"MOUNTAIN JUSTICE" (Warner Brothers-First National, 1937)
Directed by Michael Curtiz; screenplay by Norman Heilly Raine, Luci Ward;
Dialogue director, Irving Harper; camera, Ernest Haller; 9 reels
With George Brent, Josephine Hutchinson, Guy Kibbee, Hona Barrie, Robert
Barratt, Margaret Hamilton, Robert McFadze, Fuzzy Knight, Edward Pawley,
Elisabeth Risdon, Herma Hue Jones, Granville Bates, Russell Simpson, Sibyl
Harrison, Guy Wilkerson.

From its "B" western title to its stark climax, "Mountain Justice" is a
curious picture indeed, with something for everybody, or at least so the
Warner Brothers probably hoped. With a reputation for social consciousness
to live up to, the studio attacks prejudice in various guises, KKK type
mob tyranny, and preach social reform. At the other end of the scale, it
offers a helping of absurd Ladies Home Journal soap opera. No one element
dominates, save that the sillier ingredients disappear before the end, so
that one remembers the vivid style of the closing reels above all else.
But the overall impression is mystifying: was this an "A" picture, a
companion piece to "They Don't Forget" that went awry - or was it a
programmer (like "White Bondage" and so many other Warner "B"s of the
period) that came off with far more style than anyone expected? The
letter is the more likely, and if nothing else the film is yet another
reminder of what an extraordinarily versatile and accomplished director
Curtiz was, and what a strong and recognisable pictorial style he
developed in his days at Warners. It's hardly an important rediscovery.
It's the kind of thing that thirty years ago 42nd Street might have
brought back on a double-bill with an old gangster film. But 42nd Street
has let it down the stairs and the museums would look askance at it, and
try shunts it off into some obscure corner. It's the kind of
worthwhile (even if in a minor sense) film that this series exists for,
and we're glad to call attention to it. Ernest Haller's fine camerawork
is one of the film's major assets, and the cast runs the gamut of
Warner's stock hillbillies and hoodlums. Robert Barratt is in fine
fettle, and once again Ed Pawley is a lecherous moonshiner with a yen for an
eleven-year-old pigtailed barefoot mountain girl. George Brent and
Josephine Hutchinson (though it's always good to see this talented and
mis-used actress) in their unlikely roles and with their novelettish
dialogue, don't stand much of a chance against these veterans.

-- 10 Minute Intermission --

"JIMMY THE GENT" (Warner Brothers, 1934) Directed by Michael Curtiz
Screenplay by Bertram Millhauser from a story by Laird Doyle and Ray
Nazarro; camera, Fred E. K君; 6 reels
With James Cagney, Betty Davis, Alice White, Allen Jenkins, Alan Dinehart,
Philip Reed, Arthur Hohl, Ralt Haroide, Norah Lane, Kayo Hethot, Bertha
Kennedy, Robert Cavanagh.

If there were any doubts about the status of "Mountain Justice", there
can have been none at all about "Jimmy the Gent". Warners clearly intended
it as a snappy, sure-fire crowd pleaser which could be enjoyed - and
forgotten a season later. They were right on the first count, probably
wrong on the second, since its speed and irreverence keep it not only
funny today, but somehow modern as well. It's a rough production: with
a little more care and polish it might have been much funnier, and
Cagney's rather bumptious hero does go overboard a little (just as Douglas
Fairbanks tended to overdo his ebullience in some of his early silent
comedies). But its very crudity makes it work, and also enables the
ultra-polished smoothie of Alan Dinehart - a classic among comic
villains - to stand out all the more. Its opening montage deliberately
exaggerated in its hilarious compilation of sudden death-disasters and
ludicrous superimposed headlines, sets the mood and the frenetic pace
for the whole film, a pace that never lets up in its brief 67 minute
running time. Cagney and Davis work well together as a team and are much
funnier here than in their heavy-handed attempt to return to the same
style in a much bigger 40's comedy "The Bride Came C.O.D.". (The heavy-
handedness was much more the fault of the script than the stars, however).
But it's the supporting players - a marvellous collection of Damon
Runyon-esque thugs, killers, hookers and dope addicts, all somehow
endearing - who steal most of the show and get the best lines. They
include Kayo Hethot, one of the earlier Mrs Bogarts, and the bubbling
and effervescent Alice White who, asked what she'd do for a hundred
dollars, gurglingly replies "I'd do my best!"

-- William K. Everson