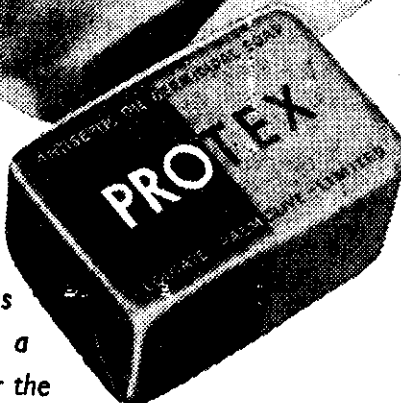


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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

## A CHILD AND A HORSE

### NATIONAL VELVET

(M.G.M.)



DOMESTIC animals and their progeny now vie with child stars (with whom they usually appear in association) as the most profitable source of box-office revenue. We have already had *My Friend Flicka* and *Thunderhead, Son of Flicka*; and *Lassie Come Home* is soon to be followed by *Son of Lassie*. But unless Hollywood repeats the egregious blunder of the New Zealand-made film *Phar Lap's Son*, there will be no sequel to *National Velvet*. For the hero of this picture is a sorrel gelding called "The Pie," and although winning the Grand National Steeplechase after having spent much of his career pulling a butcher's cart is within the powers of this intelligent quadruped, there are some feats which obviously aren't.

It is some time since I read Enid Bagnold's novel, but M.G.M.'s version of this fable about a "wisp of a butcher's daughter" and her love for a horse strikes me as being very nearly as endearing as the original. Some errors have, of course, crept into the translation: notably the very unseasonable weather for the Aintree meeting, which, though actually taking place in an English March, is here depicted, for the sake of the Technicolor cameras, as being bright with all the flowers that bloom in the spring; the substitution of a bottle of insects for little Donald's famous "spit bottle," and the choice of Angela Lansbury to play the eldest Brown daughter—a bad piece of casting. Yet these are minor defects; they do not materially decrease the substantial amount of good showmanship and fine acting that have gone into the picture. Its chief assets are the fact that horses in motion are highly photogenic; a race which (judging by reactions) could scarcely be more exciting to many members of the audience if they were seeing the real thing and had money on the result; outstanding performances by several members of the cast; and direction by Clarence Brown which, in the main, takes full advantage of the heart-warming and often poignant qualities in the story.

AN American critic has drawn a parallel between this film and certain aspects of *The Song of Bernadette*. And it is true that *National Velvet* is dedicated to the proposition that faith can work miracles. For it is faith, apparently, that enables 12-year-old Velvet Brown to win "The Pie" in a shilling raffle; it is faith that enables her to tame the fierce animal and also to recondition her equally unmanageable companion, the ex-jockey Mi Taylor, who has entered the Brown household to exploit it and who stays on to become Velvet's slave and "The Pie's" trainer. For, inspired by faith, Velvet has made up her mind that her gelding shall leave the shafts of her father's cart to win the Grand National. That, as someone observes, is a large dream for a little girl. But faith, coupled with courage and perseverance and the active assistance

of Velvet's mother, makes the dream come true. Masquerading as a boy, Velvet herself rides her horse to victory.

MUCH of *National Velvet's* charm lies in the acting of Elizabeth Taylor as Velvet Brown, the little girl who becomes "all lighted up" whenever she sees, thinks or talks about horses. "Lighted up" is just about an exact description; there is something peculiarly luminous about Elizabeth Taylor's performance; her countenance in many scenes has the radiance more commonly associated with religious ecstasy than with stables. But horses to Velvet are a religion ("I'd rather have that horse happy than go to Heaven"), so this is understandable. Yet even better, I think, is the acting of Anne Revere as the mother who encourages her little girl in her fantastic ambition. "I, too, believe that everyone should have a chance at a breath-taking piece of folly once in this life," says Mrs. Brown as she hands to Velvet the 100 sovereigns required for the Grand National entrance fee—the 100 sovereigns she herself won years before as the first woman to swim the Channel! If I remember rightly, the Mrs. Brown of the novel was enormously fat; Anne Revere in the film is raw-boned, granite-jawed. But there is something majestic, as well as something poignantly tender; something almost elemental about her portrayal of motherhood—perhaps the best such portrayal we have ever seen on the screen. In its way, this performance ranks with that of Katina Paxinou in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Even without the good acting of the others (and I include that of Mickey Rooney), it would make *National Velvet* a most attractive picture.

Unless you are a confirmed cynic and horse-hater, I think you will enjoy this fairy tale. Indeed, I would almost put my shirt on it. But you will probably enjoy it more if you can manage to see it in company with a child.

### HERE COME THE WAVES

(Paramount)



WITH Bing Crosby appearing in the role of a crooner who has more of the characteristics of Frank Sinatra than of Bing Crosby, this film promises at the start to be a fairly bright and intermittently tuneful satire on the "bobby-sox cult" of silly females who squeal and faint whenever they hear or see their hero. But it soon reveals itself as just another of Hollywood's "musical tributes" to the Services (this time to the U.S. equivalent of the Wrens). The patriotic theme proceeds according to formula, with people in cushy base jobs breaking their necks to be sent into action overseas, while the "love-interest," involving two sailors and two girls (twins, played simultaneously by Betty Hutton), is the familiar romantic hotchpotch in which everybody does the usual incredible things for the usual fatuous reasons. The film degenerates so badly that towards the end it is presenting with approval some of the sentimental mush which it has earlier pilloried.