

THE UNDERGRADUATE AND THE SCENARIO

BY THOMAS H. INCE*

THE writing of motion-picture scenarios is a field of literary endeavour that has been strangely overlooked by the ambitious and talented young fellow who is "working his way" through college.

We have come to know the undergraduate who earns his board and tuition and other expenses by managing an eating club, taking orders for laundry, chaperoning the college furnaces, soliciting subscriptions to books and periodicals and the like during the vacation period; but so far, we have not become acquainted with the clever fellow who devotes some portion of his spare time to the fashioning of scenarios for the motion pictures.

Here is a vast, unworked, wonderfully fertile field that offers better and quicker financial reward than almost any other line of personal effort that I know of.

There is a great and immediate demand for stories for the motion pictures and so far the producers have, for the greater part, been compelled to rely upon the writers of note whose "best sellers" have brought exorbitant prices to their authors, and to the staff writers who are attached to most of the important studios of the country.

With our old friends, Mr. Supply and Mr. Demand, still doing busi-

ness, as usual, and with Demand overwhelming Supply, the pressing need for scenarios becomes more apparent. Picture producers think nothing of paying anywhere from five thousand to forty thousand dollars for the motion-picture rights to some popular story that has film possibilities, and has the added advantage—and this latter is a very important item—of an exceptional advertising vogue. As much as a thousand dollars has been paid for a single idea, for a situation or an incident, for the mere suggestion of a climax that will lend itself to the purposes of the camera.

And yet there are literally thousands of bright young men, working their way through educational institutions, who regard their earning capacity as of unusual calibre if it returns to them as much as five hundred dollars a year,—meaning the scholastic year in this connection. Most of these young men are gifted in a literary way . . . certainly, each of them has at least one story locked up in his brain, one story that will stand the Missourian test of the producer.

The writing of a story for the screen is not a difficult matter, once the author has his plot well in mind. The motion-picture producer does not care for any technical arrangement of the story—meaning that he does not want the story submitted in what we, of the screen, call "continuity form." The writing of "continuity"—the writing of the various scenes of the picture—is a matter

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for the staff writers who make a specialty of this form of composition.

Any good plot for a picture can be told in from one thousand to three thousand words. All we care for is the mere story, with the characters well defined, the action and incidents plainly indicated . . . there need be no dialogue at all. The fashioning of such a story represents but a fraction of the time and effort that enter into the writing of a short story for a magazine or a similar literary composition. Personally, I have bought first-class stories that have been written on the back of a single envelope . . . but the *story* was there in its entirety, condensed, of course, but complete.

The motion-picture story makes just as many demands upon the author as does a dramatic work upon the dramatist. Everything that enters into the making of a successful play must be found in the successful motion picture. First of all, there must be conflict—and all drama is conflict—and there must be, too, suspense, plenty of action, the always necessary “love interest,” the characters must be human and act like human beings; all artificiality must be brushed aside on the screen as on the speaking stage and there ought to be as much of comedy as is permissible, because laughs are as valuable an asset to the screen product as to the play of the stage. And above all else, there should be the always desirable “punch.” This “punch” may be physical or psychological. Many picture producers rely upon the physical punch for their most effective scenes and climaxes, although the psychological has been known to be equally as thrilling and telling, if logically

introduced, and not merely dragged in.

It was not so very many years ago that most producers of films believed that a physical fight was an all-important feature of a screen product and it was not long before almost every maker of pictures was engaging the sturdiest of actors, with the result that with everybody filming fights, the fight quickly lost its screen value. Now, the producer injects a fight into his work only when the exigencies of the story demand it, and not for the mere sake of having two well set-up actors pummel each other for several hundred feet of film for the few thrills that such a battle may provide.

The public has showed, by its failure to patronise them, that costume pictures are not wanted. So, no matter how good the costume story—and by “costume story” I mean a story in which the characters live and are garbed in the attire of another period than the present—may be, nor how many opportunities it may offer for effective picturisation, the writer of scenarios would do well to avoid this class of story.

There are specialists in scenario work, as in every other department of literary effort. For instance, I have had in my employ for the last three years one writer who specialises in scenarios for my Artcraft star, William S. Hart, the portrayer of Western characters. Hart requires a peculiar sort of a story. The people that go to see a Hart photoplay never would accept him in the garb of an Easterner. He is essentially of the West. He possesses a singular and proved ability to portray characters of the early Western country—the sturdy pioneer of the plains, the grim-visaged, steel-eyed,

quick gun-draw man of the mining camp and gambling places of the early fifties. Hart always must have the best of every physical argument in his screen work, not that he personally cares to come out "first best" in every encounter, but if he did not, his millions of admirers would be disappointed and he must be kept on his cinema pedestal. Hart always must have a chance to prove his superiority as a horseman. He demands opportunities to come to the screen rescue of suffering and imperilled femininity. He must be pictured as a big-hearted, whole-souled, rough-spoken man with a wealth of real affection for animals, children and womenfolk. Aside from these screen necessities, Hart may be pictured as a despicable sort of a character by the scenarioist, only he must have a chance to swing over to the side of Law and Order during the last hundred or so feet of film of the story.

So, a story that will fit Hart pretty much after the manner of the proverbial wall-paper might not be at all suitable to any other screen player, although there are scores of what we call "Western actors" in the different studios of California and the East. But because this particular scenarioist I refer to has the knack of fashioning stories for Hart he is able to report a yearly income of fifty-two thousand dollars to the Government—and if he turns in eight stories a year I am more than satisfied.

A few months ago there came to my Los Angeles studio a young man who said he was a graduate of the University of California. He said he had taught school in a small town in the State of Washington for a year, after which he had tried being

a San Francisco newspaper reporter at thirty-five dollars a week. He thought he could write scenarios. I told him to prove his belief by writing one. He did. It was so good that I immediately bought it. I paid him more for this one story than he had received for an entire year's work as a school teacher in Washington. His next story was even better. He showed that he had the faculty for "building plots." Today he is a member of my regular staff of scenario writers and is paid more money every Saturday afternoon than he ever dreamed he could make in an entire month in any other line of work.

Any "best seller" will bring to its author about forty thousand dollars for the motion-picture rights. This is the amount such popular fictionists as Rupert Hughes and Robert Chambers receive for one of their widest advertised stories, after it has gone through the serial and bound volume process. Rex Beach will not sell his stories at any price. He prefers to turn his plots into film form himself, thereby getting the profits that otherwise would accrue to the producer. That Mr. Beach has found his plan is a good one is attested by the fact that he continues to plod along, content to make about one hundred thousand dollars with each of his stories, in their celluloid form. Even Mrs. Humphry Ward—whose writings are not particularly suitable for screen purposes—demands and receives as much as five thousand dollars for one of her stories. I think this is the amount she received for the screen rights to *Missing*, which attained something like a fourth rank in the best-seller class of its year.

Barrie will not listen to the golden

offers of the film folk. Once he did. He sold the rights to picturise *The Little Minister*. He did not like the result and declared that never again would he permit any picture maker to use one of his stories. He has steadfastly stuck to this declaration, although he has been offered one hundred thousand dollars for the film rights to *Peter Pan*. Nor will the heirs to the Lew Wallace estate consider any price for the screen rights to *Ben Hur*. As much as two hundred and fifty thousand dollars has been proffered for the right to make a picture out of the Wallace story, and the offer refused. Perhaps, some day when the bid for *Ben Hur* rights reaches the half million mark, there may be a different answer.

Only recently the sum of forty thousand dollars was paid for the film rights to a recent stage success of more than common proportions. Most of the plays of the speaking stage have been made into pictures, which will largely account for the present condition of Mr. Supply and Mr. Demand.

"While there are only a few *Peter Pans* and *Ben Hurs*, there are, nevertheless, hundreds of clever young

men, with trained minds and fluent pens, undergraduates of our educational institutions, who would not mind being paid hundreds—and perhaps thousands—of dollars for a story that would make a good motion picture. The market is awaiting their product and it is always a rising market, too. The entire future of the fifth industry in the United States depends upon exactly one thing—good stories with film possibilities. Some day, an early day, I trust, some of the young men who are earning their educations by hard work will turn their attention to this big, undeveloped, golden field of the motion-picture scenario.

And to the college student who may care to exploit this wonderfully fertile field, I might mention an all-important fact—that in selling a scenario, the author merely disposes of the motion-picture rights . . . he retains for his own the serial and other rights, because all the motion-picture man cares for is the right to turn the story into a five-reel photoplay—and five reels of film mean about five thousand feet of celluloid romance and adventure, or about fifty-five or sixty minutes' of entertainment.

STORIES OF TEMPERAMENT AND CHARACTER*

BY H. W. BOYNTON

WHILE we are waiting for the last of the "Books of the Small Souls," by that sober and subtle painter of modern Dutch life, Couperus, this complete and characteristic story comes, unexpectedly, from the unwearied hand of Mr. de Mattos. There are two theories of choosing a title for a novel. One is to bag the attention of the public with a "compelling" phrase; the other is to suggest, for better or worse, what the book is about. The work of Couperus belongs to an order of fiction that disdains catchpenny methods and wishes only to be taken for what it is. If people are not interested in small souls and old people and things that pass, if they shrink from looking upon life from the meditative ironic view, let them (he would say) take warning in advance. If they prefer rose-coloured glasses, so much the pleasanter for them, no doubt: our own happen to be of neutral colour or, perhaps, slightly tinged with grey. Still, if we do not see life as

*Old People and the Things that Pass. By Louis Couperus. Translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

The Stucco House. By Gilbert Cannan. New York: George H. Doran Company.

Children of Passage. By Frederick Watson. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

The Autumn Sowing. By E. F. Benson. New York: George H. Doran Company.

The Light Above the Cross Roads. By Mrs. Victor Rickard. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

The Restless Sex. By Robert W. Chambers. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Professor Latimer's Progress: A Novel of Contemporaneous Adventures. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

a pretty thing, an affair of juvenile love-making ending with the wedding bells, or of brisk comedy inviting to laughter, neither do we see it as the gross affair of the naturalists with their attempt to reduce human nature to the proportions of an obscene scrawl in an outhouse. The routine and much of the substance of life are wearisome and often ugly. But it contains self-rewarding affection as well as unhappy passion, noble endurance as well as meaningless suffering, a true bond of souls as well as the conventional and often clogging bonds of kinship or marriage. And under its drab surface, through its humdrum action, often runs a thread of tragic romance.

Such is the atmosphere in which the story-teller envelops us. To begin with, this whole book is saturated with the sense of age. "So old—so old," is the incessant refrain. There are Grandmamma, ninety-seven; her friends and former lovers, Mr. Takma, ninety-three, and Doctor Roelofsz, eighty-eight; her children in their sixties and seventies; her grandchildren some of whom already feel and dread the approach of age. "So old—so old . . ." But one is not called on to assist here at a scene of mere disintegration and cessation, such as, for instance, Arnold Bennett summoned us to in the latter part of *The Old Wives' Tale*. For these old and very old people are not mere shadows and echoes of the past, long since dead or dying as actors in the world's drama. A single red and deathless moment out of the past has