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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

LA GRANDE ILLUSION

(Pathé Cinema)

ONE of the excitements of being a film critic in this part of the world—almost one of the compensations, denied to those who live in the larger centres of population—is that for years you keep reading and hearing about some film which you have never seen and never seem likely to see; and then one day the film arrives and you get the chance you never expected to have. It was like that for me with *Potemkin*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and *La Kermesse Heroique*; and now it has happened again with *La Grande Illusion*. And again, realisation does not fall short of expectation. This is a film worth waiting for, a film well worth making a special point of seeing.

La Grande Illusion has not quite the legendary quality of some of those other long-deferred pleasures which I have mentioned, for it was made in France as recently as 1938. That was the year of Munich, a fact not without some significance, if you are feeling ironic. For *La Grande Illusion*, an anti-war film if ever there was one (and I can, in fact, think of no other like it), looks back with disillusionment and disgust on the war of 1914-18, and forward with a hopeful idealism which seems pitiful in the light of what happened one year later in 1939. There may be some who will see in the humanitarian, near-pacifist attitude of this French film a clue to the collapse of France in 1940. Was this one of the worms in the apple? Such people are welcome to any doubtful pleasure they can derive from being thus wise after the event. For myself, I would say that if *La Grande Illusion* explains anything it explains why Jean Renoir had the reputation of being the best film maker in France when he went to Hollywood, and why, except for a few moments of *The Southerner*, his genius has never flourished in that alien soil. For *La Grande Illusion* exemplifies almost perfectly the peculiarly national quality, the peculiar excellence, of the French cinema: the attention to detail, the emphasis on direction and characterisation rather than on individual starring players, the refusal to do anything merely because it is the conventional thing to do, above all the *naturalness* of treatment compared with the artificiality of the average screen-play. Even a story as brimful of idealism and poetic imagination as this is notably lacking in sentimentalism. Glamour, of course, is cut right out. You wouldn't expect to find it in a prison-camp, anyway, though Hollywood would try to work some in somehow; but when the two Frenchmen escape and are succoured by the German widow (Dita Parlo) at the lonely farm, it is a surprise, after what one has become used to on the screen, to find that she is just a pleasant, rather homely type of peasant girl—as, of course, she should be—instead of a spectacular Hollywood blonde.

are in the same very high class (though the French production is perhaps a little more finished in acting and treatment); and there is the same humane, decent, international outlook. *La Grande Illusion*, however, comes out even further on the side of human brotherhood, and it boldly says things about the futility of war which the other didn't even whisper. There is one other film of recent memory which bears some resemblance to *La Grande Illusion*—Britain's *The Captive Heart*, and then only in the prison-camp sequences, with their atmosphere of boredom, theatricals, dreams of home, and endless plotting to escape.

LA GRANDE ILLUSION is unequivocally an anti-war film. It is not, surprisingly enough, to anything like the same extent an anti-militarist one. With a nostalgic and slightly deferential salute to the old pattern of gentlemanly warfare and the officer class, the story centres much of its attention on two soldier-aristocrats, one a French prisoner named de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), the other the German commandant of the camp (Erich von Stroheim). Each recognises in the other the qualities and the breeding that he most admires. Each laments the passing of the old order, but each is a fatalist. Their relationship is regulated by a code of behaviour as formal and rigid as that of the duel, but within the limits of the code much unbending, even a certain friendliness, is permissible. When the Frenchman feels himself bound by honour to act as decoy so that two fellow-prisoners may escape, it is with real reluctance that the German shoots him down and with real pity that he watches him die. How regrettable that we should be enemies and that you should have forced me to do this, he seems to be saying, when we had so much in common. Thus even while paying its tribute to the military caste, the film does not neglect to point its lesson about the absurd contradictions of war.

By contrast there are the other two leading French characters—Maréchal (Jean Gabin) and the Jew, Rosenthal. They are products of the people, officers but not gentlemen, and they have less in common with their fellow-Frenchman, de Boeldieu, than the German has. Yet these are the two for whom de Boeldieu gives his life so that they may escape. There is still one ironic twist left in the story, one more opportunity for the film to deliver its message: when the escaped prisoners do eventually get across the border into Switzerland, it is only because they have been given comfort and help by a German widow, who has lost her husband and all her brothers in the war. And one of the Frenchmen has fallen in love with her; he leaves promising to return *après la guerre*.

It wouldn't be hard to pick a good many holes in *La Grande Illusion*, both in form and content. It is a trifle starry-eyed and unreal in its philosophy, (continued on next page)

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