

# The Story of PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

By A Southerner

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## Installation XV

We agree with Mr. Howells that Dunbar, the poet, was stronger and more masterful in dialect—and certainly he is conspicuous in that tongue—but the stronger individuality of Dunbar, the man, is, we believe, expressed through literary English. Doubtless that is all that Mr. Howells meant when he likened Dunbar to Burns (Harper's Weekly):

"Burns has long had the consecration of the world's love and honor, and I shall not do this unknown but not ungifted poet the injury of comparing him with Burns, yet I do not think one can read his Negro pieces without feeling that they are of like impulse and inspiration with the work of Burns when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch, when he was most peasant. When Burns was least himself he wrote literary English, and Mr. Dunbar writes literary English when he is least himself."

Mr. Howells was in a position to know what the Negro had done in the literary world and he was competent to assay Dunbar as he came before him for review. His Introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life (which volume he had not read), as well as his review in Harper's Weekly, was based upon his knowledge of the contents of Majors and Minors. While Mr. Howells, in this introduction, left open the evaluation of the poet's future work, his estimate evidently did not change; for the poet's biographer gave him the opportunity of amending his early opinion, of which opportunity he did not avail himself.

We ourselves, after reading Dunbar during a period of years and after reading Mr. Howells' appraisal of him many times, are conscious of how keenly accurate that appraisal is. The publishers of the poet's complete works, must likewise regard this introduction, for they have included it in every edition.

## Humor Is Praised

"I should say, perhaps, that it was this humorous quality which Mr. Dunbar has added to our literature, and it would be this which would most distinguish him, now and hereafter." Introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life.

With hair-splitting scrutiny, we note that Mr. Howells says, "would most distinguish him." While rating Dunbar as a stronger poet through the medium of dialect, he was not without appreciation of what he had done in literary English, and the Majors of the volume which he was reviewing, he said:

"They are good, very good.

In very many I find proofs of honest thinking and true feeling and in some the record of experiences, whose genuineness the reader can test by his own."

Also, Mr. Howells was so broad and generous in his appreciation and sympathy, that we feel assured he would harbor no resentment for our bringing this latter group of poems forward for more attention.

If in this medium Dunbar wrote no better than others, he is not excluded from ranking with others, nor denied his following of readers. The music of his lyre is too sweet not to attract. His songs are too much of our own heart's melody not to hold.

## Compared With Byron, Keats

Likened to Burns in the realm of dialect, he has been compared with other poets of literary English. To the trio of revolutionary poets, Byron, Keats and Shelly, he is related only in a circumstantial sort of way. Their lives, like his, were short, and one, Keats, died from tuberculosis. In the springs of his humor and pathos, he is akin to Goldsmith and his emotion is as fervid as that of Tom Moore. Again does his career recall that of the poet-musician, Schubert, poor and unfortunate, but ever singing. Very much in his poems of mysticism does he parallel Poe. Better even, he may be classified as a bard of the Scotch and Irish blend of the South.

A southerner, particularly one who has been separated from the southland for some years, may charter a sail on his lyric barge, drift down a peaceful stream, "neath a southern moon, where the banks are luxuriant in tropical beauty; where a gentle breeze awafts the fragrance of the jasmine; and the ether bears a plantation melody from somewhere in the distance. A pageant of a people is enacted and one awakens to a new and changed order.

Finally, he is Dunbar, the father of poetry in Negro literature in America. His gift is not the promise that his race may some day produce a poet. It is the fulfillment of the promise, made in the case of Phyllis Wheatley (b. Africa, about 1753—d. American 1794) and repeated with accelerated positiveness in the case of other Negroes since her time who have written verse.

Dunbar did not swerve from his early decision to interpret his race.

"One sees," says Mr. Howells (Harper's Monthly) "how the poet exults in his material, as the artist always does; it is not for him to blink its commonness, or to be ashamed of its rudeness; and in his treatment of it he has been able to bring us nearer the heart of primitive human nature in his race than any one else has yet done."

This applied to poems in dialect, in which, as Mr. Howells pointed out, the limitations of his race are revealed "with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new." (Introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life). And Mr. Howells says none other could have done this. Had a member of the white race attempted it, there would have been much hurt and bitter resentment; and perhaps it would have been wise for such person to have followed Irving's example, in the case of the Knickerbocker Papers and have represented them as someone's posthumous writings. But—Dunbar was a Negro himself.

## Melting Pathos

Aside from these poems of humor, in dialect, about the lowly, he writes in both literary and non-literary English, with a melting pathos of the springs of human tenderness and aspiration, which members of his race are often, unthoughtedly, not known to possess. Among these are the Voice of the Banjo, Little Brown Baby, To the

Memory of Martha and Two Little Boots.

Again he wraps his race in the mantle of an ancient lineage, as in the Noble Sons of Ham and the Colored Soldiers; and clothes them with a classic beauty:

"The night bent down to kiss her cheek"—Ione.

"Black as the pinions of night"—Black Samson of Brandywine.

"Let me drink deep, thee, my African maid"—Song.

"Smooth your brow of lovin' brown"—Dreamin' Town.

"A dusky and lovely belle"—Voice of the Banjo.

Gorgeous sunrise and sunset, and all of beauty's varied blow between, yet:

"No lovely sight I know."

"Equals Dinah kneading dough"

—Dinah Kneading Dough (Dreamin' Town has such qualities of sentiment and is so easily adapted to music that it should become an immortal Negro love song—"Whaik de streets is paved wid' gol, Whaik de days is nevah col,")

## More Literary Than Dialect Poems

Further, Dunbar calls his race to its universal heritage, as in the Ode to Ethiopia; and envisions for them the fruition of this heritage by evolutionary attainment, as On the Dedication of Dorothy Hall, Slow Through the Dark and By Rugged Ways.

In regard to the number of poems, Dunbar was more prolific in literary English than in dialect. In Majors and Minors there were 69 of the former and in the dialect of whites, and 25 of the latter. In the complete collection of poems, out of a total of near 420, about 120 are in dialect.

(Continued next week)