



Parallel Worlds: The Remarkable Gibbs-Hunts and the Enduring (In)significance of Melanin

Adele Logan Alexander

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When William Henry Hunt married Ida Alexander Gibbs in the spring of 1904, their wedding was a dazzling Washington social event that joined an Oberlin-educated diplomat's daughter and a Wall Street veteran who could trace his lineage to Jamestown. Their union took place in a world of refinement and privilege, but both William and Ida had mixed-race backgrounds, and their country therefore placed severe restrictions on their lives because at that time, "one drop of colored blood" classified anyone as a Negro. This "stain" of melanin pushed the couple's achievements to the margins of American society. Nonetheless, as William followed a career in the foreign service, Ida (whose grandfather was probably Richard Malcolm Johnson, a vice president of the United States) moved in intellectual and political circles that included the likes of Frederick Douglass, J. Pierpont Morgan, Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Mary Church Terrell.

Born into slavery, William had an adventurous youth, including a brief career as a jockey and an interlude at Williams College; ultimately he succeeded Ida's father as consul. The diplomat's "expatriate" life provided him with a distinguished career and a stage on which to showcase his talents throughout the world, as well as an escape from racial stigmas back home. Free of the diplomatic hindrances her husband faced, Ida advocated openly against race and gender inequities, and was a major participant in W. E. B. Du Bois's post-World-War I Pan-African Congresses which took her to stimulating European capitals that were largely free of racial oppression.

In this, William and Ida's unique dual biography, Adele Logan Alexander gracefully traces an extraordinary partnership with a historian's skills and insights. She also presents a nuanced account of the complex impact of race in the early twentieth-century world.

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