

The Negro Faces America

The Negro Faces America, by Herbert J. Seligmann.
New York: Harper & Brothers.

MR. SELIGMANN has written an interesting book, a generous, ardent piece of agitation, but its usefulness is greatly impaired by its failure to make good upon the pretences of its arrangement. The issue as to the evolutionary inferiority of the Negro, which, if it was relevant at all to his purpose, deserved thorough scientific presentation, is superficially handled. There is everywhere too much emphasis upon abnormalities. The steady progress of the race in many parts of the country, including large parts of the South, is touched upon as proving the stuff that is in the Negro, but entirely ignored in the writer's denunciation of the South for not opening up for him educational and economic opportunity. Mob outrages are discussed without an attempt to analyze them psychologically. And when the writer stumbles into generalization he usually betrays his inadequate mastery of his subject. Some of these defects are explained by his statement that his material was largely furnished to him by officers and members of the staff of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a propagandist organization which no more than any other can be depended on for balance and proportion.

No one can deny that our failure to do justice to the Negro threatens to degrade our social fabric. The problem is one of supreme importance, and that fact places a heavy responsibility on those who attempt to handle it. It is doubtful that any good can come of such a passionate massing of inflammatory facts, no matter how sincerely and effectively it may be done. What is needed is discussion that will enlist the confidence and sustained cooperation of the white man, particularly of the Southerner, a book which will help us to realize that either we must pull the Negro up or we will pull ourselves down; that the task of the white man, not merely as a matter of humane duty, but of cold self-interest is to insure his own standards of mass self-control, of law and order, and of economic and cultural productivity by raising up the low-grade Negro; that the great strides of the Negro, notwithstanding his disadvantages, clearly indicate that responsibility should, in so far as may be practicable, be placed upon the successful Negro for dealing with the unsuccessful and low-grade Negro; not only as teacher as he already is, but as truant officer, policeman, deputy sheriff, sanitary inspector, street commissioner, building inspector, commissioner of public safety, and as many another high administrative officer, local and state; that the Negro must, through political responsibility, be helped in a social sense to bargain collectively with the stronger white man for greater justice and opportunity by a process which will make Negro leaders interest themselves in lifting up the stragglers.

The writer's treatment of city mob outrages at Chicago, East St. Louis, Washington, Omaha and other places does fix, by downright line and verse, much responsibility for those nightmares of brutality upon certain named newspapers which whipped up race prejudice for their own immediate advantage. But in a broad sense to recount the brutalities of a mob in a frenzy of race prejudice following resentment over Negro labor competition or Negro destruction of real estate values is profitless unless the writer will do more. At a time like the present, when race prejudice is peculiarly active throughout the world, we might expect a responsible writer to avoid aggressive insistence upon race equality and the right of intermarriage, to accept a con-

siderable degree of race prejudice as irreducible. He would then be less hampered in proceeding to a serious consideration of possible customary or statutory adjustments in methods of employment, production and housing which might reduce friction to a minimum.

The practice of robbing the Negro cotton tenant by Southern planters through the medium of the commissary, which Mr. Seligmann describes in his chapter on The American Congo is cold-blooded rapacity which cannot be excused on grounds of instinctive antagonism or interests prejudiced by the presence of the black man. It is an abuse involving no profound psychologic factors, and its correction does not demand the exercise of sociological statecraft, but only publicity,—glaring, unremitting publicity. And here Mr. Seligmann's treatment is thoroughly adequate. If there be anything in the traditions of the Anglo-Saxon sense of fair play, then this practice cannot long survive its public exposure. Fortunately, competition, the leveler of opportunity, has been at work calling the Negro North, where his status and the competition of traders protect him against this form of abuse. In the South, he is coming to have a certain scarcity value which may work toward the elimination of such exploitation. But the white leaders in the south-central states, particularly the newspaper editors, owe it to their class and the nation at large to throw the weight of their influence against it.

There are, however, hopeful aspects of the Negro problem, to which Mr. Seligmann has not given adequate attention. In parts of the South today, the Negro is not suffering sensibly or substantially from the sort of oppression and exploitation which Mr. Seligmann discusses as if it were universal, and is allowed education and opportunity which enable him to become daily more prosperous, self-respecting and influential. The Negro has achieved real progress, at least a basis to build upon. The group of problems presented by his presence in the United States admits of no simple solution, but it does admit of progressive adjustments,—both express and implied adjustments,—based upon facts as well as ideals, and resulting from earnest cooperation between the best white men and the best Negroes in each community.

L. B. W.

No. 26 Jayne Street

No. 26 Jayne Street, by Mary Austin. New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company.

WHILE Fannie Hurst has been exciting American households with her program of two breakfasts per week, while Mr. Palmer and Mr. Lusk have been engaging in spasms over so-called "red" literature, Mary Austin has produced without uproar *No. 26 Jayne Street*, a novel which strikes at the very root of special privilege.

Neither socialists nor heresy hunters, however, will find the book especially rewarding. It does not advance legislation nor political platforms as means of salvation. It sees simply that neither suffrage nor prohibition nor economic independence nor bobbed hair nor any scheme of justice avails unless the Junker in man is exorcised.

Neith Schuyler, who is to learn all this, returns from relief work abroad during the early days of the war, before America's participation. She finds existence with her two socially impeccable aunts too restricting, and determines to take an apartment by herself in Green-

wich Village. This modest revolt goes no further. The book does not waste its time in tilting at conventional forms.

Neith's experience abroad has made her American companions seem painfully shallow and unperceptive. Unfortunately her observation tower, like that of many novels on a similar quest, looks out for the soul of America from the neighborhood of the Brevoort. She discovers a decadent aristocracy, an exotic radicalism, with an admixture of the nouveau-riche successful business man. She finds more salutary elements, it is true, but these three types play a major part in the novel and are made to voice America's opinions on the war.

America vocal, one must admit, is not as impressive as America in action. We are, perhaps, like sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal, but we have a modicum of charity also. America, however, or even sections of New York, has not as flat a voice as No. 26 Jayne Street would suggest. Whatever view one may hold of Max Eastman, no reader of the *Liberator* would believe him guilty of the banalities credited to him, or his counterpart ("the editor of the *Proletariat*") in this novel. The novel is impartial enough in making the conversation of the wealthy every bit as insipid as is that of the left wing.

The author, in fact, essays incompetently the occupation of a barker on a sightseeing bus pointing out New York to her country cousin reader. She tells where society lives, who are the leaders in the radical set, and so on. But in this she fails in perceptiveness and clearness of detail. No one with sound reportorial sense, could have referred, to take one instance, to the song "K-K-K-Katy" as "Katie, Katie."

One should not chide Mrs. Austin too much, however, for her somewhat blurred vision of the surface, since the greatness of her work lies in the much rarer faculty, which she possesses, of being able to focus on the inner significances.

Neith Schuyler's attempt to make something of a foundation from her experiences of the war gives her an attentive mind for the social theories advanced by her Greenwich Village neighbors. In the course of events she meets and falls in love with Adam Frear, a brilliant journalist from the Middle West who has made a reputation for himself as an exponent of liberal thought. He talks earnestly to her in terms both of love and justice. She accepts his ideas literally and looks forward to an idealistic marriage on the high plane of passion coupled with mutual respect.

Before the event she finds that Adam believes in his theories of inalienable rights for the mass, but in his personal relationships his fluent words are simply the new technique for the seduction of the modern woman. Rose Matlock, an accomplished sociologist, has already yielded to his persuasions, waiving the ceremony. He has tired of her and resents her asserting any further claim in what had been their mutual enterprise. He has assumed "a jilted woman was a jilted woman; one who took her measure from his desire. The law, a hurdle in the game. At all times a woman was a secondary thing."

Rose comes to Neith. What ensues is not the usual theatrical tantrums of a triangle denouement. Adam, to be sure, sees in it just such a situation. That is Neith's tragedy. Her grief is not primarily because there has been another woman before her, but because Frear had demonstrated his so limited conception of passion, and because he could not begin to realize hers. "If she could

have somehow given him to understand that it was the pain of the other woman's pain that she cried for—"

The feminism of Rose and Neith is more destructive of Junker government and family authority than the battle-cries of Marx or the suffrage amendment. Rose, with the circumlocutions of the logical mind, and Neith with instinctive directness, sweep aside the glitter and fascination of cure-alls, demand honest dealing between man and man, man and woman, and woman and woman. They make this fair dealing the requirement for the gift of their love.

It is a ruthless book, merciless in its revelation of man's smugness, without false reticence in its portrayal of woman's hopes and desires.

Perhaps the pessimism of the novel is over-accented. It is true that there was not one righteous man in Sodom, it is true that the autocrats of today are varied and legion; but it is also true that Neith Schuyler met with an immoderate number of rotters. There are many people of her young generation competent and worthy to appreciate her conception of love as something challenging, beautiful, and, as it surely was for her, "terrible as an army with banners."

J. C. L.

The Release of the Soul. By Gilbert Cannan. New York: Boni and Liveright.

NE sutor ultra crepidam! Admirers of Old Mole and those who recognize the strength of Mr. Cannan as a satirist of modern life will be the first to regret this venture into the field of metaphysico-mystical discussion in which the author accepts "approving convulsions of the imagination" as tests of the truths shadowed forth symbolically by lines and circles and admits that at a certain stage of his discussion he "said good-bye to [his] intellect without a pang of regret." His book is a curious, largely incomprehensible and thoroughly dull rhapsody upon God and Nature, life, love and the soul. It derives ultimately from Blake [to whom it refers constantly and whose life is contrasted in a rather striking passage with the career of Napoleon] through the neo-mystics of whom George W. Russell is the leader. But it lacks the grand authentic utterance of Blake's visions and it affords no glimpses of an exquisite spirit such as are visible to the least mystically-minded reader of A. E.'s *Candle of Vision*. There are occasional passages of power such as the description [p. 47-8] of the "terrifying nullity of modern city life." But in such passages it is the keen observer, not the rhapsodic visionary, who speaks. But for the most part one must regret that Mr. Cannan has wandered so far from his appointed path and lament the waste of so much evidently sincere emotion.

S. C. C.

Contributors

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