


THE STRANGE CASE OF SERGEANT YORK



COOPER AS ALVIN YORK
"Thou shalt not kill"

SERGEANT YORK

(Warner Brothers)

 WORLD WAR II. will probably provide quite as much story material for Hollywood as World War I. has done over the past 27 years, including the factual exploits of V.C.'s and other spectacular warriors. It will be hard put to it, however, to provide anything that is as colourful and at the same time as substantial as the real-life story of Sergeant Alvin York, who had almost every possible military and civil honour showered upon him for an exploit at the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne on October 18, 1918. Yet even such a paladin as Sergeant York needs to have some special twist, some unusual angle, even some skeleton in his cupboard, if his screen life is going to break records at the box-office. What makes the U.S.A.'s No. 1 hero of the First World War not only an ideal subject for propaganda purposes but an excellent one also for entertainment is the fact that he entered the army as a conscientious objector!

IT has to be recognised, however, that Alvin York was hardly a typical C.O. Indeed, the film is at some pains to present his objection to war as just a passing phase. We meet him first as a rootin' tootin' (and occasionally shootin') young buck of the Tennessee mountains who cheerfully admits that "Satan has hold of his shirt-tails," and who plainly doesn't include the word "pacifism" in his vocabulary. But when a lightning-flash strikes his loaded gun but spares him and his horse while he is hell-bent to murder a farmer who has defrauded him, he takes it as a direct sign from Heaven, and "gets religion" in the rootin', tootin', hill-billy way, with special emphasis on the injunction "Thou shalt not kill." So, when America enters the war in 1917 and conscription is enforced, Alvin York appeals as a conscientious objector. His appeal is turned down because "he does not belong to any recognised religious sect," and he is ordered into the army. And into the army he goes—without apparently realising what he is there for. For, while still objecting to killing on principle, he very soon proves himself

to be such a well-disciplined soldier and such a Daniel Boone among sharpshooters that he is recommended for promotion!

AT this stage, however, he is confronted by an unusually intelligent major, who is curious to learn more about York's brand of conscience, and by a captain who is anxious to try conclusions with him on the Scriptures. He floors the captain easily with both the Old and New Testaments, but is himself flooded by a History of America which the major lends him and suggests that he read during a 10-days' furlough granted him so that he may revisit his Tennessee mountains, there to wrestle with his soul and "try to get things straight." (He "can't think properly in camp," he says).

WE aren't told who is the author of that History of America, but it is mighty powerful medicine. It makes Private York change his mind—that and the chance discovery of the Biblical text about rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. Though, as the average Appeal Board of to-day has probably discovered, that question about God and Caesar is no poser to the average modern C.O., it satisfies Private York. He returns to camp and a sergeant's stripes.

Thereafter he renders unto Caesar so effectively that when he gets into the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne in 1918, he captures 132 Germans almost single-handed, and single-handed mops up about 35 machine-gun nests with an accuracy and rapidity of firing and a disregard for reloading which would make the ordinary screen cowboy look silly.

What happens after that I'm not quite sure, for on the evening of the preview they unfortunately mislaid the last reel of *Sergeant York*, and we had to leave him still on the battlefield. I've known many pictures which would have been greatly improved by the loss of the last reel, or even the last three reels, but this certainly wasn't one of them. However, in this particular predicament it so happens that the critic can turn to history for the missing ending. For, incredible as Sergeant York's career and military exploits may seem, they are all founded on fact—all except perhaps, his apparent ability to shoot Germans with an empty magazine.

ACCORDING to the records, then, when Sergeant York returned from France, he was given a real New

York welcome, complete with bands and showers of confetti. Honours, decorations, and offers of fortune in publicity ventures were heaped upon him, but he quietly went off to his farm in Tennessee and married the girl he loved. And in that retirement he stayed for 21 years until, in the spring of 1940, Jesse L. Lasky, the film producer, who had tried repeatedly to get York to allow his life to be screened, at last persuaded him that it had now become his patriotic duty to submit. Even then, Alvin York only surrendered conditionally. He stipulated (1), that no actor but Gary Cooper must impersonate him (2), that he wasn't going to have

any "oomph" girl in the role of his wife (3), that the film must be an honest record of fact (4), that part of the money due to him must be devoted to building a Bible School in his native hills. All four conditions were granted. And for all I know, Alvin York, now 54 years old, is to this day happily at work in his Bible School implanting sturdy Tennessee consciences in little hill-billies.

ALVIN YORK may have kept aloof from Hollywood during the past two decades, but he certainly knew what he was doing when he put his foot down about having Gary Cooper to portray him. Quite simply, there was nobody more suited for the job; nobody better able to make Sergeant York seem picturesque and at the same time natural, even ordinary. There is a sincerity and integrity in the performance which obviously derives from the sincerity of the man himself; so much so that I doubt if I am going too far in saying that if York's conscience had remained obdurate, if he had decided to defy the army, he wouldn't have lost much of the audience's respect and admiration. He certainly wouldn't have lost mine. For what such a prediction is worth, I hereby nominate Cooper's performance for the Academy Award.

Anyway, Howard Hawks, the director, has concentrated—and I think wisely—far more on showing us how York's character was shaped by his environment among his rugged native mountains than on his spectacular achievements on the battlefield. Because of this factor, assisted by admirable character-studies of tough mountain-folk from Margaret Wycherly (*Mother York*), Walter Brennan (*Pastor Rosier Pile*), and Joan Leslie (*York's sweetheart*, in whom "oomph" is certainly a minus quantity)—because of all this *Sergeant*



COOPER AS SERGEANT YORK
America's No. 1 World War Hero

York is much less a war story than a memorable personal document of how one man—not a typical man, of course—reacted to war. And though he may perceive the propaganda and the occasional superficiality, and though he may have answers pat for questions which Alvin York, with his lack of "book - larnin'" found unanswerable, even the conscientious objector—unless he is hopelessly one-eyed—should realise that the film does at least make an honest and fairly intelligent approach toward recognising the existence of his problem; does even make some slight attempt to answer it. If he doesn't realise this, he should compare *Sergeant York* with some of the films of World War I. in which this favourite theme of the pacifist who turns fighter was put to the crudest propaganda use. I shall not be surprised to hear that some of our Appeal Board chairmen are recommending appellants to see this film; but whatever else it may be to a C.O., *Sergeant York* should not be objectionable.

MY LIFE WITH CAROLINE

(R.K.O. Radio)



WHICH only goes to prove that a cast comprising Ronald Colman, Anna Lee, Reginald Gardiner, Charles Winninger, Gilbert Rowland, a bulldog called Winston Churchill, a screenplay by John van Druten from a noted stage comedy, and direction by Lewis (*All Quiet*) Milestone, don't necessarily add up to a good picture. We didn't slump right down in our seat until after the first half-hour or so—but we got there.

Plainly not a comedy Milestone.

HOLD THAT GHOST

(New Universal)



WHEN we saw Messrs. Abbott and Costello in *Buck Privates* (our first introduction to them) and, a little later, *In the Navy*, we were inclined to hail them as heralds of a new birth of comedy, or at least as two cuckoos

(Continued on next page)