



# ROCK OF HOLLYWOOD

## *Cecil B. deMille*

Though critics sometimes carve up a C.B. epic, they will usually admit his productions are unsurpassed for pageantry and money-making potential. His first 67 films have already grossed \$562,000,000, and Samson and Delilah may add more than \$22,000,000 to that total

### PART ONE OF TWO PARTS

CECIL B. DE MILLE, an alert, vigorous and congenitally impatient man of sixty-eight whose unflagging enthusiasm for motion pictures is exceeded only by his extraordinary durability in the same field, has been observed during the past twelvemonth in a variety of moods and poses. In a sense it has been a typical De Millian interlude, fraught with high suspense, beset by staggering problems, punctuated by magnificent explosions, but crowned inevitably by triumph.

This, of course, is as it should be. Inasmuch as De Mille occupies the chair of master movie maker and is undoubtedly the most imposing figure in the motion-picture industry since David W. Griffith, it is natural that his problems should be the most pressing, his solutions the most ingenious, his eruptions the most terrifying, and his triumphs the most glittering. Since 1913, the year of his historic descent on the orange groves, this has generally been the case.

It is interesting that while Hollywood has now become more or less accustomed to the dimensions in which De Mille operates, it still does not feel secure enough in his presence to take him for granted. There has always been a tendency to look upon De Mille in terms of genius-colossus, an unpredictable category at best. His name is synonymous with "spectacle," a word he abhors. Though he protests that he is both mortal and fallible, he has never been able to prove it. And while it is generally agreed there are better directors and better producers, it is also agreed no one has yet appeared in quite so awesome a combination of director and producer.

Possibly because the industry suspects De Mille of flaunting the natural laws of occupancy, it watches him closely for signs of approaching debility, and yields periodically to the temptation to bury him. Fifteen years ago, when *The Crusades* appeared under De Mille's battle flag and suffered the unique experience of losing more than \$700,000, Adolph Zukor, the head of Paramount, clapped his hands to his head and cried, "The king is dead! Long live the king!"

De Mille himself was shaken by the reception accorded *The Crusades*, but he rallied stoutly the following year and, with something akin to vengeance, replaced the fallen heroes of *The Crusades* with Indians and presented *The Plainsman*, a resounding success which more than balanced the books. Zukor quickly conceded his error and exhumed the king.

Despite his lofty stature, which invites neither comparison nor familiarity, numerous persons in Hollywood refer to De Mille easily as "C.B." or "the old man," and it is a mark of some distinction

De Mille's next movie, a circus story to be completed in '51, is called *The Greatest Show on Earth*





to be able to claim to have told him off. An astonishing number of people profess to have told De Mille at one time or another to go jump in a lake. It is possible that one per cent of these have actually mustered the necessary courage. De Mille, on the other hand, has frequently offered to supply the gun, if the object of his own disaffection would go out and shoot himself.

In his haste to keep moving, the gentle tyrant has left strewn behind him the broken bodies of any number of underlings and assistants who have been unable to match his stride. Not long ago he completed *Samson and Delilah*, his sixty-eighth picture in 37 years and a picture of the heroic proportions people have come to expect of De Mille. Having delivered himself of this prodigious effort, he might reasonably have been expected to sit down and draw a deep breath. Instead, he plunged immediately into the preparation of his next picture, a circus story which will also be of heroic proportions by the time it is finished, sometime in 1951, under the title, *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

For De Mille, the transition from *Samson* to the circus was no trick at all, though others in his company found it trying. At one moment, clad in boots and breeches, he was supervising the collapse of a pagan temple. At almost the next moment, he was clinging precariously to a swaying bosun's chair at the top of a circus tent, some 90 feet above the center ring, a bald, bespectacled figure gazing intently through a finder at the spangled tights of the trapeze artists flying beneath him.

"This," he explained to the dubious John Ringling North, owner of the circus, "is to start the little wheels whirring in my head."

Even De Mille's associates were awed by his persistency. "For hours each day," one of them said, "he has peered through his camera viewer with the savage determination of a Watson on the search for melodramatic clues."

In addition to producing and directing *Samson* and joining the circus, De Mille was subject to other seizures not ordinarily associated with a venerable gentleman whose reputation is established and whose fortune is secure.

#### Typical Days of an Energetic Man

Descending from his hilltop home on De Mille Drive in the Laughlin Park section of Los Angeles, he appeared regularly at his office in the De Mille Building, on the Paramount lot, to joust with the heads of the 64 departments he consults on every picture; supervised the preparation of a number of speeches and publicity releases dealing with *The Right to Work*, a thesis to which the De Mille Foundation for Political Freedom is dedicated; held court daily at lunch at the De Mille table in the Paramount commissary; sandwiched in the inevitable story conferences; hurried off to New York to take charge of the opening of *Samson and Delilah*; and was even photographed carrying his secretary piggyback across a mud puddle in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

"If the old man ever stops," one of his employees remarked not long ago as De Mille hurried past, "he'll fall flat on his face. He's cursed with momentum."

It is ironic that De Mille, for all the jewels in his crown, has never won an Oscar and, in fact, has repeatedly suffered the arrows of hostile critics. This, however, has in no way deterred him. To those who remind him of his failure to be rewarded at the annual banquets of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, he replies gently, "I win my Oscars at the box office." To those critics who say yes, but it isn't art, he simply counts the packed houses and says, with a rueful shake of his head, "Every time I make a picture, the critics' estimate of the public drops another 10 per cent."

De Mille is likely to have the last word for some time to come. Not long ago one of his statisticians computed that De Mille pictures were being shown in 44 countries, and that the first 67 had grossed an estimated \$562,000,000. Only recently some 15,000 exhibitors throughout (Continued on page 66)

For years De Mille trailed a peacock named Henry around his ranch, saving the feathers it molted. Henry makes good in Hedy Lamarr's *Delilah* costume

Collier's for February 25, 1950





Wittaker's voice tightened. "Listen, Madigan," he said. "If my load's right I can make Albuquerque. If it's too heavy . . ."

# Captain in Command

Once before, Wittaker had made a mistake that cost him his reputation as a pilot. In his desperate need to earn a living, he was being tempted now to make an even worse mistake

**F**ROM the doorway of the Kansas City Airport building Captain Fred Wittaker anxiously scanned the passenger lobby. His eye caught a glaring sign: CHEAPEST FARE TO ANYWHERE—LUXURIOUS AIR LINERS—SKYBUS, INC., over a short ticket counter. He crossed to it swiftly. He was a medium tall man, rather lean. Tense weariness about his eyes made him seem older than his actual thirty-four years.

He was suddenly conscious of unexpected relief at not meeting anyone he knew from the major air lines. He didn't want to meet guys he might have played cards with at La Guardia or killed a New Year's Eve with while weathered-in at Chicago—guys who'd do double-takes at his uncut hair and cheap blue uniform with stripes on the cuffs like gilded cardboard. As he strode across the lobby his glance dropped to his shoes. They were brown and white. In a flash they summed up in his mind the comedown he had suffered: The two years out of a job since the accident. The steady dwindling of a slim bank account as he tried to feed and clothe Jessie and two small boys. And finally this lucky break, getting a captain's run on Skybus.

At least he hoped it was a break. He wasn't sure. "Wittaker, this is no gravy train," Al Madigan had said at the interview in Los Angeles. "We've got to cut the fancies to haul passengers coast to coast for ninety-odd bucks. The CAA is getting curious how we can do it. They think we're cutting more than the fancies." Madigan's smile was slightly contemptuous. "We keep our records legal, but we expect our captains to remember we run this line for profit. There's angles. You learn them out on the line."

"I have nine thousand hours," Wittaker said, trying not to show how badly he needed a job. "I can fly a 4 on schedule and burn as little gas as anybody." He watched Madigan's eyes narrow.

"Okay, Wittaker," Madigan had said. "Since every copilot in the country hates your guts, I'd guess this is your last chance. That should make you co-operative. You're hired."

After the check ride Chief Pilot Applegate commented tersely, "Good ride, Wittaker. You fly like nine thousand hours." Later he examined the crew schedule. "You'll deadhead to K.C. and bring Friday's westbound to L.A. with Ray Jones. He's go-

ing to resent you, Wittaker. This was to be his captaincy, but he hasn't proved himself yet."

"I'll handle Jones," Wittaker stated, but he felt no conviction. It wasn't simply Jones to be handled. It was the pilot grapevine he had to buck. A 200-mph grapevine that made an icy slide at Minneapolis or an engine fire in Detroit into airport gossip from Vancouver to Miami. Overnight the grapevine could make you a legendary hero or knock you flat on the deck.

**T**HAT night in their cheap motel, with the boys asleep on the couch, Wittaker had explained the job to Jessie. She was swell. She knew how it hurt, coming down to a fringe operator in the non-scheduled field. And about cutting corners, too.

"You can try it," she said. "But you don't have to compromise. Not for me or the boys. Ever." She smoothed his forehead with her finger tips. "After all, you're the captain in command. Mr. Madigan can fire you, but he can't make you do anything against your judgment."

Next day he'd bought a uniform and dug out some black shoes. The (Continued on page 72)

ILLUSTRATED BY TRAN MAWICKE