

From Cotton Field and Levee To the Streets of Harlem

Negro Work Songs and Spirituals and New Negro Ways

MELLOWS: NEGRO WORK SONGS, STREET CRIES AND SPIRITUALS. By R. Emmet Kennedy. Illustrated by Winold Reiss. 143 pp. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. \$5.

THE NEW NEGRO: AN INTERPRETATION Edited by Alain Locke. Illustrated by Winold Reiss. 143 pp. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. \$5.

By DOROTHY SCARBOROUGH

THE startling contrasts of the negro's life in America may be glimpsed suggestively from two books just off the press—"Mellows," by R. Emmet Kennedy, and "The New Negro," edited by Alain Locke. One shows the negroes of the past, on a plantation in Louisiana, some of them so old that they remembered the Africa from which they had been brought as slaves. They are seen through the eyes of a white man who had loved them in his childhood, and who later caught the magic of their folksongs to give to us in this book. In the other volume the negro himself speaks, in various voices, of his present and of his future. Here, too, we see Africa mentioned, but it is only as the negro looks back with pride to his racial history, his cultural origins. It is not the jungle that is recalled, but the Africa of ancient arts and crafts that are being studied today.

When Emmet Kennedy was a little boy—and not so long ago, either—negro folksongs were not valued. Because of a flood that drove his family from their plantation, he can date his earliest impressions of the songs to 1885. He heard the colored people singing out their fear, as at other times they sang their hopes and longings and joys. He listened, but idly, as a child would. Now, in 1925, scholars and musicians are collecting negro folksongs, and almost a whole nation is reading and singing them. The upsurge of interest in negro folksong is one of the significant aspects of literary and musical America today. The change has come about with suddenness. Now the patient work of a few lone enthusiasts is having its results, and the books appearing recently are having popular success.

"Negro Folk Rhymes," by Thomas W. Talley of Fiske University, appearing a couple of years ago, contains a number of interesting folksongs, with the music to a few. "Folksongs of the South," by John Harrington Cox, while not strictly negro in its subject, contains some negro songs. "The Negro and His Songs," by Howard W. Odum and G. B. Johnson of North Carolina, is excellent as a sociological study of the race in connection with their music. "The Book of American Negro Spirituals," edited by J. Weldon Johnson, with the beautiful arrangements by Rosamund Johnson, is a book to be prized, though I think the editor makes rather exaggerated claims in some instances. My own volume, "On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs," in which I had the assistance of Ola Lee Gullledge, specializes in the secular songs, which have hitherto received scant attention. Each one of these books comes from a different section of the country and has its own material, with not much overlapping, which shows the richness of the fields yet to be explored.

"Mellows" is a book of beauty and charm. It is made up of memories, of poetry and of folksongs arranged with skill that brings out the spirit of the primitive but profoundly beautiful old songs. It is a happy choice for a Southerner to give or receive at Christmas, for it is a reminder of home, of other days and other ways. And musicians will prize it, as well as folklorists.

The most important aspect of the book is the songs with their arrangements. "Mellows" is the word by which the Louisiana negroes designate their songs, and this volume gives a collection of work songs, street cries and spirituals taken down from the singing of the negroes as he heard them singing at their work or worship. It is fortunate for folklore that Mr. Kennedy captured these when he did. The musical street cries of New Orleans are a characteristic part of the antique allurement of

the city. They cry of the man who announces "Clo's poles—long, straight clo's poles!"—the chromatic pleading of the buttermilk man, the call of the woman who sells hot potato cakes, the song of the black-berry woman, all are melodious with a minor pathos. The chimney sweeper sings in a loud voice:

*Romany, Romany, Romany, lady,
I knows why yo' chimny won' draw;
Stove won' 'bake, an' yuh can' make a cake,
An' I know why yo' chimny won' draw.*

The charcoal vendor driving an old white mule will sing:

*Mah mule is white, mah chahcoal is black,
I sells mah chahcoal two-bits a sack.
Chahcoal—chahcoal!*

The negro's habit of lightening his labor by a song is illustrated by the work songs in this volume. For instance, a group of men dragging out worn crossties from a railroad track will dramatize their toil and personify the dead wood by vivid phrases:

*Yo' ain' no longer a growing tree,
(Come on, cross tie! Step a-long!)
Yo' ain' nothin' now but a heavy log!*

Other work songs are the chant of the butterbean pickers, the canefield song, the song of the railroad track menders. Then there is the mysterious whistle-tune sung by the young colored man as he raked up the camphor leaves with a twig, "whistling his melancholy chant over them very like a lyric grasshopper lamenting the departure of Summer."

The naive appeal of the homely love songs, like "Mah Lady in a Guinea-blue Gown" and "Honey Baby," is inimitable. The latter is the plaint of a lover working in the cypress swamp and worried about his girl at home—of a sufficiently modern date, as seen by the refrain:

I'm gwine down yondah to de w'ite folks potakerry foam

An' aa 'um fo' to tell yo' dat I'm stah'tin' on mah journey homc.

The collection of spirituals is interesting, with some rare and beautiful specimens. "Go Down Death" is deeply moving; this vocal dead

march, wherein "the tone of triumphal command in the refrain, the thrilling iciness of fear conveyed in the unexpected C natural near the first bar of the refrain, the admirable consistency in sound and thought throughout, make it comparable to any of the classic death songs of the primitive people whose music has come down to us."

"Rock Mount Sinai" is unusual in that it is in 5-4 time. Most of the negro folksongs are in 4-4 or 3-4 time, with rarely a three-syllable measure. "Oh, Mary, Where is Your Baby?" has a plaintive beauty, while "Po' Li'l Jesus" is, as Mr. Kennedy points out, reminiscent of the Gregorian chant. Creole Louisiana is Catholic and many of the negroes are of that faith.

One is tempted to quote and comment endlessly. The songs themselves are authentic as folk material, while Mr. Kennedy's arrangements are sympathetic and admirable. He has kept the homely simplicity of the spirit, while rendering well the intricate syncopated harmonies of the negroes' singing. His book is a valuable addition to the subject of folksong in America.

In "The New Negro" Alain Locke has a chapter on spirituals in which he discusses their importance in themselves and the rich possibilities they hold for development in the music of the future. He points out that while the imperative need at present is to preserve the original folk forms, an inevitable art development awaits them. That will be along choral lines rather than solo work, he feels, since the spirituals have a sort of complex simplicity that is better brought out in group singing. He says: "Musically speaking, only the superficial resources in this direction have been touched as yet; just as soon as the traditional conventions of four-part harmony and the oratorio style and form are broken through, we may expect a choral development of negro folksong that may equal or even outstrip the phenomenal choral music of Russia. With its harmonic versatility and interchangeable voice parts, and with its skipped measures and interpolations, it is at the very least potentially polyphonic. It can therefore



Jazz Design by Winold Reiss for "The New Negro."

undergo, without breaking its own boundaries, intricate and original developments in directions already the line of advance in modernistic music."

In studying negro folksongs one is at first deceived by their crude language and elemental emotions to think of them as simple compositions, but a closer study reveals their complex possibilities. The voices in a negro chorus improvise rich harmonic changes that are very hard to put down in musical notation and that, since they are spontaneous, are rarely repeated in exactly the same way.

The book briefly discusses the various types of folksong for the benefit of the uninitiated who has caught the new popular term "spiritual" and thinks that every religious song of the negro is of that class. There are the pure "spirituals" or prayer songs, the "shouts" or more unrestrained and livelier song of the camp meeting, the "folk-ballads" so overlaid with the tradition of the spiritual

that their distinctive type quality has been almost unnoticed until lately," and the strictly secular songs. There is as much difference between the pure spiritual and the "shout" as between a fine old hymn and a Billy Sunday revival song.

But this article is only one of a collection that make up a book of unusual interest and value. "The New Negro" is a volume that has interest for readers of varied types, the musician, the artist, the historian, the sociologist, the folklorist and the American citizen. It is a book of surprises. No matter how well-informed the reader, he will find here facts that he has not known about the progress of the negro in America.

This complication grew out of the Harlem number of the Survey Graphic issued last Spring, with Alain Locke as editor. Much of that material has been incorporated here, with a deal of additional. It is an extraordinarily interesting page of history, an impressive record of achievement. Here Harlem, home of the new negro, speaks. The New Yorker has been aware in a vague way for the past few years of a phenomenon taking place there, of a settlement of a definite section of the city by negroes coming from all parts of the world. The inflow of colored people from the South made it necessary to find quarters for them, and so the old Dutch section has become the black belt of the north. Harlem is not merely a negro colony, but it is a city within a city, the greatest negro centre in the world. For twenty-five solid blocks the population is colored, the shops, the apartment houses, the schools, the churches, the theatres are for negroes.

Here negroes from the Southern States, from the West Indies, from Haiti and the French colonies, from South America and, yes, from Africa have crowded. Today Harlem is not only inhabited by negroes, but it is practically owned by them. They have bought the property and set up a permanent city for themselves. But the situation seems to hold slight menace of race riots, for there are no gangs, where large numbers of them are employed together, as in the stockyards of Chicago. The occupations are diverse. The negro lives his life there independent of the whites, is prosperous and content. There is little friction in this Harlem, which is called "a large-scale laboratory experiment in the race problem."

This volume dates the negro renaissance from about 1895, when the work of Booker T. Washington and Paul Laurence Dunbar began to attract attention. Washington showed a way to economic independence by the agricultural and industrial training in the negro schools, while Dunbar inspired his race to a sense of the artistic in their lives by his poetry. The unlettered, unnamed black singers of the past made pos-

"My Soul
Wants to
Go Home
to Glory."

From One of the Illustrations for "Mellows."



Streets of Harlem

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sible by their folksongs the poetry of Dunbar and of the educated negroes of today, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, William Stanley Braithwaite and others.

The negro writing about himself and his race is more interesting than the conventional figure in literature, for he has displaced several traditions. Fiction about the negro in the past has dealt with him largely in two aspects—has oversentimentalized him or has made of him a comic figure not really representative. The Octavus Roy Cohen stories, for example, are entertaining fiction, but not sincere studies of negro character and life. Now that the negro is being educated he is becoming articulate and can write poetry and fiction that more realistically express his nature. The short stories and novels by Dunbar and by Charles W. Chestnutt are among the early fiction of the race. Du Bois's "The Quest of the Silver Fleece," Walter White's "The Fire in the Flint," Jessie Fauset's "There Is Confusion" and Jean Toomer's "Cane" represent significant achievements of recent years in negro fiction.

The present volume contains selections of fiction, the drama and poetry qualified to stand on their own merits as such, irrespective of source. "The City of Refuge," by Rudolph Fisher, shows Harlem as it is seen by King Solomon Fisher, just up from North Carolina. He meets many surprises, is exploited and cheated by his home-town friend, gets in a fight in a cabaret, resists arrest—but yields exultantly when a negro policeman joins two white ones attempting to take him. "Even got cullud policemen in Harlem!" Fisher's "Harlem Sketches" are excellent bits of realism.

Montgomery Gregory has an interesting article giving information as to the work of the negro in drama. The acting of Charles Gilpin and of Paul Robeson in "Emperor Jones" shows the possibilities of the negro, who is a born dramatist, once he is given a chance at emotional rôles. The success of the colored musical shows "Shuffle Along," "Runnin' Wild" and "Liza" shows the lighter side and promises a good deal for the race.

The volume gives illuminating facts about the work being done in the education of the negro by Howard University at Washington, with its 2,000 students doing work of college grade and its able Faculty. In the past two years the negro race has contributed \$250,000 for endowment of the medical school for this institution and has loyally supported it all along. The work of the Southern institutions is set forth—Hampton and Tuskegee, with their program of practical training for agriculture and industries of various types, for whom a campaign was waged last year to raise adequate endowment.

The new negro is developing not only a professional class, with lawyers, doctors, college professors, authors, editors, with their various magazines, of which *The Crisis*, edited by Du Bois, and *Opportunity*, edited by Charles Johnson, but also a business class.

Harlem of the North has its counterpart, the book tells us, in Durham, of North Carolina, where the negro is developing in a business way. The list of financial enterprises to his credit there and elsewhere is amazing to one not well informed of his progress in the past few years. For example, one life insurance company started by seven men who paid in \$50 each now has an annual income of more than \$2,000,000.

In short, "The New Negro" sets forth the facts that the negro in America is developing his own racial integrity and pride, is becoming self-dependent in a material way, as in arts, science and education. He is finding a new dignity in success that does not interfere with that of the whites, and is far more of an asset to the country than when he was a slave. Alain Locke, who is Professor of Philosophy at Howard University, has done an admirable service by bringing out this volume. The bibliography alone is worth the price of the book to any one who is interested in the negro folklore, or literature about the negro, or in the historical or sociological aspects of his life.