It's difficult to know just which market Hoot hoped to serve with this diverting but very curious non-western. The youngsters must have had their patience sorely tried by the padding and lack of action, though they must have been delighted by the rousing climax in which Hoot pursues the villain through the streets of Chicago on a motor-cycle. As to the adults - and Hoot certainly had an adult following, though by 1928 his period of peak popularity was behind him - there's just too much bantery comedy and not enough substance to keep their interest. It's an oddly lack-lustre production, despite its unusual elements. One would certainly have thought that something of the dramatics of theisodes would have filled the arena - but the stands are very sparsely filled, and the somewhat unimaginative direction of MacEne makes little attempt to avoid shots of empty seats. Too, there's so much back-and-forth conversation that at times the film looks like one of those hybrid silent versions of early talkies -- which it wasn't. However, it's probably a good deal more entertaining today than it was in '28; the Chicago footage is quite fascinating, and the in-period titles make a caustic reference or two to the city's gangster reputation! A long sequence at a most elaborate Texaco gas station (presumably paid for by the Texaco people) likewise has a most charming look that wouldn't be present in 1928. Gibson's banting comedy style isn't too well served by the paucity of material, but his personality is as amiable as always. Harry Neumann (no.1 cameraman for Monogram through the 40's) comes through with some good photography, but his bashing-comedy-action climax makes up for a good deal of the earlier, near-tedium.

"THE PASSING OF THE THIRD FLOOR BACK" (Herbert Brenon Productions, 1917)

Released by First National in 1916; produced and directed by Herbert Brenon; Scenario by Brenon and George Edwardes-Hall from the play by Jerome K. Jerome; photographed and edited by Roy Hunt; 5 reels
Starring JOHN FORBES ROBERTSON as The Stranger, with Augusta Haviland (Mrs Sharpe), Molly Pearson (Stasia), Alford Hickman and Germaine Bourville (Stasia's parents), Ben Graham (Major Tompkins); Grace Stephens (Mrs Tompkins); Ketty Galanta(Vivian); Robert Fisher (Joe Wright); George Le Quere (Christopher Fenny); Sydney Goldin (Jape Samuels); Thornton Bation (Harry Larkcom).
This rarely revived early Brenon film (the earliest of his films available to us in fact) is a good example of faithful and certainly reverential transference of a stage play to the screen. As was often typical of Brenon, little attempt is made to exploit the full possibilities of the screen (a comment that applies equally well to his lovely "Peter Pan" as well), Brenon doubtless feeling that the plot material was strong enough in itself to need no embellishment. Although some changes were made in the plot by Brenon - "to use the greater freedom of the screen" to quote his own explanation - those changes do not seem to make the film any less theatrical. The sets remain very much those of the stage, and the only moments of real cinema "in this case" would be the frequent use of the close-up, and the occasional visual effects. Yet, in its limited movement and restricted settings, it is not a slow film. John Forbes Robertson's performance is quite moving, even though critics at the time pointed out that without his melancholy voice to give it depth, his acting could hardly equal the stage performances for which he was so famous both in England and the United States. The photography and lighting by Roy Hunt (frequently used by Brenon) are extraordinarily fine, and shrowd to good advantage in our first-class original toned print.

The story of course is of the mysterious Christ-like visitor who comes to a house of discord and brings peace and contentment before he leaves. A British remake appeared in the thirties with Conrad Veidt. The theme, in one form or another, has been a popular one with movie-makers since the earliest days. Biograph's "Pippa Passes" and Edison's "Annie Crawlis Upstairs" were of this genre; so, on different levels, were some of the Mary Pickford films, Lois Weber's "A Chapter in her Life", and such films of the 40's as "Strange Cargo" and "Halfway House". "The Passing of the Third Floor Back" was made during an "interim" period in Brenon's career. Behind him was "Ivanhoe" and the lush Annette Kellerman extravaganzas for Fox. With a reputation for extravagance, Brenon was proving, via films like this one and "The Fall of the Romanoffs", that he could also make good commercial films that combined artistic merit and economical budgets. His great period still lay ahead in the 20's - "Beau Geste", "The Pilgrim", "The Costume of Milan". Having had his last film in England in the late 30's and early 40s, spent a long retirement period in Hollywood writing his (unpublished) memoirs, and died a few years ago.  ---W.K. Everson.