

## Document Citation

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THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS

Gaumont-British, 1935. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, screenplay by Charles Bennett, Alma Reville and Ian Hay from the novel by John Buchan, photographed by Bernard Knowles. 81 minutes.

With Robert Donat (Hannay), Madeline Carroll (Pamela), Lucie Mannheim (Miss Smith), Godfrey Tearle (Prof. Jordan), Helen Haye (Mrs. Jordan), John Laurie (Crofter), Peggy Ashcroft (Crofter's wife), Frank Cellier (sheriff), Wylie Watson (Mr. Memory), Peggy Simpson (maid).

For many years the sextette of thrillers that Hitchcock made for Gaumont-British between 1934 and 1938 seemed to be subject to fluctuating values. Initially they seemed perhaps to be over-praised, possibly because they were indisputably superior to anything in a like vein that other British film-makers were offering. Then, in the light of Hitchcock's first American films, and especially his deluxe spy thriller Foreign Correspondent, their economies and the down-playing of action and adventure potential, seemed to reduce their status to that of enjoyable and interesting stepping-stones in the director's career. Only with his increasingly over-blown and over-produced Hollywood films (many of which certainly are still of major import and interest) did we really begin to appreciate his earlier British thrillers for their unpretentious simplicity, their brevity and vitality, and especially for their humor. Sabotage (A Woman Alone) is probably the best thriller among them, and the only one with the serious dramatics that really involve us emotionally with the characters; The Lady Vanishes, by virtue of its witty and charming script, and its multiplicity of interesting characters is probably the most entertaining; and THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS, the best remembered of them all, is probably the neatest and--despite some quite spectacular deviations from its source novel--in its own way, the apotheosis of the civilized espionage thriller of the 30's. The other three--The Man Who Knew Too Much, Secret Agent and Young and Innocent (The Girl Was Young)--are all vastly enjoyable films, but definitely of a secondary quality.

In this hydrogen age when secret treaties in the Balkans and the plans for new bomb sights seem as remote as the storming of the Bastille, it is surprising that THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS still works as well as it does. Perhaps this is because despite the gimmickry of the Bondian agents, and the disillusioned apathy of the spies who come in from the cold, most secret agents--or at least the ones we hear about--do still seem to work in a Hitchcockian mould. Only a few years ago a couple of Soviet spies were nabbed while hiding code messages in a phone directory in a public booth; real Hitchcock stuff! One wonders why more spies never entrust their messages to the mails; admittedly, they'd be asking for trouble if they relied on the New York service, but the fantastically complicated system employed in THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS does seem a little unnecessary when a penny postcard would do the job as well--and probably quicker. However, one doesn't feel inclined to carp over THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS; it moves along quickly and with good humor, making the most of some excellent Scottish locations. Unlike the nightmare criminal world of Fritz Lang's The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, shown occasionally in film societies, everything takes place against a background of utter normalcy, and the villains are every bit as likeable as the hero and heroine, and certainly a bit brighter...but then Hitchcock never did really give a hang for his heroes or heroines and rarely expected the audience to do so either. Obviously he was very fond of THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS, for he constantly returned to it for inspiration; much of North by Northwest derives from it, while Saboteur is practically a remake. The film influenced many other thriller-makers too, not least William Castle, who lazily lifted the entire landlady's scream-into-locomotive sequence (a once-famous piece of cutting, no so over-used that it seems almost trite) for When Strangers Marry in 1944.

THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS was remade by Rank a few years ago, in color, with pleasing location work, and an enjoyable performance from Kenneth More in the Donat role. But it was approximately a third as long again, certainly talked twice as much, and had none of the tautness and economy of Hitchcock's original. Yet interestingly enough, it was based almost entirely on the Hitchcock film, and hardly at all on the original John Buchan novel, from which Hitchcock had deviated rather spectacularly.

[William K. Everson]

[The New York Times, Sept. 14, 1935:]

Alfred Hitchcock, the gifted English screen director, has made one of the fascinating pictures of the year in THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS, his new film at the Roxy Theatre. If the work has any single rival as the most original, literate and entertaining melodrama of 1935, then it must be The Man Who Knew Too Much, which is also out of Mr. Hitchcock's workshop. A master of shock and suspense, of cold horror and slyly incongruous wit, he uses his camera the way a painter uses his brush, stylizing his story and giving it values which the scenarists could hardly have suspected. By comparison with the sinister delicacy and urbane understatement of THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS, the best of our melodramas seem crude and brawling.

If you can imagine Anatole France writing a detective story, you will have some notion of the artistry that Mr. Hitchcock brings to this screen version of John Buchan's novel. Like The Man Who Knew Too Much, the photoplay immerses a quite normal human being in an incredible dilemma where his life is suddenly at stake and his enemies are mysterious, cruel and desperate. Richard Hannay, a young Canadian, is sitting in a London music hall when a man is killed, whereupon a young woman confesses the murder to him and begs him for sanctuary. In his rooms she explains that she is playing a lone game of counter-espionage against foreign spies who have stolen a valuable military secret and are preparing to take it out of the country. Then the enigmatic lady is herself murdered, leaving Hannay with the meager information that his own life is now in danger, that he will learn the secret of the Thirty-Nine Steps in a certain Scottish hamlet, and that he must beware of a man whose little finger is amputated at the first joint.

That is the situation, and for the next four days Hannay finds himself in the most fantastic predicament of his life. The police are hunting him for the murder of the young woman and the spies are hunting him because he knows too much. His career is a murderous nightmare of chase and pursuit, in which he continually escapes by inches from the hangman's noose and the assassin's bullet. Mr. Hitchcock describes the remarkable chain of events in Hannay's flight across England and Scotland with a blend of unexpected comedy and breathless terror that is strikingly effective. Perhaps the identifying hallmark of his method is its apparent absence of accent in the climaxes, which are upon the spectator like a slap in the face before he has set himself for the blow. In such episodes as the murder of the woman in Hannay's apartment, the icy ferocity of the man with the missing finger when he casually shoots Hannay, or the brilliantly managed sequences on the train, the action progresses through seeming indifference to whip-like revelations. There is a subtle feeling of menace on the screen all the time in Mr. Hitchcock's low-slung, angled use of the camera. But the participants, both Hannay and his pursuers, move with a repressed excitement that adds significance to every detail of their behavior.

Robert Donat as the suavely desperate hero of the adventure is excellent both in the comic and the tragic phases of his plight. The lovely Madeline Carroll, who begins by betraying him and believes his story when it is almost too late, is charming and skillful. All the players preserve that sureness of mood and that understanding of the director's intention which distinguished The Man Who Knew Too Much. There are especially fine performances by John Laurie as the treacherous Scot who harbors the fugitive, Peggy Ashcroft as his sympathetic wife, Godfrey Tearle as the man with the missing finger, and Wylie Watson as the memory expert of the music halls, who proves to be the hub of the mystery. [Andre Sennwald]

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Next week: NO SCREENING -- Thanksgiving recess

Dec. 1st: FIRE OVER ENGLAND (1937), the Pommer, Korda, Howard adaptation of the Mason novel, photographed by James Wong Howe, starring Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh. Short film: a compilation of swashbuckling highlights with Douglas Fairbanks, Errol Flynn and others.