

THE NEW NEGRO

By KELLY MILLER

"The New Negro" is the title of a remarkable book by a remarkable man. This volume has just rolled from the press of A. and O. Boni, of New York City. Reviews in the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald-Tribune*, the *Nation* and the *Crisis* have already fallen under my notice. I feel safe in saying that no book on the race question has



ever received such extravagant laudation from high literary authorities. Doctor Alain Leroy Locke, Rhodes scholar, Harvard Doctor and Howard professor is the author, compiler and editor.

The Negro And Art

Dr. Locke looks to the portrayal of the Negro soul in artistic form as indicative of a renaissance in racial life and relationship. He boldly discounts the method of sociology, philanthropy and religion for the more subtle and potent influence of art. Dr. DuBois in his review of Dr. Locke's book, in the current issue of the *Crisis*, questions the validity of the authors philosophy which attempts to divorce art from propaganda. But Dr. Locke rather agrees with Keats that beauty is its own excuse for being, and that art for art's sake has a greater pragmatic value than pragmatic preachments. I will not attempt to settle the disagreement between the learned doctors. I note however, that Shakespeare never preaches, he merely portrays. He holds the morrow up to nature, whereby men may see their reflections the path of truth and duty, and may walk therein, if they will. Curiously enough in this connection, one reads in the current issue of the *Contemporary Review* that the Russian intelligensia is undertaking to project the renaissance of Russian higher hope against the literary portrayal of Alexander Pushkin, the Negro Russian poet and novelist. It appears that he has, by the way of pure art, depicted the soul of the Russian people and pointed out their racial and national destiny and has thereby not the mark and high calling of the Slavic soul. The relation between literature and life is so inviting a theme that I shall shortly return to it as special release. But I must reserve the remainder of my limited allotment of space to some important propositions in the volume now spread out before me.

The New Negro

What is the new Negro as compared or contrasted with the old? Let us first try to determine what is the Negro? Was he a soul that can be isolated and described in terms of its own quality and essence? We can only determine the soul through its manifestation. Its pure essence is so subtle and elusive that no attempt has yet succeeded in isolating or defining either the individual or the social soul. And yet we do know that races have certain psychics peculiarities which set them apart and differentiate them from other races and peoples. We learn of the soul by what escapes from it. The Hebrew race turned its soul wrong side out, and gave the world the Bible, that all-sufficient store house of spiritual literature. The Negro poured out his spirituals from which we learn that it possesses high spiritual potential power. In another mood this same soul has given jazz to mankind. In still another mood, we have Negro wit and humor a never failing well bubbling with good nature and shrewd discernment. The soul stuff of the Negro is of the essence of the Christ Soul. It is slow to anger and plentiful in mercy. It resists not evil, but overcometh evil with good. When it is reviled, it reviles not again. It hopeth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things. This Negro soul is modified somewhat by environment, diversities of condition and infusion of different bloods. But its basic quality persistent. Whether this type of soul is best suited for survival in an Anglo-Saxon environment is aside from the question. We are seeking definition, and not doctrine. I have laid down certain of the basic qualities of the Negro soul, whether old or new. The old Negro does the same. The diver-

Drawing his theme from Dr. Alain Leroy Locke's new book, "The New Negro," Dr. Kelly Miller declares, "the nature and circumstances of the Negro race contain a wealth of cultural material which has scarcely been touched. The pathos, the tragedy, the joy, the sorrow which gather around this people," declares Dr. Miller, "when properly portrayed and adequately presented, according to the canons of art and style will make a powerful appeal to the imagination of mankind."

Dr. Miller believes here is an attractive field for the educated men and women now passing through the schools and colleges. Con- fessing that there are thousands of white youth who would devote themselves to the development of this wealth of artistic material, he asserts that the races are now so widely separated in social areas that it is almost impossible for them to attain a sympathetic meeting of the minds as to enable these white youths to give a normal and natural portrayal.

sity of appearance is due to a unitary substance acting under varied stimuli. I am disposed to regard the difference of the old Negro and the new in the same light as an English bishop described the difference between the old and the new in religion. His analysis was, that which is new is not true and that which is true is not new.

The Old Negro

The old Negro in bondage and ignorance and superstition was as true or truer to the genius of the race in the output of his spirit as his grandson with a Ph. D. who assays to express it in the refined and recondite form of literature and art. There is much caricature of the soul of black folk. We often see imputed to it the revenge, animosity and resentfulness of the Anglo-Saxon. Every Negro who is an artist is not a Negro artist. Pushkin and the Dumas, and Tanner were artists whose Negro blood was a meaningless incident. Dunbar was both a poet who was a Negro and a Negro poet. He has given us the Negro soul in its pure revelry where no white eye could see or ear could hear. On the other hand he has given us gems of pure poetry that will rank among the choice bits of literature for all times to come. He was properly called the Robert Burns of America, in that he could imitatively delineate the life of his own people, and at the same time portray in refined English speech the working of the universal human heart.

The first generation of educated Negroes tried to borrow the soul of their perceptors. They were mimics of their masters. They endeavored to feel, think and act as their models. They spoke as the white man would speak. Any differentiation in theme, mode or manner was considered bad for they even became ashamed of the jubilee music which up to this day is the chief cultural output of the race. As a result this generation was culturally sterile. Their literary effort consisted in feeble and uninteresting imitation. Miller and Lyle of Fisk produced "Runnin' Wild," which breaks so sharply with the traditions of their alma mater that it would run their former teachers wild. It was only when the Negro broke with his tutorial traditions that he could begin to express the soul of his race.

The Negro Renaissance

It is noticeable in the "New Negro that the first section whose creative productions constitutes what Dr. Locke calls "The Negro Renaissance," are not in the main college bred. But in the second part which deals with descriptive material, the authors are all but without exception men and women of collegiate degrees.

The nature and circumstances of the Negro race contain a wealth of cultural material which has scarcely been touched. The pathos, the tragedy, the joy, the sorrow which gather around this people, when properly portrayed and adequately presented according to the canons of art and style will make a powerful appeal to the imagination of mankind. The field offers a most attractive opening for the educated men and women now passing through our schools and colleges. There are thousands of white youths who would gladly undertake the development of this wealth of artistic material, but the races are at present so widely separated in social areas that it is almost impossible for them to attain such a sympathetic meeting of the minds as to enable them to give a normal and natural portrayal. Such alien attempt is apt to result in a caricature or a conscious artifice which is death to art.

Higher Education

Our colleges are now turning out young men and women by the hundreds each year. The higher education must justify itself by more than the performance of assigned duty with requisite efficiency. We must look for work of creative imagination. If these works are forth coming in proportion to the boundless possibilities which are wrapped up in the situation it will doubtless make a better place for the race in the estimation of our white fellow citizens. After all has been said and done, art represents the highest values of life. The produces of art hold the first place in the esteem and appreciation of their fellowmen, and the race that produces artists along the various lines of culture will be enhanced in the eyes of mankind. The world likes people who can do things, but merely pities people who must have things done for them. The style of art used to illustrate the "New Negro" is significant and suggestive.