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Carolina Chansons Legends of the Low Country

DuBose Heyward

Imprint

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series.

Author: DuBose Heyward

Cover design: toepferschumann, Berlin (Germany)

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg (Germany)

ISBN: 978-3-8495-0543-1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The thanks of the authors are due to the editors of *The London Mercury*, *The North American Review*, *Poetry*, *A Magazine of Verse*, *The Reviewer*, *The Book News Monthly*, and *Contemporary Verse* for permission to reprint many of the poems in this volume.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to many friends for first-hand information and for the loan of letters, diaries, pictures, and old newspaper clippings.

PREFACE

In a continent but recently settled, many parts of which have as yet little historical or cultural background, the material for this volume has been gathered from a section that was one of the first to be colonized. Here the Frenchman, Spaniard, and Englishman all passed, leaving each his legend; and a brilliant and more or less feudal civilization with its aristocracy and slaves has departed with the economic system upon which it rested.

From this medley of early colonial discovery and romance, from the memories of war and reconstruction, it has been as difficult to choose coherently as to maintain restraint in selection among the many grotesque negro legends and superstitions so rich in imagery and music. Coupled with this there has been another task; that of keeping these legends and stories in their natural matrix, the semi-tropical landscape of the *Low Country*, which somehow lends them all a pensively melancholy yet fitting background. Not to have so portrayed them, would have been to sacrifice their essentially local tang. To the reader unfamiliar with coastal Carolina, the unique aspects of its landscapes may seem exaggerated in [10]these pages; the observant visitor and the native will, it is hoped, recognize that neither the colors nor the shadows are too strong. These poems, however, are not local only, they are stories and pictures of a chapter of American history little known, but dramatic and colorful, and in the relation of an important part to the whole they may carry a decided interest to the country at large.

Local color has a fatal tendency to remain local; but it is also true that the universal often borders on the void. It has been said, perhaps wisely, that the immediate future of American Poetry lies rather in the intimate feeling of local poets who can interpret their own sections to the rest of the country as Robinson and Frost have done so nobly for New England, rather than in the effort to *yawp* universally. Hence there is no attempt here to say, "O New York, O Pennsylvania," but simply, "O Carolina."

The South, however, has been "interpreted" so often, either with condescending pity or nauseous sentimentality, that it is the aim of this book to speak simply and carefully amid a babel of unauthentic

utterance. Nevertheless, the contents of this volume do not pretend to exact historical accuracy; this is poetry rather than history, although the legends and facts upon which it rests have been gathered with much painstaking research and careful verification. It should be kept in mind that these poems are [11]impressionistic attempts to present the fleeting feeling of the moment, landscape moods, and the ephemeral attitudes of the past. Legends are material to be moulded, and not facts to be recorded. Above all here is no pretence of propaganda.

As some of the material touched on is not accessible in standard reference, prose notes have been included giving the historical facts or background of legend upon which a poem has been based. These notes together with a bibliography will be found at the back of the volume.

If the only result of this book is to call attention to the literary and artistic values inherent in the South, and to the essentially unique and yet nationally interesting qualities of the Carolina Low Country, its landscapes and legends, the labor bestowed here will have secured its harvest.

DuBose Heyward – Hervey Allen.

Charleston, S.C.
December, 1921.

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1. shadows

2. sunshine

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CAROLINA CHANSONS
LEGENDS OF THE LOW COUNTRY

SÉANCE AT SUNRISE

Place the new hands
In the old hands
Of the old generation,
And let us tilt tables
In the high room
Of our imagination.
Let the thick veil glow thin,
At sunrise — at sunrise —
Let the strange eyes peer in,
The red, the black, and the white faces
Of the still living dead
Of the three races.
Let a quaint voice begin:

Voice of an Indian

"Gone from the land,
We leave the music of our names,
As pleasant as the sound of waters;
Gone is the log-lodge and the skin tepee,
And moons ago the ghost-canoe brought home
The latest of our sons and daughters —
Yet still we linger in tobacco smoke
[18]And in the rustling fields of maize;
Faint are the tracks our moccasins have left,
But they are there, down all your ways."

Voice of a Slave

"We do not talk
Of hours in the rice
When days were long,
Nor of old masters
Who are with us here
Beyond all right or wrong.
Only white afternoons come back,
When in the fields
We reached the Mercy Seat
On wings of song."

Voice of a Planter

"Nothing moves there but the night wind,

Blowing the mosses like smoke;
All would be silent as moonlight
But for the owl in the oak—
Stairways that lead up to nothing—
Windows like terrible scars—
Snakes on a log in the cistern
Peering at stars...."

Spirit of Prophecy

"Dawn with its childish colors
[19]Stipples the solemn vault of night;
Behind the horizon the sun shakes a bloody fist;
Mysteries stand naked by the lakes of mist;
Spirits take flight,
The medicine man,
The voodoo doctor—
Witches mount brooms.
The day looms.
Faster it comes,
Bringing young giants
Who hate solitude,
And march with drums—
Beat—beat—beat,
Down every ancient street,
The young giants! Minded like boys:
Action for action's sake they love
And noise for noise."

Voice of a Poet

"The fire of the sunset
Is remembered at midnight,
But forgotten at dawn.
While the old stars set,
Let us speak of their glory
Before they are gone."

H.A.

[20]

SILENCES[1]

You who have known my city for a day
And heard the music of her steepled bells,
Then laughed, and passed along your vagrant way,
Carrying only what the city tells
To those who listen solely with their ears;
You know St. Matthew's swinging harmonies,
And old St. Michael's tale of golden years
Far less like bells than chanted memories.
Yet there is something wanting in the song
Of lyric youth with voice unschooled by pain.
And there are breathing stillnesses that throng
Dim corners, and that only stir again
When bells are dumb. Not even bronze that beats
Our heart-throbs back can tell of old defeats.
But you who take the city for your own,
Come with me when the night flows deep and kind
Along these narrow ways of troubled stone,
And floods the wide savannas of the mind
With tides that cool the fever of the day:
[21]One with the dark, companioned by the stars,
We'll seek St. Philip's, nebulous and gray,
Holding its throbbing beacon to the bars,
A prisoned spirit vibrant in the stone
That knew its empire of forgotten things.
Then will the city know you for her own,
And feel you meet to share her sufferings;
While down a swirl of poignant memories,
Herself shall find you in her silences.
Once coaches waited row on shining row
Before this door; and where the thirsty street
Drank the deep shadow of the portico
The Sunday hush was stirred by happy feet,
Low greetings, and the rustle of brocade,
The organ throb, and warmth of sunny eyes
That flashed and smiled beneath a bonnet shade;
Life with the lure of all its swift disguise.

Then from the soaring lyric of the spire,
Like the composite voice of all the town,
The bells burst swiftly into singing fire
That wrapped the building, and which showered down
Bright cadences to flash along the ways
Loud with the splendid gladness of the days.
War took the city, and the laughter died
From lips that pain had kissed. One after one
[22]All lovely things went down the sanguine tide,
While death made moaning answer to the gun.
Then, as a golden voice dies in the throat
Of one who lives, but whose glad heart is dead,
The bells were taken; and a sterner note
Rang from their bronze where Lee and Jackson led.
The rhythmic seasons chill and burn and chill,
Cooling old angers, warming hearts again.
The ancient building quickens to the thrill
Of lilting feet; but only singing rain
Flutters old echoes in the portico;
Those who can still remember love it so.

D.H.

[1]See the note on the chimes at back of book.

[23]

PRESENCES

Despise the garish presences that flaunt
The obvious possession of today,
To wear with me the spectacles that haunt
The optic sense with wraiths of yesterday –
These cobbled shores through which the traffic streams
Have been the stage-set of successive towns,
Where cofined actors postured out their dreams,
And harlot Folly changed her thousand gowns.
This corner-shop was Bull's Head Tavern,
When names now dead on marble lived in clay;

Its rooms were like a sanded cavern,
Where candles made a sallow jest of day,
And drovers' boots came grinding like a quern,
While merchants drank their steaming cups of "tay."
Here pock-marked Black Beard covenanted Bonnet
To slit the Dons' throats at St. Augustine,
And bussed light ladies, unknown to this sonnet,
Whose names, no doubt, would rime with Magdalene.
And English parsons, who had lost their fames,
Sat tipping wine as spicy as their joke,
Larding bald texts with bets on cocking mains,
And whiffing pipes churchwardens used to smoke.
Here *macaronis*, hands a-droop with laces,
[24]Dealt knave to knave in *picquet* or *écarté*,
In coats no whit less scarlet than their faces,
While bullies hiccuped healths to King and Party,
And Yankee slavers, in from Barbadoes,
Drove flinty bargains with keen Huguenots.
Then Meeting Street first knew St. Michael's steeple,
When redcoats marched with royal drums a-banging,
Or merchants stopped gowned tutors to inquire
Why school let out to see a pirate hanging;
And gentlemen took supper in the street,
When candle-shine from tables guled the dark,
While others passing by would be discreet
And take the farther side without remark,
Pausing perhaps to snuff the balmy savor
Of turtle-soup mulled with the bay-leaves' flavor:
These walls beheld them, and these lingering trees
That still preempt the middle of the gutter;
They are the backdrops for old comedies –
If leaves were tongues – what stories they might utter!

H.A.

[25]

THE PIRATES[2]

I stood once where these rows of deep piazzas
Frown on the harbor from their columned pride,
And saw the gallant youngest of the cities
Lift from the jealous many-fingered tide.
Flanked by the multi-colored sweeping marshes,
Among the little hummocks choked with thorn,
I saw the first, small, dauntless row of buildings
Give back the rose and orange of the dawn.
Above them swayed the shining green palmettoes
Vocal and plaintive at the winds' caress;
While, at the edge of sight, the fluent silver
Of sea and bay framed the wide loneliness.
Out of the East came gaunt razees of commerce
Troubling the dappled azure of the seas;
While sleeping marsh awoke, and vanished under
The thrusting open fingers of the quays.
Ever, and more, came ships, while others followed.
Feeling their way among unsounded bars,
Heaping their freights upon the groaning wharf-heads,
Filling their holds with turpentines and tars,
[26]Until the little twisting streets all vanished
Into a blur of interwoven spars.

II

One with the rest, I saw the commerce dwindle,
High-bosomed, sturdy vessels take the main
And leave us, with the morning in their faces,
Never to come to any port again.
Slowly an ominous and pregnant silence
Grew deep upon the wharves where ships had lain.
Laughter rang hollow in those days of waiting,
And nameless fears came drifting down the night.
The tides swung in from sea, hung, and retreated,
Bearing their secrets back beyond our sight;
Till, like the sudden rending of a curtain,
The East reeled with the lightnings of a fight.