Motion Picture Classic

DEC. 1917

The Scenario Editor

And the Plotting Public

by Katharine Hilliker

THE scenario editor is a literary pariah. If one be credulous, he is the yellow dog of his kind. As the subject of invective, spoken and thought, he has held the spotlight ever since the first Moving Picture reeled across the screen, and time only adds zest to his hounding. He stands accused of every form of discourtesy known to the human mind, and is credited with being a Frankenstein of brutality and a Machiavelli for guile. According to his detractors, Sing Sing harbors no cleverer upper-story worker, and only in a pathological ward will you find anything equaling him in vagaries.

Now, far be it from me to tilt at windmills. I am no female Don Quixote. But, nevertheless, in the interests of fair play and because I know whereof I speak, let me for once present the scenario editor's side of the balance. There can be no doubt that in many cases he is as black as he is tarred—inevitably, with so much flying soot, one is bound to credit a blaze—but that the tar-brush should be applied to each and every member of the profession is not only unjust, but lacking in good sense and discrimination.

It has become the fashion to write—the field of literature has always lured the uninitiated—and because we are a democratic people with an equal-rights standard, our bootblack with an incompleted grammar-school education feels competent to enter the lists against our college graduate whose entire scholastic training has been shaped toward a literary career. As a result of this condition, publishers and editors are swamped with a flood of useless, and more often than not illiterate, material, and to every manuscript received by a magazine editor there will be ten or more for the scenario editor.

There are many reasons for this, but the chief cause is a tendency everywhere, even among experienced writers, to underestimate the art of scenario-building. There seems to be a general impression that the picture industry is a gigantic get-rich-quick opportunity promulgated mainly for the benefit of aspiring would-be playwrights, a path to easy money in which neither skill nor intelligence is a requirement. As a matter of fact, the successful screen-play is a difficult bill to fill, combining as it does the subtleties of pantomime with the constructive art of the drama, and the writer who warms over a yesteryear's hash of ideas, expecting to tickle the scenario editor's palate therewith, need not be surprised at its rejection.

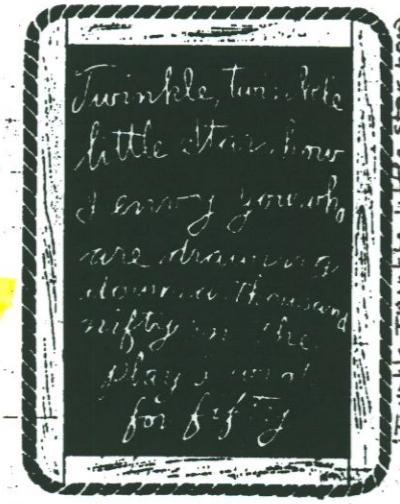
At a dinner, recently, the subject of photoplay writing was broached. One of the diners, a writer of considerable note, who has of late been devoting his entire time to Motion Picture work, was taken to task by the lady on his right.

"My dear Jonathan," she said (which, by the way, is not the gentleman's name), "what's this I hear? That you have gone in for the movies!"

He admitted the charge. Her face assumed an expression of well-bred disapproval.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed. "How could you! Why, even my maid writes scenarios!"

Jonathan grinned boyishly. "So?" he replied. "I dash mine off between tea-



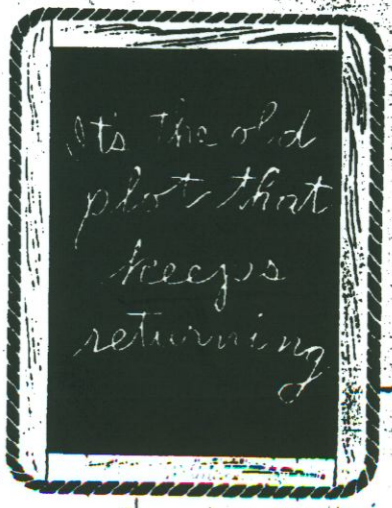
time and dinner. When does she do hers?"

In truth, he had just completed work on an eight-reel play, and by work I do not mean the writing alone. With the completion of the script, he had taken up the problems of cast-selecting, locations, etc., with the director in charge. Part of the action necessitated the taking of pictures in prohibited places, and for days he traveled back and forth between Washington and Boston pulling wires to remove the ban. As a result, his play is today a tremendous and inspiring thing and the message it carries is sweeping the country from one end to the other. Unfortunately, it is not often given the scenario editor to deal with able and conscientious writers of this sort. It is more generally the lady's maid who absorbs his time, and her scenarios are as neat and innocuous as herself.

People who would never think of attempting to write a play or a short story will, in all good faith, seize upon some happening of daily life which appears to them sufficiently out of the ordinary, and, with no knowledge of dramatic construction and a total absence of imagination, try to make a screen-play of it. Worse still, the average layman takes as his pattern one of those early screen-horrors—which served, true enough, their purpose at the time, that of demonstrating to the public the fact that photography could be given life and action, but which have long since been relegated to the limbo of antiquated and outgrown things—and after following faithfully its atrocities of theme and construction, he unloads the finished product on the nearest S. E. and sits back to await his check.

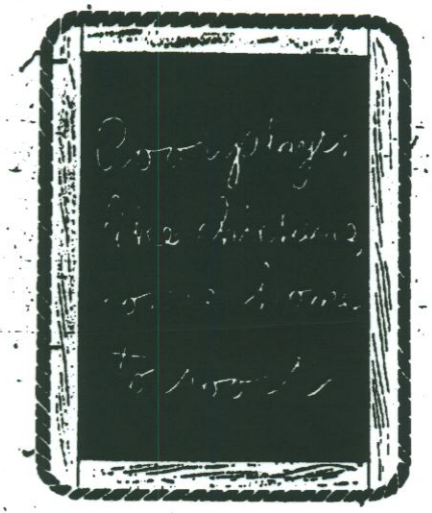
John, for instance, in the park, comes upon Mary deeply annoyed by Horace, the villain. John to the rescue. Wins Mary's grateful thanks. Friendship ripens into love. Horace plans revenge. Involves John in a robbery. John innocent but in jail. Horace free to court Mary. Convinces her that John is a thief, unfaithful as well. Righteously incensed, Mary marries Horace. By the time John's prison-term is up the writer decides to let right and justice triumph. Out of a clear sky, Horace confesses his crime and removes himself from the path of happiness either by the poison-route or with an automatic, in consequence of which Mary and John are reunited, living happily ever after on Horace's money.

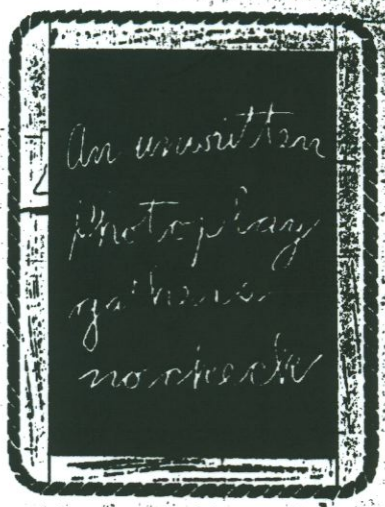
On the other hand, there is the successful writer of short stories and novels who looks on the newly opened field of literature with a lackadaisical interest, tinged with tolerance in view of its gold-lined soil. This type of contributor is the bane of the scenario editor's existence. Moved mainly by thought of easy money easily turned, and with a thinly veiled contempt for the work itself, he falls to and boils up one pet-child after another, expecting his name and fame to bring an instant response from the editor he has deigned to favor. In many cases the name *is* worth while from an advertising standpoint, and the purchase of a script, seemingly approved by the scenario editor, may often be traced to the policies of the business office. In this same class runs the playwright who submits the shabby, dog-eared manuscripts



(Thirty)

It's the old plot that keeps returning—





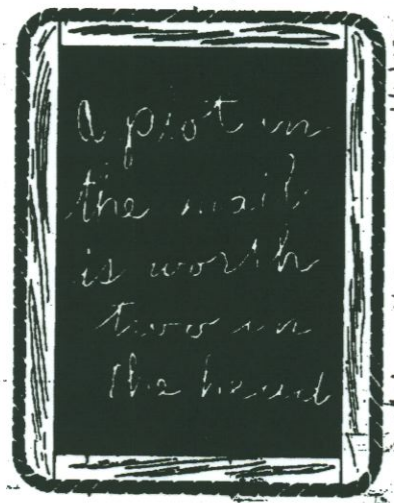
of past successes, plays with not a glimmer of picture value, in the hope that he may be able to squeeze from an already dry orange another drop of its golden juice.

It is significant that very few of these people make a business of screen-writing.

In nine cases out of ten the writer will be holding down some sort of a job for eight hours or more of daylight, and his venture into scenarioizing is simply an attempt to trim the daily loaf with frosting. Again, there are others set far beyond the need of financial consideration, who have no particular gift for writing, but who see in the films a mode of expression independent of careful diction and the stylist's rules. These invariably have a pet story to tell and the screen solves the problem.

In this latter class, I call to mind a man with an established income, the head of a large corporation, who amused himself in spare time by writing scenarios. Unlike the majority, he had ideas, and if circumstances had forced him to depend on a fertile brain for plots, he would undoubtedly have notched another mark on the stick of fame. In direct antithesis to him was a little seamstress who came into the office one day with what she fondly hoped was a masterpiece. Poorly dressed and overworked, her head filled with flowery tales of the money to be made in pictures, she fancied she had hit upon a Utopian dream of deliverance. An excellent dressmaker, she was unfortunate as a dramatist, and the poor little effort had to go back.

Doctors, lawyers, merchants, chefs, stenographers, housemaids, firemen, cooks, from the newsboy to the magnate, they all come to the scenario editor's door. Sometimes they set forth those phases of life with which they are most familiar, as, for instance, the delightfully naive young fireman who complained to me that he had never seen a fire-story properly presented in the movies, and who was prepared in his script to stage a million-dollar conflagration just to show how it should be handled. But more often they write of things they have never seen. Nelly, the switchboard operator, dwells on the sea, never having been further outland than Valparaiso, Indiana; and Toughy, the newsy, bred and brought up in New York, sends in a Wild-West yarn that would make "Broncho-Billy's" escapades look anemic.



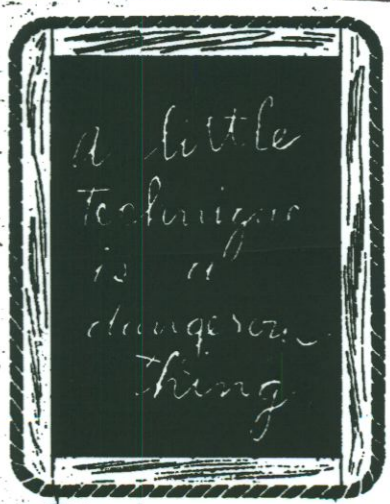
One of the worst pests is the poet. He is possessed of a frantic longing to see his rhyming couplets sandwiched between the scenes of a play, and no amount of cold-blooded reasoning will penetrate his poetic ardor. You may tell him that reading poetry is not the average American's idea of an indoor sport, and cite instances in which poetry and the film have been combined with disastrous results, financially at least. But as he is generally ridden by a desire to uplift the masses and a conviction that *his* verses will be the ones to awaken the sleeping soul of a Broadway audience, your argument falls on unheeding ears.

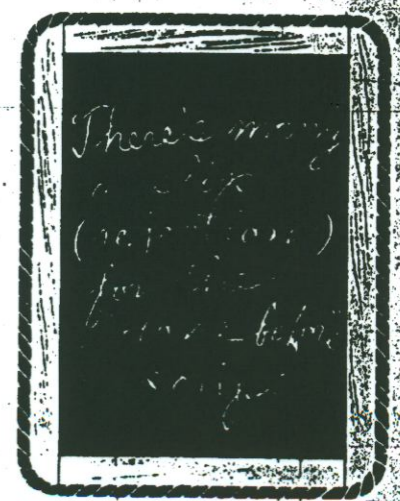
Another of the scenario editor's trials—which, however, he shares in part with all other editors—is the tendency of contributors to fall upon some current topic for inspiration and work it until the flavor has died of exhaustion. The European war was the signal for a downpour of international spy plots; the recent rise in the marriage rate following directly our declaration of hostilities with Germany brought an influx of slacker tales. But by far the most harrowing of all epidemics was the vampire fever, which a year ago was at its height, and which is still dying hard. It is safe to say that the scenario editor can now distinguish with the naked eye, at a distance of five hundred yards, any specimen of the improper female. Her ways are no longer past finding out. He knows every trick in her bag and is weary to death of them all.

Keeping a close second in the race was the white-slave horror. After reading several hundred scripts in which little Maggie, fresh from cow-ey fields and chicken-y acres, was always hotfooting it just ahead of the villain's clutches, the reader is apt to start running himself, in circles around his desk or sprints up and down the fire-escape.

Every few months brings a new rage. For a while the scenario editor couldn't open an envelope without being ambushed by Indian material; then came the Western stuff, cowboys and pony

(Continued on page 66)





The Scenario Editor and the Plotting Public

(*Continued from page* 31)

girls, round-ups and broncho-busters *ad nauseam*. One of the saddest and most chastening of experiences was the wave of sickly, sentimental slush for which "Marie Odile" was responsible and which nearly asphyxiated the suffering S. E.

And now let us come to the most serious problem with which the scenario editor has to deal—the literary thief. Much has been written of plagiarism, and the half is still unsaid. While it is without doubt a constant menace to the magazine editor's peace of mind, it is the ever-stalking Nemesis of the scenario editor. A thief may seize upon a plot, but in order to dispose of it to a magazine, he still must clothe it in pleasing English and a certain individuality of style, else his chances of selling it are slim indeed. This is apt to give him pause, especially if he is not a clever thief. But given his lifted plot with a scenario in view, and his path is far rosier. He may dress it in the most indifferent of English so long as the salient points of the story are defined, and still have an excellent chance of interesting the scenario editor, who is in the market for ideas and well-constructed plots rather than for skillful writing. So easy a prospect is bound to attract crooks, and the scenario editor, in order to avoid pitfalls, must have read everything from Andromache to the current number of the *Police Gazette*.

Not long ago I received a number of manuscripts from a moderately well-known playwright. Among them was an old French tale of marital difficulties, situation for situation as Balzac had written it. No attempt had been made at disguising it, and the sender had signed it in full as the author. With the inefficient copyright laws protecting him, he was safe so far as legal procedure threatened, and that was all that interested him.

On another occasion, rather recently, I became aware that the manuscript I was reading was bafflingly familiar. I glanced at the title and the author's name. Both were total strangers. I continued my reading, knowing ahead of time each phase of the story before it unfolded, but at the finish I was as much in the dark as ever. I could not unearth from my memory the name of that tale and its writer. As a result, it went back to its sender in a return envelope. A few nights later, in going over a bundle of old magazines I found its original in the pathetically charming war-story which Mary Roberts Rinehart had written some time before under the title: "Are We Downhearted? No!"

One day last summer I came across a script sent in by a very reputable agent, a man who handles only the work of well-known people. The writer's name was equally familiar as the author of a number of short stories and novels. To my amazement, on reading the submitted manuscript I found its main situation apparently lifted from a story by Henry Rowland which had appeared serially in *The Saturday Evening Post* a year or so before. On notifying the agent of my find, he acknowledged the similarity of the stories, said that he, himself, had noticed it, but after talking to his client was convinced that it was one of those unexplainable freaks of thought by which two people had been visited with the same inspiration. The explanation was entirely acceptable by reason of the agent's reputation for integrity, but the story was not. No matter how honestly the lady had come by the idea, it was much too close to the Rowland story to be wholesome, and it was consequently returned.

These are only a few examples of what has become the most unsettling feature of the scenario editor's work. Furthermore, his responsibility is increased by the very nature of his contributors. Take, if you will, the Rinehart story. It is often the custom in scenario departments, when a script is poorly written and put together, tho still presenting a plot, to purchase outright with a view to reconstruction. The story is then turned over to an expert continuity writer, to be whipped into shape for the screen. In other words, the author is paid for his idea, and, unless he so stipulates in his contract, his name does not appear on the finished play.

Suppose I had never read Mrs. Rinehart's story. I might have put the submitted version thru for reconstruction, for while the main essentials of the plot were there, it was abominably written. The sender, provided the story proved acceptable all around, would doubtless have waived his credit, accepted his check and sunk out of sight. When Mrs. Rinehart discovered her story screened without permission, she would have descended on the company, and the company, in turn, would have descended on me. In time the matter would have been cleared up, but meanwhile there would have been added to the legion another rumor anent the thefts of the scenario editor.

Then there is the case, an example of hundreds of others, where the company gets caught and has to pay for stolen goods—innocently stolen by them, mind you. I recall one of the first cast-away-on-an-island stories, in which the butler turns out to be the hero. A reputable company had accepted the script from its alleged author and sent him a check. Then, lo and behold! when the picture had been produced and was ready for release, somebody (heaven knows who) discovered that the plot had been bodily lifted from William Gillette's "The Admirable Creighton." A check for $5,000 avoided a lawsuit. There followed a frigid and frosty day for Mr. S. E.

Is it any wonder that he has developed a disposition and the conviction that a scenario is the red-headed stepchild of Fiction?