NEXT TUESDAY: Josef von Sternberg's THE KING STEPS OUT (1936) with Grace Moore, Franchot Tone, Walter Connolly, Herman Bing; Laurel & Hardy in "Midnight Patrol" and a marvellous Warner cartoon, "Feline Frameup".

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

23 July 1963

An Evening with the Ladies .... 1912-1926
HELEN HOLMES - PEARL WHITE - MARY PICKFORD - LOUISE BROOKS - EVELYN BRENT

"In Danger's Path" (Kalem; released June 1915) Produced and directed by J.F. McGowan; story by E.W. Matlock; One reel
Starring Helen Holmes, with Hoot Gibson.

"The Hazards of Helen" began in November of 1914, and wound up (at episode 119) in February of 1917. "In Danger's Path" is comparatively early in the series, episode 33 to be exact. In its pacing, editing, variety of camera angles and sensible use of both closeups and the moving camera, "The Hazards" were well ahead of the far cruder "The Perils", and indeed ahead of many other simple melodramas of the day. This chapter is one of the better ones of the few that we've seen, and moves along without a let-up. Hoot Gibson, glimpsed previously in "The Pay Train" as a Mexican villain, here is far more prominent and more recognisable, as one of the energetic train crew.

"The Floating Coffin" (Eclectic, 1914) Directed by Louis Gasnier; story by Charles Goddard, with Pearl White, Crane Wilbur, Paul Panzer; two reels.

This ninth episode of "The Perils" was presumably intended as the last installment since the villainous Paul Panzer here meets his end - and Pearl announces her intention to retire. It's rather heart-warming to note that simple-minded Pauline never does cotton on to the fact that her guardian is behind all her troubles, although on the other hand her devotion to him is somewhat nebulous since she seems to neither know nor care about his demise. In its plotting, this is one of the more ingenious installments, and though M. Gasnier doesn't have the directorial know-how to make the most of the tense situation, it still comes off rather well. Despite being the apparent end of "The Perils", it was actually far from that. This installment was copyrighted in August of 1914; after a hiatus of two months, episode 10 was copyrighted in October, and carried right on through until ep. 15, so presumably a fresh villain was brought in to menace Pearl.

Incidentally, this episode offers a clue or two to those impossibly illiterate titles. It always seemed incredible that a serial put out in conjunction with the Hearst newspapers would have been permitted such lapses of grammar and spelling. And the awkwardness of much of the phrasing suggested that somehow the surviving print from which all these dups have been made was not a print with the original title text. It has always rather looked as though some small-scale and semi-literate distributor made these titles himself, after latching on to a foreign print, and having a translation made of the foreign titles, and then used those translations verbatim, without adapting to the easier-flowing natural American idiom. Two titles in this chapter bear out this suspicion, and hint that the translation may have been from a German print. Titles and inserts were always numbered in those days, and the number on the insert of Pauline's note (asking for help) includes a very Germanic 7. Obviously this wouldn't have been in an original American title, and thus must have been "translated" by sight from a German title. Similarly, a Naval officer gives the order: "Put a boat out to sea"; and this being the German spelling for "sea", which is the sense intended, it again lends credence to our suspicions. In its plot, acting and situations, "The Perils" still hardly approach genius or sophistication -- but perhaps we can, at last, absolve it of the charge of illiteracy!
"The Female of the Species" (Biograph, 1912) Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by G.W. Bitzer; One reel
With: Mary Pickford, Claire McDowell, Dorothy Bernard, Lionel Barrymore, Charles West.

Biograph subtitled this curious little film "A psychological tragedy". Psychologically it doesn't hold too much water, with many of its motivations both obscure and unlikely, but for 1912 it's a remarkable little work -- grim, stark, and something of a primitive forerunner of elements in both "Greed" and "The Treasure of Sierra Madre". Thanks to careful camera placement and the utilisation of stop-gap substitutes for wind machines, the rather attractive-looking California foothills pass quite acceptably for a desert locale. The interesting handling of the players doesn't permit sympathy for anyone, not even Dorothy Bernard (who deserves it), and least of all for Mary Pickford who plays it all like a female Iago and with an uncomfortably convincing nastiness.

- Intermission -

"LOVE 'EM AND LEAVE 'EM" (Paramount, 1926) Directed by Frank Tuttle
From a play by John Van Alstyne Weaver and George Abbott; adapted for the screen by Townsend Martin; photographed by George Webber; production editor, Ralph Rozelle; film and title editor, Julian Johnson, 6 reels
With Louise Brooks, Evelyn Brent, Lawrence Gray, Cagney Perkins, Arthur Donaldson, Marcia Harris.

Apart from the couple of films that Jim Card at Eastman House was able to salvage ("Beggars of Life", "A Social Celebrity") and the sound version of "The Canary Murder Case", "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" is the only one of Louise Brooks' American silents to have survived. (I discount Cruze's "City Gone Wild" since the Brooks footage in that is negligible, and in any case, the condition of the one existing print is so bad that its days are obviously numbered). "The American Venus", "Rolled Stockings", "The Old Army Game" -- all are no more, at least insofar as the archives and Paramount themselves are concerned.

"Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" is, in a way, a happy choice for survival. It may not be as good a film as some of the others, but it does offer marvellous opportunities for the Brooks face, figure and personality, and for the kind of Brooks bitchery and bewitchery that otherwise seems to appear only in her European films. The semi-comic seduction scene in reel three should be a positive answer (and probably conversion-point) to all those who just can't see what all the shouting is about where Miss Brooks is concerned. Admittedly, belated "cults" can be as annoying as hell -- and it doesn't matter whether the object of the adoration deserves it or not, or whether it's a personality like Brooks or a director like Hawks. One should remember that these cults are not the creation of the individuals themselves, and the engendered annoyances and contempts should be directed at the instigators of the worship, and not at the inspirations.

"Love 'Em and Leave 'Em", as you are probably aware, is an earlier version of the 1929 Clara Bow film, "The Saturday Night Kid". Both films run fairly parallel in plot substance, but differ greatly in emphasis and incident. There's no doubt that this silent version is by far the better film, but the talkie had its odd points too. Here, Evelyn Brent is such an unattractive heroine, and Lawrence Gray such a dumber-headed hero, that one's sympathy would fail to Louise even if she weren't such a charmer. In the sound version, Clara Bow and James Hall made a far more likeable hero-heroine team, and while Jean Arthur walked away with the show (because the bad sister role in the best role in the film), at the same time her bitchiness was so obvious and unsubtle that one was surprised rather than glad that she got away with so much.
Comparison of the two films makes one realise what a marvellously exciting film it would have been had Louise and Clara been co-starred in this 1926 version. Not only does Clara look enough like Louise (with the right hairdo and camera angles, viz. certain shots in "Mantrap") to convincingly play her sister, but what a powerhouse combination that would have been! One just can't blame the hero here for straying from Evelyn Brent to Louise -- after all, who wouldn't? -- but having to choose between Clara and Louise would really provide food for thought.

On the whole, "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" aims at comedy rather less than did "The Saturday Night Kid", and plays up the dramatic elements more. This includes making of Osgood Perkins a rather more seedy and lecherous villain -- introduced by a title that tells us he spent six months curing himself of halitosis only to find he was unpopular anyway!

Throughout, there are pleasant surprises: a languorous opening, a lively Charleston for Louise Brooks, a whale of a finale in which Miss Brent regains some of her lost ground, some excellently-lit interiors (the film was made at Paramount's Long Island Studio), and a pleasantly nostalgic love-scene by the lake in Central Park.

Like so many Paramount films of the 20's, it's slight fare and slowly paced. Without Miss Brooks, it wouldn't be a markedly notable film. With her, it becomes something rather special -- and with a director like Mal St. Clair instead of heavy-handed Frank Tuttle, it might have taken on a gloss and a sophistication that would have made it really quite remarkable. But, while no rediscovered masterpiece, it's a slick and enjoyable little work, and a fascinating study of Miss Brooks in her best years. The print, we're happy to say, is 100% complete, and a beautiful reduction print from the original negative.

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Wm. K. Everson

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NOTE: There will be no Film Group meeting in July. Next one is scheduled for August 16th.