THE MYSTERY FILM

The 30's, from which the bulk of tonight's program is drawn, represent something of a "Golden Age" for the mystery film -- an age that dimmed when television, with its endless detective series, and sleuths solving crimes in groups of 39, at 25 minutes a piece (four minutes out for station identification and commercials) just about edged the mystery off the theatre screen, leaving only the blood-and-guts operators like Mike Hammer. But from the coming of sound until the mid-40's, we had a never-ending parade of sleuthings -- in "A's," "B's," and serials -- Charlie Chan, Sherlock Holmes, Philo Vance, Sam Spade, Thatcher Holt, Nick Charles, and so many other old friends. Unless our program were to be all excerpts, and brief ones at that, we couldn't hope to offer a comprehensive rundown, and in any event, television has made available again so many of these films. So we've settled instead on longer and fewer excerpts, with a stress on the less familiar and the purely nostalgic.

THE UNPAID RANSOM (Edison, 1915) Director: not stated. Based on the story "The Under Secretary" by Scott Campbell (pseudonym for Frederick William Davis); with Augustus Phillips, and Warren Cook, Harry Paddock, Carlton King, Frank Tenor, Frank Cummings, William Bole, Charlotte Felice. One reel.

Early detective movies are quite a rarity, and this little Edison film is quite typical of the rather naive mysteries of the period. It's good fun though, nicely photographed, with some pleasant street exteriors, old brownstones, and plenty of Fords. The detective in question, no Holmes, is quite eloquent in his pantomime -- witness his description of a beard as he questions a long line of cabbies as to whether they have seen a bearded suspect.

THE SLEEPING CARDINAL (Julius Hagen Productions, 1931); Dir: Leslie Hiscott; adapted from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Empty House" and "The Final Problem". Excerpts.

Of all of the movies, Sherlock Holmes -- Barrymore, Rathbone, Massey, Brooks, Reginald Owen, Robert Rendell etc. -- Arthur Wontner was probably the closest to the spirit of Doyle's original. And his Dr. Watson -- Ian Fleming -- was one of the best too. These excerpts include one of his most entertaining tiltings with his perennial enemy, the great Moriarty.

LORD EDGWARE DIES (RKO-British, 1937) Dir: Henry Edwards; from a novel by Agatha Christie; with Austin Trevor as Poirot.

Poirot -- well played on the London stage by Francis L. Sullivan -- is here essayed quite interestingly by the thoroughly British Austin Trevor, whose French accent does not always convince. A rather plodding and talkative mystery -- and an obvious one too -- it nevertheless rates a passing nod here since Poirot is one of the most unexploited of sleuths, and given far less cinematic prominence than his French rival Inspector Hanaud, of the Mason novels. There were some quite good performances in "Lord Edgware Dies", notably a brief one by Kynaston Reeves, Henry Edwards, who directed, was a great favorite of early British silent, something of a British Milton Sills. He continued acting and directing well into the forties.
CHARLIE CHAN AT THE OLYMPICS (Fox, 1937) Dir: Bruce Humberstone; story by Bess Meredyth, based on characters created by Earl Derr Biggers.

Warner Oland, fourth of the seven Charlie Chans, was quite certainly the best, and his films, though "B" and formula, were neatly turned out in a period when "B" films could and often did top the bill. This excerpt offers a typical Chan situation, as the redoubtable sleuth confronts all the villains (a formidable array this time - C. Henry Gordon, Katherine DeMille, Morgan Wallace, John Eldredge, Johnathan Hale etc. - eliminates the innocents and turns on the guilty one with a succinct and to the point "You are murderer!"

SEXTON BLAKE AND THE HOODED TERROR (George King Productions, 1937) Directed by George King.

Sexton Blake, largely unfamiliar over here, was a thick-ear Sherlock Holmes, with just a dash of Dick Tracy. Like Holmes, he operated from Baker Street, and was more a man of deduction than action. He exercised his greatest appeal to youngsters via the route of comic-strip penny dreadful and paperback. This film however is such a delightful throwback to the old serial days, with a hooded, Mabuse-like mastermind, a secret organisation, dungeons, and all the trappings, that we have allowed it the luxury of two reels of excerpts which Blake himself, probably doesn't warrant. George Curzon, a very polished and accomplished actor, brings to Blake a Holmesian respectability that David Farrar was unable to duplicate in later adventures. And as the Hooded Terror, Tod Slaughter is grand fun. A deliberate ham, who specialised in burlesque and full-blooded melodrama ("Maria Marten", "Sweeney Todd"), Tod Slaughter is a triffe more restrained here than usual. And like Fu Manchu, his Hooded Terror is sufficiently above the law to escape unscathed at the end.

THE LAST WARNING (Universal, 1928) Dir: Paul Leni; from a play by Thomas Fallon and a novel by Wadsworth Camp; with Laura LaPlante, Montague Love, Roy D'Arcy, John Boles, Margaret Livingston, Bert Roach, Mack Swain, Burr McIntosh, Slim Summerville, Fred Kelsey.

This one-reel compilation of highlights is both fascinating and frustrating, since a print of the complete film is not available. Not a condensation, it does nevertheless give an idea of the story, and follows it through from the beginning to the end. Most of all, it gives an idea of the wonderful and bizarre pictorial style of the film. A nightmarish theatrical front is a truly brilliant and imaginative piece of work. With all the "stylish" shots compressed like this, one tends to over-rate the film as a whole; in its entirety, with such imaginative stuff spaced out, it is not quite as completely bizarre as this collection of shots suggests. Very much in the vein of Leni's earlier "The Cat and the Canary", it is not quite as good as that, but isn't far behind.

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INTERMISSION

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THE CANARY MURDER CASE (Paramount, 1929) Directed by Malcolm St. Clair and Frank Tuttle; from the novel by S.S. Van Dine; adapted by Albert Shelby Levin; screenplay by Florence Ryerson; photography by Harry Flashbeck; Assos. Producer - Louis D. Lighton. 9 reels.

Like so many mystery films of the pre-
"The Thin Man" period, "The Canary
Murder Case" adopts a singularly measured pace, and tells most of its story
in a talkative fashion. But in those days, when good mysteries were big box
office, the talk was interesting talk, and the players worth listening to as
well as worth watching, so the comparative lack of cinematic qualities was
not always a hardship. "The Canary Murder Case" was shot first as a complete
silent, then re- vamp ed as a talkie, with all of the original players
(Louise Brooks excepted) re-doing their scenes with sound. This sound version
was directed by Frank Tuttle, and it is possible - even probable - that the
original, by Hal St. Clair, may have been faster-paced and more cinematic.
St. Clair had a knack of making even the plottiest silents move, and with a
minimum of subtitles too; he may well have pulled off the same trick here,
although since the solution of the crime depends on the use of sound,
preumably the talkie version must have been a slight improvement in some
departments.

Today of course interest in "The Canary Murder Case" is divided. The S.S. Van
Dine devotees regard it as nothing but a Philo Vance film; but to the majority
of us, its principal importance is as the last major American vehicle for
Louise Brooks. In Europe after its completion as a silent, she refused to
return to Paramount to re-shoot her dialogue footage. (She now admits that this
strange obstinacy wrecked her career here). The result: Paramount dubbed in
Margaret Livingston's voice for her, and even used Livingston herself as a
double in many long and medium shots. James Card of Eastman House
has written that this resulted in an absolute butchery and mutilation of
all her scenes, but apart from the fact that the loss of ANY Brooks footage
is a crime against humanity, the deception seems to me to be brilliantly done.
All of the Brooks footage available is silent; thus whenever she speaks, the
first few words are dubbed in over her lips and the rest done over cutaways
to someone else. Via incredibly adroit inter-cutting between her footage
and that of Margaret Livingston (with the right lightening and makeup, the
resemblance is quite uncanny), Miss Brooks seems to be talking constantly.
True, she is always being backed into corners and behind screens -- but the
ruse works, and there are enough closeups of the lovely Louise left to
satisfy -- although of course it's unfortunate that she winds up as a corpse
within the first third of the film.

For the rest, the film still entertains as a well-thought-out mystery. The
identity of the killer is patently obvious from the beginning, but there are
still enough plot ramifications left to maintain suspense. And for amateur
detectives in the audience, there's added fun in trying to spot where the
microphones are hidden; most of them seem to be secreted away in flowers,
or suspiciously bulky telephones!

Suave William Powell makes an ideal Vance, the best of a long line of
polished sleuths that included Basil Rathbone, Warren William and James
Stephenson (as well as such inappropriate players as Alan Curtis, Eliot
Makemah and William Wright).

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William K. Everson

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NEXT TUESDAY

What we had hoped wouldn't happen, has -- the lab is still only a third way
through printing SEA BEAST from a very shrunken negative, and it is getting too
close for comfort. Therefore, to be on the safe side, we are putting SEA BEAST
back to JANUARY 30th, and bringing forward from that date CHANCES and
DARK JOURNEY for our show next Tuesday. (Our February notes will go out in
mid-January, and will carry a reminder of the SEA BEAST showing). Presumably
the nucleus of our membership will be present tonight; we'll advise as many
others as possible, and your help in this direction will be appreciated too.
Since members were advised to check by phone if they hadn't heard about a
change, we think we can get the word around without a complete mailing - which,
at this time of year, probably wouldn't arrive in time anyway. Thankyou.