


SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

(Cathedral Films—20th Century Fox)

 **ALTHOUGH** it has just been released here, this film was actually made in 1939 B.J. (Before Japan). That much should be obvious to almost anyone who sees it, for it is the story of how the early Christians faced and at last overcame Roman aggression—not by the sword but by putting into practice that more revolutionary portion of Christ's teaching regarding the ideal attitude to be adopted toward an enemy. The fact that the film's message may now seem a trifle untimely does not necessarily rob the message of its potency, though that may be a matter for argument. Much less debatable is

the fact that *The Great Commandment* is a religious picture that also manages to be entertaining. And that is something that has seldom been attempted in Hollywood and even more rarely achieved.

I don't know how accurate the picture is historically—I mean, of course, in matters of detail—but if it is even roughly true it would appear that even the Nazis could not have given any points on collective punishment of villages, mass executions, and other refinements of intimidation to the Roman conquerors of Judea before the latter were at last converted by the people they had conquered. It is to meet this dire oppression in the only way he knows how that the hero of the story, Joel, a young Jewish zealot (John Beal) sets out from his threatened village against the wishes of his father,



JOHN BEAL
The sword was not accepted.

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the aged Scribe Lamech (the late Maurice Moscovitch), whose only interest is in the Law and the Prophets. With him Joel takes the historic sword of Judas Maccabeus, and goes to give it into the hands of the man Jesus of Nazareth to carry into battle against the Romans at the head of a Jewish army. Reports speak of this Jesus as a man of much influence with the people: if he will but lead them to war, Judea may be saved. But what Joel finds and what he learns is very different from what he expects; yet as a result, though he becomes an outcast among his own people, he does succeed in saving them from punishment, by turning their army chief, a Roman centurion, into a friend; and he does succeed—rather a sop to popular sentiment this—in winning the girl he loves.

This untimely parable of applied Christianity, the work of an American parson with some ready money and the ambition to be a movie producer, does not forget, as I have said, that the chief purpose of even a religious film should be entertainment. While it is somewhat incongruous to hear ancient Romans and Jews speaking with the accents of modern America, there is nothing of the Church Drama Circle about the acting of Beal, Moscovitch, Marjorie Cooley (who looks like Rochelle Hudson's twin sister) and others. Nor has the sacredness and sombreness of the theme precluded many good touches of humour and human interest. But most effective of all is the film's representation of Christ: he does not appear except as a shadowy figure, or as a reflection in a pool, but His Voice (the voice, I think, of Sir Cedric Hardwicke) dominates the story with its melodious power as it expounds the message of *The Great Commandment*.

BILLY THE KID

(M-G-M)

 **THEY** should have tacked the words ". . . Rides Again" on to the title of this film, for I distinctly remember seeing at least one earlier instalment (circa 1930), of Billy's bloodstained banditry. It starred Johnny Mack Brown, and I know I was much more excited about it than I am about this—but then, of course, I was much nearer the Saturday-morning-villain-

booing-hero-clapping age than I am now. Anyway, this time it's Robert Taylor who does his best to look hard-boiled as well as handsome, and goes about shooting people with his left hand, but Never In The Back. And because it's Robert Taylor, and because he never shoots people In The Back—and only shoots them at all because somebody shot his father—and because he is kind to a guitar-playing Mexican called Pedro, you know that Billyboy is really Good At Heart, if only the right person could touch it. Which happens when he meets Eric Keating (Ian Hunter), a four-square English rancher whose cattle Billy had previously been helping to rustle for a Really Bad Man named Hickey (Gene Lockhart), who does shoot people In The Back. But Mr. Keating Never Shoots Anybody, because he just won't carry a gun. And because Billy has a Nice Boyhood Friend (Brian Donlevy), who works for Mr. Keating as foreman, and because Mr. Keating is so Four-Square and has a Pretty Sister (Mary Howard), Billy goes to work for him, too. But then one of Hickey's gang shoots Mr. Keating In The Back, whereupon, Billy's heart almost breaks and Goes Bad again, and he shoots four of Hickey's gang, and then he shoots Hickey himself. Worst of all, oh very sad! he shoots him In The Back. And then you know that Billy is past redemption; and so, because Law and Order Have Come to the West at last and men must no longer take Justice Into Their Own Hands, his Boyhood Friend has to shoot Billy. In The Stomach.

All this is in Technicolor, with which I have no complaint—but please, Messrs. M-G-M, as a matter of interest, tell us why you make a Western in colour and leave *Ziegfeld Girl* in plain black and white.

There actually was a bandit named Billy the Kid, one William H. Bonney, born in New York in 1859, whose bloodstained career ended when he was shot by a sheriff 21 years later, but there was little in his brief but lurid history even approximating to the sentimental fairy tales which Hollywood is so fond of retelling. Anyway, Billy's had a fair spin, and I think it's now high time he got off his horse and let himself be finally buried.

[Even this hope is likely to be frustrated. Howard Hughes is reported by "News Review" to be planning a sequel in which the Kid does not die, but fakes a tombstone to bury his past, and goes off with his girl friend for a new life.]

THESE ARE WORTH SEEING

DUMBO (Disney's fifth full-length cartoon). In which Walt goes back to the animals. More simple than usual but just as effective. "A" grade. *Listener*, Jan. 30.

QUIET WEDDING (Margaret Lockwood, Derek Farr). Outstanding British comedy, directed by Anthony Asquith. A film with a flavour of its own. "A" grade. *Listener*, Jan. 23.

KIPPS (Michael Redgrave, Diana Wynyard, Phyllis Calvert). A British director and cast do justice to the H. G. Wells novel. "A" grade. *Listener*, Jan. 16.

OUR TOWN (Frank Craven, Martha Scott). The film has been ruthlessly and inexcusably cut, but shows clear signs of having been a masterpiece. No grading. *Listener*, Jan. 16.

HERE COMES MR. JORDAN (Robert Montgomery, Claude Rains, James Gleason). Rich comedy of a prize-fighter's soul in search of a body. "A" grade. *Listener*, Jan. 9.

IT STARTED WITH EVE (Deanna Durbin, Charles Laughton). Comedy, outweighs music in this gay trifle about a "temporary" fiancée. "B" grade. *Listener*, Jan. 9.

RAGE IN HEAVEN (Robert Montgomery, Ingrid Bergman, George Sanders). *Orhelo*, more or less, in modern dress. "B" grade. *Listener*, Jan. 2.