

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

Film Reviews

By G.M.



BEAU GESTE

(Paramount)

This is, briefly, a silent classic which has been given a voice. The original film of 1926 vintage (also produced by Paramount), has been re-made with painstaking care and a big new cast, but in the process of producing a relentlessly faithful copy of the original they have somehow lost most of its spirit. Perhaps that spirit could never be recaptured these days. Perhaps we have grown up too much and become too blasé and disillusioned to accept without question the mock heroics and mawkish sentiment which moved us to such enthusiasm when P. C. Wren wrote his novel of the French Foreign Legion in 1924 and when Herbert Brenon followed it with his large-scale spectacle two years later.

The large-scale spectacle is still there in the new talkie, and those scenes of desert warfare are the best things in it. But Ronald Colman, the original Beau, is not there; he is replaced by Gary Cooper. It may be noted here that Paramount are now prepared to admit in a foreword that the film does not pretend to give an accurate picture of life in the Foreign Legion. They should also, while they were at it, have admitted that it does not pretend to give an accurate picture of Englishmen. For if any Hollywood star can claim to be a typical American, surely it is Gary Cooper—his whole reputation has been built up on those lines, with stories of the Wild West and the Mr. Deeds type of thing—and yet here we have the lanky cowboy called on to play probably the most pukka sahib in the whole of English fiction. Much as I admire Gary Cooper when he's an American, I simply can't swallow this. That's not patriotism, it's simply common sense, as I see it.

To a lesser degree, the same can be said of Ray Milland and Robert Preston. They are more English, but not much more believable, as the other "stout fellows" of the Geste family, who behave with such embarrassing manliness and brotherly love toward one another and with such objectionable smugness toward their cousin, whose only offences, as a lad, so far as one can see, were that he wore spectacles and considered it dangerous for small boys to operate on one another with pen-knives. However, when they have grown up and joined the Foreign Legion for the noblest of motives (to shield an aunt),

the Geste brothers have to take more than a taste of bullying themselves, from the hands of a sadistic sergeant. Brian Donlevy gives a ripe interpretation of this role, which was made famous by Noah Beery.

Those picturegoers who are not old enough to remember the previous "Beau Geste," and those who are simply out for an evening of synthetic emotion and blood and thunder, will find this a technically efficient, handsomely produced, and satisfactorily exciting melodrama. I'd have been happier about it myself if they'd called it "Mr. Deeds Goes To Morocco."

Interesting sidelight: The brutal French Sergeant Lejaune of the original story now becomes a Russian named Markoff.

RULERS OF THE SEA

(Paramount)

The title of this film led me to expect another of those cavalcades of Man's achievement, all full of noble sentiment but little dramatic substance, with which Hollywood periodically delights to dumbfound us. "Rulers of the



WILL FYFFE

Takes up the slack

Sea," I feared, would take us all the way from coracles to pocket battleships, and possibly finish with a close-up of Mr. Churchill. It was a relief, then, to find that this show concentrates on but one aspect and one epoch of the story of navigation—the conquest of steam over sail. By so doing it is able to keep the human interest very much alive and spin a good yarn about the efforts of two men last century to prove that a paddle-wheel was faster and safer than wind-filled canvas when it came to crossing the Atlantic.

Producer-Director Frank Lloyd, whose forte is the sea, is in his element for

most of the picture, with storms fierce enough to turn your stomach if you're a landlubber, trouble aloft, trouble under hatches, trouble on the waterfront (yes, even in those days), and trouble all the way from England to America. On dry land, Mr. Lloyd is not quite so happy in his story-telling; but fortunately Will Fyffe is there to take up most of the slack in the interest with probably the juiciest bit of character acting since the same Will Fyffe's performance in "Owd Bob." Fyffe is the elderly little engineer, Shaw—cantankerous, lovable and very braw Scots—who is ready to fight the whole world to prove that the Atlantic can be crossed by steam. His staunch ally in the fight is young David Gillespie (Douglas Fairbanks junr.). With him one moment, against him the next, but finally cheering him wholeheartedly along, is Shaw's daughter, Mary (Margaret Lockwood), whose interest in steam engines is occasioned mainly by the young engineer who assists her father. There is intelligence in the acting of all three stars.

The film, it may be said, takes a little too long to get up steam; but once the big test begins, and the "old steam kettle," the *Dog Star*, is paddling furiously along in a race with a sailing vessel, there is no lack of incident. The success of the venture is threatened by storms, coal shortage, mutiny, and an accident which scalds old Shaw to death; but Frank Lloyd's restraint is admirable. Having pioneered the first steamship crossing of the Atlantic, he leaves it at that: almost any other Hollywood director would have given us a final shot of the young lovers' grandchildren doing it in style on the Queen Mary.

A film well worth seeing.

THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

(RKO)

This, like "Beau Geste," is a re-make of a famous silent picture. It is also a screen version of a famous novel. But if the new "Hunchback" has lost most of the atmosphere of Victor Hugo, it has replaced this with something which, from the film point of view, is probably just about as important—a sense of vivid action and huge spectacle.

As a general rule, the further Hollywood gets away from the present the harder it finds the task of bringing the past to life: and in this case the mobs of Paris seldom resemble anything but a collection of Hollywood extras in colourful fancy dress, and the Paris of the fifteenth century seldom seems much more than just a collection of stones, plaster and back-cloths assembled with typical Hollywood lavishness. Yet within those limits they are very efficient Hollywood crowds, and the cathedral of Notre Dame is a very large and handsome Hollywood edifice.

Adding notably to the interest of the show is the fact that Charles Laughton, as Quasimodo the Hunchback, achieves a repulsiveness outrivalling even that of Lon Chaney in the silent version. By some magic of make-up, Mr. Laughton gives the impression of carrying his bulging paunch on his shoulders. One Laughton eye blinks ferociously under a beetling brow, while the other has slipped down his cheek and stares unblinkingly. Thus clumsily equipped, Mr. Laughton is surprisingly agile when it comes to swinging on bells and ropes high up in Hollywood's Notre Dame.



IN the first week of January of this year, William Powell promised to love and cherish in sickness and in health, etc., his third wife. Newest mate for the Thin Man is Diane Lewis, five feet tall, 24-year-old, sultry beauty. To marry William, Diane is reported (by "News Review") to have thrown over young Mickey Rooney. And Mickey, according to the same paper, is "very despondent"

Considering his habit of doing most of the talking in any film he graces. I must confess I am rather surprised that Charles Laughton should have accepted this role, for he hardly opens his mouth at all. However, he manages quite properly to excite some sympathy as well as repulsion.

Hollywood has gone its own sweet way with the details of the Hugo story, while maintaining the broad outlines. After providing audiences with such gruesome highlights as a flogging, a hanging, and a visit to the torture chambers, the producers apparently could not screw up their courage to kill off quite as many of the leading characters as Hugo did. For instance, the gypsy heroine, La Esmeralda, comes through it alive and with a husband. Following the big scene in which Quasimodo drops boiling lead and stone blocks on the mob storming the cathedral, she departs in safety with that quaint fellow, Pierre Gringoire, while her hunchbacked rescuer looks despondently on.

If I remember history aright, the real Louis XI. wasn't nearly such a benevolent old eccentric as RKO would have us believe (his benevolence and eccentricity in the film consist chiefly of an anxiety that his subjects should have the right of free speech). And if I remember my Hugo aright, the villain of the piece was a tonsured priest. Hollywood, with more tact, has turned him into a wicked, lustful Minister of Justice (a role which Sir Cedric Hardwicke handles with sepulchral malevolence), and has given him a brother who is a good archbishop (Walter Hampden, America's leading Shakespearean actor).

It would appear to be Maureen O'Hara's screen destiny to be leered over by Laughton. Having escaped his attentions in "Jamaica Inn," she now falls once again into his ugly clutches. But he, like the audience and the Minister of Justice, is soon bewitched by her dark beauty, and the clutches are gentle.