"THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH" (Gaumont-British, 1934) 8 reels Directed by Alfred Hitchcock; Produced by Michael Balcon; Associate, Ivor Montagu; Scenario by A.R. Rawlinson, Charles Bennett, D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Edwin Greenwood from an original theme by Charles Bennett and Wyndham Lewis; Additional dialogue, Eelyn Williams; Camera, Curt theon; Dialogue: Peter Slesser, Anthony Waterman, and Peter Gravina; With: Leslie Banks, Peter Lorre, Edna Best, Frank Vosper, Hugh Wakefield, Nova Filibean, Pierre Fresnay, Cleo Lacey Oates, George Curzon, D.A. Clarke-Smith

The first of Hitchcock's six thrillers for Gaumont-British, "The Man Who Knew Too Much" is an incredible step forward from his previous thriller, "Number 17", made less than two years earlier for a smaller studio and an infinitely smaller budget. If one accepts "The Lady Vanishes" as being the most entertaining of his British thrillers (by virtue of its humor and rich assortment of characters), "The Man Who Knew Too Much" is a film prototype of the light-hearted chase-suspense spy film, and "Sabotage" as being probably the most powerful and certainly the most "serious" of the group, then "The Man Who Knew Too Much" seems to be pushed into the lower half of the group, roughly on a level with "Young and Innocent" and superior to "Secret Agent". But such "ratings" are pointless, since all were so good; a more valid comparison would be with Hitchcock's own 1955 remake. Obviously (like Mary Pickford with "Tess of the Storm Country") he liked the story, and felt that the initial version hadn't done it justice. He himself has said that he regards the original as the peak of all his British films of that of a personal nature. There is certainly no disputing the professionalism of the second version, and in some ways it is superior. Hitchcock in the intervening 20 years had learned a great deal more about manipulating audience emotions, and is thus able to engage them more fully. In the original for example, the plot is under way almost before one has had time to get to know the principals, and thus to really care what happens to them. Nova Filibean is such a precocious little brat that one almost feels that the kidnapping will knock a little sense into her, while Edna Best seems so cold and self-assured that, fine actress that she is, she never quite brings to the role the built-in audience sympathy and "instant" vulnerability that the casting of Doris Day (with James Stewart as her husband) provided in the remake. There are also some production crudities, including very obvious back projection in this first version. On the other hand, it is about half as long and certainly twice as taut as the remake, the characterisations are richer, the climax far more exciting, and the general atmosphere of nightmare well sustained, whereas it was merely dissipated by the travesty aspects and the cheerful Technicolor of the remake. Our print tonight, as we forewarned, is sub-standard, but since the film is not in circulation, legally or otherwise, at the moment, we consider ourselves lucky to get it. We think it's well worth bearing with the irritants of disappointing print quality if the rarity and merit of the film really warrants it, which in this case it certainly does. As a comforting final thought however, there are no more such prints on our schedule at least until the Fall of '72!

-- ten minute intermission --

"THE PENALTY" (Metro-Goldwyn, 1920) Directed by Wallace Worsley; Produced by Sam Goldwyn; Scenario by Charles Kenyon from the novel by Governor Norris; Camera, Donovan B. Short; Art Director, Gilbert White; 7 reels With Lon Chaney, Ethel Grey Terry, Claire Adams, Kenneth Harlan, Charles Clary, Doris Pann, James Haeon, Milton Ross, Caesar Gravina.

A fine score arranged and played by James O'Kane.

The rediscovery of the later Chaney MGM films, and (separately and together) the Tod Browning-MGM films, has been one of the most disillusioning areas of filmic research of the past few years. They are stodgy, unimaginative, formula-ridden pictures which in no way live up to their reputation. But the earlier Chaney-Alfred Hitchcock films, such as "The Manxman" (1929), directed by Roland West - are something else again. They not only sustain the Chaney reputation for colorful melodrama and rich, grotesque makeup, but also make one wonder why audiences (and critics) stood still for all the mediocrity of later years when the earlier films must still have been vivid in their memories. "The Penalty" at any rate (directed by the same man who did Chaney's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame") is fine, full-blooded stuff. Its almost deliberate lack of subtlety is stressed by the gloriously simple yet overblown title dialogue, while the plots - unlike the Bronson - have no real humor or property. The story is unreal, hokey, illogical to say the least - but it's engrossing fare of its type, and still works its magic. Chaney's work as usual is an effective mixture of macabre physical contortion and frequently underplayed pantomime, while the nimble way he gets around in his constriciting and painful harness is still nothing short of amazing.

----- Wm. K. Everson ----