

Fiction. Where does fiction end and fact begin? Many readers will ask themselves that question in thinking about this week's variety of novels. Beneath its fiction veneer Robert Carson's "The Magic Lantern" gives a panoramic picture of Hollywood's commercial and social life which will probably be resented by those who think themselves to be caricatured and enjoyed by those who vicariously follow the antics in filmland through syndicated columns. Socio-science wrapped in fiction has had some startling popularity in this country. About sixty-four years ago Edward Bellamy caused a sensation with his fiction-veiled predictions of things to come in "Looking Backward" (from 2000 A.D. that is), which is still a steady seller. Other literary prognosticators like Aldous Huxley and George Orwell have turned out classics of the kind and met with remarkable response. Bernard Wolfe's "Limbo" (page 17) belongs in the same class with its provocative and pyrotechnical speculations. The plot must be read to be believed!

Shadows on Celluloid

THE MAGIC LANTERN. By Robert Carson. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 504 pp. \$3.95.

By BUDD SCHULBERG

THEY didn't travel westward in covered wagons, and the enemy who ambushed them were process-servers rather than Indians, but they were pioneers. They had the vision of pioneers, and the drive, the fanaticism, competitiveness, and sometimes the amorality of pioneers. Starting from scratch (and without scratch) some fifty years ago, in less than thirty-odd years they parlayed a penny-arcade novelty into a billion-dollar industry that revolutionized the entertainment of the whole world. I refer, of course, to the founders of the American motion-picture business.

Norris and Dreiser and Sinclair have made novels out of the growth and power of other great American industries. But the Hollywood phenomenon, for all its incredible development and worldwide influence, has been largely neglected in our literature. Now Robert Carson, a noted screenwriter who knows his Hollywood, presents us with this ambitious, painstaking novel of the film capital from its humble beginnings through its spectacular triumph in the Coolidge era to the panicky introduction of sound in the late Twenties.

This saga of the "silent days" is told through the eyes of young Ellie

Silversmith, son of Frank P. Silversmith, and while the father-son relationship is the wheel on which this book revolves, it is the elder Silversmith who powers that wheel. He seems to be a shrewd amalgam of Selznick (old Lewis J.) and Laemmle, Goldwyn, and Fox, and some of the other inspired gamblers who got in on the ground floor when that

floor was covered with the saw-dust of the old Nickelodeon.

Silversmith is cunning, tenacious, ruthless, obsessed, visionary—a truly-drawn product of his day. His love for his son is the possessive, self-perpetuating kind in which dominating men so often indulge. Frank Silversmith lavishes generosity on Ellie, but always for selfish ends. Even when Ellie falls in love, his father capitalized on this emotion to consolidate the power of the Silversmiths. A sense of dynasty is one of Hollywood's more valid and pathetic qualities, and Carson's understanding of this is shown in his account of Silversmith's efforts to establish a dynastic control to which Ellie can succeed. Yet, for all his unethical vigor, his compulsive, egoistic drive to establish his son and his company as a lasting monument, Frank Silversmith is never quite the dynamic and full-bodied figure we expect him to become.

We learn how he dresses and what he says and how he operates. His dreams and schemes are known to us, and these are drawn from the sound historical data on the exciting shoe-string days of early feature production. Carson has outlined him well and has not spared himself in crayoning in all the necessary colors. What



THE AUTHOR: Unlike many writers who went West only after they'd scored in the hinterlands, Robert Carson got his first mouthful of literary pabulum in Hollywood itself. "I started in with pictures," he said the other day as he teed off on an autobiography that revealed him as having undergone a succession of attitudes vis-à-vis Hollywood—crazy about it, bored by it, grateful to it, but, most of all, determined to put it in proper perspective. Carson turned up on the scene in the mid-Thirties, in his twenties. A scenarist, he ran the works of Robert Carson, P. C. Wren, and R. Kipling through his typewriter, and extracted the scenarios of "Men with Wings" (1938), "Beau Geste" (1939), and "The Light That Failed" (1939). Back in 1937 Carson had reached a cinema apogee in "A Star Is Born," its story winning him and William Wellman an Academy Award. There have been other movies he'd just as soon forget. Also, there have been novels and magazine fiction. Anyway, it now appears Carson is the kind of man who'd rather leave his Hollywood imprint in a novel than in the cement of Grauman's Chinese. "I had become bored with modern Hollywood, a pleasant wonderland entirely mechanized, organized, and businesslike," he said, discussing his book. "The beginnings of it were fascinating, romantic, and often incredible; but when the dead and clammy hands of the bankers and cost-accountants fell upon the studios, spiritual atrophy set in. Having lived in Hollywood most of my life, I loved it. I bore no grudge, cherished a certain gratitude for favors received, and had no axe to grind. Somehow, I thought, justice had not been done an international phenomenon, a fantastic industry, and a goose that laid golden eggs daily. Wild parties, bitter sarcasm, and the idiocies of movie critics who almost never know the least thing about pictures and the solemn, stultified poses of the present film grandees were not sensible explanations for a force which has moved billions and made billions. So," Carson concluded, "I had to write a novel. I hope I have somehow managed to convey a little of the most potent magic that was ever brewed."

—BERNARD KALB.

Budd Schulberg, who has lived many years in Hollywood, is the author of "What Makes Sammy Run" and "The Disenchanted."

seems to be missing is that illusive, magical element that breathes life into competently created characters and plots.

Ellie Silversmith, who hates and fears his father while remaining the old man's pliant instrument, is another convincing character who somehow lacks that extra quality of being vibrantly alive. He is more human than Silversmith senior, and more generous, and his interest in developing the art of the movies goes far beyond his piratical father's. Some of the best things in the book are Ellie's descriptions of the feverish activity of picture-making. There is a first-rate description of the inventiveness of an early cameraman who reminded me of that unheralded veteran, Joe August, head cameraman on "The Informer." "He masked out parts of scenes, contributed elaborate tops to sets that were topless with slides of painted glass, changed the lighting of whole areas from where he stood at the camera, and when necessary overcranked or undercranked to artificially slow or speed the action." Carson concludes this section with a fitting epitaph to a forgotten hero whose contribution "is entombed in rolls of yellowing and brittle film that run too fast on modern projection machines and are populous with a race of uninhibited and voiceless actors who provoke present audiences to laughter."

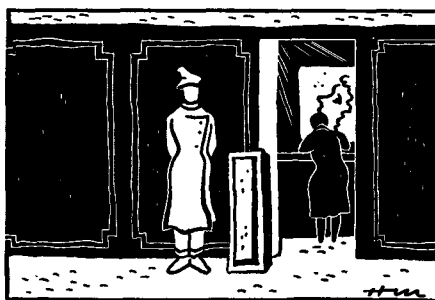
The first half of the book, particularly, is replete with knowing observations on a medium that has attracted millions of admirers, but all too few with a genuine appreciation of the movies' artistic and technical demands. There is a breathlessly convincing chapter on the production of a record-breaking silent feature, the hit with which Silversmith Productions soars into the big time. By a happy accident the film is "Ivanhoe," one of those timeless marquee titles that has been breaking box-office records again this very year. "The Magic Lantern" is so entertaining when it addresses itself to the actual function of film-making that one can't help wishing that its emotional line and its plot measured up to its knowledge of the subject-matter and its admirable intentions.

There are times when one wonders whether this book has too much plot or not enough pages. It is one of those overly conscientious plots that does not like to leave anything dangling. It has Silversmith doublecrossing his associates at the beginning only to have them usurp his company at the end; it has Silversmith in a financial jam and needing help from a caricatured pious hypocrite, Christopherson,

just in time for Christopherson to get involved in a personal scandal and need the Silversmiths to help him out, which of course they do on condition that he'll see them through their emergency; it has Ellie falling madly in love with Christopherson's granddaughter, an odd little red-dish-haired number called Honey, and about to become the senior partner in Silversmith Productions by marrying her and inheriting the "dirty old man's" majority interest; it has old man Christopherson grow senile so that Honey's hateful parents, aided by a sinister operator called Segal, become the real owners of the company; it has Honey dying in childbirth, a fate thoroughly deserved after some of the stickiest dialogue this side of *Godey's Lady's Book*. This reviewer lost track of the number of times she said something like this: "I'm Mrs. Silversmith, the lovely wife of the head of Silversmith Productions. I'm the one who thought of making the lovely baby. Most of the three thousand dollars a week for three years will be spent on me."

Carson is writing a novel and not a social history and so can hardly be criticized for not following more faithfully the course of actual events. But the fall from power of a Silversmith may be more significant than he has indicated. It was not the outsmarting of one "independent" by another that leads to the eclipse of a Silversmith. In actuality, with the advent of sound, the film business had expanded too rapidly for any individuals to maintain personal ownership, and a new era was beginning in which the actual control shifted from Hollywood and the "last tycoons" to New York and the great banking companies.

We leave this novel with the sense that while we have enjoyed this cavalcade we have not been as deeply moved as we had expected to be during the early reels. But even aware of its shortcomings, you should enjoy "The Magic Lantern" for its sound historical background and its evocation of the men and women whose daring and all-around skulduggery, vision, and domineering drive are already the stuff of legends.



The Road to Delhi

THE MASK OF A LION. By A. T. W. Simeons. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 305 pp. \$3.50.

By ROBERT PAYNE

SOON (the sooner the better) someone is going to write the picaresque novel which most closely corresponds to our time. We are all vagabonds now. With half the world running blindly from terror and the other half firmly embracing it, the story of our vagabondage assumes a new perspective. It is possible to imagine a vast novel corresponding in its scope to "Don Quixote" or Joyce's "Ulysses" which will tell of these strange wanderings from one temporary resting place to another: a moment's pause for breath, then sudden flight, then a pilgrimage to the shrines, but the shrines are empty and the enemy stands behind them in ambush. And so the journey goes on, with the footsteps of the pursuers heard like continual drumbeats, the families torn apart, the caravans lost in the desert. Is there some rest perhaps at the North Pole? It would be a novel like the Indian epics where an incredible number of extraneous characters are allowed to wander into the story and somehow by their very presence enrich the tale. We know that the great epics were written at the time of the folk-wanderings. Then why is it that in our own age we have no comparable story of human wanderings and deceits and travails as we make our way through the dark?

It would be pleasant to record that "The Mask of a Lion" is a picaresque novel of considerable proportions. Unfortunately, it is not. Dr. A. T. W. Simeons has contented himself with a miniature canvas, and within the limits he has chosen for himself he has succeeded admirably at least half the time.

He tells the story of Govind, an Indian tailor who pricks his thumb one morning and feels no pain. Then strange rough bumps appear on his forehead and over his arms, and it occurs to him that he is suffering from leprosy. In fear and trembling he goes to a quack doctor and then to a Government hospital. Suddenly the prosperous tailor becomes a pariah, evil-smelling, ugly, bloated, shambling in the dust with every man's hand against him. It is the story which Kafka told in "Metamorphosis," but Kafka's immense beetle clinging on the wall was curiously inhuman: Govind is only too human, only too credible, and these introductory chapters are wonderfully sustained. Afterwards we