

FEBRUARY 6, 1897

A NEGRO POET.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Lyrics of Lowly Life."*

Surely there is a poet born to us, a man whose lines are singing ones, who throws in words all aglow with rich colors, who interprets human passions, who counts heart throbs, and, incomprehensible as it may seem, has a subtle humor, is keen, abounding in mother wit, and, to sum it all up, has an originality quite his own. Paul Lawrence Dunbar is the poet's name, and Mr. Howells says of him: "As far as I could remember, Paul Dunbar was (or is) the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically." There was, however, a colored woman who, before the Revolution, really did write good verse, and whose book, principally on religious subjects, was printed.

As for the story of the life of the author of "Lyrics of Lowly Places," his father was a runaway slave from Kentucky who fled to Canada. His mother, freed by the civil war, came to Dayton, Ohio, where her son was born. Paul taught himself to read, and delighted in history. The mother was fond of books and shared her son's "special love for poetry." When the father, who was a plasterer, died there was a hard fight for both the boy and his mother with poverty. Then Dayton learned that there was a colored boy who wrote poetry, and at first it wondered, and then it admired, and, to the credit of Dayton, the lad found many warm and kind friends. The reputation of the lad kept growing. There was, as Mr. Howells writes it, "cordial appreciation, critical recognition," and then, most kindly, Mr. Howells obtained work for Paul Dunbar more congenial to his tastes.

Now, what has the fact that Paul Dunbar is a colored man to do with the subject? Give over any surprise which might arise from a false prejudice. To put it in the most commonplace manner, there is Paul Lawrence Dunbar's semblance opposite the title page, showing in photogravure the portrait, and, to use an old Southern expression, it is that of "a likely field hand." But no Röntgen ray will fill the fibre of that brain the man possesses. You are conscious of its power, even of its subtlety, when you read the verses.

There may be divisions as to taste and as to the quality of the verse. You compliment his pure English verses when you compare them with those of the great ones, for they hold their own with many a poet of to-day who has a reputation. In his pure negro songs and those in what may be called a half dialect Dunbar is simply incomparable. He catches the peculiarities of his own people, not in language alone, but in their thoughts. His verses have the singular quality of fixa-

Paul Lawrence Dunbar

tion. You remember them with scarce a mental effort, and that is one indicative stamp of what is really good poetry. Extracts from the "Lyrics" might be endless. Here is one, with a bit of moral to it, which is capital, and note the banter at the end of it:

THE DILETTANTI: A MODERN TYPE.

He scribbles some in prose and verse,
And now and then he prints it;
He paints a little—gathers some
Of nature's gold and mints it.

He plays a little, sings a song;
Acts tragic rôles, or funny;
He does, because his love is strong,
But not, oh, not for money!

He studies almost everything,
From social art to science;
A thirsty mind, a flowing spring,
Demand and swift compliance.

He looms above the sordid crowd,
At least through friendly lenses,
While his mamma looks pleased and proud,
And kindly pays expenses.

If ever there was a negro who was the eater of the lotus, Paul Dunbar in his "Song of Summer" shows him. We have no room to quote in full the deliciously lazy lines. They begin:

Dis is gospel weathah sho'—
Hills is sawt o' hazy;
Meddahs level ez a flo'
Calling to de lazy.

And the ending:

Breeze is blowin' wif perfume,
Jes' enough to tease you;
Hollyhocks is all in bloom,
Smellin' fer to please you—
Go 'way, folks, an let me 'lone,
Times is getting dearah—
Summah's settin' on de th'one
An' I'm a layin' near her!

Those musical lines in this bleak weather make you long to be "dreamin' by de rivah's side." "Accountability" has its funny catch at the end of it. Some negro is discussing the ways of nature. The idea is that we have no right to censure folks "about dey habits." The "squir'ls have bushtails and the rabbits bobtails." We have our likes and dislikes. You are firmly convinced that everything is wisely ordained. The ending reads:

Nuthin's done, er evah happens, 'dout
Hit's somefin' dat's intended;
Don't keer what you does, you has to,
An' it sholy beats de dickens—
Viney, go put on de kettle, I got one
O' mastah's chickens."

Thanksgiving is near and the "tu'key" is unconscious of his fate, and Paul Dunbar describes the coming festival in "Signs of the Times." Appreciate the wind-up. Do you not see and smell the preparations for the feast?

Choppin' suet in the kitchen,
Stounin' raisins in de hall,
Beef a-cookin' fu' de mince meat,
Spices ground—I smell 'em all.
Look hyeah, Tu'key, stop dat gobblin!
You ain' lured de sense ob feah;
You ol' fool, yo' naik's in danjah.
Do you know Thanksgibbin's hyeah?

There is the keenest satire in "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," where the old colored preacher talks of "Pher-oh" and Moses, who "comes and sets the Israel-

Paul Lawrence Dunbar

ites free," and the recurring refrain is "I'm talking about ouah freedom in a Bibleistic way," and

Now, don't run an' tell yo' mastahs
Dat I's preaching discontent.

No New Englander, not even Lowell, could have written better the longing some ancient people have for a return to the old style of singing in the choir which Paul Dunbar treats of in "Deacon Jones' Grievance":

* * * The loose an keerless way
'At the young folks treat the music,
'Taint the proper sort o' choir;
Then, I don't believe in Christuns
A-singing hymns for hire.

The poet's comic vein is at its best in "Deacon Jones' Grievance," and especially in "The Party." There could not be a jollification written in more engaging rhyme, and then the by-play of the listener who hears the story of that party! The chorus is inimitable, for the story teller says:

* * * We danced dat way an'
capahed in de mos' redic'lous way,
'Twell de roostahs in de barnyard
chleahed deir th'oats an' crowed for day.

A true singer of the people, white or black, it makes no matter, nas been found.

The New-York Times.

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