

Review #53 : *Golden Salamander* (1950)

Trevor Howard and Anouk Aimée

CLIP

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBX52s39IPU>

The British directors' taste for the exotic in their romantic adventure films is quite evident in *Golden Salamander*, where the authentic Tunisian backgrounds and atmosphere are its best points, along with Anouk Aimée as a French girl residing in a remote Tunisian town where things happen during the course of the film : she is youthful and sweet and possesses a magnetic sort of charm, which seem to be more in her favour than a striking ability to act ; in this film, she is fortunately given little to do except blend into the **atmosphere of mystery** and string along with a **nice adventure tale** based up on a lusty novel by Victor Canning.



SYNOPSIS

“We are given eyes, but not without the wisdom to keep them shut.” (Aribe to David)

David Redfern is a **British archaeologist sent to Tunis** to recover **Etruscan art treasures** washed ashore years earlier in a storm, and now in the cellar of Serafis, a wealthy man who lives in a huge villa in the small village of Kabarta on the coast. For Redfern it promises to be a nice trip, an interesting job of cataloguing and repacking the treasures, and a few weeks of sun and fishing in between.

His arrival is none too promising though : while driving on a narrow rocky road under thundering storm, David runs into a rock-fall blocking the road. He then decides to continue on foot to the inn where he has a reservation. But as he gets on the other side of the rock-fall, he spies a wrecked lorry — carrying a cargo of Browning automatic pistols ! **Gun running...**

When he hears another lorry coming, David decides not to get involved and watches from a grove of cork trees near the road. Two men get out of the truck. Once again, David decides to stay out of it. A little gun running is none of his business after all. He hikes to the cafe where he meets the **beautiful French expatriate owner**, Anne Tabu, to whom he is immediately attracted. It promises to be a good trip after all...

The next day he meets Serafis, a charming type happy to be rid of the treasures he has been guarding. At this point of the story, he has completely forgotten the lorry and the dodgy dealings ... until the two men he saw at the gun running rendez-vous enter the cafe : Rankl and Max, who appears to be **Anne's brother**.

David ultimately feels the need to report them to the local constabulary. Sadly for him everyone is in the back pocket of the local Mr Big and he soon finds himself in some serious jeopardy...

REVIEW

There were many fine writers of adventure and suspense in the late 40s, but there was always something more to Canning, a weight, almost a gravity, to his grounded professional heroes, reluctant perhaps, but capable and when needed ruthless. A Canning hero is always a professional man : engineer, archaeologist, reporter, private detective, spy... And perhaps because Canning began as a novelist rather than a thriller writer his books had something more, an indefinable quality that you could distinguish in only a few pages. His books were **vivid and cinematic**, but never at the expense of **character or style**.

David Redfern is a typical Canning hero, facing a typical Canning dilemma : *are we responsible to confront evil, or only spectators who should keep our eyes shut ?* Among the Etruscan artefacts is a golden salamander with on it engraved the answer to this question : *'Not by ignoring evil does one overcome it, but by going to meet it.'* Become part of the evil by denying it exists, or **confront it and risk the consequences ?**

Indeed **small actions have big repercussions**. A few days after offering Max a way out, David and Anna spend a day fishing and swim at the beach — where they find Max's weighted body, murdered by Rankl...

From that moment on, David feels he is on his own : commissaire Douvet is a **pawn of the conspiracy**, the phone lines are down to Tunis, and even the **mail is controlled** by Douvet's mistress. With only Anne on his side he's hopeless...

Location shooting, Ronald Neame's sure hand directing suspense films (David Lean was once his editor) and a fine cast combine for a **truly enjoyable adventure**, slow to build, but with a fine chase at the end. This is the traditional adventure film, not an endless concussive assault of constant action, but **actual characters with inner lives and difficult choices to make**.

As the scientist, **Trevor Howard** delivers his usual **sincere and intense job**, demonstrating as much evolution into a **bold adventurer** as the script will allow. Under Ronald Neame's easy-going direction, he emerges from his academic calm with absolute assurance once the melodramatic heat is turned on. Many (contemporary) critics have said that British actors are only effeminate fops or boundless cads, both of which have zero *sex appeal* on screen. Well, I certainly do not appreciate Trevor Howard for his looks, but I'm only interested in him being a credible actor, and I must admit he's one of the best at the time and he has a great screen presence and personality as well...

Anouk is a revelation here. Wearing little makeup and playing as an innocent, she has something of the freshness and promise of a young Ingrid Bergman. You can see why David falls in love with this **innocent melancholic girl**, and why a man would confront dragons for her — or even salamanders^^.

The villains are pretty well pictured, too : Rankl (**Herbert Lom**) especially is at his slimy best, and manages to even slip a hint of an **unhealthy obsession about Max** into his meaningful glances.

A vast lot of **outdoor action** within the crowded streets of a Tunisian town and in the midst of a noisy **boar-hunt** (for the climax) brings colour to the film. This solid entertaining thriller isn't well known at all, but deserves better. Catch it (the DVD print is a good clean one) and see how effortless they used to make it look in the 40s +++