

# CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

## THE BAKER'S WIFE

(Sirtzky-International)

**T**HE Baker's Wife is—at first sight—as straightforward, simple, and uncomplicated as its title. The action covers little more than the classic twenty-four hours; the characters are the common-or-garden people of a dusty little French village—the baker and his wife, the schoolmaster, the priest, the local poacher, the shepherd. As it happens, *The Baker's Wife* is also an old picture. Marcel Pagnol filmed it about 10 years ago and the star (Jules Raimu) died nearly two years ago. But if it had been three-score and 10 years in reaching us we would, I think, still have found it as shrewdly satirical, as broadly comic, and (in places) as touchingly beautiful as it is to-day.

It is all these things because it is both more and less than a realistic picture. Its realism is built with deceptive skill upon a classic framework—a universal foundation. The characters are all types, and some of them highly stylized types at that. It is a case (as a friend remarked to me) of Every Man in his Humour. But not, I might add, of every woman. One of the incidental amusements of *The Baker's Wife* is that while the plot-theme is one of conjugal infidelity and the mainspring of the action is, literally, *cherchez la femme*, women hardly figure in the action at all. The baker's erring wife appears briefly at the beginning of the picture and again briefly at the end, and apart from her there are only two other female characters, both of minor importance.

But in spite of a quality of universality in the characterisation the picture is essentially Gallic in both atmosphere and *dramatis personae*. How very French those Frenchmen are, one feels. M. le Professeur, the agnostic schoolmaster who believes there are only three kingdoms in nature (animal, vegetable and mineral) and M. le Curé, who believes there are four, snipe away at one another as only Frenchmen would. M. le Marquis, a regular army man ("Retired, Madame, but I trust still dangerous"), and the village poacher with a couple of dead thrushes in his game-bag, might both have stepped out of the pages of Daudet's *Tartarin*. And the others are tailored to match.

As the film opens, the villagers (all busy with their own private quarrels) are converging on the baker's shop. Bread, it appears, figures rather prominently in their thoughts since this morning they are going to have fresh bread from their own bakery instead of stale stuff from the county town. We meet the new baker (Aimable by name, and nature) and his wife Aurelie, and of course, all of the village meet them, too. Dominique, who is the shepherd of M. le Marquis (how catching is French syntax!) also meets Aimable and Aurelie—but especially Aurelie. They conceive an instantaneous passion for one another.

That night Dominique serenades her. Aimable is deeply touched, believing that the serenade is a tribute to his good baking. He sends Aurelie down-

stairs to reward Dominique with a bag of *croissants* or a *brioche* or two, and in the warm darkness of the bakehouse Aurelie and Dominique arrange to run away together. And they don't waste any time about it. The same night Dominique steals the Marquis's horse and off they go.

Next morning poor Aimable is desolated—his wife is gone, and he knows why and how but can hardly bear to admit it to himself or to his neighbours. M. le Marquis is also desolated—his horse has gone, not to mention his shepherd. But the entire village has cause for desolation, too—the second batch of bread has burned while Aimable slept, and is uneatable. Nor can the baker be persuaded to bake another batch: "There will be no more bread till my wife comes back. I can't do two jobs and at present I am busy being deceived."

In the face of this crisis the villagers forget their private feuds, the schoolmaster joins forces with the priest, M. le Marquis assumes the direction of operations and the ab'e-bodied manhood of the village is drafted into the search. Before long Dominique and Aurelie are discovered in hiding and (in a superlatively humorous sequence) Dominique runs away at the approach of Authority in the shape of the schoolmaster and the priest. Aurelie is then brought home repentant.

Within the framework of this simple story there is a good deal more than traditional fun at the expense of a cuckold—though there is plenty of that. Raimu, who was one of the great figures of the French theatre in his generation, manages to make the unfortunate baker not merely a figure of fun but one which simultaneously arouses our compassion and, finally, our admiration. He does not waste a gesture, and he can contrive to make even the droop of his shoulders eloquent. Since he dominates almost every scene, this miming virtuosity transcends the barrier of language and to a great extent makes comprehension of the French dialogue unnecessary. But not altogether so. Dependence on the English sub-titles prevents one enjoying many of the subtler witticisms. Some of these are almost untranslatable; others, if translated, would scarcely survive the scrutiny of puritanical officialdom. On the whole, therefore, one may well be satisfied with Raimu and a quality of acting which makes the comprehended word almost unnecessary.

### NATIONAL FILM UNIT

"THE Railway Worker," a documentary film just completed by the National Film Unit, will be released on June 25 in Weekly Review No. 355. It runs for the whole reel. The picture deals with the life of railway workers, giving an insight into the work of the men whose responsibility it is to maintain safe train travel throughout the Dominion. There is a 24-hour a day job—night shifts and day shifts, dirty work, dangerous work, and sometimes lonely work. But there is something about it that gets into the blood and there is a certain inherent pride in every man or boy whose job takes him daily to the railway tracks or the railway workshops. The film points this out in a very absorbing story.

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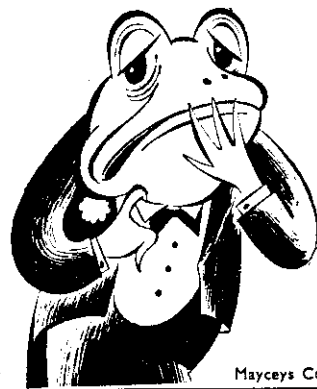
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