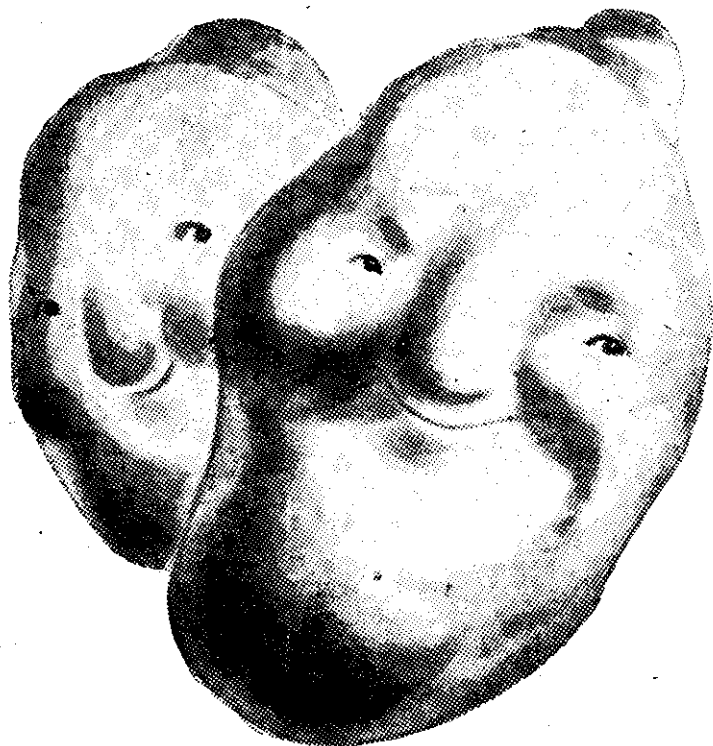




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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

## THE "PRESTIGE" PICTURE

### THE ADVENTURES OF MARK TWAIN

(Warner Bros.)



"USUALLY I read books from the viewpoint of the critic. But when I read Mark Twain's work I find myself enjoying it as a human being," says one of the characters in this film. And perhaps that is the spirit in which one should look at the film itself, though I am not prepared to surrender unconditionally. This is an essentially worthy and well-meant tribute to a great comic genius — and a well-deserved tribute, too. Anybody who can make millions laugh is a benefactor of the human race, and these days especially the world is not so rich in such benefactors that it can afford to forget Mark Twain. Though the film, like most tributes, is sometimes inclined to be prosy, self-conscious, and even a little dull, it does include a performance by Fredric March which is a triumph for the star (I doubt if I have ever seen him do better) as well as for the make-up artist; a large amount of authentic Twain in the dialogue, and several funny, exciting, and even moving sequences. Thanks largely to March, you do get a fairly vivid impression of Twain's rugged, sardonic, but lovable character. One has the feeling also that Warners have tried rather more conscientiously than is customary in Hollywood to adhere to the main facts of their subject. They are even on occasions over-conscientious, with the result that the authentic sequence of the banquet where Twain "insulted" Whittier, Longfellow, Emerson, and Holmes, falls flat; whereas the fictional representation of *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, which was the cause of Twain's sudden rise to fame, is not only a permissible device but a highly successful one. If the film does nothing more than revive some interest in Twain's writing, or even send some people, as it has sent me, into the libraries to check up on the facts of his life, it will have done something worth while.

WITHIN limits, then, Warner Bros. deserve credit for tackling the subject and for having added another title to a list of screen biographies which have brought some prestige to the screen, a list which already includes *Disraeli*, *Pasteur*, *Zola*, *Erlich*, and *Juarez*. It can scarcely be disputed that Warners have a finer record for making this type of "prestige" picture than any other studio. What, therefore, do I mean when I say that they deserve credit only within limits? The limits are not those of Warners alone; they are the limits of what, for want of a better term, must be called the Hollywood mentality. Whenever a studio decides to make what is known as a "prestige" picture, it must be aware at the outset that it will probably be an expensive production, and that in proportion to cost the takings are likely to be relatively small; but it starts off in the belief that the prestige gained among the critics and the more discriminating section of picturegoers will make the venture worthwhile. One

would think that the studio, having decided that on this occasion its rewards are likely to be found somewhat nearer to Heaven than the box-office, would continue undaunted to the end. Yet how seldom any studio does!

Very soon the producer becomes panic-stricken: he remembers his precious box-office and throws prestige to the winds. In an effort to safeguard his investment, he bespatters the production with handfuls of clichés and turns out all the Hollywood pigeonholes for stock situations. As a result he seldom succeeds in producing "box-office entertainment" and in recouping his expenditure; he succeeds only in alienating the discriminating picturegoers he originally set out to attract.

MARK TWAIN is a good example of this Hollywood fault of faint-heartedness. There is much material that is admirable; there is also a good deal that is banal and foolish, thrown in by the producer in a desperate attempt to retrieve the situation at the box-office. For example, the symbolism by which the appearance of Halley's Comet is made to mark the life-span of Twain is altogether too glib; the comet may, in fact, have done so, but one feels here that even the Heavens obey the convenience of Hollywood. Again, the explanation of why Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*—because he was heart-broken over the death of his baby boy and wanted to perpetuate for other little boys the memories which his own son could never enjoy—comes much too pat. And so on; there is no need to pile up the evidence. But the net result is that one gets the impression that Mark Twain lived and worked and died to suit Hollywood's purpose. Especially died: the final sequence in which Twain's spirit leaves his body and walks off into the inevitable Technicolour Heaven, with the inevitable Celestial Choir singing full bore, might have been put there for the express purpose of clinching my argument about prestige and the box-office. It strikes not one false note but a whole chord; and even if one accepted the sequence in the spirit the producer intended, it would still be off key. For surely a film about a great comic genius should send the audience away with a laugh instead of a lump in its throat.

(Note: For the purposes of this picture, the *Little Man's* companion should be regarded as in his teens. The film is quite suitable for children, but picturegoers younger than 12 are not likely to find much to interest them.)

### WEEK-END AT THE WALDORF

(M-G-M)



THIS is, on the whole, an entertaining and amusing show, one of those gorgeous, glossy, star-studded fabrications which Hollywood (and particularly M-G-M) knows so well how to produce. And though I would hesitate to recommend it to devotees of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Lorentz, there is a sense in which *Week-End at the Waldorf* is a social or historical document, as well as an entertainment, since it provides us, in nearly 12,000 feet, with an

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