"LOVE FROM A STRANGER" (United Artists, 1937) Directed by Rowland V. Lee
From a story by Agatha Christie and a play by Frank Vesper; screenplay by Frances Marion; Associate producer, Harry Edington; music by Benjamin Britten; Camera, Phil Tannura; 8 reels
With Basil Rathbone, Ann Harding, Binnie Hale, Bruce Seton, Jean Cadell, Bryan Powely, Joan Hickson, Donald Calthorp, Eugene Leahy.

It is more than seven years since we last ran this film, and our print tonight is both better, and about a reel longer, that the trimmed version we ran in 1961. Rowland V. Lee and Basil Rathbone, who made four films in the latter made as felicitous a team as Ford and Wayne, or Howard and Lowe. Lee seemed especially adept at not only controlling Rathbone's tendency to overact, but also at exploiting it, especially in scenes of nervous hysteria. "Love from a Stranger" is one of the best of that small, select, theatrical group of wife-terrorised-by-husband thrillers, of which "Gaslight" is in a sense the prototype, even tho' not the first. Based on a play by Frank Vesper (who enacted the lead in the London production) and disappeared mysteriously aboard ship, a presumed suicide or murder victim. Rathbone is now basically familiar stuff but yet is so tactfully done and splendidly acted by the two stars, that it maintains its suspense still. It remains superior not only to the oldish American remake (heavy-handed period melodramatics, and a fist fight to round it off) but also to the more famous but over-rated Thorold Dickinson version of "Gaslight". Perhaps because Ann Harding isn't the mousy little wife that Diane Wynard was, the battle of wills is far stronger and more dramatic. Too, Anton Walbrook made the scheming husband such a stage stereotype that, re-seeing his "Sixty Glorious Years" on film, one is apt to believe that his Prince Albert is momentarily going to hide Queen Victoria's order as the first step of a campaign to drive her insane! Rathbone on the other hand is exactly right all the way - debonair and charming at first, and suddenly, shockingly insane when one least 'expects' it. There isn't too great an attempt to hide the stage origin, but the film moves constantly, and at key moments there are bizarre camera angles which may be theatrical in themselves, but which work well in emphasizing the tension and hysteria. All told, it holds its own remarkably well today. -- intermission --

"THE GREAT BARRIER" (Gaumont British, 1936; rcl: 1937) Director: Milton Rosser
Screenplay by Michael Barringer and Milton Rosser from an original story by Alan Sullivan; Camera: Glen MacWilliams, Sepp Allgeir, Bob Martin; editor, Charles Fremd, B.H. Hipkins; 8 reels

Released in the US as "Silent Barriers" and later reissued as "Hall's Gateway", "The Great Barrier" was one of the most successful of Gaumont's many Hollywood-oriented films of the 30's. Several British films had tried to adapt local and colonial history to a basic Western format ("Lorna Doone", "Dick Turpin", "Rhodes of Africa") hoping to tap the American action market, and "The Great Barrier" came off best of all. Of course, it was largely shot in Canada (the interesting with rather obvious studio sets back in England in a bit jarring), had a typical Hollywood non-poetic score and strong players - including familiar bit people like Tom London imported from Hollywood, so it's not surprising that it succeeded so well. Presumably there was an experienced if uncredited 2nd unit director working on the film too, since the action sequences have a real Hollywood zip - especially the excellently staged chase after the train - and it's hard to believe that Milton Rosser, a character actor-director of the Arlin and Mathes Lang school, could suddenly have turned himself into a Ford Beebe! The dialogue is often quite crisp and the story-line at least serviceable although some Canadian government employees, with whom I once saw the film at Eastman House, were entirely too well dressed to warrant the severing of diplomatic relations! If it's a third Western, it's also one third German mountain epic too -- and Lilli Palmer, as the agitator in the climactic mob scenes, reminds one more than a little of the robot Maria in "Metropolis". Incidentally, heroine Antoinette Cellier is a curious but most appealing combination of Fay Wray and Valerie Hobson. Superbly photographed and fast-paced, "The Great Barrier" has its share of clichés - but in 1936, these were nobody's business. Look back only "The Iron Horse" and "Surfside", and "Union Pacific" "Santa Fe", "Panza Pacifico" and all the other standardized railroad-building epics still lay ahead. I must admit still being baffled by the engineering feasibility of the all-important pass in the last reel - which seems to be surrounded by rapids, mountains and quagmires, but perhaps I am being picayune! The print is trimmed a trifle from the original release, but I cannot recall any key scenes that are no longer here, though the Arlen-Palmer-Mackay relationship does seem to deteriorate a bit too fast and its time lapse is a bit vague in that area. -- we --