"THE GLASS KEY" (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Frank Tuttle
Produced by E. Lloyd Sheldon; screenplay by Kathryn Scola, Kubec Glasmon and Harry and the novel by Dashiell Hammett; Camera, Henry Sharpe; 80 mins

Dashiell Hammett was not a particularly prolific crime and mystery writer. "The Thin Man" was filmed once (with a string of follow-ups); "The Glass Key" twice, "The Maltese Falcon" three times (with a fourth version always being promised or threatened, but as yet never materialising) and "Red Harvest" about to be filmed for the first time. And there is a small handful of films based on Hammett short stories or originals for the screen: "City Streets", "Woman in the Dark", "Mr. Dynamite". Hammett's novels probably did not seem at first to be very promising screen material: their seedy realism seemed to go against the grain of the slicker and more elegant mysteries in pulp-construction, character and decision to film them was made, they proved to be ideal screen material. Hammett wrote like a scenarist and films based on his novels found that the construction was perfectly laid out for them, and that dialogue could be used verbatim.

"The Glass Key", though intelligent, may seem a surprisingly passive movie today, conditioned as we are to the casual acceptance of corruption and super-violence in contemporary thrillers. In 1935 however, it was an interesting, engaging film (and not very influential) on the hardboiled "colite" detective stories, and two slick all-action melodramas like Cagney's "G-Men" of the same year. It was also a strange film to be directed by Frank Tuttle, then a specialist in light comedy and musicals. (Tuttle's career never quite fulfilled the promise of his earliest years. Early in the twenties he directed several interestingly off-beat independent films like "Second Fiddle", and then was swallowed up by Paramount as a contract director. However, his best films were his too-infrared thrillers, such as "The Glass Key" and the commendable Fritz Lang imitation, "This Gun for Hire").

"The Glass Key" of 1935 is in every way superior to its 1942 remake, though that remake misfired for rather interesting reasons and its minor changes were not altogether bad ones. The principal change was in enlarging the small role of the heroine to star status for Veronica Lake, and using her as the hub of a triangle situation that does not exist in the original. The added scenes are worked in logically and do not appear as padding; moreover, while the triangle is a cliche, it is at least a satisfying one, where the romantic elements in the first version are both contrived and ultimately insignificant. (Edward Arnold seems quite happy to drop his mad obsession for the society girl and to go back to his mother instead!)

In line with the dynamic new Alan Ladd image, the limited action elements of the original were expanded in the Ladd remake: more fisticuffs, an off-screen murder turned into an on-screen assassination, Raft's escape from the hoods by tumbling into an alley transformed into a spectacular fall through a sky-light on to a dining table in a restaurant. Perhaps what hurt the remake most was its commendable fidelity to the spirit of the original. The lead characters virtually unchanged dialogue just didn't work in the milieu of the 40's. The characters somehow all seemed like misplaced time-travellers, and the glossy sets and photography lacked the tatty realism and powerful low-angle compositions of the original. A major shortcoming was Brian Donlevy (in the Arnold role), a weak personality who just does not suggest the loyalty-inspiring qualities that come automatically to the Arnold characterisation. Donlevy apart however, the casting for the remake was first rate: William Demarest makes a good movie心理ist, Joseph Calleia, Bonita Granville and Richard Denning taking over effectively for Robert Greckler, Rosalind Keith and Ray Milland. The director - Stuart Heisler - obviously studied the original extremely closely, for many scenes are virtually identical even to the camera angles and cuts. Realizing the star-building potentialities of the nurse's bit (Ann Sheridan in the original) the role was given to Frances Gifford the second time around. A male Negro singer in establishing scenes in a night-club becomes a female Negro singer in the remake; other changes are similarly slight, and typifying of bit roles (Tom Fadden doing the waiter that Irving Bacon did originally) was obviously suggested not by the script, but by looking at the earlier
film. Incidentally, it is interesting to look at George Raft as Hammett’s hero, compare him to the similar Ricardo Cortez performance in "The Maltese Falcon", and recall that Raft was originally scheduled to play Spade in the John Huston version, and turned it down — leaving the way open for Bogart. This first "The Glass Key" certainly gets off to a faster start than its remake, and also white-washes the heroes somewhat less.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

"THE MALTESE FALCON" (Warner Brothers, 1931) Directed by Roy Del Ruth
Screenplay by Wanda Fulton. Lucien Hubbard and Brown Holmes from the novel by Dashiel Hammett; Camera, William Rees; 75 minutes.

Note: Produced under the title "Women of the World"; this print retitled (for television use) "Dangerous Female". For a more detailed comparison between this first version, the second (William Dieterle’s "Satan Met a Lady") and the Huston-Bogart version, then we have room for here in notes, we refer you to the current Citadel Press book "The Detective in Film".

John Huston has frequently been quoted as saying that he was excided by the idea of making "The Maltese Falcon" because, even though it had been filmed before, the first version "hardly touched the book". Even though he could probably have gotten away with that statement in 1941 when the idea of the original surfacing again to refute him was remote, it's unlikely that he ever made the statement. (The quotes were never from Huston direct, always from someone who had it second hand.) Then especially, he was too good a director and probably too fair a man to make such a claim. The only thing that Huston is superior to is the popular magic of Huston in the enthusiasm of his first direction. Warner’s at the peak of their production expertise for this kind of film, an incredibly felicitous cast (Greenstreet, Lorre, Bogart, Astor, Cook), all combined to make it a classic which absolutely transcended its genre. Huston was a better director than Del Ruth, and handled his actors with greater intelligence. Moreover, his own scripting wrought subtle changes that in some cases were an improvement on Hammett’s own writing, and as a director he handled the camera in a semi-subjective way that brought about an unconscious audience “participation” and is a key ingredient in the maintenance of the film’s freshness. Nevertheless - especially given the handicaps of working in the early days of sound - the original is an unusual and interesting production, 1ike 1935’s "The Glass Key" very much at odds with the mainstream of crime and mystery films of the day. What is really remarkable is the fidelity with which Huston’s version follows the original, even allowing for the fact that both versions were faithful to the novel and thus must be faithful to each other. But the choice of angle, and in the selection of dialogue, even in the opening dialogue, were virtually identical. The one element missing — the more gradual introduction of Wilmer, Spade spotting him in the hotel lobby, accompanying him to Gutman and discoveries first — was seen, exactly as in the Huston version (extant stills bear this out) and was presumably cut just to shorten the film. The introduction is now effected merely by the insert of a telegram, and a dissolve into Gutman’s room. Other differences are usually to the disadvantage of the remake, since Huston was hamstrung to a degree by the Production Code, even though delicately suggesting what he could not actually show. In the original, Spade’s affair with Archer’s wife is clearly established, and Archer is aware of it; Spade’s affair with Brigid is also spelled out a little more clearly, as is the relationship between Gutman and Wilmer. Bridg’s being forced to strip was averted in the remake; here it clearly takes place, though tastefully and behind closed doors, and Brigid’s own double-dealing is exposed a little earlier. The performances (especially Dudley Digges as Gutman) are admittedly less flamboyant and less “fun” than in the remake, but they are seedier and dramatically just as valid. Even given the less subtle scoring and less “involved” acting, this first version still holds up well, and would hold up even better with just a little more mechanical help. In keeping with the feeling of the times that musical scoring was an artificial device, there is no music at all — except for the one love scene when it was felt to be essential, and they justify it by giving the music a logical source — Spade puts on a phonograph record. (The device also serves as a outway as the love scene gets under way: scratching phonograph needles, roaring fireplaces and seagulls swopping over waves were once associated with sex in the 30s). Too, Roy Del Ruth, who would his his cracking peak the following year with "Blessed Event", was not yet sufficiently absorbed into the Warner machine to create the kind of taut pacing that was both his specialty (for a while) as well as a studio trademark.