JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

FIFTY YEARS & OTHER POEMS

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Содержание

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To G. N. F.

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INTRODUCTION

Of the hundred millions who make up the population of the United States ten millions come from a stock ethnically alien to the other ninety millions. They are not descended from ancestors who came here voluntarily, in the spirit of adventure to better themselves or in the spirit of devotion to make sure of freedom to worship God in their own way. They are the grandchildren of men and women brought here against their wills to serve as slaves. It is only half-a-century since they received their freedom and since they were at last permitted to own themselves. They are now American citizens, with the rights and the duties of other American citizens; and they know no language, no literature and no law other than those of their fellow citizens of Anglo-Saxon ancestry.

When we take stock of ourselves these ten millions cannot be left out of account. Yet they are not as we are; they stand apart, more or less; they have their own distinct characteristics. It behooves us to understand them as best we can and to discover what manner of people they are. And we are justified in inquiring how far they have revealed themselves, their racial characteristics, their abiding traits, their longing aspirations,—how far have they disclosed these in one or another of the several arts. They have had their poets, their painters, their composers, and yet most of these have ignored their racial opportunity

and have worked in imitation and in emulation of their white predecessors and contemporaries, content to handle again the traditional themes. The most important and the most significant contributions they have made to art are in music,—first in the plaintive beauty of the so-called "Negro spirituals"—and, secondly, in the syncopated melody of so-called "ragtime" which has now taken the whole world captive.

In poetry, especially in the lyric, wherein the soul is free to find full expression for its innermost emotions, their attempts have been, for the most part, divisible into two classes. In the first of these may be grouped the verses in which the lyrist put forth sentiments common to all mankind and in no wise specifically those of his own race; and from the days of Phyllis Wheatley to the present the most of the poems written by men who were not wholly white are indistinguishable from the poems written by men who were wholly white. Whatever their merits might be, these verses cast little or no light upon the deeper racial sentiments of the people to whom the poets themselves belonged. But in the lyrics to be grouped in the second of these classes there was a racial quality. This contained the dialect verses in which there was an avowed purpose of recapturing the color, the flavor, the movement of life in "the quarters," in the cotton field and in the canebrake. Even in this effort, white authors had led the way; Irvin Russell and Joel Chandler Harris had made the path straight for Paul Laurence Dunbar, with his lilting lyrics, often infused with the pathos of a down-trodden folk.

In the following pages Mr. James Weldon Johnson conforms to both of these traditions. He gathers together a group of lyrics, delicate in workmanship, fragrant with sentiment, and phrased in pure and unexceptionable English. Then he has another group of dialect verses, racy of the soil, pungent in flavor, swinging in rhythm and adroit in rhyme. But where he shows himself a pioneer is the half-dozen larger and bolder poems, of a loftier strain, in which he has been nobly successful in expressing the higher aspirations of his own people. It is in uttering this cry for recognition, for sympathy, for understanding, and above all, for justice, that Mr. Johnson is most original and most powerful. In the superb and soaring stanzas of "Fifty Years" (published exactly half-a-century after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation) he has given us one of the noblest commemorative poems yet written by any American,—a poem sonorous in its diction, vigorous in its workmanship, elevated in its imagination and sincere in its emotion. In it speaks the voice of his race; and the race is fortunate in its spokesman. In it a fine theme has been finely treated. In it we are made to see something of the soul of the people who are our fellow citizens now and forever,—even if we do not always so regard them. In it we are glad to acclaim a poem which any living poet might be proud to call his own.

Brander Matthews.

Columbia University in the City of New York.

FIFTY YEARS & OTHER POEMS

FIFTY YEARS

1863-1913

O brothers mine, to-day we stand
Where half a century sweeps our ken,
Since God, through Lincoln's ready hand,
Struck off our bonds and made us men.

Just fifty years—a winter's day—
As runs the history of a race;
Yet, as we look back o'er the way,
How distant seems our starting place!

Look farther back! Three centuries!
To where a naked, shivering score,
Snatched from their haunts across the seas,
Stood, wild-eyed, on Virginia's shore.

Far, far the way that we have trod,
From heathen kraals and jungle dens,

To freedmen, freemen, sons of God,
Americans and Citizens.

A part of His unknown design,
We've lived within a mighty age;
And we have helped to write a line
On history's most wondrous page.

A few black bondmen strewn along
The borders of our eastern coast,
Now grown a race, ten million strong,
An upward, onward marching host.

Then let us here erect a stone,
To mark the place, to mark the time;
A witness to God's mercies shown,
A pledge to hold this day sublime.

And let that stone an altar be,
Whereon thanksgivings we may lay,
Where we, in deep humility,
For faith and strength renewed may pray.

With open hearts ask from above
New zeal, new courage and new pow'rs,
That we may grow more worthy of
This country and this land of ours.

For never let the thought arise

That we are here on sufferance bare;
Outcasts, asylumed 'neath these skies,
And aliens without part or share.

This land is ours by right of birth,
This land is ours by right of toil;
We helped to turn its virgin earth,
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.

Where once the tangled forest stood,—
Where flourished once rank weed and thorn,—
Behold the path-traced, peaceful wood,
The cotton white, the yellow corn.

To gain these fruits that have been earned,
To hold these fields that have been won,
Our arms have strained, our backs have burned,
Bent bare beneath a ruthless sun.

That Banner which is now the type
Of victory on field and flood—
Remember, its first crimson stripe
Was dyed by Attucks' willing blood.

And never yet has come the cry—
When that fair flag has been assailed—
For men to do, for men to die,
That have we faltered or have failed.

We've helped to bear it, rent and torn,
Through many a hot-breath'd battle breeze;
Held in our hands, it has been borne
And planted far across the seas.

And never yet—O haughty Land,
Let us, at least, for this be praised—
Has one black, treason-guided hand
Ever against that flag been raised.

Then should we speak but servile words,
Or shall we hang our heads in shame?
Stand back of new-come foreign hordes,
And fear our heritage to claim?

No! stand erect and without fear,
And for our foes let this suffice—
We've bought a rightful sonship here,
And we have more than paid the price.

And yet, my brothers, well I know
The tethered feet, the pinioned wings,
The spirit bowed beneath the blow,
The heart grown faint from wounds and stings;

The staggering force of brutish might,
That strikes and leaves us stunned and daezd;
The long, vain waiting through the night
To hear some voice for justice raised.

Full well I know the hour when hope
Sinks dead, and 'round us everywhere
Hangs stifling darkness, and we grope
With hands uplifted in despair.

Courage! Look out, beyond, and see
The far horizon's beckoning span!
Faith in your God-known destiny!
We are a part of some great plan.

Because the tongues of Garrison
And Phillips now are cold in death,
Think you their work can be undone?
Or quenched the fires lit by their breath?

Think you that John Brown's spirit stops?
That Lovejoy was but idly slain?
Or do you think those precious drops
From Lincoln's heart were shed in vain?

That for which millions prayed and sighed,
That for which tens of thousands fought,
For which so many freely died,
God cannot let it come to naught.

TO AMERICA

How would you have us, as we are?
Or sinking 'neath the load we bear?
Our eyes fixed forward on a star?
Or gazing empty at despair?

Rising or falling? Men or things?
With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?
Strong, willing sinews in your wings?
Or tightening chains about your feet?

O BLACK AND UNKNOWN BARDS

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love, and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,

Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars,
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting pean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

O SOUTHLAND!

O Southland! O Southland!
Have you not heard the call,
The trumpet blown, the word made known
To the nations, one and all?
The watchword, the hope-word,
Salvation's present plan?
A gospel new, for all—for you:
Man shall be saved by man.

O Southland! O Southland!
Do you not hear to-day
The mighty beat of onward feet,
And know you not their way?
'Tis forward, 'tis upward,
On to the fair white arch
Of Freedom's dome, and there is room
For each man who would march.

O Southland, fair Southland!
Then why do you still cling
To an idle age and a musty page,
To a dead and useless thing?
'Tis springtime! 'Tis work-time!
The world is young again!
And God's above, and God is love,

And men are only men.

O Southland! my Southland!
O birthland! do not shirk
The toilsome task, nor respite ask,
But gird you for the work.
Remember, remember
That weakness stalks in pride;
That he is strong who helps along
The faint one at his side.

To HORACE BUMSTEAD

Have you been sore discouraged in the fight,
And even sometimes weighted by the thought
That those with whom and those for whom you fought
Lagged far behind, or dared but faintly smite?
And that the opposing forces in their might
Of blind inertia rendered as for naught
All that throughout the long years had been wrought,
And powerless each blow for Truth and Right?

If so, take new and greater courage then,
And think no more withouten help you stand;
For sure as God on His eternal throne
Sits, mindful of the sinful deeds of men,
—The awful Sword of Justice in His hand,—
You shall not, no, you shall not, fight alone.

THE COLOR SERGEANT

(On an Incident at the Battle of San Juan Hill)

Under a burning tropic sun,
With comrades around him lying,
A trooper of the sable Tenth
Lay wounded, bleeding, dying.

First in the charge up the fort-crowned hill,
His company's guidon bearing,
He had rushed where the leaden hail fell fast,
Not death nor danger fearing.

He fell in the front where the fight grew fierce,
Still faithful in life's last labor;
Black though his skin, yet his heart as true
As the steel of his blood-stained saber.

And while the battle around him rolled,
Like the roar of a sullen breaker,
He closed his eyes on the bloody scene,
And presented arms to his Maker.

There he lay, without honor or rank,

But, still, in a grim-like beauty;
Despised of men for his humble race,
Yet true, in death, to his duty.

THE BLACK MAMMY

O whitened head entwined in turban gay,
O kind black face, O crude, but tender hand,
O foster-mother in whose arms there lay
The race whose sons are masters of the land!
It was thine arms that sheltered in their fold,
It was thine eyes that followed through the length
Of infant days these sons. In times of old
It was thy breast that nourished them to strength.

So often hast thou to thy bosom pressed
The golden head, the face and brow of snow;
So often has it 'gainst thy broad, dark breast
Lain, set off like a quickened cameo.
Thou simple soul, as cuddling down that babe
With thy sweet croon, so plaintive and so wild,
Came ne'er the thought to thee, swift like a stab,
That it some day might crush thine own black child?

FATHER, FATHER ABRAHAM

(On the Anniversary of Lincoln's Birth)

Father, Father Abraham,
To-day look on us from above;
On us, the offspring of thy faith,
The children of thy Christ-like love.

For that which we have humbly wrought,
Give us to-day thy kindly smile;
Wherein we've failed or fallen short,
Bear with us, Father, yet awhile.

Father, Father Abraham,
To-day we lift our hearts to thee,
Filled with the thought of what great price
Was paid, that we might ransomed be.

To-day we consecrate ourselves
Anew in hand and heart and brain,
To send this judgment down the years:
The ransom was not paid in vain.

BROTHERS

See! There he stands; not brave, but with an air
Of sullen stupor. Mark him well! Is he
Not more like brute than man? Look in his eye!
No light is there; none, save the glint that shines
In the now glaring, and now shifting orbs
Of some wild animal caught in the hunter's trap.

How came this beast in human shape and form?
Speak, man!—We call you man because you wear
His shape—How are you thus? Are you not from
That docile, child-like, tender-hearted race
Which we have known three centuries? Not from
That more than faithful race which through three wars
Fed our dear wives and nursed our helpless babes
Without a single breach of trust? Speak out!

I am, and am not.

Then who, why are you?

I am a thing not new, I am as old
As human nature. I am that which lurks,
Ready to spring whenever a bar is loosed;
The ancient trait which fights incessantly
Against restraint, balks at the upward climb;

The weight forever seeking to obey
The law of downward pull;—and I am more:
The bitter fruit am I of planted seed;
The resultant, the inevitable end
Of evil forces and the powers of wrong.

Lessons in degradation, taught and learned,
The memories of cruel sights and deeds,
The pent-up bitterness, the unspent hate
Filtered through fifteen generations have
Sprung up and found in me sporadic life.
In me the muttered curse of dying men,
On me the stain of conquered women, and
Consuming me the fearful fires of lust,
Lit long ago, by other hands than mine.
In me the down-crushed spirit, the hurled-back prayers
Of wretches now long dead,—their dire bequests.—
In me the echo of the stifled cry
Of children for their bartered mothers' breasts.
I claim no race, no race claims me; I am
No more than human dregs; degenerate;
The monstrous offspring of the monster, Sin;
I am—just what I am.... The race that fed
Your wives and nursed your babes would do the same
To-day, but I—

Enough, the brute must die!
Quick! Chain him to that oak! It will resist
The fire much longer than this slender pine.

Now bring the fuel! Pile it 'round him! Wait!
Pile not so fast or high! or we shall lose
The agony and terror in his face.
And now the torch! Good fuel that! the flames
Already leap head-high. Ha! hear that shriek!
And there's another! wilder than the first.
Fetch water! Water! Pour a little on
The fire, lest it should burn too fast. Hold so!
Now let it slowly blaze again. See there!
He squirms! He groans! His eyes bulge wildly out,
Searching around in vain appeal for help!
Another shriek, the last! Watch how the flesh
Grows crisp and hangs till, turned to ash, it sifts
Down through the coils of chain that hold erect
The ghastly frame against the bark-scorched tree.

Stop! to each man no more than one man's share.
You take that bone, and you this tooth; the chain—
Let us divide its links; this skull, of course,
In fair division, to the leader comes.

And now his fiendish crime has been avenged;
Let us back to our wives and children.—Say,
What did he mean by those last muttered words,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.