

To the Halls of Montezuma

CAPTAIN FROM CASTILE

(20th Century-Fox)

TO be strictly accurate Captain from Castile petered out a few miles short of the Halls of Montezuma and I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry about it, for this flamboyant costume drama, which follows the fluctuating fortunes of a young Castilian hidalgo from the gardens of 16th Century Spain to the brave New World of Cortes and his Conquistadores (with a brief excursion en route to the dungeons of the Inquisition) illustrates beyond a peradventure both the technical competence and the intellectual poverty of most Hollywood film-making.

It is resplendently produced. Since it deals with a period of history which recognised two fair sexes, the wardrobe department has made a field-day of it and the colour-cameras dwell lingeringly on richly-brocaded doublet, burnished morion, and Toledo blade. I suppose Velasquez might have improved on the Spanish interior settings, and perhaps Goya could better have conveyed the atmosphere of the Inquisition's torture-chambers, but in the absence of both these experts the studio's research and property departments have filled the breach handsomely. And some of the Mexican outdoor scenes are even more impressive.

For the New World half of the film the shooting was done in Mexico itself, where the studio had the co-operation of the Government and the National Museum, and anyone familiar with Prescott, Madariaga, or *The National Geographic Magazine* will feel that Mexican antiquaries and studio researchers can have left no stone unturned to ensure the historical accuracy of native costume and architecture. There is no more dazzling spectacle in the film than the scene in which Cortes receives an Aztec embassy headed by Montezuma's nephew, resplendent in a blue feathered headdress and carrying as much gold ornament as El Dorado himself. There is a panoramic quality in the landscapes, too, a quality of space and emptiness and strangeness (ominous plumes of volcanic smoke in the far distance) which does suggest the state of wild surmise and suppressed excitement with which stout Cortes and his wild adventurers must have pressed onwards into the unknown interior.

The technicians and the camera-men, in other words, have done their best—and it is not a bad best either. But add the dialogue to the photography and you have a good argument for a return to the silent film. It is surely ridiculous to spend so much money and talent on securing authenticity of costume and setting and then make no effort at all to ensure that the story will sound authentic. It is true that dates, places, and (in the main) events conform to history, but conspicuously absent are the thoughts and attitudes of the 16th Century. And I can't for the life of me see why these shouldn't be as picturesque, as interesting, and even as exciting as the costumes and customs of the period. As far as I am concerned, they could not possibly be as annoying as Hollywood's persistent advertisement

BAROMETER

FAIR: "Captain from Castile."
DULL: "Cry Wolf."

of America as the last stronghold of liberty. This naive propaganda line (for which we are no doubt indirectly indebted to the long-armed Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities) crops up in the most unexpected places. Its exponents in the present instance are Lee Cobb, a dipso-maniac swashbuckler ("In the Noo World it's what you are, not who you are that counts"); Jean Peters ("a wench for the Noo World") who attaches herself, as a sort of personal maid, to Tyrone Power while he is in Old Castile but manages to marry him in the democratising atmosphere of Mexico; and Thomas Gomez, Cortes' chaplain who sounds like a blend of Buchmanism and Social Justice. If America were the last home of democracy this would still be a peculiarly irritating form of ideological narcissism.

However, those who are less touchy on such matters, and whose notion of what constitutes good acting is less exacting than my own, will no doubt find *Captain from Castile* a satisfying show. It is a long film (long enough, I noticed, for Tyrone Power to grow a moustache), with all the conventional ingredients—the conventionally handsome hero, the conventionally sinister villain, the indispensable pursuit on horseback, the discreet modicum of off-stage torture (sadism by second intention, as it were), and the inevitable duel. Mr. Power, who has a fair seat as a horseman and the right figure for doublet-and-hose, will remain, I have no doubt, as popular as ever with the bobby-soxers.

But, as a friend pointed out, with all those knights of Old Castile sculling around, the sudy atmosphere of soap opera was unavoidable.

CRY WOLF

(Warner Bros.)

ADDICTS of the mystery-thriller type of film fall roughly into two classes. There are the initiates—exacting and critical types for the most part—who, being by long acquaintance privy to all the mysteries, know a hawk from a handsaw whatever quarter the wind is blowing from. They can also tell you within the first hundred feet or so who the villain is—and they frequently do. In contrast to these *cognoscenti* are the crypto-masochists who derive a perverse pleasure simply from being hazed, bamboozled and led up the garden path—and who wouldn't recognise a clue if they met it in their porridge-plate.

For the latter *Cry Wolf* will no doubt have its charm—and the more uncritical admirers of Errol Flynn and Miss Barbara Stanwyck will, I suppose, find pleasure in the simple contemplation of their favourites. The experts, who will have no scent to follow except the pungent odour of red herrings, will be infuriated. Ordinary listeners like you and me, who don't mind a modicum of mystery so long as it is ultimately (and logically) elucidated, will simply be bored.

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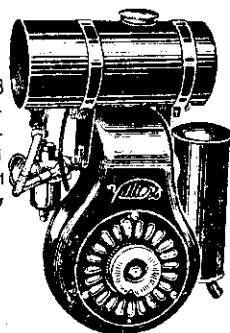
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