

Little Miss Marker

By John F. Kasson

“Little Miss Marker” is a film about losers and winners, heels and heroes, defeat and dreams. Released during the Great Depression in May 1934, it charmed audiences eager for comedy and sentiment, hope and redemption. In March of the previous year, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously declared, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” and in its own way “Little Miss Marker” showed how confidence and cheer could triumph over gloom and suspicion. Loosely based on a Damon Runyon short story, the second of a score adapted to the screen, the movie casts a cheerful and trusting little girl into the unlikely custody of a motley mob of raffish bookies, race-horse touts, gangsters, gold-diggers, pugs, mugs, and petty crooks. The film also cast Shirley Temple, still under six years old when the movie was made, into her first starring role. Her co-star and comic foil, the elegant, urbane Adolphe Menjou played against type as a sour, scruffy, and stingy bookie with the wonderfully Runyonesque name of Sorrowful Jones. Lynne Overman brought his sardonic nasal delivery to Sorrowful’s clerk Regret, burly Charles Bickford swaggered as the gangster Big Steve, and Willie Best sleepily pushed a broom in the painfully stereotypical role of Dizzy Memphis. As Big Steve’s sometime girlfriend Bangles Carson, nineteen-year-old former beauty queen Dorothy Dell squeezed into a low-cut gown and sang torch-songs. Perhaps her best performance, it was also one of her last. She died in a car crash a month after the film’s release.

Still, the movie belongs to the little girl with the dimpled beaming smile and precisely fifty-six blonde pin curls, Shirley Temple. As she later recounted in her autobiography, “Child Star,” at her initial audition she danced briefly and was shown the door. But then, shortly after she made “Stand Up and Cheer!” for Fox Film Corporation, her steel-willed mother, Gertrude Temple, plunged through the Paramount studio gates and coaxed the movie’s director, Alexander Hall to give her daughter a second chance. He asked her to say “Aw, nuts,” and “Scram”—two pieces of dialogue in the script. She did so, and the audition was over. She got the part.

That part helped to establish key elements of Shirley Temple movies for years to come: a motherless, often completely orphaned but indomitably cheerful little girl who sings upbeat songs, restores hopes, melts hearts, and brings couples together to be her parents and loving protectors. In “Little Miss Marker” her mother is dead at the outset, and almost immedi-



Studio publicists reckoned they’d sell more tickets if they pictured a sexy woman (Dorothy Dell) instead of an curly-topped moppet (Shirley Temple) on their movie poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.

ately she loses her father as well. A well-spoken man, now destitute and desperate, he pleads with an off-track bookmaker to take his little daughter as security for a twenty-dollar bet. In the argot of bettors, she is his “marker,” his I. O. U. Menjou’s Sorrowful Jones at first turns him down flat. But Shirley Temple’s Marthy instantly pierces through his callous façade to see into his emotional depths. Looking intently at him, she says, “You’re afraid of my daddy. Or you’re afraid of me. You’re afraid of something.” She identifies fear as the chief obstacle to a healthy sentimental economy as Roosevelt did for the financial one. Sorrowful lifts her up and returns her searching gaze. “Take his marker,” he tells his astonished assistant, Regret. “A little doll like that is worth twenty bucks, any way you look at it.” Regret replies sardonically, “Yeah, she ought to melt down for that much.”

When her father loses his wager, instead of reclaiming his daughter, he turns on the gas in his room and kills himself. Little Marthy, an unredeemed I. O. U. becomes Little Marky, punning on the word “marker.” Reluctantly contemplating turning over Marky to the police, Sorrowful sees a way to turn the little girl into gold: he makes her titular owner of a racehorse, the true owner, Big Steve, having been suspended from racing because of infractions.

Sorrowful is not just a bookie but a comic version of the disillusioned, untrusting economic man of the Depression, with a single worn suit, no family, and no woman on whom to lavish gifts or affection. The film has already suggested that his stinginess sank any possibility of romance with the beautiful nightclub singer, Bangles Carson. Emotionally as well as financially, he is a tightwad.

Little Marky melts his frozen feelings and also loosens his purse strings. When Bangles orders new clothes to replace Marthy’s one thin dress, Sorrowful pays for them without complaint. Soon, he moves out of his tiny fleabag to a spacious modern apartment. Still later, he buys a new suit and makes a resplendent appearance. The economics of consumer spending and sentiment turn together.

Orphaned by her father’s suicide, Marthy is sustained by a children’s book about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. She projects their titles and attributes onto the raffish characters about her, with unintentional mock-heroic effect. The gamblers pin their hopes on Dream Prince and similar horses, or, like Sorrowful, Regret, and Bangles, they no longer truly dream of anything. Yet when Marky

starts to adopt their tough talk and to give up on her storybook fantasies, they avidly seek to restore her wondrous innocence by arranging an elaborate Arthurian ball. These doubly-depressed adults need the emotional qualities of childhood, including the ability to play and pretend, every bit as much as children do. The plot contains still more twists and turns, and ultimately Marky repairs the broken relationship between Sorrowful and Bangles—and even turns the gangster Big Steve from a heel to a hero.

The work of emotional repair of adults’ relationships became a strong and abiding theme in Shirley Temple’s films. Caring, often emotionally wounded men receive a second chance to resume upright lives, gain the love and admiration of a child—and the love and admiration of a woman as well. Depression audiences yearned for cheer and second chances, and such movies made Shirley Temple the world box-office champion from 1935 through 1938 and the greatest child celebrity in the history of entertainment. Shirley Temple Black died in 2014, two months before her eighty-sixth birthday, but her performance eighty years earlier in “Little Miss Marker” still shines with the cheer of childhood.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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