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THE EMINENT MR. COOGLER

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When, forty-two years ago, the self-appointed poet laureate of South Carolina printed his complete works in a small volume bound in green and modestly called *Purety Original Verse*, the literati was made to realize that J. Gordon Coogler had done the kind of thing which is done once and only once and by only one. *The Washington Times* said as much. And highly reputable newspapers and magazines all over this country warmed the heart of the Columbia poet by very nearly going into ecstasies over his work. If you have seen the volume, revised, illustrated, and printed as it was by the author himself, you could not have avoided being impressed by the lengthy reviews quoted in the introduction. Although in his own expressed opinion he was a self-effacing man he could not refrain—out of fairness to his wide-spread public—from taking some thirty-three pages of the two hundred in the book to quote his various reviewers. Perhaps such a considerate attitude toward those who had never been exposed to Cooglerian verse was admirable. It certainly sold more than twenty-eight hundred copies of the book and brought the author's being and his divine afflatus to the foreground in American letters—which of course was what he wanted.

I quote, as did the Sweet Singer of South Carolina (the name he so modestly gave himself) from *Puck*:

"THE GENIUS OF COOGLER

"We have received a little volume entitled 'Poems by J. Gordon Coogler, Columbia,' with a request from the author to 'please notice.' Book reviews are not in our line but a careful study of these poems has con-

vinced us that their gifted author is really in need of some fearless criticism and he shall have it. Although we may be frank to the verge of severity it must be understood that we have no wish to belittle the undoubted genius of Mr. Coogler. . . Here, for instance, is the influence of the improper Mr. Swinbourne:

Many a Sabbath hour I've spent
With Maud beside my knee
Gazing o'er the distant hills
On the banks of the Congaree.

Many a balmy kiss I've stolen
From precious lips too pure for me,
While caressing lovely little Maud
On the banks of the Congaree.

"We will not say that the tone of these verses is immoral, but surely it is not elevating and enobling. It is too suggestive."

The Nickel Magazine, interested really in presenting to a wider public one of the "type of humbler bards, humble in pretension, not in achievement," says of his originality:

"In truth, originality would appear to be a hobby with him if so transcendent a genius may be supposed to possess a thing so common. 'My style and my sentiments are MY OWN, purely original,' he insists further; and an examination of his work proves this to be no idle boast."

Thus we see the recognition given to this amazing poet of Columbia.

To show the ability for rhyming displayed in the work of the Sweet Singer we have a verse written to a lady who had said to him, "I am now on the verge of womanhood: eighteen summers' old; but oh, how unsteady I am!":

There's a tide in the affair of woman
Which if taken at the eddy,
Would make her life unsteady,
And give her time to get ready.

CAROLINIAN

The subject matter of the foregoing verse makes me think of another of his works: "She Fell Like a Flake of Snow." This was evidently written after Coogler had further contemplated his shaky feminine friend:

She was beautiful once; but she fell
To the clay-stained earth below;
Her tender form came down to die
As softly as a flake of snow.

She was beautiful once; but she fell
To the lowest depth of woe;
She can never be spotless again,
And as pure as a flake of snow.

She was beautiful once; but she fell
And some said, "let her go,"
For she can never shine again
Like a beautiful flake of snow.

She was beautiful once; but she fell
Just three sad years ago;
She fell in the grave of sorrow
And lay like a flake of snow.

She was beautiful once; but she fell
Ne'er to rise again, ah, no;
She fell in all her loveliness,
And vanish'd like a flake of snow.

Really, the pessimism and sad quality permeating the whole of Coogler's verse make one wonder at its cause. He had—if he was not taking advantage of the already flexible poetic license—a rapid and fleeting succession of fatal love affairs. It seems that some strange power put an end to almost all of the lovely frail creatures to which he became attached. When one of them had died he spoke with words worthy of Walt Whitman:

She died after the snow had melted,
And was buried beneath the slush.

Christopher Morley has asked in the *Saturday Review of Literature* recently if there was not some serious epidemic of a fatal disease in Columbia in the '90's when he saw the great number of unhappy endings of which Coogler sang. Morley gives, too, an amusing little contortion which "envious Yankees" are said to have quoted:

My feet are so tired, they must have
rest;
I pillow them on a maiden's breast.

It really comes from Coogler:

How sweet when our lonely souls
grow weary
And our tired feet need rest
To recline 'neath the shade of the
willow-tree
Pillow'd on a maiden's breast.

Many and wordy are the writers and reviewers who have, in a serio-comic way, taken cognizance of the verse of this South Carolinian of the years before the turn of the century. All of them have tried to amuse their readers by playing with Coogler's work in an agile and frivolous way, thinking that the poet was taking his efforts quite seriously. Probably the keen sense of humor of the Columbian was the fountain from which the snickers originated, because, although he might possibly have begun his poetic essays seriously, he saw the tremendous opportunity to amuse the populace

and at the same time to put his print shop to advantageous work while replenishing his own pocketbook. He did not worry over the fact that he was, by those who did not recognize his attitude and purpose, the blunt of the whole affair and appreciated his unique position in it. At any rate, had he not assumed the role he did in encouraging and quoting the farcial reviews of his work, he would today have been an obscure man with absurd "ditties" to honor his name in the shelves of literature.

So today we might toast Columbia's writer of purely original verse as he himself did his Amy:

May your life, like the rose of summer,
Be fresh and remain in its bud
As I never was partial to whiskey
I'll toast you in Congaree mud.

