

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

Film Reviews

By G.M.



GOOD-BYE, MR. CHIPS

(M.-G.-M.)

This is one of the handsomest tributes ever paid to the English public school system and the tradition of the old school tie. Some cynics may be capable of cheap sneers, but they will find it difficult; for the film, by the grace of good direction and better acting, is almost as gentle and kindly and sincere as the little book by James Hilton, from which it is taken.

This is not to say that it is a flawless film. I have called it a little book; but it is a long film — a very long film, even by M.-G.-M. standards. And there, I think, is its only really noticeable fault. James Hilton did not write enough to fill two hours of screening time, and so they have had to improvise. They have improvised brilliantly, but sometimes I found myself wishing that the long procession of years in Mr. Chips's scholastic career would unroll just a little faster.

But any film such as *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, must stand or fall by its starring performance, and Robert Donat is never in need of props. This is not to disparage the supporting cast, which is large and talented: particularly Greer Garson, with her perfect "period" characterisation as Mr. Chips's young wife. If there is such a thing as an "Edwardian" type of beauty, Miss Garson has it. The fact remains, though, that Donat makes this essentially a one-man show; which is as it should be, since the whole story is presented as the first-hand musing of a man of 83, looking back on some sixty years of schoolmastering at Brookfield College — the boys who have come and gone, and then come again in the persons of their sons and grandsons, the games that have been lost and won, the wars that have been fought and left their mark on the school, the masters who have worked with him, and the wife who was his inspiration and whom he lost so soon.

And as the memories of Mr. Chips flow gently across the screen they become somehow identified with memories of one's own school days, of all school days, just as Mr. Chips himself becomes a composite of many schoolmasters we ourselves have known. For once, a film has caught the spirit as well as the letter of a book; just as Donat himself has caught the schoolmaster's manner as well as the mannerisms of this particular schoolmaster. His performance is a masterpiece of sustained effort that is polished enough to seem almost effortless. Gone is the handsome, dashing hero of *Monte Christo* and of that other and unsuccessful version of a Hilton story, *Knight Without Armour*; instead we find an old-fashioned, whimsical, fastidious

and lovable elderly pedagogue who has learnt the secret of turning boys into men. Some of his fans may not like the new Donat as much as the old, but *Mr. Chips* will be remembered when his other films are forgotten. Picking Academy Award winners is a risky business; but Robert Donat now seems a better bet than most for 1939 honours.

James Hilton has the happy and remunerative knack of writing stories capable of successful translation to screen, stage or radio. Listeners may remember "Good-bye, Mr. Chips" as an NBS radio play four years ago. Last year Leslie Banks scored heavily in the stage version in England. Hilton's other famous novel, "The Lost Horizon," has been put on the air by the BBC as well as on the screen by Columbia. Not yet released, is the Warners' production of "We Are Not Alone," with Paul Muni. So far, "Knight Without Armour" is Hilton's only screen miss.

NURSE EDITH CAVELL

(RKO Radio)

Circumstances have made Nurse Edith Cavell a more important film than it intrinsically is. At the same time, they have made impartial appraisal of it very difficult. In the light of a new war, this story of one of the most famous tragedies of the last one acquires a meaning which even its producer (Herbert Wilcox), cannot himself have intended, since he finished making the film some time before Great War II, broke out. Indeed, according to *Time*, this new film of the Cavell story—there were others in 1918 and 1928—was designed as the "appeasement or Munich version," rather than as an occasion for re-opening old wounds. But now, most people's view of it will be coloured by current events, and they will see it chiefly as a devastating indictment of Germany, all the more effective because of its studied air of understatement.

Viewed as dispassionately as possible, and solely as screen entertainment, *Nurse Edith Cavell* is a thoroughly worthy effort. It is, in fact, almost overpowering in its worthiness, and to that extent it lacks entertainment. Whether it is true or not, there is a story which illustrates this point: it is said that one member of the firing squad detailed to execute Nurse Cavell—a German private named Rammler—refused to carry out the officer's command, and himself followed Nurse Cavell before his comrade's guns. When it came to making the picture, however, Producer Wilcox rejected this incident as being too melodramatic, with the result that on the screen Nurse Cavell dies alone.

An American producer would probably have inserted that incident for sake of colour and "human interest"; but even though he made his film in



ANNA NEAGLE, star of "Nurse Edith Cavell," meets Gui Igon, whose life was saved by Nurse Cavell's execution. Igon, sentenced to death as a spy, occupied a cell adjoining Nurse Cavell's, but so world-wide was the outcry at her execution that his sentence was commuted. He is now a Los Angeles portrait artist

Hollywood, Wilcox has kept absolutely clear of the Hollywood atmosphere. His production is a painstaking and minutely authenticated document of Nurse Cavell's life and death, showing how, after helping one Belgian boy to escape the German invaders, she became more and more involved in such efforts, until finally she was the head of a large-scale organisation for assisting the escape of prisoners-of-war and civilians from Belgium. The film stresses her devotion to duty and humanitarianism; but even when it records her arrest, trial and execution, the indictment is directed at the German military machine rather than at the men who worked it. They are as dutiful to their own code of behaviour as she is to hers, inhuman though their code must appear. Some of the Germans are shown as kindly men who would have acted differently if they could. Indeed, it is a rather notable fact that the German character who looks most like the traditional screen "Hun" is the very one who behaves most like a human being.

In the role of Nurse Cavell, Anna Neagle is as serene and dignified as you would expect an actress to be who has twice played the part of Queen Victoria. Her conscientious performance is typical of the whole picture.

YES, MY DARLING DAUGHTER

(Warners')

The release of this film right on top of its presentation by a touring company gives many New Zealanders an unusual opportunity for a close comparison between stage and screen methods of treating the same play. As I have not seen the stage show, I cannot give any pointers, apart from suspecting that the play is a good deal more "daring" (see advertisements),

than the film. I may be wrong, but the script certainly seems to contain possibilities which, because of the stricter screen censorship, could not be realised.

When the darling daughter (Priscilla Lane), goes out to take her plunge in the waters of unconventionality, by spending an unchaperoned week-end with the young man of her choice (Jeffrey Lynn), she succeeds in getting not much more than her toes wet. The joke of the story is that the mother (Fay Bainter), who tells her darling daughter that she may hang her clothes on the gooseberry bush but not go near the water has in her younger days been a crusader for women's rights and has been more than a little partial herself to illicit swimming. And the daughter knows it. Which weakens the maternal authority more than somewhat; especially as the daughter also knows that the bachelor poet (Roland Young), who happens to be spending a holiday with the family, used to be mother's swimming partner.

Grandmother May Robson knows all about it, too; but Granny has a well-developed sense of humour, and, having had the same kind of trouble with her own daughter, can afford to enjoy the sensation of getting some of her own back. There's a gossiping aunt (Genevieve Tobin), who is also in the know and very much in evidence. The only one who cannot understand why the whole family is running circles round the gooseberry bush is the stodgy but well-meaning father (Ian Hunter). When he finds out he acts with vigour, but no tact.

This is talkative but pleasant and innocuous farce. Any daring in it lies in what might have happened, but didn't. I notice that one critic has suggested that the story contains a social message: if so, it is underneath the gooseberry bush and well out of sight.