed her things and went South. She had thought it would be easy to get something to do away from New York. She said she didn’t know why she had thought so, but she had.

“I guess I left because I didn’t want to get married or somethin’,” she explained. “I just wasn’t in love or anything, an’ I didn’t want to marry like that.”

She said it all quite freely, sitting there; and the boy just sat there with his elbows on the table and listened.

“I been down here over two years now,” she went on. “First off, I got a job in a nursery, lookin’ after babies an’ things. Then I took a summer job in a girls’ camp; an’ when I come back, I had to take this job. The pay ain’t much, but it kind of keeps me goin’. An’ I always send a dollar or somethin’ home when I write, an’ say how well I’m gettin’ along. I don’t tell them how tough it is, or how lonesome I get, or anything like that. I just say, ‘I’m doin’ swell, be home soon!’—an’ let it go at that.”

She stopped speaking, and the boy sat there looking at her eyes—and

everything inside of him felt queer and mixed up.

He said: “An’ you wants to go home?”

“Sure,” the girl said. “I ain’t been back since I left. An’ I guess just seeing you, an’ knowin’ where you from, makes me want to go back. Go back an’ see things—people an’ things—I used to know! Ever see anybody, or anything, that made you want to go home?”

She stared at him, and her eyes seemed to burn. The boy looked at her eyes, and his face tightened and looked away. He could see a queer image standing there before him, cold and hard, glaring at him—boring into him; and it was only a card in a window, which said: “*Low Round-Trip Fares to Points South.*”

“Yeh, I—I seen somethin’ like that once!” he said, and his voice sounded flat and loud. “I seen it two days ago on Seventh Avenue, an’ I had thirty-eight one-dollah bills in my pocket, an’ no job.”

He had got to his feet then, a thin sweat breaking out on his face. And the piano went on playing, for the couples had begun to dance.

The music stopped. The dancing stopped; and the boy stood there clutching the girl’s hand, and watching the couples. He watched their faces and eyes, and listened to the throb of their laughter, as they moved off the floor. Their laughter rose care-free and loud, like singing. It beat against his eardrums and set up a tightening in the pit of his throat. And standing there listening to it, to the thunderous rhythm of it, he caught a fleeting glimpse of all the years that had passed—life in cabins and cotton-fields along the river bottoms. And that was what he had come to see: the substance of things he had once known!

He dropped his eyes and looked at the girl's face. He looked at it a long time, and he could see something bubbling up out of the depths of her eyes and spilling over her face, like sparkling water from a spring.

"Listen," he said, and his voice sounded a little thick. "I guess I got to go now; but I got seven dollahs left in my pocket. They done promised me a job on relief, soon as they investigate. But it don't matter ef I don't get no job. You kin take what I got an' put it wid what you got, an' come on an' go back wid me. You kin go home!"

The girl had stood there a long moment before she spoke, a strange tenderness welling up in her eyes. Then her face quivered slightly, and she said: "No, no—I can wait; but you

got to go back. I can wait, because when I come, I don't only want to be goin' home. I—I want to be comin' to you!"

Her fingers tightened about his, and there was a little silence. . . .

When the bus rolled out of Memphis, a boy was sitting on the back seat, bound for Harlem. He just sat there, staring out of the window, and watching the dark blur of the landscape as it swept past. Then he straightened and glanced down at his hands. "Kind of funny," he said. "I jes' had time for a dance; an' now—"

He broke off and stared out of the window again. And the bus rolled swiftly onward, and the landscape kept reeling past and falling away into the dusk.

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