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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

BEWARE OF PITY

(Two Cities)



THIS is a type of film for which one can feel considerable admiration but not much warm affection. It is competent and intelligent, especially on the acting side, but, in spite of dealing with highly emotional material, the general effect is rather cold, depressing, and morbid. It certainly didn't succeed in arousing in me the feelings of sympathy for the leading characters which I feel sure it was the director's intention to arouse. And that wasn't because I was taking literally the film's injunction to beware of pity.

This J. Arthur Rank production is based on the novel by Stefan Zweig. It is set in Central Europe on the eve of the 1914-18 war, but probably in an effort to engage the attention of to-day's audiences the director has fitted it out with a modern prologue and epilogue in which the hero, a middle-aged veteran, is shown recounting his own 30-year-old romance for the guidance of a young airman of World War II, who is in much the same sort of emotional predicament as that in which the hero once found himself. This flash-back technique is becoming a bit hackneyed now; if a story is worth telling it should be worth telling straight, without wrapping it up as an improving parable. And the attempt to gain immediacy in this case is, I think, largely responsible for the film's failure to catch our sympathy, since paradoxically the effect is to make the main narrative seem remote. It is, after all, hard to feel sorry about something which, you have just been reminded, happened three decades ago.

In those days, we are told, the hero (Albert Levien), was a young Czech cavalry-officer who met and took pity on a beautiful but crippled baroness (Lilli Palmer) living in the castle near the village where his regiment was garrisoned. He gave her a great deal of his time and attention, and she mistook his pity for love. When she discovered her mistake she pushed herself over the parapet and killed herself.

There's a bit more to the plot than that, but not much, which means that in place of incident we get plenty of conversation. Hero and heroine spend most of the time discussing their emotions with one another, or with her father, or his fellow-officers, or the family doctor and the doctor's wife. The doctor, particularly, is full of philosophy and good advice on the need to distinguish between the ordinary kind of pity and the superior kind, which is compassion. The philosophising is maybe a little woolly, but the talk is mostly educated talk and worth listening to; the costumes were designed by Cecil Beaton and are worth seeing; the settings have an antique charm (30 years ago is a long time in European history); and the acting is nearly all worth watching. I don't think that either Lilli Palmer or Albert Levien quite succeed in bringing the hero and heroine to life, but I admire their earnest endeavours, especially those of Miss Palmer, who has an exceedingly difficult role to play as the frustrated, sensitive invalid. More

successfully defined, perhaps because less complex, are the characters of the doctor and his blind wife (played by Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Gladys Cooper). But I think that Ernest Thesiger overplays his part as the desperately unhappy father of the crippled girl: at any rate, far from making me feel sorry for the old man, he mostly made me feel impatient.

13 RUE MADELEINE

(20th Century-Fox)

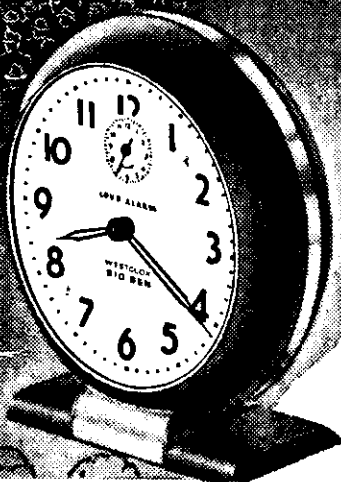


INSTEAD of making films about what allegedly happened on the fighting fronts during the late great war, Hollywood is now busily engaged in making thrillers about what allegedly happened behind them. This new production is the third or fourth allegedly based on the exploits of agents belonging to the Office of Strategic Services; and perhaps because it was made by the same team as made the first and best in the series *The House on 92nd Street*, and employs some of the same technique, it requires the use of the word "allegedly" rather less than either *Cloak and Dagger* and *O.S.S.*

Even so the film is a compromise, and might have been better if it had adhered to the outright fictional methods of *Cloak and Dagger* or, better still, if it had adopted the documentary style of *The House on 92nd Street*, instead of trying to combine both approaches. For the first part, and the best part, *13 Rue Madeleine* is almost straight documentary, showing with the impersonal precision of a March of Time the processes of training Allied secret agents. Pieces of newsreel and glimpses of actual places and persons are mixed with studio reconstructions and studio players, while a March of Time voice adds to the factual atmosphere. But when the story leaves American shores for Britain we feel, strange as it may seem, that we are leaving real life behind; and when the leading characters take a parachute jump into Occupied Europe they come down in what is, for the purposes of this film, almost wholly the realm of make-believe. At least that is the impression. Then begin in earnest the daring exploits of James Cagney and Annabella as they seek to kidnap a French collaborationist who is a top-rank rocket scientist, and ship him back to England. There are desperate encounters with the Nazis—and with the French Underground—and the camera shows no reticence in photographing various forms of sudden death. This part of the film is as exciting as a tough spy-thriller can be, but the early air of verisimilitude has almost entirely vanished. The director does, however, avoid any suggestion of romantic entanglements: Cagney and Annabella are interested in one another only as fellow-workers in a hazardous enterprise, and never once exchange a tender word or a soft glance. Annabella, you feel, might be capable of it in other company, but certainly not with Cagney, who is probably more relentlessly unsentimental as a patriot than

(continued on next page)

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