

# "IN WHICH WE SERVE"

(Two Cities-G.B.D.)

ONE or two readers have taken me to task because I was not more enthusiastic about the recent *Corvette K-225*, their complaint being that while I praised the documentary side of that picture I was too critical of the Hollywood touch in its story. If those people have since seen, as I have, the Noel Coward production, *In Which We Serve*, they may understand better what I was getting at. For *In Which We Serve* is outstanding in just about every department. You may, of course, object to Mr. Coward so intensely that nothing he can do is right, or you may dislike all war films so much that you would not go to see one even if you were paid. In that case, nothing much can be done about you; you will be better advised to go and look at Betty Grable's legs or Victor Mature's torso in *Footlight Serenade*.

ALTHOUGH it uses a synthetic plot specially constructed by Coward, employs professional actors and actresses, and was largely shot in a water-tank in the studio, *In Which We Serve* is closer to the documentary than to any other type of movie. It is almost as much a documentary as *Desert Victory*. That is to say, it dramatises factual material in terms of human beings and human interests. The factual material here is the story of a destroyer, H.M.S. *Torrin*, from the time of its commissioning just before the war in 1939, until it is dive-bombed and sunk by the Nazis off Crete in 1941; its human beings are the members of the crew; its human interests are the day-by-day experiences ashore and afloat of these men, their domestic lives, their personal triumphs and tragedies.

Much of what happens to these men is melodramatic, in the sense that much of what happens in any war is melodramatic—their escape from the sinking ship to a Carley float, their struggle to keep alive while planes repeatedly machine-gun them, and so on. But all that happens is, at the same time, natural and even ordinary. If Coward had been able to use actual scenes throughout instead of some studio ones, and had been able to photograph ordinary Englishmen and women in their homes and on duty, instead of employing a professional cast, the general effect could not have been much different or more authentic. The difference between this kind of film-making and the kind that we usually see (as for instance in *Corvette K-225*), is that here you do not continually have the feeling that everything that happens in the story is according to the established Hollywood pattern of behaviour. I do not mean by this that the characters do surprising things: on the contrary, they do commonplace and even humdrum things. And that, in a movie, is what is surprising.

I DO not mean either that *In Which We Serve* is just a drab record of naval life, with a few background details of domesticity. The art of even a documentary tale lies in its telling, and here Noel Coward has employed all the devices of selection and emphasis that he could lay hands on to heighten the

dramatic, emotional and sometimes sentimental effect. He particularly favours the flash-back technique: as the members of the *Torrin's* crew struggle to escape drowning their past life is supposed to flash before their eyes, and on to the screen. The Captain (Coward) thinks of his wife and children, their home in Devonshire, and the brief happy moments snatched between periods at sea. The Chief Petty-Officer (Bernard Miles) also remembers his wife, his last Christmas ashore, a visit to a music-hall, and other inconsequentialities that mean nothing in the average movie, but everything in this one. And the mind of Ordinary Seaman Shorty Blake (John Mills) is filled with thoughts of the girl he met in a train, married after a very brief courtship, left after a very brief honeymoon, and who is going to have a baby. (It is typical of the film's integrity that the character of Shorty's wife appears in one sequence as the most frankly pregnant woman that the movies have probably ever presented).

ALL the characters are portrayed with sincerity and sometimes with nobility, and nobody, not even Coward, tries

to grab more of the camera's attention than the action legitimately entitles him to. You may, of course, cavil at the angle at which Mr. Coward wears his naval cap; you may think he makes rather too many high-minded speeches; and I must admit I still prefer Mr. Coward in a cynical, caddish mood to Mr. Coward when he is being profound, tight-lipped, and sometimes slightly corny, as he is here. At the same time, his Captain Kinross is probably an authentic Navy type; and in any case, the work of Coward as author, producer, co-director, and musical composer for *In Which We Serve* far outweighs in importance his work as star.

There is, of course, one other character in the film—that of the ship itself. Several critics have picked on this as the most important thing in it—the manner in which the destroyer is presented as an organism with a personality of her own, more valuable in herself than the men who serve her. Well, perhaps because I'm not a naval man, I think those critics were merely giving way to sentimentality, just as Coward himself was when he makes Captain Kinross say that the men who went down with the *Torrin* were luckier than those who survived because they now sleep beside her (or something to that effect). Flesh and blood counts for more in *In Which We Serve* than steel and wood.



MADE SPECIALLY TO PREVENT SORE THROATS

NZ 1.46