

Nugent

9/11/39

On Alexander Gumby

He came to New York when he was about nineteen years old. That was in the days when Bert Williams and George Walker were partners at making the Negro popular on the New York stage thereby creating theatrical history during the 'fin de siecle.' Alexander Gumby was dazzled by the glitter of life in the big city before the turn of the century. Gumby, fresh from being a 'best butler' in a most 'first class' family in Philadelphia, was anxious to fit into this new and better environment. He became a bellhop. Bellhopping was a most lucrative art, for art it most assuredly was to be able to satisfy at one and the same time one's employers and one's patrons, and to be able to turn this most difficult procedure into pennies. As the dollars mounted into tens of dollars as they rapidly did he put them away into the bank, and spent money at Marshall's with both profligate hands. He was breathing the same air as ~~we~~ did the famous of his race. He worshipped ~~art-with-a-capital-A.~~ art-with-a-capital-A.

He wrote a song and had it published. It was even sung, from which time he felt himself to be a full-fledged member of this colorful aggregation. However he decided that being a bellhop was not quite high class enough so he became a butler again and went away to Riverdale to buttle at his best. This occupation, which he raised to the heights of an art did not prevent his constant excursions into the city proper to live the fast life of the bohemian group with which he now felt himself to be identified. Gumby became

a sport. Fancy clothes, a perennial walking stick, pale yellow kid gloves and a diamond stick-pin helped make him the Beau Brummel of his particular little group. He was the member of this group who was most cognizant of and familiar with the various and sundry arts, artists and their lives. He had a hobby as all gentlemen do, a hobby apart from the collecting of artists; he collected rare books. He had a flair for this that amounted practically to genius. His instincts were nearly infallible. He also collected newspaper items and clippings which he kept in many file boxes and in his spare moments catalogued carefully into scrapbooks of mammoth size and meticulous groupings. It was the secondary hobby which was to become a most important and interesting contribution on his part. He collected newspaper items on everything, on anything, there was nothing too small, there was nothing too large but that he would follow through in every detail until he had every scrap of information published about it. It was and is that amazing ability to garner every little news item about anything which he happened to fancy that was to make his scrapbook collection practically invaluable.

However at this time, Gumby was much too interested in establishing himself as a member of the group of doers to realize that this secondary hobby of his would ever be of importance. He continued to go to literary teas and social lawn parties, to night clubs where the theatrical great congregated, to give soirees in his furnished apartment in lower Harlem at which he could exhibit his latest

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catch. He took the examination and became a postal clerk. This greater income allowed him more freedom in buying his eternal first editions, newspapers from which to clip items and every now and then a Chinese vase or cloissonet samovar. He took an enormous studio, it had really been a store, on Fifth Avenue between 131st and 132nd Streets. It was to be a salon. For months he prepared. Finally came the opening. It coincided with the advent of the New Negro. Nineteen twenty-six was a most prolific year. Gumby knew all of the New Negroes or knew those who did which amounted to the same thing. Sooner or later, usually sooner, they all visited his studio and were introduced to those others around him whom, Gumby, with the social ~~dictator's~~ dictator's instinct, wished to impress. Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Rose McClendon, Evelyn Ellis, Paul Robeson, Alain Locke, Robert Schlick, Heywood Brown, H. L. Mencken, Richard Reid, Aaron Douglas, Waring Cuney, Helene Johnson, Dorothy West, Augusta Savate, Richard Bruce, Arthur Faucet and all of the interminable numbers became movable fixtures in his bright and social art collection. He was the Great God Gumby, God of his studio, God of all he surveyed, and God could do no wrong. He allowed himself the luxury of temperament. It was temperament of the truest, most honest, most naive, and highest sort. He was a true person and in reality the God he called himself. He could go into fits of rage, of majestic and pompous ire, during which he would storm about, light flashing from his eyes, swear words spitting from his teeth, damnation laying low those whom a moment ago he had

raised to such ~~high~~ heights.

Gumby's salon continued in popularity until he was taken ill, and having spent all of his salaries in his studio and on his artists, (for his artists were his proteges, with all the expenses thereby entailed), he found himself forced to accept the charity of the city. He went away to try to affect a cure for his tuberculosis. He spent five years taking the cure, and finally left the hospital, a nearly-cured man, to return to Harlem and there try to resume his activities in the arts and with the artists. His scrapbook collection, which had in the interum grown in importance was sadly behind and he immediately set upon trying to rebuild and recapture the old glamor and urge to collect.

The Great God Gumby was still and despite the Great God Bumby. His files of scrapbooks were and are still the source of last resort for the bibliophile and researcher. His newspaper clippings are still, despite the many hundreds which he lost during the five years interment in a tubercular hospital, more complete even than the Schomburg Collection at the 135th Street Public Library. He is an <sup>anti-</sup>ardent/everything, and being biologically a complete revolutionary is fundamentally, primarilly, and totally correct in all of his judgements.