A SOLDIER'S PLAYTHING (Warner Brothers, 1930) Directed by Michael Curtis Screenplay by Percy Vekroff from a story by Vina Delmar; Camera, J.O. Taylor; 6 reels
With: Ben Lyon, Harry Langdon, Lotti Loder, Jean Hersholt, Noah Beery, Fred Kohler, Lee Moran, Otto Matieson, Marie Astaire, Fred Campeau, Al Hill, Dick Cramer, Andy Devine.

I am well aware that "A Soldier's Plaything" may be considered the programming mistake deluxe in our entire twenty-series history. But a series such as this is intended, hopefully, as at least a partial film study source as well as an entertainment recourse. In view of the great film student interest today in the work of both Michael Curtis and Harry Langdon, this unsuccessful but fascinating film seems justified. To my knowledge, it has never been revived, never shown on television. From the condition of our twenty-year-old yet still virginal print, it is obvious that it has never been out of its box, let alone near a projector, since it left the lab! In any case, it has been cast in a rather "rough house" atmosphere and the thought that the audience for "Beast of the City" will be most likely to be kind to it. Its mystery extends from its title, which has nothing to do with the story at all, to its star, Lotti Loder who appears only very late and minimally in the film, and touches all bases in between. An expensive looking film, it gives the impression of either having abandoned whole chunks of footage, reducing well-established players like Jean Hersholt and Otto Matieson to mere bit status, or else of having decided early on that the whole thing was a mistake and just eliminating whole stretches of script. Except for some good openings and sequence (containing a stunningly good, short, violent fight between Ben Lyon and Fred Kohler), it moves in a series of lurches, blocking out after "sketches", and using silent-day subtitles to cover the gaps in continuity. It appears to have been built (originally) around Harry Langdon in an attempt to regain the reputation as Chaplin's rival that he had only so recently lost. (More of that in our opening remarks). His material is thin, and seeing him in such a role is almost as tragic as if Chaplin had been likewise reduced, but he makes more than the most of what he has to work with, and occasionally-as in the curious cafe scene where he notably limes with a deaf girl-it revives that old combination. As to the pantomime and black humor that was Langdon's forte. And the closing gag, too-a minor one, is Langdon's too. For the rest, it is too short (58 minutes) to be dull, with its plethora of easy if misfire jokes, and its solid Curtis technique of mobile camera and shock-outs. Incidentally, the ditty sung by Ben Lyon was later given fresh lyrics and became better known as "Just a Gigolo". — Ten Minute Intercision —

BEAST OF THE CITY ( MGM, 1931; released 1932) Directed by Charles Brabin Screenplay by John L. Mahin from a story by W.R. Burnett; Camera, Norbert Brodine; edited by Anne Beuhans; 9 reels

There was a time, a few years ago, when we thought that Hollywood's rather disturbing series of Fascist-inclined gangster movies — films which advocated ruthless police-state methods to stamp out crime — were limited to a handful of such films as "Star Witness", "The President Vanishes", "This Day and Age" and "Gabriel Over the White House". The more one uncovers of the forgotten past however, the bigger — and longer-lasting — this cycle seems to have been. Even Harold Lloyd's Frank Capra-fish comedy, "The Cat's Paw", falls very much into this category — and so, certainly, does "The Beast of the City", too. So often, MGM gangster films lacked the drive and gusto of their Warner counterparts. "The Wet Parade" could never make up its mind as to a point of view, and "The Secret Six" was basically serial material that didn't have the guts to give itself wholeheartedly to melodrama. "The Beast of the City" however, is different. Without a regular "hero" or at least, without the usual boy-meets-girl complications — it doesn't have to twist and turn to meet formula requirements, or even to match an MGM "image". It's seedy and unpredictable, and its climax both disturbing, powerful, and perhaps — unintentionally — a little amusing too, since it is such a total transfer from the bad conditions of social realism to the glamorous million. (This is doubly emphasised in retrospect, since later in 1932, in another story written by the same W.R. Burnett, "Law and Order", marshall Walter Huston cleans up Tombstone in the O.K. Corral shoot-up in an identical manner.) Another major surprise of the movie is Jean Harlow in what is probably her best non-comedy performance. As the moll who doesn't have to be redeemed for the fadeout, and who of course is uninhibited by not yet introduced Production Code strictures, she is slutish, sensuous and amoralistic — yet doesn't have to be unattractive or guilt-ridden to "compensate". It's a remarkable performance; without the "golden heart beneath it all" patina that spoiled so many other similar roles. (For comparison with "Death Wish" is not inapt.)

William K. Everson