"Midnight Patrol" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1933) Directed by Lloyd French
With Laurel & Hardy; Eddie Dunn, Bob Kortman; 2 reels

"Midnight Patrol" is an ELM that we've long wanted to repeat, as our last print left much to be desired. This one is in excellent condition. With the boys as well-meaning, if inept, cops, it is one of the very few films where they were forthrightly on the side of law and order. Some of the minor characters are pleasingly bizarre, and there's some excellent slapstick involving a lily pond. A minor Laurel & Hardy in the general run of their output, but still a vastly enjoyable one.

"Felline Frameup" (Warner Bros., 1952) Directed by Charles K. Jones.
Voices by Mel Blanc; Technicolor; one reel

Another one of those marvellously savage Warner cartoons where the humor derives as much from frustration and misunderstood good intentions as from the ingenious sadism. Now that there are so few Laurel & Hardy films to be re-seen, it's good to know that there's a healthy backlog of Warner cartoonery awaiting us.

-Intermission-

"The King Steps Out" (Columbia, 1936) Directed by Josef von Sternberg; produced by William Perlberg; written by Gustav Holm, Ernst Digest, Robert Marischa, Ernst Marischka; screenplay by Sidney Buchman; vocal conductor, Josef A. Fasternak; musical score by Howard Jackson; music, Fritz Kreisler, lyrics by Dorothy Fields; Ballet, Albertina Rasch; camera, Lucien Ballard; 9 reels

There was quite a parade of "King" pictures in 1936; apart from this one, we were offered "King of the Dazzled", "King of Hockey", "King of the Fools" and "King of the Royal Mounted". "The King Steps Out" is a seldom-revived and seldom-remembered von Sternberg; even those who do remember it as a pleasant film often fail to associate it with Sternberg with it. It's pleasant to discover that it's not one of those films where there is a reason for its obscurity; it holds up well, both as a piece of good cinematic froth, and as a von Sternberg film.

In his immediate post-Paramount period, there are obvious signs that Columbia were not going to permit him the luxuries and excesses of "The Scarlet Empress". There are a dozen occasions when, in the good old days, Sternberg would have closed his eyes to the budget and gone hog wild on decorative abandon. But if there are signs that here the budget was kept under careful control, at least there are as many signs that, within that control, Sternberg had pretty much his own way. Most of the things we look for in a vintage Sternberg movie are there, even to some of the painted trees! There's the usual carnival of course, curiously recite with dragons and Oriental motif, even though taking place in old Austria. The studio "exteriors", the ornate coach scenes, that lively and amusing bit at the shooting gallery, even the brief but ultra-decorative closing of a clock chiming in the last reel, all are reminders of Sternberg's best days.

But it is Sternberg in a rather different mood, invading, and rather successfully, the Viennese-schmaltz territory of Chavalier and Lubitsch. Sternberg's sense of humour, too often heavy and misplaced, was here in rare form, even to (in the opening scenes) parodying his own opening to "The Scarlet Empress". The plot is the usual nonsense, and for once Sternberg's ultra-simplification helps; almost none of the tedious operetta complications materialize, even though they are always threatening to. And though very little really happens, it all bounces along in a pleasant fashion, backed by a non-stop musical score, that it has far more pep to its pacing that one expects from this director. (Not that his methodical pacing doesn't work admirably in "Shanghai Express," et al -- but one wonders how "The King Steps Out" developed at that speed.) The cast is full of old favorites, and Raymond Walburn gets some plum lines. But it is Herman Bing, for once not wasted in odd appearances, who really gets some of the best comic footage. The Sternberg-Grace Moore feud while the film was in progress was at its peak. The Strehlum-Mae Murray alterations on "The Merry Widow", but here at least there are no obvious signs of strain. But apparently her temperament did show through in some scenes, and much footage was juxted curiously, some of this footage -- including a cow-milking scene -- turned up in the trailer while cut from the film itself. Miss Moore, denied Grand Opera and restricted to lifting melodies instead, nevertheless comes off quite pleasingly -- although Franchot Tone, arriving quite late in the proceedings, manages to steal the show quite effortlessly.

--Mr. KeVerson--