Chain Gang

Hugh G. Hull*
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By Hugh G. Hull, '36

The prize-winning poem in the 1936 Inkhorn literary contest

Dirge-like strains of a darky song
Drift sadly down the lifeless air;
Plaintive, shy with a nameless dread
That tells of more than earthly fear.

Rising, lifting, with rhythmic swell,
Then sinking low to a deathless hell,
As fading hope rings a parting knell
And weaves a shroud like a witch's spell
In agony such as no tongue can tell.

Black feet shuffle in the dusty road,
Black heads droop and lagging steps are slowed,
Shoulders sag beneath their heavy load—
Black men shrink before the white man's goad.

Black arms move in a weary swing,
Steel meets stone with a clashing ring,
Beating time to the song they sing—
Black eyes wince at the jarring sting;
Dust swirls up like a living thing.

Black hearts dream of a golden stair,
Black lips move in a hopeless prayer
To the God they fear for a helping hand
To lead them on to a promised land.