

Springtime in Ottawa

THE HAPPY TIME

(Stanley Kramer-Columbia)

THE existence of the Dominion of Canada—which is a circumstance of some importance to Canadians and to the rest of the Commonwealth—is also, I'm sure, a dramatic property of immense value to the film industry. And I'm not thinking only of the Mounties and the Barren Lands, of fur-traders, atom spies, or paddling voyageurs. Consider how many Hollywood productions might have failed to cross that critical ledger line dividing the red from the black had their heroes not hailed (nominally) from above the equally important frontier that follows the 49th Parallel. Let Alan Ladd assume a Canuck alias and his accent is accepted, Britannic pride is appeased, our one-and-sixpences are extracted with tact, and Hollywood remains in the mink.

The Happy Time, however, suggests that Canada has something fundamentally more valuable to offer the filmmaker than a cheap form of box-office insurance. Once upon a time, you may remember, all Gaul was divided into three parts. Nowadays there are four, and it is the fourth division—the French Canadians of the St. Lawrence valley—

whose un-Anglo-Saxon attitudes to life and love are explored with cheerful and irreverent gaiety in this picture. I enjoyed *The Happy Time* (I thought it well-named), but I would be even more pleased if I could be sure that Hollywood knew a good idea when it saw one. This is not a French film the



GRANDPERE
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BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "The Happy Time."
MAINLY FAIR: "The Master of Ballantrae."

opening sequence, in fact, is a light-hearted spoof with its French dialogue and prominent sub-titles—but it has a strong infusion of Gallic wit and charm that more than mitigates an occasional lapse into farce, and there is warmth and gentleness in the characterisation.

The film has several things in common with Clarence Day's *Life With Father*. It is a family story which began as a book (by Robert Fontaine), was turned into a play, and under the aegis of Rodgers and Hammerstein was a long-run success on Broadway. But while father was indubitably the central figure in the American story, the focal point of *The Happy Time* is a small boy.

Bibi, a 12-year-old cadet of the Bonnard family, lives in an old frame house in Ottawa with his parents (Charles Boyer and Marsha Hunt), his grandfather (Marcel Dalio), and Uncle Desmonde, a dashing wine salesman (Louis Jourdain). Father—genial, gentle and understanding (the recession of Boyer's hairline looks like becoming one of the important turning points in his dramatic career)—conducts a local theatre orchestra. Grandpère, retired from business but not from pleasure, dispenses dry worldly wisdom at table and pursues widows (the more the merrier) at most other times. His reclining years are, in fact, dedicated to the rebuttal of that

old French lament. *Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait*. Uncle Desmonde, a gallant garter-snapper, takes after Grandpère. Over the way lives Uncle Louis (Kurt Kasznar), henpecked, bibulous, and disillusioned.

Surrounded by these diverse influences, Bibi enters adolescence and the way in which he weathers its storms and learns (from the ripe experience around him) something wholesome about the facts of life is the substance of the story. A good measure of the film is explosively funny, in parts it is genuinely tender and affectionate in its portrayal of the boy feeling the first uncomprehended stirrings of love and desire, and if one uncle or the other at times overplays his part the film is, on the whole, charmingly successful. The dialogue is good (how shoddy most film scripts are when compared with stage lines), and with its help, and the sound work of the cast (grandpère is magnificent), Stanley Kramer has produced something delightfully but not dangerously un-American. Bobby Driscoll, as Bibi, is appropriately gauche. I thought he seemed a little ill at ease once or twice—a little too anxious to get the right manner of intonation—but perhaps that is part and parcel of adolescence. Alas, I can't remember.

THE MASTER OF BALLANTRAE (Warner Bros.)

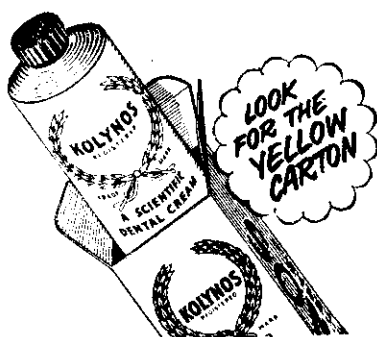
THE flaw in *The Master of Ballantrae* (which isn't one of Stevenson's best stories, anyway) is that R.L.S. thought

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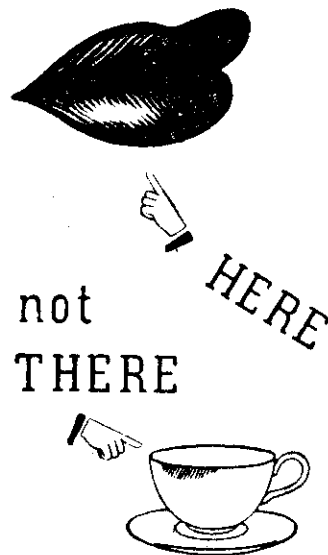


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