A PROGRAM OF AMERICAN COMEDY FROM THE TWENTIES

"DOG SLEW" (1926) A Hal Roach production, supervised by F. Richard Jones, and directed by Leo McCarey. (Two reels)

Members who recall Chase's "Outdoor Fajitas" of a few months back will welcome this further reminder of Chase's best period. A sophisticated blending of slapstick with drawing room comedy, "Dog Sleu" presents the popular comedian in a series of gags ranging from the gentle to the wildly lunatic. F. Richard Jones, its supervisor, is best known of course as the director of Mabel Normand's wonderful "Mickey", while McCarey (who made many fine silent Laurel & Hardy & Charlie Chase comedies following an assistant-director chore on Tod Browning's "Virgins of Stamboul") continued to make remarkable progress as a comedy and light-drama director through the early thirties. He reached his zenith with the famous "Going By Way", and promptly went into a rapid decline. Featured prominently, incidentally, in "Dog Sleu", is famous silent "-heavy" Stuart Holmes.


Tremendously popular in the twenties were the groups of short "series" films, of which "The Leatherpunchers" was one of the best and most successful. They were by no means serials, although inasmuch as a central linking theme was retained throughout, they had more cohesion and continuity than the later series features (Haram, the Hardy Family etc.). Each episode was quite complete in itself, and though naturally there was a good deal of action, the stress was more on light drama and comedy than on melodrama. In fact, the films were a polished throwback to "What Happened to Mary?", the Edison "series" film that directly introduced the blood-and-thunder serials, without being one itself. All-in-all there were 24 "Leatherpunchers" films, all based on the excellent stories of H.C. Witwer. Universal remade the series in 1930-31, but compressed to ten episodes and without Reginald Denny. This particular episode, with its fast, cheerful pace (and a narrator chatting informally to the audience) and some wonderful shots of a clean and all-but-deserted Central Park, makes delightful viewing today. Quite incidentally, Norma Shearer made her debut in this series (but not, alas, in Round Two).

"THE COLLEGIA" - chapter one - "TRUMP AT CAFORD" A Universal Junior Jewel picture, (1925) produced by Carl Laemmle Jr., and presented by Carl Laemmle. Directed by Harry Edwards, photographed by George Robinson. Starring GEORGE LEWIS, DOROTHY GULLIVER, HAYDEN STEVENSON etc. (Two reels)

Another excellent example of Universal's series films is this first episode from a group of films which were given over to Laemmle Jr. by Uncle Carl for the younger to cut his production teeth on. They also provided useful training grounds for many (subsequently) top-ranking directors such as Wesley Ruggles. Each episode, again complete in itself, started casually with light-hearted banter and collegian rivalries and worked up to a climax of astonishing speed and vitality. (A vigorous all-in scrap on the sports field in this chapter is a typical example). Today "The Collegians" seem wonderfully fresh and exciting after so many tired feature comedies ("A Champ At Oxford") and dramas ("The All-Americans") along similar lines. It also provides a rare and welcome glimpse of the work of director Harry Edwards, whose career remains one of the most puzzling mysteries in the history of the movies. After several years in short comedies he made Harry Langdon's finest comedy, "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" for First National in 1926. A masterpiece in every sense of the word, it was probably one of the five greatest comedy films of all time. Yet as soon as it was finished, Edwards reverted to making shorts for Bennett, Universal and independent distributors.

George Lewis, hero of "The Collegians", subsequently became a well known figure in westerns and serials, playing both heroes and heavies. In the latter category, he is still quite active.

- INTERMISSION -

"ORCHIDS AND BEER" (First National, 1927) Presented by John McCormick; Produced and directed by Alfred Santell Story & Scenario - George Seaton. Comedy Construction - Mony LeRoy Photographed by George J. Folsey, A.S.C.

With COLLEEN MOORE, TAYLOR MULHALL, Sam Hardy, Owen Lee, Fred Kelsey, and Mickey Rooney.
Although "ORCHIDS AND E v f}] was made at a time when American comedy, over its peak period (1925-26) was beginning on a decline from which it has sadly never recovered, it stands up wonderfully well today as a thoroughly enjoyable example of the gentle, sparkling comedy of that period. Perhaps if we were to proceed with Langdon's TRAMP TRAMP TRAMP, and follow it with S. Clair's THE GRAND DUCHESS AND THE MAGNET or Bronson's A KISS FOR CAINEMA, we might detect the beginnings of that decline - but, unfortunately, we cannot present any such marathon show.

"Orchids" delights in many ways. Nostalgic New Yorkers will love the long sequences shot in and around the Plaza Hotel, and atop the 5th Avenue bus. The film was made during Alfred Santell's peak period as a director, at a time when he was specializing in pleasingly sentimental dramas ("The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come", "The Patent Leather Kid") and frothy comedies. Such early sound films as "Folly of the Circus" excepted, his later talkies ("The Haunted House", "Beyond the Blue Horizon") were generally quite uninteresting. Carey Wilson was here still on the same acid note he had been on the previous side of the camera, and Maryek Lee was responsible for much of the fun, very gaudy. Later of course, he became a director of much top-flight hard-boiled early talkies as "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang" and "Five Star Final". He recently left MGM, scene of his least distinguished days, "Over Vadia", to return to Warners and we hope - better properties. George J. Palance, who photographed "Orchids and Emmie", is currently one of MGM's top cameramen and an Academy Award nominee for "All the Brothers Were Valiant". Incidentally, not the least of the film's pleasures are the wonderfully snappy subtitles - so well written that even fast cross-talk waxers retain all their humor despite an occasional surfeit of titles.

But when all is said and done, and with due respect to the array of talents behind the camera, "ORCHIDS AND EMNIE" remains pleasing and amusing largely due to the charm and lively personality of the star, Colleen Moore. Something of a combination of Clara Bow and Betty Bronson without losing anything to either of them, she was one of the finest little stars of the silent period. (For the record she had one blue eye and one brown one - something of a rarity!) She had started out with Griffith in 1917, playing opposite Robert Harron in "The Bad Boy" for Pine Arts Triangle. But it was "Flirting Youth", for First National six years later that established her as the typical "Zapper" heroine. Although she played one or two "Cinderella" roles (Goldie's "Little Orphan Annie", Charlotte's "Go Long Lotta"), Collyea's "Halliflower" she continued to enjoy her greatest popularity as a round-shouldered flapper in a whole series of films for First National that were big boxoffice from 1923 right through to the early talkies ("The Perfect Flapper", "Painted People", "Flirting with Love", "The Moderns", "Ellie Cinderella", "Naughty But Nice", "Her Wild Bed", "Symphonies in Blue", "That's a Bad Girl", "My Boy Good", "Footlights and Pool" and others). Yet frequently she would embark, effectively, on a sea of sensation and the results can be seen in films like "SO BIG", "ULMAG TIME" (opposite Cary Cooper), an usher in THE SCARELET LETTER in 1924 (directed by Robert Vigors), for Paramount but also as Spencer Tracy's ambitious wife in the late William K. Howard's "THE POOR AND THE BRIGH". Incidentally, she married John McDonald in 1923 and divorced him in 1930 - a period which curiously coincides with the starring vehicles of hers that he "presented" under the T.F. banner.

Co-star JACK HUHALL was another specialist in the slick comilies of the hectic twenties - "The Butter and Egg Man", "Let's Go! Night in a Turkish Bath", "Subway Sadi" etc. In the early sound period, he came a popular sensation star of thrillers, westerns and serials, remaining in that species more or less exclusively, though in increasingly smaller roles as the years passed by. Still seen in bits occasionally, though infrequently, one of his most interesting recent appearances was in the Fox musical "You're my Everything" wherein he played a champagne-drinking playboy in a sequence outshining Clara Bow.

Finally - watch for Mickey Rooney making his first film appearance as a very self-confident midget!

OUR NEXT MEETING: March 16th: WILLIAM S. HARR - THE BEGINNING AND THE END, "ROYAL FLUSH" - one of his first one-reelers - and - "FRUSTIMUGious" - his last picture, and one of the big western epics of the mid-twenties. Directed by King Baggot. Book Chapter Three of "THE MAESTRO: A Memoir of S. N. BEASLEY". GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEETING.

COMMITTEE OF THE FILM SOCIETY: Charles Turner (Chairman, and musical sources); Robert G. Youngman (Program Secretary); Warren Rothenberger; Herman G. Weinberg; William K. Everson (Program Notes).