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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

MRS. PARKINGTON

(M-G-M)



[T would be a good idea if every now and then all of us—and especially the critics—took a long holiday from picture-going. As it is there is a real danger that, through constant attendance at the movies, we are subjecting ourselves to the "hypnosis of mediocrity." Any critical standards we may have are being insidiously undermined, not because we are seeing a succession of films which are intolerably bad, but because week after week we are seeing films which are not bad at all—but none of which is quite as good as it ought to be. If they were intolerable we could reject them outright and take to crossword puzzles or politics as an alternative diversion, but every time we do accept them—"Oh well, it's quite enjoyable. Nothing startling you know, but quite the best thing on in town, and certainly better than that show last week"—every time we do accept such films our critical faculties are washed away by just that fraction. Familiarity breeds not contempt, but tolerance. That is why I suggest that long movie holidays would be good for all of us, because when we came back we would probably realise how far from being worth while are some of the pictures which are now accepted as world-beaters.

THESE thoughts occurred to me on seeing *Mrs. Parkington*. To many people they may seem ungenerous thoughts because this really is a very competent production, handsomely mounted, very well acted in parts, and with quite an interesting story. But that, of course, is precisely the reason why I think it necessary to express them. You have to be specially on guard with a film like *Mrs. Parkington*. There is so much surface brilliance; you sit looking at it fascinated while Messrs. M.G.M. keep making the familiar passes in front of your face and repeating the accustomed formulae; and soon you are in a happy state of hypnotic trance, quite ready to accept the general proposition that you are watching a work of art and any other particular suggestions that the producer cares to put forward.

I was pretty well under the influence myself until that scene where Greer Garson, as the innocent country girl of the 'nineties on her honeymoon in a luxurious suite with the dashing Major Parkington (Walter Pidgeon) asks with wide-eyed wonder, "Is that really gaslight?" As he reached up to turn off the light I had murmured to myself the next line of dialogue before he could utter it—"It was gaslight." Somehow that cliché broke the spell for me, and when the Major a few scenes later revealed himself as another of those husbands who don't know they are soon to become fathers until the news is touchingly revealed to them, I was, so to speak, wide awake. Perhaps that conventional display

of ignorance was true to period, but the Major, after all, was supposed to be very much a man-of-the-world, and anybody who was such an expert at running Wall Street and bringing business competitors to ruin and suicide would surely not have been so surprised that Nature was taking its course in another way. And then there was that episode where Mrs. Parkington goes off to England to rescue her gallant Major from the clutches of the titled beauty who has become the mistress of his luxurious household, and presumably of his bed-chamber, during the hunting season. Edward Prince of Wales is here introduced as the fairy godfather who disposes of the cuckoo in the nest by summarily ordering her to become a lady-in-waiting to Mamma Victoria. On the ground of irreverence towards sacred institutions, some picturegoers may object to Hollywood's frivolous treatment of Edward, but that wasn't what worried me: in fact, I enjoyed Cecil Kellaway's handling of the royal role. What I did find hard to stomach was the proposition that Mamma Victoria would have accepted so dubious a character into her retinue at Edward's simple request.

HOWEVER, though they do all add up, these are only details. There are other more important reasons in *Mrs. Parkington* to keep reminding yourself that what you are looking at is only the product of half-a-million dollars and not great art. The method of narration is difficult and quite ingenious; a kind of double-exposure, with two main themes running side by side. One theme concerns the romance of Susie, the girl from the boarding-house in Leaping Rock, Nevada, and how she married and tamed the Major and helped him build an empire of finance. The other theme, developed concurrently, shows Mrs. Parkington as a regal old widow in modern times, dealing with the nastiest imaginable bunch of parasitical relatives, headed by Grandson Amory, a Wall Street wizard who has embezzled 31 million dollars.

By almost any standards other than those of Hollywood, both the Major and his grandson are bad lots. Indeed on several occasions the Major does gaily confess himself to be a scoundrel—but since in the next breath he declares that no matter what happens he will always love his Susie, you must be prepared to forgive him everything, and what is more, like him. Prepared, that is, unless you are in a cantankerously critical frame of mind which enables you to see that, in spite of the attempt to suggest that the Major behaved legitimately because he gambled only with his own money and ruined only his colleagues on Wall Street, while Amory used other people's money and robbed widows and orphans, the only valid distinction between the two characters is that the Major was successful and looked like Walter Pidgeon, whereas Amory was

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