Since the stress tonight is on the "big" emotional drama so popular in Hollywood in the early 30's, it seems only appropriate to start off with a marvellously typical coming attraction, for Alfred E. Green's "I Loved A Woman" (1933) with Kay Francis and Edward G. Robinson. Florid and superbly immode cutscenes coupled with well-juxtaposed highlights manage to make a fairly turgid movie item like a dynamo of scenic emotion. Its opening cutscene - "HERE IS SOMETHING TRULY DIFFERENT -- I LOVED A WOMAN" - has unintended irony today, with so much of the current movie fare being of the "My Hustler" and "Reflections in a Golden Eye" category!

Next, a reminder of the theatrical commercials that were far more prevalent in the 30's than we tend to remember. Big stars, major studio sets and color were often brought into play for dramatic or comedy vignettes that seemed to be unexpected bonuses, since the very soft-sell plug was introduced quite late in the proceedings. Here, Warner Brothers, plugging General Electric product, use Dick Powell, Warren William, Joan Blondell (in bed in a negligee of course), Preston Foster, Walter Miller and Ruth Donnelly as a warm-up to Bette Davis pre-dating Betty Furness by spelting for refrigerators and washing machines!

Thirdly, we have two reels of excerpts (actually a fairly concise, though unofficial condensation of the film) of Frank Borzage's 1933 "Secrets," a remake of the famous Norma Talmadge silent. Typical of those that are half-a-century and incorporate much empire building ("Cavalcade"); "Cimarron" and "The Conquerors" were other contemporary examples) this was Mary Pickford's last film. It gives us a welcome (and today, rare) glimpse of the more mature Mary, plus Leslie Howard in one of those sensitive man-of-action roles that he managed to carry off by sheer force of personality over physique.

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"OF HUMAN BONDAGE" (Rko Radio, 1934) Directed by John Cromwell

Scenario by Leslie Cheshire from the novel by Somerset Maugham;
Music: Max Steiner; Camera: Henry Gerrard; editor, William Morgan

With Leslie Howard, Bette Davis, Reginald Denny, Frances Dee, Alan Hale, Kay Johnson, Reginald Owen, Reginald Sheffield, Desmond Roberts.

While some films ("Applause") acquire and sustain well-deserved reputations through decades when they appear to have been lost, others inevitably don't live up to their legends quite as well, and "Of Human Bondage" is one. Apart from a single showing at Lincoln Centre two years ago, it has not been seen for more than 25 years. That fact, and the need to re-evaluate it and satisfy curiosity - more than justifies its revival today, so we need not apologise for it not being a great film. It's easy to understand its tremendous impact in 1934 when Bette Davis was a new face, and what we now regard as mannerisms were energetic new techniques. Too, while films per se are not necessarily more sophisticated now than they were in 1934, the art of screenwriting-definitively is. The screenplay, already hampered by the new production code (and studio policy which, "King Kong", apart, tended more to general adaptations of Barrie et al), simplifies and condenses Maugham's long and monumental novel. Motives are only half-explained, period and time are vague, and Maugham's virulent hatred of women is softened by romanticising the other, more sympathetic women in his tale. The hero too (or a seducer, albeit a likeable one, in the book) is made to seem so holy and spineless that he almost deserts his torment. Nevertheless, with all its flaws, it is probably the best of the three movie adaptations. (Incidentally, it is the only Maugham novel to be filmed more than twice). The 1946 version with Paul Henried and Eleanor Parker, moving further back in time even than Neugham (who wrote it in 1915) created a handsome, Gothic style that was visually effective, if weak dramatically. The more recent Kim Novak-Laurence Harvey version, though unfairly maligned, was still the weakest of the three. John Cromwell, a tasteful if often static director, does keep the film more on course than many 1934 literary adaptations, though he overlooks the ripe effects. But Bette's Mildred is no longer as dynamic as it was, there is little to complain of in direction or performance, and it is the naive scripting that occasionally pulls us up short. The dying Mildred, in 1912 Biograph black eye makeup, coughs and lurches, and in his most genial bedside manner Dr. Howard asks "What seems to be the trouble?" - before glancing down her presumably ample throat to casually diagnose lung trouble! However, it's a handsome film, a good showcase for Davis and Howard (who later worked well together in "The Petrified Forest" & "It's Love I'm After") and it's good to have it back in circulation again.

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