1923 -- Two Programmers

1923 is best remembered by the historians for "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and "The Covered Wagon"; for "The Ten Commandments" and "Creed"; for box-office milestones (if not artistic ones) like "The White Sister", and for two of the best of the Lloyd vehicles, "Why Worry?" and "Safety Last". Seldom are the bread-and-butter pictures of that year recalled; more seldom still are they revived. We hope you'll agree that tonight's two films provide an interesting and entertaining cross-section of the really solid little programmers that were being turned out at that time -- not "B" films by any means, but "A" pictures that just weren't "specials" -- and which have now been discarded into an undeserved limbo.

"A CHAPTER IN HER LIFE" (Universal, 1923) 6 reels; based on a novel by Clara Louise Burnham; scenario and direction by Lois Weber; photographed by Ben Kline; art direction, E.L. Sheely; starring Jane Kerco as Jewel, with Claude Gillingwater and Fred Thomson, and Eva Thatcher (housekeeper) Frankie Raymond (Nudge). Jacqueline Gadson (Eloise) Robert Frazer (Dr. Ballard)

Lois Weber's work isn't too familiar to us today; an abbreviated version of "The Marriage Clause" is the only other Weber film that we've otherwise shown at the Huff Society. From these two films she appears to have been a leisurely and somewhat undramatic director, but one with a neat sense of pacing and a good eye for pictorial effects. She had made an earlier (1915) version of this story, also for Universal, under the title of "Jewel" -- which incidentally was the title of the original story. I suspect it was remade not so much because of its intrinsic value, but because it bore a striking parallel to Mary Pickford's "Pollyanna" which had been such a big hit in 1920. It isn't as good a film as "Pollyanna" by any means; Mary had the wit to take her heroine down a peg or two once in a while, whereas Jewel's consistent goodness and a philosophy that hints at Christian Science become both cloying and unlikely. However, it's typical of a type of literature that enjoyed a tremendous vogue in the teens and early 20's, and so perhaps it's more valuable as a comment on the times in its sentimentally unadulterated state. The film is uneventful on the whole -- one suspects that Universal might have built a big climax up their sleeve, like a red-tinted fire, but they don't! However, it's charming and often quite moving, and seldom drags.

There are some fantastically long subtitles -- but also some extremely good ones, often combined with live action. One or two "symbolical" scenes are fun too, and of course the tints are always a pleasure. Jane Kerco makes the heroine less robust than Mary would have done, but no cry-baby either, and of course Claude Gillingwater is in his element as the old crouch who is tamed -- going through the motions he'd already practised with Mary Pickford and Jackie Coogan, and that he was to polish up on a decade later with Shirley Temple! "Film Daily" advised exhibitors; "You'll need the right crowd for this one; make a special appeal to the women folk". We hope we have the "right" crowd this evening. The print is a little choppy here and there, but apart from wear and tear seems quite complete, and a full 5 reels.

(Original length: 6530 feet)

- Intermission -

"Scars of Jealousy" is one of the loveliest prints we've come across in years; in flawless physical condition, and with a range of tints that is quite wonderful. Experience has shown that prints in this shape never turn out to be great pictures, and this is no exception -- but it's certainly a darned well-made programmer, and crammed everything in to keep the customers satisfied. Starting out in the French revolution with Griffithian titles, it soon switches to Alabama in the 20's -- and brings in mountain feuding, Southern honor, a son's regeneration, two walloping fist fights, a runaway horse, an attempted lynching and a forest fire -- plus sundry other minor ingredients. It's cornball stuff all the way, with Frank Keenan doing his old "The Coward" performance all over again. Somehow the performances and the production mountings make it all seem much more important than it really is. It's exceptionally well photographed, and Lambert Hillyer, Bill Hart's old director, keeps things moving at a nice clip.

As usual with Ince, the economy shows a little at times. His studio front (better-known today as the trademark for Selznick) seen service once more (as it did in his "Barbara Frietchie") as a Southern mansion. And one of the many expert glass shots is exactly the same as one in 1922's "Lorna Doone"; evidently the basic set was a standing one, and Ince had seen to it that the painted glass for the camera had been filed away. All he had to do was set it up again with a set of differently costumed extras; indeed, he may even have shot the scene while "Lorna Doone" was in work, and held it over pending a "French spectacle". Incidentally, in later years a lot of Ince footage was sold for stock shots, and some of you may find the fire and gaudy scenes at the end vaguely familiar. They were used in a Universal serial of the mid-40's, "Mystery of the River Boat".

When the film was originally previewed by the trade press, it ran 6246 feet. Although this seems fairly short by current standards, most critics thought the film much too long. "Film Daily" commented: "There is only one drawback to the feature's attractiveness -- excess footage, a regrettable fault of far too many pictures of the present time". After going on to explain where and why it was too long, it concluded "A little cutting would help greatly". They suggested that it was the climax that was too protracted. Our print runs for an equivalent of about 5600 35mm feet -- or some six minutes shorter than the original length. And, oddly, the climax has some rather abrupt stuff in it. This print itself hasn't been cut (that is, splices for the most part are negative splices) so it may well be that Ince took the criticisms to heart, and trimmed the film a little before release. However, the fire stuff is so good that it's strange that he didn't make his trims elsewhere. Maybe forest-fires were just old-hat back in 1923!

Anyway, important or not, "Scars of Jealousy" is enjoyable and vigorous film-making. Just look at the multitude of cutaways and alternate angles for almost every sequence, and you'll realize what a tremendous amount of leeway an editor had in those days -- and why an editor fulfilled a far more creative role then than now. (Look at the lack of angles and cutaways in current fare, of which "Ben Hur" is obviously the glaring example, for a reminder of what real filmic movement even the routine old silents had!)

-- Wm. K. Everson --