"THE FOUR FEATHERS" (Paramount, 1929) A Schoedsack-Cooper Production; Directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack, Merian C. Cooper and Lothar Mendes Associate Producer, David O. Selznick; Scenario by Howard Estabrook and Hope Loring from the novel by A.E.W. Mason; Camera, Robert Kurrie; Titles by Julian Johnson; Musical Score, Wm. F. Peters; With Richard Arlen, Fay Wray, Clive Brook, William Powell, Theodore von Eltz, George Pawlet, Noah Beery, Harold Hightower, Noble Johnson & 8 reels.

It's not often that a silent film - particularly a traditional epic adventure of this type - is improved on by a sound remake, but "The Four Feathers" is one of the rare exceptions to the rule. The best and definitive version is still the superb Technicolor Alexander Korda production of 1939, (It was also made prior to the twenties by a British company, and remade yet again, as "Storm Over the Nile", likewise by the British, in the 50's. Tonight's version does however hold the distinction of being the only Hollywood version of the classic British adventure novel.

While this "Four Feathers" is an extremely interesting and entertaining piece of hokum, as well as being a good example of the ultra-late silent, made and released well after the changeover to sound was a fait-accompli, it is as a strange mixture of assets and liabilities. The basic complaint is that it looks like what so many people assume to be a "typical old-time Paramount" film. Nor is it the case that Schoedsack and Cooper, who already in 1929, on the other hand, one has to look at it in the chronological context of the Schoedsack-Cooper films; they started out with the outstanding but severely documentarian "Grass"; followed up with "Chang", ostensibly a documentary too, but a manipulated one, aiming at thrills and Disneyesque cuteness rather than realism. "The Four Feathers" was their first real contact with a scenario and stars, and it is perhaps not surprising that the film's best elements remain its rather sensationalised documentary elements. The film was quite severely criticised at the time for departing from Mason's story in order to interpolate lengthy chunks of animal footage, yet it is these genuinely exciting sequences which retain the greatest interest today. In an earlier note covering this entire series, I erroneously referred to these scenes as being unused footage from "Chang"; actually they were specifically shot for "The Four Feathers", though probably not anticipated in the original script. The whole plot takes a decidedly recumbent twist at one point in order to accommodate the hippopotamus herd that seems to have presented itself rather unexpectedly. The rather curious composition of many of these shots, with a rather unintentional emphasis on hippo-derriers, suggests that more Schoedsack and Cooper were standing just outside camera range, prodding these normally amiable animals into their unusually animated activity! Incidentally, while "The Four Feathers" itself was rather quickly forgotten, Paramount continued to make good use of its action material - almost all of the big scenes (with much borrowing from "Grass" as well) turned up, intercut with Cary Grant closeups, in "The Last Command"; while the battle scenes were used yet again in William Wellman's "The Light That Failed". Schoedsack and Cooper were soon to abandon documentaries entirely, and the retrained dramatization of "The Four Feathers" too, to concentrate on such shock and stunt films as "King Kong", "She", "The Last Days of Pompeii" and, much later, "Doctor Cyclops".

Perhaps because they were afraid of having too long a silent film in the sound era, the producers cut the film extensively after its completion - and since they didn't want to lose their big action sequences, it was the stockier elements that had to be jettisoned. One of the most jarring deletions involves Clive Brook's blindness, a key plot element of the novel, and of all other film versions. It was certainly shot for this version, and much of the time Brook staggered around in a blinded and helpless state - yet there is nary a mention made now of the fact that he is blind, and anyone unfamiliar with the basic story might well be entitled to wonder at Brook's unexplained and unsoldierly conduct. All in all, "The Four Feathers" is a most enjoyable minor entry in the "Gunga Din" stakes, -- over --
but it is important to remember the rather unusual background of its producers, and to stress that it in no way represents the high standards attained by the late Hollywood silents. The print is of only fair quality, having been struck at the last moment from an obviously decomposing negative. Reputedly, it is the only print in existence, and we are most grateful to both Universal and MCA for having rushed this print back to us from Europe for this showing.

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"Moby Dick" (Warner Brothers, 1930) Directed by Lloyd Bacon
Screenplay by J. Grubb Alexander from an adaptation by Oliver H.P.
Garrett of the novel by Herman Melville; Camera, Robert Kurrle;
Special Effects, Fred Jackman; Music, Erno Rapée; 7 reels
With: John Barrymore, Joan Bennett, Lloyd Hughes, Walter Long, May
Boley, Tom O'Brien, Nigel de Brulier, Noble Johnson, William Walling,
Virginia Sale, Jack Curtis, John Ince.

If A.E.W. Mason's jingoistic swashbuckling underwent something of a
trouncing at Hollywood's hands, Herman Melville's classic was even
more manhandled as Warners turned it into first a silent, and then a
sound vehicle for John Barrymore, eliminating the metaphysical
aspects and the tragic ending, and substituting a formula love story
instead. "Substituting" is perhaps an understatement, since there
wasn't even a heroine in Melville's novel. As alone a love story,
what emerged was far more in the vein of Jack London, and Mr. Melville
must have spun his grave until John Huston exorcised his restless
spirit with a far more respectful - and faithful - rendering of
"Kobdy Dick" some 25 years later!

However, both Barrymore versions had their own specific assets. The
1926 silent film, directed by the somewhat undistinguished Millard
Webb, did have a certain mystical quality akin to at least the spirit
of Melville's novel, it was long enough to allow for interesting
character development, and it allowed Barrymore to play Ahab, with
grotesque makeup, as yet another variant on Mr. Hyde. Moreover, the
love scenes were enhanced not only by the classic beauty of Dolores
Costello but by the fact that she and Barrymore were very much in
love and were soon to marry. On the debit side were some rather
unconvincing special effects.

The talkie version, just four years later, benefitted from a much
improved whale (although some of the action scenes were repeated from
the first version). However, the script by Oliver H.P. Garrett, a
no -nonsense specialist in melodrama (he did both "Night Nurse"
and "The Story of Temple Drake", shown here a week or two back) made
even less attempt to capture more than the bare bones of Melville.
The script was short, snappy and fast-paced, though reflecting some
changes in audience tastes - as in the different method of disposal
for the villain. However, this new version did have the enormous
advantage of sound, allowing Barrymore to roar out some marvellous
bravura lines in that rich voice of his, even while relying much
less on his pantomimic eloquence. (The delightful seagull bit is one
of the highlights of the silent version!). Sound had its
drawbacks too -- Joan Bennett's plaintive "Oh, Ahab!" was a poor
substitute for the limpid eyes of Dolores Costello.

Prior to "Koby Dick", we will be showing some highlights - or more
accurately, a narrated condensation - of the original "The Sea
Beast", and we think you'll find the comparison rather interesting.
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William K. Everson -

Details of our Summer series were outlined, briefly, on our program
note last week, a copy of which will be displayed by the exit doors
this evening. A more fully detailed schedule will be available at
next week's program (the 1931 "Cimarron") or will be mailed to you
on request.
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