

What is a Documentary?

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

(Columbia)

AT a preview of this film on the drug traffic there were a number of bulky-looking gentlemen with vaguely familiar faces who turned out to be policemen in plain clothes. There were also several customs officials present, and since the picture was described on the printed invitation as a documentary, the question uneasily arose as it proceeded, How much can these men really learn from it?

To the Ends of the Earth is said to be based on the files of the Narcotics Bureau of the United States Treasury Department. Does that make it a documentary? All the participants are indisputably film actors and actresses. Dick Powell is the agent who brings to justice the members of an international opium ring, Signe Hasso is the woman in the case, and Vladimir Sokoloff is the Chinese narcotics commissioner. Surely a documentary is essentially a document, a transcript of real life in which ordinary people are seen at work at their everyday occupations.

So although the basis of To the Ends of the Earth may be factual, to call it a documentary seems to be giving it more importance than it actually possesses. It is largely a matter of intent, of course, and this film seems intended to attract as many people as possible to the box-office through its revelations of the seamier side of life, given superficial authenticity by incidental references to the United Nations, the Narcotics Bureau, and international co-operation. Still, few who see the film should fail to enjoy it, if simply as a somewhat better-than-average thriller that keeps them on the edge of the seat right until the last moment of suspense.

The events take place around the year 1938, when the Japanese were completing their conquest of Manchuria. Dick Powell, as Commissioner Barrows of Los Angeles, gets on to the trail of a gang of opium smugglers who are operating in a big way. The trail leads first to Shanghai, where he has some thoroughly melodramatic adventures in a sinister Oriental atmosphere. Although one or two minor crooks are killed, he is after the ringleader of the gang, a mysterious person called Jean Hawks, so from Shanghai he goes to Cairo. Here he succeeds in locating a hidden poppy field and even in discovering how the raw opium is smuggled out of the country—in the first stomachs of camels (they have four) headed for a Beirut slaughter-house.

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "To the Ends of the Earth."
FAIR TO FINE: "Escape."

From Beirut he follows the opium to Cuba, and from there to New York, where a final attempt to smuggle the drug into America—five million dollars' worth of it by now—is thwarted. The rest of the gang are then captured, and finally the identity of the mysterious Jean Hawks herself is revealed, to the smug satisfaction of those who had spotted her five or six reels beforehand. A large part of the film's undoubted success must be credited to the down-right performance of Dick Powell as the agent who goes to the ends of the earth (almost) in his pursuit. He does more to make the whole thing believable than the plot, the dialogue, the photography, or the spoken narrative technique.

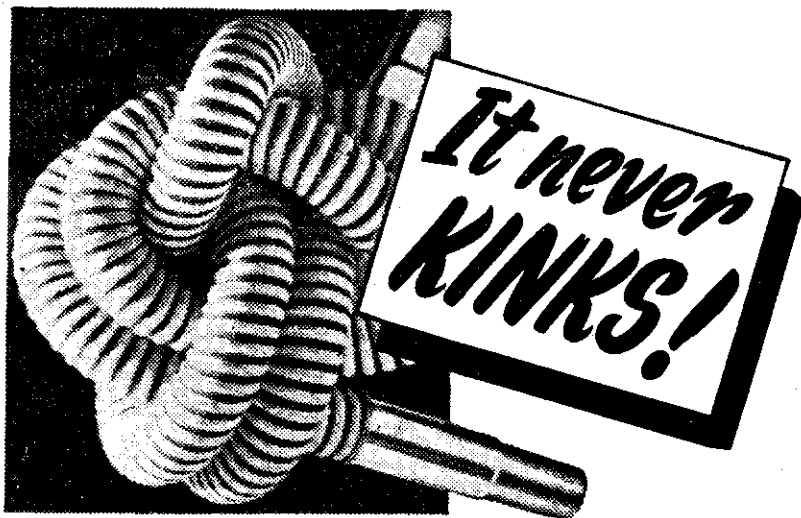
ESCAPE

(20th Century-Fox)

THE worst that can be said of this modernised version of John Galsworthy's play is that the sentiment on which it is based now seems a little too unworldly to provide convincing motivation for the action. The idealistic Matt Denant (Rex Harrison) goes to prison for accidentally killing a policeman who is about to arrest a prostitute in Hyde Park. This appears such an injustice that no one is surprised when he is assisted, after escaping from Dartmoor, by the local squire's daughter (Peggy Cummins), nor when she quickly falls in love with him. In some exciting sequences Harrison gets entangled in a fox-hunt, converts a motor-car, crawls through a swamp in the mist, takes off and crashes in an aeroplane, and then gives himself up so as not to prejudice the position of the village parson whose church he is hiding in. Points which lift the film out of the rut are an almost flawless piece of casting (including William Hartnell as the police inspector), some solid, clean-cut acting by the principals, and a fine atmosphere of rural, moorland England.



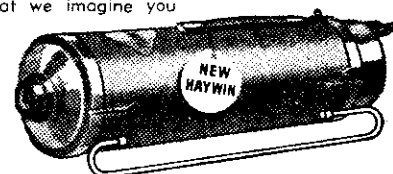
PEGGY CUMMINS and REX HARRISON in a scene from "Escape"



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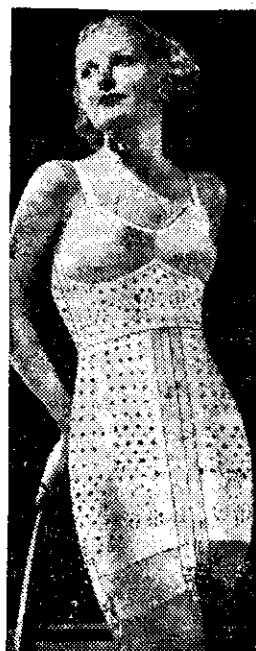
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