

ALL ABOUT CORPSES

LADIES IN RETIREMENT

(Columbia)

 NOT since Robert Montgomery carried a head in a hat box through *Night Must Fall* have audiences had such a chance to enjoy a good, sustained shudder. If *Ladies in Retirement* doesn't give them the creeps, nothing much will. Ellen Creed (Ida Lupino) uses no hat box but an old-fashioned, bricked-in Dutch oven, set in the parlour wall, to conceal what is left of her murder victim, Miss Fiske (Isobel Elsom). And since Miss Fiske disappears early in the piece, and since most of the action of the story takes place in the parlour, that confounded oven, with the corpse inside, is very much in the picture. If it gets on the audience's nerves, small wonder that it eventually gets on the nerves of Ellen Creed, who has to live with it. But Ellen is made of stern stuff; she had to be to dispose of her kindly employer in the first place in order to secure a haven for her two mad sisters (Elsa Lanchester and Edith Barrett); and she is beaten in the end, not by the body in the oven, but by her very-much-alive young nephew (Louis Hayward) whose bad habit of poking his nose into secrets—and his fingers into other people's bank accounts—brings them both to disaster.

Ladies in Retirement is from a Broadway stage success, and as a film it is still very much a stage play, unable in its new form to overcome entirely the cinematic handicaps of too much talk, too little action, and restricted setting. But the director, Charles Vidor, and his cameraman, George Barnes, have done their best to work up an eerie atmosphere round the desolate house on the English marshlands in the year 1885 where three ladies, one corpse, one pretty housemaid, and one inquisitive and amorous young man abide in uneasy retirement. Outside the house the director and cameraman concentrate on the familiar melodramatic devices of gaunt trees, howling wind, and fog which is a bit too thick, but inside they manage very nicely with flickering candles, lurking shadows, and glimpses of that confounded oven from all angles. But it is with the shadows in the minds of Ellen Creed's two unfortunate sisters and the black mark on the soul of Ellen herself that the director and his talented cast are most successful.

Elsa Lanchester and Edith Barrett portray the mad Miss Creeds with such a keen sense of dementia that one can hardly blame the kindly, religious Miss Fiske for insisting at last that they terminate their already protracted stay at her house, and for suggesting that their sister, her housekeeper-companion, had better go too. Sister Emily's obsession is collecting dead birds, and "tidying-up" river banks by bringing driftwood into the parlour (she just can't bear to see anything wasted). She also makes unfortunate remarks about religion. Sister Louisa is milder; she likes to put frogs on the table and make them jump into the marmalade pot. So Miss Fiske tells

them to go, and so Ellen has to do something about it. Hence the oven.

It may not sound as if there is much of the heroine about Ellen, but there is. Apart from garrotting her employer, she is a rather admirable girl, and certainly a courageous one. She commits murder only because she loves her two crazy sisters so much that she cannot bear them to be put away in an English asylum of the 19th century; and because of this, and because she is no much alone with her terrible secret, one hopes that she will be able to keep it, although one knows she won't. It's that psychological law of sympathy with the hunted which I mentioned last week in connection with *49th Parallel*. Anyone who has believed that Ida Lupino is merely a musical-comedy actress is in for a surprise on seeing *Ladies in Retirement*. She plays Ellen with the repressed intensity of emotion that not only makes for good melodrama but has often won Academy Awards.

Popular appeal? Well, if you enjoyed *Night Must Fall*, if you like horror on the mental plane rather than on the physical plane of clanking chains and rattling bones, you should like this film. It's strong meat, rather slowly cooked, and it's my meat; but it was near-poison to the man I took with me to the screening. He couldn't see why they'd bothered to film the thing at all. So, though my personal inclination might be to stand up to applaud, I think I'd better keep my seat to do it.

THREE GIRLS ABOUT TOWN

(Columbia)

 ON the same evening as I saw *Ladies in Retirement* I saw *Three Girls About Town*, which also happens to be all about corpses—and, curiously enough, is very funny about them, too. If the one film is good melodrama, the other is just as good farce. One of those crazy pieces which drag in one absurdity after another but manage to retain spontaneity.

The plot reminded me a bit of that even funnier film *A Slight Case of Murder* which dealt with the difficulty of disposing of several inconvenient cadavers. They were dumped by gangsters on innocent doorways, but kept on turning up in awkward circumstances. In *Three Girls About Town* there is only one body but it is equally troublesome. It belongs to the man who is to act as Government mediator at a conference of employers and employees in an industrial dispute (America's defence programme is being held up), and it turns up first in a hotel room occupied by three sisters, quaintly named Faith, Hope, and Charity, too of whom act as "hostesses" at the hotel. To avoid a scandal, these virtuous (well, almost) young women rightly decide that the "corpse" won't object if it is found somewhere else; but their journey with it from their room to the alley outside the hotel takes most of the picture and is fraught with complications, arising from the interference of the police force, several "gentlemen" of the press (the



HUSBAND AND WIFE in real life, Louis Hayward and Ida Lupino play nephew and aunt in "*Ladies in Retirement*"

quotation marks are unfortunately necessary), the hotel staff, the hotel guests, representatives of Labour and Capital, three Irish charwomen, and the sodden remnants of a Magicians' Convention which has just been meeting at the hotel. Not to mention a Convention of Morticians (American for undertakers) which is just starting.

The producer has put almost too many outrageous absurdities into the film for safety, but he gets away with it, thanks to slick acting by Joan Blondell, Binnie Barnes, Janet Blair (the Three Virtues), Robert Benchley, John Howard, Eric Blore, and others of this comic ilk, and thanks particularly to an abundance of wisecracks in the dialogue. It is perhaps not a show to be remembered a year from now, but certainly one to be enjoyed when you see it, provided you are in the mood and don't object to jokes on a grave subject (the wisecracks are better than that pun).

Good shot: The president of the morticians singing "If a body meet a body . . ." as he dresses for the Convention.

SHADOW OF THE THIN MAN

(M.G.M.)

 ONE can't help feeling that there's something in this heredity business. At any rate this great grandchild of *The Thin Man* is much thinner (as far as the plot is concerned anyway) than any of its three forbears, and even the comic efforts of William Powell and Myrna Loy can't make it put on much weight. To my mind there seemed to be a divorce—no, not between Nick and Nora, who are as casually uxorious as ever, but between the domestic comedy motive and the crime and detection theme, and there is a sense of annoyance whenever the film switches from one to the other. It's really a good thing that one isn't particularly gripped by the jockey murder and the killing of the blackmailing reporter, or one would be rather annoyed at people, like Myrna Loy holding up the possible discovery of the malefactors while she tries on what every character in the film agrees is a "screw" hat.

Because, of course, it's only Nick Charles who can solve the murder, and there's Nora wasting his time by making him take her to a wrestling match. Not

a waste of time from the audience's point of view, because it was fun to see Nora in her excitement getting a headlock on Nicky while the two 18-stoners squirmed in agony upon the floor, later recovering sufficiently to say "Thank you, Miss," to Nora's drawled "Hope you get out of it all right." I could watch this sort of thing for quite a long time, if it weren't for the fact that by this time there are at least two corpses and nothing's been done about either of them. It isn't as if the police can do anything, because they're in charge of a Lieutenant Something who evidently entered the police force because his I.Q. was too low for him to be welcomed in criminal circles.

Well, at last Nick gets going and solves everything in less time (considerably less time) than it takes him to swallow a glass of milk, and lands his suspect plonk in the middle of a room full of other suspects who are as surprised as the audience at this unexpected dénouement, because neither the characters nor the audience have seen much of the unfortunate gentleman before, and anyway he looks so harmless.

But of course this isn't the grand climax. The grand climax comes when the innocent-looking suspect turns nasty and the faithful Nora flings herself in front of Nick to receive the fatal bullet himself. But it isn't fatal—in fact it isn't even a bullet—so there's a lovely fade-out of Mr. and Mrs. Thin Man, both unharmed, and I have a feeling they've been left this way on purpose and that we'll be seeing them shortly in M.G.M.'s "*The Thin Man's Shadow Returns*."

But I rather hope I'm wrong.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

I SHOULD like to take this opportunity, the only one possible, of acknowledging a letter I received the other week from an anonymous correspondent in Wellington who, under the pen-name of "Still an Admirer", wrote to say that "although a very very old-fashioned person (55)", who rarely sees a film because of ill-health, "she thoroughly enjoys reading my reviews." In a very nice way she went on to say that sometimes my choice of language hurt: for example, the phrase "Lawson drawing good belly laughs from a matinee audience with his salty comments on marriage". Without necessarily agreeing that there is anything objectionable in that phrase, I should like this correspondent to know that I appreciate her viewpoint, and her interest in the films, and also what is implied by her *nom de plume*. She may, incidentally, be interested to know that I have three young children, not two.—G.M.