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LAUGHING AT DEATH

COMMANDOS STRIKE AT DAWN

(Columbia)

THIS is a story of Norway under the Nazis. After an idyllic peace-time prelude in which Paul Muni, a middle-aged widower in a small village, falls in love with the daughter (Anna Lee) of a visiting English admiral (Sir Cedric Hardwicke), the film goes on to show what happens to the village when the Nazis invade the country, and what happens to some of the Nazis when the villagers organise sabotage and murder. ("We thought we were living in a decent world. We find instead we are living in the jungle: to survive we must behave like the beasts of the jungle"). After some narrow escapes, the hero manages to get to England in a small boat, but he returns almost immediately to Norway as guide in a large-scale commando raid by British forces on a strategic German airfield. The raid succeeds, but he is killed.

This is a spectacular film, well produced and well acted, and its portrayal of Norwegian life and character gives the impression of being reasonably authentic. But the climax, consisting of the long sequence showing the commando raid, has one very disquieting feature, which is not so much a reflection on the film itself as on the audience's reaction to it. Gory details of Germans getting their throats cut and their faces smashed in by rifle butts, realistic scenes of soldiers being shot down or blown up were, on the evening I saw *Commandos Strike at Dawn*, greeted by a large audience with loud laughter and applause. That audience consisted predominantly of adults, yet they behaved exactly like a Saturday afternoon gathering of children at a Wild West thriller. "Bang! And another Redskin bit the dust" — that was the spirit of the occasion.

I am sure that this was almost exclusively a civilian reaction. There may have been in the audience a few soldiers new to war who revelled in these sights and sounds, but I find it hard to believe that any soldier who has actually seen service could behave like that. And even with the civilians the laughter and applause would, of course, be partly a nervous reaction to excitement—the sort of thing you get when somebody makes a good tackle at a football match. Still, you can't explain it away as conveniently as that, and anyway it is exactly my point that there is too much of a tendency to treat war in a fox-hunting or football-match spirit. ("Good-hunting!" shouts the admiral, as the commandos prepare to strike at dawn).

That sort of thing is harmless, you may say. I don't think so. At the beginning of the war the authorities were inclined to frown on too-realistic scenes of fighting on the screen. It was thought then that their effect might be to make people depressed and unwarlike. As it has turned out, the authorities had no need to worry on that score—but have they no reason to worry on another, now that the cinema has gone to the other extreme? Is it a good thing that we should be encouraged to grow callous, that Hollywood should be allowed to

exploit the war for the sake of sensationalism and cheap thrills? This is not the level on which good causes are won and a righteous peace is built.

Commandos is not an isolated example of this tendency. I mentioned the same thing in my review of *Wake Island*, and there have been other cases. In fact, it does almost suggest that it is at present beyond the capacity of the cinema to produce realistic war films (except documentaries) which do not have this effect of causing grown-ups to behave like a lot of thoughtless children. And the remedy? Well, I'd almost go so far as to say that if we behave like children we should perhaps be treated like children, and that films of this type — even an otherwise excellent film like *Commandos Strike at Dawn*—should be kept out of our reach until we can be trusted not to do ourselves harm with them.

SEVEN SWEETHEARTS

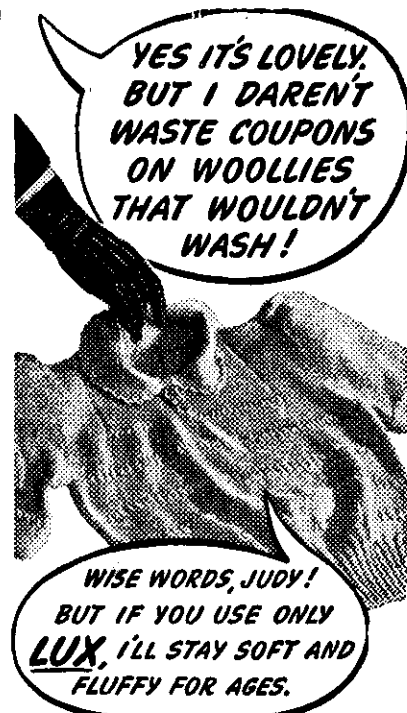
(M-G-M)

NOW, if Bluebeard were asked to appear on the screen with his bevy of beautiful wives, I suppose he'd be able to feel that he had some sort of protection in his beard from the too-eager public gaze; but here is Mr. Van Heflin (*Johnny Eager's* pal, the cute detective in *Grand Central Murder*), braving, without the comfort of even a toothbrush moustache-shelter, the rigours of a campaign opposite the 14 soft and shining eyes of the seven beautiful young dames who are the heroines of *Seven Sweethearts*. You have to hand it to Mr. Van Heflin. It would be tough enough to ask even a Hollywood star to compete with seven beautiful young actresses, each busy trying to steal the show; but Mr. Van Heflin has hardly been heard of yet, certainly his star-shine isn't bright enough to read by. But he takes them on, the seven of them (Kathryn Grayson, plus voice, Marsha Hunt, Cecilia Parker, and the rest of them; and, oh yes, they're all busy trying to steal the show), and he gets away with it. Yes. A hat-off to Mr. Van Heflin.

A hat-off again to Mr. Van Heflin and also to Director Frank Borzage for introducing us to a reporter who is unimportant enough to look like a reporter. He is sent to report the tulip festival at a Dutch settlement in Michigan, arrives at a hotel kept by a fat Dutchman (played admirably by S. Z. Sakall), with seven beautiful Dutch daughters called George and Albert and Cornelius and Peter and so on. ("Well, father always wanted boys, so when we were born girls, he just called us boys' names"), and then the rain begins. Imprisoned in the hotel, the young reporter fumes and grumbles at his luck. ("Imagine being stuck on a job like this anyway, when there's a war on"), and listens to long praise of the tulips.

There are, however, seven beautiful daughters, and they and their charms cannot be overlooked, even by a disgruntled reporter.

Seven Sweethearts isn't a very serious film with a serious moral to point; it is a happy picture with a slight story and pretty dresses, dancing and singing. In fact, a film to see for its cheerfulness and charm.



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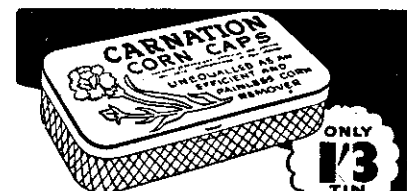
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