

A FOLK-SONGSTER.

Melodies That Grew With the Cotton.

COLEMAN'S LUCK WITH THEM.

The Professor Is Stranded and Hopeful and Talks of Plantation Songs and His Concert.

The American Folklore Society, in session at Cambridge, Mass., is discussing today a lot of interesting subjects, ranging from Fanny's mythology to the animals story of Uncle Remus, but the program this year does not include one of the most interesting fields open to this sort of research and one in which the possibilities for investigation are fast increasing.

This field is the negro melodies of the South. They are beautiful as well as picturesque and unique, and the origin of most of them is already lost in the mists of theory and tradition.

While the Folklore Society is in session at Cambridge a lot of these songs will be sung by some colored people of rich and varied culture, who learned most of them on Southern plantations in slavery days. They may sing, for instance:

"The Jordan river 'n' I'm bound to cross, The Jordan river 'n' I'm bound to cross, No sinners fare you here."

Where did that aging melody come from, with the peculiar and inimitable musical genius of the negro race in every line and bar? It came from where on a moonlight night the Southern air first pulsated with that song about judgment day:

By Lord, was a morning, My Lord, was a morning, When stars began to fall.

It came from where simple, untutored genius, that found its sustaining flame in the heart, sent forth into the world the undying sweetness of "The Old Kentucky Home" and "Swanee River."

No author's name will ever be linked with "Roll, Jordan, Roll," and "Dar's a Meetin' Here To-night." They came from a people

he just that way. Lots of them were developed at the big corn shuckings. One planter would get ready for a corn shucking and all the negroes on the neighborhood would be invited over to the evening.

The master would provide whisky, a fine supper of possum, hot cake, coffee, etc., to be eaten about 11 o'clock. Ah, how those pecker came along with the Yankee or five hundred men, women and children together in a great big barn, making the yellow ears fly into great big bins and as joyfully as they could be with drinking and singing. Somebody would start with a verse of something. Perhaps he'd improvise the tune. Then somebody else would take it up with another verse that he knew or would make up, and it would go on half a century ago.

"I was a slave boy on a plantation." That was rude and simple, but by its peculiar poetical genius had been clouded and withered by the influence of a stronger race and by the general social revolution that it has undergone.

The true story of the origin of some of these melodies would be as striking and interesting in its way as the history of "The Star-spangled Banner." Big of the rice and cotton fields, the cabins and the little log meeting-houses where slave minstrels first amplified the harmonies of this and that familiar tune will never be portrayed.

The intelligent people who compose the "original sible singers," now in this city, were most of them raised in slavery and knew some of the songs they will sing to-night long before they dreamed of Yankee and freedom, and they were among the first to teach a lot of them to Northern audiences when they were caught twenty years ago as they fell from colored lips and were written for the first time, but they only know that they were plantation songs that had somehow grown and spread spontaneously.

Professor Z. A. Coleman, organizer and director of the original sible singers, talked for an hour and a half yesterday afternoon and said some interesting things about himself, negro melodies and the troupes that have been going about the world singing them for twenty years.

Mr. Coleman is something of a scholar, quite a gentleman and a devout Methodist, but he has been having hard luck for a

"I sang for fifteen years with the Original Sible Singers, and with Donavan's Tennesseans, that succeeded them."

"Then I went to Boston and taught music, and worked for six months as head waiter in the Tremont House, while I attended the New England Conservatory of Music."

"Two years ago I went to the Yellowstone National Park as head waiter, and then I went to Helena, where I drilled Sunday-school and sang."

"I heard that two or three of the old Tennesseans were here, and I came out here last January to see if I couldn't do something."

"I got a little troupe together and got up a number of concerts in churches, but they don't pay very well. The churches generally want 50 per cent of the receipts and that generally don't leave a day's wages apiece for us."

"We sang at the Chautauque meeting at Pacific Grove last summer, and now, if we can make enough money to-night, we're going to try to try luck."

"Now to try to sing some melodies again," said Professor Coleman. "Do you know that the colored people out here do not sing them and are rather opposed to anybody singing them? They are high-toned and they are ashamed of them. Up at the Zion Colored Methodist Episcopal Church I just told them that I wasn't ashamed of what was mine and while I could sing but I liked to sing the songs my own people have made. It's the same way among the colored people of the North generally. You don't hear those religious melodies singing them, except at Christmas sometimes. The white people are the ones that sing them here. Yes, in the South the colored people sing them yet. There is a great deal of feeling and beauty in those songs and I love them. One of my favorites is:

Swing low, sweet chariot, Swing low, sweet chariot, Coming for to carry me home.

And the stranded minstrel sang the charming melody in a sweet low voice that invested it with wondrous beauty.

When he finished he said good-by and started out to hustle for his concert in Young Men's Christian Association Hall to-night. Anybody of his race who cherishes ears and hearts with the sweet, simple melodies of the Southern plantations accompanied by the manner and dialect are to them what scenery and costumes are to a drama, ought to succeed in the world somehow.

If Professor Coleman's final effort in the concert line results in disaster may he get the better of his job in California.

Graham's Lead Dollar. Henry Graham, a mattress-maker, was arrested last night for trying to pass a counterfeit dollar. He was caught on a street in the city.

A triple wedding in which a father and two daughters were united in matrimony at a ceremony at Jeffersonville, Ind.

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