THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK (Joe Rock Productions, Britain, 1936) Directed by Michael Powell Screenplay by Ian Hay, Syd Courtenay, Stanley Haynes, from an adaptation by Jack Byrd of the novel "The Chase of the Golden Plate" by Jacques Futrelle; Camera, Ernest Palmer; Distribution in Britain by MM; no U.S. release; 65 mins.

With Hugh Williams (Nick Barclay); Jane Baxter (June Slade); Maurice Schwartz (The Master); Donald Calhoun (Dr. Walpole); George Rose (International police officer); Peter Gawthorne (Lord Slade); Kitty Kelly (Miss Weeks); Ronald Ward (Jimmy Slade); Reginald Tate (Hayden); George Merritt (Mallory); Ivor Hayward (Hewett); Hal Gordon (Sargent); and Barbara Everest, Wilfrid Caithness, Moyna Fagan, Henry Caine, Syd Crossley, Gerald Fielding.

The British Film Institute has just issued a very handsome book entitled "Missing, Believed Lost" listing and describing their hundred "most wanted" lost British films. Happily, four of these have by now been shown up, three in this country (including tonight's film) and one in Britain. Quite a few of the surviving titles are Michael Powell films, and "The Man Behind the Mask" is particularly interesting in that it is the last (and one of the best) of his Quota quickies. Its success, and Powell's association on it with Joe Rock, led to the production of "The Edge of the World" (incidentally the first Powell film to get a U.S. release). Quota quickies could be abysmal, unless they were directed by someone like Powell (or Arthur Woods, Bernard Vorhaus and David MacDonald) who cared about film, used ingenuity to overcome small budgets, and came up with quality that showed what they could do and eventually paid off in better assignments. Even at the time, Powell's direction was noted by critics. Kine Weekly, in its trade paper, remarked "(It) holds attention by extremely good acting and clever touches. Michael Powell has done everything possible to give plausibility to the tale; he provides a clear continuity, concentrates on facial expressions and detail rather than background and is responsible for many amusing touches". The BFI's monthly film bulletin commented: "Technically the film is excellent. Direction, photography, lighting, acting and sound are all good ... but on the whole the director is to be most congratulated on having made what must be termed a good film out of very unlikely material."

Powell remembered the film as having (initially) a poor script, and that he tried hard to impart the visual and mysterious quality of German films of the late 20's. Certainly he keeps it very nicely on the move, and in fact its briskly paced quality tends the make the ending a little anti-climactic. It plays for pathos as much as for emotion behind it, offers a satisfying rather than an exciting finale, with Maurice Schwartz dominating the film from start to finish. Its point is a very good one, though unfortunately of a later reissue, and trimmed slightly so that it would fit better into the "B" market. Fortunately the editing seems to have done primarily in the establishing byplay at the beginning; it starts rather abruptly, and at least one cut follows. But dialogue explains what is missing, and once under way the film seems to be intact and without any obvious holes.

The film is based on a 1906 novel — his first — by an American mystery writer, Jacques Futrelle. Apparently his novels were regarded less highly than his short stories, which were considered quite remarkable. His detective hero was a Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, an intellectual investigator somewhat in the Poirot tradition. Van Dusen made his first appearance in a Futrelle novel with "The Chase of the Golden Plate", but only appeared at the story's climax. Although the detective is missing from the film version, presumably his function is fulfilled by Henry Oscar, who likewise appears only at the end, as a kind of forerunner of an American agent. Futrelle, born in Georgia in 1857, sadly had about six years as a writer, no time to stretch his potential, before his death. He died, heroically, in the Titanic disaster of 1912. (For this information on Futrelle, and more that there was no room for, I am most grateful to Charles Shibuk, an authority on the detective novel and a regular contributor to "The Armchair Detective".)
and a remarkable cast. Surprisingly, its biggest disappointment today is Colman. At the time it was considered one of his finest screen portrayals, and more than one critic commented on how well he had downplayed his romantic mannerisms. Actually he seems more determined than ever to give a Colman "performance", and award the high-flying dialogue that certainly doesn't help the cause of realism; he charges through the film in a kind of vacuum, almost totally ignoring anyone in the same scene with him as though the whole film were a one-man show. Doubtless this is what audiences wanted from him at the time, and there's no denying that it's an engaging and diverting bravura display. Loretta Young, who later that year would inspire the Holy War in "The Crusades" and two years later would be at least a partial inspiration for Tyrone Power to create the Sue Suez Canal, here provides whatever inspiration Clive's gigantic ego lacks. (One wonders if his falling in love with her picture in her brother's locker was a casual plagiarium from Walthall's falling in love with Gish in "The Birth of a Nation"). For all its teasing of incident and political intrigue into a mere nine reels, "Clive of India" does create an impressive mosaic of the period, and if much happens off-screen, to be relayed only by titles, then the schemings are fascinating and the perpetrators colorful. If "Clive" were to be remade today, doubtless revisionist history would turn him into at least a semi-villain; at that, he's considerably less whitewashed than Cecil Rhodes in the British "Rhodes of Africa" the following year.

The Battle of Flassey is spectacular, though rather untidy (as it probably was in actuality) and the elephants are certainly impressive. Newman's score is surprisingly ordinary for a film so ripe with opportunity, making use of such airs as "Drink To Me Only" and of course the marching music of the British Grenadiers. Casting suggests that originally it was much longer; Clifton Clive is so wasted as a kind of all-purpose enemy to Clive that one feels he must have had more to do originally. Lumsden Hare is pleasingly cast against his usual pompous stereotype, and Mischa Auer has a high old time whipping dancing girls and setting up the Black Hole of Calcutta. There's the usual amount of name-dropping, not too objectionable considering the levels of society against which the action is laid, although the prize is taken by Clive's decision to redecorate his apartments and to employ the services of "that Chippendale fellow".

Rather surprisingly, little is made (other than by a dialogue reference) of Clive's early attempt at suicide, when his gun failed to go off twice in a row -- and then worked perfectly when somebody else pulled the trigger. ( MGM made a little one-reeoler out of that.) Perhaps initially it was intended to use this sequence as an indication of Destiny preserving him as a contrast to Clive's final, successful suicide when stripped of power and in ill-health. The film avoids this dark ending, arriving at a note of mildly optimistic compromise instead, probably largely to keep Colman's huge fan following happy, and possibly partly to placate the Production Code which, because of its liaison with the Catholic Legion of Decency, discouraged "Suicide in plot solution". While certainly not a major Colman or a major Bolelsnawski, "Clive of India" is certainly interesting on both counts, and it's good to see those sets and Marley's camerawork back on a big screen again.

A STRING OF BEADS (Everest Productions, 1953; released to tv, 1954) Directed and Designed by William Cameron Menzies; Produced by William Frye; Executive Producer, Don Sharpe; Camera, George E. Diskant; Based on a story by Sophie Treadwell; 85 minutes. With: Angela Lansbury (Joan Robinson); George Macready (Count Forcelli); Ronald Randall (Peter Jeffries); Nigel Bruce (Colonel Mournay); Brenda Forbes (Edythe Livingstone); Sean McClory (Robert Upton); Sarah Selby (Della Charlton); Ben Wright (Jeweller); Dorothy Green (Laura) and Ronald Colman (Story-teller).

We don't normally screen television films, but occasionally a director or a star makes a difference, and this is certainly an oddity worth sharing -- as well as giving us a Colman with moustache restored, after its absence in "Clive of India". It was made as a pilot for a proposed series of Somerset Maugham half-hours, with Maugham (by implication) playing Maugham and acting as story-teller. The series was never sold, and this pilot found its way into the "Four Star" anthology series. As a pilot, it has the usual above-average production trappings and cast and is one of the very few films that William Cameron Menzies made for tv. Although nearing the end of his movie career and his life, Colman's charm is undiminished, and his trait of playing solely for himself, clearly (and understandably) in love with his voice and situation, hardly matters in a format where he is dissociated from the plot and serves as story-teller. It's an enjoyable little film, with Angela Lansbury especially pleasing in the lead. Ironically, in his credit as production supervisor, Colman's name is misspelled.

Program Ends approx. 10.50. (If we can shave a few minutes from the intro and the intermission, we'll have a short discussion session.)

Program notes. In the notes for "The Man Behind the Mask" I commented that none of Powell's earlier films had had a theatrical release in the U.S. Actually British sources cite RED ENSIGN as being released here as STRIKE!, but so far I have found no evidence of an actual release. Program will start promptly at 7:30 without introduction. Notes will be on hand of course. Also the print of LUCRILE BORGIA is not the one I was expecting and is a little shorter than anticipated, but all of the key material is there and it is still a very substantial version. Full details in next week's notes. Please note that next week is the one weekend of every Fall when I have to be away. Program