The Scenario Editor and the Plotting Public
by Katharine Hilliker

The scenario editor is a literary pariah. It is a black sheep of his kind. As the subject of invective, spoken and thought, he has been neglected since the first Moving Picture reared its head across the screen, and he has been only a relic of his kind. He stands accused of every form of discourtesy known to the human mind, and is credited with being a Frankenstein of brutality and a Machiavelli for guilt. According to his detractors, stuffing harbor no cleverer upper-story worker, and only in a pathological ward will you find anything equaling him in vagaries. Far from me to think ill of him, for in all his works, I am not a female Oedipus. But, nevertheless, in the interests of fair play and because I know whereof I speak, let me for once present the scenario editor in his true balance. There can be no doubt that in many cases he is as black as he is tarred—inevitably, with so much flak about, some is bound to catch a blase—but that the tar-brush should be applied to each and every member of the profession is not only unjust, but lacking in good sense and discrimination.

It has become the fashion to write—the field of literature has always been the uninitiated and uneducated—the democratic people with an equal-rights standard, our bootblack with an incompleteness grammar-school education feels competent to enter the lists against our college graduate whose entire educational training has been shaped toward a literary career. As a result of this condition, publishers and editors are swamped with a flood of useless, and more often than not, inarticulate materials, and the yellow manuscript received by a magazine editor will be ten or more for the scenario editor.

There are many reasons for this, but the chief cause is a reason of itself, to underestimate the art of scenario-building.

There seems to be a general impression that the picture industry is a gigantic get-rich-quick organization, primarily for the benefit of aspiring would-be playwrights, a path to easy money in which neither skill nor intelligence is a requirement, and the matter of fact that a successful screen-play is a difficult bill to fill, combining as it does the subtleties of pantomime with the constructive art of the drama, and the writer who warns over a year ago a bash of ideas, expecting to tickle the scenario editor’s palate, has need not be surprised at its rejection.

At a dinner, recently, the subject of playwrighting was broached. One of the diners, a writer of considerable note, who has of late been devoting his entire time to Motion Picture work, was taken to task by the lady on his right.

“My dear Jonathan,” she said (which, by the way, is not the gentleman’s name), “what’s this I hear? That you have gone in for the movies!”

He admitted the charge. Her face assumed an expression of woful disbelief.

“Dear me!” she exclaimed. “How comes you this, then, even my maiden writer scenarios!”

Jonathan grinned bashfully. “So?” he replied. “I dash mine off between tea and dinner. When does she do hers?”

The truth, he had just completed work on an eight-reel play, and by work I do not mean the writing alone. With the completion of the script, he had taken up the problems of cast-selecting, locations, etc., with the director in charge. Part of the action necessitated the taking of pictures in prohibited places, and for days he traveled back and forth between Washington and Boston pulling wires to get them through.

As a result, his play is today a tremendous and inspiring thing and the message it carries is sweeping the country from one end to the other. Unfortunately, it is not often given the scenario editor what he wants, and conscientious writers of this sort. It is more generally the lady’s maid who absorbs his time, and her scenarios are as neat and innocuous as herself.

People who would never think of attempting to write a play or a short story will, in all good faith, seize upon some happening of daily life which appears to them sufficiently out of the ordinary, and, with no knowledge of dramatic construc-
A little technique is a dangerous thing.

(Thirty-one)

fondly hoped was a masterpiece. Poorly dressed and overworked, her head filled with flowery tales of the money to be made in pictures, she fancied she had hit upon a Utopian dream of deliverance. An excellent dressmaker, she was unfortunate as a dramatist, and the poor little effort had to go back.

Doctors, lawyers, merchants, chefs, stenographers, housemaids, firemen, cooks, from the newsboy to the magnate, they all come to the scenario editor's door. Sometimes they set forth those phases of life with which they are most familiar, as, for instance, the delightfully naive young fireman who complained to me that he had never seen a fire-story properly presented in the movies, and who was incensed at his script to stage a million-dollar configuration just to show how it should be handled. But more often they write of things they have never seen. Nelly, the switchboard operator of the sea, never having been further outlandish than Valparaiso, Indiana; and Togy, the European war was the signal for a downpour of international spy plots; the recent rise in the marriage rate, following directly our declaration of hostilities with Germany brought an influx of slacker tales. But by far the most harrowing of all epidemics was the vampire fever, which a year ago was at its height, and which is still dying hard. It is safe to say that the scenario editor can now distinguish with the naked eye, at a distance of five hundred yards, any specimen of the improper female. Her ways are no longer past finding out. She knows every trick in her bag and is weary to death of them all.

Keeping a close second in the race was the white-swan horror. After reading several hundred scripts in which little Maggie, fresh from cow-eyed fields and chicken-y acres, was always hotfooting it just ahead of the villain's clutches, the reader is apt to start running himself, in circles around his desk or sprints up and down the fire-escape.

Every few months brings a new rage. For a while the scenario editor could open an envelope without being ambushed by Indian material; then came the Western stuff, cowboys and pony (Continued on page 66)
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Rowland which had appeared serially in The Saturday Evening Post a year or so before. On noticing the agent of my find, he acknowledged the similarity of the stories, said that he, himself, had noticed it, but after talking to his client was convinced that it was one of those unexplainable cases of thought by which two people had been visited with the same inspiration. The explanation was entirely acceptable by reason of the agent's reputation for integrity, but the story is then turned over to an expert continuity writer, to be whipped into shape for the screen. In other words, the author is paid for his idea, and, unless he so stipulates in his contract, his name does not appear on the finished play.

Suppose I had never read Mrs. Rhinehart's story. I might have put the submitted manuscript in the wastebasket, or for reconstruction, for while the main element in the story was there, it was abominably written. The sender, provided the story proved acceptable all around, would doubtless have added a few words of encouragement and encouragement and encouragement.

A reputable company had accepted the story from its original author and sent him a check. Then, lo and behold! when the picture had been produced and was ready for release, somebody (heaven knows who) discovered that the plot had been bodily lifted from William Gillette's "The Admirable Crichton."

A check for $5,000 was sent to the author. He then followed a frigid and frosty day for Mra. E. Z. Is it any wonder that he has developed a disposition and a conviction that a scenario is the red-headed stepchild of fiction?