January 24, 1972

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

$10,000 REWARD (Davis Distributing Co., 1925) Produced and directed by Clifford S. Sleigh; story by Frank Howard Clark; Camera, Bert Longmeaker; 5 reels

Maynard's early pre-First National westerns are hardly of major interest or importance, and are certainly economically made. But they are light, breezy, full of art, and make a good showcase for Maynard's riding skills. Like so many of his later Universal westerns, these are also quite bizarre and unpredictable. Maynard had a fondness for the theater, and this film is no exception. It is at least to be pulling the kind of financial stunt normally reserved for the villains! Only Ken could casually demand five million dollars for his property - and get it!

"BALACLAVA" (Gainsborough, 1928) Directed by Maurice Elvey and Hilton Rosser; Scenario by Robert Stevenson; additional dialogue (sound version) by Milton Rosser and Angus MacPhail, from a story by Boyd Cable; Camera, Percy Strong and James Wilson; 7 reels
With Cyril McLaglen (John Kennedy); Benita Hume (Jean MacDonald); Alf Goddard (Nobby); Wally Patch (Trooper Strong); J. Fisher White (Lord Baglim); Harold Huth (Captain Nolan) and Edmund Willard, Robert Holmes, Betty Bolton.

"Balalaiva" (the print tonight actually titled "Valley of Death") has a rather complicated history. Begun (and copyrighted) in 1927 as a complete silent, it was withdrawn, and two sequels added to it for a 1930 British release, and a 1931 US release by Sono-Art under the title "Jaws of Death." Although it had two good screenwriters, reviews make no mention of dialogue, and refer only to the crudity of the kettle-drum effects for the battle scenes. But conceived as a silent film, it plays that way, and never once looks like a silent version of a talkie. Missing from our print are two sequences, and two characters (an officer played by Miles Brandor, and an enlisted man played by Clifford Holland). The two missing sequences were clearly all-talkie episodes added later, and only one of these really hurts the continuity. The hero's court-martial and discharge is missing, though explained away in the titles. More serious is the deletion of the sequence wherein the hero first meets the heroine (Benita Hume), an Englishwoman whose home is rather unfortuitously situated right between the British and Russian battle lines. Miss Hume now makes her appearance rather unceremoniously, and appears to be a camp follower when the hero turns into an "honest woman."

Any version of the Charge of the Light Brigade automatically suffers now by comparison with the showmanship of the Errol Flynn film, and the cynicism and realism of the most recent Tony Richardson version. Nevertheless, despite that handicap, this British version holds up rather well, and rather curiously falls between the two extremes. Its slight framing story is at least as serviceable as Flynn's and a good deal more logical; moreover, there is a definite attempt made at documentary reconstruction. The officers are named, the battle plans outlined; and earlier, there is even some surprising comment on the snobbism of the Army's code of honor. But the action does have a little Hollywood Surprise for a British film made only a quarter of a century after her death. For a British film too, the action scenes are surprisingly lavish, smoothly presented and staged almost with a Hollywood polish - although some economies do show. The mass battle scenes (some of them suggest some inspiration from Griffith's "America") are well done, but all of the large bodies of extras are kept for the extreme long shots. Once the cameras move in for closeup work, it all becomes a bit sketchy, and the illusion of two armies is not so well maintained. But every action does have a little Hollywood flair, and it is a reminder that writer-director Milton Rosser did have a Hollywood flair for this kind of thing, as witness his much later "The Great Barrier." Some of his silhouette-images have a Ford-like look to them, and the battle scenes were good enough to be re-used as stock in Alix's "The Iron Duke." Incidentally, in the words of D.W., an historic footnote: when Richardson was preparing his version, he screened the E.F.'s 35mm print, the equivalent of tonight's copy. In order to save on corsets and costumes it was proposed to use a familiar film-saving device. Richardson apparently remembered it thus, which is why his charge goes from left to right instead of right to left, as almost all screen chargers do. There's no rigid rule about it, but I suspect that it is because the eye normally goes from left to right - as in reading - and that by presenting a charge from right to left, against normal direction, there is more of an illusion of movement and conflict. Richardson thus fell into the same trap as Franju, who was screened Poullide's "Jedus" at extreme silent speed, and raced his remake the same way. -- W.K. Everson --