

BACK TO THE ATOM

THE THIEF

(Harry M. Popkin-United Artists)

THE THIEF, so the publicity handouts tell me, is the first feature film without a line of dialogue to come from Hollywood in the 25 years since movies first became talkies. I don't know how close to the truth that is—Hollywood makes claims like that with the same exuberance as it handles superlatives, and memory, even when it is long, is rarely broad enough to furnish an effective check. But I am sure that a pre-talkie audience couldn't have made head or tail of the picture. If you could show it to a group of desert-island castaways whose sole link with civilisation over the past quarter-century had been a pile of eroded gramophone records, they would be either bewildered or bored.

The more worldly-wise among them might know something about the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and therefore have an inkling of what went on in the building with that nameplate on its portico, but they could not be expected to know the significance of the words Atomic Energy Commission, to perceive (except in some moment of vague disquieting intuition) a connection between the two buildings, or to understand why the apparently respectable workers in the one establishment should be covered by dossiers and identification cards in the other. It would not be difficult for them to deduce that Dr. Allan Fields (Ray Milland), the nuclear research worker, was spying; but if they had been familiar with scientific practice they might wonder why there was any need for him to do so—why scientific formula should be secret. And I imagine that in the end the more intuitive among them might elect to go back to their desert islands, with a fresh selection of LPs.

But you and I, who have spent the past 25 years in the desert of civilisation, don't need words to eke out the drama of *The Thief*. We can catch all the allusions, recognise each jagged fragment from the contemporary nightmare

and match it against its fellow. We know all the answers—or all but one.

And there is no doubt that a wordless script provides a disconcertingly appropriate treatment for the theme. It accentuates the mental conflict of the scientist caught in a web from which there seems no escape, in a dilemma which he can discuss with no one. It serves to underline the stealthy operation of the spy-ring, the furtive, unannounced assignments of the go-betweens, the general impression of a silent but remorseless battle in the shadows.

The Thief is, in fact, not only a bold but on the whole a successful film experiment, and one that is likely to cause a good deal of discussion wherever it is shown. The naturalistic treatment (reinforced by some splendid outdoor photography) may remind you often of Mark Hellinger's *Naked City*. The soundtrack has not been eliminated, though the spoken word has, and the place of dialogue has been taken by the noises of Washington and New York—most of them invested with a larger-than-life significance by the scenes with which they are associated. But the very naturalness of the treatment underlines the need for at least some dialogue. Even sparingly used it would have brought the drama a little closer to us.

The appearance of Miss Rita Gam (TV's gift to the movies) was possibly contrived to meet the lack of human warmth in the script. She has nothing whatever to do with the story. She has not any effect upon the development of the action (save to stall it occasionally); in fact, one might wonder why she was dragged in at all—if it weren't patently obvious. Even the desert-islanders could follow her without dialogue.

EIGHT IRON MEN

(Stanley Kramer-Columbia)

[F I had set out deliberately to find a film to contrast with *The Thief*, I could hardly have found a better example than this latest production of the busy Mr. Kramer. *Eight Iron Men* is based on a Broadway hit, *A Sound of Hunting*, and is the story of 24 hours in the lives of eight U.S. infantrymen who form a forward patrol in the front line in Italy. For them the front line runs through a shattered town. Some of the buildings are held by the Allies, some by the enemy, and the spaces in between are unhealthy, being covered by snipers and concealed machine-guns. In one of these spaces a flat-footed member of the patrol gets pinned down in a shell-hole and the rest of the group pin themselves down in what seems like an interminable argument on the pros and cons of an attempt at rescue. Occasionally one or two, bolder or more insubordinate, venture out, and we get some fresh air, change of scene and good photography, but they're soon back to chew the fat and slang the sergeant. I should say that *Eight Iron Men* has more dialogue per square foot than any other war picture I have seen in the last 10 years—so much, indeed, that the real problems of moral responsibility which lie at the roots of the drama are at times quite obscured. Yet I thoroughly enjoyed the film. The observation is often shrewd, the dialogue has a nip to it, and there is a wry twist to the ending which leaves one in a good humour. But best of all is the performance of Bonar Colleano, as a lead-swinging, self-assured private. He makes the show—and quite a bright show he makes it.

BAROMETER

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FAIR: "Eight Iron Men."

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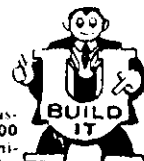
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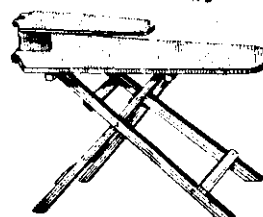
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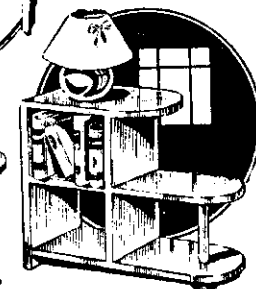
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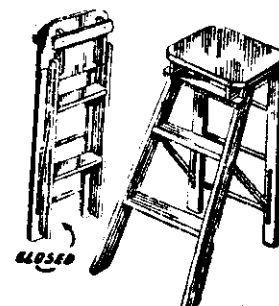


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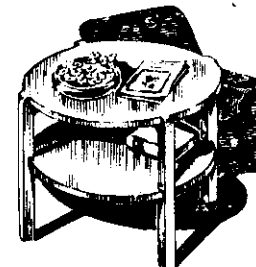
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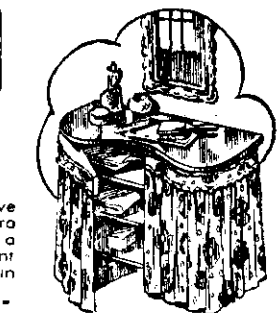
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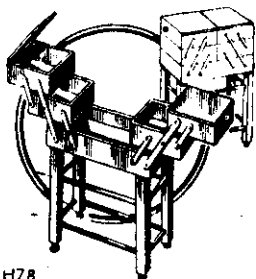
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