Tuesday October 4, 1966

"JUST A HUSBAND" (Fox, 1927) Directed by Harry Sweet; supervised by George Marshall; story by Nabel Herbert Urrner, scenario by Murray Roth; 2 reels
With Arthur Housman, Bud Jamison, John Qualen, Frank Rice.

Fox's 2-reel comedies of the 20's went to astonishing extremes; some, like "Easy Payments" - shown last year - were wonderful little films; others were so absurdly unfunny that there's no more excuse for us to show them now than there was for exhibitors to inflict them on their audiences then. "Just a Husband" is a lesser Fox comedy certainly, but interesting for its fairly off-beat plot-line and situations and oddly assorted cast. This print, going under the title of "The Bony Bridgegroom", was touted in a British catalogue as a satire on "Greed". It's hardly that, nor is it likely that anyone would be spoofing the Stroheim film as late as '27. All the two films have in common is extensive use of Death Valley as a location -- and one or two barren landscapes that Keaton used in "Go West" as well.

"THE WHITE SISTER" (Inspiration Pictures, for Metro release, 1923)
Produced and directed by Henry King; A Charles H. Daelli Jr. presentation; Scenario by George V. Hobart and Charles E. Whittaker from the novel by F. Marion Crawford; photographed by Ray Overbaugh, assisted by William Schurr and Fernando Rial; Art Director, Robert M. Haas; edited by Duncan Mansfield; Titles by Will M. Ritchey and Don Bartlett; print acquired through the courtesy of Lillian Gish. 11 reels.
The Cast: Angela Chiaromonte (LILIAN GISH); Capt. Giovanni Severi (RONALD COLMAN); Marchesa di Mola (Gail Kane); Monsignor Saracinesca (J. Barney Sherry); Prince Chiaromonte (Charles Lane); Madame Bernard (Juliette La Violette); Professor Ugo Severi (Sig. Serena); Count Del Ferice (Beman Ibanez); Alfredo del Ferice (Alfredo Martinelli); Mother Superior (Carloni Talii); Alfredo's tutor (Antonio Banda); Archbishop (Guiseppe Favoni).

Although "The White Sister" as a whole fails to live up to its reputation, largely due to an old-fashioned, primitive scenario and a complete lack of any directorial style, it is easy to see why it was such a tremendous popular success in its day, and many of the ingredients that made it so popular still work. One of the movies' first elaborate ventures into religiously-motivated romances - the equivalent I suppose of the Lloyd Douglas adaptations of the "Green Light" - "Magnificent Obsession" - "The Robe" school - "The White Sister" is big and lavish, and typical of the larger-than-life romances of the 20's. It is sensitively acted by Miss Gish and above all it is a gentle and fragile romance, as opposed to the often ugly and usually sex-obsessed filmic love stories of today.

"The White Sister", first a novel, was later transformed into a play and a "musical romance" as it was termed. Viola Allen scored a tremendous hit in it on stage, and also starred in the first film version for Essanay in 1915. MGM remade it as a talkie in 1933, with Helen Hayes and Clark Gable in the leads, and Edward Arnold and Lewis Stone in supporting roles. While retaining the same basic story it was both a newer and an even more contrived interpretation. Under Victor Fleming's direction it sprawled less, emphasised the romantic angles more, brought in a triangle element, did away with the volcano and floods, and supplanted them by aerial warfare scenes. It was a typical MGM product of the 30's - glossy, flawless and somewhat heartless. For all of its directorial finesse, better organisation and neater dovetailing of story-lines, it lacked the romantic sweep of this silent version.
However, even as a silent, it does fall somewhat below the standard of other romantic classics of the era - particularly "Way Down East" and "Seventh Heaven", and even "The White Rose". The blame for this must fall squarely on the shoulders of Henry King, surely one of the enigmatic of all directors. A master in his own genre, the depiction of various aspects of Americans("State Fair", "I'd Climb the Highest Mountain", "Tol'able David") -- and a director of intelligence when dealing with restricted, semi-psychological themes ("The Gunfighter", "Twelve O'Clock High") -- he seems to flounder hopelessly when tackling anything foreign to the American scene, and especially when it is allied with elements of spectacle.

In 1923, and not without some justification, King saw himself as a potential successor to Griffith. But surprisingly he showed no inclination to follow up "Tol'able David" with more films that would utilise to the full his unique talent for that sort of fare, instead he sought size and spectacle. Lillian Gish has mentioned that "The White Sister" interested him not at all as a film but what did interest him was the opportunity to head a location unit in Italy, assume sole responsibility and turn out a "big" picture. Yet oddly enough he makes no attempt to exploit the few opportunities for spectacle that the story offers; having assembled hordes of Arabs in the desert for a big skirmish sequence, he lets it all fizzle out before it gets under way. Similarly, the volcanic fireworks and the flood scenes at the end are decidedly sketchy. The floods are well staged, but there are far too few of these scenes and they seem dragged in just to provide a climax (and one that has been well-planted and unsubtly telegraphed throughout the film). At no time does this disaster sequence become as logically integrated into the story-line as was, for example, the storm and ice-bleak sequence that climaxed "Way Down East". It merely serves to provide a dramatic halt, to wrap up the story-threads conveniently, and incidentally to give us some lovely shots of Lillian battling the elements. As in "The Wind" and "Way Down East", she's right in the thick of it -- and wind and dust, forming minor individual tornadoes, seem to make a point of concentrating their fury on the hapless Lillian as she fights her way through the tempest! Too, story-line seems to be King's main concern. With such fine players as Gish and Colman to work with, he yet handles them very casually. One feels that the success of their big scenes together is due more to their own zeal than King's guidance, and when such scenes do rely more on directorial finesse than on performance - for example the potentially "big" emotional scene of the parting on the quay - they are never fully realised. Another case of King's lack of concern for anything but basic story-line is the sequence of Colman's escape and flight across the desert; what could have been wonderfully dramatic material is sketched in by just one or two scenes, and a couple of subtitles. On a much less important level, there is the scene of Colman on the wall, obviously intended by the script to lead or transfer to his waiting horse. Either the horse was uncooperative or Colman couldn't make it - but the sequence is clumsily cut and prolonged, until finally, via various cutaways, Colman is abruptly on the horse and the scene finishes.

Miss Gish recalls that there were almost no rehearsals for the film, such as there were were instigated by the players themselves, on the way over to Italy by boat. The famous sequence of Miss Gish taking her final vows was filmed in one night, after the unit had been working for a full day. In this case, due mainly to Miss Gish's performance, such lack of preparedness doesn't show up on the screen, but it seems typical of King that such an important sequence should have been shot in such a manner. Incidentally, King was already looking ahead to "Romola", since on her way back to America Miss Gish stopped off for costume fittings for that film. "Romola" (which we showed a few years ago) had most of the flaws of "The White Sister" but few of its virtues, and considering how effective Colman was in "The White Sister", his shabby and inconsequential role in "Romola" is hard to understand. Another factor sadly missing in "The White Sister" is the camerawork of a man like Henrik Sartov, who photographed Lillian so superbly in "Way Down East" and "La Boheme". Roy
Overbaugh’s photography is competent, but never inspired. In a film which could gain so much from pictorial eloquence, the hand of a Sartov or a Rosher or a Strauss is sorely missed. The Catholic church of course cooperated fully in the production of the picture, supervising details, making the costumes etc., and telling only at permitting nuns to act in the film. The famous sequence of the final vows may seem a trifle tasteless and even bizarre to non-Catholic eyes; and since it is treated almost in documentary fashion it tends to become a trifle harrowing. Also this sequence is decidedly not helped by King’s surprising tastelessness in cross-cutting it with shots of Colman rushing home aboard a warship, an attempt to create melodramatic tension that is quite out of place. Incidentally, considering that the film is (a) sympathetic to Catholicism, and (b) blessed with the approval of Louis B. Mayer, some elements of the film are quite surprising. Colman’s outburst against “the tyranny of the church” is not met with an equally strong defense (perhaps because basically there is no refuting such a charge); and most of the nuns seem a rather weird lot too. One trio reminds one of nothing more than the witches in “Macbeth”.

Thanks primarily to the work of Gish and Colman, and the innate strength of the story, the basic love-story comes across very well and is often quite moving. The secondary story of Colman’s brother, a scientist devoted to volcanic study, is more than a trifle ludicrous, mainly because it is never developed. King reverts to it only when he needs to cut away from the story proper for a time lapse, and unfortunately it soon becomes more amusing than dramatic. However, despite never realizing its potential (and how a director like Maurice Tourneur could have realized it!) “The White Sister” doesn’t date and the flaws it has now, it also had in 1923. Little vignettes are often very poignant and moving ... look for instance, at that little scene of Gail Kane tongue-lashing the heroine’s dead mother — and Lillian, her face a composite of sorrow and disbelief that anyone could be so evil, hesitatingly pointing a finger heavenward and begging Miss Kane to desist before she is overheard. It is a fine little scene in which all these emotions and ideas are conveyed — and are gone — in far less time than it takes to describe them on paper.

Although Miss Gish’s fragile beauty is not manipulated as well as it would have been with Griffith and Sartov at the helm, her performance remains one of her best. And Colman is fine too in his first important American role; a few minor roles in films like Selznick’s “Handcuffs and Kisses” had preceded it. Incidentally, Miss Gish recollects that it was necessary to get Colman slightly drunk before he could stop being a gentleman long enough to get any feeling and conviction into the scenes in which he turns on her and tells her that despite her vows, she must remain with him! An enormously popular film in its day, “The White Sister” nevertheless wasn’t quite the money-maker that is generally supposed, due mainly to financial manipulations by Metro. Since they didn’t own the film but were merely distributing it, they used it as a wedge to promote more income for wholly owned Metro product. Thus exhibitors were forced to pay a high price for films like “Scaramouche”, which was moving slowly, in order to get “The White Sister”, which Metro then let them have quite cheaply. It was a common procedure in the 20’s — and not entirely uncommon today, despite the official outlawry of the block-booking system.

It has been a little over eight years since we last ran “The White Sister”, so we suspect it will be new to many of our recent members. If this proves to be the case, we’ll also revive “La Boheme” with Lillian and John Gilbert, directed by King Vidor, which we likewise ran some eight years ago.

-- William K. Everson --