"THE DRUNKARD'S REFORMATION" (Biograph, 1909) Directors: D.W. Griffith
Camera: G.W. Bitzer. One reel.

With Arthur Johnson, Marion Leonard, Adele de Garde, Gladys Egan, Florence Lawrence, Bobby Harron, Mack Sennett.

Made during Griffith's second year as a director, "The Drunkard's Reformation" was one of several films that he made advocating temperance (one of them, "What Drink Did," was made the same year) and was an interesting forerunner to his much under-rated and very powerful talkie, "The Struggle". For 1909 especially, it is a remarkably well-done little picture, adroit in its cutting between its basic story of a father's struggle against drink, and a parallel story as depicted in a Emil Zola play that he takes his child to see. Photographically it is sharp and well composed, and the fadeout shot, with its remarkable firelight effect, is a beauty. The "cast" is full of Bitograph familiars, including Bobby Harron, still but a boy, as an usher, and Mack Sennett playing two roles — one with an artificial nose. But there's one (to me at least) new, the baby-looking face — the lovely young extra sitting just behind Arthur Johnson in the theatre audience — two rows behind him, and just to the left. Something of a 1909 Michelle Massie, she has a beautiful and interesting face, and from the state of nervous excitement she displays at the play's high spots — indicating that she is not only moved by the play, but is also a novice at theatre-going — one suspects that she might have developed into quite an actress. Did she become famous, or was she just passing in and out of the studio during the day, earning a couple of dollars in the making? The conviction of her little cameo puts the "Method" advocates quite to shame — or perhaps we are guilty of "method criticism" in reading into facial reactions a depth that was never intended. In any event, faces like hers had a disconcerting habit of appearing in Griffith movies — like the gorgeous Southern girl on the left of the screen, waving a Confederate flag in the ball sequence of "The Birth of a Nation" — and then disappearing forever, leaving only fleeting images on a few frames of film to tantalize future generations.

"HER TORPEDOED LOVE" (Triangle, 1917) A Mack Sennett production. One reel.

With Louise Fazenda, Ford Sterling, Weyland Trask, Tom Kennedy, The Keystone Cops.

Very few Keystone of the pre-1920's hold up as well as they're supposed to; those directed by Clive Babcock and Clarence Badger, and some of the ambrose comedies, being rare exceptions. The really good Sennetts came in the 20's. But of the earlier ones, "Her Torpedoed Love" is certainly way above average. Its plot is stronger than usual, with Ford Sterling mugging less as the wife-stealing husband, and with far better slapstick. There are fewer pratfalls for their own sake, less priming, and better action comedy sequences, winding up with a whiz of a chase, partially filmed from other Sennetts. The titles appear to be from one of the mid-20's release prints; the authentic Keystone titles didn't utilize illustrations, and the reference to a German U-Boat as a "pirate" is an obvious attempt to cover up the film's age.

= INTERMISSION =

"ISLE OF LOST SHIPS" (First National, 1929) Director: Irvin Willat
Based on the novel "Isle of Dead Ships" by Grittenden Marrott; screenplay by Fred Kyton; photographed by Sol Polito; special photography by Fred Jackson; nine reels. Editors: John Rawling

"Isle of Lost Ships" was first made in 1923 by Maurice Tourneur. From all accounts, it was something of a masterpiece of melodrama, and knowing Tourneur's wondrous visual style, it seems a subject ideally suited to him. In this country at least, no negative or print is known to exist of the original, but there is reported to be a good condition print in England, and I hope that ultimately it will be made available over here. This remake undoubtedly falls far short of the original, but it is still a roving and extremely well-made melodrama — especially for 1929, when, with a few oddities, "moving pictures" hardly moved at all. The (presumably) far more straightforward treatment of this version can be attributed to Fred Kyton, who was just a hack writer (specialising in westerns and serials) and who approached this colorful story as just another action show. But quite certainly, Irvin Willat — one of the best and most under-rated directors of
The film was made as a talkie, but unlike most early sound films, kept its dialogue to a reasonable minimum. It was released in a silent version too, but of that, no material remains. The sound was recorded on disc -- and though many of these early Warner discs have been preserved, and are of excellent quality, the discs for this particular film were salvaged. Since you are seeing this print without either its titles or its sound, you are seeing it under a certain liability -- and yet in a way that very liability stresses what really excellent movie-making Willats was capable of. The whole story (admittedly, it's story-line is quite simple) is told in thoroughly visual terms; essential plot-points are made through inserts -- newspaper clippings, cuttings, letters -- and we know right away that the hero is unjustly accused of murder. (Lip-reading isn't necessary, but it does help to show us that public opinion is on his side too) The only important points not made immediately clear, due to the lack of dialogue, are (a) the villain's determination to force the heroine to marry him, and (b) the detective's final line in which he presumably tells the hero either that he'll clear him, or that he'll report him dead. For the rest, one misses Noah Beery's delivery of what must have been fruity lines, but the whole film is constructed so exclusively on visual terms that it is like watching a wholly silent film. Even the conversations which run a little longer than they would normally in a silent are consistently broken up into long shots, two shots, close-ups; the camera moves in and out; there is never any sense of stasis or equipment sound in this film. Perhaps it was in "Hallelujah" or "Applause" (and certainly not as important), this film is certainly their equal in sheer smoothness of technique, and a refusal to abandon the filmic grammar of the silents for the demands of sound.

Apart from that interesting and valuable academic aspect, the film holds its own well as a piece of thrilling melodrama. (Why, one wonders, has it never been remade since? Too unsophisticated perhaps -- or too much trouble to do properly?) The storm sequence at the beginning is one of the best of its kind we've seen; and the long sea footage is a particularly convincing welding of sets, miniatures, backdrops, and what look like occasional stock scenes from Tourneur's version. Certainly it's a lively and fast-moving adventure, though occasionally funny through no fault of its own due to its unintended parallels with Keaton's "The Navigator" (a sudden meeting on deck; the galley sequence). Plot matters far more than acting in a show like this of course, but it's always nice to see Jason Robards in a starring role; nice to to watch the lovely Virginia Valli minus her voice. (She was one of the few genuine casualties of sound; her squawk and strident voice, and her inability to read lines, was at complete odds with the composed, aristocratic serenity her face suggested) But of course it's Noah Beery (appropriately, Walter Long in the earlier Milton Sills--Anna Q. Nilson version) who steals the whole show as the superbly swaggering heavy, perhaps just a shade too jovial to be really terrifying, but just enough to be upsetting, gloriously lecherous -- he serves nude figures out of wood and displays them with a knowing wink to Boborman -- and quite disgusting in his eating habits, he nevertheless adheres to the "good form" traditions of Captain Jack and is mildest of all villains in the traditional sense. He really is a villain, no matter how much he tries to do the right thing for his girl. And in so many of his Zone Grey villain roles in the 20's and 30's, he is trailed abjectly by a tired and toughened old woman (in the westerns it was invariably Blanche Frederici) who has obviously served faithfully as wife or mistress for some twenty years, and who can now be dispensed with via a shrew and a scowl now that the comely Miss Valli has arrived on the scene! And no villain before or since has ever been able to make a two-or-three word suggestion to the heroine, with an appropriate leer, and produce a reaction of shock, disbelief and repugnance, as he has here. He certainly has a field-day in this role, and it's a genuine pleasure to watch such "glorious, uncomplicated, un-neurotic villainy" in this day and age!

Incidentally, a word about the print, which is a reduction from the original 35mm negative. Because of the sudden necessity of finding a substitute for tonight's program, we are running this film a little earlier than we had planned to. There are flaws in the print, occasional framings, one or two of which is due to the usual lack of领导 indicate a missing title -- which, at a later date, could have been remedied. Right now, so that this print may match the negative exactly, we have to leave them rigidly alone. We hope you'll bear with us in this rather unprofessional presentation.

Thankyou. ————Mr. K. Everson

Next program: Tues., Feb. 19th -- first program in the Rouben Mamoulian cycle -- APPLAUSE (1929) and CITY STREETS (1931). O V E R
As a postscript, it is perhaps worth recording that First National did not seem to think very highly of "Isle of Lost Ships" as new talkies went -- certainly not enough to spend much money on advertising. Possibly it seemed too much of a movie, too much like a good silent and not like an all-talkie, to warrant their attention. All the big money ads went to the Garbo musical comedies, and to films like Arliss' "Disraeli". One ad for the latter consisted solely of endorsements for Arliss' performance from John Barrymore and (I) Al Jolson. But when the film had its first big opening in San Francisco, it got such excellent reviews and did such standout business, that they broke down and put a one-page ad of review quotes and boxoffice figures in the trade papers.

Those of you who haven't seen the film but find it familiar may be reassured to recall that a couple of year's back we ran Bob Youngson's one-reel version under the title "An Adventure to Remember" -- a particularly adeptly edited version that covered most of the highlights albeit in a ninth of the time. Incidentally, Willat's remake was one reel longer than the original; it seems to be an unwritten law that all remakes have to be longer than the originals, even if only by a single reel. (Apart from this one, several films of the thirties -- "Spirit of Culver" for example, refashioned from Wyler's "Tom Brown of Culver" -- were exactly a reel longer than their ancestors!)