

How To Make a Silk Purse

THE GUINEA PIG

(Pilgrim Pictures—B.E.F.)

THERE are some films which seem better the more you reflect upon them, and there are others—often thoroughly enjoyable during the actual screening—which seem to spoil as fast as a cut apple. After a week-end cogitation, and with some misgivings, I would place *The Guinea Pig* in the latter category.

The misgivings are there because I feel that for the performance of Richard Attenborough alone the film deserves a rating above the average, and because for rather more than three-quarters of its length, the picture is an admirable representation of that curious social organism, the English public school. Most of us have enjoyed school stories at one stage or another of our development. Many of us can still enjoy them if there is an adequate infusion of realism such as one finds, say, in Bruce Marshall's *Prayer for the Living*—and there is a good deal of that in *The Guinea Pig*. But in the film's ending the realism is superseded by a stereotyped conventionality which leaves the dramatic potential of the story unrealised, and the essential social conflict unresolved. This is no doubt the fault of the play on which the film is based, but it is still a fatal weakness.

The theme is one with great possibilities. Jack Read, an elementary schoolboy from Walthamstow, wins a bursary entitling him to be educated at Saintbury, an establishment obviously intended for the sons of gentlemen. Equally obviously, Jack does not come within that category. His father is a sergeant-major turned tobacconist and the boy himself has some shockingly low-class habits. His h's are insecure, he dips bread in his gravy, and even talks Soccer at a Rucker school. In the argot of the place, he is rather frightful smear, even for a new bug. And of course, he suffers all the persecution which schoolboy sadism inflicts upon the nonconformist.

At first he tries to run away, but is stopped by a sympathetic house tutor. Home for the Christmas holidays, he is half-inclined to stay away, but decides to go back, partly because of an innate stubbornness, partly because he is no longer at ease in the company of his old friends. The boy is, in fact, now in the very real dilemma of belonging to neither world, yet this consequential problem is completely glossed over, and from this point the film, as a piece of realism, starts to go downhill.

Jack begins to assume the caste marks appropriate to a Saintburian. He learns to tackle his man low and to keep a straight bat; and under the friendly eye of the understanding tutor he makes good progress in his studies. In the end even the reactionary housemaster ("A boy like that will always revert to type") is won over, the tutor marries the housemaster's pretty daughter and takes over the House—which presumably means that future guinea pigs will have an easier time of it—and Jack

BAROMETER

FAIR: "The Guinea Pig."
FAIR: "House of Strangers."
OVERCAST: "Elizabeth of Lady-mead."

goes off to Cambridge with another bursary in his pocket.

Passing over the inadequacies of the story, the chief attraction of the film is the fine performance of Attenborough. There are a number of amusing thumbnail sketches of the curious fauna traditionally associated with a boys' school, but the sustained performance of the star is astonishingly good. Not only does he act like a schoolboy of 14, he reacts like one, which is a much more difficult thing for an adult to do, when you come to think of it.

HOUSE OF STRANGERS

(20th Century-Fox)

THIS is a grim and violent little picture of domestic savagery in New York's East Side which succeeds rather well in establishing an authentic period atmosphere (the story is set in the hectic days of the speakeasy era), and which contains some well polished acting by Edward G. Robinson, Richard Conte, and one Luther Adler whom I do not recall having noticed before. Robinson plays the part of a small-time Italian banker who has (as they say in those parts) come up the hard way, but has not acquired any knowledge of accountancy en route. From the story's opening the family is divided. On the one hand is the despotic father and the favourite son (Conte), who has escaped the impact of that despotism by becoming a tough young attorney; against them are ranged the three other brothers, all under the old man's thumb in the family business, and all hating him as cordially as they fear him. Their chance comes when the State investigates father's bank. Conte defends the old man, but tries to make sure of the verdict by suborning a member of the jury. The elder brother (Adler) informs the police and Conte gets a seven-year stretch in jail. Meanwhile the other sons take over the business, father dies of frustration, and Conte swears vengeance. Up to that point the film is quite a satisfying study in black and white, but thereafter it gets rather purple at the edges. You may, of course, feel (and not unreasonably) that New York in the 'thirties was melodramatic enough, in which case the purple patches won't seem so much out of place.

ELIZABETH OF LADYMEAD

(London Films)

IF you saw *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* you should have a fairly good idea what to expect from the Elizabeths of Ladymead—except that the latter give you more for your money. The Curzons only went back as far as Spion Kop, whereas the Elizabeths win comfortably by a generation. They date from the Crimea. I should like to be able to record how much I enjoyed seeing Anna Neagle in four separate incarnations in the one picture, but somehow the only feeling that remained when I reached for my hat was one of thankfulness that the title hadn't been Elizabeth of Runnymede.



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