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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

MORE REALISM

A FEW additional comments seem to be called for on the list of film gradings for 1945 which was published the other week. When they studied it, those correspondents who have been accusing me of turning so pro-British that I am now practically a jingo, doubtless found confirmation of my Anglophile tendencies in the fact that five out of ten films which I chose as the best of last year were British-made. In case it escaped their notice, however, I should like to point out that several British films were included among the lower gradings, and that of the total of 16 stand-up claps for the year, 11 were awarded to American productions.

However, although the continued triumphant emergence of the 'British cinema was the most important screen fact of 1945, the next most important was, I think, the increasing emphasis placed on the "realistic" technique—as demonstrated by the documentary or semi-documentary type of film. At least three such films appeared among the stand-up claps in my list, and there were others in the lower categories. But most documentaries are, of course, supported rather than features, and so are not noticed in the usual way by the Little Man. In any case, it would appear that a good many documentaries are still not given the benefit of public release in the commercial theatres—a fact hard to explain when one compares their quality with the quality of many short films which are shown. Three of those I am about to mention were seen by me in 16 mm. form at semi-private screenings, and though I suggest that you watch out for them, I cannot guarantee that they have yet been publicly released or ever will be.

THE True Story of Lili Marlene is a half-hour production by Humphrey Jennings for the Crown Film Unit, telling how a nostalgic German tune became the favourite battle song of Montgomery's Eighth Army in the desert. The words (which are supposedly sung by a lonely girl waiting under a lamp-post for her lonely sentry sweetheart) were written in 1923 in Hamburg. The tune, with which everybody who owns a radio set is now familiar, was added to the words in Germany in 1938, and words and music were first popularised in a Berlin cabaret by a Swedish singer named Lala Andersen (who later went to a concentration camp for mildly criticising the Reich). When the Nazis entered Belgrade and took over the radio station there, a recording of "Lili Marlene" was sandwiched in among the propaganda messages that were broadcast. The homesick men of Rommel's Afrika Corps heard it, liked its nostalgic lilt, and made it their signature tune. But a catchy tune has no nationality, and it was not long before Montgomery's troops were also sitting around their radio sets listening in, and not long either before they were marching into battle singing it. As may

be gathered from this brief synopsis, this true story is by no means devoid of "human interest," and it has the almost invaluable cinematic asset of a catchy theme song. Humphrey Jennings has handled the subject with considerable skill and imagination, embellishing the facts with some legitimate fancy and all the time plugging the song in a variety of ways. "Lili Marlene" has, of course, a propagandist message to impart, and its greatest fault is that the producer was too conscious of his obligation to impart it. Accordingly, the film is burdened with a pretentious commentary, especially at the end. But if this ending were cut, *The True Story of Lili Marlene* would still be worth telling now that the war is over.

THE Silent Village, also made by Humphrey Jennings, suffers a similar handicap of having been produced for war purposes and therefore of being a trifle dated now. Here again, however, the deletion of the final few feet would largely remove this obstacle. The film re-enacts the story of Lidice, the Czechoslovak village wiped out by the Nazis in revenge for the assassination of Heydrich; but it does this, not by showing what actually happened, but what *might* have happened if the Nazis had occupied the Welsh mining village of Cymgiedd. This is a grim and angry little film, very moving in its use of Welsh music and of everyday men and women, not one of whom is a professional actor. The screen is not likely to produce a better memorial than this to the tragedy of Lidice.

THE Star and the Sand is a straightforward, almost reportorial account of an UNRRA camp set up for Yugoslav refugees in the Egyptian desert. Besides paying tribute to the hardness of the Yugoslavs and their determination to help themselves, it emphasises the "rehabilitation" aspect of UNRRA's work, as distinct from that of straight "relief."

BATTLE for Berlin is the official Russian film of the last terrific fight for Hitler's capital. I saw it at a private screening sponsored by the new Soviet Minister, who brought it with him to this country. Running for over an hour, it is distinguished by some of the most remarkably photography of battle scenes to have come out of the war (securing them undoubtedly cost the lives of several cameramen), and by clever montage effects with maps at the beginning. When the Russians open up with 22,000 guns in the attack on Berlin, the screen is probably even noisier than it was for the El Alamein offensive in *Desert Victory*. The film has a commentary in English, and in some ways this is the least satisfactory feature. It would be interesting to know whether this commentary is simply a translation of that in the original Russian version, or whether it was written specially for English-speaking audiences, for besides being