

What You Lose on the Swings...

FOLLY TO BE WISE

(London Films-British Lion)

IT used to be said of Alastair Sim, when he was younger and leaner than he is now, that his resemblance to Sir John Reith was so striking that junior BBC announcers would blench and genuflect hastily when they encountered him on the street. I was reminded of that by Sim's latest comedy vehicle, *Folly to be Wise* (chassis by James Bridie, coachwork by Launder and Gilliat), for it also makes fun of a venerable broadcasting institution—the Brains Trust. But there is more to it than that. Bridie called his play *It Depends What You Mean*—and if you remember the original Brains Trust team, and Professor Joad's cautious opening gambit you will see where the title came from. But Bridie set his scene in a military camp and the best of the fun (or the most good-humoured fun, if you like) is at the expense of the camp padre and his desperate efforts as the unit entertainment officer, to find the right kind of stuff to give the troops.

Since most adult New Zealand males have at one time or another been confined to barracks for a period of basic military training, this kind of comedy is likely to produce a fairly universal and cheerful response. At any rate, the sight, and sound, of the May Savitt Quilthrop String Quartet sawing away in a practically empty recreation hut while the troops wet their whistles in the Red Lion down the road was to me a hilarious evocation of times now mercifully past.

To meet the competition of the Red Lion, the padre is driven to extreme measures. He cancels the next performance by the string quartet, postpones a visit by the local Madrigal and Canticle Society, and in an ill-starred moment decides to stage a discussion panel and invite questions from the troops. ("The padre's asked for questions," says one platoon sergeant, handing out quires of paper, "and I want a spontaneous response, d'you understand?")

In assembling the Brains Trust, vetting the questions sent in, and endeavouring to control his panel of celebrities once they are assembled, Alastair Sim has no lack of scope for the fumbling foot-in-the-mouth comedy at which he is so adept. And there are excellent minor performances by Miles Malleson, Edward Chapman, Roland Culver and George Cole. But what was undoubtedly the climax of the film did not strike me as unadulterated comedy. This is reached when the panel is asked to give an answer to the question, "Is marriage a good idea, and if so, how should one choose a partner?" The questioner is an earnest little Waac who really wants to know—and her determination to get an answer provokes a first-class brawl on the stage. It is, I think, the emphatic contrast between the earnestness of the questioner (she is the padre's secretary) and the broad farce which she precipitates that takes some of the bloom off the fun. That our intellectual betters can make complete asses of themselves in public is one of the staples of the comic tradition (as well as one of the more cheerful facts of life), but all the same I thought that this time it went a shade too far. Not that I'm writing the show off—it is better than average

BAROMETER

FAIR: "Folly To Be Wise."
FAIR: "Mogambo."

comedy, and Alastair Sim is better than average, too—but it just didn't quite come up to expectations.

MOGAMBO

(M.G.M.)

ALL the best film critics will tell you that John Ford is a great director who has reached a *modus vivendi* with the film industry—producing commercial potboilers so that he may have the freedom necessary to achieve the occasional masterpiece. It is true that sometimes the higher critics can't agree on which is which, but there should be no serious doubts about *Mogambo*. This is strictly commercial—no studio could afford to hazard a valuable property like Miss Ava Gardner and I don't suppose Clark Gable is expendable yet. But even if it is a potboiler, Ford can still make it good to look at, and he has a wealth of material to work with. *Mogambo* was filmed in Kenya, Tanganyika, the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa, and if we get all the routine shots—the wallowing hippos, bounding impala and massed flamingos—we are also shown some first-class landscape and animal photography. Ford has a feeling for the wilderness that is as true for the savannah lands of Kenya and the matted jungle of the Congo as it is for the more arid landscapes of Utah or Arizona. He at least has no difficulty in filling a wide screen with life, movement and meaning, and except for one or two brief lapses in back-projection (studio foreground against location background) the picture of "Africa—its ominous green vastnesses, its broad waterways and its teeming life—is absorbing and exciting.

So far as the human element goes, the story is trite enough. Gable, as a professional big-game hunter and safari guide, looks not so much a Hemingway character (Hollywood can't move round in Africa these days without bumping into Papa) as what Hemingway himself might have been if he had let his big-game hunting instincts get the upper hand. The women fall for Gable, too—in fact, for a few reels *Mogambo* looks like turning into another short happy life of Francis Macomber. Miss Gardner, however, makes it a quadrangular affair and eventually gets the rogue male tamed before he can do any serious mischief. *Mogambo*, in short, is not the zeepest notch on John Ford's tally-stick, but there's no reason for him to be ashamed of it. If *Folly to be Wise* fell a little short, *Mogambo* substantially exceeded my expectations. What you lose on the swings (if I may coin a phrase) you gain on the roundabouts.

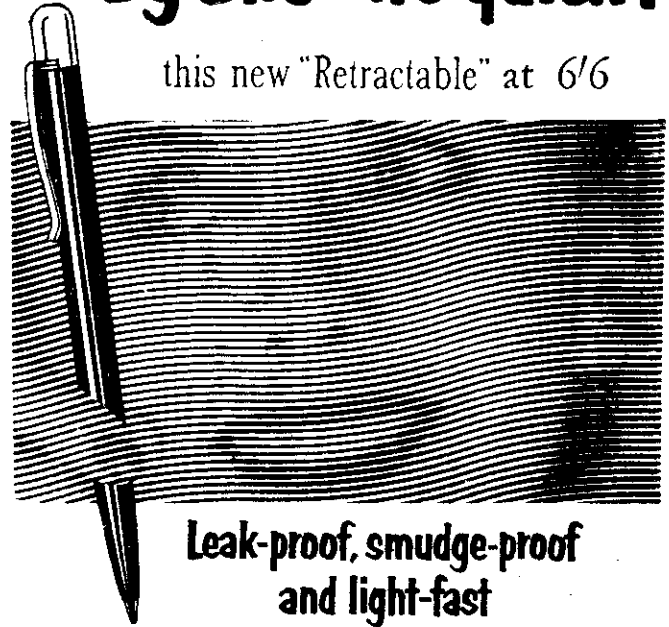
Bookshelf

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, *The Fourth Musketeer*, by Ralph Hancock and Letitia Fairbanks; Peter Davies. English price 15/-.

I DON'T suppose Douglas Fairbanks left behind him the same fanatical following as Valentino did, but there are doubtless tens of thousands who remember him with sentimental affection. This biography is aimed at the sentimentalists. If you are interested in Fairbanks you will find 250-odd pages about him here—but you will have to be pretty interested in him to wade through them. It's not in the same class as, say, *Good Night, Sweet Prince*, but then Fairbanks was not in the same class as old Jack Barrymore.

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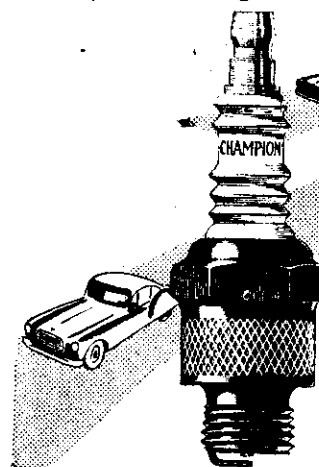
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