

COLD WAR IN COLORADO

CANON CITY

(Eagle-Lion)

THERE is always something new coming out of Africa—or so the Greeks were in the habit of saying. But it is not a habit that has worn well. Africa is no longer a dark continent; Evelyn Waugh, Joyce Cary and Graham Greene have in turn explored even its subconscious and little that is mysterious remains (if we except its interpretation of the laws of Rugby). Indeed, since we have largely lost the faculty of wonder we may doubt if there is anything new anywhere, but when we do encounter something with an element of novelty to-day the chances are that it has come out of America. (Thus does the New World redress the balance of the Old.)

Take, for example, *Canon City*. You're not obliged to, and indeed I might not have taken it myself had it not been a rather grim week for film-going, but it was not nearly so painful an experience as I had expected. For, as it turned out, there was an element of

novelty in the production. It was not in the theme (Crime Does Not Pay has become a Hollywood cliché), nor yet in the Treatment. Like *Call Northside 777*, *Canon City* might be called a cryptodocumentary—a story from real life slightly souped-up to meet the demands of the Box Office. It was the cast which seemed a little out of line. According to the big black type in the advertisements, it had been "Filmed where it Actually Happened—with the People to Whom it Happened!" And they, according to the credits, included a bunch of long-term convicts from the Colorado State Penitentiary at Canon City whose rash bid for liberty on December 30, 1947, was the subject of the film.

It was a show which created quite a furore at the time. "Downtown in the convivial warmth of Canon City's Elks Club," wrote one of the chattier U.S. weeklies, "barrel-shaped Warden Roy Best bull-roared with the boys and waited for his dinner. It was a nasty night outside. Snow swirled heavily about the high, menacing walls of Roy's place of business, the Colorado State Penitentiary, on the edge of the town.

On the grey stone towers, guards paced uneasily and strained to see through the swirling blizzard, etc., etc."

And, as I live and breathe, that might have come straight from the shooting script, for here in the solid flesh is Warden Roy himself. Not exactly bull-roaring, to be sure, and perhaps hardly oblate enough to be called barrel-shaped, unless under the stress of emotion or excitement, but recognisable beyond any peradventure (anyway he admitted it himself to the disembodied Voice on the soundtrack).

Having been introduced to the Warden we were then introduced to the Pen and just why twelve men had risked death from cold blizzard and hot lead became at least partially apparent. Colorado State Penitentiary (along with several others I have seen on the screen) seemed like a gigantic steel mousetrap through whose doors half the world had beaten a pathway. Certainly there were occupational departments—shoe making and engineering shops, photographic darkrooms, a film theatre and so on—and some of the more hardened inmates even managed to find the tools, the materials (and the privacy) to manufacture

home-made shotguns in their own cells. But the vast cell-blocks and the long lines of shuffling prisoners reminded me of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and I felt more genuinely sorry for one old buffer who explained to the camera that he had been a voluntary inmate for some fifty years because he had nowhere else to go, than for any of those slugged, shot up or otherwise manhandled before the film ended.

Before the film ended, too, I was beginning to doubt the claims made in the advertisements. Much of the dramatic tension arises from the attempts made by the hunted convicts to force farm people in the district to give them food and shelter from the blizzard, and these scenes were exploited pretty well. But one felt rather let down to recognise in Schwartzmiller (the ruthless leader of the outbreak) the gentle and compassionate doctor from *Home of the Brave*. And Mrs. Laurence Oliver, the farmer's wife who pluckily conked Schwartzmiller with a clawhammer after he had forced his way into her sitting-room, seemed familiar to me too. Maybe she has a double in Hollywood. Not all of the

BAROMETER

FAIR: "*Canon City*."

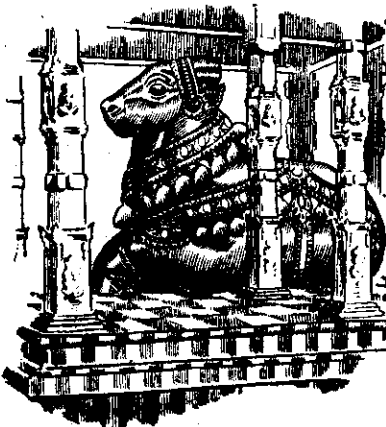
MAINLY FAIR: "*The Gallant Blade*."

OVERCAST: "*One Sunday Afternoon*."

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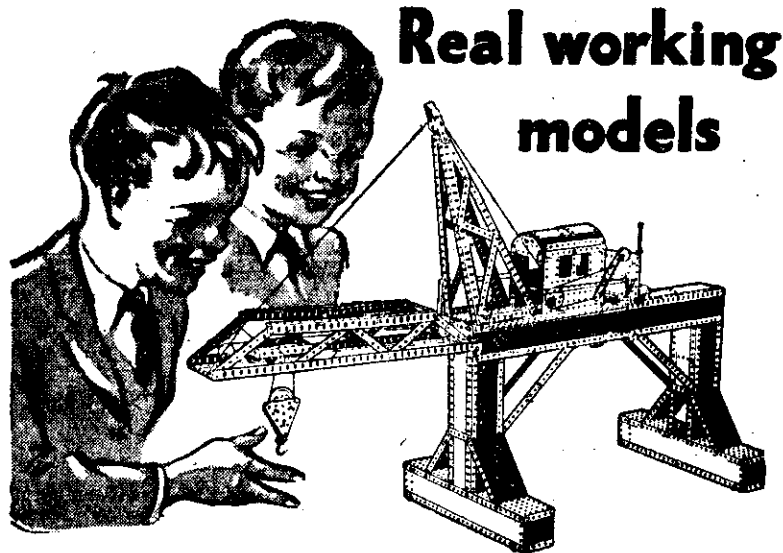
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