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SUPERSTITIOUS TRIO

IN one way or another, the three pictures which I saw last week all had superstition as a basis for their plots. I don't know whether this means that I am going to walk under a ladder and meet a cross-eyed theatre-manager who will leave me a fortune, or whether it was just coincidence. Just coincidence I'm afraid. One was a super-colossal feature; another was just colossal; and the third was merely the first half of a double-feature programme at a B-grade theatre to which I went simply because a Dunedin reader had been good enough to write and tell me to look out for it. I hope I shall not jeopardise any chance of inheriting that fortune by saying that the merit of these three pictures was in inverse ratio to their size and box-office status.

THE SEVENTH VICTIM

(R.K.O.-Radio)

THIS is a real collector's piece; an item which I warmly commend to the notice of all connoisseurs of the macabre. It was produced by somebody called Val Lewton, who is a

new name to me, but it seems he specialises in "creepies." He doesn't belong to the Frankenstein-Mummy's Ghost school, though—he'd be expelled for not playing ball with the boys. He specialises in horror stories in the way in which Edgar Allan Poe or Ambrose Bierce specialised in them; in fact, if you can imagine Poe or Bierce making a film, *The Seventh Victim* is the kind of film they would make.

If I say that it is all about a school-girl who has lost trace of her sister, and a cult of devil-worshippers in modern New York, that is true enough—but it is about as satisfactory in giving you an idea of this film's peculiarly fascinating flavour as it would be to say that Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" deals with a premature burial. For genuine thrills and a pervading atmosphere of horrid suspense I can, offhand, think of no film to touch this little masterpiece, and none of the thrills and suspense are obtained by the orthodox chain-clanking, horrid-face-pulling methods. The audience is left to scare itself. The producer merely opens the door a crack: it is up to you whether you venture inside and give yourself a really enjoyable fright. Naturally it depends on yourself, too, whether the fright is enjoyable.

Not the least of this picture's unusual features is its authentic literary quality. One doesn't, in a Hollywood shocker, expect casual yet important references to *Cyrano de Bergerac* or *La Boheme*, any more than one expects to find a young poet who behaves like a normal person. And it is certainly unusual to find such a film deriving its theme from two lines by the mystic poet, John Donne: "I runne to death, and death meets me as fast, And all my pleasures are like yesterday." As it happens, nobody is guilty of murder in this story; of the two sudden deaths which occur one is an accident, the other a suicide. But as that quotation suggests, there is a preoccupation with death and the unseen which, though it may not exactly produce a feeling of gaiety in the on-looker, certainly produces tension.

Now then, you grisly epicures, if you want a good shudder you know where to go for it.

THE CRYSTAL BALL

(United Artists)

IN case it may appear from what I have just written that I am developing morbid tendencies, I had better lose no time in saying that I also enjoyed *The Crystal Ball*, which treats superstition strictly as a subject for comedy. Thanks more to the sprightliness of Paulette Goddard than to anything else, but with some credit also to William Bendix, Ray Milland and the director (Elliott Nugent), this inconsequential effort contains a good deal of real fun. It depicts the complicated love life and professional career of an out-of-work country girl in the Big City who joins a fortune-telling racket to earn her meal-ticket and uses "professional secrets" to win a rich husband (Milland).

(continued on next page)

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BEAVERS

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