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"THAT CERTAIN THING" (Columbia, 1928) Directed by Frank Capra
Produced by Harry Cohn; Story by Elmer Harris; titles by Al Boasberg
Camera: Joseph Walker; 70 mins.

With Viola Dana, Ralph Graves, Burr McIntosh, Aggie Herring.

Piano accompaniment arranged and played by Stuart Oderman
Frank Capra began his career as a writer and director of silent Harry Langdon comedies in the mid-20's, and of course found his real niche with the "social comment" comedies and dramas ("It Happened One Night", "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town", "Lost Horizon") of the mid and late 30's. In between, from 1927 through 1933, was a curiously diversified period in which he steadily turned out comedies, gangster films and aviation epics in which the only real common denominator was an ever-present element of sentiment. "That Certain Thing" is one of the simplest yet one of the most enjoyable films from this period. It has a lot in common with Colleen Moore's "Orchids and Ermine", which we showed last season, in that it's a typical Cinderella story of the period, and even overlaps into such specifics as the comic bus sequence, here shot on the sunny Hollywood streets. But whereas the Moore film was very much a product of the 20's, "That Certain Thing" is less brittle, less prone to wisecracking, and - but for the lack of sound - could easily pass as an early 30's film. A lot of the basic roots for Capra's later "class-distinction" comedies can be found here, including a curiously savage sequence - common to later Capra films - in which the "ordinary people", normally the salt of the earth in such films, turn out to be bigotted and singularly objectionable. But the general mood is light and breezy, with the serious moments briskly disposed of. There are no great comedy highlights, but there is constant warmth and spontaneity. The film is also something of a model of how to make a "class"-looking product on a shoestring. The cast is small, and most of the sets are clearly permanent standing sets, pressed into use on other films. Stock footage is neatly and unobtrusively cut into the night-club sequence as establishing shots, and the ditch-digging exterior scene is shot against a stretch of studio wall. Yet it all has a far slicker and more efficient look to it than many a much bigger picture from the major studios. Incidentally, it is also an extremely rare Capra; Columbia destroyed all their original 35mm materials on this film in the mid-50's, just about the time that this original 16mm print was being uncovered in a little camera store in Connecticut. The American Film Institute has just made a preservation negative from this print, but it is just by the purest chance and luck that this early signpost to Capra's later career exists at all.

----- 10 minute intermission -----