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## Contents

1. At Central High . . . . .	7
2. Troubles and Triumphs . . . . .	23
3. <i>The Dayton Tattler</i> . . . . .	32
4. Closed Doors . . . . .	41
5. <i>Oak and Ivy</i> . . . . .	53
6. O Mother Race . . . . .	63
7. Come to the Fair . . . . .	72
8. The Turn in the Road . . . . .	83
9. <i>Majors and Minors</i> . . . . .	94
10. The Jubilee Year . . . . .	106
11. The Pouring Time . . . . .	115
12. Sunshine and Shadow . . . . .	124
13. Candle-Lightin' Time . . . . .	131
Index . . . . .	140





1872



## 1. At Central High

It was a September morning in 1886, twenty-one years after the Civil War, and the first day of school in Dayton, Ohio. Little groups of white students drifted along the dusty streets leading to Central High.

All alone, a slim black youth hurried eagerly up Perry Street, then turned and cut across Maple. It was the shortest route to the high school building. Fourteen-year-old Paul Dunbar had been up and dressed since dawn. Who could sleep on the exciting morning of starting a new school?

Last night Bud Burns and Charley Higgins had come over to have homemade cake and admire Paul's new shoes and pants. His two best friends

were a class behind him. They hoped to enter Central High next year. Like Paul, they were black.

Paul Dunbar reached the high school and marched up the steps to join the other freshmen. He was the only student from what Dayton called the "colored neighborhood" to start Central High School that fall.

Few children of the working class attended high school in the 1880s. Black or white, most students left school by seventh grade to go to work. Their earnings were needed at home to help pay the rent and buy food.

The Dunbars were certainly as poor as anybody in Dayton. Paul's father was dead. His mother barely made ends meet doing laundry work. Paul's older half brothers, Will and Rob, lived and worked away from home.

Paul himself had been earning money since he was big enough to run errands. At eleven he'd had a part-time job with a crew of lamplighters. It was exciting to make the rounds each sunset and light the gas streetlamps. The following year, however,