Tuesday, Nov. 30th. A Program of silent comedy. "SUNSHINE DAD" (1916), a Griffith-supervised, Eddie Dillon-directed film that is an amazing parallel to the current "Help"; a fascinating little film, with DeWolf Hopper, Fay Tincher, Eugene Pallette and Max Davidson; plus two 1924 Mack Sennetts -- "The Halfback of Notre Dame" and "Black Orfords".

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Tuesday Nov. 23rd 1926. The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"Jubilo Junior" (Hal Roach, 1924) Released by Pathe; 2 reels.
- With Will Rogers, Mickey Daniels, Our Gang, Noah Young, Leo Willis, Charley Chase.

Although probably an "economy" short, put together with chunks lifted from other "Our Gang" comedies, "Jubilo Junior" is rather an appealing little comedy. It has plenty of variety, and odd moments of quite touching pathos. Some gags are played for a little more than they're worth, and the hole-filling scene is a shameless plagiarism from "Tom Sawyer", but on the whole it's quite a pleasing little work.

"Crazy Like a Fox" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1926) Directed by Leo McCarey Supervising Director, F. Richard Jones; camera: Leon Powers; 2 reels
- With Charley Chase, Martha Sleeper, William V. Mong, Oliver Hardy, Milla Davenport, William Boyd, Max Asher, Al Hallett, Fred Kelsey, Kewpie Morgan.

"Crazy Like a Fox" is at its best in its opening sequences, with Chase's debonair fooling and quick gags of embarrassment. Once it gets stuck into its basic plot it becomes rather tiresomely labored, and unworthy of a comedian as sprightly and fresh as Chase. Nevertheless, his charm holds it all together, and since he's on camera practically 100% of the time, it still remains an entertaining little film. Some of the titles have genuine wit, and indeed it seems sub-standard only because of the unusually high level of the average Chase comedy.

--- Intemission ---

"HALDANE OF THE SECRET SERVICE" (Houdini Film Corporation, 1923)
Released by F.B.O. 6 reels

With Harry Houdini, Gladys Leslie, William Humphrey, Richard Carlyle, Edward Boulden, Jane Jennings, Charles Fang, Myrtle Morse, Irving Brooks.

"Haldane of the Secret Service" is a long way from being the best film we've ever shown at the Huff; perhaps not quite such a long way from being the worst; but it is certainly the most bizarre and the most mysterious. Never copyrighted, the film was also never reviewed, either by trade or fan publications, and indeed it was only advertised twice. It was also such a financial disaster that it wasn't shown much either! In lieu of the lack of research material and the fact that the film itself modestly declines to credit writer or director, it is thus far impossible to trace who actually did what on the picture, and even Gerald McDonald, the ablest and most thorough film historian in our midst, drew a blank in this direction.

The second film produced by Houdini's own company (Houdini had announced he would be manager, author, editor, caption-writer, star and supervisory director, so we really do know who to blame, despite the lack of documentary evidence!), "Haldane of the Secret Service" was his last film venture. And frankly this film shows that he had no-one but himself to blame. Whatever his shortcomings as an actor or romantic lead, he must surely have known that an audience came to see a Houdini film for one reason only -- and to deny them the stunts and trick escapes that they expected is the height of inexplicable folly. True, Houdini's escapes never paid off as well on film...
as they did "live". Changes of angles, jump cuts and other editing frequently suggested doubles or other cheats even where none were necessary. Even authentic newsreel coverage of his stunts was often doctored, via jump cuts etc., to make the escapes less time-consuming for movie audiences. Nevertheless, with good directors and material, Houdini could have gotten by. "The Grim Game", which we showed a few years ago, was an excellently done melodrama, and the serial "The Master Mystery" had a lot of excitement to it. Even Houdini's other personal production, "The Man From Beyond", had a whale of a climactic reel to make up for the absurd plotting. With more reliance on the writing and directorial skills of others, there seems no reason why Houdini shouldn't have duplicated at least the moderate success of, say, Richard Talmadge --- although probably "moderate" success wasn't what Houdini was interested in.

Perhaps because of its shortcomings, "Haldane" is tremendous fun. Its overall impression is of the splicing together of all the cut-takes from a hashish nightmare --- with all the juicy bits missing, but the incoherent insanity remaining. Or, taking another view, it's a bit like "The Vampires" with all the beauty and action removed. Houdini literally seems to have NO idea where the story is going, and to be making it up as it proceeds. Whenever he's stuck, he demands a full confession from some hapless character, who promptly replies with a "Well, back in Shanghai six months ago ---" and leads into a flashback that merely adds to the confusion. The overall chaos even spreads to the title writers, who within a single reel give two different addresses for the same Washington Square building, and although the action clearly takes place in 1923, which date is frequently given on letters, newspapers etc., they manage to have a London newspaper dated 1921. Although London is charmingly behind the times in many things, its newspapers are always up to date! Further adding to the curious mosaic is that the plot rambles from New York (nice shots of the harbor, Brooklyn Bridge etc.) to England and Paris. The street scenes of London, the Thames, Hull, Paris, and old tenements in Glasgow are nostalgically superb and even valuable, but the different quality stock, camera speeds etc. indicate that they are lifts from Houdini's own extensive stock footage library, although one shot does seem to fit in with the plotting quite well, and indicates that Houdini, thinking ahead to his future features, probably shot ambiguous scenes that could later be cut in to fiction films.

Curiously, there are several situations which seem made to measure for Houdini's escape routines, but they are all shunted aside, and only the climactic escape from the giant water wheel is actually delivered. However, in plot and complications, if not in physical action, the film moves quickly, and is enhanced by some of the wildest titles we've seen in a long while. The poor Oriental gets quite a rough time of it in these florid onslaughts against the Yellow Peril, and there's one glorious moment when a seemingly unimprovable title, with everything crammed into it, is topped by a kind of one-liner postscript title, the fun of which we won't spoil by tipping it off.

Incidentally, most of the characters speak quite slowly and deliberately, and it's fairly easy to lip read their remarks --- all of which seem appropriate to the action, but never seem to correspond with the titles that go with them.

With a little more coherence and traditional action, "Haldane" might have been something of a classic of wild and woolly Secret Agent fare. As it is, it is unwittingly still VERY diverting, and in this James Bond era, Houdini's dim-witted Haldane, forever "hiding" by hiding his straw hat in front of his face, comes off as rather an appealing and lovable oaf. Whatever the new policies of the Museum of Modern Art under Mr. Van Dyke, we feel sure that future generations can claim that "only at the Huff" could films like "Haldane of the Secret Service" be seen in New York in the sixties.

------------- Wm. K. Everson ----