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## Jamaica Inn

*Jamaica Inn* was Hitchcock's last English film and his first costume piece, and seems, from his point of view, to have been more or less a potboiler made to fill in time while waiting to go to Hollywood.

Spirited young Maureen O'Hara comes to a Cornish village and finds her relatives involved with a gang of wreckers who include Emlyn Williams, Bernard Miles, and Robert Newton. She turns to the local J.P. (Charles Laughton) for help, only to find, *in extremis*, that he is the originator of all these crimes.

Hitchcock complained that his involvement was too obvious too early. This need not necessarily have demolished all suspense, since it is to the master-mind that the heroine increasingly entrusts herself. But maybe Hitchcock would have preferred a situation with the double suspense introduced by a continuing ambiguity, so that, for example, we share the heroine's hesitations as to whether she should entrust herself to him or not. In a more delicately balanced situation, Sir Humphrey Pengallan's every action and gesture would have flicked us, rapidly and briskly, between an ascendancy of hope and terror, but with neither quite free from the other. And in such a climax a hysteria-inducing alternative of terrors might loom large, e.g. as to whether her captor is himself a victim of a miscarriage of justice (the reverse angle, in fact, on *The Thirty-Nine Steps*)?

Because suspense involves a careful balance of intimations and possibilities, it is easy to see why Hitchcock's unusually precise style requires deft and docile actors. And Charles Laughton, who was not only Hitchcock's leading man, but, with Erich Pommer, his producer, had artistic interests of his own which ran clearly athwart Hitchcock's, so that he wouldn't let Hitchcock photograph him until he had hit on the right walk for his character—a detail which, with a director on his own wavelength, he might have mastered much earlier on. Nor was Daphne du Maurier's gallery of full-blooded Long-John-Silver-type Cornish rogues exactly propitious for the development of economical enigmas.

Although it was highly successful in its time, presumably because



the suspense, though indelicate by Hitchcock standards, was massive enough to satisfy audiences, the film is no longer viable, on its own terms, debilitated by the awkwardnesses which made it Hitchcock's unhappiest memory since *Waltzes From Vienna*. Laughton's blend of languor and energy, of babyish benignity and strutting self-sufficiency, with its plethora of mannerisms that suggest both country gentry barbarism and a more elegant arrogance, has a current of real artistic inspiration running through it, even though it is stylistically sealed off from everything else in the film, except for Bernard Miles, another 'archaic' and rustic actor. The post-war filmgoer must be rather startled by the young Robert Newton, who six years later would have made no mean Sir Humphrey himself; here he registers only as a Léo Genn-type rather too subdued for the romantic badinage which Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll handled so much more professionally. The irrationalism of the model shots now seems wildly excessive, particularly when a tempest-tossed schooner performs something like a U-turn at Z-car speed.

The film as a whole is keyed to rather Orczian melodramatics which no longer obtain, even if it is clearly an ancestor, along with Thorold Dickinson's *Gaslight*, in the following year, and maybe Lance Comfort's *Hatter's Castle*, of the period melodramas, full of upper-class brutalities, which Gainsborough were soon to make their own, and to which Hitchcock was later to return with a project much closer to his heart, *Under Capricorn*. The artistic awkwardness of both films seems connected not so much with problems of period, as with a certain incompatibility, or rather the difficulty of achieving a successful compromise between the heavy atmospherics with which such films must reauthenticate their barnstormer streak, and Hitchcock's concern with delicately tilting implications. In *Jamaica Inn* Hitchcock seems still to be thinking in terms of suspense continuity as a series of rapid events, flicking the spectator's mind first one way and then the other, as in *The Lady Vanishes*. And to this most of *Jamaica Inn* lends itself none too well, preferring, it would seem, a more brooding and picturesque atmosphere. In *Rebecca*, also by Daphne du Maurier, and virtually a costume piece (as Hitchcock comments), Hitchcock moves towards the terms of suspense as a continuing atmosphere of alternatives; while the sustained ambiguities and the supernatural overtones create a more sophisticated and subtle dramatic continuity.

Uneasily balanced as it is between rapidity of action and intensity of atmosphere, the film can none the less display, apart from Laughton's performance, its dark blossom of lyricism. Pistol to hand, the

smug and brutal Squire gags and binds the heroine, compelling her submission, however, with a merely psychological *coup de grâce*. 'Now,' he remarks, 'you have no one to depend upon but me.' And she yields herself to him as a child abandons herself to a father, as if desperately in need of her tyrant, and allows herself to be led, utterly docile, head bowed for her cloak's hood to obscure the gag around her mouth, through a bustling crowd, in a bondage which is more than physical, which is worthy of *The Story of O*, and which is by far the most romantically expressed emotion in the film.

And in some ways not dissimilar submissiveness has become a socially-ingrained second nature among Sir Humphrey's grateful tenants, and dominates, in religious terms, the wrecker who knows himself to be damned but retains just enough bizarrely hypocritical sincerity to offer religious consolation to the man whom he is about to kill. For the Hitchcock universe is dominated, not so much by ambition versus frustration and by desire versus despair and fear (the positives and negatives of an optimistic and progressive creed), as by self-preservation versus a deliciously irresistible fear (a more pessimistic, cautious and English attitude). We cannot but be reminded of lower-class meekness in Hitchcock movies generally, of erotic martyrdom in *Suspicion* and of religious martyrdom in *I Confess* and *The Wrong Man*. A director as individual as Hitchcock is bound to express himself through the overall content of a film, but sometimes one or more of the characters are in a particular sense his representative, within the action, of an emotional pattern particularly close to the source of his inspiration. This may be no less true of light entertainers than of profound artists (for self-expression is not the prerogative of genius), and in *Jamaica Inn* it is tempting to see the religious wrecker, damned in the long term but defiant in the short one, and Sir Humphrey, in his girth as in his quality of director of operations, as incarnations of the black side of the Hitchcock spirit, unleashed.