

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE STRANGE LOVE OF MARTHA IVERS

(Paramount)



THIS is a story—not exactly a bedtime one suitable for the very young—about a little girl named Martha Ivers who kills her aunt because the aunt, a sadistic type, has just killed the little girl's pet cat. As a result of this rather picturesque domestic con-tempt—which reminds me of one of those Ruthless Rhymes by Harry Graham—Martha's character is irreparably warped, an innocent man is sent to the gallows, and the lives of one or two other people are greatly influenced; but the full effects are not seen until 17 years later when a young man named Sam Masterson returns to the home-town which he left in a hurry on the night of the cat-and-aunt killing. From Sam's point of view, it is just an accidental and semi-sentimental visit, but he soon discovers that two rather important persons are showing a lively and even an embarrassing curiosity about his movements and for some reason are apparently expecting to be blackmailed by him. They are his old

childhood playmates, Martha Ivers, now grown into a very rich, ambitious and unscrupulous woman, and her husband, who has grown from a moody, sheepish little boy into a moody, sheepish but occasionally resolute District Attorney. Both are afraid that Sam may let the story of the cat out of the bag; but the husband is even more upset at the thought that Sam and Martha will cuckold him. At any rate, he knows the way his wife's mind works in that direction and he can't be quite sure of Sam; so just by way of precaution he arranges, in one of his rare spasms of resolution, for some thugs to beat Sam up and chase him out of town. Sam, however, being the tough type, spits out a tooth or two and decides to stay around to find out what it is all about. After this, the plot grows thicker and even murkier, and by the end of the film the corpses are scattered about almost as profusely as in the last scene of *Hamlet*.

There is, indeed, quite a flavour of *Hamlet* about the character of the morose and tragic husband, played with great skill and discernment by an actor named Kirk Douglas. Barbara Stanwyck is, however, no Ophelia; her rendering

of Martha Ivers inclines more towards Lady Macbeth. Offhand, I can't think of any Shakespearian reference to suit Van Heflin as Sam, though there probably is one: at any rate it is a nervy and convincing performance, which is always a pleasure to watch. And though it wouldn't do to get too high-falootin' over a Hollywood thriller, there really is something almost classic about the shape of this story; a sense of maturing evil, a feeling that the three main characters are people under compulsion. It was a very good idea on the part of the director (Lewis Milestone) to start off with that episode from childhood, for the result is that the story has roots, and the characters acquire a breadth and a depth unusual in this type of melodrama.

I have spoken of three characters only. There are, in fact, four, and this fourth character provides the film with a kind of sub-plot. She is the girl with a prison record whom Sam Masterson befriends and who becomes involved in his adventures. But she is only incidentally involved, and I suspect that the real excuse for introducing her into the story was because the main triangular theme did not provide a heroine but only a villainess, and because there had to be somebody left to marry the hero after Martha Ivers was eliminated. However, I wouldn't mind so much that this character is dramatically extraneous; I wouldn't mind so much that she keeps on getting in the way of the story, if only the part were well played. But it isn't. Possibly it would be going too far to say that Elizabeth Scott, who takes the role, is a phoney actress, because in this film she isn't given a chance to show whether she can act or not. All she does here is impersonate Lauren Bacall, even to the gravel-pit voice; and this may be as much Paramount's fault as her own. What does annoy me, though, is the fact that this entirely synthetic and almost totally unnecessary young woman is given top billing in publicity, as if she were more important and more talented than Van Heflin, Barbara Stanwyck, and Kirk Douglas. Even so, this still makes the film about three-quarters right, which is not bad scoring.

Incidentally, all the evidence which I have been able to collect indicates that this film was made under the title of *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, but in local publicity "love" has become "life." Ah well, in the eyes of the movie industry, the two terms are synonymous anyway.

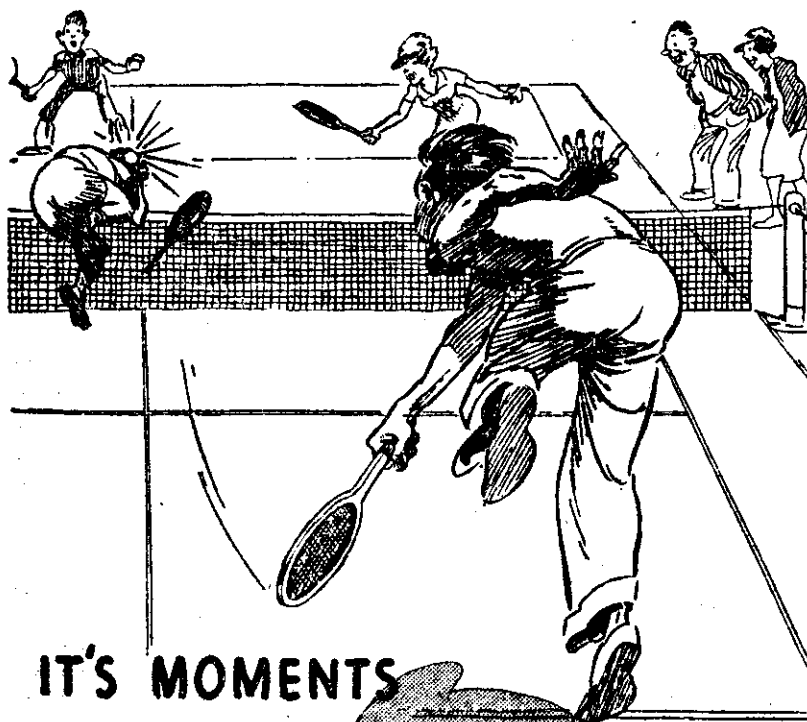
ISLE OF THE DEAD

(RKO Radio)



THE name of Val Lewton as producer took me well out of my usual way to see this film at a double-feature, second-run theatre. For to those in the know, particularly those who remember Lewton's *Seventh Victim*, that name is an almost certain guarantee that the thriller which carries it will be as far above the usual run of silly screen shockers as the works of Poe, Bierce, and E. F. Benson are outstanding in the literary field of the macabre and the terrifying.

Isle of the Dead has not quite the sustained spiritual uneasiness of *The Seventh Victim*; it is rather slower to get moving and its best effects are achieved by more mechanical means: they depend rather less on that state of inward terror in which the audience, its imagination having been set working, is left to frighten itself, than on such



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