

THE "ENGLISH" CHARACTER

PIMPERNEL SMITH
(B.E.F.)

ORDINARILY I don't much like making comparisons, but a comparison between *Pimpernel Smith* and the recent *International Lady* seems a good way of appraising the worth of the former. The other day I had an argument with a friend who took me to task for giving a fairly low grading

to *International Lady*, which he had enjoyed very much. My defence was that the film had been so completely artificial and unrelated to real events, viewing the war simply as a convenient background for melodramatic adventures by impossible characters. Admittedly it did very well at the box office, but this was mainly because it took people's minds off the war: which (as I suggested in my review at the time) was rather damning comment to have to make

about what purported to be a realistic picture of total war on the Secret Service front.

NOW this introduction is relevant to *Pimpernel Smith* because this film also deals with impossible characters in melodramatic situations against a somewhat similar background, but unlike *International Lady* it does not pretend to be what it is not. A foreword labels it as a "fantasy," and we have it on the authority of Leslie Howard, its producer, director, and star, that it is "just an amusing piece of hokum." Quite apart from any other considerations — and there are several — such frankness and honesty of intention would alone make it a better picture than *International Lady*. Actually, taken in the spirit in which its producer has offered it—as entertainment pure and simple—*Pimpernel Smith* is quite the most enjoyable show I have seen for weeks, as good in its way (and it is much the same way) as *The Lady Vanishes*.

BUT I should like to be sure that you do take it in that spirit, because even such an ordinarily level-headed critic as my renowned and much-admired colleague C. A. Lejeune has on this occasion been so carried away by emotion that she has rhapsodically declared *Pimpernel Smith* to be a fine "anthology of the British Character," and has discovered all kinds of hidden meanings in it—such as that "everything that these islands mean to our people is implicit in the film for those who choose to find it." With deference to Miss Lejeune, this is sentimental nonsense. For one thing, "British" is a very broad term and includes most of the spots on the map marked red, but even if one narrows it to "English" it is still nonsense. For although Professor Smith is such a likeable fellow it would, I submit, be a rather bad outlook for Britain's War Effort if we had to regard him as The Typical Englishman. He is the absent-minded professor of all the funny stories and cartoons; so vague that he "blends into the landscape," so forgetful that he can't remember what day it is nor the names of his best friends. He makes mildly academic jokes about Oxford and Cambridge, Shakespeare and Aphrodite; he regards women as a nuisance; and he is interested (or gives the appearance of being interested) in nothing but digging up the dead past.

Now much of this, of course, is a deliberate pose in the tradition of the original Scarlet Pimpernel — the mask of comic ineffectualness hiding the man of action. This modern Pimpernel is busy snatching, not French aristocrats from the guillotine, but men of culture and learning from the Nazi execution squads and concentration camps in the days just before this war; and Leslie Howard brings as much charm and humour to the part as he did to his early role as Sir Percy Blakeney. But there is a difference. The distinction between the foppish Sir Percy and the daring Scarlet Pimpernel was clear cut, whereas in *Pimpernel Smith* you hardly know where the meandering professor of archaeology ends and the elusive, re-



PROF. LESLIE HOWARD
The Typical Englishman?

sourceful rescuer of Nazi victims begins. Professor Smith's haphazard vagueness seems to be not so much a part of his pose as a part of his (English) nature. And if one were to believe with Miss Lejeune that the film presents a faithful portrait of the typical English character, then it would be logical to believe that it is equally faithful in depicting the Nazi character. Well, it may be; but if it is, one can only wonder why we aren't winning the war much faster than we are! Why, in fact, we didn't win it in the first few months.

For the Nazis of *Pimpernel Smith* are merely playthings in the professorial hands. Accompanied by a band of young students, he roams almost at will through Germany, making a rescue here and a rescue there under the very noses of the Gestapo who, for all the evidence to the contrary, are a bunch of comic-opera blunderers who bawl each other out on all occasions. The girl they depute to ensnare the elusive Smith is a Pole whose father the Englishman is in process of rescuing—and of course she goes over to his side. (The role of the girl is most interestingly played by Mary Morris.) When, after a successful raid has been carried out on one of their concentration camps, the Nazis do find themselves with some of the Pimpernel's band in their clutches, they show what can only be described as criminal negligence in allowing them to slip out again unmolested. And the mild Professor himself ambles in and out of Government headquarters, pulling the wool over official eyes in handfals and leaving a wake of baffled, frothing Teutons.

THE equivalent of Chauvelin in this story is the gross, chocolate-guzzling Reichminister General von Graum. Though apparently he is Germany's Chief of Police, his official status is actually rather indeterminate, for when he is not cursing Professor Smith he is cursing the Army or the Gestapo and appears to be responsible for neither. Von Graum is portrayed by Francis Sullivan with such a rich sense of fun and rotund absurdity that he comes near to stealing Leslie Howard's thunder; but with regard to this character I feel again impelled to ask why anyone should ex-

(Continued on next page)

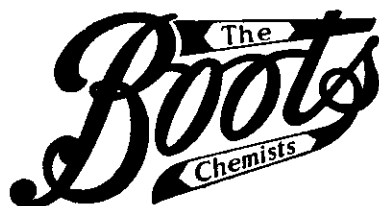


Soft & Dainty Puffs for Pretty Cheeks

N.Z. LAMBSKIN — N.Z. MADE
EXCLUSIVE TO BOOTS



You will be delighted with our selection of downy little Lambskin Puffs—a real New Zealand idea and production. These soft, dainty Puffs hold the powder perfectly and stand any amount of washing.



AUCKLAND — 104 QUEEN STREET
WELLINGTON — 58 WILLIS STREET
PALMERSTON NTH. — 165 The Square
DUNEDIN — 192 PRINCES STREET

Orders by post will receive prompt attention.
Postage paid on all orders to the value of £1 or over.



Hanky Puffs (attached to floral handkerchief)
2/11 3/6 3/11



Suede Pouch Puff — unspliable — a novel idea. Lambskin Puff with loop and suede pouch to match. 3/6



Dainty Fur Puff — In cardboard box. 1/6