November 15, 1921

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"Coals and Courtship" (Mascot-Star Films, Wales, 1927) Eds E. Edmunds
Written by Fred Harris; with Fred Harris, Miss C.A. Edmunds, Charles Smith, Ludlow Moll, M.P. Phillips, Mr. E. Edmunds; 2 reels.

"Coals and Courtship" is the first of a series of 2-reel slapstick comedies intended to establish a Welsh film industry. (How many were made I don't know, but there were at least two, and incredible as it may sound this is the better of the two.) Such a venture seems rather ill-advised from the beginning, since while the Welsh are a very generous and warm-hearted people, they rival the Germans in the subtlety of their sense of humor. However, we need make no apologies for resurrecting this spectaculo unfunny comedy starring "the famous Welsh laugther-makers," to quote the credits, since its academic and historic interest is far greater. The grim and depressing backgrounds of the slag heaps surrounding Portypid collide with the background indeed for slapstick, but since the film is shot almost entirely out of doors - against coalt mining backgrounds, or at a sad little country fair - it is a valuable record of how such an area really looked, and how it people dressed and behaved. The titles use a fair amount of Welsh dialect-expressions, and much of the comedy has the off-the-cuff look of those early screeners improvised in MacArthur Park.

"The Light in the Dark" (Associated First National, 1922) Dir. Clarence Brown
Story by Clarence Brown and William Dudley Felley; Camer., Alfred Ostlind; Art Direction, Ben Carré; this 4-reel version retitled "The Light of Faith" and re-edited from the original 7-reel version. A Hope Hampton Production. With Hope Hampton, Lon Chaney, B.K. Littleton, Therese Maxwell Gouvier, Dorothy Walters, Charles Musset, Edgar Norton, Max Davidson, Mr. Mugure.

This polished if dramatically rather absurd film was made when Clarence Brown was still very much influenced by his apprenticeship with Maurice Tourneur, and indeed was still utilizing Tourneur's fine art director, Ben Carré. (Carré's work was strikingly on view recently in the Roial Welsh film "The Red Dancer." on the credits of this release version it is erroneously listed as a cameraman.) The film is a readily good example of the way silent films literally painted with light; sets, camerawork and pictorial design combined, etc. to produce a film that is a visual if not a dramatic treasure, enhanced by particular color toning. Despite its stress on sentiment rather than the macabre, Chaney's surprisingly typical role, the essentials remain, a good deal of it revolves around the recollection of the Holy Grail, and its casual encounter on a shelf in a New York apartment, where it sits on display rather like an Academy Award. Nobody seems unduly awed by the discovery, and it is passed around with all the reverence of a Medici's orange-dru marble. In this version it is presumably returned to its display shelf; in the original it was lost to the ages, though presumably limited to the New York environs where its omnipresence hasn't appeared to work any particular influence for good.

"The Thirteenth Hour" (KDM 1927) Directed by Chester Franklin
Story by Chester Franklin and Douglas Furber; continuity by Edward L. Lowe Jr.; Camerag Maximilian Fleibig; Sets, Eugene Hornbostel; editor, Ben Shari; 6 reel. With Lionel Barrymore, Napoleon the Wonder Dog, Charles Delaney, Jacqueline Gadsen, Fred Kelsey, Polly Moran.

KDM made relatively few silent "B" pictures, but when they did - as this film and the Tim McCoy westerns attest - they gave them all their best production care and gloss, even if the sets and plot did occasionally remind one of a Cheapside Pictures than mighty Metro. Right away, "The 13th Hour" gives evidence of a real style, with elaborate camera angles and the use of zoom and slow-motion shots throughout. The opening mystery is soon shattered; within the first couple of reels, both we and the hero know who the villain is, the police are summoned - and the usual last-reel chase is extended to a four-reel wrap-up! Its action all the way, abounding in trapdoors, clutching hands and hidden panels, rather like crossing Keaton's "The Haunted House," with one of the best silent chase sets ever filmed, what marvellous fare this must have been for the youngsters - something to keep them (and us) through the whole time, yet tongue-in-cheek enough not to be productive of nightmares. KDM's flair for all the ways, the standards of quality being set-down only by some of the rape, ordinary titling. But in terms of action and shear light-hearted thriller hokum, Griffith veteran Chester Franklin keeps it on the move all the time. Lionel Barrymore curiously has doubles in a couple of scenes calling for his to carry the girl across the room, a feat either beneath his dignity or beyond his strength, incidentally. We used this dog series as an effective means of disposing of cameraman Hendrik Sartov. He was assigned to one of them - with all his time-consuming filters - and when he couldn't meet the production pace, he was fired.  

-- W.K. Eyres --