



The Ebony Flute

By GWENDOLYN BENNETT

IN searching about for a heading that would make a fit label for literary chit-chat and artistic what-not I stumbled upon "The Ebony Flute." So lovely a name it is that I should like to have made it myself, but I didn't. I say "stumbled" advisedly. Reading again William Rose Benet's poem, *Harlem*, in the *October Theatre Arts Magazine* I was struck by the exceeding great beauty of his use of the "ebony flute" as an instrument upon which one could "sing Harlem." An ebony flute ought to be very effective for most any sort of singing for that matter. Ebony, black and of exquisite smoothness. . . . And a flute has that double quality of tone, low and sweet or high and shrill, that would make of Harlem or any other place a very human song. No better instrument then for the slim melody of what book one has read or who is writing what new play than an ebony flute . . . speaking of Benet's *Harlem*, what a lovely thing it is! It opens with:

*I want to sing Harlem on an ebony flute
While trap-drums ruffle to a crash and blare,
With a clear note
From a sylvan throat
Of a clarinet—of a clarinet!
God and brute, black god and brute
Grinning, brooding in the murk air,
Moons of flame and suns of jet,
Hurricane joy and dumb despair.*

*Vermillion, black and peacock blue,
Pink, plum-purple, zig-zag green—
I want to sing Harlem with a paint-box too,
Shaking out color like a tambourine,
Want a red
Like a furious fire;
Want a black
Like midnight mire;
Want a gold
Like golden wire;
Want a silver
Like Heaven entire
And God a-playing at his own front door
On a slide trombone with a conical bore!*

And on through line on line of beauty that coins a Harlem as a poet would see it, lush and colorful . . . fertile like rich earth. On and on to its close which ends with the crooning of his "Mammy Earth. . . ."

*O child of the wild, of the womb of the night,
Rest, and dream, my dark delight!*

Tropic Death, a book of short stories by Eric Walrond will come out in October. Boni and

Liveright are the publishers. I can scarcely wait for this book to be on the market. . . . Few of the Negro writers that are being heralded on all sides today can begin to create the color that fairly rolls itself from Mr. Walrond's facile pen. *Tropic Death* ought to have that ripe color that is usually the essence of Mr. Walrond's writing . . . and also a simple forcefulness that the author often achieves. . . . A new magazine is added to the Chicago list of Negro publications: *American Life Magazine*, Moses Jordan editing . . . the same Mr. Jordan whose book, *The Meat Man*, was published a few years back. The June issue, Volume One—Number One, carried "From Venice to Vienna" by Jessie Redmon Fauset and "Pale Lady" by Langston Hughes. I have not seen the July issue of this magazine but look forward to seeing the future copies that will come out. . . . Maude Cuney Hare has an article on *Creole Folksongs* in the July number of the *Musical Observer*. Needless to say, Mrs. Hare's article is adequate . . . certainly there are few people more authoritative in their speaking of Creole folksongs than she.

Aaron Douglas is doing the illustrations for Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* which will appear August the twentieth. *The Publisher's Weekly* says that Mr. Douglas' advertisement for this book in the current magazines is the best for the month of June . . . but by far the most important thing about Mr. Douglas these days is his new wife. He married Miss Alta Sawyer of Kansas City, Missouri, on Friday June eighteenth. . . . The English edition of Langston Hughes' *Weary Blues* came out on July ninth . . . the second edition of *The New Negro* will be out in the fall. . . . The Negro writers must not let the first of September slip up on them without having their manuscripts ready for the Albert and Charles Boni contest. The address for sending the novels to the judges is 66 Fifth Avenue. . . . Thinking of novels makes me recall what Simeon Strunsky of the *New York Times Book Review* said not so long ago about beautifully written books. . . . "The beautifully written book as a rule is the over-written book. One sinks into beauty ankle-deep." He goes to quite some trouble to poke fun at the elegant conservatism of what is called beautiful prose today. But even in the face of Mr. Strunsky's caustic remarks on the question of beautiful writing, properly so-called, I should be ever so happy to find some of that ankle-deep beauty in the things that come out of the Boni contest . . . what of it, if some Negro should write a *Marie Chapdelaine* with its wistful but perfect simplicity or perhaps an "Ethan Frome. . . ." Mr. Strunsky rambles on to the amazing consolation that "We

still have our newspapers. In them are the reservoirs of simple health upon which we can draw when the English language threatens to cave in under heavy doses of beauty between bound covers" . . . and we can do little else but wonder how any one can live in New York and see the rife yellow journalism of the daily news sheets and speak of them as the salvation of the English language . . . nor even the aridity of the *New York Times* could be set on the pinnacle that had been built for "beautiful writing."

"George Sand Reigns Again For A Day" in the *Times* for June twenty-seventh made me think of a young newspaper writer I knew in Paris who was always breaking into any conversation that chanced to be going on at the time with the information that he lived in the back part of a house the front part of which had belonged to George Sand . . . and I always think within myself that I could see in that about as much claim to fame as any. . . . F. Fraser Bond in reviewing *The Best Love Stories of 1925*: "Something has come over the American love story. . . . It seems to have grown up. No longer does it find its chief concern in the billings and cooings of tepid adolescents" . . . he goes on further to observe that "Peter Pan has put on long trousers." Can't you see some E. E. Cummings-John V. Weaver person coming forward with a "Come out of it Lovers" to scare away that something that has "come over" the love story of today. . . .

Hall Johnson's Negro operetta, *Goophered*; with the libretto by Garret is to have in it three lyrics by Langston Hughes: *Mother to Son*; *The Midnight Blues*; and *Song for a Banjo*. This operetta is for early fall or late summer production. Mr. Johnson is the winner of the third prize of the music section of the OPPORTUNITY Contest . . . and by the way, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes are collaborating on an operetta the libretto of which is to be by Miss Hurston and the lyrics by Mr. Hughes . . . they are also writing a musical comedy together. . . . Mentioning musical comedies of a dusky character reminds me of the ill-fated *My Magnolia* which ran for a single week at the Mansfield Theater.

Jean Toomer, author of *Cane*, is spending the summer at the Gurdjieff Institute in Fontainebleau, France. . . . Countee Cullen and his father, Reverend Cullen, are traveling through Europe for the summer months . . . they will make many interesting stops chief among them a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. . . . Arthur Huff Fauset whose "Symphoniesque" won first prize in the short story section of the OPPORTUNITY contest is to be a member of their party. . . . Dr. Rudolph Fisher has very endearingly nick-named his new baby "the new Negro."

Friday, July sixteenth, the annual reception for summer school students was given at the 135th Street Library. Mr. Johnson of OPPORTUNITY spoke on the OPPORTUNITY contests and what they had meant to the younger school of writers. When Mr. Johnson had finished his speech he called on several of the prize winners of the first and second OPPORTUNITY contests who chanced to be in the audience and asked them to read. . . . "Golgatha Is A Mountain" was never so lovely for me until I heard Mr. Arna Bontemps read it himself. He reads with a voice as rich in its resonance as his prize-winning poem is in its imagery and beauty. It was good to see so many

of the people who are writing and doing things together . . . Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent, John Davis . . . Langston Hughes who talked a bit about blues and spirituals and then read some of the new ones he had been doing . . . and just before he sat down he read a poem called "Brass Spittoons" . . . as lovely as are many things with much more delectable names.

Horace Liveright is busy casting his play *Black Boy* for its fall production. Paul Robeson is to play the lead which I understand is to be a prize-fighter. I heard Mr. Liveright say the other night that he was having difficulty in finding an actress for the role of Irene who plays in the lead opposite Mr. Robeson. This part is difficult to fill since the heroine is supposed all during the play to be white and is discovered at the end to be a colored girl who "passes." Remembering the harmful publicity that attended the opening of *All God's Chillun* because of a white woman's playing opposite a Negro, Mr. Liveright has been leaving no stone unturned to find a Negro girl who can take the part. There are hundreds who are fitted for the physical requirements of the piece but few whose histrionic powers would measure up to the standard of Broadway production.

Clarissa Scott of Washington dropped into the office the other day on her first trip in the interest of the new social investigation work she is to be doing in New York this summer . . . the same Clarissa Scott whose *Solace* won a prize in the OPPORTUNITY contest for last year . . . and it was good to see her again and to know that she would be in New York all the summer . . . sandwiched between talk of what was happening in Washington and at Howard the question arose as to what was the most beautiful line of poetry written by a Negro . . . her first thought was:

*Dark Madonna of the grave she rests;
Lord Death has found her sweet.*

from Countee Cullen's *A Brown Girl Dead* . . . strange how discussions of this sort get started, isn't it? I had never thought in terms of the best or most beautiful or the greatest line of Negro poetry before . . . there are several that come in line for the distinction now that I come to think of it . . . without thinking too long my first choice is from Langston Hughes' new blues poem called *The Railroad Blues*. . . .

A railroad bridge is a sad song in de air

or

*Where twilight is a soft bandanna handkerchief
. . . or perhaps Lewis Alexander's*

*A body smiling with black beauty . . .
or Jean Toomers*

*Above the sacred whisper of the pines,
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,
Bring dreams of Christ to dusky, cane-lipped throngs.*

We wonder what William Stanley Braithwaite would say . . . or Claude McKay . . . or Jessie Fauset. . . . But all that resolves itself into the hopelessness of deciding what the greatest of anything is . . . nothing is really greatest but greatness itself. . . .