

**MR. HOWELLS DISCOVERS A POET
IN PAUL DUNBAR—A NEGRO.**

At last an intellectual bridge has been cast across the chasm dividing the black from the white race! At last, for the first time in the history of this country—or, so far as we are aware, in the history of any other country—a man of pure African blood has arisen to speak for his people in the person of Mr. Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

For several years poems bearing this name have been appearing in the leading magazines, but they bore on the surface no racial mark, and the fact that some of them were in the negro dialect counted for nothing, since many white writers have attempted that, although with less success. It was not, therefore, until a slender, quiet, shabby little volume of verse, dateless, placeless and without a publisher, drifted out of the west and accidentally reached Mr. Howells—who is always quick to see and never reluctant to praise what is really good—that the young Afro-American poet was introduced to the larger audience which the importance of his work deserved.

Only then did it become generally known that the author was black, that his parents were slaves who learned to read after they were free, and that he himself had stood shoulder to shoulder with the heaviest laden of his race. He was educated in the public schools of his birthplace, Dayton, O., and was until recently an elevator boy.

As these facts came out, the significance of Mr. Dunbar's poetry stood revealed, and it was recognized not only for its intrinsic worth, for its lyric beauty and metrical quality, which are quite enough to lift it into prominence, but as the first authoritative utterance of the inner life of a race which had hitherto been dumb. The little book thus voicing what had never before been spoken was privately printed and called "Majors and Minors," the Majors being in English and the Minors in dialect, sometimes the dialect of the middle-south negroes and sometimes the middle-south whites, and in the case of the negro dialect reproduced with a perfection that no white writer has attained.

These poems, covering a wide range of thought and feeling, have been gathered with a number of new poems into a much larger volume soon to be published by Dodd, Mead & Co. Mr. Howells has written an introduction to the new work, and in it says:

"What struck me in reading Mr. Dunbar's poetry was what had already struck his friends in Ohio and Indiana, in Kentucky and Illinois. They had felt as I felt, that however gifted his race had proven itself in music, in oratory, in several other arts, here was the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate literature. In my criticism of his book I had alleged Dumas in France, and had forgotten to allege the far greater Pushkin in Russia, but these were both mulattoes, who might have supposed to derive their qualities from white blood vastly more artistic than ours, and who were the creatures of an environment more favorable to their literary development. So far as I could remember, Paul Dunbar was the only man of pure African blood and American civilization to feel the negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically. It seemed to me that this had come to its most modern consciousness in him, and that his brilliant and unique achievement was to have studied the American negro objectively, and to have represented him as he found him to be, with humor, with sympathy, and yet with what the reader must instinctively feel to be entire truthfulness."

"I said that a race which had come to this effect in any member of it had obtained civilization in him, and I permitted myself the imaginative prophecy that the hostilities and the prejudices which had so long constrained his race were destined to vanish in the

arts; that these were to be the final proof that God had made of one blood all nations of men. I thought his merits positive and not comparative; and I held that if his black poems had been written by a white man I should not have found them less admirable. I accepted them as an evidence of the essential unity of the human race, which does not think or feel black in one and white in another, but humanly in all.

And, if the poems appeal so powerfully and seem so profoundly significant to one who has never, perhaps, been personally in touch with types, the ideals, the emotions, the traditions, the surroundings and the environments of the negro race, the work must in the very nature of things find equal if not fuller appreciation among Southern readers. To the Southern mind the Majors will surely come as the first lifting of an impenetrable curtain which has always hung between the black and the white race. In the Southern heart the Minors must certainly stir deep and mingled memories of the old order which neither white nor black would have back again; memories in which laughter contends with tears, as the lines of the first African poet waver between humor and pathos. It is a curious fact that until the acceptance of this book Dunbar had never earned any money by his literary work. He had lived entirely on his pay as an elevator boy. The few books he wrote and which gave him a reputation were published at the expense of himself and friends, and brought him no immediate profit. His rise has been a hard struggle with discouraging conditions. When the acceptance of his new book of poems was announced it was accompanied by a sum of \$400. This amount was in the form of four crisp \$100 bills, of the new design. The poet had never been the possessor of so much money in his life, and its unexpected receipt sent him into a state of ecstasy. His success, however, has not made any change for the worse in the simple and unaffected youth, who until recently guided the destinies of an elevator.

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