

The New Negro

By V. F. CALVERTON

In this day when Holiday Nigger, and Porgy have been succeeded by Nigger Heaven and Black April, and new books by and about Negroes seem to multiply almost with every dawn, it is wise to take inventory of the situation.

While the Negro problem is fundamentally economic, its recent stir has been largely within the sphere of the books. Few problems have absorbed so profoundly the attention of the reading public. Between 1923 and 1924, for instance, thirty books, covering a diversity of themes: fiction, poetry, essays, history, sociology, religion, were written by Negroes, and over eighty books concerned with the Negro and the Negro problem, covering the same diversity of topics, were written by whites. The Negro press itself is an important contributory factor in the cultivation of the Negro writer. In 1923 there were only two newspapers in the United States published by Negroes. Today there are 412 periodicals published by or for colored people; 70 religious, 85 pertaining to education, 7 magazines of general literature, 30 fraternal organs and 220 newspapers. Today there are prize contests that are run every year by two leading Negro magazines, the Crisis and Opportunity, which are an additional inspiration to the young Negro writer. Although the work of the older Negro writers from Dunbar to Chestnutt developed without the incentive of prize contests, it can be said without exaggeration that the development of the Negro press, and in particular the encouragement of prize contests, have helped to promote if not stimulate the work of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

The new Negro is thought of as synonymous with these new achievements in the novel, drama, and poetry. Alain Locke's recent volume The New Negro is devoted primarily to things artistic. While There is Confusion has passed into a welcome limbo, the young Negro intellectual still follows the expressions of the Negro in fiction and poetry with an avid curiosity that too often excludes interest in matters economic and political. In Walter White's Fire in the Flint and Flight, or Eric Waldron's Tropic Death, Langston Hughes' Weary Blues or Fine Clothes to the Jew, or Countee Cullen's Color or Jean Toomer's Cane, is seen the evolution of the New Negro. This new Negro thus becomes an art product. In a way he becomes an isolated phenomenon, separate from the economic struggle of his people.

The cause of this phenomenon is peculiar. Out of the Negro masses has emerged a Negro intellectual. Education has created a new type of Negro. The strides in educational ad-

vance have been extensive. An examination of recent statistics will reveal the sweep of this change. First, let us look at the data in reference to illiteracy in the United States. In 1920 there were 4,431,905 persons 10 years of age and over who were illiterate. Of this number 3,087,744 or 62.6% were white and 1,344,161 or 37.4% were Negroes. In 1880 there had been 3,320,878 illiterates among the Negroes, tantamount to a percentage of 70. To pass from illiteracy to literacy, we discover that in 1924 alone, 675 Negroes received the Bachelor of Arts degree and that the total number of Negro college graduates is now about 10,000. Twenty-nine Negroes have won the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from standard American Universities, and sixty Negroes have been elected to the Phi Beta Kappa. In the professions, likewise, the Negro has achieved singular success. In 1900 there were 1,734 Negro doctors; in 1920 there were 3,495. In 1920 there were 1,950 Negro lawyers, two of them women, 1,109 dentists and 3,341 trained nurses. Negro physicians such as Daniel H. Williams, who was the first surgeon to perform successfully an operation on the human heart, and Algernon E. Jackson, who discovered a cure for articular rheumatism, have attained international reputations.

The force of these facts is all the more striking when we turn to statements that were part of accepted sociology less than a generation ago. At the time when Booker T. Washington was propagating his philosophy of adaptation based upon submission, and inculcating his ideal of segregated endeavor that was to achieve economic unity, A. H. Keane, the well-known anthropologist, wrote in the Encyclopedia Britannica (9th edition):

"No full blooded Negro has ever been distinguished as a man of science, a poet or an artist; and the fundamental equality claimed for him by ignorant philanthropists is belied by the whole history of the race throughout the historic period."

A few decades earlier Theodore Parker in a letter to Miss Hunt (Letter Nov. 10, 1857) had written:

"In Massachusetts," there are no laws to keep the black man from any pursuit, any office that he will; but there has never been a rich Negro in New England . . . none eminent in anything except the calling of a waiter."

These statements are so grotesquely absurd today. The facts adduced in the preceding paragraphs of this article are sufficient to expose their fallacy. In historical perspective also they reveal a pathetic ignorance of the Negro's past. Since the times of their respective utterances, the Ne-

gro in America has advanced in almost every branch of human activity. His educational advance we have noted. In economic life also he has progressed. Immediately following the Civil war the Negro was engaged in approximately forty different business occupations; today he is engaged in over two hundred kinds of trades and business projects. There are about one hundred Negro banks with resources equivalent to \$20,000,000, a dozen state wide business leagues and a score of local leagues in a number of states.

One of the important economic forces behind the development of this new Negro is the vast migration of black people from southern to northern latitudes. In this sweeping heira, economic law has been predominant. The entire migration has been one of economic circumstances. The old belief that it was persecution which hastened the Negroes from their Southern hovels to Northern ghettos was decisively exploded by a recent correlation made between Southern counties in which lynching had occurred during the thirty-year period 1888-1918, and the migration to and from these counties. (See Charles Johnson's article on The Negro Migrations in The Modern Quarter Vol. II, No. 4, page 314, which presents the most valuable study of this migration problem that has been made.) For instance, in Jasper county, Ga., where nine lynchings were effected, the greatest number for any county of the state in thirty years, the Negro population increased between 1890-1920, while the white population during 1900-10 actually decreased. In Harrison county, Texas, which has the largest number of lynchings (16) of any county in the state, the Negro population increased from 15,544 to 15,639. In other words lynching, the most severe and flrant form of persecution, does not depopulate communities of their Negro inhabitants.

In view of all these changes, we see that the Negro as a social and economic group is passing through a stage of rapid evolution. The possibilities of this change being stemmed, or diverted into futile channels, are enormous. Already the economic philosophy of the Negro is conservative. Already it has accepted a score of American myths. That it has accepted these things as a result of its having been an enslaved group, and is continuing many of them because it is still a submerged class, is obvious to a radical sociologist. Now that the Negro is beginning to grow as a social and economic group, it is important that his philosophy does not become entangled with the webs of American liberalism, and thus be led into a political cul de sac. It is im-

portant too that it does not become infected with the racialisms that too often handicap persecuted peoples in their struggle in an economic world.

The mass of Negroes are proletarian. Their cause is linked up with the cause of the proletariat.

What has this to do with the problem of the new Negro? What has this to do with the poetry of Cullen and Hughes, the stories of Toomer, Chestnutt, Mathews, the dramas of Gregory, Fauset and Richardson?

The connection is simple and significant. These poets, story-tellers and dramatists have been described as the New Negro. Their work has been interpreted as the work of the New Negro. Their achievements represent a Negro Renaissance.

It is the argument of this article that the New Negro represents something deeper, more stirring and more signal than that. These Negro artists represent certain artistic fumbings for form. Jean Toomer, for instance, can write of simple things with subtlety, of little things with skill. His genre is the delicate, the precious prettiness of life, the soft, poetic regrets, the purple nuances of fleeting, futile passions. He is the Lafcadio Hearn of Negro literature. He has beautified the trivial, ensnared the elusive. Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and many others have made of words a thing of beauty, but none of them has as yet caught the song of the masses. Their work, in most cases, seems to live in a separate world. It appears in the regular magazines, is featured as an attraction, and the word Negro comes to have an enchantment somewhat like the lure of strange drama or the fascination of antique furniture.

The new Negro, we venture to prophesy, is and will be something different. The New Negro will really be new in that he will understand the economic situation of his people. His literature will be of a proletarian people, struggling for revolution and freedom. His songs will be the songs of the worker. The new Negro will labor for a new economic world. He will challenge not race-prejudice only, but class-prejudice, class-rule, and class-oppression. He will link himself with the labor movement. Like Dronke, Freiligrath, Wirth and Pfau in Germany of the last century his poetry will be defiant and revolutionary. Contemporary Negro poets represent achievement, but not newness. Their spirit is different from that of Dunbar, but it is a difference more in degree than in substance. Perhaps they represent a transition. The work of Claude McKay is a hint in the new direction. The work of the new Negro in poetry as in life, however, will abandon hint, evasion, and pure prettiness, and seek reality in radical reconstruction and revolutionary aspiration.

AT THE PITMOUTH

By HENRY GEORGE WEISS.

And the crowd is surging around the pitmouth,
And a pall of black smoke is hanging over the pitmouth.
And there is weeping of women and wailing of children around the pitmouth,
And grim-faced men are striving to reach the dead and dying far down below the rim of the pitmouth;
And a fat boss stabs at the pitmouth,
Stabs with a two-bit cigar at the pitmouth,
And tired miners come and seal up the pitmouth,
With concrete and brick, wall up the pitmouth,
So the air may not rush down the pitmouth,
May not feed the flame that burns the coal far below the pitmouth;
And frenzied hands beat in vain on the barrier erected at the pitmouth,
Beat in vain at the concrete and brick that prevent them from winning to safety beyond the pitmouth.
O dead, twisted bodies lying with bruised hands behind the Implacable Greed that seals the pitmouth!

