FOUR FIRST NOVELS

By Sidney Williams

IN Walter Gilkyson's "Oil" one occasionally feels he cares too much about the texture of his prose. Most novelists do not care enough. If Mr. Gilkyson suspends action to look at a landscape, at least his observation is worthwhile. He possesses a high order of pictorial vision, at once ocular and intellectual. Witness this vision of twilight at sea:

> The violet light drifted out of the East and the waves slowly darkened, sweeping in purple gleams to the horizon; the crimson flush had faded from the sky, changed to a yellow glow, infinitely remote above a low girdling bank of clouds. Beyond the smokestack the circle of the moon shone with a faint silvery pallor. The swift tropic night was falling upon the sea, dim, odorous, palpable, enfolding the dusk in its blue moonlit shadow.

"Oil" is a first novel proceeding naturally from the author's occasional short stories, marked by distinction of style and ardent interest in life's finer issues. Mr. Gilkyson is an artist whose heart and head are at odds. The romancer encounters the realist.

His story has to do with the danger encompassing an American who, in the unstable condition of so many men returned from the world war, is menaced ethically by association with a superior shark in the oil business, and tempted to the threshold of domestic disaster by the promoter's daughter. An accident nearly costing his life breaks a spell, and restores him to what is known as "right living". The scene is laid in Philadelphia, Tampico, and the Mexican oil fields. Oil, which Mr. Gilkyson visualizes as "the great steady flow, unceasing, invariable, a symbol of invisible power, of incalculable energy", is really subordinate to the story's purely personal interest. Mr. Gilkyson turns imperiously to his happy ending. To that point his characters are reasonable in their behavior, and warmly human.

"Talk" is a notable début. Its clarity, its pungency, and Emanie Sachs's gift of compression set it apart. Without the artist's feeling for music of speech, but with a compelling passion for truth, Mrs. Sachs discloses the life of a woman warped by pressure of public opinion, and the collective existence of a self satisfied Kentucky town. For Delia Morehouse to run a bookstore after her marriage is preposterous to Merville. So a woman unhandy in housework is badgered into becoming a domestic drudge. Then, when later life holds no interest sweeter than pots and pans, sudden wealth finds her again out of place in a jazzy fusion of youth with middle age. Now the onetime revolutionist is a hopeless reactionary. Life has been hard to Delia.

Here is a quarter century in the life of a woman, and the life of a town, carried through in some three hundred pages with no feeling of shifts in the dark. The poise, the intelligence, the cool humor of Mrs. Sachs are admirable.

"Is the importance of sex exaggerated?" queries the publisher of "Who

Would Be Free". It is, by those who talk about it most of the time and seemingly think of nothing else. In true sense, however, the question has little to do with Marian Spitzer's novel.

Though she shrinks from "my now little girl" and kindred appellations, Elly Hoffman's hesitancy about marriage is mostly due to poverty of feeling and lack of the economic urge. These drawbacks — if one regards marriage as woman's supreme goal — plus enough talent to net interesting contacts, account for her aversion to mere anchorage with a husband, and her resistance to agreeable Steve. Lacking money, she would have married him and been a contented wife.

Failing as a thesis, if meant to be one, Miss Spitzer's story shows Jewish-American society of the better sort in clear light, and the inevitable liberality of the younger generation set against the equally inevitable conservatism of the elder. The author takes pride in plain speaking.

Why is a red haired, green eyed woman always inscrutable — in fiction? That is the only conventional touch in Solita Solano's story of "The Uncertain Feast". Otherwise it is marked by diligent effort to express the truth.

The "Uncertain Feast" is holy matrimony. Miss Solano's study of David Geer's misadventure therein might be styled "The Tragedy of a Mean Soul". For, cruel and stingy, and crude to boot, he is still tortured by suspicious passion for the woman from another sphere who for a reason evident to the reader, though Daniel evades complete conviction, condescends to roil his life.

Impeccable in its psychology, and written with vigorous sophistication, this is a story for readers past their freshman year. One wonders a little where Miss Solano, herself a newspaper writer, found the original of Daniel, so gauche for a New York editor-in-chief — as he further wonders how Daniel, apparently nourished in Newark, acquired the wealth of erotic, esoteric, and classical similes trooping through his mind. But this has no bearing on the essential veracity of the story.

Oil. By Walter Gilkyson. Charles Scribner's Sons.
Talk. By Emanie Sachs. Harper and Bros.
Who Would Be Free. By Marian Spitzer. Boni and Liveright.
The Uncertain Feast. By Solita Solano. G. P. Putnam's Sons.