

Escape to the North

"Swamp Angel," by Ethel Wilson (Harper. 215 pp. \$3), is the story of a young woman who finds balm to soothe a broken marriage among the woods and streams of the Canadian north woods.

By Pamela Taylor

WHEN Maggie Vardoe left her second husband forever, a flight meticulously and long planned, down to its last detail, and with great good fortune carried out exactly as she had intended, it was a break for freedom, away from a situation which was no longer tolerable, even for a single day. Fleeing Vancouver, to which she proposed never to return, she headed for the Canadian north woods, where she had been happy as a child. It was not only freedom from an unbearable marital mistake she sought, it was freedom to make herself whole, to knit up the threads of her inner self, left frayed and ragged by the assaults of personal tragedy and unforgivable error. Her simple aim was self-preservation, an independent survival. But Maggie was not intended by Nature as a lone wolf. Young and attractive, she personified competence and compassion. People with problems turned to her as inevitably as she sought river and forest for comfort. As Maggie rebuilt her life, other peo-

ple's lives became involved with hers.

The intricate pattern of mingled emotions, demands, and resentments forms the fabric of Ethel Wilson's "Swamp Angel." For one person at least the threads of love and hate were so twisted together that it was impossible to distinguish them. To another Maggie gave independence, the power to stand alone and walk as a man.

In many ways this deceptively casual story of the rebirth of a bruised and desperate adult is tantalizingly fragmentary. The characters appear, catch our imagination, and disappear with the maddening inconsequence of real life. A Chinese family is introduced, described with sympathy, abandoned. A secondary plot promises to be interesting but we no sooner begin to feel at home with the two lovers involved than they too disappear from view.

THE style in which "Swamp Angel" is written is a curiously varied one, illuminated by occasional flashes of most engaging originality. The author communicates her own knowledge and love of the deep woods and their waters, and of the pleasures of fishing, most persuasively, and she is most persuasive when describing their healing influence on the battered human spirit. Maggie is the first literary heroine I have encountered who is an expert at the delicate art of tying beautiful fishing flies.

The character who walks away with the book, however, is Mrs. Severance, of whose triumphs as part of a circus juggling act only the "Swamp Angel," an elegant little revolver, remains. It is probably the infrequent but always to be hoped-for appearance of unique and vivid creations like Mrs. Severance, and, for instance, Aunt Palm in "The Left Hand Is the Dreamer" and Grandma in "February Hill," that keeps those of us who are inveterate readers of fiction faithful to our addiction. When all too often novel after novel appears to have been written about the same set of stock figures, an unforgettable, outrageous, and pungent individual whom we can think back to with warmth and amusement compensates for all manner of technical weaknesses. "Swamp Angel," whatever its weakness, is an unusual and delightful book.



—Victor Berling.

Gilbert Rees—"extraordinary charm."

Kansas's Hard Life

"Respectable Women," by Gilbert Rees (Random House. 342 pp. \$3.50), is the story of a courageous woman who made a home for her brood in a raw Kansas town after the Civil War, as seen through the eyes of one of her daughters.

By Sara Henderson Hay

AT FIRST glance, Gilbert Rees's "Respectable Women" appears to be another candidate for that already groaning shelf of books about eccentric relatives and helter-skelter growings-up in out-of-the-way places and situations. It is a folksy reminiscence in the Mark Twain tradition, a mixture of ingenuousness and exaggeration, of naivete and salty wit, a homespun chronicle shot through with flashes of startling color and beauty. What gives it a difference is the subtle shift of emphasis from the story told to the storyteller; from a re-creation, however authentic and picturesque, of a colorful era to the poetic and sensitive creation of a character—the ostensible narrator, Clara Barnes. It can be safely assumed, I think, that Mr. Rees is not, at this writing, an old lady of 110 or thereabouts, reminiscing about life in Kansas around the 1870s. That he has made Clara, through the medium of her own speech and thought, as real as flesh and blood is a considerable feat of imaginative projection.

Clara was a little girl when the family came to Pike, Kansas, to the raw young Midwest in the latter part



—Howard Severson.

Ethel Wilson—"warmth, amusement."

of the nineteenth century. "Ma almost fainted when she saw the main street. The main street of Pike was a mud-hole between twelve saloons and a general store. Yes, those were fiddles all right and cowboys, my goodness, their legs were like doughnuts, they were that bowed, and they wore high heels on their boots and they hopped from one saloon to the next in packs. . . ." Dad was going to make his fortune, but he never did. Dad was a debonair, visionary no-good, a fiddle-playing whiskey-drinking woman-chaser, and irresistible to everyone, including Ma, whom he could always, or nearly always, get around.

Ma had a passion for respectability, and she was run so ragged trying to keep her family respectable, not to mention fed and clothed, that she had no time to be gentle and tender. But she was proud and brave, and Clara her daughter remembered her "that stood so strong against the wind, that was warmth and food and shelter and never let us hunger, never let us thirst. That hid the black world from us with her skirts. Watched day and night, always there, kept back storms and silence. . . ."

Clara's simple story is told with an artless, unselfconscious intimacy of style which is extremely appealing. Some of the incidents have a rowdy, Americana flavor of tall-tale humor, some are matter of factly grim, some are poignant and moving. The freshness and vividness of imagination and response, the homely vigorous dignity of its folk-speech give Mr. Rees's book an extraordinary charm.

Spy-Thrill Hugger-Mugger

"The Midnight Patient," by Egon Hostovsky (Appleton-Century-Crofts. 278 pp. \$3), tells of the attempt of a somewhat mad refugee physician to assist the FBI by upsetting morale behind the Iron Curtain.

By Harrison Smith

ALTHOUGH Egon Hostovsky is the author of thirteen novels and volumes of short stories, and twice the recipient of Czechoslovakia's highest literary award, his work is almost unknown in the United States, where he has been living for the last five years, an exile from his country's Communist regime. It is obvious that Mr. Hostovsky's American publishers intend to put an end to this anonymity through use of the increasingly common and often annoying device of plastering the jacket of a novel with laudatory comments of well-known critics obtained long before publication. Thus, the purchaser of "The Midnight Patient" is assured before he opens the book that "it takes a stand for the values of trust in a world dominated by fear," that it is "highly unusual in every way," "a psychological thriller which reads magnificently," and that "Mr. Hostovsky has written an important tract for our times."

Nevertheless, after Graham Greene, Alfred Kazin, Malcolm Cowley, and Lewis Mumford have described the virtues of the plot of this novel, there still remains something for the book reviewer to say. To begin with, while "The Midnight Patient" is undoubtedly a story of espionage and counter-espionage, the moral issues of our time are not revealed by "the very simplicity with which the plot is constructed." It is actually more complex, involved, and befuddling than the most difficult of Graham Greene's novels.

The story describes the quite unbelievable adventures of a confused and ill Czech psychiatrist living in New York who has abandoned his practice and whose only activity consists in his daily visits to his former mistress. Dr. Arnost Malik is approached by a man who calls himself Colonel Howard, head of the Psychological Warfare Institute of the FBI. It appears that years before someone sent the Bureau a document

proposing an elaborate scheme for using radio broadcasting to bring about a sort of mass insanity behind the Iron Curtain. It was designed to terrify Bolshevik leaders by inventing crimes and treacheries they had never committed, to multiply distrust, extend purges, and leave everyone afraid of his own shadow. Colonel Howard offered the doctor \$20,000 if he would reestablish his office. His first client would be a high-level super-espionage agent, known only as Alfons, who would visit him only at night. The legion of Communist spies in New York would observe that the Czech doctor had reopened his office and would naturally send him their own agents, all of whom would also counterfeit mental illnesses. American spies would also be present as patients and would thus trap the Russians.

TO THE reader this devious and harebrained scheme, far from being a minor device in the attempt to cure world hysteria, or to end "the struggle of modern man as he attempts to escape from his earth-bound purgatory," would only make confusion twice confounded. It inevitably produces scenes, as Graham Greene says, "of excitement and nightmare humor." Indeed, nearly everyone in the novel appears to be insane, including Dr. Malik and the head of the Bureau, who had interested himself so long in the subversive activities of the enemy that he had planned his own attack on human society.

The doctor's house and office are soon surrounded with armed agents of both persuasions. His sleepless patient Alfons swallows a bottle of narcotic pills and goes to sleep with a time bomb under his pillow. Colonel Howard shoots himself when his contacts with the enemy are discovered. Most of the doctor's visitors commit suicide, or are killed, and a fat woman spy tries to seduce him and then steals all of his money. In the end, of all the leading actors in this confusing drama, Dr. Malik is the only one who remains alive. In fact, when the FBI hauls him in for investigation, his questioner says, "Doctor, if you call that a story, you are as crazy as you look. It sounds fine; but it has no beginning or end."

To this reviewer it would seem to be one of the few logical or sane
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—Ladislav Dejnoska.

Egon Hostovsky—"nightmare humor."