


# GOODIES and BADDIES

## I'LL WALK BESIDE YOU

(B.E.F.)

 THE heading of my column this week refers not to the quality of the films reviewed, but to the moral stature of the people in them. They offer an interesting contrast. Those in the British film *I'll Walk Beside You* are wholly nice people; nice, kind people, conscientious, warm-hearted, and self-sacrificing, whom you could suitably recommend to the notice of your children and neighbours as types to emulate (and might even do worse than copy yourself). Those in the American film, on the other hand, are aggressive, acquisitive, violent, or downright criminal. The nearest approach to a redeeming motive in the character who plays the hero's part (that of a private detective) in *The Maltese Falcon* is that he wants revenge on the gangsters who killed his partner, not because he particularly liked his partner (he had in fact been conducting a love affair with the fellow's wife behind his back!), but just because the murdered man was his partner and to leave him unrevenged would presumably be contrary to business ethics. As for the other characters in the story they were, I imagine, only acceptable to the Hays Office because they all come to a bad end.

The nationality of these two particular films is, of course, purely coincidence. You are just as likely, on other occasions, to find bad characters in British films as in American ones; and, conversely, many a Hollywood production contains characters who glow with sweetness and light. But granted that the cinema has some social purpose and influence, the general question does arise as to which type of film best serves that purpose: one which shows human nature at its most admirable, or one which shows it in a less agreeable mood.


One school of thought would, indeed, argue that it is always the quality of the human material that is most important: that if a man is intrinsically a good man it doesn't matter whether he is a Tory or a Socialist, an Italian or an Eskimo. Thus, what really counted in *Colonel Blimp*, for instance, was that both the leading characters were naturally good men, not that one was a Blimp and the other a Junker. As against this there is the argument that a man is largely what he believes; that it is impossible to separate character from conviction.

The trouble, dramatically, is that human nature being what it is, bad people are usually more interesting than good ones. Angels are not merely unreal: they are too often wishy-washy. At any rate, it seems to require much greater skill in a book, play, or film, to hold the interest with a wholly good character than with one who is spectacularly wicked. My own view is in the direction of compromise. I believe that the main function of the cinema, as of any other art, is to present truth; so that while it would certainly be an anti-social move if vice were consistently depicted on the screen as alluring and glamorous, it would be equally wrong and misleading if virtue were over-emphasised.

ANYWAY, if you are in a mood for virtue, and enjoy simple pleasures, I can recommend *I'll Walk Beside You*. It would be easy enough to be cynical about this picture, because it has so plainly set out to tug at all the available heart-strings, with a naive little romance about a sailor who loses his memory and doesn't recognise the girl who has waited so faithfully for him, with a collection of English rural types for comedy and local colour (including good old Percy Marmont as a country parson), and with enough sentimental music for a ZB Request Session. The pace is pedestrian (but then, it's *I'll Walk*, not *Run*, *Beside You*), and the production, direction, and acting are a bit ragged at the edges. In fact, this is a "typically British" picture; by which I mean, in the cinema sense, that it is completely lacking in the slickness and sophistication which characterise such a typical Hollywood production as *The Maltese Falcon*. Yet, for all that, there is something very endearing, very warm-hearted, and very worthwhile about *I'll Walk Beside You*. Rather curiously, perhaps, it reminded me strongly of a Russian film called *A Musical Story*: mainly I think because the heroine (Lesley Brook) is such a genuine and natural type, as little like the usual screen glamour girl as the hero (Richard Bird) is like the conventional screen hero, and also because such effective use is made of homely comedy and sentiment.

## THE MALTESE FALCON

(Warner Bros.)

 IT has taken nearly four years for *The Maltese Falcon* to get around to my part of the world, and I cannot help feeling that the bird's plumage may have lost a little of its sheen in that time. For one thing we have probably seen some of the imitations before we have had the chance to see the original. But it still remains a good thriller about bad people — a Dashiell Hammett story about a group of very determined crooks double-crossing one another in order to gain possession of the bejewelled statuette of a falcon and all mixed up with a private detective (Humphrey Bogart) who is even tougher than they are. As social types not one of them is worth a moment of your sympathy; as characters in an improbable but exciting situation they are good for an evening's entertainment—if this is the sort of entertainment you like.

Sidney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre in particular are brilliantly sinister—Sidney Greenstreet with the huge girth, the deep laugh, the By Gad, sir, I like you, sir, by Gad I do, you're a character if you don't mind my saying so; and Peter Lorre, showing everyone what acting really is in a part that makes him into a ridiculous little, greedy little, soft little, whining little money-grabber. And Elisha Cook Jr., the drummer boy of *Phantom Lady* is there, too, in another nasty little triumph of acting. And Mr. Bogart himself, so hard the bullets would glance off him if he ever gave anybody a chance to take a shot before he dropped him.

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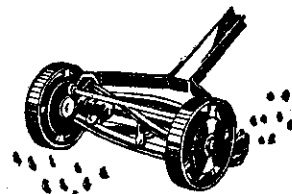
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