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Film Reviews

"THE LAST CHANCE"

"THE LAST CHANCE," a Swiss
film (one of the first they have
made) which has been brought here
by M-G-M, was previewed by three to
four hundred people at the Paramount
Theatre, Wellington, on a recent Sun-
day evening. "The Listener" was not
among those invited. Fortunately we
are in a position to turn the other
cheek, by printing this very favour-
able account of the film written by
a contributor who did attend the pre-
view:

THEIR last chance of survival
was to cross the Alps into
Switzerland. The little Italian
village that they left, what re-
mained of it, was occupied by the
Germans. The weather made the
Alps apparently impassable; there was
no guide; and it was uncertain whether
Switzerland would admit this poor group
of refugees if they got there at all.

What a theme for Hollywood! And
how many times they have used it, or
themes like it, to show to advantage
the photogenic qualities of their most
glamorous stars, the fighting qualities of
their more masculine actors. *The Last
Chance* could have been just another war
film, set in Italy in the early part of
1943 with a British lieutenant and an

American sergeant escaping on their way
to a German prisoner-of-war camp. But
this is a Swiss film, and for the first
time for a long while we are able to see
what Continental movie-makers can do.
The result is a completely different and
far more satisfying approach.

To begin with, the characters of the
film are some of the most normal and
human people we have encountered on
the screen, and they are the more real
because they speak in their own lan-
guages. As there are characters from all
over Europe this means that we listen
to Englishmen speaking English, French-
men, Germans and Italians speaking in
French, German and Italian, and fre-
quently trying to make themselves under-
stood in alien diction. With abbreviated
translations given as sub-titles and the
appropriate intonations and gestures, the
whole thing is most convincing and not
at all hard to follow.

THE main character, a British
lieutenant, has no outstanding charac-
teristics which would set him apart from
thousands of other soldiers. His courage
enables him to do just what thousands
of others have been doing during the
last eight, or even eight hundred, years:
he consciously endangers and finally loses
his own life in an attempt to help a
small group of people against overwhelm-
ing odds. Matter-of-fact treatment is
given to the flashes of temporary weak-
ness in human nature—the lieutenant,
the American sergeant, and an English
captain whom they have joined, are
tempted to strike for their own freedom
and leave the unfortunates to fend for
themselves; the spasms of rebellion
against the British leaders and mistrust
of them by the refugees when things
appear hopeless; the exasperation at the
professor who will not leave his heavy-
case of research papers behind him, and
so on.

Possibly the film is most successful
and sensitive in its treatment of savag-
ery, and it is here that the difference be-
tween the American and European films
most clearly emerges. The director
credits his audience with a little imagina-
tion and does not force close-ups of bru-
tality on them. It was more powerful to
show, not the actual beating-up of the
Jewish woman after her attempted
suicide, but the American soldier quietly
vomiting in revulsion at the sight; the
photography of the dead bodies as the
result of almost Belsen bestiality is done
from a respectful distance. Far from les-
sening reality, this restraint makes a far
greater impression.

IT is difficult to describe the atmosphere
of tension which the direction is able
to create. The characters appear so true:
the kindly assistants in the Italian vil-
lage, the gallant-hearted Italian Scarlet
Pimpernel, the slimy informer. The
refugees seem to represent the whole of
suffering Europe. It may well be that
the happy and hopeful ending—the ad-
mission of the group into Switzerland—

is too good to be true; it is questionable
whether these people, some of whom had
been turned back from country after
country since 1938, would against writ-
ten orders be admitted to this refuge.
Possibly the director felt that we had
borne enough for the 90 minutes, and
that for this group of people fate should
show some little consideration.

The courage and hope they express
at the last, their faith in their future
is shown with that same restraint as is
noticeable throughout the film. "Not
much to look at," says the English cap-
tain in the final scene, "just a handful
of people"; but it is this handful of
people who give an urgency, more vivid
than anything I can remember, to the
plight of those whom the politicians
rather objectively and inhumanly term
"displaced persons."

—P.T.

CAPTAIN KIDD

(United Artists)



IF you want to get the
children off your hands
some wet afternoon these
holidays, you could do
worse than send them to
this. But adults are entitled to expect
something better than this kind of kidd-
stuff from an actor like Charles Laugh-
ton, who, in case you have forgotten, was
once one of the greatest artists on the
screen. These days he seems content to
play all the time to the gallery, galumph-
ing through his roles with the minimum
of creative effort and the maximum of
mugging.

It isn't entirely his fault, of course.
In the present case if they had given
him a better story he might have turned
Captain Kidd into a three-dimensional
character instead of making him just a
miserable Cockney rascal almost entirely
lacking in depth. Failing this, the pro-
ducer should have tossed artistic preten-
sions to the winds and gone all out for
blood and thunder, as befits a tale of
piracy on the high seas. Instead, the
film gives one the impression of being
curiously inhibited and disappointingly
static. It never really moves, and when
it does it mostly moves across a map,
which is flashed on the screen with irri-
tating frequency, instead of across open
water. And in several aspects the plot is
needlessly complicated and obscure; all
that business about the ship "The Eight
Apostles," for instance: how exactly did
Kidd pull off that coup? I say "need-
lessly" because this was one of the occa-
sions when Hollywood need not have
hesitated to simplify history in the in-
terests of entertainment, since history
cannot tell us anything very accurate
about the real Captain Kidd.

Not that there isn't a good deal of
simplicity about some aspects of the
story: for instance, the convenient habit
Kidd has of writing his list of intended
victims in a little book and of leaving
a skull-and-crossbones flag lying about
in a drawer in his bureau where it can
be found by the spy who has got on
board his ship in the king's interests
(Kidd, you see, is sailing under false
colours, having persuaded King William
to give him command of a ship). Equally
convenient is the spy's habit of wearing
his family crest round his neck so that

(continued on next page)

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