Claude McKay: On "If We Must Die"

Among my new poems there was a sonnet entitled "If We Must Die." It was the most recent of all. Great events had occurred between the time when I had first met Frank Harris and my meeting with Max Eastman. The World War had ended. But its end was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white.

Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted. We did not separate from one another gaily to spend ourselves in speakeasies and gambling joints. We stuck together, some of us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters. We stayed in our quarters all through the dreary ominous nights, for we never knew what was going to happen.

It was during those days that the sonnet, "If We Must Die," exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry. It was the only poem I ever read to the members of my crew. They were all agitated. Even the fourth waiter - who was the giddiest and most irresponsible of the lot, with all his motives and gestures colored by a strangely acute form of satyriasis - even he actually cried. One, who was a believer in the Marcus Garvey Back-to-Africa Movement, suggested that I should go to Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the organization, and read the poem. As I was not uplifted with his enthusiasm for the Garvey Movement, yet did not like to say so, I told him truthfully that I had no ambition to harangue a crowd.

That afternoon with Max Eastman was spent in a critical estimation of my verse. He decided to publish a page of it. When I departed I left some of the verses but took with others the "If We Must Die" sonnet. I wanted Frank Harris, whom I had not seen for many months, to see it. I had always remembered his criticism and rejection of "The Lynching," and now I wanted to know if in "If We Must Die" I had "risen to the heights and stormed heaven," as he had said I should.

At that time Pearson's Magazine had its office in the same building as The Liberator. Frank Harris had me ushered in as soon as I was announced. "And where have you been and what doing all this time, my lad?" he roared, fixing me with a lowering look. All his high exhibitionism could not conceal the frank friendliness and deep kindliness that were the best of him. "Now what have you done to be called a real poet, to join the ranks of the elect? Have you written a GREAT poem yet?" I produced "If We Must Die." He read it at once. Then he slapped his thigh and shouted, "Grand! Grand! You have done it. That is a great poem, authentic fire and blood; blood pouring from a bleeding heart. I shall be proud to publish it in Pearson's."

I said that I was sorry, but the poem had already been accepted by The Liberator. "What? It belongs to me," Frank Harris thundered. "The Liberator be damned! I gave you the inspiration
to write that sonnet and I want to have the credit of publishing it. In the next number of Pearson's. I'll play it up big."

But I said I couldn't do that; I would have to ask Max Eastman's permission. "No, you won't," roared Frank Harris. "Do you think I am the kind of man to accept a favor from Max Eastman? Why did you bring your poem here, after showing it to him?" Because I wanted him to see what I had done, I said, because I valued his opinion so highly, perhaps more than any other critic's, because his unforgettable words that memorable night of our first meeting were like a fire alive in me, because I so much desired to know if he considered what I had written as an achievement. I was excited and spoke quickly and earnestly. Frank Harris melted a little, for what I said had pleased him. But he was none the less angry.


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