Voyages

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Washing the Black-A-Moor White. A Page from Life

This useless unprofitable speculation has become proverbial. I wonder if any one had ever the folly to undertake it! It is one of those hard uncompromising facts that leaves no opening for pugnacious disputants to fight about. Even the celebrated individual, “that swore I was not I, and made a ghost of personal identity” would have to give it up. Still it strikes me, that the experiment must have been tried, or the satire contained in the old proverb would lose half its stinging pungency. I am more inclined to believe this, from a rude illustration of the subject, that gave its name to a portion of a street in the old city of Norwich, England, which was called Labor in vain Hill, and divided the Court House from the County Jail opposite.

Well I remember when a child, viewing this barbarous relic of a by-gone age, with the greatest admiration. I had never seen a darkie, and I took the picture for a likeness of his satanic majesty.

How it came there I do not know, or for what purpose it served as a sign, and I have often wondered if it is still hanging in the same place, and teaching the same trite truism to the passers by. I wonder if “Notes and Queries” ever took note of it, or the reverend antiquarian society let it depart in peace.

It was the portrait of a negro, certainly drawn from the dark side of nature, with no flattering pencil, sitting in a tub, making shocking big mouths and wry faces, while a
sturdy John Bull, a genuine pup of the old bull dog breed, applied a scrubbing brush with vigorous energy to the bare shoulders of the dark-skinned African, grinning with supreme delight at the chained and helpless victim.

At the base of this odd picture, was appended in red letters, the moral of the benevolent intentions of the operators:

LABOR IN VAIN!

Whether the ancient fathers of the city intended this as a reflection upon the whole African race, or meant it to convey a gentle hint to the inmates of the jail, that the task of attempting to whiten characters blackened by years of crime was hopeless or to admonish the gentlemen of the long robe, who assembled in the Court House twice a year, to sit in judgment upon the rebellious weavers, — who were fond of kicking up a row and breaking the windows and heads of the lieges, — not to reverse the picture by turning white into black, we are not aware.

The nearest approach to solving this difficult problem was achieved by a negro lad of twelve years of age. The boy had been taken off the wreck of a slaver near the Guinea coast by a Captain Brown who commanded a merchant vessel, “the John Bull of Portsmouth.” The young negro was the only living creature left in the doomed ship. The captain was a friend of Mr. C ———, of B ———, in the county of S ———, England, to whom he recommended the poor lad, who took him into his service, and he soon became an especial favorite with his master.

It was during the time when phrenology was making a great stir in the scientific world, and the writings of Gall and Spurzheim had produced a perfect mania for the new science. Mr. C ——— was an enthusiastic advocate of the new theory, and saw no sacrilege in House disintering the body of his mother, in order to obtain a cast of her head. Mr. C ——— had fitted up a large hall for casts and skulls, the latter ranged in ghastly rows, seemed to laugh at death and show their grinning teeth in defiance of decay. This horrid charnel house, which Mr. C ——— appropriately termed his scullery, was the favorite resort of all the
disciples of the marvellous new theory. And rotting bones and casts from living heads were daily consulted to attest its truth. John Bull — for the lad had been named after the vessel that had proved to him an ark of safety — Mr. C — considered to have a very finely developed Negro cranium. He must take a cast of his head.

John Bull placed no impediments in the way, he was in ecstacies, and submitted to the unpleasant operation with the meekness of a black sheep.

When the bust was put together, Mr. C — had it painted black, to make the likeness more apparent. John watched the proceedings with intense disgust, considering them a black injustice, and he expressed his dissent by sullen shakes of the head and low murmurs in his native tongue. John slept in the scullery, the keeping of it in order being entrusted to his care. The day after the cast had been placed on the shelf, Mr. C — brought several gentlemen to look at it.

To his surprise and mortification, the black model was nowhere to be seen. Who had stole it? He rang the bell violently. John's woolly head instantly appeared.

"Vat massa ring for?"
"John, what's become of your head."
"La mass," grins the boy with a look of incomparable simplicity. "Him war God Almighty put him, on John's neck."
"The cast I mean, the cast I took of you yesterday."
"Ough, dat black ugly nigger."
"The same. Where is it?"
"Duppies fly off wi dat head, him gone to de debil."
"Now John you must produce that head or I will have you whipped."

John saw a glare in massa's eye he didn't like, stepping up to the shelf which Mr. C — had just reconnoitered, he quietly handed down the white cast of himself.

"How John. How is this. How came the black bust white?"

"Lors, massa fust make white boy, den turn 'em black. By am by de moon get up, John get up too, and scrape all de black off and turn de nigger white."

Washing the Black-A-Moor White
Mr. C — turned laughingly to his companion. “I believe the boy has solved at last the difficult problem, not by applying the brush, but an oyster shell.”

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