

GREEN PASTURES

SOMEONE has said that all bad Americans go to Chicago when they die; hence perhaps we may infer that all good ones, granted they have any choice in the matter, go South. Even the Semitic gentleman pounding out popular songs in a grubby office just West of Broadway, has caught something of this tendency to localise the national heart, and is perpetually admonishing the homesick, regardless of their original habitat, to wend their erring footsteps thither.

You cannot understand America unless you know something of the South; and you cannot know the South unless you understand something of the Negro, for it is the black Mammy who is really responsible for the shy friendliness, the gentle courtesy, the lovely mysticism of the little white boys and girls who grow up under her care.

The oversight on the part of my otherwise estimable parents, which prevented me from being born in the South, was partly mitigated by the amply proportioned Mammy who came to rule over our nursery. Aside from her red bandanna and her gold ear-rings, her great fascination lay in the tradition that she was the daughter of a very gorgeous and very black African king. We were convinced that nothing but generations of the purple robe, the homage of prostrate natives and a possible diet of evangelical missionaries, could account for her supreme dignity or the proud lift of her white-haired head.

After the manner of children, we loved and feared her alternately. There were moments, when in her simple piety, we were sure that she walked with the Lord, and others when we were equally positive that she consorted with the devil, beliefs coloured possibly by our own state of grace at the moment.

Blackfriars

Like most of the children of our generation, a large part of our religious training was left to the direction of this devout old woman, whose interpretation, to put it mildly, was original. It combined a curious combination of religion and morals calculated to make us conform to the more rigid demands of an unsympathetic adult society, which, in spite of the most energetic opposition on the part of the minority, insisted upon clean ears and clean pinafores. At frequent intervals we were duly reminded of the story of Elisha and the bears and the dire punishment that lay in store for the disrespectful young. Also, our heads were filled, at an early age, with a wealth of superstitious nonsense clothed in the gayest imagery and brightest colours. In addition to the more conventional rules of polite behaviour, an elaborate system of taboos gave our lives variety. Black cats bring bad luck, white horses accompany wishes. Children may not sleep in the moonlight, and the whites of eyes roll upward if someone crosses in front of your shadow. A dog trees a cat and gives audible vent to his emotions, and the most awful of calamities will befall your household. If forks fall, the preacher is coming to dinner, if knives, relations will shortly descend upon you unawares. We, who are privileged to live among the coloured people, are apt to forget that it is barely two hundred years since the first slave-ship with its cargo of suffering human things set sail from Africa. But the Negro does not forget so easily,

the Congo creeping through the black,
Cutting through the Jungle with a golden track'

like a thread of destiny, his savage heritage returns to taunt him with its leering presence. Fearfully it whispers in the out-lying cabins at dusk when the owl hoots or the tree-toad moaningly predicts rain. In the daytime, it is more or less hidden, but after the

Green Pastures

sun goes down and the smell of dampness rises from the swamp, it sidles up behind and whispers in his ear, 'I am your shamen and your witch doctors, the charms you mutter on moonless nights, the rabbit's feet you carry to bring you luck. You thought that you had left me behind in Africa, but I came in the toothless cackle of your old men, the sinister mouthings of your old women. I am your black magic and your voodoo.

'Beware, beware,
Walk with care,
Or Mumbo-Jumbo, the god of the Congo,
And all the other
Gods of the Congo,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoodoo you'

—*Vachel Lindsay.*

It follows that with such a background, the religion of the darky must be a very vital thing if it would cope with these forces struggling to smother his simple soul. Something of the spiritual travail, the reaching up for Light, has crept into the pathos of the negro spirituals.

At night we were, each in turn, rocked to sleep to the soft C minors, the peculiar half-tones and quarter-tones of these American folk-songs. Sometimes we 'walked in Jerusalem jest like John,' or were urged to 'come to the Manger in Bethlehem, never mind the frost and snow,' but always we fell to sleep to the dying notes of that best beloved of all darky melodies, 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot comin' for to Carry Me Home'

We were brought up on Joseph and his coat of many colours, on Brother Noah and the fascinating inhabitants of his wonderful Ark, all properly impersonated on rainy days in uproarious antics in the attic. A moth-eaten tiger skin, with a slight stretch of the imagination, made Daniel feel the seriousness of the occasion; and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,

Blackfriars

quite devoid of those external superficialities which civilisation demands, were found shivering in the drinking-water tank, while Nebuchadnezzar 'in fury and in wrath' commanded them to make their teeth stop chattering, for 'didn't they know that they were supposed to be burning up in the fiery furnace?'

Yet there were great heights and depths of mysticism too, and even now the fragrance of rain-drenched pansies brings back the memory of the little child who sobbed for hours after hearing the story of Our Lord's Crucifixion.

What a childhood to look back upon! We never quite forget

' Those first recollections
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet the master light of all our seeing . . . '

and we long to re-live them again.

It was this, then, that made me catch my breath when the curtain went up on 'Green Pastures,' for there before my delighted eyes, in a setting vaguely reminiscent of our garret days, sat a grave old black minister telling a class of small and wiggly pickannies a Bible story in exactly the same voice and the same words of my childhood Mammy. The voice was saying :

Well, nobody knows exactly what God looks like. But when I was a little boy, I used to think that he looked like the Rev. Dubois. He was de finest looking ol' man I ever knew. I used to bet de Lawd looked exactly like Mr. Dubois in the days when he walked de earth like a natural man.

When was dat, Mr. Deshee?

Why when he was busy gettin' things started down heah. When He talked 'to Adam and Eve and Noah and Moses and all dem. He made mighty men in dem days.

Green Pastures

But aldo they was mighty dey always knew dat He was de mightiest of dem all

In de beginnin' God created de heaven and de earth. An' de earth was without form and void. An' de darkness was upon de face of de deep

and the lights go up on the darky's conception of heaven and the first scene in Marc Connelly's play.

The author has described this play as a fable, but it is not a fable. It is a miracle play. As such it is given in the deepest humility by a coloured cast, and as such it is received by a white audience who bring to it, instead of applause, that most perfect of all tributes, reverent silence.

For me at least, it was to sit again at the feet of my Mammy and hear once more the beautiful Old Testament stories with something of the faith and heart of a child. All the old favourites were there. There was the supremely moving Creation, when a young and fearless Adam, in the simple working clothes of a farm hand, looks out for the first time in hushed wonder at the earth which God has made. Something of the thrill of that first morning steals out over the audience when Eve, in her fresh gingham dress, is told 'to take care of dis man' and Adam, 'to take care of dis woman.' The critic of *The Herald Tribune* of New York has caught something of this spirit when he writes, 'It is strange and impressive how much of the supernatural burden of the story—the real spiritual hunger and steadfast faith of these groping souls—is carried over the footlights by the simplest and most unaffected means.'

Cain and Abel, and all the descendants of Cain, who cause so much sorrow to the Lord, walk out across the stage, and Noah and a Mrs. Noah, every bit as funny as their prototype in the ancient Townley play, occupy a good half hour.

Blackfriars

The scene in Pharaoh's court is a thing to remember, ushered in as it is by a chorus of negro voices singing,

'Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell ol' Pharaoh to let my people go.'

All the pathos of a race has gone into that song, and the scene which follows is worthy of it. The plagues of Egypt following in rapid succession end with the most terrible of all, when Aaron lifts his rod and even the great Pharaoh cries out in the darkness:

'O my son, my fine son.'

Undoubtedly the most remarkable thing about this play is the reverence and restraint with which the 'mystery of godliness,' the Incarnation, is represented.

Gabriel: You look awful pensive, Lawd. You been sitting yere, lookin' dis way, an awful long time. Is it somethin' serious Lawd?

God: Very serious, Gabriel.

Gabriel (awed by his tone): Lawd, is de time comin' for me to blow?

God: Not yet, Gabriel. I'm just thinkin'.

Gabriel: What about, Lawd? (Puts up hand and the singing stops).

God: About somethin' de boy tol' me. Somethin' about Hosea and himself. How dey foun' somethin'.

Gabriel: What, Lawd?

God: Mercy. (A pause). Through sufferin' he said.

Gabriel: Yes, Lawd.

God: I'm tryin' to find it too. It's awful impo'tant. It's awful impo'tant to all de people on my earth. Did he mean that even God must suffer? (God continues to look over the audience for a moment and then a look of surprise comes into his face. He sighs. In the distance a Voice cries.)

The Voice: Oh, look at Him; Oh, look dey is goin' to make Him carry it up dat high hill! Dey is goin' to nail Him to it! Oh dat's a terrible burden for one Man to carry.'

Green Pastures

(God rises and murmurs 'Yes' as if in recognition) and the curtain falls on a hushed and silent house.

How has this wonderful thing been achieved in a modern theatre in the most modern of Babylons? First by the obvious genius of the playwright and the artistic treatment of the stage director, Mr. Robert Edmund Jones, and, finally by the perfect casting of the principal part. How Mr. Jones has translated Mr. Connelly's thoughts into costumes and cast is cleverly told in the introduction to the play (Gardiner's) which has been published for English readers. I am indebted to Mr. Desmond MacCarthy for this paragraph which he quotes in a recent review in *The Sunday Times*, for I was unable to procure a copy of the book itself, which is explained by the fact that you cannot approach any group of book-lovers without immediately being asked if you have read 'this play. It reads :

Mr. Jones's fancy transported him to a small town where he became a leader in church activities. He borrowed what scenery the manager of the local opera house would lend; the cutwood wings and cutwood borders. Then, thrown back on his own resources, he designed a simple two-dimensional setting with which to indicate heaven, the Garden of Eden, and other backgrounds of the play. Some of the costumes were also borrowed by Deacon Jones. The ermine cloak of the King of Babylon had originally proclaimed the regality of another king at a Mardi Gras. A neighbour loaned a Confederate uniform which would give a military touch to Pharoah's court. Costumes for a fireman and a Scotsman, also happily available, were placed in the same scene because they agreed so pleasantly with the red cloaks of the courtiers. Of course, the majority of the costumes were made by the ladies of the congregation from designs the Deacon gave them. As a result, when the now thoroughly oriented actors came to the dress rehearsal, they found the garments and the scenery exactly those which an artistic fellow-member of the church might have been expected to provide. And as Deacon Jones was also Robert Edmund Jones, they all had great beauty.

Blackfriars

But when it came to the casting of the principal *rôle*, the storm (in England at least) broke. For Mr. Richard Harrison is a negro, and the idea of a coloured God is more than the minds of the orthodox can grasp.

Now Mr. Connelly, with that uneasy foreboding which warns unconventional mystics that they may meet with opposition from a correctly pious world, took the precaution of seeking advice. He hunted up a friend and took him to the play. If Mr. Connelly knew negroes by intuition and sympathy, as well as by a few other things, Herbert Shipman knew them by first-hand knowledge, with a goodly supply of the other things thrown in as well. Moreover, he was a Southerner himself and a man of the rarest personal charm and distinction. Second only to his natural sense of reverence and beauty, was his love of the black man, and he had an uncanny gift, in his function of Anglican Bishop, in settling those difficulties with which even the African constituency of that communion find her

‘so sore oppressed
by schisms rent asunder
by heresies distressed.’

It was to Bishop Shipman then, that Mr. Connelly brought his play, and he was told, what those of us who have been fortunate enough to have seen the play have discovered, that with the right man playing the leading part, it would be the greatest religious drama of the century. Also, Bishop Shipman knew just the man, though it took a terrific amount of persuading to get him to leave the little negro college where he taught literature. He said that if the play failed, he would lose the respect of his pupils and that he could not go back to them, he liked his work and had never done much acting, except in amateur performances; no, the money did not interest him. It took the com-

Green Pastures

bined effort of Bishop Shipman and Mr. Connelly and the prayers and entreaties of Mr. Jones to get him to come, this grave, dignified elderly man, who would rather read Lawrence Dunbar's poems in a primitive class-room than experience the excitement of life on a New York stage. And he has made the play, nor are the 'sentiments of religious reverence' of the theatre-going public jarred by his appearance as God. As a matter of fact, I was so carried away by Mr. Harrison's acting, that I could not tell when I had left the theatre whether his skin was black or white. The only thing I was sure about, and there couldn't be the slightest doubt about that, was the colour of his soul.

Isn't the good God greater than any attributes with which His children see fit to clothe Him? It seems perfectly reverent and congruous that the negro should picture Him with those characteristics of race with which he is the most accustomed. As Mr. Connelly so wisely says, 'The Lord may look like the Rev. Dubois, as our Sunday school teacher suggests, or he may resemble another believer's grandfather. In any event, His face will be familiar to the one who has come for his reward.' Is there anything so dreadfully shocking about this?

We have many vices, real and imagined, laid at our door, but irreverence is one of the things Catholics are seldom accused of, in fact we are generally blamed for being over sensitive where our religious sensibilities are concerned, yet this play has met with the unqualified approval of the Catholic Archbishop of New York, His Eminence, Cardinal Hayes, who took the whole theatre for his annual theatre-party this year.

In view of the welcome given to it, particularly by those whose minds are peculiarly sensitive on points of religion, it does seem regrettable that the Lord Chamberlain should not see that this is an exception

Blackfriars

to the type of play of this kind, which he ordinarily would be justified in prohibiting.

When so much that is undesirable does represent us, especially in the movies, may one who has lived among and loved the black people venture to say, that surely it is only misunderstanding of the nature of the play which has made you turn away this perfect thing, so filled with our bits of folklore, so lovely with our wistful folksongs?

J. SHRADY POST.

WITH CHILD

hereditas Domini filii; merces fructus ventris

PEACE on the lifted brow and in the grey
Of thy clear eyes, whose courage naught may let
Of constancy, till that day's pain be met
Which shall draw tight the lips, too faint to pray:
Lips which in secret purse themselves to play
At kisses with a guest who tarries yet:
But that new kindled smile's the greeting set
For Death, if he shall chance to pass that way.

An immemorial heritage is thine,
Who hast creation's cradle-song for dower,
And dost with both hands take the cup divine
Fulfilled with joy and sorrow to the brim.
And for this cause, and here, and at this hour,
I bow my knees to God and worship Him.

J.D.B.