

## BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Treasure of Sierra Madre."  
DULL: "The Walls of Jericho."

(continued from previous page)

Bacalls showing a well-turned ankle at every opportunity, will be disappointed, for women appear only once or twice in the background of its near-12,000 feet of outdoor action.

The story is simple enough. Three Americans, down-and-out in Tampico during the depression of the early-twenties, decide to go on a gold hunt. Howard (Walter Huston) is the leader of the party—a half-crazy old digger who hopes to make one last big strike before he dies. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) and Curtin (Tim Holt) are just two ordinary types with a little ready cash but no chance of a job, who are attracted by the old man's talk of gold. Eventually, in a hot, dusty, Mexican wilderness they strike it rich, and, with the tension between them rising as steadily as their separate piles of gold-dust, they finally decide, after an accident in the mine, the visit of a mysterious stranger, and a fight with bandits, to return to civilisation. On the homeward journey the drama moves swiftly to its unexpected end. Howard goes to stay (against his will) at an Indian village, Dobbs shoots Curtin and is in turn killed by the bandits, and finally the gold is scattered by the wind into the dust from which it came.

IN many ways *Treasure of Sierra Madre* (adapted from a novel by the mysterious Ben Traven) is a kind of super-Western in a South-of-the-Border setting. But it is neither romantic nor juvenile in tone. On the contrary it is a mature and realistic film. What to these merits are added sensitive direction (by John Huston), fine photography (by Ted McCord), and an extremely able performance by Walter Huston, the film becomes something out of the ordinary.

John Huston, the son of Walter, first attracted attention as director of *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941. Later he made the war documentary *Report from the Aleutians*, which contained some very fine mountain photography. From both of these he must have gained valuable experience for *Treasure of Sierra Madre*. The near-documentary realism, the simple, laconic language of the script which he wrote, and the tough sardonic flavour of the film, relieved with flashes of humour, contribute a great deal to its enjoyment. Moreover, the skill and restraint with which he evokes the arid background of Mexico is one of the best things in it. This, one feels, is the true Mexico, of the novels of D. H. Lawrence or Graham Greene—hot-blooded, primitive, ruthless, with its enervating heat, its lotteries, and its coldly efficient police. Nevertheless this local colour never becomes obtrusive, despite many memorable scenes—such as the bandits digging their own graves before execution, or the Indians gathered around the sick boy in their jungle village. The meticulous care for effective detail, too, is reminiscent of the artistry of *Brief Encounter*.

*Treasure of Sierra Madre* is really a family success, for, as the old prospector, Walter Huston gives a first-rate performance. Comical, garrulous, shrewd, so experienced that the whole grim adventure is like a game to him, he never fails to get his laughs (and they are many) and is always the centre of attraction when he is on the screen.

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YET, while the film draws its strengths from the Hustons, its weaknesses cannot be overlooked. The brutal fist-fight near the beginning, for which there is no apparent reason unless to placate the Bogart fans, the scene in which the demented Dobbs and his partner Curtin see who can stay awake longest (Dobbs wins, of course, and shoots Curtin down, unbelievably, in cold blood), and the succeeding scenes in which Dobbs, now a gibbering idiot, rushes around trying to decide what to do with the body, are among the least successful. These last two passages especially drew slightly embarrassed laughter from nearly everyone in the audience.

There also appears to be a flaw in the central motivation. If the film is supposed to show the moral disintegration of three men through their contact with gold, it is successful strictly speaking only up to the point where Dobbs is hit on the head by a fall of rock in the mine. Whereas before this all three were becoming progressively more distrustful, suspicious, and fearful of each other, afterwards the other two return more or less to normality, while Dobbs's madness increases. He talks to himself, has sudden outbursts of rage, imagines everyone is after his gold, and finally commits virtual murder. But since these things are apparently due to the knock he received and not to gold-fever, the implied evil influence of the gold's presence diminishes accordingly.

There is some unobtrusive symbolism in the film worth noting, especially the incident of the Gila monster which Curtin finds curled up under a rock, nesting amongst Dobbs's secret cache of gold-bags. Is this the symbolic serpent, the evil suspicion that grows like a canker in his mind with the gold's presence? ("Once it grabs your hand it'll never let go. If you cut it in half the head still hangs on, and even if you cut your hand off you'd be dead by sundown from the venom it lets into your bloodstream.") The treasure itself, symbol, presumably, of the secret hopes in all of us, is also lost symbolically, within the megalithic ruins of an old Indian village.

The supporting roles—Tim Holt as Curtin, Bruce Bennett as the stranger from Texas, and Alfonso Bedoya as the ignorant, child-like, brutal bandit leader who unwittingly plays such an important part in the drama—are all well acted. Yet despite its tragic overtones, the film is not at all grim to endure. It has everything required for good, husky entertainment, and in the masculine tradition it is one of the best things Hollywood has made.

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