

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

THE MATCH KING

Friday, February 4, 7:00pm

1932, 79 mins.

Restored by the Library of Congress

Directed by Howard Bretherton and William Keighley. Written by Houston Branch and Sidney Sutherland. Photographed by Robert Kurrle. Edited by Jack Killifer. Art Direction by Anton Grot. Costume Design by Orry-Kelly.

Principal cast: Warren William (as Paul Kroll), Lily Damita (Marta Molnar), Glenda Farrell (Babe), Juliette Compton (Sonia Lombard), Claire Dodd (Ilse Wagner), Harold Huber (Scarlatti), John Wray (Foreman), Spencer Charters (Oscar).

Note by Michael Mashon, head of the Moving Image section, The Library of Congress:

Of the five major Depression-era studios in Hollywood, Warner Bros was undoubtedly the scrappiest. Unlike MGM with its luxurious sheen and boastful 'More Stars Than There Are in Heaven' slogan, Warners pugnaciously proclaimed that the plots for their films were 'Torn From Today's Headlines!' *The Match King* is a prime example and, as so often with their pre-Code output, the story – brimming with pyramid schemes and other financial shenanigans – could as well been torn from 2010's headlines. Warren William plays the title character, another in a line of unprincipled

businessmen he so vividly portrayed at Warners. Based on Ivar Kreuger, the Swedish industrialist/swindler whose company by the 1920s controlled over 75% of worldwide safety-match production, William's Paul Knoll is an amoral dynamo, crushing competition and human souls with equal gusto. And, in a display of just how swiftly the studio could move from reality to screen, production of *The Match King* began just five months after Kreuger's suicide in March 1932, with the film's release coming in December of the same year. The film is preserved from the original camera negatives by the Library of Congress Packard Campus for Audio Visual Conservation.

From Thomas Doherty's Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934:

Less overt than the preachment yarns but to no less direct in expressing cultural resentment was a series of films targeting the cupidity of the professional classes who had profited most publicly from the 1920s and who folded most pathetically in the 1930s.

Typically cast as workplace melodramas or fictional biopics, they vented a breezy contempt for the American system by exposing the villainy of government officials, elite experts, and professionals of all job descriptions. Once guaranteed to garner prestige and profits, hagiographic biopics of great men from the American pantheon, such as *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) and *Alexander Hamilton* (1931), lagged at the box office. In film after film, the administration of justice and the practice of business appeared as scams and rackets, to be looked upon cynically and bypassed when possible. Corrupt politicians, crooked bankers, shyster lawyers, and quack doctors practiced professional malfeasance as part of the job.

No profession suffered more in public prestige than the businessman, a once unassailable figure. In the 1920s, the businessman was a secular saint, his financial wealth outward manifestation of moral worth. In the 1930s, he was dethroned, condemned as impotent at best and parasitic at worst. The portrait of the self-made man, the rags-to-riches individualist who had been an American exemplar since Ben Franklin paved his way to wealth, took on dark and sinister shadings. By the early 1930s, the cultural stock of the business class was as low as that other stock.

The titan of the industry is a public enemy in *The Match King* (1932), a kind of biopic-a-clef of the notorious Swedish industrialist and swindler Ivar Krueger. A jaundiced look back at the economic practices of the Roaring Twenties from the rueful perspective of the Great Depression, it tracks the criminal enterprise of ruthless international tycoon Paul Kroll (Warren William, pre-Code Hollywood's scoundrel of choice) who stops at nothing to corner the global market on matches, "the one indispensable commodity." Unscrupulous, contemptible, Kroll rockets up the financial ladder by betraying coworkers, girlfriends, and relatives and committing fraud, robbery, and murder. Whenever an obstacle disturbs the swathe he cuts through the commandments, Kroll repeats his favorite saying: "Stop worrying until something happens-then I'll take care of it."

Kroll incarnates the fast-talking 1920s businessman, a slick hustler constructing a financial house of cards on margin buying and worthless bonds. Not neglected is the 1920s obsession with advertising, as when Kroll concocts the "three on a match" superstition to encourage the use of more matches. Like the rest of his generation of rapacious and reckless businessman, however, market forces more malevolent than even Kroll set him up for a fall. When the stock market crashes, the debts come true. Encircled by creditors and threatened with prison, "something" has finally happened and he can't take care of it. "Gentleman," Kroll tells his board of directors, "it is my experience that bankers and pawnbrokers are reluctant to lend you money when you actually need it and frantic to accommodate you when you don't." With his past crimes swirling in double

exposure around his head, Kroll shoots himself and falls into the gutter from whence he came.

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