

THE SPOTLIGHT

By WALTER F. WHITE

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF THE N. A. A. P.

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WHEN "God's Stepchildren" was published in more than a year ago its author, Sarah Millin, was unknown in this country. That book soon became famous. For here was a woman, an Englishwoman, who had been in Africa and who sensed the drama of life there for the millions of natives whose minds were not understood by administrators who were sent out to that part of the world. Millin saw and heard a great deal. She could have written a great deal more to her advantage as an artist and as a new scene. And she might well have laid down her preconceptions and prejudices of people of another race on her pen. "God's Stepchildren" missed being a masterpiece very margin that existed between what her Negro readers thought and what Mrs. Millin thought they thought.

For Mrs. Millin can write. "God's Stepchildren" is of moderate length but its author lays out and fills a wide canvas which embraces the lives of six generations in a word and this welcome lack of verbosity gives a remarkably clear picture of the changes in the lives of the generations. The line began with the Rev. Amos Flood, a preacher who has failed miserably in England and has decided to go out to Africa as a missionary. He is despised by the natives, they laugh at him and by the time he is in Africa they find him ridiculous when he seeks to tell them of the love of God. Flood sees a lithe, seductive girl of the tribe and he wants to marry her, thus killing two birds with one stone. The girl is satisfied and he thinks he will try to convince a native convince his scoffing parishoners that he is a native and that all of God's children regardless of skin color are God's and Flood's sight.

But disillusionment follows. Flood's wife has a son, running away with a man of the tribe and the child grows up in squalor. The child grows up and is seduced by a girl of the tribe. This son becomes wealthy and tries to marry a girl whose skin is fair and they try to go white, sending her away to school in Cape Town. She goes along all right until illness and one or two other things reveal that she has Negro blood. She is forced to leave her engagement to a young white man is broken. A neighbor of her parents who by a former marriage is a white man and desires her. After much objection on both sides the girl and they have a son. The mother leaves and wonders how she stood him as long as she did. The boy and the boy is raised by a maiden aunt, the aunt is his mother.

She sends him to England to be trained in the law and from him the presence of Negro blood in his veins is discovered and brings his wife out to Africa. His aunt tells him of his Negro blood and he, hating and loathing his Negro blood, takes it upon himself to do penance even after his wife has said "What of it?"—when he tells her he has Negro blood she says to his people as a missionary, refusing even to visit his child will look like, feeling that this act of atonement will face of his child is some sort of expiation of the presence of Negro blood.

Told baldly like this the story sounds much more like a novel than it is. The story is immensely readable and the scenes Mrs. Millin has written are unforgettable. My most violent objection to the story rests upon the rather stupid eagerness of the Negro characters to go white. There are a lot of Negroes right here in the United States who have gone white, hundreds of thousands of them, and I can understand if little details like pigmentation and hair texture stand in the way. But nearly every white writer and reader of the naive conceit believes that Negroes want to go white for the sake of being white instead of wanting greater economic and social advantages and the lessening of painful prejudices which white skin would bring.

My main quarrels with Mrs. Millin's thesis are two in nature. The first rests in the reaction of the last of the line descended from Flood in going back to minister to people he detested whose very aspect made him shrink in loathing from them. I question whether that objection is minor. My major quarrel is with her implication that all this woe sprang from miscegenation and intermarriage. Instead, it came from inherited religious fanaticism and was perpetuated because the weaknesses of the fanatical and mentally unbalanced were perpetuated in his descendants. The only strength in the line was that contributed by the Negro blood.

"God's Stepchildren" was for some time a best seller and it was a magnificently written book, I am afraid, but it was a pseudo-scientific attack on intermarriage. But now a new book by Mrs. Millin has been published and we are much interested in it as to whether or not she ranks high as a writer. The book is called, "Mary Glenn," and its scenes are laid also in Africa. It has wide margins and thick paper and fairly large type and is only a little over two hundred pages but within that space is packed as tight a little story as one could find. Here Mrs. Millin is concerned with a thesis on the race question and she writes with the mind and soul and body—of a woman who is an intellectual climber and poseur yet who possesses also a driving ambition to rise herself above the rather commonplace circle in which she is born.

Mary Adams with a few small gifts and much ambition marries Brand Van Aardt who loves her in his stolid way and marries instead a penniless but personable Elliott Glenn. Mary hates Glenn because he drifts and takes no place for himself and this hatred increases when he becomes wealthy and powerful. This hatred of her husband increases and goes by and reaches its climax when Elliott and Jack, his old son whom Mary loves passionately and in whose ambitions are centered, go off on a hunting trip and leave her alone. It is a story told with amazing compactness and Mrs. Millin never for a minute lets compassion or sympathy creep in. Women readers, upon whom it seems rests the burden of novels in America, will not, I fancy, like the story in the way in which Mrs. Millin pulls back the flap and lets us see all the pettiness and chicanery and meanness of Mary Adams with all these faults. Mary does come alive though at the feeling that Mrs. Millin might have used even greater some of her picturing of Mary's mental peregrinations.

In brief, "Mary Glenn," is a story which one can read for pleasure and profit. It is not a great novel—offhand, there are or so stories of the lives of weak women which are superior to mention only one, there is Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady" written by an American novelist who comes pretty close to being the best writer in America. If you haven't read Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady" and her "A Lost Lady" I promise you a few names of books as you will ever find in books when you read them. But Mrs. Millin, "Mary Glenn" will give you some pleasure and come some profit through the spending of the hour or so that you take to read the story.

Boni and Liveright (61 West 45th St., New York City) publish Mrs. Millin's novels. Miss Cather's publisher is Knopf, New York.

I am wondering if the readers of the COURIER who spend some time each week reading this column would be willing to make a simple test which may be of value. At various times I have heard of the current belief entertained by many booksellers and publishers that Negroes do not buy books. Here is the test. Will you readers who have purchased Dorsey's "Why We Boil," or "The Being's" or Stribling's "Teetallow" or Countee Cullen's "Langston Hughes' "The Weary Blues" as a result of reading the result of reading the reviews that have appeared in this space to let me know. You need not write a letter—a postcard will do. Just let me know which book or books you have purchased. Send the card to me at 69 Fifth Avenue, New York City. I will let me know which books you have not purchased but which you borrowed from a library or an indulgent friend and read. This data I can show concretely to doubting publishers and to the growing demand among Negro readers for books. Perhaps it will even more open the door for aspiring Negro writers as yet unborn.