

# WHO DESTROYED "OUR TOWN"?

## Sad Fate Of An Exceptional Film

### OUR TOWN

(United Artists)

THE space on the left remains blank because none of the accustomed attitudes of our little man could correctly interpret my feelings about *Our Town*. The nearest I might get to it would be to show him jumping up and down on the prostrate body of the vandal who ruthlessly cut some 4,000 feet out of the picture and thereby all but ruined a masterpiece.

I had read about *Our Town* in overseas papers, and when its local screening was at last announced I went to see it, at some inconvenience but with high hopes. After it had been running for an hour that seemed like only ten minutes it suddenly jumped forward, then stopped short in mid-air, and a slide announced that it was the interval and time for a well-known brand of cigarette. Personally I felt more like seeking out and telling the barbarian responsible exactly what I thought of him. But I wonder how many others in the audience would have backed me up? Did they even realise that the film had been butchered to make a double-feature programme; or did they simply think "Well, that was a queer show, ending abruptly like that. Nothing much to it. Let's hope the second feature's better?"

That feeling that "there's nothing much to it" would not be unnatural: it is, indeed, the essence of *Our Town*, which is simply the day-by-day record of the uneventful lives of the inhabitants of a small American town. Nothing, and yet in a sense everything. For these people, for all their apparent Americanism, might as easily be the common people of almost any town in almost any part of the world, and their experiences are the humdrum yet all-important material from which the lives of most of us are woven — getting up in the morning, having breakfast, going to school or to work, doing our lessons, growing up, falling in love, dying, having children, going to bed at night. That's all, but depicted on the screen in an idiom that combines casualness with intimacy, and is as near to folk-drama or folk-poetry as one can imagine on the screen. The fact that the film was made by Sam Wood (of Mr. Chips fame) from Thornton Wilder's prize play should have meant something to the vandal with the scissors—but apparently didn't.

Who was he, I wonder? Certainly not the censor, for there could be nothing harmful to the war effort in showing us that the best things in life are simple, or that Americans are very much like ourselves. Probably it was some Philistine of the film world who perforce measures the quality of such films chiefly by the number of minutes they will fill in before the Interval.

In spite of mutilation, the film—like the Venus de Milo or the frieze of the Parthenon — is still recognisable as a work of art, but so that you may the



FRANK CRAVEN  
The spokesman of "Our Town"

better appreciate what you and I have missed, here are the opinions of three worthwhile overseas critics who were lucky enough to see *Our Town* in its original form:

*Time*: "The picture is a cinema event."

*New Statesman and Nation*: "*Our Town* is a film in a hundred. . . . It succeeds in drawing out of common lives and surroundings an emphasis and texture of their own."

C. A. Lejeune (London Observer): "Once in a long while there turns up in the cinema a film that breaks all the rules. When this happens, the result may be good or bad, but it is always an event. Sacha Guitry's films are like that. *Green Pastures* was like that. *Down Went Maginty* was a little like that. *Our Town* is certainly like that. The film will startle all its audiences, delight some, exasperate others. It blandly overlooks all the conventions of time, space, and script-writing. . . . It will either appeal to you as one of the loveliest films you have ever seen, or one of the silliest. To me it seems like opening a window and letting the sunshine into a dark room. It has a gentle philosophy of everyday goodness that I find most comforting. It knows and loves the little things of life, the common things—coffee, and bacon, sleep after a long day, the warmth of sunlight. It is so beautifully acted—and particularly by that flower-like creature, Martha Scott, who plays the girl Emily—that the human story shines through the most startling innovations of technique. An enchanting film I thought — but you must make up your own mind about it. Like music and the bitter scent of chrysanthemums, it is the sort of thing that invites the sharpest personal response."

After that, Mr. Man-With-the-Scissors, I could almost wish that you would cut yourself with them—only you were probably no more to blame than an apathetic public.

### KIPPS

(Gaumont British)

WHEN I first heard that Michael Redgrave was to play Kipps I was dismayed. I had seen him playing the romantic lead with Elizabeth Bergner in *Srolen Life*, and the gallant hero in *The Lady Vanishes*, and I couldn't bear to think of his 72 inches being whittled down to the stature of H. G. Wells's harassed little draper's assistant. However, in spite of this physical handicap for his leading man Director Carol Reed shows unusual respect for the characters, dialogue, and essential spirit of the Wells novel.

The settings and atmosphere, too, recapture faithfully the true flavour of Edwardianism. For an hour and a half you find yourself living in another world and another age, and yet in a world and an age that has a nostalgic familiarity. Many of us remember it; to the younger of us it recalls rainy afternoons when mother let us look through the postcard collection or the family album, and we saw just such pictures of piers, promenades, and punting on the river, boaters and bicycles, gallantry and Gibson Girls.

When I came out of the theatre after seeing *Kipps* I heard a woman in front of me remark, "I like a picture like that after a week's hard work." Per-

haps that is the reason for the warm and happy feeling which the film gave me. It was so delightfully restful—and "escapist." There is no suggestion of fighting one's way to the top and wresting success from the unwilling hands of the gods. It is the perfect vindication of the "simple soul."

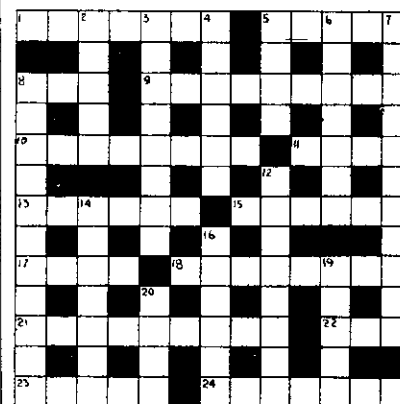
But to get back to Michael Redgrave. When you first see a weedy youth hurrying to the counter to serve an impatient customer you think "This can't possibly be Michael Redgrave." By the time you've realised that it is, you've become so used to Kipps that for the duration of the film, you forget there is such a person as Michael Redgrave. It's merely Kipps swanking on the pier, Kipps listening with half-open mouth to a lecture on self-improvement, Kipps improving himself, Kipps walking out, pronouncing his aitches, unpronouncing them again, getting married, losing his fortune, finding some of it again. He is so diffident you want to shake him, and so good-natured and trusting that you want to pat him. It must be difficult to portray a simple soul without conveying an impression of dim-wittedness, yet there is nothing of the dim-wit about Michael Redgrave's Kipps, though perhaps there is something a little other-worldly.

As Miss Walshingham, the "other woman" (several steps up) in Kipps's life, Diana Wynyard finds her happiest role since *Cavalcade*. I was rather disappointed with her in *Freedom Radio*, but perhaps it is merely that an Edwardian setting (or set) suits her better than an Adolphian.

But it is to Phyllis Calvert, as Ann Porrick, that I award most of the feminine laurels (Miss Wynyard, after all, gets most of the feminine fig leaves). Miss Calvert's Ann is a charming and lively person, and there is an impression of strength and sincerity beneath her charm and liveliness. And so it is without misgiving that, at the end of the picture, we leave our hero in her capable hands and say "Good-bye, Mr. Kipps."

### THE LISTENER CROSSWORD

(No. 83)



#### Clues Across

- Sam and Gary are Mongolian inhabitants of Hungary.
- Rum inside an Able-bodied Seaman on an important road.
- Fuss and bother.
- Taunting.
- Lion and mule trodden underfoot.
- A mineral salt.
- Get Ray to move in a circle.
- It may be silent, but it glitters.
- Tool made from a spar.
- Pelt with a nut—this is rather touchy.
- It takes a calm liar to form a Spanish cabal.

- No more after this.
- I sell a kind of thread used for stockings.
- Some art for a great musician.

#### Clues Down

- Queer sound to come from an organ.
- Be a lotus—this is perfect.
- Do rush into a winding sheet.
- Bowls have this tendency.
- Startle (anag.).
- Maud cut lace (anag.).
- Real and logical, and yet only make-believe.
- Pretend it's a mule.
- Sees rum (anag.).
- Here you find me bald in an asylum.
- This may be later.
- Constant.

(Answer to No. 82)

