"I LOVED A WOMAN" (First National, 1933) Director: Alfred E. Green
Screenplay by Sidney Sutherland & Charles Kenyon from a story by David Karsner; camera: James Van Trees. 9 reels.

Some months ago we ran a marvellous and full-blooded trailer for this film, which made it seem like a dynamic bombshell almost rivalling "Citizen Kane". Even allowing for the dexterity of trailer-editors, the end result is surprisingly different, though in keeping with the solid, careful, tasteful and often gentle style that was Alfred E. Green's, whether he was doing a Pickford or a Colleen Moore or a talkie satire. Forceful and powerful though the leading player must be, possibly Robinson now is too familiar in this kind of role for it to really ring true. Edward Arnold did this kind of thing better ("Diamond Jim", "The Toast of New York", "Sutter's Gold") but didn't do it quite as often. Directorially, Wellesman or Curtiz might have brought more bite to the use of "Where the Buffalo Roam" as a musical theme soon loses its initial point and its constant and hardly varying repetition stresses the "even keel" approach of Green's direction.

However, perhaps we are judging it too much by what it might have been had it duplicated the pace of its trailer! Certainly it's a careful and always interesting production, with well reconstructed period flavor. The World War One sequence uses some of the best clips from "Chances" or "Liliane Le Mesle" and "The Patent Leather Kid", and there's interesting though risque stock taken in the Cuban war scenes. Perhaps what hurts it most in the final analysis is the too contrived and over-simplified script, almost paralleling the juvenile-level "history" of Flynn's "Robin Hood". It's difficult to believe in a Robinson who has such lines as "I'm half-man with ambition", or casually tells his secretary that he thinks he'll corner the Argentine grain market the next morning! When the whole bottom drops out of his canned-meat monopoly, one almost expects to see a montage of a ruined and broken Robinson spending his last years eating corned-beef sandwiches from an unending pile of cans of meat, rather like Stan Laurel with his beans in "Blockheads". Because these thoughts intrude constantly, one cannot be as moved by Robinson's plight as one would, for example, by Edward Arnold in "Diamond Jim" -- a not dissimilar bio film, and not markedly more accurate, but better written on its own particular level of dramatics. Nevertheless, "I Loved A Woman" is a skillfully-made big star vehicle, beautifully typical of its genre, and probably more effective in its day than now, when we have had more time to witness Warren William, Edward Arnold and of course Robinson himself following the familiar path to power -- and collapse.

--- Intermission ---

"MOBY DICK" (Warner Brothers, 1930) Directed by Lloyd Bacon
Screenplay by J. Grubb Alexander from the novel by Herman Melville;
camera: Robert Kurrle; special effects, Fred Jackman; musical
supervision by Erno Rapée; 8 reels.
With John Barrymore, Joan Bennett, Lloyd Hughes, Walter Long, May Boiey,
Tom O'Brien, Noble Johnson, Nigel de Brulier, William Walling, Virginia
Sale, John Ince, Jack Curtis, Bud Jamison, Dick Craver, Dick Sutherland.

It's a foregone conclusion that most originals are superior to their remakes, though there have been the odd exceptions ("Blood and Sand", "Greed", probably "The Lost Patrol"). The frustration comes when both versions have fine things in them; when a fusing of the best elements of both could, in theory if not in physical practice, make a more adequate film. "Moby Dick", if one dismisses its relation to the original work (which had NO love interest and NO hero's dilemma!), is a case in point. The original is unquestionably the better all-around film; both a bigger film, and one more faithful to the spirit if not the letter of Melville's mystical novel. The second version, also with Barrymore, has the tremendous advantage of infinitely superior and still impressive special effects, and the Barrymore voice to roll out those fine bravura lines, which are 10% Melville, 35% Jack London, and 55% Sunset Boulevard. On the other hand, this second version has a cheap look to it, a careless look at times, and the supreme disadvantage of a pretty but
hopelessly inadequate Joan Bennett, whose wailing "Oh, Ahab!" is such a let-down after the beauty and dignity of Dolores Costello that one just cannot believe that such a strong-willed man would ever waste his time on her!

The script is curious indeed, nodding to the original work at times by having some bit player say to another "Come here, Starbuck!" and commiting such literary and biological faux-pas as having Moby Dick dismissed as "a stupid fish!. The opening is curiously lethargic and slowly paced too, as though the writers have no idea of the wealth of material that lies ahead, and must "pad" it up to length. Obviously the original was re-staged; and not just so that key bits of old footage could be cut in. The use of stock, actually, is at a minimum which is surprising considering the mere four years that had elapsed since the release of "The Sea Beast". Many scenes are copied fairly faithfully however. Ahab watching for his beloved through the cabin porthole is visually the same as before, though the scene is less elaborately constructed in terms of dramatic build-up. Ahab's reintroduction in black Mr. Hyde garb is even extended, but lacks the sadistic climax of the seagull scene. Less free and easy censorship deores that this time Ahab may not kill his evil half-brother, but instead wreaks his spine, and that at the hands of the giant heathen -- surely, censorship or no, a much grimmer fate. However, censorship has no quails about the ribaldries and racial innuendoes of Ahab's sea shanties!!

Other changes and/or additions include a mutiny scene, and much comic by-play to introduce Barrymore at the beginning. The original, opening with a flashback establishing Ahab's already long courtship of his fiancée, was far more satisfying, and did away with the need of all the establishing romantic footagte that this version eats up. Other mild complaints are the overuse of a silhouette of the ship at sea, though this may seem more apparent now because it has turned up many times since in "Captain Blood", "The Sea Hawk" etc; the excessive night shots, done obviously to get around the need for too many expensive sets; and the rather cavalier type-casting of lesser roles. Nigel de Brulier rents and raves as he had done in a zillion earlier pictures, and Walter Long's Shanghai-expert is too close to his later comic villains (especially in Laurel & Hardy's "The Live Ghost") for comfort, though this is admittedly hardly a flaw in 1930.

All of which brings us to Barrymore, who at times is superb, but never takes the role quite as seriously as he did back in 1926. He aged incredibly in those four years; his original Ahab was handsome and dashing; his 1930 Ahab looks tired and a trifle dissolute even before the meeting with Moby Dick. Frankly he gives the impression of having imbied more than a little during some of the scenes! Yet the old magic is there when he wants it to be; some of his rascally comedy bits are great, and again he can be almost unbearable poignant at odd moments. At his best in "Moby Dick" he is a real pleasure to watch. As his worst, he is still infinitely preferable to Gregory Peck's faithful and thoughtful but insufferably stodgy Ahab in Huston's version. Incidentally, it would be interesting to see William Dieterle's performance in the version that he made for German release concurrent with Barrymore's shooting.

Barrymore always loved the bizarre, but he goes rather overboard in this "Moby Dick" in stressing the physically repellent. Even today, when blood and violence are commonplace on the screen, "Moby Dick" occasionally seems a little "nasty"; in 1930 it must have seemed far more so.

Wm. K. Evereson

The George Cohan Film Group meets at Academy Hall on Friday of next week; May 21st. Julius Postal will issue a mailing nearer the time giving such program details as are available, and we'll have a note about that too in next Tuesday's program notes.

Our June-July-August Bulletin will be going out in about two weeks. The programs are just about completed, and include such films as "The Heart of Wotoma" with Norma Talmadge and Thomas Meighan; two Laurel & Hardy silents we haven't shown before, "Their Purple Moment" and "Bacon Grabbers" (with Jean Harlow); a fascinating 1920 feature from Norway, "Growth of the Soil"; Bowland Brown's "Hank Hall in the Wild West"; Lyn Loder's "Showgirl in Hollywood" with Alice White & Blanche Sweet; "Seven Days Leave" with Cary Cooper and Beryl Mercer; "Seven Years Bad Luck" with Max Linder; an early silent (Italian) version of "Les Miserables"; probably "The Singing Fool" with Al Jolson and Betty Bronson; and sundry others.