Tuesday next, February 6th: The British "B" film: THE SILENT PASSENGER (1935) with John Loder, Leslie Perrins; and BRIEF ECSTASY (1937) with Linden Travers, Paul Lukas, Hugh Williams; and excerpts.

January 30 1968

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"CRAINEQUEBILLE" (France, 1922; US release, 1923) Director: Jacques Feyder From the novel by Anatole France; 4 reels
With Maurice de Feraudy (Crainequebille); Marguerite Carre (Mme. Laure); Jeanne Cheirrel (Mme. Bayard); Nissim (Le President Pourriche); Felix Oudart (L'Agent); Romier (Le Docteur Mathieu); Jean Worms (L'Avocat Lemerele); Roques (L'Agent 121); J. Forest (Le Souris); Françoise Rosay (customer in shoe store).

"Crainequebille" was the very first film shown by the Huff society, when it was still a small and private group of a dozen or so people, back in the early 50's. We have only shown it once since - and that some nine years ago - so a further revival is certainly due, especially in that it is an excellent toned original print, and the only other prints that seem to be around these days are 35mm dupes.

"Crainequebille" is usually either completely ignored - or vastly overrated. It is little more than a vignette, just right at four reels, and just as a longer treatment would destroy its fragility and natural qualities, so too would undue analysis and discussion rob it of the elements of surprise and sudden tenderness that make it such an interesting movie. Actually made by Feyder more or less as a move to keep pace with the then new and growing French avant-gardes movement, it makes its points far more tellingly with its completely realistic aspects than with its occasional experimental sequences, although certainly the trick shots in the trial episode do produce effective moments of visual irony. Sometimes a point seems to be hammered, with some very unsubtly, but this may be because of the deceptive air of naturalness about the whole film. The Comedie Francaise "method" of acting, better displayed perhaps in Feyder's talkie "La Kerмесse Herolique", is elegantly and gracefully underplayed, so much so that in the fairly realistic milieu of this particular story there is just not enough contrast, and its very skill almost hides its presence. It's rather a shock, for example, to recognize Francoise Rosay (Mme. Feyder) and realise that these are, after all, players, and not just superb types that Feyder happened to find. Quite a lovely little film, with some very touching moments, it has what amounts to a kind of neo-realism long before that phrase came into use - and misuse. The camerawork is often very striking, although as in other Feyder films, rather inconsistent; a lovely and unfomed image will be followed by a pretentious one, a naturalistic shot by a trick effect.

In England the film was retitled "Coster Bill of Paris", while in the US it was released just as "Bill". D.W. Griffith liked the film a great deal, and his unofficial endorsement helped its boxoffice chances quite a bit. Quite probably Griffith's publicised interest in the film is responsible for the very Griffithian foreword, which would seem to be patterned after the opening titles of "The White Rose". "Crainequebille" has been remade twice; once in 1933, and again in 1954. I saw neither, but it is difficult to imagine them being more effective than this slight and simple but very sensitive version of 1922.

--- intermission ---

"THE GOOSE WOMAN" (Universal, 1925) Directed by Clarence Brown; from the story by Rex Beach; Camera: Milton Moore; Assistant Director, Charles Dorian; 8 reels
With Louise Dresser, Jack Pickford, Constance Bennett, Marc McDermott, George Nicholls, Gustav von Seyffertitz, George Cooper, Kate Price, Spottiswood Aitken.

In last week's notes for "Smouldering Fires" we devoted quite a lot of space to Clarence Brown generally, so I won't cover the same ground again - other than to reiterate the hope that one of his very best films, "The Trail of '98", will one day be generally available again. "The Goose Woman" is one of the best-remembered of the Brown silents (perhaps more for Louise Dresser than for Brown) and one of the most elusive. Although it has more of a reputation than "Smouldering Fires", I can't help feeling that "Fires" is the better film, but that may well be because it has such a slim and almost non-existent plot that one can just sit back and marvel at Brown's style and taste, and what he does with his characters. "The Goose Woman" on the other hand, has a far stronger plot, but there are also some weaknesses in that plot. Accordingly, Brown isn't able to glide along as smoothly. Nevertheless, Botha (in "The Film Till Now") seems rather unfair when he praises the early portions of the film, but claims that in the last half both Brown and Dresser "fail to pieces". The
script certainly does falter; a plot that has all the potentialities of an earlier "Sunset Boulevard" backs itself into a corner in which bathos and melodrama are injected for a hasty rescue act and a gimmicky last scene which is entirely too formula after the imaginative way in which Brown brought "Scouring Fires" to a close. But these are writing problems; and certainly there is no inconsistency in either Brown's direction or Dresser's playing.

One problem may well have been that Rex Beach's story was suggested by an actual murder case of the mid-20's in which a "Pig Woman" turned out to be a key witness. The murder was unsolved when the film went into production, so it had to exploit the situation and the character without running foul of the libel laws, and by coming up with its own solution. In many ways it is a most curious film, romantic and emotional about a theme that one can envision rather better as a hard-bitten 30's film by LeRoy or Wellman. Actually it was remake in the thirties, by Eko, surprisingly. Under the title "The Past of Mary Holmes" (1933), it was co-directed by Slavko Vorkapich and Harlan Thompson, and starred Helen Mackellar, Eric Linden, Jean Arthur and (presumably as the reporter) Skeets Gallagher.

Beautifully lit and photographed (by Milton Moore, who also photographed "He Who Gets Slapped"), "The Goose Woman" has much of the visual style of "Scouring Fires", with interesting stress on detail and closeups to suggest rather than to state outright via subtitle. (Oddly enough, Jim Tully once wrote a piece on Brown lauding the way he had "eliminated the closeup" from his films, and citing "The Goose Woman" as an illustration!) At times the film does slow down, and has almost the pace of a talkie, yet the "talkie" scenes of cutting from closeup to closeup produce some interesting effects. Emotions always seem to be well under way in these closeups, and not just reactions to the director's instructions; this is only conjecture of course, but it looks as though Brown may have shot very long takes of some of these scenes, and then used only the climactic moments.

Although missing the original tints (the juxtaposition of the blue night scenes and amber interiors, especially in such a well-lit film, was most pleasing) the print is very good and quite complete -- and the tints are at least preserved for us in John Hampton's print in Hollywood. Oddly, nobody is starred in the film -- even if the contractual arrangements didn't originally call for it, one would have thought that Louise Dresser's superb performance was of a stature that Universal would have given her starring billing. Jack Pickford again reminds us what a good and usually under-rated player he was, and Constance Bennett is as slim and lovely as always. That same year of course Louise Dresser and Clarence Brown also worked together in "The Eagle". It is surprising that a more elaborate talkie remake wasn't tried -- Eko's effort was strictly a B - as it would seem (and especially with the operational angle) that it had all the ingredients that were considered sure-fire in the early 30's. However, it probably won't be too long before Rex Beach puts his hands on it as a vehicle for Lena Turner, Sandra Dee and Frankie Avalon.

------------------ William K. Everson ------------------

The News Bulletins covering the February/March/April programs will be available at next Tuesday's meeting, and will also be mailed next week. We don't have the same lineup of rediscovered silent blockbusters that we had this last session (and for the time being, no more of those unannouncable specials -- the word got around too fast and they were just being discussed too freely) but there are some interesting and off-beat little surprises. Among other things, the Czechs have finally come through with "Straight Shooting", John Ford's first silent feature (Harry Carey and Hoot Gibson) so that will certainly be one of the highlights of the new schedule.