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ON THE SCREEN

DICKENS AND SOMERSET MAUGHAM

By C. A. LEJEUNE

A FEW years ago, a British film producer, racking his brains for something new—but not *too* new—with which to entertain his audiences, hit on the idea of collecting a number of short pieces by one writer, and making them into an omnibus picture. There have been omnibus films before, of course, but this was to be an omnibus with a difference. The author was to be a celebrity in the field of literature; he was to introduce the stories personally; he would be allowed, nay, even encouraged, to make his own selection; and he, rather than any individual actor, was to be the star of the show.

A number of famous names were pencilled in for this literary undertaking, but only one of them — William Somerset Maugham—survived the initial stages. The triumphant success of *Quartet* led to the production of another omnibus called *Trio*, and now comes *Encore*, to bring three further Maugham stories to the screen.

The new collection follows the pattern set by its predecessors. That is to say, the several films, differing sharply in style and mood, have been presented by different directors, and acted by different artists, while before each item the 78-year-old author makes a personal appearance on the screen, chatting to the audience informally; telling us, in his dry, cultivated voice, just how he came to write this particular tale; fingering, with affection and pride, some volume from the long rows of uniform editions; and flattering the customers with a glimpse of a Great Writer in his Riviera villa amongst his books.

The three stories chosen here are not, on the whole, such a felicitous collection as those presented in *Quartet* and *Trio*, and in two of them one is over-conscious of what might be described as Mr. Maugham's glossy magazine quality, but none of them is less than entertaining. The first, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, is a comic trifle about two brothers, the one industrious and worried, the other indolent and happy, and although it is pleasingly enough played by Roland Culver and Nigel Patrick, with a bright script by T. E. B. Clarke, who brought such fun

into *The Lavender Hill Mob* earlier in the year, its contents seem a trifle flimsy; its situations too pat and its jokes too clearly signalled.

The third item, *Gigolo and Gigolette*, is better, but still not up to Mr. Maugham's top form, nor to the British film studios' top standard. The story is about a young woman who earns a living for herself and her husband, and gives the patrons of a Riviera hotel a vicarious thrill, by diving twice-nightly into a tank of blazing water from an 80-foot tower. After a few seasons of this sort of thing, she begins to lose her nerve; first she imagines that she cannot bring herself to face the stunt more than once a night, and then that she cannot bring herself to face it at all. Her husband, who isn't a bad sort of fellow, simply a rather unimaginative one, and practically concerned to save enough money to give up show life, buy a garage and settle down, persuades her to go on, and the message of the story, as I take it, is that even one's nearest and dearest may not be acute enough to know when the breaking-point comes.

In his introduction to *Gigolo and Gigolette*, Mr. Maugham makes it quite plain that he does not approve of the sort of risks such people are expected to run, in order to provide other people with a cheap sensation. Since the subject is so sober, and the author's feeling about it so intense, the film needed, I think, rather more serious treatment than it gets here. Harold French's direction seems more concerned to entertain us with superficial details of Riviera life than to get to grips with the problems of his characters, and he never made me feel that Glynis Johns, delightful and accomplished little artist though she is, was the sort of girl who *habitually* dressed in black spangles and dived into five feet of blazing water. Terence Morgan, as the young husband, comes out of the ordeal more successfully, and seems to strike something closer to the original Maugham vein.

Mr. Morgan is a young stage actor, who has had little film experience, but who learned his business with Sir Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic. Up till now I have always classified him as another personable, forthright, useful, but rather undistinguished juvenile lead. In *Gigolo and Gigolette* he suggests, for the first time, that he might have, buried deep in that handsome frame of his, the makings of a good actor. He plays the

star's stooge in this film, with exactly the right amount of perky inferiority complex. His accent, whether he speaks English or French, is just off-colour. His evening dress is worn with just the *nuance* that distinguishes the showman from the gentleman or the waiter. The script does not give him very much to work on, but he works on all he has with percipience, and the subtleties he gets out of the part are highly commendable for a good-looking young man who has been accustomed to play on looks alone.

The centrepiece of *Encore*, a story called *Winter Cruise*, is the real gem of the collection. This is mainly due to the beautiful performance of Kay Walsh in the leading part, but it has everything else, too, in its favour; a shrewd, kindly story with a neat twist in its tale; firm direction by Fay Compton's son, Anthony Pelissier; a generous male supporting cast of actors who can enjoy their fun without exceeding their limits; and the benefit of a warm heart and a wide observation.

The heroine of *Winter Cruise* is the sort of woman whom all travellers know and experienced travellers shun. "She had a heart of gold" says her author, who admits that he sketched the character from life, "but she was a crashing bore." He adds very firmly that he liked her, and hopes we shall like her too. We do, without a peradventure, for in spite of all her irritating qualities, she is the sort of holiday acquaintance who remains on our Christmas card list for years.

Middle-aged Miss Reed, who keeps a tea-shop with a friend, has chosen to go on a cruise to Jamaica for her annual holiday. All the way out she pesters the passengers, having decided to "banish all silly old stand-offishness, and be hail-fellow-well-met with everyone on board." When the rest of the tourists disembark at Jamaica, she spends the return voyage pestering the crew. For the sake of a little peace and quiet, they try to provide her with a nice romance. A young French steward is picked for the sacrifice; he does his best (and just how well he does is left to the imagination) but the lady does better.

It would have been disastrously easy for a bright young actress like Kay Walsh to guy this character. She never does. Her performance is completely satisfying because it has been created from the inside. Miss Walsh does not exaggerate Miss Reed in

appearance or manner; only the gentlest pressure is used to bring out the emphases, comic or moving, in a part that is sympathetically observed and played straight from the heart. Her spinster is a figure of fun, but the fun seems to spring from an inner gaiety and candour, that may express itself in absurd and infuriating ways, but is salted with the real salt of the earth. This performance provoked a tremendous round of applause at the picture's show, and thoroughly deserves it.

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When an actor of Alastair Sim's eminence and freakish humour elects to play Scrooge, we may expect a version of Charles Dickens' Christmas Tale that is at least unorthodox. It should be noticed that the title of the film is *Scrooge* and not *A Christmas Carol*; considerable liberties, in fact, have been taken with the text, and although the hands are, on the whole, the hands of Dickens, the voice is often the voice of novelist Noel Langley.

Scrooge is Sim's piece. The outline of the plot and the original characters have been retained; the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present and To Come still haunt the miser's sleep; Marley's Ghost still gibbers and clanks his chains, and Tiny Tim asks God to bless us everyone; but the picture has been unashamedly turned into a "vehicle" for a licensed clown, and Mr. Sim, as was to be anticipated, goes at his rich part with tremendous relish. He has never been an artist to do things by halves, and there is no doubt that his comic parody of terror during the ghostly visitations, and his jubilant caperings when he wakes from the last nightmare on Christmas morning, puts new life into Scrooge's old bones. It may not be the sort of life that the purists will wholly admire, but I fancy there is a great deal in this Scrooge that Dickens himself would have enjoyed. It can still be said of the Sim picture what G. K. Chesterton wrote of *A Christmas Carol* long ago, "Whether or no the visions were evoked by real Spirits of the Past, Present and Future, they were evoked by that truly exalted order of angels who are correctly called High Spirits."