

# AND NOW THE SCHOOLTEACHING CYCLE?

## ANNA AND THE KING OF SIAM

(20th Century Fox)

WE have had the medical, the religious, the psychological, and various other cycles in the cinema. Indeed, in the more precise colloquial sense, it would be correct to say we have "had" them. Now, it might seem, we are on the fringe of a pedagogical or teaching cycle. As is inevitable in such cases, the earlier examples of the trend will be the more exciting; soon, I am afraid, the dreary imitative process will be under way, and it will probably not be long before we are becoming as sick of schoolhouses and schoolteachers as we now are of consulting-rooms and neurotics. Meanwhile, however, the prospect is not unattractive. Education, the "romance of mind meeting mind," is likely to provide entertainment at least as adult and stimulating as the romance of boy meeting girl.

Perhaps I have insufficient evidence for my prediction of a pedagogical cycle. I am basing it, however, on the appearance of two important new pictures in both of which the leading character is a schoolmistress. *The Corn is Green*

(already reviewed) is an excellent drama set in fairly orthodox surroundings. *Anna and the King of Siam* is also excellent, but the setting is unusual enough to be correctly described as exotic. This film is based on Margaret Landon's biography of Anna Leonowens, an English widow who went in 1862 to the court of King Mongkut of Siam to teach school to his children, and who became a power behind his throne.

AS screen material, this biography contains certain great natural advantages, as well as a few serious inherent handicaps. Heading the assets is the spectacular setting, and Director John Cromwell makes good use of it. I am only surprised that he did not use technicolour to exploit to the full the barbaric splendour associated with an eastern potentate who went by such resounding titles as Disc of Light, Lord of Life, Brother of the Moon, Half-Brother of the Sun, Arbiter of the Tides, Possessor of the Four-and-Twenty Golden Umbrellas, and Commander of the White Elephants. "They run a bit to language here," confides the sea-captain who puts Anna Leonowens and her small son ashore at Bangkok. But though dazzled at first by

the magnificence of her surroundings in the Royal palace and harem, and a little disconcerted by the pagan ceremonial, Anna soon reveals herself a Victorian lady of strong character and purpose, capable of coping not merely with the education of the King's 67 children (at a rough count) and his dozens of wives, but also with the imperious whims of her royal master himself.

THIS brings me to the film's second outstanding asset: the mature and intelligent treatment of the relationship between Anna and the King of Siam. To a Hollywood director the temptation, and even the pressure, to introduce a conventional love-interest must have been very great. It would have been exceedingly easy to do; and there are moments when you think the director is on the verge of giving way to temptation. In fact, however, there is not even a hint of either Young or Middle-aged Love in the whole picture, except in so far as it is incidentally and spuriously supplied by one of His Majesty's wives. Instead of our being asked to interest ourselves in the affairs of the heart of the two leading characters, what absorbs us in *Anna and*

*the King of Siam* is the clash and communion of their minds — the English-woman, conscientiously wanting to do her best in her strange job but standing on her dignity and her rights (particularly her right to a home outside the palace); and the autocratic, wilful young ruler, anxious to educate himself and improve his backward country, but unwilling to come down off his regal perch and accept guidance from a mere woman. It is a highly explosive situation, but Anna does gradually entrench herself in favour. The story of how she does it, how she becomes the valued friend and counsellor of the king and his adolescent son, and how she changes local laws and customs and introduces Western ideas into Siam is told with ingenuity, wit, and (on the whole) very good taste. Almost the only thing missing is the dash of satire which I think should accompany any tale about the introduction of Western civilisation to an Eastern community. We are led to infer here that it was an un-mixed blessing.

SO I come to the third of the film's three notable assets: the performances of its stars, Irene Dunne and Rex Harrison. Miss Dunne acts with the dignity becoming a Victorian widow, but she also conveys the sense of humour and the forbearance essential to a woman in such remarkable circumstances as those which confronted Mrs. Leonowens.

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