



The 1924 *The Thief of Bagdad* is a prospective future LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Kino Lorber restoration dvd.

12 of a possible 20 points = *** = a very good film

United States 1924 color-tinted black-and-white 154 minutes
 silent live action feature fantasy United Artists Producer: Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.

Key: *indicates an outstanding technical achievement or performance
 (j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 0 Direction: Raoul Walsh
- 2 Editing: William Nolan
- 2 Cinematography: Arthur Edeson*
 Stills: Charles Warrington
- 2 Lighting: Albert Wayne

Special Effects: Hampton Del Ruth, Howard Lydecker, Sr. and Coy Watson, Sr.

0 Screenplay: Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. writing as Elton Thomas

**1 Music: Compilation from pre-existing sources including
Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

2 Production Design and Art Direction: William Cameron Menzies*

**Associate Artists: Park French, Harold Grieve, Anton Grot*, H. R. Hopps,
Edward Langley, William Utwich, and Paul Youngblood**

Sculptor: Charles Gemora

Technical Director: Robert Fairbanks

Props: Paul Burns

Costume Design: Mitchell Leisen

Makeup: George Westmore

0 Acting

2 Creativity

12 total points

Cast: Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. (Ahmed, The Thief of Baghdad), Julianne Johnston (Princess), Snitz Edwards (The Thief's evil associate), Anna May Wong (j) (The Mongol Slave), Charles Belcher (The Holy Man), Brandon Hurst (The Caliph), Sōjin Kamiyama (The Mongol Prince), Tote Du Crow (The Soothsayer), Noble Johnson (The Indian Prince), Mathilde Comont (The Persian Prince), Sam Baker (Sworder), Basil (j) and George (j) Bookasta (Page Boys), Sadakichi Hartmann (The Mongol Prince's Court Magician), Eugene Jackson (j) (Child), Etta Lee (Slave of the Sand Board), Paul Malvern (Giant Bat), Scotty Mattraw, Charles Sylvester, and Jess Weldon (Eunuchs), K. Nambu (The Mongol Prince's Counselor), Jack Parker (j) (Child), Charles Stevens (The Persian Prince's Awakener), Laska Winter (Slave of the Lute), others

Based on *The Arabian Nights Tales*, Raoul Walsh's 1924 *The Thief of Baghdad* is a silent feature fantasy film heavy on special effects and light on story substance. Enormous, highly detailed sets and outsize monsters dominate the humans seen here, whose thievery, impostures, lusts, and longings constitute what little there is of a storyline. Characterizations are communicated in blatant

gestures inherited from Victorian stage drama. What passes for a central romance isn't even barely credible. Indeed, the thief is truly blinded in love, passing up Anna May Wong's sensual Mongol slave for the utterly neutral Princess of Julanne Johnston. Perhaps a rich inheritance passing down in future to his daughter on the Caliph's demise was chief influencing factor on this supposedly lovestruck pickpocket and cat burglar.

Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. wrote himself the hero's part in the screenplay, disguising his authorship under the moniker of Elton Thomas, two of his baptismal middle names. Themes of religious tolerance, rewarded effort, honesty, and humility are interwoven together, making the film a kind of pictorially fascinating Sunday School lesson geared to youthful viewers.

The plot centers on an initially atheistic, self-absorbed criminal living underground in Baghdad with a thoroughly corrupted associate and mentor, the latter played with relish by comedian Snitz Edwards. Acquiring by theft a magical self-climbing rope, this swaggering, amoral robber and his colleague plan nocturnal robbery of the Caliph's palace. However, their scheme goes awry when the younger man casts a prolonged glance on Princess Anonymous's reposing face while canvassing for portable treasure in what might be termed the royal suite. Immediately lovestruck, he abandons the original goal and resorts to an extemporaneous Plan B, carrying off a princessional slipper instead.

That doesn't set well with his companion in crime, who proposes he resets priorities and absconds with the princess as his next foray into criminal adventure. The Thief of Baghdad thinks this over and decides to pursue it. After all, "What I want I take." And what he desires most at present is physical presence of the caliphate heir.

Encouraged by his companion's suggestion of a historical precedent for such kidnaping, Ahmed the thief agrees to disguise himself as a princely suitor, obtaining requisite garb for that role by pilfering a nearby bazaar during drowsy post-prandial qailulah hours. With hatchet-faced partner acting as herald, the Thief joins the rear of a procession of suitors visiting Baghdad in hopes of marrying into its royal family. Riding on a stolen horse and claiming to be "Prince of the Isles," he finds his charade ending in farce as bee-stung mount pitches him into a rose-tree. Salvation nonetheless arrives, for that accident provides opportunity to pluck a flower for his beloved.

Meanwhile, the princess has learned from a sand oracle her husband-to-be will be whichever wooer touches the rose-tree outside her suite of rooms. Surprise! It's Ahmed, who's buff, funny, and about as lordly as Oliver Hardy. Far more attractive is he than the scowling visitor from India, played by Noble Johnson. A Nosferatu-fingered Mongol, Cham Shang, is no more appealing. Even worse, the portly, squat gourmandizer from Persia has manners and bearing of a pig rather than those of a prince. Obviously, Ahmed leads the pack. Even if nobody among palace nobles ever heard of him before.

Chosen formally as the Princess's spouse, he receives a regal wedding ring.

Eventually being recognized as imposter and fraud, the Thief is arrested, flogged, and sentenced to be torn to pieces by a gargantuan ape. He's saved from that fate when guards are bribed by pearls from one of the princess's necklaces. Still, Ahmed finds himself dumped through a secret panel back into one of Baghdad's dusty streets.

Weak, delirious, and disillusioned, he staggers his way into a mosque where a "holy man" restores him to exuberant health again, then serves as intermediary with the princess, gifting her with return of half Ahmed's royal wedding ring.

When the Caliph insists his daughter make a new spousal selection at once, the girl falls back on delaying tactics, countering with the proposition she will marry whichever candidate can bring her the rarest treasure after the passing of six moons.

Everyone knows who that will be. Right?

From this point on, logic flies out the window and special effects zoom in to replace it. Magic powder, magic crystal, cape of invisibility, a treasureless dragon, one flying horse, a flying carpet, enormous bat and spider opponents – all these make an appearance. Some prove useful, others are merely irritants.

Unsurprisingly, Ahmed resolves to try his own hand at locating the rarest of treasures. He manages to make do nicely with a combination easily overshadowing singularities of rivals. Only by working together can the other three save a poisoned princess from death, the poisoner being completely traitorous Mongol slave girl Anna May Wong, who probably wants Ahmed for her own suitor. Ah, the injustice of a Hollywood-designed script!

Anyway, Ahmed has two definite advantages: his enchanted powder can germinate a loyal army of one hundred thousand soldiers and his cape of invisibility, which actually looks more like a semi-transparent dwarf cyclone, can

readily triumph over Cham Shang's infiltrated army, even though it holds possession of Baghdad's walls and palace.

Fantasy lovers and romantics, rejoice. You're unlikely to find a more entertaining Oriental epic anywhere.

Set designs by William Cameron Menzies, Arthur Edeson's arresting cinematography, excellent lighting by Albert Wayne, and William Nolan's impressively fast-paced editing are highlights, while lackluster acting, borrowed music, and dialogue devoid of character development are severe flaws.

For contemporary viewers, this 1924 production is dated but intriguing. A portion of the restored film relating to what happens at the island of Kwak during the fifth moon is barely watchable due to nitrate deterioration. Otherwise, the movie is pictorially splendid and seems to move along rapidly despite its two and one-half hour runtime.

This Kino Lorber dvd release includes a five-minute Introduction spoken by Orson Welles, nineteen minutes of rare outtakes, some of which are not worth glimpsing (though the mermaid sequence ones are mesmerising), a three-minute excerpt from Paul Leni's silent drama *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*) and a nearly eight-minute long extract from Georges Méliès's *Le Palais des Mille et Une Nuits* (*The Palace of a Thousand and One Nights*), neither adding anything particularly enlightening for the viewer but both straining limits of coherent visibility, greatly informative souvenir program excerpts showing how the film was publicized, a completely insignificant and rather muddled one-minute account of how matte photography was used in the film, some rare special effects footage of a very blurry kind, and a quite detailed and engaging account of how the orchestral score performed by the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra was adapted from 1924 cue sheets.

To summarize, *The Thief of Baghdad* silent film dvd makes enjoyably suitable viewing for teens and adults willing to surrender themselves to a couple hours of dreamy escapism.

