
In the late 30's, when Nazi militarism was rattling the sabre, British studios embarked on a minor but curious cycle of espionage thrillers dealing with World War One, and stressing the nobility of the German enemy. "The 39 Steps" (in that was all that) and a far more convincing one than the traditional flow of bull-necked Hun's that returned to the screen when war was declared. Conrad Veidt played the idealistic German hero/villain in two of these films, "Dark Journey" and its follow-up "The Spy in Black". With war very much a reality however, he switched to playing a Dutch hero in "Contraband" ("Blackout" in the U.S.), rounding up Nazis in World War 2 London - before heading for Hollywood to play standard Nazi heavies opposite Bogart's standard heroes. Although not seen theatrically for many years now, "Dark Journey" was at one time an art-house standard, to the wartime film what "The 39 Steps" was to peacetime espionage. Like all Korda productions of the period, it is extremely well mounted and handsomely photographed. And like all spy films of its period, its plot now seems a little old hat - but then the contrived machinations that spies went through to pass on vital information were always a little hard to accept, when a postcard would have been cheaper, quicker and just as effective. Constance Bennett's "Three Faces East" and "After Tonight" probably represent the zenith of the nazi/murder (or the nadir of this kind of formula) but never event, "Dark Journey" is a smooth, tasteful and good-humored film about the kind of civilized warfare that is no more and probably never was, although with such good-looking and highly-minded spies as Vivien Leigh and Conrad Veidt, one feels that this is certainly the way it should have been.

"THE EAGLE AND THE HAWK" (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Stuart Walker Scenario by Bogart Rogers and Seton Miller from a story by John Monk Saunders; Asst. Director, Mitchell Leisen; Camera: Harry Pischke; Title Sets: FREDRIC MARCH, CARY GRANT, CAROLE LOMBARD, Jack Oakie, Sir Guy Standing, Forrester Harvey, Leyland Hodgson, Russell Scott, Kenneth Howell, Douglas Scott, Crawford Kent, Adrienne d'Ambricourt, Olaf Hytten, Lane Chandler, Dennis O'Keefe, York Sherwood, Paul Greason.

The W1 aviation cycle that had started with 1927's "Wings" was here in its sixth year and like Rko's "Ace of Aces". "The Eagle and the Hawk" was basically made for catching a popular cycle, and catching a lot of economical corners. Much of the spectacular aerial footage is lifted bodily from "Wings", and new combat scenes are cut in largely via back projection. Nevertheless, it's a tight, compact, quite undeservedly ignored film, its programmer status no stigma at all. John Monk Saunders, author of so many serial epics, here turns out a story quite out of the rut for its day, and up-to-date enough to fit into what current critics so conveniently term "anti-hero" films. It's original ending, jettisoned before release, was even stronger and more cynical - but rather than describe it here and lessen the impact of the film's ending I'll say a little more about it in the discussion period following the film.

There are certain cliches in this kind of fare that would be missed were they absent... the toasting of an enemy, the tactless battman, chattering about his "gentlemen" who have been shot down, and that wonderful old professional Englishman, Sir Guy Standing, underplaying everything. "Seems a pity... he murmurs after an entire squadron of replacements has been wiped out by one direct hit. But cliches or not, the film holds up well both as a piece of vivid aerial excitement and as wartime dramatics - surprisingly so in fact, considering the number of World War Two films ("Twelve O'Clock High", "Command Decisions") that later explored the same situations rather more thoroughly. No time wasted in pretentious soul-searching here though, and even that pleasant old device of introducing the characters pictorially in the credits is used creatively by showing the leads in scenes that do not subsequently form a part of the picture proper. In a series of deft images we get to know the characters and their backgrounds, so that when we meet them again we need no further explanations, flashbacks, or other details. --- VM. K. Everson