

which Mr. Dewey overlooks, but on which good and evil seem to me to be elementally dependent. Mr. Dewey's conception of these values is thoroughly self-consistent and comes by direct implication from the pragmatic position. As, for the pragmatist, error is rejected truth, so evil is rejected good. Dialectically, this should undoubtedly be so. But empirically, observation points to certain physiological revulsions, pains, discomforts, uneasinesses, the rejection of which is automatic, direct, immediate and persistent; qualities which are never chosen, though often, perhaps, endured. That, mixed with other elements, they seem to be chosen, is true. But is it not also true that they only seem to be? It is the other elements, not they that are chosen. They are suffered for the sake of the others; unsustained by those, they are ineluctably rejected. Who chooses martyrdom for its own sake, and not for the sake of the martyr's crown? The same observations would apply to certain goods. Empirically, there is ground, I think, for recognizing specific positive, direct, simple goods and evils which are such regardless of whether they figure in alternatives or not, and which are quite as definitely a part of the texture of life as the comparative betters and worses of which the moral life is more conspicuously composed. Unless they are so recognized, it would be difficult to find a reply to such moralists of the tradition as are likely to assert that Mr. Dewey has only shifted the emphases, not abolished the dichotomy between morality and life.

H. M. KALLEN.

A Satire on the Movies

Merton of the Movies, by Harry Leon Wilson. Garden City: Doubleday Page and Company. \$1.75.

NOW take your picture public. Twenty million people every day; not the same ones every day, but with the same average cranial index, which is low for all but seven out of every hundred. That's natural because there aren't twenty million people in the world with taste or real intelligence—probably not five million. . . . Don't worry; that reliable field marshal, old General Hokum, leads an unbeatable army." This from the Governor, a movie director in Mr. Wilson's *Merton of the Movies*.

For once, old General Hokum is beaten, badly beaten, by the humor, the art, the wisdom, the restraint of Mr. Wilson's satire. He will raise his head again to be sure, and rally his legion of morons, since for the thousands who will laugh with Mr. Wilson there are millions who might read his story and see nothing in it to laugh at at all. He will rise again, and continue his easily conquering march, but you and I will carve a small tablet to mark Mr. Wilson's brilliant victory.

It would be an injustice to the skill with which Mr. Wilson begins his story to try to reproduce that beginning's particular effect. Enough to say that Merton Gill, who is a humble clerk in the Emporium of Amos G. Gashwiler at Simbury, Illinois, is ambitious to become a movie star. His room is plastered with pictures of Beulah Baxter in her great screen series, *The Hazards of Hortense*—Beulah "alone in a foul den of the underworld," or leaping, to escape a fate even worse than death, from the cornice of a Fifth Avenue mansion to the branches of a eucalyptus tree. There were other pictures—of himself, stills of Merton in a trench coat, in a sport shirt, "in evening dress, two straightened fingers resting against his left temple," pictures

signed, "in a running, angular, distinguished hand, 'Very truly yours, Clifford Armytage.'" When work was over, Merton Gill, or, as he usually thought of himself, Clifford Armytage, would go down town to get his mail, waiting on the platform for the arrival of No. 4, whose passengers, he used to fancy, "might shrewdly detect him to be out of place there." His mail consisted of Photo Land, Silver Screenings, and Camera, in which he read perhaps interviews with screen stars—the male star, Harold Parmalee, saying, "You ask of my wife: she is more than a wife—she is my best pal, and, I may add, my severest critic"; the female star, "with her beautiful arms about the shoulders of her dear old mother," saying "I'm wild about history. And how I love the great free out-of-doors!" Merton is much moved by the pictures of this "slim little girl with the sad eyes and wistful mouth." "But he had been unable to learn if Beulah Baxter was still unwed . . . Camera, in its answers to correspondents, had said, 'Not now.' Then he had written to Photo Land: 'Is Beulah Baxter unmarried?' The answer had come, 'Twice.'"

While downtown he meets Tessie Kearns, who is also full of screen ambitions, and has written a scenario, *Passion's Perils*. They talk shop, they are both disgusted by the comedies. Tessie remarks that "Those censors ought to suppress this sort of buffoonery instead of scenes of dignified passion like they did in *Scarlet Sin*." And Merton agrees.

Late at night he goes back to his room, there to take "some dumb-bell exercises that would make his shoulders a trifle more like Harold Parmalee's." "This rite concluded, he knelt by his narrow cot and prayed briefly.

"Oh, God, make me a good movie actor! Make me one of the best! For Jesus' sake, amen!"

At last he has saved up enough to take him to Hollywood. For a long time there is no job there for Clifford Armytage. He wanders about the studios, feeding his intense curiosity and his reverence for the Art. Happening upon a film in any stage of development, he can reconstruct the whole plot from one glance. He watches "one of those moving tragedies not unfamiliar to the screen enthusiast. The beautiful but misguided wife had been saying good-bye to her little one and was leaving her beautiful home at the solicitation of the false friend in evening dress—forgetting all in one mad moment. The watcher was a tried expert, and like the trained faunal naturalist could determine a species from the shrewd examination of one bone of a photograph. He knew that the wife had been ignored by a husband who permitted his vast business interests to engross his whole attention, leaving his wife to seek solace in questionable quarters. He knew that the starched but faithful nurse would presently discover the little one to be suffering from a dangerous fever. . . ."

After many days Merton, thanks partly to his having kept his evening clothes, gets a job as an extra in a cabaret scene from *The Blight of Broadway*. Here he obeys the command to smoke cigarettes—which he hates—with disillusion; to register, with other weary pleasure-seekers, "the hollowness of this night-life" when told "you're bored with it all; you're feeling the blight, see?"

But the few dollars earned for this one performance cannot prevent his small savings from dwindling away. He cannot pay his board, he gives up his room, and sleeps in what by day is the Log Cabin of the Big Hearted Miners. He finds, as he wanders about the Lot, that his interest is chiefly in bedroom scenes. He is down to one last ten-dollar bill, and notices that the face of Andrew Jackson would have made a good motion-picture type—"probably

they would have cast him for a feuding mountaineer, deadily with his rifle." By day he watches the various films in process of manufacture. Hunger perhaps helps to spread over his mind a certain disillusion, as he notices how easily a horse can be made to shy by a skillfully aimed charge of rock-salt. A dreadful day comes when he discovers that Beulah Baxter employs a double for her dangerous stunts, and that she is married. Flips Montague, who acts as her double, sympathizes with Merton. She was once very fond of the preacher at her church—"the loveliest thing, with wonderful eyes and dark hair, and his voice would go all through you. . . . When you found Baxter was married it was like I'd found this preacher shooting hop or using a double in his pulpit stuff."

How Flips Montague rescues Merton, how she sees the possibilities of his deadly earnestness and his caricatural resemblance to Harold Parmalee, is best left to Mr. Wilson to tell. It would not do to spoil his story of how Merton, who thought he was playing in serious-worth while drama, finds the film—not all of which he has been allowed to see in the process of manufacture—in which he starred advertised as "5 reels—500 Laughs," and his state of mind as he sits through all the audience's five hundred laughs.

To keep this naïf tragi-comedian in character must have been a difficult job, but Mr. Wilson has done it with great skill and ease. Only twice does he stray out of key, as when he describes Merton as standing with "a trace of the fatuously admiring smile still lingering on his expressive face." It is a tribute to his deftness that this innocent but false word should so stand out from page after page of perfect characterization. Mr. Wilson's painting in of Merton Gill, a character which offers so many rich possibilities for violent colors and broad burlesque, has restrained him within limits which recall the art of Ring Lardner's "busher." Flips Montague is also extremely well-done, and Mr. Wilson avoids, neatly and humanly, the many pitfalls of what would in less workmanlike hands have been an unreal love-story. He has a particularly pleasing combination of being not unkind in his view of people without being in the slightest degree soft-hearted.

Mr. Wilson is best of all at reporting movie dialect. Her is a bit between Henshaw and the Governor, a director who can make his mind, cynical as it is, coincide exactly with the movie stereotypes:

"And it appeared that Island Love, though having begun as Robinson Crusoe, would contain few of the outstanding features of that tale. Instead of Crusoe's wrecked sailing-ship, there was a wrecked steam yacht, a very expensive yacht stocked with all modern luxuries, nor would there be a native Friday and his supposed sister with the tattooed shoulder, but a wealthy young New Yorker and his valet who would be good for comedy on a desert island, and a beautiful girl, and a scoundrel who would in the last reel be thrown over the cliffs.

"Henshaw was vivacious about the effects he would get. 'I've been wondering, Governor,' he continued, 'if we're going to kill off the heavy, whether we shouldn't plant it early that besides wanting this girl who's on the island, he's the same scoundrel that wronged the young sister of the lead that owns the yacht. See what I mean?—it would give more conflict.'

"But here—" The Governor frowned and spoke after a moment's pause. "Your young New Yorker is rich, isn't he? Fine old family, and all that, how could he have a sister that would get wronged? You couldn't do it. If he's got a wronged sister, he'd have to be a workingman or a sailor or something. And she couldn't

be a New York society girl; she'd have to be working some place, in a store or office—don't you see? How could you have a swell young New Yorker with a wronged sister? Real society girls never get wronged unless their father loses his money, and then it's never anything serious enough to kill a heavy for. No—that's out."

From this short passage, if dug up thousands of years from now in some American Pompeii, an archaeological posterity would be better able to reconstruct our movies, and with them much of our civilization, than from any other passage, book, record, plot or picture that I know of. I shouldn't dare to say how high I rank Mr. Wilson, for a skill of which this is only the largest nugget, as a satirist, as a humorist of the quiet, deep-dish variety which this country produces every once in a while.

ROBERT LITTELL.

A Drama of Race Relations

White and Black, by H. A. Shands. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. \$1.90.

IF plot made the novel, a few lines would be sufficient to dismiss this book. There is a boy and girl romance in it, so little essential that the author doesn't even take the trouble to bring it to a definite conclusion. There is a hero worth building a plot around: a real Southern gentleman, just, humane, tolerant, who develops under the author's hand into a figure of extraordinary distinctness and beauty. There is a "bad nigger" and a lynching; Ku Klux Klan outrages, leaving behind a menace of revenge which would serve well as the beginning of a novel of the Mérimée school. The material is promising enough, but it is left as material, because the author is interested in something else. What he has attempted to do is to set forth the drama of race relations as it is played or might be played almost anywhere in the rural South. And he has succeeded. One who has not lived in the South will learn more about the real race problem from this novel than from a dozen scientific treatises.

The scene is laid in a county in East Texas, a region of worn out plantations worked under the share system by Negro tenants. The characters are about a dozen whites and as many blacks, each individualized with a knack that indicates direct observation rather than a self-conscious technique. A character appears on first introduction as almost a lay figure: what he does or says means nothing until, apparently by accident, the author hits upon a sentence or a phrase whose authenticity makes the character live. Take this plaint of Harry Senter, twenty-one year old son of an impoverished white tenant. "Hell's got into me, that's whut's got into me. Hyeer last year Sister Mary died, an' we're jus' so damn pore an' don't know nuthin' an' can't do nuthin' an' never have nuthin'." One knows that lad pretty well, now, and understands why he "slips around of nights after the gals," turns into a demon of revenge when his remaining sister has been raped, joins the Ku Klux Klan to hunt down a young Negro preacher whose real offence is good English and a decent education. Or take Mr. Deane, prosperous landowner, a man who doesn't want anything but what is his, and means to get that, examining a gold medal won in high school by his prospective son-in-law. "Yes, it's gold. It must have cost at least ten dollars. I wonder how the school board could legally make an appropriation for that." That last sent-