

# WHITHER HITCHCOCK?

## SHADOW OF A DOUBT

(Universal)

WHAT is the one quality above all others which distinguishes the really successful thriller, whether it is a classic ghost story or simply a tale of crime? Without wishing to be didactic, I would suggest that it is its power to convey a feeling that normal, everyday life rests on very insecure foundations; that if you crack the surface crust you will find unimagined evil seething and spawning just underneath it; that if you lift the stone, all kinds of slimy horrors will be revealed. Or, if it is a ghost story, that just beyond the realm of the natural, always ready to encroach on it, lies the territory of the supernatural.

There is nothing supernatural about *Shadow of a Doubt*, but it is undoubtedly a thriller, and it depends for its success, as most of Alfred Hitchcock's pictures do, on just this suggestion of a threat to the normal placidity and security of existence. For Hitchcock's latest attempt to give an audience some agreeably nasty moments, Thornton Wilder has supplied a screenplay about an ordinary Californian town and an average middle-class family in it, and what happens when Uncle Charlie pays them a visit from New York. Uncle Charlie is mother's youngest brother, a man-about-town, handsome, charming, wealthy, generous with his gifts and full of good works. Nearly everybody loves and lionises him, and when he is killed at the last by falling off a train, the whole town turns out to mourn him at the funeral. Only his attractive niece (who, in the quaint manner of American nomenclature, is also called Charlie) and the young detective who loves her, know that Dear Uncle Charlie had made a practice of strangling rich widows and that he got killed while trying to push his niece off the train because she knew too much.

The audience knows this too, of course: in fact it has suspected something from the very first sequence, when Uncle Charlie is seen dodging out of New York to escape the notice of two men who are interested in his movements. But thereafter the audience's realisation of the horrid secret keeps pace with the niece's own discoveries of curious little details about her once-adored uncle—such as his aversion to being photographed, the way he tears items out of newspapers, his dislike of the "Merry Widow" waltz, and his annoyance when mother announces that two men are coming to the house to collect information for a Gallup poll.

IT is the way in which Hitchcock piles up these casual, innocent details to make a sinister whole that gives *Shadow of a Doubt* its fascination. He does it unhurriedly, nonchalantly, almost, but each revelation, coming on top of the last, heightens the suspense. And even when the truth about charming Uncle Charlie is finally made known to the audience and to his niece, there is still the problem of what she will do about her knowledge—and what Uncle Charlie will do about it, too.

For this tale of terror in small town life, Hitchcock has assembled an extremely competent cast. Much depends

on the two principals. Joseph Cotton (who had a leading role in *Citizen Kane*) has here no ordinary criminal to portray. He has to show us a man who is haunted as well as hunted; who tries to keep up a bold and disarming front, but who constantly betrays his own terror of discovery by his very defiance and ruthlessness. For there is a psychological twist to this thriller (mother tells us at one stage that "dear Charlie" hurt his head and was very delicate as a boy), and it is this excursion into the realms of psychology that does much to differentiate *Shadow of a Doubt* from most other Hitchcock pictures.

Teresa Wright (the girl who died in *Mrs. Miniver*) plays the niece; plays her with sensitivity and the same understanding of the character as Cotton shows in his. It is, indeed, through her eyes and her mind that the narrative is unfolded: it is almost as if she is telling the story in the first person. And that is a very difficult effect for any actress to create, especially when the script is not actually written that way.

*SHADOW OF A DOUBT* is a notable film, particularly perhaps for connoisseurs. But the question it has left in my mind, and in the minds of some others with whom I have been discussing it, is "Where does Hitchcock go from here?" For this film is different from his other successes. It is more subtle, for one thing, and—as I have already suggested—it is more psychological (horrible word!). And for another thing, Hitchcock is telling his story in a new way. Some will think he is telling it almost in the idiom of Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane*. He sometimes has action and conversation happening on two planes at once: he shoots scenes from funny angles; he leaves a lot to your imagination, sometimes too much.

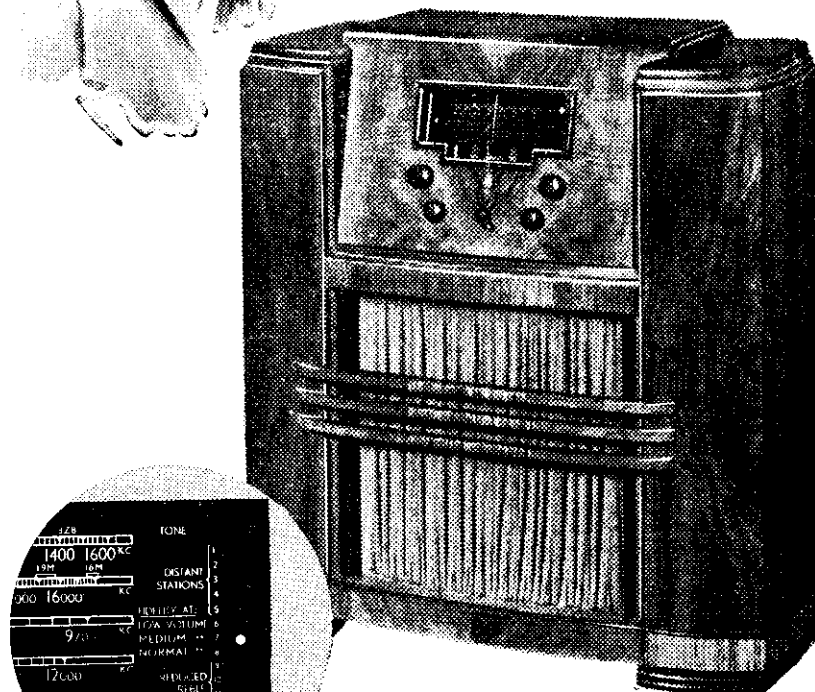
But the question really is, Do we want Hitchcock to do this sort of thing? If this is where he is going, mightn't we prefer him to stay where he is? Chaplin was the genius of pure pantomime, but he got tired of that, and interested in politics, and the results were *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*; Disney made himself the master of the straight cartoon with Mickey Mouse and the Silly Symphonies, but now he wants to experiment in abstract art and propaganda. And Hitchcock has long been the cinema's acknowledged genius of the fast-moving thriller: his *Man Who Knew Too Much* and his *Lady Vanishes* were masterpieces of their kind. So is *Shadow of a Doubt* a masterpiece, but it is of another kind. Like Chaplin and Disney, Hitchcock is branching out, is now seeking fresh worlds to conquer. Well, some of us might prefer that any man who does one kind of job supremely well should be content to go on doing it—but good luck to him all the same!

## A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

(Columbia)

BUT not a night to remember for very long—just a mildly pleasant evening, as Brian Aherne and Loretta Young, as a typically irresponsible cinema couple, behave in a typically crazy way throughout a typically involved and confusing murder-mystery.

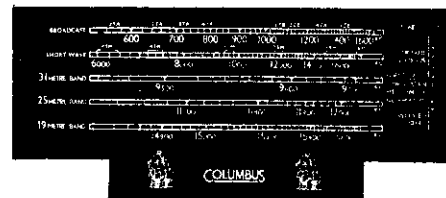
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