

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

LADY IN THE LAKE

(M-G-M)

 BOTH the films reviewed this week are based on novels by Raymond Chandler and both of them feature Mr. Chandler's private detective hero, Philip Marlowe, a rugged individualist with few moral scruples who, impersonated by Dick Powell in *Murder My Sweet* and by Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep*, has already participated in a much greater amount of violent crime than comes the way of the average screen character. In the new films, neither the author nor his hero show any marked divergence from type; so far the stories themselves go, both *Lady in the Lake* and *The Brasher Doubloon* are hard-hitting, formalised "whodunits," cluttered with corpses and reeking with red herrings. But it is the treatment of *Lady in the Lake* which sets it apart and proves that something new can still come out of Hollywood.

Mere novelty is not enough in itself to justify high praise, though it may merit attention. And it must be admitted that a complicated crime story is by no means ideal material for the imaginative experiment which Robert Montgomery carries out in *Lady in the Lake* (he is the director as well as the

star). Something more straightforward would, I think, have been better suited to Montgomery's highly subjective method of narration: nothing less than the virtually complete identification of the audience with the hero who tells the story. Montgomery achieved this by acting the part with the camera strapped to his shoulders; so that, in effect, the camera-lens becomes the eyes of the hero and the audience looks at everything from his viewpoint. Apart from an introductory sequence when Montgomery, as Private Detective Marlowe, sits at a desk and introduces himself, and a similar sequence about half-way through, we never see the hero except when reflected in a mirror or as a hand opening a door or lighting a cigarette. His voice we hear throughout, of course, taking part in the dialogue, talking tough to the tough heroine (Audrey Trotter) and to the other characters of various shades of criminality, in the manner expected of Mr. Chandler's Mr. Marlowe.

As I say, a simpler story might have been better to launch this innovation. The camera "I" technique attracts so much of one's attention that it is not always easy to follow the tortuous plot (involving a scheming woman editor, a missing wife, and at least four cases of

homicide). If you try to concentrate on solving the mystery, as you are invited to do, you cannot appreciate fully the ingenuity of the direction: if you concentrate on the technique you may lose your way in the story.

For my own part, I was more interested in the technique. It is, of course, not entirely revolutionary. Several other movies have used the camera in this way to gain a momentary effect: but Montgomery is the first Hollywood director to have employed it throughout a film with such whole-hearted enthusiasm—with the result that when the hero is hit with a knuckle-duster the audience itself seems to be taking it on the chin, and when the heroine is in affectionate mood she advances with parted lips and kisses the camera full on the lens. Though this is probably as close as most of us will ever get to being kissed, by a Hollywood star, the technique as a whole has certain disadvantages, and I share the qualms of William Whitebait (of *The New Statesman*) who, in expressing the hope that the idea would not be generally adopted, declared that he would hate to see the world through the eyes of Lassie, or Rita Hayworth, or Frank Sinatra.

All the same, despite the horrid prospect thus opened before us, Robert Montgomery, while not wholly successful, deserves to be congratulated on the imagination and enterprise which he has shown in his first big assignment as a director.

THE BRASHER DOUBLOON

(20th Century-Fox)

 COMPARED with *Lady in the Lake*, this is a very orthodox thriller of the rough-and-tumble school. Philip Marlowe this time is played by George Montgomery: so far as I know he is no relation to Robert, and he has little of his skill and polish. His present assignment is to trace a rare coin, called the Brasher Doubloon, which has disappeared from a collection owned by a tyrannical dowager (Florence Bates). The old girl also possesses a large house, an unpleasant son (Conrad Janis), a terrified secretary (Nancy Guild), a biting tongue, and a sinister secret. In the course of his investigations, Marlowe runs into plenty of trouble at the hands of the police as well as at the hands of the criminal element, but finds some compensation in teaching the pretty secretary to cure herself of a peculiar nervous complaint—she dislikes being touched by men. However, she is a willing enough patient, and by the end of the picture her cure is complete.

This is a comparatively new approach to screen love-making, especially for Philip Marlowe, an amorous type as well as a hard-boiled one, who usually collects a girl or two without any such difficulty in every screen play in which he figures. But the real interest of this

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