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MOTION PICTURE CENSORSHIP

by GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

THE anti-censorship organizations have lately been making a beautiful noise about the threatened complete censorship of the motion pictures. The latter, they allege, will be fit only for juvenile half-wits when the scissors boys and girls, if they have their way, get through with them. An incipient art is to be hamstrung and squashed; free speech, the very foundation-stone of the Republic, is tottering; and so forth and so on. As a member of certain of these anti-censorship bodies and as one who, in almost all cases involving censorship, is ever ready to lend them his full and vigorous support, I nevertheless on this particular occasion privilege myself the pleasure not only of disagreeing with them, but of accompanying that disagreement with what, in the low vernacular, is known as the bird.

The current movie censorship drive, as everyone knows, is directed primarily against smut, with which the pictures in recent years have been brimming. Smut—and there is no other name for the thing the pictures have been retailing—is no part of any kind of art or even pseudo-art and its forced elimination should not concern any anti-censorship body with an ounce of intelligence left in its head. Furthermore, not *one* of the relatively better pictures made and released in the last fifteen years has in the least relied upon dirt, and these pictures, while here and there censored in an unimportant detail or two under the former dispensation, have still remained possible for adult consumption and more or less intelligent enjoyment. What is more, these pictures have been the screen's high-water marks and some of them have made big money. To name a few: "The House of Rothschild," "The Private Life of Henry VIII," "Arrowsmith," "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang," "Two Arabian Knights," "Tabu," "The Big Parade," "Disraeli," "Hallelujah," "Journey's End," "All Quiet on the Western Front," "The Last Laugh," "Two Hearts in Waltz Time," the several René Clair pictures, "The Birth of a Nation," "The Guardsman," "Hell's Angels," "Abraham Lincoln," "Cavalcade," "The Covered Wagon," "Little Women," "Variety," "China Express," the various Chaplin films, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", etc. Still others such as "Ben Hur," "Way Down East," "Little Miss Marker," "The White Sister," "Smilin' Through," "The Champ," "Convention City," "The Thief of Bagdad," "Cimarron", the various Pickford films, "Skippy", etc., have been very successful and have been similarly uncensorable and uncensored save, in one or two instances, in negligible and entirely insignificant fragment. Furthermore, even under the strictest censorship, no films of any so-called educational or scientific value have been bowdlerized or damaged in the slightest,

except perhaps one or two Bali or South Seas travelogues which have had a few feet of dark beauties' mammae cut out—and just where the great educational or intellectual value of amplitudinous bosoms lies, one has difficulty in making out.

The truth about the movies is that, in many cases, they have got to be so filthy that they do not in their present plight deserve the least consideration from any anti-censorship organization. As well let such organizations protest against the raiding of stag "smokers", prevention of the public sale of pornographic pink-backs, or the forbidding of promiscuous peep-shows. How the intelligence of a public is to be affronted and how its cultural rights are to be invalidated by eliminating from the movies scenes in which Mr. James Cagney pinches his old grandmother on the bottom, literary moments in which Mr. William Powell, surprised by an intruder while he and a lady are seated respectively on a water-closet and bidet, jocundly observes, "That's all right; we're only chatting", and episodes in which Miss Mae West sardonically employs her spacious backside in lieu of repartee, I should like the anti-censorship crusaders, including those with whom in other directions I am wholeheartedly affiliated, to explain to me.

Censorship, far from hurting the movies (save in the pocket), in the long run will doubtless improve them. No first-rate, honestly made, intelligent picture is likely to be much interfered with. A few unimportant little cuts, now and again, perhaps, on the part of the inevitable busybodies, but of small impairment. Cheap smut, cheap humor, cheap sex—these will be compulsorily weeded out. Imagination, invention, better writing and a general greater literacy will perforce have to take their places. The notion that intelligent adults—or even children who haven't been dropped on the head, for that matter—take an overwhelming delight in guano seems to be a notion shared only and equally by the movie executives and the anti-censorship committees.

But, say these anti-censorship committees, it is not only smut and cheap suggestiveness that the censorship advocates are driving against; they are driving against what they are pleased to call the general "immorality" of the films. That is, everything from illegitimate babies and godless gangsters to prolonged kisses and facile divorces, from too accessible bedrooms and too inviting haystacks to women's bare thighs and undulating rears. Therein, they contend, lies the danger. All well and good. It is quite possible, even probable, that the motion picture censorship will now and again be as ridiculous as most censorship becomes when it gets a few free drinks under its belt and goes on a rampage. But that is not the

point at which we are trying to get. The point—and we repeat it for the stubbornly obtuse—is that this violent free-for-all censorship movement would never have got under way if it had not been for the smut in which the movies have permitted themselves gloriously to wallow. The smut started the ball rolling and gave the censors the necessary ground into which to dig their indignant—and properly indignant, if we do say so—toes. If it had not been for the smut, things would have gone on in the old, easy, humdrum censorship way, and with little or no damage to the films. But the pictures have now got what is coming to them. With certain honorable minor exceptions, they have given the public excrement in return for its entertainment money, and the excrement has been brought home and dripped on to the parlor rug and the nursery carpet, and has befouled the household. And not only the pictures themselves, but the way in which they have often advertised themselves in the newspapers and the way in which they have heralded their appearance by means of suggestive and often disgustingly lewd “trailers”.

Let the anti-censorship bodies face the facts and meditate them. All of us are against censorship, but those of us with some little sense left may reflect that there is a whale of a difference between reputable literature, reputable drama and even reputable motion pictures on the one hand, and foul money-grubbing dung on the other. To fight in behalf of such stuff is to lose the whole fight against censorship.

TOVARITCH SINCLAIR

by HAROLD PREECE

AFTER I had left the theological seminary, I removed the figure of the Nazarene from the niche above my bed and installed a carved image of Upton Sinclair. The light of faith, almost extinguished by sundry delvings into anthropology and economics, flared again into the white heat of rebellion. Chicago packing-house employees, begrimed with the filth of the slaughter-rooms, Colorado coal-miners defying injunctions and national blackguards, became my holy angels singing cosmic Internationales around the everlasting throne at Long Beach. Ardent neophyte, I visualized the time when I, too, might suffer for the faith and perhaps leave behind an Augustinian confession to inspire the unknown young novices who would take up the fight.

Alas! I once more walk in darkness without even the dehydrated assurance of a Unitarian intellectual. My Master, after years of agonizing contortion, has jumped a little bit too sprightly from the cross, and is now hobnobbing with those who drove the tacks into his shins. He whose words caused many a Jimmie Higgins to do and dare forgets the poor who heard him gladly, and casts lustful eyes toward the California Executive Mansion. The Devil has shown the earthly kingdom to the Messiah, and the Messiah has bitten like any rural aspirant for the constable's office. “Governor” Sinclair seems incomparably less impressive than “Comrade” Sinclair, the ex-deity's continued adherence to a milky Socialism notwithstanding.

Not that I am free from grave qualms of conscience. I know full well that I did not measure up unequivocally to the standards of the Master. When I first escorted a freckle-faced damsel to the haystack, I had grave misgivings regarding the purity of such a procedure. I recalled, in a sudden flash of decency, that Comrade Sinclair had fled the lascivious embraces of a siren who had tricked him into the woods. But when my temptress demanded to know what “we were waiting on,” the flesh won a decisive victory over the spirit.

Sometime, afterward, the unholy potion distilled from corn first touched my lips. At the moment of quaffing my initial drink, I recalled Upton's stern prohibition regarding the use of intoxicants.

When the fiery red-eye began to burn my insides, I wondered if the sensation was not that of my hepatic cells being eaten up, the condemnation which the Master had fixed for drunkards. Nor did I become entirely free from alarm until I had attended several other parties.

Playing God is undoubtedly a lonely task. Upton, perhaps weary of the venality of such young jackstraws as myself, quietly stepped from the throne and decided to be “just folks.” The internecine contests among his disciples, various rebel groups buffeting and pillorying one another, probably sickened his vegetarian stomach. Then again, he might have retained his celestial attributes had the Socialist Party of California not nominated him for Governor a couple of times. It was too much like giving a taste of sirloin to a retired circus lion.

Had I not been fatuously blind, I might have noticed long ago that the toes of my idol were beginning to crumble. “Boston” was the last novel which most nearly suggested the early Upton Sinclair. Then began a dreary cycle of Mary J. Holmes *opera* bound in cloth, enlivened only by “Oil,” which had the merit of being fairly well-written.

To me, it is a sad commentary upon Sinclair's deterioration that he was unable to grasp the significance of the events which followed the ebb of prosperity. The stock market crashed; hungry workers stormed city halls and relief stations; here was the proletarian revolution in the first throes of birth. But a man who had possessed undisputed intellectual sway over the American radical movement became suddenly impotent, clinging to a sterile parliamentarianism and expressing himself in the drooling gibberish of capitalist democracy. The paralysis which afflicted democracy as a political system afflicted Upton Sinclair as an individual writer. Henceforth, he could only repeat himself, and repeating at so much a word has been his later policy.

What is “Mountain City” but the afterbirth of “Oil?” One is tempted to think that Comrade Sinclair preserved the discarded pages from the manuscript of the latter novel and shipped them off to his tractable printer. The central character is a two-fisted oil operator whose beautiful and neglected wife, yearning for romance, runs off with another feller. The author, having purged himself of his youthful iniquities by writing an unconscionably dull book, thus made himself eligible for the unconscionably dull society of the intellectual bourgeoisie. There is a faint, very faint, flare of the old Upton in “Roman Holiday.” But even in this rather mediocre production the germ of imitation is present. “Roman Holiday” is simply a feeble reminder of “They Call Me Carpenter.”

At the same time that “Upton Sinclair Presents William Fox” was released for publication, Tom Mooney was rounding out another year in San Quentin, and the Imperial Valley massacres were maturing. But Comrade Sinclair found more emotional depth in the career of a former Hollywood magnate who had been caught napping. That Mr. Fox retired with several cool millions was irrelevant to his biographer. Comrade Sinclair thought it a damned shame that the perpetrator of innumerable Tom Mix atrocities should have lost according to the rules of his chosen game. As if in apology for glorifying an unhorsed captain of industry, the veteran propagandist revealed that Fox was once a Socialist. Perhaps the defection of his hero salves Sinclair's erratic conscience.

“American Outpost” is the most shameful mark of Upton's surrender. Here the old Communard boasts of associating with all sorts of phoney characters from the other side of the barricade. All that now remains for a man, who at times approached Gorky in his pity for the under-dog, are the shroud, the book, and the bell.

The younger writers who have identified themselves with the proletariat can no longer look to Upton Sinclair as a patron and friend. His demagogic barnstorming over the length of California may constitute an “Epic” in his own mind. To us, it is a pain in the neck!