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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING

SAN DEMETRIO, LONDON

(B.E.F.)

 IF you want to see a picture that gets right down to tin-tacks and drives every one of them home, I urge you to see *San Demetrio, London*. It confirms me in my previously-expressed opinion that the war has had some kind of spiritual effect on the quality of British films, by taking much of the sham out of them and bringing them closer to reality. Hollywood could not have made this picture in its present state of mind, for when it comes to producing war pictures Hollywood is still too far away from the scene of action for its own good. In *San Demetrio, London*, however, there is a hint of what the cinema in general and the British cinema in particular, may achieve when it really becomes aware of "the richness and delight of human character observed for its own sake." Without wishing to be unduly complacent or prophetic, I would suggest that it is along this semi-documentary line that the cinema must travel if it is to make progress, and it is fitting that the British, who pioneered

CANDIDLY

the documentary film, should be leading the new advance.

What *San Demetrio, London* does is to take an entirely factual incident and re-enact it with a professional cast of actors. It hasn't got a film story—but it has certainly got a story. And what a story! In November, 1940, the tanker *San Demetrio* was homeward bound in the North Atlantic with three million gallons of petrol from Texas when she and the other ships in the convoy were attacked by the German raider, *Von Scheer*. This was the action in which the convoy's escort ship, *Jervis Bay*, went down after so gallantly drawing most of the raider's fire. But *San Demetrio* was hit by a shell and set ablaze. She was abandoned by her crew in three lifeboats, two of which were soon picked up. But the third lifeboat, containing the Second Officer, the Chief Engineer and 14 men, drifted helplessly for several days until those aboard had almost given up hope. Then miraculously they came upon their abandoned ship again, still afloat, still on fire. They re-boarded her, put out the fires, got the engines going again. The bridge and navigation instruments had been shot away; the charts had been lost; there was practically nothing to eat except raw vegetables (petrol fumes made cooking almost a suicidal risk). One man died and was buried at sea. There were storms and breakdowns. But those 15 men took the ship under her own steam through submarine-infested waters and brought her with her cargo triumphantly up the Clyde. By so doing, in a case almost without parallel in nautical law, they became entitled to full salvage money.

* * *

THAT real-life story is told with a restraint which is altogether remarkable. There are some fine actors in the cast, but there are no stars to make demands on the camera's attention. There are no false heroics, no concessions to sentiment, no conscious showmanship, to get in the way of the plain, inspiring theme of courage and endurance. The risks are not over-emphasised: after the encounter with the raider the Germans stay right out of sight. There are none of those conventional conflicts of love or friendship versus duty (as there were for instance in *Corvette K-225*), and none of those stock characters, such as the young-man-who-won't-take-discipline, or the two quarrelsome comics, who usually go to sea from Hollywood. The nearest thing to a "funny man" in the film is the walrus-moustached seaman who has never been seen to smile, who reads *True Romances* in the fo'c'sle, and who can't eat ship's biscuit in the lifeboat because he left his teeth aboard.

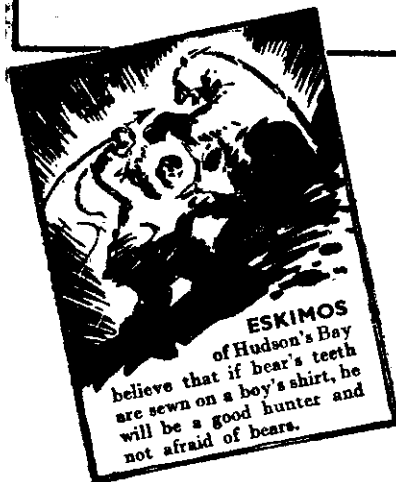
San Demetrio, London is a fine, austere, almost elemental piece of cinema art, but it has the warmth of real life in it, and it is gripping as only a good sea story can be. By its jettisoning of non-essentials, by its complete subordination of acting personalities to theme, I think it even eclipses Noel Coward's *In Which We Serve*, and so becomes the finest picture of this war.

(continued on next page)

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THE FINNS

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