"LONG FLIV THE KING" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1926) Dir: Leo McCarey; camera: Floyd Jackman; supervised by F. Richard Jones; starring Charlie Chase, with Martha Sleeper, Oliver Hardy, Max Davidson, Fred Malatesta. 2 reels.

Judging comedies without an audience is often a precarious business. It's easy enough to weed out the downright duds, and heaven knows, there were scores of them in the 20's. But an individual reaction to a comedy can be fantastically misleading. First-rate comedies sometimes raise hardly a laugh because the lead comedian is relatively obscure (Monty Banks, Walter Hiers) and audience enthusiasm isn't with him. On the other hand, stars like Laurel & Hardy, Charlie Chase and Buster Keaton can often make routine films seem hilarious, not only because they are funny, but because the audience wants to laugh with them -- and does. Last month, Laurel & Hardy's "Any Old Port" went down wonderfully well. I had always shied away from it because it seemed inferior. Yet with a responsive audience, it not only seemed funny; it was funny. "Long Fliv the King" fits into much the same category. Undeniably, it is a lesser Chase vehicle. There are dead spots, and other sections where the humor is labored and unworthy of either Chase or McCarey. Yet, really, the wonder is not that such talents failed once in a while, but rather that, turning out so much material on a real assembly line basis, the bulk of it was fresh and inventive. "Long Fliv the King" most certainly has its moments. Its opening, with Chase awaiting the gallows, is a distinct departure. Bits of off-screen action, conveyed solely by facial pantomime (a trick that McCarey and Chase frequently employed) pay off well; and so do the jovially villainous expressions of Oliver Hardy. Elaborately mounted, nicely photographed, and dominated by Chase's breezy personality, it is, with all its shortcomings, still a most entertaining two-reel comedy -- and a fine original toned print into the bargain.

THE EXPLOITS OF ELAINE (Star Company & Pathe, 1915); directed by Louis Gasnier and George B. Seitz; written by Arthur B. Reeve and Charles W. Godard; with Pearl White, Arnold Daly, Creighton Hale, Sheldon Lewis.

Episode 9 - THE DEATH RAY - 2 reels
Episode 10 - THE LIFE CURRENT - 2 reels

Considering that it comes so closely on the heels of "The Perils of Pauline" -- good fun all of it, but crude and often infantile -- "The Exploits of Elaine" is a surprisingly polished production. The editing, the pacing, the dramatic structure, the use of closeups, even the acting, all show evidence of much more production knowhow and overall intelligence. It seems fairly safe to ascribe at least part of the credit to the addition of George B. Seitz as a co-director. Seitz was always a good serial action (and later dramatic) director -- something of another W.S. Van Dyke -- and he so remained right through the 30's and 40's. Gasnier on the other hand, probably never made a good film in his life, although he managed to keep active, even on major studio lots. (When Paramount used him in the 30's, he was responsible for several rather crude actioners built around stock footage -- including the inept "The Last Outpost" and the slightly better "Forgotten Commandments". "Exploits" at any rate is rattling good fun, with all the science-fiction gimmicks one expects of a battle of wits between master criminologist Craig Kennedy and arch-fiend The Clutching Hand. "The Death Ray" is the better of the two episodes, including as it does a wonderful episode where the Hand warns Kennedy that he will kill off innocent bystanders outside his house, every hour on the hour, via a death ray -- unless Kennedy gives in. Cautious Kennedy, watch in hand, allows
two unfortunate victims to drop dead before he "a convinced." Pearl has surprisingly little to do until the climactic sections of each chapter, and Arnold Daly and Greighton Hale carry the bulk of the action. (In the 1976 serial "The Clutching Hand," Jack Mulhall and Rex Lease took over as Kennedy and Jamieson; and the identity of the Clutching Hand was as easy to guess there as it is here!) Like "Perils," "Exploits" contains each adventure within a chapter, and there is no cliff-hanging ending. However, unlike "Perils," which had lengthy wrap-up sequences, "Exploits" ends it chapter immediately after the melodramatic highlight, while audience interest was still at its peak. It's a most effective device as used here, and I don't know but what it isn't even a little more satisfying than the eventually hackneyed cliff-hanging endings.

= INTERMISSION =

"A DESERT WOOING" (Thomas H. Ince-Paramount, 1918) Dir: Jerome Storm
Written by J. S. Hawks; photographed by Edwin W. Willats;
Art Director: C. Harold Perdew; art titles and effects, Irvin J. Martin
Starring Emil Bennett with Jack Holt, Donald McDonald, J. F. Lockney,
Charles Sprung. 5 reels.

Despite its unpromising title, "A Desert Wooing" is an extremely enjoyable programmer mixing action, drama, comedy and romance -- with some typically elaborate and often quite fine subtitles. Something of a combination of "The Taming of the Shrew" & "The Wind," with a bit of Willard on thrown in, it aims at providing something for everybody, and to a large degree it succeeds. The western stuff is downplayed however; Jack Holt, a fine rider, has some excellent rough-riding scenes, but they're all edited down to a hubble, presumably to keep the film out of the "western" class and ensure its acceptance as a "drama" instead.

There really isn't too much one can --or should-say about this kind of film. Overly detailed notes would merely be pretentious. (In 40 years from now, this society may be playing such expert programmers from the 50's and 60's as "Edge of Eternity" and "The Man from the Alamo." "A Desert Wooing" is that kind of picture. The only difference is that in 1918 they were playing at every movie house in town; in 1960, you were lucky if two or three good ones came along in the course of a year!)

What a pleasure it is to see Jack Holt again -- and what a pity that so few of his silents are available today. He has a typically virile role here, and just the right clean-cut, no-nonsense, manly name for his screen character -- Barton Masters. Emil Bennett, starred, cuts a more attractive figure than she did in her plumper "Robin Hood" days, but it's Jack's show all the way. Incidentally, there's a lovely nostalgic shot of 1838 New York at the very beginning of the picture -- and if you look closely you'll spot part of a poster for D.W. Griffith's "Hearts of the World." But Tom Ince wasn't one to plug his competitors' product on purpose, and the shot probably slipped by his normally eagle eye. However, he leaves you in no doubt as to who produced THIS picture -- in the credits alone, his name appears no less than six times -- sometimes twice on a single title card!

Next show -- Tuesday next -- same time, same place

FRANK CAPRA'S "THAT CERTAIN THING" (1923) Viola Dana, Ralph Graves
WILLIAM K. HOWARD'S "CAPTAIN FLIX BY NIGHT" (1922) Johnnie Walker