

# Secrets in the house behind the cedars



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

“ The House Behind the Cedars” is an interesting story of John and Rena Walden who tried to keep their family secret, even from those they love because of the racial prejudice and discrimination in their time. It has a very tragic ending when Rena, who is brought back home by Frank from Sampson County, died and George’s hope of pursuing their marriage plans with Rena to be forgotten (221). The title of the novel “ The Hope Behind the Cedars” can be probably interpreted and translated to “ The Truth behind the Secrets”.

Just as the house of the Waldens is hidden from the sight of prying eyes “ by a row of dwarf cedars”, so is the truth of their race obscured from the malicious minds of those who belittle the black race in the form of secrets. Indeed, the story is full of secrets and each one is discussed conscientiously below. First, is the secret of John Walden’s change of last name. At the age of eighteen, when he went to South Carolina in the hope of being a lawyer and rising from his social position (134), took upon himself the name of John Warwick. His last name being taken from Bulwer’s novel.

The reason for this is to prevent others from suspecting that he is not purely white but a mixture of the white race and the black race. His name had to be changed to remove all traces of his ancestry because during those times the black race is considered inferior to the white and any association with a black man is considered a crime. Reference to a pamphlet has been made in the novel and it says: “ that negroes are beings ‘ of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; in fact, so inferior that they have no rights... 131)” He needs to attain a high social position.

Thus, to be successful in the profession he chooses, he needs to pretend that he is a white man. Fortunately, his looks and skin did not give his secrets away. He mixed with the white men perfectly. For if he was found to have a mix of black blood, he wouldn't have succeeded as a lawyer and as a man with possessions and a social position in South Carolina(56). Second, is the secret of Judge Archibald Straight's involvement in John Walden's course of actions.

He couldn't help but support the 15-year old young man who came to him one day and told him " I want to be a lawyer" (127-128) because he remembered his friend who was not able to write a will for his children before he died. So, to give him a chance at life and the opportunities of the world, he told him that: " you need not be black, away from Patesville. You have the somewhat unusual privilege..." and allowed him to read his law books while working for him as an office boy (130-131). All these, he did even if it was going " over the law" (33).

Third, is the secret of John's coming to Patesville. He came, because of the temptation of seeing his beloved mother again and with the intention of bringing her sister with him in order for her to have a chance at the opportunities life has to offer her. Just as he has kept his real identity throughout the ten years, he also has to cover up his coming back to his origin. Fourth, is the secret of Rena's departure from Patesville to South Carolina. Her departure is considered " a secret flight". No one should know where she is going.

This is to avoid discovery of her whereabouts by their town folks (37). Fifth, is the secret of Rena's real name and identity at South Carolina. When she came to Clarence, South Carolina after almost a year at boarding school, she is introduced with a different surname but similar to that of her brother's (48). This is still for the same reasons that John has in mind when he changed his last name and that is to erase traces of the past attached to their surname. In fact, her introduction to society was beyond his brother's expectations.

Sixth, is the secret of Rena's going back to Patesville to visit her sick mother without George Tyron's knowledge. When Rena dreamt of her sick mother thrice and when she read the letter from her, she did not hesitate to go back to Patesville even if it meant "blowing up her cover". But to keep George, his future husband from finding out her ancestry, she should not tell him her destination (79). If George finds out (which was what happened), he might refuse to marry her because of "a drop of black blood" in her veins.

Unfortunately, it was because of this visit that her dreams of marrying George fell apart and eventually wrecked her life. Seventh, is the secret of Frank Prowler's love for Rena. For years, Frank has been very good, kind and loyal to Rena, not just because of friendship but because of the love he feels for her. Yet, he cannot reveal his love for he is more inferior than Rena. He is a pure black while Rena is a mulatto. Rena also doesn't have feelings for Frank except for friendship. Moreover, she has another love interest who is George Tyron.

Revealing her love for her, would probably cause his heart to break apart. " A smile and a kind word were little enough to pay for a life's devotion" (102).

Frank also ventured forth as far as finding Rena at South Carolina but this he did not reveal so as not to disturb and jeopardize Rena's secret. Eighth, is the secret of Jeff Wain's " possessions", social position, accommodating manner and civil status. When he was introduced by Mary B. Pettifoot to Mrs. Walden, he seemed to be very " rich" and " single".

In fact, she was " struck with awe" with his " possessions" (150). This made Mrs. Walden to encourage Rena to like and eventually marry him . Jeff was even made a " guest of honor" in the party held at Mrs. Walden's house (. This secrecy is basically intended to deceive people so he will be given favors and privileges that he would not have been given otherwise if they learned he is not what he said he is. He maybe intentionally was accommodating to Rena so he can win over her heart which never happened.

Lastly, is the secret of George in asking Plato to hand in a letter to Rena and in bribing Plato to lead Rena to walk and talk with him. This is still for the same reason that a white man must not associate with a colored woman and that they should never be seen together. He had other options yet , " A messenger, then, was not only the least of several evils, but really the only practicable way to communicate with Rena (194-195). " Aside from these secrets that revealed in the novel, there are also meaningful quotes.

Some of these are: TIME touches all things with destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but

a brief mockery, to be surely and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age, the dry leaves and bare branches of winter (9). " It is true, time can change a lot of things. Unexpected things come to happen. New things become old. Happy days turn sad and gloomy. Just like the love affair between Rena and Rena, it had seemed so sweet at first but when George found out her ancestry, he abandoned her.

Nothing in this world is permanent. "... happiness is a relative term, and depends,.. upon how nearly we think we get what we think we want (24). " This is one of the lines of John which tells of his own state of happiness. It reveals that John is happy because of what he has gotten based on what he wants in life. He has acquired material possessions and a social position that a white man enjoys and he is happy with that. " He who would climb the heights of life must leave even the pleasantest valleys behind (29).

For John, he cannot go on staying in a comfortable zone if he wants to achieve his ambitions in life to be rich, powerful and influential. He should leave behind the " valley" so he can climb up the " mountain" of opportunities. "... One must stoop in order that one may lift others (162). " This quotation referred to what Rena intends to do with her life after a failed relationship with George. She thinks it is better for her to help her own people by stooping down as a school teacher to black children in a remote schoolhouse than to dwell in her own problems.