

THE "COON SONG" FAD.

[Written for THE CONSERVATIVE.]

The American people are possessed of a very strong tendency to the adoption of "hobbies." Something appeals favorably to them, and they grasp it eagerly and cherish it with all the fondness of a mother for her first-born, only ceasing to talk by day and dream by night of the all-consuming subject when some ingenious person exhibits before them a more entrancing object for their whole-hearted devotion.

Sometimes these peculiar conditions are extensive, sweeping over almost the whole civilized world, and again they may exist in certain restricted localities, or include a particular class of people. The former case is well represented by the mad chase after the aesthetic inaugurated by Oscar Wilde some years ago, which threatened to engulf the universe in its onward rush. The sunflower suddenly found itself become "too utterly utter," and received with nods of approval the worship of the devotees of the aesthetic. Examples of "provincial" or "class" fads are many. The youth who decorated his vest and the lapels of his coat with innumerable buttons proclaiming the merits of bicycles or breakfast bacon has probably recovered his sanity by this time, and will be willing to act as a living example as a warning to future generations.

But the height of human folly is reached, and the capstone placed on the tower of depravity, by the present craze of our people over the so-called "coon-song." Never before has any particular kind of music taken such a hold on so many people, and one has but to notice the long catalogues of new productions in the "nigger" line which are being issued daily to realize how great is the demand. A letter just received from a prominent music dealer contains the startling information that during the present craze over four hundred of these songs have already been published. A copy of sheet music has but to bear on a gaily-tinted cover a representation of what is supposed to be a *fin-de-siecle* "yaller gal," to insure its ready sale, regardless of air or words.

In these money-making productions the authors have succeeded in gathering into small space more of the modern slang than can be found in any other class of literature. Indeed, I believe that for a perfect understanding of these songs one would do well to provide himself with the "Up-to-date Slang Dictionary" which I saw advertised in one of the newspapers. The real meaning of the lines,

"I thought at fust she was giving me a jolly,
Never thinkin that she'd ever tuhn me down,"

is hidden from the eyes of any but the initiated, and, when some "wahm nigh-gah" proclaims that she "don't like no

cheap man," and persists in saying the same thing day after day for "forty-two weeks," one is inclined to cease hoping for any improvement in the grammatical construction of the tale of her troubles.

The old negro melodies which sing of the darkies of the South are many of them beautiful, and will live always. Everyone knows "Suwanee Ribber" and "Nellie Gray" as sure as he knows "America," and loves them in the same way. Even the old plantation melodies, "Ca'be dat Possum" and "Comin for to Carry me Home" have endeared themselves to the American people, and will ever be listened to with pleasure.

The Southern darky was and is a character worthy of our study. He retains many of his primitive customs, and has developed long ago a way of living in keeping with his environment. Some of the best of our modern story-writers have chosen the Southern negro as the subject of their work, and have achieved lasting honor.

But the "colored man" who lives in our Northern cities is indeed a queer creature. Devoid of all the mental characteristics of his race, he has no attributes peculiar to himself. He is only able to mimic his lighter-hued fellow citizens, carrying to the utmost extremes the most objectionable traits of the white man, and refusing to accept those which are worthy of his adoption. He is a part of no race, being the result of many races. If the "coon song" is designed to portray the character of this racial "what is it," then it has indeed gone wide of the mark.

Hand in hand with this new kind of character song goes the now famous "rag time" method of instrumental production. When one hears such familiar airs as "Annie Laurie" or "Star Spangled Banner" played in "rag time" by one who knows his business, he is apt to ask the title of the selection, overlooking the true air in its lavish embellishment of variations of the kind peculiar to this "new process," but it is all there, you may be sure, and admirers of "rag time" declare that this interpretation adds much to the original beauty of the music.

The writer had the pleasure a short time ago of attending the theatre and witnessing the performance of one of the most popular actresses. Her efforts met with the hearty applause of the large audience. At the close of the first act the ushers were kept busy carrying to the stage the floral compliments of her many admirers. But before the curtain fell on the second act an incident occurred which materially lessened the dazzling brilliancy of the star's welcome. An ebony-hued gentleman, his complexion the result of a skillful application of some cosmetic known only to "the profession," attired in swallow-tailed coat, lofty collar and tan shoes, approached the footlights and bowed profoundly,

then seated himself at a piano tastily placed under a bower of trailing vines and blossoming ramblers, and played a series of the most elaborate "rag time" selections one ever listened to. He was billed as the "Rag Time King," and surely such homage was done to him as monarch or potentate never received. The audience went fairly wild, their tumultuous cheering mingled with the stamping and cat-calling of the *canaille* in the gallery fairly shaking the scenery on the stage. Seven times was this wonderful performer compelled to return to the piano; seven times did the audience demand recognition from their idol. From this time on interest in the performance was at a low ebb, and when the doors were opened and the crowd pressed outward into the street no words were heard but those of the loudest praise for the "Rag Time King." The eminent and accomplished actress had become a mere incident in the evening's entertainment; a small setting in the crown of which the "Rag Time King" was the central gem.

The most popular musicians among the young people, those who are most often invited to perform at social gatherings, are those who can play such selections as "Georgia Campmeeting" and "Mississippi Rag" with the greatest violence and rapidity.

If this malady continues to increase in malignity, we will doubtless soon accompany our dead to the tomb to the time of a "cake-walk" march, and sing over their lifeless bodies anthems with "rag-time" arrangements.

If these musical monstrosities are the result of a craving of the ignorant for melody which their untutored minds can understand and appreciate, why should we not, instead of ministering to their crude desires, strive to lift them up to the level of refinement and cultivation where they will take pleasure in the sublime compositions of the masters?

HERBERT E. HERSHÉY.

An Irishman lingered long over a monument upon which was inscribed:

"Here rests the body of James Blank, Esq., a successful lawyer and an honest man!"

"What are you standing there for so long?"

"Oim studying and whondering why they buried the two of them in the wan grave?"

THE CONSERVATIVE will contain correspondence next week from Matthew Marshall upon finance. This author is an authority of great respectability and weight. His contributions in The New York Daily Sun during the last ten years have elicited the commendation of the thoughtful and prudent men of money everywhere.