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A ella que, nacida debajo los mismos
cielos como el escritor,
le ha dado la in-
spiracion
este esfuerzo débil es dedicado
con los sentimientos
del mas alto
aprecio .

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

Written for the Memorial
Concert

at

ST. AUGUSTINE'S SCHOOL,

RALEIGH,

NORTH CAROLINA.

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

It was in the reading room of a library many miles from here, some five or six years ago, that I first learned the name of Paul Laurence Dunbar. There was a page about his life and early training in an English illustrated magazine. In the course of the next few days I asked the three black men who were my closest friends, each of whom had an unquenchable faith in the ability of men of the full Negro blood to do work of the best kind, whether they had heard of the rising American Negro poet. And when, some three years later, in the lonely London boarding house the middle-aged American lady from Topeka, Kansas, seeking for some common ground whereon to meet her black fellow lodger, told of the pleasure the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar had given her, I hoped that some day it would be my good fortune to look at that face, to gaze into the depths of those eyes, from which had flashed the African Spirit that gave voice in dialect to the joys and sorrows, to the hopes and fears of the Children of Africa in the United States, and even held a message for them, and indeed for the world, in the ordinary English language. Since then I have asked, time after time, those who have seen him, those who have called him friend, those who have loved him, what manner of man he was, what spirit was that which lay hidden behind the black veil of flesh; and some said one thing, and some another; but none brought word of what I longed to hear, none had the artist's eye and hand to paint in a few bold strokes the soul of that black man; and now the spirit has returned to the depths of the Infinite from which it came as silently as it had journeyed into this Time World.

A column or so in the papers and magazines is thought sufficient to sum up the career of the greatest poet of the full Negro

blood that this country will ever see-- first and last, the greatest, for the race is changing, and the age of which he wrote is passing, while the coming race will need new interpreters in the changeful years to come. From the scanty notices I glean that in the days of slavery his father and mother lived in Kentucky. The former was able to escape to Canada and win his freedom. Liberated by the proclamation of Lincoln, the mother travelled to Dayton, Ohio, where she seems to have been rejoined by her husband. Here it was that Paul Laurence Dunbar was born thirty-three years ago. His father dying early, the mother had to fight against poverty to support herself and her boy. All the education he had was obtained in the public schools of Dayton. After his graduation he became an elevator boy in that city and even continued at this work when his fame had spread far and wide, because like many other famous poets his income from his books was not enough to maintain him and his mother. Subsequently he obtained a place in the Congressional Library in Washington; but consumption, the scourge of the young manhood of the Negro race in temperate climates, fastened on him and he was compelled to give up his work. Arrangements had just been made to receive him into the Pickford Sanatorium at Southern Pines when death came to his release.

Dunbar's life work was that of a poet, a calling which has borne an honoured name in every age and among all peoples. The multitude look to the poet to give utterance to the secret emotions of their souls, to make real what they only vaguely feel but scarcely know what it is they feel. He sees a thousand beauties in a scene of nature and preserves each one for his less gifted brethren in words that charm the ear with their music and still the restless longings of the heart. Dunbar was essentially a lyric poet. Now, poetry of this kind is distinctly emotional; it is the revelation of the poet's inward feelings. Hence, an intense, impassioned idea runs through each stanza and through

the whole poem. Dunbar's lyrics in dialect are the only classics; while those in the conventional English often reach a high water mark. He is never at loss in the selection of a theme, whether it is of the life of the cabin, in its bare simplicity, that he sings, or of the tragedy of the black man bearing up on his shoulders, like the African Atlas, a mighty civilization, or of the pathos of the bondslave's life sustained and strengthened solely by that native joyousness and buoyancy of spirit of the children of Africa:--

"Oh poor were the worth of the world
If never a song were heard,--
If the sting of grief had no relief,
And never a heart were stirred.

"So, long as the streams run down,
And as long as the robins trill,
Let us taunt old Care with a merry air,
And sing in the face of ill."

And again,--

"Just whistle a bit, if your heart be sore;
It's a wonderful balm for pain.
Just pipe some old melody o'er and o'er
Till it soothes like summer rain."

Nature, too, had its message for him; and in sea and woods he found rare treasures which he shared with the multitude. The sea is full of mystery, and its strange charm holds him captive.--

"The smell of the sea in my nostrils,
The sound of the sea in mine ears;
The touch of the spray on my burning face,
Like the mist of reluctant tears.

"And ever the breaking billows,
And ever the rocks disdain;
And ever a thrill in mine inmost heart
That my reason cannot explain.

"So I say to my heart, 'Be silent,
The mystery of time is here;
Death's way will be plain when we fathom the main
And the secret of life be clear.'--

In many ways his life resembled that of Burns, the national poet of Scotland. Burns knew what poverty meant, so did Dunbar. The humble ploughman's task may be set side by side with the lowly calling of an elevator boy. Like Burns he allowed no difficulties to crush his poetic genius; like Burns, too, he won fame, was

courted and fêted by society. Both gave expression to their own feelings and to those of their race in a special dialect; and death came to both at an early age, as their best work was just taking shape.

Though the dialect poems of Dunbar may be unintelligible six hundred years from now to the average individual, yet such a lyric as this will always live which gives assurance to the defeated that no cause, worthy of the name of a cause, is ever lost.--

"It is true enough that the laurel crown

Twines but for the victor's brow;

For many a hero has lain him down

With naught but the cypress bough.

There are gallant men in losing fight,

And as gallant deeds are done

As ever graced the captured height

Or the battle grandly won."--

The "Verdict after Death" is alone sufficient to establish his fame as a poet. The lines swing along with defiant strides and almost seem his own bold challenge to the judgment of the world.--

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,

What of his loving, what of his lust?

What of his passion, what of his pain?

What of his poverty, what of his pride?

Earth, the great mother, has called him again.

Deeply he sleeps, the world's verdict defied."

But he is not often thus: he is so tender when he touches on the theme of death; so hopeful, because in the life beyond no clods of earth shall hamper the free flight of spirit; so trustful, that the Eternal will accept his work and retouch its imperfections.--

"When all is done, say not my day is o'er,
And that through night I seek a dimmer shore;
Say rather that my morn has just begun,
I greet the dawn and not the setting sun,
When all is done."

Allusion has been made in all the obituary notices of the fact that Dunbar was a full blooded Negro. We are still waiting for the golden age, when a man's work and its influence on humanity will alone be judged without a thought of his race coming in. Meantime one race is ever ready to grapple with another for distinctions in war, in science, in literature and in art. Each is ready to claim as its own the great geniuses that spring up, with startling suddenness, no one knows whence. Limited by these conditions, it is impossible for any one to find Dunbar's real place among the poets of the world, or to estimate the true quality of his genius. Some, with a strange inconsistency at which angels would smile, refuse to judge of his literary work along with that of Dumas, of Du Bois, of Booker T. Washington. Be it so; that is a small matter; he occupies a seat apart.

The curious may ask, Whence came his genius, from father or from mother? One writer seems to trace it to his mother, telling of her love for poetry and of kindred tastes shared by mother and son. Perhaps there may be some truth in this. The riddle of the Sphinx of Egypt is still unread in that passionless, stone face of a Negro, guarding the secret of the ages; nor can the stranger of an alien race, notwithstanding a boasted insight into the African character, enter into the innermost recesses of the heart of the highest type of black women. If intellectual power is transmissible, these can hand it on. In patience they labour for their children. They stand aside and follow their onward march with a strange and awful gaze of love. Racked by anxious fears, sustained by ardent prayers, they watch in utter self-effacement to see them reach the heights to which they climb,-- those heights to which they had pointed their childish hands at the dawn of life. Ofttimes death comes upon them, and they see not the fulfilment of

the promise, or they are left behind to lay the last garland on the grave; then, meekly bearing the weight of a broken heart and weeping in silent anguish to see the bright hopes of a race, which they had planted and tenderly reared, fade suddenly away, they wait patiently to meet them once more beyond the tomb.

Genius, however, has never yet followed the ordinary laws of heredity, nor does a single race possess a monopoly. It is abnormal. It suffers under terrible disadvantages, since the body it must needs use is like that of ordinary mortals and cannot last when controlled by the excess of nervous force which accompanies it. The greatest German genius has declared that "a genius is formed in solitude". Few know how much the man of genius is to be pitied; still fewer realise the rending asunder of soul and body which he is destined to endure whenever the warring personalities of his being contend for the mastery. Is it strange then that death comes to him early,-- to Vergil, to Marlowe, to Shakespeare, to Keats, to Dunbar?

Peace came to all these men of genius, to him also. No man knew more than he of how much he was capable, and how little he accomplished; so, with abiding faith in the Infinite, he made himself ready to go on his journey and welcomed the call to enter his eternal home.--

"Because I had loved so deeply,
Because I had loved so long,
God in his great compassion
Gave me the gift of song.

"Because I had loved so vainly,
And sung with such faltering breath,
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of Death."

S. B. Jones.

St. Augustine's School,
Raleigh, N.C.,

February 22, 1906.