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Film Reviews, by Jno.

## Lost in the Himalayas

BLACK NARCISSUS

(Rank—G.F.D.)

THE most remarkable thing about this Powell-Pressburger film is that it was made within half-an-hour's run of London—for the setting of the story is in the foothills of Nanda Devi, in the Himalayas. So skilfully have the sets been contrived, and so unflatteringly beautiful is the colour photography that the illusion of vast heights and perspectives, of the teeming luxuriousness of sheltered valleys and the bleak aridity of windy uplands is never seriously disturbed. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the story on which Messrs. Powell and Pressburger have lavished so much technical skill and artistic ability is by no means so convincing.

It describes the attempt of a band of Anglo-Catholic nuns from Calcutta to establish a convent school and hospital in a remote mountain village, at the invitation of the local nabob. The latter, whose generosity exceeds his tact, makes available to the sisters a somewhat dilapidated pleasure dome, decreed by a lusty ancestor for the accommodation of his harem, but long since abandoned by all save an antique relic who sounds as if she'd be more at home in the Mile End Road. This establishment, which perches on the edge of a vast precipice overhanging the village, conforms to the Perpendicular tradition of Tibetan architecture and, in fact, suggests at first sight that Shangri-la is probably just over the next ridge. But it is certainly worlds away in spirit.

Led by Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), the good nuns arrive and set about their work. They are met on arrival (welcomed is hardly the word) by David Farrar who, as Mr. Dean, the nabob's English factotum, is under orders to give them every assistance. Mr. Dean hasn't got much time for nuns and, indeed, doesn't give them much time either—"I give you until the rains break," he tells the Sister Superior. But at intervals, when he is not trying to sow spiritual doubt in their minds, or being rude to them in his cups, or questioning their ability to proselytize, or in fact being the complete advocatus diaboli, he makes himself so generally useful supervising the renovations, overhauling the plumbing and advising on native ways and customs that he spends as much time on the hill as he does in the valley. But even that is not a good thing, for Mr. Dean is so far removed from the popular conception of the pukka sahib that his entire summer wardrobe consists of an excessively dilapidated black felt hat, a short-sleeved khaki shirt, khaki shorts, sandals, and a pipe. And he has to get his shirt washed sometimes. It is just as well that the script carefully emphasises at the outset that this order of nuns is bound only by annually renewable vows, for the effect of Mr. Dean's clamant masculinity disturbs the serenity of the Sister Superior and proves completely disastrous for Sister Ruth, a

### BAROMETER

Overcast, rain developing: "Black Narcissus."  
Cloudy, with wind and rain: "Song of Love."

weak, cantankerous and neurotic person who should never have been accepted into the order in the first place.

And Mr. Dean is not the only source of disquiet. There is the Holy Man who sits immobile in all weathers within the convent grounds and is a constant reminder to the sisters of their own lack of inner serenity; there is Sabu (now a plump and smirking 22-year-old) who, as the local ruler's son, comes to school at the convent and leaves in disgrace, accompanied by one of the maturer pupils (played disgracefully well by Jean Simmons). Above all, there is the atmosphere of the place—the defiant boom of the great trumpets which answer the convent bell from the lamasery across the valley, the winds that whistle through the buildings, the brooding mountains, even the mural decorations indoors which may have been appropriate enough originally but are hardly in keeping with the new austerity.

In the end even the natives become antagonised by the death of a child, for which they quite wrongly blame the sisters. Sister Ruth goes mad and renounces her vows. In a climax which I found shockingly melodramatic she tries to run off with Dean, is rebuffed with scorn, then attempts to push Sister Clodagh over a precipice and falls instead to her own death.

The last scene which, by its singular beauty, does much (but not enough) to remove the unpleasant taste of the climax, shows the remaining sisters starting down the valley on their way back to Calcutta. As the forlorn cavalcade moves off the first few drops of the monsoon patter like split shot on the wayside shrubs, then the farther hills are slowly veiled in the grey curtain of the rains. And Mr. Dean, who has been proved so precisely right in his prognostications, goes home to dry his hat, shirt, shorts and sandals, and get his pipe alight.

Apart from the photography, the acting of the principals and the technical excellence of the settings, I found little to commend in *Black Narcissus*. The spiritual erosion of the sisters is too precipitate to be believable and the situations too exotic to be related to everyday experience. Nor did I find the dialogue without blemish. One or two laughs were certainly bought at the expense of good taste. In fact, Messrs. Powell and Pressburger, who recently stumbled a bit on their way to Canterbury seem this time to have got completely lost in the mountains.

### SONG OF LOVE

(M.G.M.)

HOLLYWOOD, which has for over a generation been a byword for hyperbole, allows itself one piece of classic understatement in this picture. "Certain (continued on next page)"