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Caldwell Lynches Two Negroes

BY BURTON RASCOE

BOGEY in reading time for the new Erskine Caldwell novel¹ is two hours flat. Like Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, it is a tour de force; but, unlike the Steinbeck, it is neither original in theme nor novel in treatment. For fluidity, concision, clarity, proper balance of narrative and dialogue, deft use of suspense in the building of climax, and precise employment of vocabulary it might serve, to students of composition, as a classical example of how to write an exciting novel — and as a classical example of what not to write about.

It begins to look a little as though the Arvin Hickses and Freeman Cantwells of the League of American Writers had creased Caldwell with their Marxian dum dum bullets, roped and dragged him into their corral, branded this literary Meddlesome Jack with the hammer and sickle, rechristened him Social Significance, and even got him into

believing that he is something quite different from what he is. Critics who get a reputation for profundity by writing great gobs of stuff that is almost impossible to read and quite impossible to understand — except for some unconnected sentences here and there — have been known to do this, after they have adopted some simple genius at story-telling as a pet exemplar of their theories and as a special recipient of their encomia. Waldo Frank and Paul Rosenfeld nearly ruined Sherwood Anderson by writing 3000-word articles for high-brow periodicals, declaring somewhere therein something to the effect that Sherwood was a great naïf *intuitif*, undoubtedly an autochthonous *philosophe*. Sherwood couldn't find out what he was from his pocket-dictionary and had to go ask Lewis Galantière what the words meant. When he learned that he was supposed to be a natural-born wise man who thought great thoughts instinctively, Sher-

¹*Trouble in July*, by Erskine Caldwell. \$2.50. Duell, Sloan & Pearce.

wood got to thinking he *was* one and got to writing out so much of the stuff he imagined was deep thought that it was hard for his friends to get him back to writing his short stories again.

Caldwell is a marvellously clever literary technician, especially expert in depicting with finesse both the comic and pathetic aspects of lubricity. As Carl Van Doren says in *The American Novel*, Caldwell with his sure art, never feverish or foggy like Faulkner, can invent a story and so write it that the reader instinctively accepts it as an old folk-tale. And he can make his most outrageous invention sound as though it were an exact, naturalistic record of something that happened.

This quite precious art of Caldwell's is what has misled the Marxian muttonheads. Incapable of accepting creative imagination as creative imagination, they have taken *We Are the Living*, *God's Little Acre*, and *Tobacco Road* to be authentic transcriptions of life among the Georgia crackers, social documents designed to expose the horrors of capitalistic exploitation. If *Tobacco Road*, either as a play or novel, is a naturalistic transcription from life, so is Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. People have wondered why *Tobacco Road* has

the longest continuous run of any play in the history of the American theatre. Such people must never have been to a burlesque show. The scene from *Tobacco Road* in which the girl squirms on her belly and writhes her legs is shrewdly designed to produce more caloric suspense in the audience than a strip-tease by the best bump and grind *artiste* in burleycue show business. And the to-do on the stage about the nuptial peep-show, faithfully transcribed from the novel, is another conspicuous example of Caldwell's genius so to invent and treat an incident that it seems as though it weren't something Caldwell had thought up but a marvellous example of bawdy old barnyard folk-tale.

Caldwell displays some of his fine talent for grim but robust humor in *Trouble in July*, but the central theme is so trite and has been exploited so often that one can explain his using it only on the assumption that he is beginning to take seriously his rôle as a crusader for social and economic reform. The idea was used by Waldo Frank in *Chalk Face*, by Roy Flannagan in *Amber Satyr*, twice by T. S. Stribling, once in *Birthright* and again in *Teeftallow*, and it appears in an English variation in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. In the

earliest version, of course, it is the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It is about the white girl who wants a Negro to lie with her and who, when frustrated in her desire, accuses the innocent boy of raping her; and a lynching of the boy follows.

Caldwell gets hold of an incidental theme of profounder aesthetic and social importance but he muffs it and makes little out of it, chiefly, I believe, because his comic sense causes him first to conceive the sheriff (protagonist of the incidental theme) as a ridiculous character, callous, insensitive, hen-pecked, given to jailing Negro wenches for carnal reasons or suspected of it by his wife, and constantly falling into comical difficulties through stupidity and incompetence. A caricature can't be made to carry a deeply serious argument *and realize it*; and not all of Caldwell's talent can make it credible that this buffoon of a sheriff is brought to an acute critical realization of all the flaws in the democratic process of government, through the means Caldwell supplies. The idea is, simply, that the sheriff is an old man, really holding a sinecure; he depends upon the people's vote to keep him in that sinecure; if the people want to hang a Negro, he will lose their

vote and his livelihood if he tries to prevent them.

Caldwell attempts to make the ethical implication of the sheriff's cogitation on that personal aspect of his problem dawn upon him, not through the hanging of the Negro boy or through the girl's confession that she lied, but through the hanging of an old idiot Negro he had given to the blood-thirsty mob as a hostage against his promise to deliver the Negro boy to them. Caldwell ends on a bathetic note as incongruous as when the burlesque queen, wearing a G-string, a black lace brassière and a purple scarf draped over arms and shoulders, shakes a couple of small American flags' and sings, "Land . . . of . . . thuh . . . Pil . . . groms' pride." He has the sheriff recall an officer's oath to do his duty as he sees it, without fear or favor, and then say aloud, "That's a mighty pretty oath for a man in public office to swear to. . . . I guess I had sort of forgotten it," and walk blindly down the road, alone.

II

Incidentally, according to Monroe W. Work, department of records and research, Tuskegee Institute, and editor of *The Negro Year Book* (the authority quoted in the 1940

World Almanac), there were six lynchings in the United States during 1938, all of Negroes; none of the persons lynched was in the hands of the law when seized; there were forty-two instances in which officers of the law prevented lynchings. Also, since 1882 there have been in Arizona twenty-nine lynchings of whites, no Negroes; in Colorado, sixty-six whites, two Negroes; New Mexico, thirty-three whites, three Negroes; California, forty-one whites, two Negroes; Oregon, twenty whites, one Negro; South Dakota, twenty-seven whites, no Negroes; Washington, twenty-five whites, one Negro; North Dakota, thirteen whites, three Negroes; Nebraska, fifty-two whites, five Negroes; Idaho, twenty whites, no Negroes; Oklahoma, eighty-two whites, forty-one Negroes. There have been seventeen Negro lynchings in Illinois, fourteen in Indiana, twenty-seven in Maryland, sixteen in Ohio, seventy in Missouri, six in Pennsylvania. Caldwell's native Georgia, in fifty-six years, is second. Mississippi leads with a total of 568 lynchings, forty-one being of whites. Georgia's total is 507, of which thirty-seven were of whites.

Caldwell's book and these statistics, taken in conjunction with Percival Jackson's *Look at the*

*Law*² and Ralph H. Gabriel's *The Course of American Democratic Thought*,³ and correlated with such earlier publications as Oberholtzer's *A History of the United States Since the Civil War* and the Chapel Hill publication, *Culture in the South*, edited by W. T. Couch, bring to my mind the fact that the literary exploitation of Negro lynchings in the South, particularly the invariable use of the dramatic device of making the Negro innocent, has made it important, if not actually imperative, that quite a number of contingencies should be clarified and that a lot of smug, pharisaical Northern heads should be shaken around and cuffed with a little knowledge in the interests of common fairness, if not of inter-sectional amity.

Northern writers and Southern writers (who have to depend in large measure upon New York publishers, New York critics, and New York outlets to Northern bookstores for their acceptance, critical notice and appreciation, advertising, promotion and royalty checks), by appealing directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, to Northern preconceptions, Northern ignorance, Northern taste,

² *Look at the Law*, by Percival Jackson. \$2.75. Dutton.

³ *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, by Ralph A. Gabriel. \$4. Ronald Press.

Northern temperaments and Northern complacency, have not only over-emphasized flaws in the South but have falsified the South by this very over-emphasis and have done it with full appreciation of the fact that the South cannot effectively hit back, dissipate the fallacies, or even plead very cogent factors in extenuation. Except for its subsidized university publications, the South has no media but its newspapers, which are often owned by Northern capital and even when not are restrained from correcting Northern misconceptions simply by the knowledge that whatever they might say would be discounted in the North as mere ebullitions of professional Southern pride.

I herewith set down, as concisely as possible, some salient facts:

The North, after the Civil War, imposed upon the South the most humiliating and crippling peace ever imposed by a victor upon a conquered people, short of complete annihilation. The North enfranchised the Negroes and, under the "iron clad" test oath of 1862, disfranchised the Southern whites! Under the act of March 2, 1867, "to provide for the more efficient government of the rebel states," this test was invoked to make it impossible for any Southern white who had served the Con-

federacy or had in any way given aid and comfort to the rebel forces, to become a registrar at the polls, and, in the cases of hundreds of thousands of literate whites of voting age, even to vote. The North freed the Negroes but left them where they were and did nothing about them except provide the means for scoundrelly Northern carpetbaggers to exploit them for the theft and expropriation of Southern property. (*Vide*, Oberholtzer, Vol. II, *The Klan*, pp. 1-391.)

We have heard a vast deal about the Ku Klux Klan, old and more recent, most of it justifiably abhorrent. Well, the first Klan was organization in defense, and in retaliation, against the hugest, most horrible, most sinister secret society the country has ever known — the Loyal League, a federated society of Negroes and Northern white skunks, with branches in every county of every state in the South. These Northern swindlers, selling the ignorant Negroes four wooden pegs for four dollars, told them a Negro could stick them down anywhere at four corners of a piece of land and the government would deed it to him even if it embraced his late master's choicest lands. They played on the Negroes' voodoo superstitions and put them up to

killing off all the cattle of the whites, stealing their horses and mules, and plundering their fields and storehouses at night. They sold the Negroes whiskey in exchange for stolen cotton, tobacco, horses, mules and other chattels.

Northerners, swarming down and controlling the electorate, the constabulary and the judiciary throughout the South, made such a mockery of the law, the courts, and of justice that they implanted in the minds of decent Southerners such contempt for judicial procedure and such loathing for shyster trickery that not until very recent years have they been able to get over the effects. In serious matters such as rape and murder, the Southerners had come to have such a low opinion of the judicial process that they would not entrust the issue of such matters to corruptible, incompetent judges, tricky lawyers and the delays and loopholes of the law. They sometimes took the law into their own hands, and not merely for the sadistic pleasure of it, as they have so often been pictured as doing by the litterateurs, but out of a feeling of grim necessity. One almost entertains a half-wish that an honorable group of decent men would arise in New York and go expeditiously about such a prophylaxis in cleaning out

the corruption of our New York courts so hideously revealed in *Gang Rule in New York*⁴ by Craig Thompson and Allen Raymond.

In spite of the sentimentalists, there are Negroes capable of committing rape, just as there are whites who are capable of it. There were 8,302 rape cases tried in the courts in the United States during one year, 1938! Of the 8,302 defendants quite a few, who were found guilty and punished, were Negroes. In New York City, whites outnumber the blacks in the committing of rape and murder; but, as the records show in the Thompson and Raymond book, if you are a successful mobster you can commit rape and murder with relative impunity: a rape charge seems especially hard to make stick. Finally, as Percival Jackson quite conclusively shows, it *is* very hard for an ordinary, decent American citizen, with little money and no political resources, to get a square deal in the courts of the USA, particularly in large Northern cities. But the answer is: the law is just what the layman makes it, no more. It is high time for some Northern laymen, particularly litterateurs, to wipe their noses and shut up about the South.

⁴ *Gang Rule in New York*, by Craig Thompson and Allen Raymond. \$3.50. Dial.

THE CHECK LIST

FICTION

GOING NATIVE, by Oliver St. John Gogarty. \$3. *Duell, Sloan & Pearce*. The prototype of Buck Mulligan in Joyce's *Ulysses* here lives up to his reputation for erudite bawdry. The narrative is largely concerned with the erotic frustrations of a naïf and normal Irishman who is house guest at a vicarage whence gather an assortment of queerries out of De Brett and Krafft-Ebing. Billed as a satire on English manners and morals, it is in the main a series of elaborate refinements of the ancient barroom jokes about the Englishman's alleged emotional anaesthesia concerning sex. Some of the pages might have been written by "Baron Corvo" and some by Ronald Firbank; but, on the whole, it is a rather ghastly deterioration of the talent displayed in *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street*. More than half of the book will be unintelligible to the average reader, who in this instance is to be congratulated.

THE YOUNG MAN FROM MOUNT VERNON, by Arthur Pier. \$2.50. *Stokes*. The life of George Washington from his sixteenth year down to the beginning of the Revolution, with a postlude, twenty years after, involving an incident of General Washington's retirement to Mount Vernon. Told in a series of imagined letters by various hands. The artistic trick here was to make each letter not only reflect the character of the sender but also forward the drama of Washington's love affair with Sally Fairfax, wife of his best friend. Every line in these letters, even the illiterate one attributed to Washington's mother, is natural, revealing and consistent. The essential qualities of Washington's greatness are enhanced rather than diminished by this very human depic-

tion of a man who kept his feet on the ground and his eye pretty much on the main chance, and did not allow a romantic love affair to blast his career.

THE KEEPERS OF THE HOUSE, by Harry Harrison Kroll. \$2.50. *Bobbs, Merrill*. Meaty and moving novel of the warping of a man's soul by illegitimacy, and of the strong, magnetic character, though full of hate, his sense of injustice made him. A powerful drama enacted against a background of Mississippi plantation life down to the fall of Vicksburg. Skillful and entertaining.

THE TREES, by Conrad Richter. \$2.50. *Knopf*. This novel is likely to become one of the classics of primitive American history and of pioneer Ohio Valley folklore. Rarely has a novel been more carefully documented and yet able to carry that documentation so lightly. If you would know what kind of people first explored and settled in the wilderness beyond the Alleghenies, how they lived, what they ate, how they spoke, what their superstitions were, what songs they sang and what verses they recited, how they amused themselves and what special instincts they developed from the dependence largely upon wild game for food, here is a grimly lyrical novel in which all these things are revealed in the story of a woodsman's family and of the woodsman himself. It is the story of a wilful man who hated civilization and anything that threatened to tame him, and of the conflict between him and his sickly and defeated wife who hated the woods. And finally it is the story of the woodsman's daughter, a wood-sprite, who embraces the new order when farms take the place of the hunting-grounds.