Mrs Ellen Tuck Astor

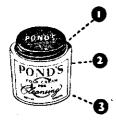
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Film Reviews, by Jno.

THE 13th LETTER

(20th Century-Fox)

N fairness to the cash-customers, there is one point about The 13th Letter which should be made clear at the outset. It is not, as the advertisements in Wellington have described it, "a new and baffling masterpiece of suspense." It is, in fact, no more than an American version (and a fairly unimaginative transcription at that) of Le Corbeau, a French film made during the Occupation by Henri-Georges Clouzot, screened first in New Zealand about five months ago under the title of The Raven, and noticed on this page in The Listener of January 5 last.

If you are interested in films as something more than the weekly anodyne or opiate, and saw The Raven, then it should divert you to compare the two productions, to contrast techniques, to observe the occasional evidences of Anglo-Saxon bowdlerisation. You may even find mildly amusing the spectacle of the producer-director, Otto Preminger, capering round in M. Clouzot's shoes.

If you have seen The Raven, and if you are simply looking for an evening's entertainment, then you will find it irksome to sit through much the same thing again, even with the advantage of English dialogue, since The 13th Letter generates neither the tension nor the emotion of its prototype.

However, if you didn't see The Raven (and this should about exhaust the list of permissible options), you may well find this quite a satisfactory film. When your attention is not being diverted by the thought that this shot or that sequence might have been handled much better, you are more likely to notice that the level of acting in the American film is good, and that this quality extends beyond the principal players. It is true, too, that the story is sound enough to stand a second telling, and even to survive the excisions and the grafted sentimentalities, without losing all its force.

In the original version (script by Louis Chavance), Le Corbeau was the



CONSTANCE SMITH A new face

SINCEREST FLATTERY

BAROMETER

FAIR: "The 13th Letter." MAINLY FAIR: "September Affair."

story of a poison-pen whose anonymous letters whipped a small French country town into a hysterical witch-hunt, caused one suicide and almost precipitated a lynching. Almost all the leading citizens were implicated in some scandal or another by the letters, which skilfully played on the individual weaknesses or prejudices of the recipients, but the principal object of the correspondence was to force the resignation of a young doctor from the staff of the local hospital. The determination of the doctor to ignore the scandal spread about him, and to resist the public pressure brought to bear on him, was, of course, the mainspring of the action, but the appalling quality in the French film was the picture of a whole town goaded into frenzy.

This quality does not come through effectively in the American version, The young doctor is played forcefully, but with restraint, by Michael Rennie, who manages to suggest both nervous strain and stubborn determination without the one cancelling out the other. The other principal roles are filled with equal competence by Charles Boyer, Linda Darnell, Constance Smith (a new face to me), and Françoise Rosay. Thinking back, I should say that their acting was just about as good as that in the French film, but what claimed my attention almost to the exclusion of other considerations was the marked absence of an original approach in the direction. In the credits I noticed that Louis Chavance was named as author of the story, but if my memory can be relied upon there were long sequences which could have been lifted almost holusbolus from Clouzot's shooting-script. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but I'd rather have a secondclass original than a second-class copy.

SEPTEMBER AFFAIR

(Paramount)

IF I hadn't seen the name of William Dieterle among the credits I would have been tempted to believe that James A. Fitzpatrick had had a hand in the direction of this sentimental little Mediterranean idyll. It's so full of scenery—Florence with its squares and statuary, Rome, Naples, Vesuvius and Pompeii, Capri and the Blue Grotto (not so impressive in black and white) -and over all the bright sunlight of an Italian summer. But beyond the outdoor photography, which is handled with a March of Time verve and efficiency, and a small quantity of good acting, mainly by Jessica Tandy and Françoise Rosay (who knows how to make the most of her opportunities), there is not much substance to September Affair. "A picture for middle-aged women" was how I heard it described (by a woman not yet middle-aged), and that is probably true. I was quite hemmed in by Marthas, all of them enjoying their vicarious romance, but all, I'm sure, convinced that they had chosen the better