

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

Film Reviews
By G.M.



HITLER, BEAST OF BERLIN

(Associated Distributors)

"Professor Mamlock" was welcomed officially in New Zealand just after Russia, where the film was made to damn the German treatment of Communists, had made a pact with the persecuting Nazis. "Hitler, Beast of Berlin," is propaganda that misfires through the same barrel and another one as well.

It should be said first that the picture does not represent Hitler as a beast, except by allusion. It tells almost exactly the same story as "Professor Mamlock," with as much restraint, and as much emphasis. The two films differ only in the difference between the technique of the Russian direction and the technique of the British direction. And

the difference is not so great that any but Russophobes will bother to make a distinction. Without the tiresome necessity for interpreting language in captions, this latest film will probably be more appreciated than the Russian, given that those other things are equal.

The label of the film does not do justice to its contents. The man who wrote the title—after the film was made—was obviously just a good showman who had not forgotten that one of the most profitable propaganda films of Great War I. was "The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin." This is also propaganda, and will readily be recognised as such, since in these days the word is in everyman's dictionary. Propaganda, of course, ceases to become propaganda as soon as it is recognised; but this film, in spite of its

name, manages to be interesting in spite of itself, and in spite of the fact that it is telling people what by now they have known for 10 years: that the habits of the Nazi are unpleasant.

As a film, then, it is a good film; but considered as propaganda it is confusing. It works up sympathy for radical agitators, for example, as "Professor Mamlock" did, while the authorities are busy arresting them behind the Home Front. And its other misfire is the tendency to contradict what Duff-Cooper said the other day about fighting the German people as well as their rulers. It draws between the persecuted German people and their Nazi rulers a distinction which must be and will be contradicted by the sensations of every man behind a bayonet at this moment, by every man in a tank, behind a machine-gun, or artillery, in the cockpit of an aeroplane, or at the other end of the earthward journey of a bomb.

"We have been talking too much; now we are punching them on the nose," said Lord Lothian, after the first big raid on Sylt. In "Hitler, Beast of Berlin," we are still by those standards talking too much. It will be a nice point for the propagandists to decide how far they can go with the policy of being nice to the Germans without finding that it also means being nice to the Nazis.

As war propaganda, then, the film slips. As a movie, it gives Ronald Drew (Hans), Steffi Duna (Ailsa), and Alan Ladd (Karl), the opportunity to make a thoroughly good job of acting Truth Driven Underground, to Burrow Like a Mole. It puts its theme into a complete and satisfying picture, and it does this without the lack of artistic restraint implied in its name.

HELL'S CARGO

(A.B.P.)

The story is by Leo Johnson. The direction is by Harold Huth. The three principal players are Walter Rilla, Kim Peacock, Robert Newton. They are commanders of a French, a British, and a Russian man-of-war, attached, it seems, to an international patrol in the Mediterranean. Into port comes an oil tanker. Trouble follows. The tanker slips out to sea, but not before the nature of her illegal cargo is discovered. The French warship is despatched in pursuit, with the British and Russian commanders on board as liaison officers. Caught, the owner of the tanker holds his crew at revolver point while he opens the cocks that allow the horrid cargo to flow into the sea, creating a poisonous gas against which gas-masks are ineffective. The Navy seems helpless. Who is to save the passenger steamer right in the line of the wind-blown gas cloud? Why! Are not the commanders brave men? *Le Fortune* steams at 40 knots through the gas and gets through, but only after the French and British commanders have coughed a great deal and the Russian, who was gassed in the last war, has died. But the French Commander's wife, a passenger on the crippled liner, is saved, to stand for the final shot with glistening eyes while the Russian goes into an honourable but watery grave.

Obviously, this is not propaganda. Obviously, it is not a Grade A picture. In spite of these handicaps, however, it manages to be fair entertainment.

Slips: The "battleships" are destroyers. One shot of the gas cloud in-



STAN KNIGHT, as "Old Ben" in the New Zealand-made talkie "Rewi's Last Stand"

cluded too much ship, spoiling the illusion that it was anything but a smoke screen.

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

(Paramount)

This is Kipling, plus Colman, two negatives that still mean no, and two wrongs that do not make a right. An artist wins success as an artist, goes through certain emotions as set out by Kipling, and then goes blind. It is all very automatic. If it is anything, it is a gesture: a gesture in the true Gunga Din manner.

Colman's picture of Kipling's Richard Helder has little of the force of Kipling's. This is understandable, for William H. Wellman, producer-director, has been at no pains to lift the picture out of the rut of close adherence to the Kipling method, and there is not much of Kipling that corresponds to real life, or will bear even the small test of realism involved in photographic portrayal. For Kipling, plot did not matter, character did not matter. Both were simply means to his end, and that end was often the evocation by grand phrases or pungent doggerel, of more or less superficial emotions. With them, Kipling was the great artist, the artist of the heroics, of self-sacrifice, of gallantry. But with them alone—and he seldom exceeded himself—Kipling was not the complete artist. For this modern medium, bereft of the influence of Kipling's power over words, "The Light That Failed" has proved too one-dimensional. So Colman, pretty one-dimensional in his own right, cannot wave the Kipling banner with much success. Undiluted Kipling on the screen is no more successful than undiluted Colman. In these times, they are not sufficiently subtle. Any opportunity the story gave him for subtlety, Wellman has missed. The picture accentuates the deficiencies of Kipling, and Kipling is not the author to disguise the deficiencies of Colman.

For those who like Colman, however, it is good, sound Colman. In one brief moment, Walter Huston is priceless, bestirring himself, as he says, on behalf of his friend the artist, who has gone to the artistic dogs. For the rest, this part has the same limiting quality of sameness as the others, shared by Muriel Angelo, Ida Lupino, and Dudley Digges.

Not an excellent picture, or first-class, or very good—but good enough.

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