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Film Reviews, by Jno.

## THE LOST SHEPHERD

PASTORAL SYMPHONY

(Gibe Films-B.E.F.)

I LIKED almost everything about *Pastoral Symphony* except its title, and for that Gide and not Gibe is to blame. Like the *Pastoral Symphony* most of us know best, the film has a peaceful beginning—a first movement which introduces a pleasant picture of country life and quiet happiness. But the storms and tempests which follow are in the film the tempests of the human heart and from these the story offers no release. The name *Pastoral Symphony* suggests a hymn to nature—something more like what I imagine *Farrebique* to be (and hope we will not have to wait so long for that film) than André Gide's sensitive but heartbreaking study of a blind girl and her blinder guide.

But the appropriateness or otherwise of the title is a matter of small importance alongside the strength of the film, its beautiful photography, the sensitive but low-keyed acting, and the finesse of the direction. The pattern of the story is the most complex and close-woven that I have encountered on the screen for a long time. It concerns the Protestant pastor of a French highland village who rescues a blind orphan child from destitution and takes her into the sanctuary of his own home. The child, who is little more than a helpless animal when he finds her, grows up completely dependent upon him, but as she reaches womanhood the balance of dependence subtly alters. It is now the pastor who is dependent and, in a sense, the pastor who is blind.

Up to this point the emotional tension has built up almost imperceptibly—like the snow-wreaths outside the windows of the manse. The pastor's practical, prosaic and hardworking wife, who has looked indulgently upon his blind protégée, becomes by slow degrees irritated and perplexed by her husband's exclusive interest in the girl. The latter, unduly sensitive to the changing atmosphere of the home, is aware of the growing antagonism of Tante Amélie without understanding its cause, while the pastor is not only unaware of these psychological cross-currents, but is incapable of analysing his own actions objectively.

Into this already complex situation comes the pastor's grown-up son, who has been abroad, and from this point the tragedy moves inexorably towards its climax. The son falls in love with the adopted daughter and the whole household is sundered by suspicion and dissension. In the midst of this emotional turmoil, the girl is operated on and recovers her sight. Distracted by love both for the father and the son and tormented by the distress she has caused her foster-mother, she commits suicide. And that, of course, solves nothing at all.

With such strong emotions for plot-material, it would have been fatally easy for the cast to overplay their parts and blur the finer detail of Gide's startlingly perceptive characterisations, but

### BAROMETER

FINE: "*Pastoral Symphony*."

FAIR: "*Fury at Furnace Creek*."

only once did I feel that an effect was overdone and only twice did it seem that probability had been sacrificed for dramatic effect. For me much of that effect sprang from the contrast between the strength of the emotion and the restraint of the two principals, Michèle Morgan as the blind Gertrude, and Pierre Blanchard as her pastor. In its handling of detail, the film is superb and the minor effects stick in the memory—the mute eloquence of footprints in crisp, glittering snow, the blind girl's hands fluttering like moths along a mantelpiece, her sad submissive phrase "Si tu veux," so often repeated. I thought as the film progressed that Mlle. Morgan was less sure in her portrayal of the physical fact of blindness than she was in suggesting its psychological burden, that she overdid the fixed gaze and the withdrawn look. But the force of the final climax made me revise my opinion. Ignorance of French may prevent the complete comprehension of some passages of dialogue (the English sub-titles are occasionally flat-footed), but there is fortunately no impediment to the appreciation of superb acting.

### FURY AT FURNACE CREEK

(20th Century-Fox)

APART from *Pastoral Symphony* the week in Wellington was a barren one for new films, and I went along to see *Fury at Furnace Creek* simply for want of something better to do—and as so often happens in such circumstances I thoroughly enjoyed myself. *Fury*, etc., has most of the classic ingredients of the horse-opera—fights with and without guns, thundering hooves, a platoon of yowling Injuns (*Appa-chees* in this case), and the black sheep who makes good—and how exciting these unpretentious and time-tested devices can be when they are well handled. Those terrible grey horsemen (everything at *Furnace Creek* is grey with dust), how they ride! And it comes as a rather pleasant surprise to find that when they are riding you hear nothing but the muffled sound of hooves on dusty roads. There are even comparatively long stretches of film unspoiled by any sound at all, and background music is used only twice in the entire film. This return to naturalistic treatment (which we noticed a week ago in *Naked City*) is the most arresting feature of *Fury* and one which does much to raise the film above the Western average. The historical (sic) background to the goings-on at *Furnace Creek* is dealt with at tedious length, and Reginald Gardiner (who is irrevocably associated in my mind with iron horses) seems particularly unhappy in the part of a renegade cavalry officer. But I was pleased to make the acquaintance of Charles Kemper, as Peaceful Jones, surely the happiest fugitive from a chain-gang you ever did see, while Victor Mature has, if anything, matured slightly.

