

Down to the Sea Again

THE CRUEL SEA

(Rank-Ealing)

WHEN I was a little lad (like the character in the old drawing-room ballad) I gave to ships and sailormen, if not all my heart, at least a goodly share of my attention. Sometimes it was too large a share—the first imposition I collected at High School was, I recall, for allowing my mind to wander from the classic austerities of the First Declension to the romantic possibilities of the shipping visible through the classroom window. But in spite of such checks, and in spite of the larger distractions which come to us with the greying years, that juvenile enthusiasm remains. No ship—he it grimy coaster, or Technicolored three-decker out of Hollywood—crosses the screen without quickening my interest or waking Homeric echoes of the wine-dark sea.

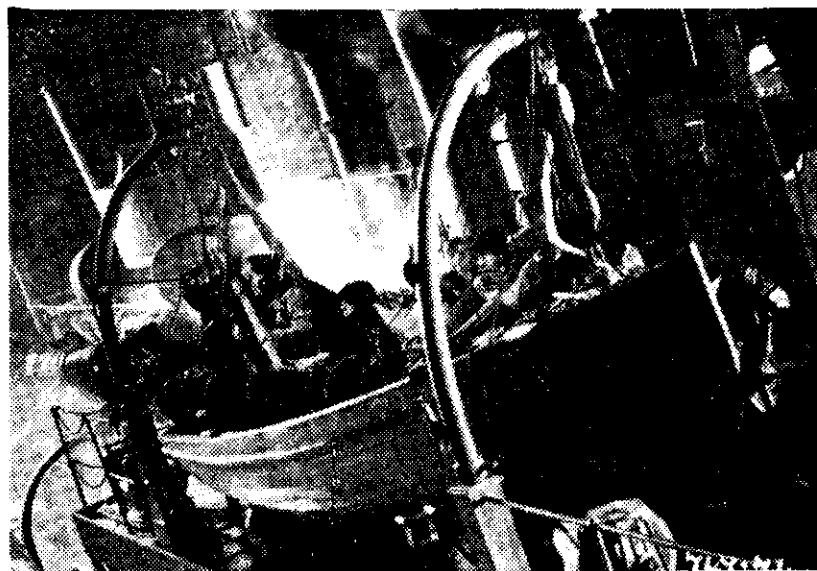
And that is, I'm sure, a commonplace of experience, at least among Anglo-Saxons. Half of those who are now crowding in to see the Ealing version of Monsarrat's best-seller may be there

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "The Cruel Sea."
DULL: "Botany Bay."
DULL: "Salome."

simply because the book was a best-seller, or because of the threads of human interest which Monsarrat wove into it. But the rest are drawn, I am sure, by the irresistible drama of the title and the theme. Filmgoers in the second category will enjoy it most, but I would be surprised if anyone (critics possibly expected) went home unsatisfied.

Speaking for myself—and studiously avoiding superlatives—I would say that *The Cruel Sea* (directed by Charles Friend) is often splendidly dramatic, on the whole well above average, but just occasionally a little lacking in technical enterprise and originality. With those sequences which were shot at sea I have no fault to find at all. The passages which showed corvettes and frigates keeping station in an Atlantic gale, the air-bombardment of the Murmansk convoy, or the stalking of the U-boat in the Mediterranean could scarcely have been



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improved on for drama, even with the full co-operation of the elements or the enemy, but the closer shooting done in the studio is occasionally unconvincing. I don't mean to suggest that technical detail is not reproduced faithfully—one is always conscious of that quality of sincerity and honest workmanship in an Ealing production—but no matter how well one may recreate the picture of the torpedoed *Compass Rose* the effect will be to some extent impaired if she sinks in a curiously static sea. Inevitably, of course, studio tank water is static water, but there are surely ways of overcoming that difficulty. The camera, for example, need not be static; unconvincing backgrounds can be trimmed down and relevant details highlighted. What, for example, does the horizon look like from a rubber dinghy or a Carley float wallowing in the trough of an Atlantic swell? Some of the magnificent sea-scapes glimpsed behind the credit-titles of the film could profitably have been cut into later sequences. And there was, I thought, too much use made of model ships. With tens of thousands of feet of wartime film in the archives models should scarcely have been necessary. They are often handled with great ingenuity, but only rarely are they completely successful in a *tromp l'oeil* sense.

There was, goodness knows, no need to use them to simulate sinking merchantmen, and the heroic (and historic) quality of the story would here have justified the use of combat film.

These criticisms, however, are made because the film can stand them; they would not bulk so largely in my mind if the film had not captured my interest and attention. When the action moves out to the open sea both the story and the characters in it gain in stature. Jack Hawkins, as Captain Ericson, and Donald Sinden and Denholm Elliott as his lieutenants, are convincing wartime officers—not too tight-lipped to have doubts and fears, not too tough to crack occasionally; human enough to cheer the sinking of the impersonal enemy or to succour him if he is lucky enough to grip their hands before going under in the oil-slick. Of course, as Monsarrat pointed out, the only villain in the story is the sea. But even the sea's villainy plays, in the end, a secondary role. Half the horrors of the war at sea are barely hinted at—hardly more than a hint is, in any case, necessary. But it is heroism and not horror that stays in the mind. Listening to the oscillating *ting* of the Asdic, watching the faces of sweating stokers waiting for the torpedo that doesn't come, remembering that

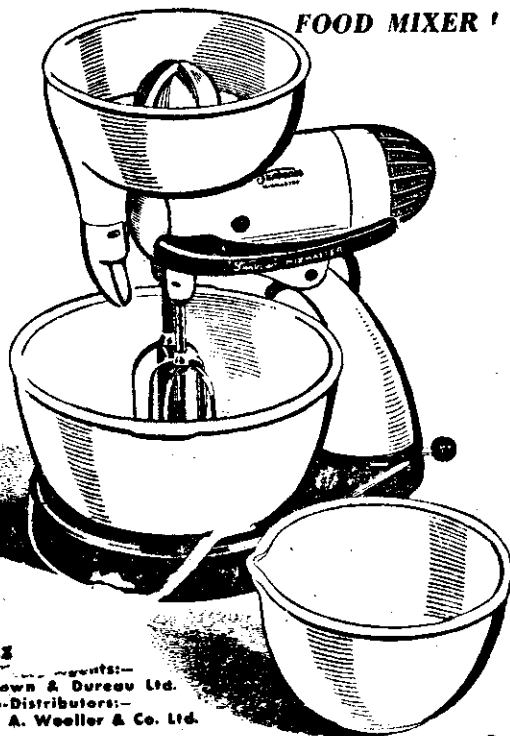
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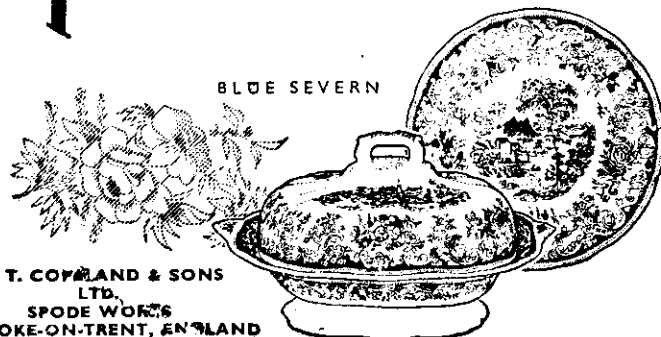
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