

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

TAKE A LETTER, DARLING!

(Paramount)

AZ OH, a wicked, wicked film. Well, Rosalind Russell's there, you may say, so what did I expect? But don't take me up that way; I'm not talking about bedroom scenes, seen or implied, or near-precipitous back-chat; I'm talking about still one more film that's blatantly not about the ordinary lives of ordinary people and yet cannot be described as fantasy, pure or impure. *Take a Letter Darling* is wicked because it looks real, and between strictly silk-lined limits probably is real, and because it doesn't strike me as the kind of reality to be encouraged. Which doesn't mean that it isn't amusing.

Mr. F. MacMurray, who once had an income and "did what he wanted," is seen applying for a job at an advertising office, a big and swingy-doored one; he finds that he is to become, at fifty bucks a week, the phoney secretary of MacGregor (Miss R. Russell), partner in the firm. The other partner in the firm is Mr. R. Benchley, who seems to be awfully busy most of the time playing something that looks like either billiards or scallywag; and I was glad to notice that they had let him get away with that charming little rubber toy horse from *The Reluctant Dragon* set.

The idea was that the phoney secretary was to tag along and be MacGregor's fiancé so that, whenever a client had a wife, MacGregor would be covered by a sort of third-party risk (because she always explained to the client that it was really O.K., and it was only a phoney engagement). And the phoney secretary meanwhile danced with the wife to dispel her far from phoney jealousy.

"I don't like it," said Mr. MacMurray. "It isn't honest." (He really

wanted to be a painter. He hadn't made up his mind yet whether he was a good one or not, he told MacGregor when she asked). That was at fifty bucks a week. But when they were working to pull off a plum of a tobacco contract it was less distasteful; for one thing, he'd been raised to 100 a week with a promise of 10,000 out of the profits on the deal; and for another thing, it was a sister he had to deal with instead of a wife, and this sister was some sister, a blonde one (Constance Moore); and for another thing it would mean he could go to Mexico in a caravan and Paint.

It was a bit awkward when MacGregor and Sec. went to MacGregor's mountain hide-out to work on the new campaign, but talked about What They Really Wanted to Do with their lives instead, and MacGregor admitted that she wrote Poetry in Secret. Well, he kissed her then, and after a bit of walking up and down (caged animals, you know), in their respective bedrooms, MacGregor ordered the whole outfit back to town. It was Safer that Way. And anyway, that deal had to be pulled off. So it was some considerable time before Mr. MacMurray could afford to stop being phoney and go to Mexico in a caravan to Paint. MacGregor at that stage decided to stop being phoney about not being in love and go along, too. I suppose Mr. Benchley had to stop playing billiards or whatever it was and start looking after the firm.

A GENTLEMAN AFTER DARK

(Small-United Artists)

AZ MUCH of the story of this film takes place in the year 1923, but that scarcely seems sufficient reason for the director to have copied the screen technique of the same period. Remove the sound and the dialogue and you would have a completely silent film; by which I mean that the actors do not act so much as visibly "register" their emotions, as of course they were forced to do in the days when pantomime was almost their sole means of expression.

It would, admittedly, be difficult for any cast not to "emote" in such a juicy, old-fashioned melodrama as this. The chief character, taken by Brian Donlevy, is in particular "a part to tear a cat in, to make all split"—a gentleman jewel thief reformed almost overnight by father love. Mr. Donlevy is in the middle of a daring coup one New Year's Eve when his wife (Miriam Hopkins), somewhat casually presents him with a daughter, and from that moment the fingers which once itched to get at Mrs. Vanderbilt's diamond necklace seek no more exciting occupation than that of rocking the cradle. This, while good for the soul, is of course, bad for business, so his wife (unnatural woman!), joins forces with another crook and prepares to double-cross the doting father. Mr. Donlevy is therefore reluctantly compelled to murder the boy-friend and go to gaol for a long term in order to protect the baby from scandal. The hero's boyhood pal, you see, is a detective (Preston Foster), and Mr. Donlevy strikes a bargain with Mr. Foster whereby the former will give himself up to the police provided the

latter will rear the baby as His Very Own. But Mr. Donlevy has not yet finished with the exacting demands of father-love. Years later, when the detective has become a judge and the daughter is about to marry a Nice Boy, he has to break gaol so that he may send his wicked wife to her death and thus ensure that his daughter's name shall get into no part of the paper except the Society Column.

This is an Edward Small production—and in spite of the fact that it has had an extended season in Wellington, it must be regarded as one of that gentleman's Smallest.

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Back Seat Commentary

LOOK! It's starting! The lights are out.
I wonder what this film's about.
("You do look bad, my dear," she said.)
"Why don't you spend the day in bed?"

THE Manor House upon the moor
The year is eighteen-eighty-four.
("The Chudwicks called in yesterday. They've named their second baby Fay.")

THE hero's handsome, don't you think?
I'm sure his uncle's got a kink.
("I want a tur," Kate said to him. Oh, she knows how to manage Jim.)

THE villain plots a wicked deed
But look, the young lord mounts his steed.
("I don't think George will marry Jean:
Just now he's mad about Eileen.")

AHA, the traitor feels remorse.
Now everything's all right, of course.
("I saw Beth at the party, too. She looks so smart in navy blue.")

THERE they are upon a swing
And, heavens, here's "God Save the King."
("Why, it's over, and so soon. You haven't heard about Miss Moon.")

—L. M. G. Nobes.