

Hollywood as Strikebreaker

ED RAY

THE entire Pacific Coast is threatened with an industrial crisis in maritime and allied industries and Hollywood propagandists are right on the job with the production of two motion pictures to aid in breaking a strike that has not yet started. Each of these pictures attacks militant labor leadership, seeks to win sympathy for scabs, pictured as "loyal" workers and strives to bolster up the fascist ideology implicit in such productions as *Black Fury* and *Stranded*. These new pictures are Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Riff-Raff*, starring Jean Harlow and Spencer Tracy, and Warner Brothers' *The Frisco Kid*.

The Frisco Kid attempts to evade the propaganda issue by dating the story in the Barbary Coast days and its plot centers around the action of vigilante mobs in cleaning out water-front grumblers. *Riff-Raff* is more vicious, it has a point to make and doesn't care who knows it. Frances Marion, once a Hearst newspaper woman and now the highest-paid writer in the world at a salary of \$3,000 a week, is the author. The scenario deliberately seeks to prove that the waterfront strike with which it deals is fostered through a "Red" conspiracy to delude the workers and all of Hollywood's outworn clichés are utilized to drive home the lesson. Even the obstacles in Jean Harlow's path to the hero's arms result from the machinations of a San Francisco Communist agitator.

The scene is laid in a waterfront town in which fishermen and the boss are getting along famously until the advent of Red Belcher, the Communist agitator, described as a "newcomer to fish-harbor who uses his dynamic personality to breed discontent among the men." In contrast to this dangerous agitator the conservative union leader is "although ignorant, a fine type of man, serious, intent and reliable."

Of course, Belcher manages to get Spencer Tracy, Jean's husband of only a few days, in his toils. The rest is easy. Belcher incites a strike by telling the men to "Rise up. Take your necks from under the iron heel. The workers shall be free. Strike the fetters from your starved bodies. How long will you sell your souls for their dirty pennies while they take the dollars you make? Those are your dollars. Yours and Yours and YOURS."

The strike collapses when the boss threatens to import scabs to be furnished by a "San Diego labor leader"! Belcher is happy. He proposes to blow up the fleet but the conservative union leader herds the men back on the ships by recalling that "the union is for justice—justice for everybody—but it ain't a union for criminals. We've never

committed a criminal offense and we ain't gonna destroy property."

Balked in their scheme and dropped from the union, Belcher and Spencer Tracy leave for San Francisco. Her home broken up, Jean follows but Spencer refuses to see her, a decision encouraged by Belcher's "quotation" from the Communist Manifesto: "by the actions of modern industry all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder." There are complications; Jean gets thrown into jail, Spencer returns home to get a job as night watchman and wins his way back into the boss' heart when he prevents Belcher from dynamiting the fishing fleet. The scenario ends on a happy note with the boss tendering Spencer a dinner and with Jean home again. Just to round the story out the union returns Spencer his card. "One of these days," Jean tells him, "You'll own that fishing fleet."

To list every attack on the working class made in *Riff-Raff* would entail copying the complete script. If this film had been blessed with a glossary it would run something like this:

Communist Manifesto—Balderdash, a ridiculous document that says, page 40, "by the actions of modern industry all family ties are torn asunder."

Hero—A man who resorts to violence to knock out Reds and stop strikes.

Heroine—Female of "hero"; contented and happy when staying home attending to her wifely duties. 2. A girl who accepts furs and attentions of men she does not like. 3. A girl whose only interest in life is the man she loves.

Villain—A Red, whose chief pleasure in life comes from making employes disloyal.

Boss—In the Russian language, boss and villain are synonymous. In English, a good guy who hides a heart of gold beneath a brusque, business-like manner. Their favorite pastime, after business hours, is throwing parties for the help.

Workers—(Especially waterfront workers). Drunken, improvident, lazy good-for-nothings, addicted to much thoughtless ca-

rousing. They are usually uneducated, illiterate, speak and look like gangsters.

Radicals—Habitat, San Francisco. Agitators, foreigners. Alien fanatics who believe in violence and destruction, happiest when throwing bombs. They talk of rank-and-file control but take orders from Moscow. Thus, "When your husband has been out late and comes home smelling of booze, he's been out with a radical."

Union Members—See "workers" above. Easily swayed by speeches.

Strikes—Unnecessary demonstrations by misguided workers which can only lead to increased profits for the bosses and privation for the strikers.

Demonstration—A gathering of "workers," "union members" (see above) carrying placards. They usually feel silly.

Scab—A loyal worker who hates to see a boss imposed upon. Sometimes they have been loyal in other parts of the country and are transported to troublesome spots by "loyal labor leaders." They are an irresistible force and once they come on the scene, strikers had better go back to work.

Union Leader—An intelligent, big-hearted man who was once thought to be a "worker" (see above) but fooled 'em. He believes that an employer has a legitimate right to use scabs in industry. He believes strikes should end at the first opportunity, so long as the boss is willing to forgive and forget. Sometimes he gets the boys a pay cut.

Labor Agreement—See dictionary for definition of Ten Commandments, Book of Moses, Holy Writ, New Testament. This is holier.

Union Demands—Never mentioned.

Relief—A plate of soup and roll given by pretty women in the Red Cross.

Solidarity—The feeling among workers, especially as demonstrated by a worker's son who steals the rations of four other workers at the relief station, bringing his mother's approbation and this comment to her neighbor: "Ain't he a good kid—always thinkin' of his family."

(Repeated Owing to Popular Demand)

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The Screen

The Thirty-Nine Steps

NO MATTER how belligerent Robert Forsythe becomes in his war against the British Empire, I think he will admit that, through a necessity brought on by their long years of god-awful blundering, they have developed a suavity that often exceeds their intelligence. The best indication of that I know is their diplomatic history, particularly the phase they are now creating in that Chamber of Chit-Chat known as the League of Nations. Another example, closer by and much easier on the nerves, is the British movie, *Thirty Nine Steps* (Gaumont-British), which is so suavely directed that it isn't until the hero has permanently taken possession of the heroine that you begin to scratch your head looking for one of those college-degreed Roxy ushers to answer your bewildered questions.

If you happen to pick out the same usher I did, it won't do you much good. He will tell you that a mystery story is a mystery story and has to remain that way or else it wouldn't be a mystery story. As a matter of fact, the picture is really a spy melodrama, with a few Sherlock Holmesian touches tucked in just to keep you guessing. The man who wrote the screen play must be the most original person in the business, for the hero is neither a spy, nor is he faced with that famous dilemma of choosing between his love for his country and his love for his girl.

The murder of a beautiful spy in his apartment at the start of the story compels him to become a man trying to clear himself of murder and, incidentally, save the British

Empire from the nefarious schemes of a gang of spies. His methods of going about that job are full of loop-holes and unmotivated action. But because the picture avoids the best-known formulae and clichés, it has an atmosphere of naturalness about it that is positively refreshing. The illusion of reality is well kept up by good photography and ingenious directing, so that the flaws in the story and the absurdity of seeing our hero make at least four successful escapes out of four attempts, don't hit you in the face at the time they are being pulled off.

The most exciting scene, though the least satisfying from the point of view of logic and motivation, is the scene of the climax, when things look very, very dark for our hero. He is sitting in a London vaudeville

house surrounded by Scotland Yard and the gang of spys ready to pounce on him. Mr. Memory, the man who knows everything, is introduced to the audience. What is the connection between him and the Thirty Nine Steps? Our hero suddenly sees it all and, in a burst of Holmesian dialectics, solves the mystery, absolves himself and saves the British Empire from them foreigners. Robert Donat plays the lead in a lazy, comfortable way that makes up for such uncomfortable scenes as the one in which he is chased over half of Scotland with a squadron of police on his heels.

Though somewhat pudgy, Donat in this movie is reminiscent, in appearance and daredeviltry, of the ex-husband of America's ex-sweetheart, Douglas Fairbanks. If you agree with the Roxy usher that a mystery should remain a mystery, your sense of logic won't be hurt too much and you will accept *Thirty Nine Steps* as an entertaining piece of British suavity.

JAY GERLANDO.

The Theater

LIFE'S TOO SHORT, by John Whedon and Arthur Caplan. Produced by Jed Harris at the Broadhurst Theater.

THE authors may have started out to say something sharp and solid about a typical wage-cutting, business-grabbing corporation and how its workers feel about it; if so, they quickly tired of that nonsense, for *Life's Too Short* winds up as an almost antediluvian pre-war triangle drama, and a rather anemic one at that. It is too bad, for the urge behind the play obviously was a lot of inside information about the Elite

Food Corporation and an itch to pass the information along. And what finally did get across the footlights was the thesis that an unemployed clerk can become so desperately hard-pressed and demoralized that he drives his wife back to her ex-lover by his jealous rage and later accepts the job which his rival has had restored to him. The successful rival being represented throughout as charming, handsome and the big broad-gauge executive type.

The cards are pretty well stacked against the office workers of the Elite Corporation. There isn't one that seems to have any sense, except possibly the hardened old war horse Miss Fogarty, who maintains an even attitude of contempt for everybody concerned throughout wage-cuts, dismissals, the mouthings of the sanctimonious chiseller who heads the concern and the breakup of the little clerk's home. And Miss Fogarty's highest flight of political understanding is reached in replying to the toast, "Here's to the New Deal!" with "Nuts to the New Deal! Here's to Calvin Coolidge!" A Miss Rosenberg is the office radical, and reports what her father says the workers ought to do—the only trouble with this arrangement being that Miss Rosenberg talks like a half-wit, and that she is cast for a knockabout comedy part. Beyond these there is a dim-brained miss who on receiving her wage-cut bursts out into joyful tears because it isn't a complete dismissal; a husband-hunting cutie who is supposed to symbolize the anger of the workers by sticking out her tongue behind the boss's back; and a wise-cracking office boy. Not an impressive aggregation with which to represent the office staff of a large corporation, although Mr. Harris, the

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