

# TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE

## THE UNDERPUP

(Universal)

Comparisons may be odious, but Universal seem to me to have gone out of their way to invite them in "The Underpup." They appear to have done everything possible to label their newest child prodigy, 11-year-old Gloria Jean, as a pocket edition of Deanna Durbin. It is surely not merely a coincidence that both "The Underpup" and the Deanna Durbin pictures are made by the same director and producer; that the stories have much in common; that Nan Grey, who has often acted as Deanna's screen sister, should act in much the same capacity for Gloria Jean; and that the new "discovery" should be dressed, made up, photographed and recorded in such a way that you are inevitably reminded of the first and youngest of the Three Smart Girls.

All this, I feel, is hardly fair to Gloria (quite apart from loading the poor child with such an impossible title as "The Underpup"). She is a clever enough little actress in her own right, and a fine enough little singer, to give an indication of what she might become if allowed to develop as herself and not as

the reflection of someone else. But will she ever get the chance? I doubt it. It's probably too late now.

In fact, this picture epitomises one of the greatest faults and tragedies of the Hollywood cinema—its slavish copy-cattling; so that a bright new personality is seldom hailed as having any special merits of her own, but merely as a "Second Somebody-or-Other." Thus success breeds stagnation. It's a solemn thought.

However, I wish little Gloria Jean the best of luck. I hope that next time a director tries to make her look like Deanna Durbin she behaves with some of the engaging toughness she exhibits in "The Underpup" and kicks him in the shins. I only hope she doesn't take the moral of this particular story too much to heart and really become like one of those obnoxious, snobbish little Penguins whom, as one of the underprivileged classes, she strives so hard to emulate. The Penguins, you see, are a club of horrid little rich girls who, just to show their superiority, invite a poor little girl from the slums to be their guest at a summer holiday camp. They make her life thoroughly miserable with a display of catty bad manners; but the dear child takes it all on

the chin and comes up smiling. Her behaviour, which is a composite of hitting back and turning the other cheek, proves so effective that in the end she softens the meanest hearts and is accepted as one of the snobby sisterhood, complete with uniform and Penguin badge. It doesn't seem to occur to anybody that, considering everything, becoming a Penguin might be a doubtful privilege.

## KATIA

(Mayer-Burstyn)

The Romanovs were a tragic lot; but no member of the dynasty was a more tragic figure than the Tsar Alexander II. He was assassinated on the eve of proclaiming his beloved Empress, and of giving a Constitution to his sorely-tried people. Nobody played a bigger part in his life than the Princess Catherine Dolgorouky. "Katia" (or "Catherine," as they are calling it in this country), is her story.

Characteristically, Katia bursts into the picture like a young whirlwind, haughty and impetuous in her girlish caprice. She leaves it a sorrowing young widow whose last words are "pauvre Russe" — unhappy Russia!

Danielle Darrieux showed her greatness as a tragedienne in "Mayerling";

she demonstrates her brilliance again in this new French picture. It is as if she has fitted herself perfectly into the character of that unhappy, wilful young woman who nearly changed Russia's destiny. Her joy and grief are spontaneous. She portrays the caprice of youth and the sorrow of maturity with equal felicity. It is, of course, her picture.

If you cannot understand French, there are efficient English sub-titles.

## DARK VICTORY

(Warners)

I have met several women who tell me that they wept over this picture as they have never wept before. As a man, I'm not ashamed to admit that the finale moved me more than I can ever remember having been moved at the movies, and that, coming out of the preview, I had to go for a good walk by myself in the sunshine to get over it.

All of which must make "Dark Victory" sound not quite the average person's idea of entertainment. And in a sense that is true, for this film is far above and beyond the average drama. It is, indeed, not far short of being revolutionary; for whoever heard before of a movie heroine who went through a whole picture under sentence of death and wasn't rescued in the nick of time? Yet Bette Davis does just that in "Dark Victory." She is a spoiled, nervy young sportswoman who develops a mysterious brain disease and learns that nothing can prevent her going blind and dying from it within ten months. And nothing does prevent her. In the final scenes, she simply creeps away alone, like some wounded animal, and waits quietly for death to come to her.

That last glimpse of the young heroine, at peace with her soul, lying on her bed in the darkened room, awaiting the end, is enough to wring anyone's heart—and at the same time to lift it up with exultation. For somehow this seems the very essence of human courage.

"Dark Victory" is not a perfect picture. Even a character-study by Bette Davis which is perhaps the most interesting she has ever given, a supporting performance by Geraldine Fitzgerald which is almost as good, and some supremely moving passages, are not quite enough to make it that. There are moments in the script when the author's otherwise shrewd observation of human conduct seems to have failed badly. For instance, would any woman, knowing herself about to die as this one does, be able to push the fact so far out of mind that, in her last few minutes, she would be interested in her horse's chance in a steeplechase and what sort of cocktail party had been arranged for her friends? And would any husband, let alone a doctor who knew all about the case, fail to notice when the last attack of blindness had struck her? But George Brent, having watched lovingly over her for ten months, goes off at zero hour to attend a medical conference.

Yet such lapses do not prevent "Dark Victory" being a remarkable and epoch-making film. Screen heroines may have died before; but never in such daring circumstances as this; and never before that I can remember has any film been dedicated quite so fearlessly to the theme of death. Warner Brothers can still claim to be the pioneers of Hollywood.

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