

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

I STAND ACCUSED

(Universal-International)

THE question of whether euthanasia may be justified is one of those highly controversial issues that occasionally flare up in the public mind, and it would seem highly commendable on Hollywood's part to attempt a film about it. Yet *I Stand Accused*, which starts out as a film about a mercy-killing, ends up by completely side-stepping the real issue and presenting the audience with no moral problem at all, except the problem of how the film might have ended if any mercy-killing had actually been committed. Nevertheless, within its limits, this is a worthy picture, if only because it broaches such a subject. Its theme is also well handled by the actors.

Fredric March plays the part of a small-town judge famed for the harsh impartiality of his legal decisions and named, appropriately enough, Calvin Cooke. One day Judge Cooke discovers

that his wife (Florence Eldridge, who happens to be Fredric March's wife in real life) is suffering from an incurable disease, apparently some sort of brain tumour. She experiences attacks of excruciating pain which become progressively more frequent and painful, and soon the judge is faced with two difficult decisions—made doubly so by his past life and training. Although he has always adhered to the strictest of moral codes, and has an almost pathological aversion to falsehood and crime, he violates his most cherished principles before the film ends.

His first decision, the comparatively easy one of not telling his wife she is dying, is made only after a considerable mental struggle and at the insistence of her doctor, who is a family friend and hence sentimentally involved. The second decision is rather staggily forced on him, within the picture's framework, when at a crucial moment he sees a dog that has been run over "put out of its misery" by a policeman's bullet. Twice he resists the urge to end his wife's sufferings by giving her an overdose of medicine, and finally he tries to kill

them both (he alone survives) by running their car over the bank.

From this point the previously clear outlines of the drama become blurred. The scenes in which the judge gives himself up and is tried for murder are uncertainly played, and after a lot of over-dramatic court-room histrionics the audience discovers that he didn't kill his wife at all, because she was dead before the car left the road. The subsequent discussion on the moral or legal guilt of mercy-killing becomes, therefore, purely academic, to say the least. Having reached the very point to which the whole dramatic build-up of the action was tending, the producers have taken fright, and the film ends with a court decision which pronounces Calvin Cooke "legally innocent but morally guilty."

The first part of *I Stand Accused* is handled with considerable skill and restraint, although the camera-work and the direction generally are never more than conventional, and the script is often flat and uninspired. But the acting is

good, and the plain backgrounds and the absence of much sub-plot permit attention to be starkly concentrated on the tragedy confronting the judge and his wife. Fredric March gives a sound performance, only occasionally marred by moments of over-acting, and shows himself a master of the simple, laconic phrase which can convey as much as a whole torrent of words. It is not his fault, or his wife's, that *I Stand Accused* is disappointing. In fact, the brilliantly sensitive interpretation by Florence Eldridge of her difficult part produces some scenes of great pathos which are the emotional high points of the film.

However, the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from such a picture as this is that it is impossible for Hollywood to reconcile its ideas of what is good box-office entertainment and what is good drama. The resultant confusion and the failure to face the issue of what might happen to a man who commits an act of mercy-killing has spoilt what was almost a very good film.

LARCENY

(Universal-International)

THE old adage that it is the script which in the long run makes or mars a film is demonstrated in this picture about the illegal activities of two high-class confidence men named Rick (John

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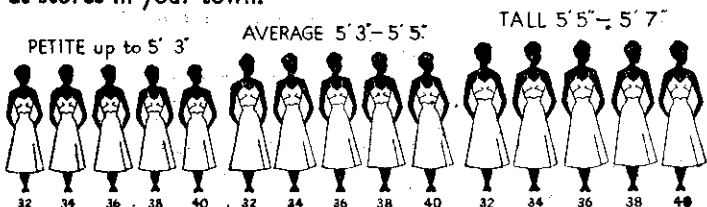
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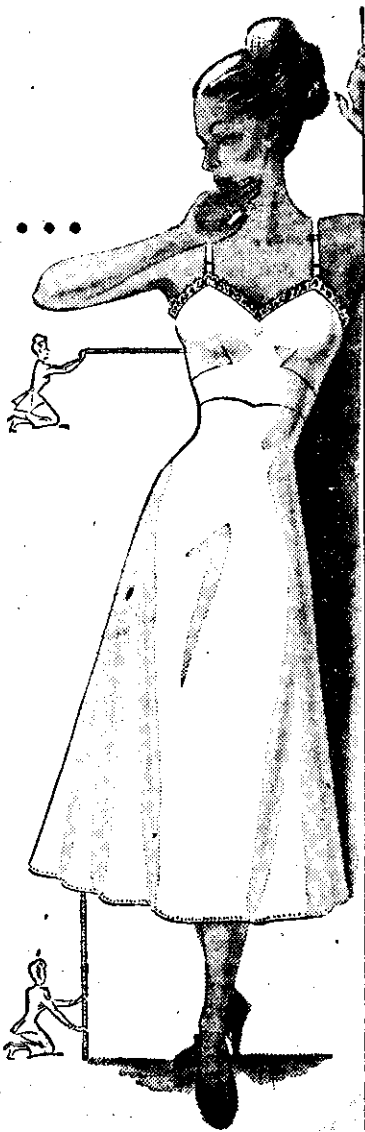
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