"The Hot Air Merchant" (Paramount, 1930) Directed by Ray Cozine; Dialogue staged by Max Hayes; two reels
Starring Charlie Ruggles, with Betty Garde, Paul Clare,

Familiar as we are with Charlie Ruggles as the hen-pecked husband or rompous stuffed-shirt, it is odd and amusing - to see him in this very early sound short invading 'C. Fields' territory as a charlatan with the gift of gab. This is another one of those curious 2-reel comedies of 1929-30 which is all talk, and done like a vaudeville skit, but done so well that it really pays off. The whole film is both anti-marriage and anti-female, and a delightfully savage attack on all the womanly viles, deceits, tricks, sadistic schemes and sordid stabs in the back that we all either run away from or pretend not to notice, but are inevitably defeated by. Possibly someone like Kathleen Howard might have made a follow-up, presenting the other point of view, but as such it would have been biased and distorted, and not nearly as much fun as this.

"Our Wife" (Klaw-Hal Roach, 1931) Directed by James W. Horne; two reels
With Laurel & Hardy, James Finlayson, Charlie Rogers, Ben Turpin.

1930 had been a disappointing year for Laurel & Hardy, but by 1931 they were back in strain again, and all of their shots that year were good ones. In terms of their overall output, "Our Life" is one of their "better lesser" films. It has many good things in it, ranging from Hardy's self-satisfied preening prior to his marriage, through at least two truly ferocious fails to a typical pants-pulling bit (nobody could look more forlorn than Hardy in his shorts, chubby knees staring nakedly to the camera) and a routine with a miniature car that prefaces the Marx Brothers' cabin sequence from "A Night at the Opera". As often with L & H, some of the most distasteful bits are the funniest -- and the aggressive fits, backed up by exaggerated sound effects, that resonate around and land on Hardy's wedding cake, provide some of the funniest moments that the boys have ever given us.

- I n t e r m i s s i o n -

"BROADWAY BILL" (Columbia, 1934) Directed by Frank Capra; screenplay by Robert Riskin from a Mark Hellinger story; photographed by Joseph Walker; edited by Gene Havlick; 11 reels

Ever since Capra's remake of this film for Paramount in 1950, under the title "Riding High" (with Bing Crosby), the original has tended to grow in stature; partly because the unavailable always seems to be outstanding, and partly too because in that remake Capra used a tremendous amount of stock footage from this first version. He has used many of the same players (Walburn, Bond, Dumbrille, Muse) for matching-up purposes, and used all but a few of these players from both versions, despite the 15 year gap. Once, by an editing tour-de-force, Ward Bond even wound up chasing himself! Seeing the two versions thus side by side in one film, there was no question but that the original was superior -- and this still holds good.

But in other ways, "Broadway Bill" disappoints a little. Its material is curiously and poignant, but it is also very slight, and there seems no logical reason for it being stretched to 11 reels (in the remake it was 12) other than that Capra was newly arrived as a "prestige" director, and to so many directors (now alas far more than then) it is inconceivable to make a "prestige" film of less than two hours. Capra's other 1934 entry "It Happened One Night" warranted that running time; "Broadway Bill", which is basically familiar program material lifted out of the rut by good performances, writing, and direction, does not. At 90 minutes, and with some of the trimmings trimmed, it would have been infinitely better. Nevertheless, it's good, vintage Capra -- uncomplicated, pleasing, well made, and with a sitcom that is still both topical and amusing. Warner Baxter, largely repeating (with variations) his "42nd Street" performance, is again excellent -- and the supporting cast has just about every Capra stock performer and Columbia bit-player on view throughout.

- W i l l i a m K. E r s o n -

N E X T  T U S D A Y  --  K I N G  V I D O R  --  1 9 3 5 / 3 6  - -  T H E  C I V I L  W A R  A N D  T H E  O L D  W E S T

50 RED THE ROSE" with Margaret Sullivan, Randolph Scott, Walter Connolly
"THE TEXAS RANGERS" with Fred MacMurray, Jean Parker, Jack Oakie, Lloyd Nolan

C O M I N G  --  J u l y  1 6  --  K A R L O F F  I N  T H E  R A V E N  ( 1 9 3 9 )  a n d  I S L E  O F  T H E  D E A D  ( 1 9 4 5 )

J uly 23 -- Louise Brooks in LOVE 'EM & LEAVE 'EM (1926); plus Mary Pickford in Griffith's "Female of the Species"; Pearl White in "The Floating Coffin"; Helen Holmes in "The Sidetracked Sleeper"