



A Cottage on Dartmoor

Director: Anthony Asquith
Production Company: British Instructional Films
Producer: H. Bruce Woolfe *
Technical Supervisor: Max Stern *
Assistant Director: A. Frank Bundy *
Scenario: Anthony Asquith
Continuity: Ralph Smart *
Original story: Herbert C. Price
Director of Photography: Stanley Rodwell
Photography: Axel Lindblom *
Art Director: Ian Campbell-Gray
Art Director: Arthur Woods *
Music/Music Conductor: William Hodgson
Cast:
Hans Adalbert von Schlettow
(farmer Harry Stevens)
Uno Henning (Joe Ward)
Norah Baring (Sally)
Judd Green (customer)*
Anthony Asquith (bespectacled man in cinema)*
UK 1929
86 mins
35mm

* Uncredited

With live piano accompaniment

A BFI National Archive print

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Too Much: Melodrama on Film

A Cottage on Dartmoor

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

For those accustomed to the miniature pleasures of Asquith's later work, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (his last silent film, though a dialogue sequence was added during production) is a major revelation. It displays the director's lively and sensitive imagination working at full stretch before he succumbed to the visual and moral blandness of 'quality' cinema: theme and style are equally provocative – indeed, the movie's intensity and bravura seem positively un-English. Perhaps the Swedish link-up in production explains some of this (the Swedish version is titled *Fången 53*): certainly audiences accustomed to the dramas of Sjöström would have relished the characters' turbulent emotions and the striking use made of natural landscapes.

The opening moments (mostly static shots, beautifully composed) establish the spiritual milieu – the escaped prisoner making his way with difficulty across the bleak moors, silhouetted against a vast expanse of sky, with swirling mist and gnarled leafless trees. After Joe reaches the cottage and emerges from the shadows to surprise the girl he adores, flashbacks plunge us into the tale's social milieu – the barbershop where haircuts cost one shilling and singeing costs ninepence, and love flares up amongst the chattering assistants, hot towels and lather. Outside the barbershop, love has an equally hard time surviving: Sally takes Joe to her horrendous boarding-house, where they sit stifled amongst the potted plants and gossiping old maids. The only alternative for a night out seems to be a visit to the Elite Cinema, where Sally and her friendly farmer are jammed in tight with the rest of the audience (here, originally, was the talking sequence – the present print remains silent throughout). While everyone else watches the movie (ingeniously, a talkie itself), Joe stares at Sally with a glint of madness. Finally, his jealous passion erupts in the form of bodily violence: he threatens the farmer with a razor and all is pandemonium – bottles smash on the floor, water-sprays jump out of control, and Joe stands petrified, smearing his forehead with blood from his fingers.

For the tragedy's last act we return to Dartmoor's mist, boulders and bare-branched trees: Joe is reunited with Sally only to lose her in death. At the time of their original releases, Asquith's movies were frequently criticised for being superficial and synthetic in style: Asquith himself was well aware of the deliberateness with which he planned his effects ('I am fond of sky shots and also of staircase scenes ... I like shots of reflections in mirrors, too', he wrote in 1931). Yet the stylistic tricks work perfectly well in context. Suitably for a tale which deals in passions screwed to the pitch of hysteria, the lighting time and again reflects expressionist practice: the scenes inside the cottage are played in half-darkness and shadows play about the characters' feet whenever they move. The image of prison bars constantly recurs – in the bars of the baby's cot (behind which Joe crouches, an outcast from domestic bliss), in the shadows on the floor as Joe lies dying.

Asquith also employs rapid-fire editing: objects and people in the boarding-house, barbershop and cinema are jostled around at a frenzied rate. More spectacularly, Joe's tortured state of mind is conjured up by subjective montages: footage of sporting events is intercut with shots of him bartering, resulting in a surreal dislocation worthy of Bruce Connor's *A Movie*. Other

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Fri 14 Nov 18:20; Sat 22 Nov 12:30

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: The Arch Dong fu ren + pre-recorded intro by T'ang Shushuen

Fri 14 Nov 20:50

Melo-dramarama

Sat 15 Nov 11:00-17:00

Far From Heaven

Sat 15 Nov 18:00; Thu 20 Nov 20:50

The Cranes Are Flying Letylā zhuravli

Sat 15 Nov 20:45

Written on the Wind

Sun 16 Nov 11:00 BFI IMAX

Brief Encounter

Sun 16 Nov 14:45 (+ 80th Anniversary discussion with theatre director Emma Rice, filmmaker Barnaby Thompson and writer Oliver Soden)

The Life of Oharu Saikaku ichidai onna

Thu 20 Nov 17:50

The Eternal Breasts Chibusa yo eien nare

Fri 21 Nov 20:45

Stella

Sat 22 Nov 15:00

Madame X

Sun 23 Nov 12:20 (+ intro by season curator Ruby McGuigan); Sat 29 Nov 20:40

The Wicked Lady + panel discussion on Gainsborough melodramas

Sun 23 Nov 14:50

Madonna of the Seven Moons

Sun 23 Nov 18:20

Splendor in the Grass

Mon 24 Nov 18:00

Now, Voyager

Mon 24 Nov 20:40

Mamma Roma

Fri 28 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)

Olivia

Fri 28 Nov 20:45

Spring in a Small Town Xiǎochéng zhī chūn

Sat 29 Nov 12:40

Volver

Sat 29 Nov 18:10

Leave Her to Heaven

Sun 30 Nov 15:10

moments are more facile, yet still prove effective in puncturing the mundane setting and furthering the nightmare mood: the profile of a hen is juxtaposed (Eisenstein fashion) with the profile of a hen-like customer; in the seconds before Joe threatens with the razor, there are a few frames of a cannon firing and a rope snapping. Elsewhere, Asquith impresses with the sheer fluidity of his editing: we cut from scene to scene (with many jumps in time and place) unaided by titles. Interestingly, Swedish audiences never had a chance to sample the full range of Asquith's effects: prints of *Fången* 53 apparently have a 'straightened-out', chronological narrative, plus a few additional scenes, including establishing shots of London (though the action takes place in darkest Devonshire) and footage from a Harold Lloyd movie, supposedly shown at the Elite Cinema.

Geoff Brown, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1976

This film consolidated Asquith's reputation. He was acclaimed as a close rival to Hitchcock and, indeed, *A Cottage in Dartmoor* is in its own way just as impressive as *The Lodger* and *The Ring*. Subtitles were curtailed to a minimum, the use of cross-cutting was masterly and a great advance on the techniques of Asquith's contemporaries in British studios.

Asquith developed new resources of style in this film. In the sequence of attempted murder he made successful subjective use of the camera. The young farmer is leaning back in the barber's chair, quite unaware of Joe standing over him with a razor; the camera then 'becomes' the man in the chair and we, the audience, look up at the razor – and beyond this to the tortured face of the boy. Then a cut to Sally's face, as she smiles at the farmer; then back again to the boy's face, and from his anguished eyes down to the engagement ring on Sally's finger. As Asquith then reverts to a large close-up of the razor trembling in Joe's hand, the audience (i.e. the camera) feels a shudder of apprehension.

Peter Noble, *An Index to the Films of Anthony Asquith* (BFI, 1951)

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