

THE LITERARY DIGEST

March 25, 1922

Genius Defeated by Race



BERT WILLIAMS.

THERE WAS A TRAGEDY in Bert Williams's career. The negro comedian who has just died at less than fifty achieved a high position on the American stage, but not the position he craved, nor the one he felt his talents best fitted him to fill. By reason of the "taboo of color" among us he could not in his earlier years mount to a position in higher comedy. By the time Eugene O'Neill had written a play that brought Charles Gilpin to the legitimate stage, it was too late for Williams. "His ambition and his talents both had waned." So Mr. Percy Hammond states in the *New York Tribune*, and the point receives considerable attention in other papers now that death makes the tragedy seem keener. The *New York Evening Post* tries to find another reason for Williams's defeat in "the upswell of the tide of jazz in these later years." His "admirable art was not for the orgiastic jazz, but for that plaintive humor of the 'blues' that is now coming to the front." Mr. Hammond writes of him:

"A reticent fellow, Mr. Williams seldom talked of himself, save in modest reference to his work as a comedian. Yet he was the repository of a secret sorrow.

"There he was, unquestionably, once a comic artist of the first rank, doomed for the rest of his career to an environment of songs and dances, with the doors of advancement closed against him, as they were not to Mr. Warfield and others. He could not, with success, aspire to make his genius an instrument of characterization in the more eminent realms of the theater, to fix his fame in the more permanent foundation of the drama. He humbly proceeded along his antic pathway, exciting the ephemeral admiration of the knowing, and remaining, in the delicate and not descriptive phraseology of the press agent, a 'distinguished colored comedian.' . . .

"It was intimated above that Mr. Williams nursed this distressful circumstance as a private wo and was mute concerning it. While he did not give expression to his thwarted esthetic yearnings, he did at times hint his mild resentment at what he termed 'an American phase.' You may be surprized to hear that Mr. Williams described the frontier between him and his audience as 'an American phase.' Yet those are the words he employed one evening in a somewhat reluctant exposition of his emotions in the matter. He talked well. Said he: 'This may sound snobbish, tho it isn't; I'm not a native of the United States, but a West Indian, and I must take solace from my philosophy so long as I earn my livelihood in this country. The rebellion is all out of me; for I know that it is up to me, and that this is the only civilization in all the world where a man's color makes a difference, other matters being regarded as equal, and you must admit that there's food for thought, not necessarily bitter, in the fact that in London I may sit in open lodge with a premier of Great Britain, and be entertained in the home of a distinguished novelist, while here in the United States, which fought four years for a certain principle, I am often treated with an air of personal and social condescension by the gentleman who sweeps out my dressing-room or the gentleman whose duty it is to turn the spotlight on me if the stage directions call upon him to do so.'"

Williams was born in Nassau of the British Bahamas; his grandfather, who was white, married a quadroon, so the negro blood in him was less than the white. He was



brought to the United States when quite young and educated in California. When he went on the stage minstrelsy was the only career open to him. In the *Tribune's* notice we read:

"In 1903, when the Williams and Walker company played at the Shaftesbury Theater, in London, Williams was invited to attend a lawn party at Buckingham Palace to entertain guests at the birthday celebration of the Prince of Wales. His demeanor so delighted royalty that he remained until his death a favorite with Londoners.

"Booker T. Washington once wrote of Williams:

" 'Bert Williams is a tremendous asset of the negro race. The fact of his success aids the negro many times more than he could have helped the race by merely contenting himself to whine about racial difficulties. The fact is the American people are ready to honor any man who does something worth while, irrespective of his color.'

"At the time of his death Williams was appearing in 'Under the Bamboo Tree.' Some of the most successful productions in which Williams and Walker appeared as a team were 'Two Real Coons,' 'The Gold Bug,' 'Senegambian Carnival,' 'Sons of Ham,' and 'In Dahomey.' It was with the last-named production that they appeared so successfully in London. George Walker died in 1907, and Williams was featured alone in 'A Load of Coal.' In 1911 he made a Ziegfeld contract under which he appeared in 'The Follies' for ten years."

An interesting homily is preached, and an interesting story is told in *The World* by Mr. Heywood Broun:

"Bert Williams found prosperity and success in the theater, but his high talents were largely wasted. His death merely marked the end of the tragedy. Color was a factor, but not the only one in the circumstances which led to his downfall. There was much more white blood than black in Williams, but the Caucasian of America is customarily modest in such cases, and by some illogical process has decided that any discernible strain, however slight, of negro blood extraction outweighs all other lines. And so Bert Williams was a negro.

"It would not be quite fair to say that the theater discriminated against him on this account. Audiences applauded him generously and laughed hard the moment he came before the footlights. There was only one restriction which limited him. Since he was a negro, he must be a funny man. It did not seem to us that Williams was a great comedian, and certainly he was not a great clown, but that was the rôle to which he was assigned season after season. Every round of laughter bound him more securely to his estate as a merryman. Even indifferent work during the last few seasons was of no aid in freeing him from the thrall. Somehow or other laughing at Bert Williams came to be tied up in people's minds with liberalism, charity and the Thirteenth Amendment.

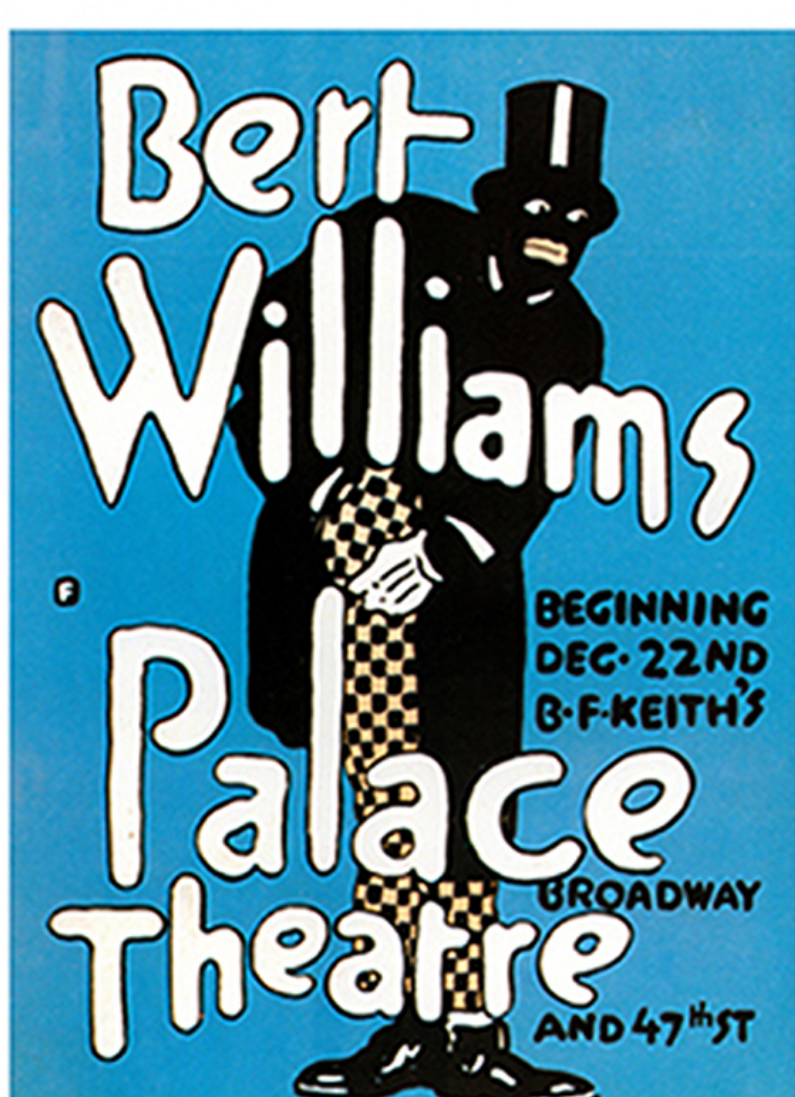
"To our mind Williams did have a gift in which he was supreme, but it was not exactly comic. No man in the theater of our day could tell a story as well. He had in his repertoire at one time a tale about a negro parson and a haunted house. This was the story built about the refrain, 'We can't do nothin' till Martin comes.' You may remember that it was said by the first cat which came out of the fireplace and paused to eat the live coals. It was a little, friendly cat. The next cat was the size of a St. Bernard dog, and after it had dined and spit out the sparks, it asked: 'When are we gwine to begin?' 'We can't do nothin' till Martin comes,' was the reply of the first cat.

"The next one was as big as a Shetland pony, and like the others it ate fire and inquired plaintively: 'When are we gwine begin?' and the answer came chorally, 'We can't do nothin' till Martin comes.'

"It was at this point that the negro preacher rose (in the story as we remember it he was the father of Bert Williams) and said, 'When Martin comes you tell him I was here, but I'se gone.'

"For all the humorous fantasy of incident and the whip-like finish, Bert Williams did not tell the story as a comic anecdote. By voice and pantomime he lifted it to the stature of a true ghost story. We could see the old negro feverishly turning the pages of the Bible. The cats from the fireplace took form before our eyes. Sparks dript from their jaws and wind howled outside the cabin. All this was built for us by a tall man, his face clownishly blackened with burnt cork, who stood still in the center of the stage and used no gesture which traveled more than six inches.

"The memory of the happening remains with us so vividly that sleeping in a haunted house is one of the all too numerous



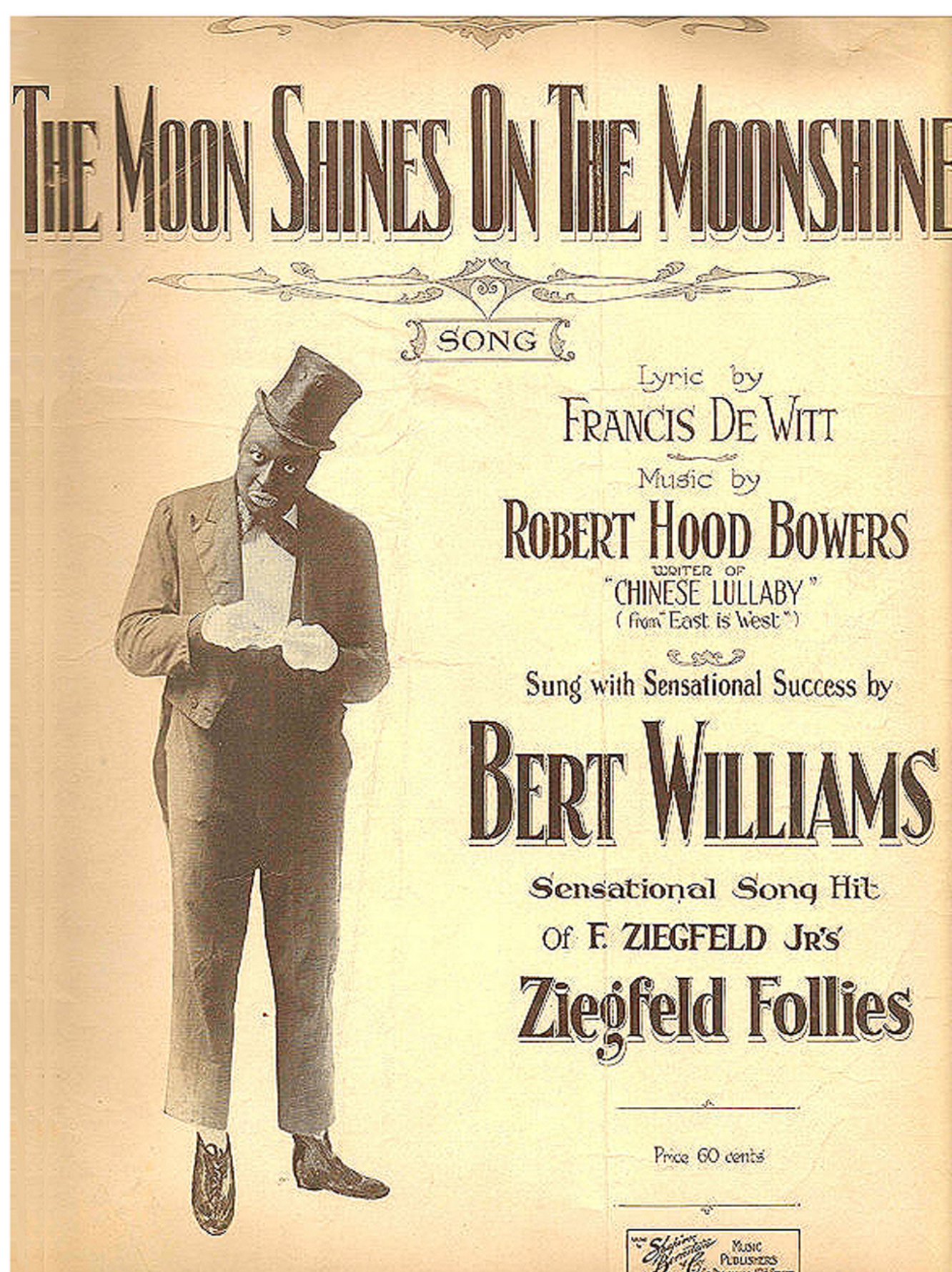
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Bert Williams

things which we are afraid to do. Of course, we laughed at the message which was left for Martin, but it was more or less defensive laughter, because we knew in our heart that the preacher of the story had outstayed us by at least one cat."

Mr. H. D. Renton, an expert on minstrelsy, writes to the New York *Herald*:

"Your editorial article on the stage art of Bert Williams voices the general opinion exactly and the concluding sentence is true indeed: 'The task of carrying on the work of the blackface funny man will hereafter be the white comedian's burden.'

"But with due regard for the talents of genuine negroes like Sam Lucas, Bob McIntyre and Billy Kersands, the idol of the negroes of the South, the white comedian has always been the best delineator of Senegambian humor. Luke Schoolcraft was the superior of any genuine negro in his characterizations. So were John Mulligan and Billy Manning of a past generation."



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