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Author(s)	William K. Everson
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"THE WHITE TIGER" (Universal, 1923) Directed by Tos Browning; scenario by Browning and Charles Kenyon from an original story by Browning; Camera, William Fildew; 7 reels

With Priscilla Dean, Wallace Beery, Matt Moore, Raymond Griffith,
ERIC MAYNE, ARTHUR N. MILLETT (as a detective)

It is 17 years since we last ran this film at the Huff. On that occasion we had access to a fine toned original print, long since vanished. Our print tonight is a routine black-and-white copy, and is missing scenes here and there. A negative does exist in England, and we had hoped to replace those missing bits and pieces, but the footage hasn't materialised as yet, and since many of our members are impatient to see it (we've had the print for over a year) we are playing it in its rather rough state. Frankly, while the missing scenes make its plot run smoother, they don't make it a better film, and even originally it had a disjointed quality, as in the virtually unexplained climactic death of the villain -- and the repeated symbolic use of the title throughout is a bit murky too!

When we last ran the film, it and "The Unholy Three" were about the only silent Brownings available, and thus it tended to be regarded as something of a Browning primitive. Today (after exposure to the abysmal "Under Two Flags") it seems far less primitive; but it also confirms that the basic pattern and structure, the use of coincidence and irony, were set up very early in Browning's writing/directing career, and that the later and more famous films with Chaney showed little sense of development or progress. As with "The Show", "The Blackbird" and so many others, "The White Tiger" starts out with a bang -- it is pictorially and dramatically exciting, and sets up an interesting group of characters and relationships. There is a hint of the macabre, and the roots of themes which crop up again and again with Browning, at least as late as 1936's "The Devil Doll", one of his best pictures. (In fact the more one sees of Browning's silents, the more one is convinced that his best films are his often very under-rated talkies). But -- as with so many of his silents -- once Browning has tantalised us with all this material, he lets it all spiral downhill, and two-thirds of the way through (as also in "The Show", "Outside the Law" and others) contrives to have all of his characters locked up in a cramped space, and literally talk their way to a climax -- bad enough in a sound film, but doubly frustrating in a silent! However, it has its academic interest, not least in its cast. It's incredible how Raymond Griffith, given a modicum of pantomimic material, can make the whole film suddenly come to life. Priscilla Dean's huge popularity still eludes me; a harsh and uninteresting actress, she seems totally unsuited to sympathetic roles, and possibly only von Sternberg could have really brought her to life -- as he did with Betty Compson and Evelyn Brent. Moreover, the Browning-Dean films that survive (this one, "Under Two Flags", "The Virgin of Stamboul") are singularly unexciting -- and only her "A Cafe in Cairo" (made independently, with Chet Withey directing) has the color, excitement and exotic adventure that her Brownings were supposed to have. -- M.L.