

MAKERS OF BRITISH FILMS—NO. I.



CAROL REED, one of the men who have introduced a new spirit and a new excellence into British films. He was the director of "Laburnum Grove" (1936), "Bank Holiday" (1938), "The Stars Look Down" (1939), "Kipps" (1941), and "The Young Mr. Pitt" (1942), but his maturity as a film-maker dates from the later war years when he directed "The Way Ahead" (1944), and "The True Glory" (1945, with Garson Kariñ, of U.S.A.).

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Renoir, the Frenchman whose splendidly simple and honest film *The Southerner* came in for so much praise in this column a week or so ago. I think it may be kindest to suggest that Renoir lent himself to it in a mood of peevish perversity brought on by an acute attack of Hollywooditis, and is probably now regretting that he did.

True, there is a certain indefinable quality about some aspects of the new production—the costuming, the lighting, and the atmosphere of the little village—which, though indefinable, will possibly be defined by the cognoscenti as typically French: and it may be that, if I knew more about surrealism, dadaism, or even elementary psychology, I would appreciate what the co-producers, Benedict Bogeaus and Burgess Meredith, assisted by Director Renoir and the cast, are getting at in this version of Octave Mirbeau's 19th century story, *Celestine—The Diary of a Chambermaid*. However, at the risk of being immediately discarded by the cognoscenti as an ignoramus and a Philistine, I must reiterate that I found it a mess—as much of a mess as a painting by Salvador Dali, which it somehow resembles.

The scene is laid in France in the last quarter of the 19th century, and Paulette Goddard (in private life Mrs. Meredith) plays Celestine the chambermaid who goes to work for a rich provincial family in the hope of living a quieter and more profitable life than she has found in Paris. A wealthy husband is what she chiefly wants, and at least there is no lack of suitors. Almost from the moment she arrives she is pursued with amorous intentions by the

crazy old master of the house (Reginald Owen); by his even crazier old neighbour (Burgess Meredith) who capers madly about the garden hurling rocks into glasshouses and who subsists on a diet of roses and water-lilies which he gobbles up at every opportunity; by a sinister thieving valet (Francis Lederer) who has a nasty habit of killing geese by sticking a steel spike through their brains, and who finally disposes of that silly old goose, the flower-eater, by the same method; and by the son of the house (Hurd Hatfield, ex-Dorian Gray) who looks like R. L. Stevenson and is consumptive as well as neurotic. Two other choice specimens, both of whom appear to suffer from some form of Oedipus complex, are the mistress of the household and the fat housekeeper of Mr. Meredith, the former being also afflicted with severe class-consciousness.

Amid all these more or less pathological types, Miss Goddard somehow manages to retain her sanity and even succeeds eventually in getting herself a rich husband—True Love triumphs over T.B.—but I shall be surprised if any audience retains its patience let alone its sense of humour much past the point where the story ceases to be a joke and degenerates into a welter of novelettish melodrama.

BLACK ANGEL

(Universal)



THIS minor murder mystery is considerably more enjoyable than a good many more pretentious efforts, almost the least satisfactory thing about it being the title. This presumably refers to a jewelled brooch worn by and stolen from a blackmailing woman (Constance Dowling) on the evening when she is murdered by a person or persons unknown. The police, however, and a jury are in no doubt about who did it: a man who was being blackmailed is condemned to die. But while he is awaiting execution, his wife (June Vincent) starts looking for the missing brooch in the hope that she will find the real killer attached to it. She is assisted in her search by the husband of the murdered woman (Dan Duryea), and the trail leads them into some tight corners and the audience into some pretty exciting suspense. The tightest corner is occupied by Peter Lorre, as a nightclub owner with a murky past and a tough bodyguard.

While trying to find a satisfactory solution to the classic problem of whodunit, the story develops an interesting romance between the husband of the murdered woman and the wife of the condemned man: interesting, and quite refreshing, in that the wife remains faithful while obviously susceptible to Mr. Duryea's slightly saturnine charms. And Mr. Duryea isn't a simple type himself: he has a fondness for the bottle which makes parts of *Black Angel* resemble parts of *The Lost Weekend*. By withholding the reprieve of the condemned man until the last possible minute, even after the real murderer has revealed himself, the film prolongs itself almost to the point of anti-climax; but what with bouts of dipsomania, third-party romance, and visits to a nightclub, a director who appreciates the importance of detail, and skilled performances by Duryea, Lorre, Miss Vincent and others, *Black Angel* adds up to a neat and reliable thriller.

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