

THE PHOTOPLAY SYNOPSIS

A. VAN BUREN POWELL

A COMMON-SENSE METHOD OF
WRITING THE LATEST PHOTOPLAY
PLOT-FORM — "SYNOPSIS ONLY" —
SHOWING ITS DEVELOPMENT FROM
GERM TO PLOT AND FULL SYNOPSIS

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The Photoplay Synopsis

BY

A. VAN BUREN POWELL

AUTHOR OF

"EVERYBODY'S GIRL,"

"BELINDA PUTS HER HAIR UP"

ETC., ETC.

FOREWORD BY J. BERG ESENWEIN

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THE HOME CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL
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FOREWORD

By J. BERG ESENWEIN

It has long been a favorite recreation of critics to flout the opinions and counsels of other critics. "A mere doctrinaire!" they say, with a scornful sniff; and they are right, in so far as this attitude stresses the value of experience in an art or a craft as over against unpracticed theory.

The author of this book—which is all the more to be commended because it not only blazes a new trail but does so with the proverbial neatness and despatch—combines the virtues of the theorist with those of the "practical" man. Mr. Powell has long been an original thinker on all matters that have to do with the photoplay, a successful teacher of his theories, the author of—literally—many successful screen-productions, the adapter of fiction for film-showing, and a staff-member of one of America's great moving-picture producing companies. To this strong list of qualifications for authorship let me add a word of personal approval of one special phase of this work—yet more than a phase, because it runs like a central strand through the whole length of this well-woven cord: There is here developed, with the reader's active help, as it were, a complete photoplay synopsis, from the germ, the first crude out-reachings after plot-ideas, the conception and development of the play-people and their essential characteristics, the invention of incidents, and even the following out and rejection of false leads up to the final building together of the whole plot and synopsis. This laboratory practice, especially when guided by a worker who constantly sells his own photoplays, is in the last degree valuable, and marks a distinctly original contribution to the literature of the photoplay.

TO
MY WIFE

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CHAPTER I

BY WAY OF PREPARATION

“Synopsis only!”

So says the motion-picture producer, through his editor, to aspiring writers for the screen.

“Great news!” cries the Average Person. “No need to bother with scenarios or technique. No time wasted. I’ll merely have to get an idea, slap it down on paper——” Just here the idea comes along. It is “slapped down.”

During the next week or so the sky is a rosy sea upon the bosom of which cloud-argosies float toward Mr. Average Person, to condense and pour down upon him their burden of fat checks: while the wife of his heart negotiates with the junk man for the sale of the family “Flivver” and spends the rest of her hours inspecting the new models in the show rooms of the “Hammerhard Motor—Twin-Twelve.”

In time the postman passes. Mr. Average Person discovers that Uncle Sam has had a chance to cancel the stamps grudgingly but providently placed on the return envelope: he acquires a gloom equal to that of a woman who must wear last winter’s hat in the Easter parade. He becomes a consistent complainer and tells all who will hearken that “the companies don’t want *good* stories; they do not encourage real genius; only the insider with a pull can hope to land.” As for the

big check, it is to him a species never yet seen in captivity.

Laugh at him. Name him idiot. Pity his hopelessness. *But do not emulate him.* He has gone out to snare the big check with far less tact and care than is displayed by the darky approaching the rear hoofs of his balky mule. The "kick" is due him. He gets it.

There is a definite lesson to be drawn from the example of Mr. Average Person. That lesson is as important to you as any ever assigned an earnest student. It is the sole purpose of this chapter to hammer it home, to lodge it so firmly in your consciousness that nothing can ever displace it. *The "slap it down" day is far in the past!*

The great cause for failure with most writers for the screen is inability, or unwillingness, to realize this fact. So, take a tight grip on those italicised words; carve them indelibly on the tablets of your memory. They form a magic talisman, an "open sesame" that will open the way into that cave wherein lies the treasure you seek—success. With every step toward that hidden goal, pronounce the powerful formula. Thus you will drive away the demon of impatience which ever seeks to lure you into the blind alley of haste—an alley with a wide entrance and a smooth surface, but an alley that bumps into an unsurmountable wall on which you will read your doom in the word "Failure!" for once you are well along the course of that alley the way of retreat is turned into a quicksand.

Say the protecting words again—now! *The “slap it down” day is far in the past.*

A Skeleton of Yesteryear

If you will examine, in an attitude of comparison, the picture plays of ten years ago and the feature photoplays of the present, you will fully comprehend the reason for the stress laid by the foregoing italics.

In days gone by, when the motion picture was an infant, it attracted a public eager for novelty: as the mere succession of flickering photographs, projected upon the screen in such a way as to give the eye an impression of movement, lost the holding power of sheer novelty, a fresh element was needed to sustain the interest and patronage of the public. The picture makers hit upon the idea of adding to the quality of *movement* a further simulation of lifelikeness by presenting story-ideas as well as action-ideas; in other words, these picture makers introduced into their films an element of *plot*.

The introduction of this story-quality gave the motion picture a new lease on life. More than that, it changed the picture makers into prosperous producing companies.

The public rapidly took to the condensed dramas and comedies of the screen. Producing companies found their market ever widening, the demand for story-element in their pictures always increasing.

Although the field of inspiration for plot-material was almost untouched, the producing companies were

not always able to get ideas for their little productions. Directors, the men who supervised the filming of the pictures, could not be positively depended upon to find "different" plots; their ideas were apt to fall into a rut, for these directors had to "put on," or produce, a picture in from two to six days, according to the length of the subject.

In this matter of length the requirement was simple. Motion pictures were, and still are, photographed upon prepared strips of celluloid, known as "film." These strips must be wound upon a foundation, or "reel," which must be standard in size, so as to fit every projection machine, by passing through which the picture is thrown upon the screen. The amount of film which the standardized reel accommodated best was close to, and usually just within, the limit of one thousand feet to each reel. Thus the "thousand feet of film" became a standard of measurement controlling the subject matter of the reel's contents. This thousand-foot-to-the-reel standard is still the basis for motion-picture measurement, though the limit of reels to a subject has changed—a matter for discussion later on in this chapter.

For purposes of easy handling, the producing companies made their pictures conform to the reel-standard by either filling a single reel with film containing a single drama, comedy or other class of material, or by dividing this single reel into several subjects, such as an abbreviated comedy, to which would be added a "scenic" or an "educational" picture. In the former case, that of one subject to a reel, the material must

not run over the allotted limit of footage or it would choke the magazine or container when placed in the projecting machine. In the case of the "split reel"—where two (or sometimes three) different subjects, comprising altogether a footage within the thousand feet, would be put on the same reel and distributed as a single unit—the condensation of story was amazing in its retention of idea in compact, yet complete, story-quality.

No film subject of those days comprised more than one reel of film. Yet the producing companies and their corps of directors had to seek their basic material, or ideas, from an outside source, from some creative brain beyond the studio walls, the brain with new stories and novel methods of presenting these ideas in pictured-story form.

Thus there arose a demand for a form of expression which would convey these ideas from the imagination of the creator to the understanding of the director. Since the limitations of length were exceedingly constrictive in the amount of story that could be contained within these limitations, the creator of an idea did not bother to strive for a highly perfected form in which to present his brain-child. He could "dash off" a bare outline, a mere skeleton of his story. All he had to put before the director was a statement of the underlying plot of his creation, leaving the details of development to the director himself.

A director could read a two-hundred-word outline, call his people together, order several simple indoor settings, secure a few outdoor locations, and "shoot

the picture." He needed no elaborate scenario, or manuscript detailing the continuity of scenes, for the dramatic effects to be secured were elemental and he could "carry the continuity in his head."

Thus the writer who had a fund of inventiveness could expect to corral a considerable number of ten-dollar checks with a comparatively small expenditure of time and effort. He wrote merely an outline of the main situation, hinting at relationship of characters and the affairs that led up to the single real situation required to satisfy the picture-eager public.

The Modern Synopsis

Now, all that is past. The producing of motion pictures is an industry that is a veritable antelope of progress, for it has advanced by leaps and bounds.

Today the single reel is a standard relegated to the "slapstick" comedy and the "educational" subject; and even in these departments of production the better grade of material finds expression in two reels and even a greater length. As for the photoplays themselves, the subjects containing the more serious drama and the comedy of greater complication, their limit of length seems to be determined only by the power of the story to hold interest.

The producer maintains high-salaried stars, with talented and expensive directors, in costly studios, with a profit proportionate to his ability to present a succession of vital, fresh story-ideas.

Since the story-idea is the commodity which the producer must demand, and which you as a prospective

writer expect to supply, it is a wise edict which decrees that the material shall be prepared in its simplest, most attractive form.

That form is the modern synopsis.

The present-day form of story for the screen copes with its host of predecessors at a certain disadvantage: the easily-thought-of ideas have all been utilized, and as they were depleted, new twists, fresh developments and novel methods of treatment, had to be devised to disguise the old garments on the once-bare skeletons.

So it is natural that the synopsis should have advanced in the technique of its composition. Now, it may be in the exposition of certain characteristics of your play-people that you prove your right to be considered original; or it may be in the cleverness with which you turn an old situation inside out; or even in the freshness and virility of your suggested conversation, bits of which can be employed in the modern synopsis to reveal a trait of character, "put over" a comedy point, or indicate the "punch" which a well-turned speech may often give to a dramatic situation.

Sometimes the modern synopsis will run to twenty or thirty double-spaced typewritten pages. It will begin in such a way that the attention of the reader is instantly caught. "Here is something worth while," is his mental comment as he goes on with his perusal of the neat manuscript, learning the names of the characters and discovering their relationships, both to one another and to the plot-development: discovering these essential bits of information without realizing that he is being "told," so easily are the essentials blended into

the flowing action of the story's first "situation" or plot-complication.¹

The Big Idea

"This is decidedly fresh," mentally approves the reader, turning a page, to read a clear, concise description of the salient characteristics which have been brought out in the principal figures of the story; these characteristics show themselves in the actions they produce; the play-people who display them seem just like the folks on the street—natural, likeable or hateable as the case may be, living a vivid bit of their lives in a way that holds the attention, promises something even more interesting, and arouses the reader's subconscious speculation as to how they will handle their difficulties, how they will solve their problems.

"Great! I didn't expect that," the reader is prompted to exclaim under his breath as the adroit author springs some unexpected twist of idea. This introduces a fresh measure of wonderment, of uncertainty in the mind of the person perusing this example of synopsis form; he is even more anxious than ever to know what will happen. The situation seems almost unresolvable, almost hopeless of explanation; the leading character, the one about whose struggle against circumstances or some antagonist all interest concentrates, seems powerless to find a means of extrication

¹ This, as well as the rest of the description of the modern synopsis, is only a sketch. Every point introduced here is discussed at full length in its proper place in some later chapter. This sketch is only to bring out the radical change in the form required for the submission of ideas to motion-picture producers.

from the maze of Fate. Thus has the reader become the guesser of a riddle propounded by the fashioning of the story; his inability to solve the riddle, his anxiety to discover if the vitally concerned play-person will do so, creates an element of suspense that craves a quick satisfaction. A sudden shift of mood, the swift catching at a solution, brings the principal character into a position dominating the situation; the obstructing element in that life is swept aside and a triumphant and satisfying termination of the struggle gives the chief play-people their desire.

The reader sits back and decides that such a synopsis merits consideration, the antecedent of purchase. Why? Because its author has both presented a fresh idea, and shown that he realizes the truth of the lesson that: *The "slap it down" day is far in the past.*

This is the era of the carefully-thought-out idea, worked up to its best advantage, and presented to the prospective purchaser in a form that leaves no doubt in the mind of that purchaser as to the inventive thought and study put into it by its creator.

It can not be too often repeated that it is the fresh, vital story-idea which is in demand: anything short of this high type of plot is futile, a thing to clog the mails and enrich the printer of rejection slips.

A Field for Serious Study

Do not go about this study lightly. Make up your mind that you are not going to waste your time and effort by trying to rush through. If a surgeon or a

lawyer went at his study in that spirit, who would have confidence in either? You are to be a composite plot-arboriculturist and purchase-advocate: you will prune your plots, operate upon them, patch them up, make them strong and whole by grafting upon their forms some new elements to take the place of those cut away; at the same time you will prepare the brief that will present their argument so comprehensively that the trial judge can only render a verdict of "sold!"

If you begin to feel that the preparation of a modern motion-picture synopsis is something rather terrible to contemplate, the impression has been created purposely. Too many would-be writers fail because they attack the matter without a proper sense of its need for sincere study and real effort. In the days when ten dollars paid for an idea, nothing in the nature of hard work was worth while. Now that the story, if suitable, presupposes a heavy addition to your bank account—a check in three, if not four, figures—certainly you ought to be willing to do hard work to make your thought productive.

CHAPTER II

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE—AND DO

If you have made the contents of the previous chapter a part of your understanding, you will already answer the implied question of the heading for this one by saying: "I must be in earnest. I must do some hard work."

Other qualities you will undoubtedly cultivate; other things you will certainly have little time left to do, if you do your work conscientiously. This is not to be understood as a warning that you cannot pursue your present vocation and at the same time learn to prepare photoplay ideas in a salable form. What it does mean is that you must work at your photoplay-synopsis study every waking moment that is not devoted to that other means of livelihood.

An understanding of the lines of effort along which you will need to direct your study is, quite properly, the second step of your progress.

Thinking in Action

The first thing you will need to do is to cultivate the ability to visualize.

As you sit in the picture theatre, watching a film-story develop in the light upon the screen, your eyes carry the impressions made by the light-waves to your

brain, which completes the process of sight by translating the impression of those light-waves into the brain-equivalent—thought! That is what happens when you see a projected photoplay. As Sir Mortimer folds the fair Angela to his mail-covered bosom your eye is put into functioning vitality by the reflected rays from the screen. The nerves flash the vibration to the brain. The brain translates, and says to the consciousness: "The knight loves the lady," and since you see that she does not deny his love, logically it is made manifest to the understanding that she accepts his devotion.

Suppose that you wish to reverse the cause and the effect: that is, you wish to have your own consciously-evolved thought, "The Knight loves the lady," put upon the screen. What is the first step? Naturally, arbitrarily, it is the translation of that thought into some tangible form that will enable you to express it without speech. Your brain makes the reverse translation into the same thing which it would receive from the screen—not light-wave or nerve vibration, truly, but *that which they conveyed—action*.

When you devise a story for the screen you must simply reverse the process of "seeing" a projected picture, leaving out, of course, the intermediate steps; and this reversal will be, in effect, a mental viewing of the action into which your story should translate itself if it is to be suitable material for the picture form. Necessarily this statement demands the qualifying addition that it is the theoretical idea only which may be completely translated from thought into action: in the

practical application of the idea certain things will be found important enough to justify their retention in the development of the idea, and yet impossible of interpretation by any known gesture, physical attitude or facial expression—that is, they cannot be conveyed by mere action. Here, of course, you will have to fall back on the explanatory aid given by words. Nevertheless, the idea most suitable for the photoplay screen is the one that your mentality can visualize in action.

If you learn to *think* in action, you will find yourself *writing* in action—that is, choosing words to describe your thought, and making these words typical of movement. Therefore, as you will acquire the habit of visualizing your ideas, you will want to build a vocabulary to express your visual embodiment of idea in movement.

The Fiction Form and the Synopsis Form

There is one point of similarity between the writing of fiction and the preparation of the photoplay synopsis: each is designed to conjure up picture-thoughts in the mind of the reader. Yet in the manner of attaining this object the two forms differ widely.

The fiction story may begin with a striking situation which, in point of story-continuity, should be somewhere in the middle of the tenth paragraph—in which place one finds the way-back-in-days-gone-by part of the explanation.¹ A chapter or so later one discovers

¹In the language of dramatic technique this explanation of foundation or antecedent facts is known as "the exposition."

with surprise that some character told a falsehood when making a certain statement much earlier.

In the photoplay synopsis everything must run in a sequence of natural development. The story must be told very much as it will appear upon the screen: once the plot begins to develop there is no time to go back and explain some important point—it must be “planted” in advance, as will be shown later. Characters have to be made known, with their important traits and dispositions; their relations one with another are to be clearly stated so that no uncertainty will cloud the mind of the reader at a vital point.

A fictionist draws his mind-picture with the aid of dialogue and a whole vocabulary used for descriptive characterization or for the clarifying of emotions and thought-processes; but a screen-talester achieves his result almost solely by means of vivid action; and while he necessarily employs *words* to put these actions into form, *his vocabulary is rich in expressions of movement*. He cannot use up whole pages to tell why to Jim the thought of Agnes—cold and careless, stony of heart, as she must be if her plan to wed an unloved millionaire is fulfilled—is terribly depressing. He has to weave his story so that one knows by a visual embodiment of idea in action—or in some tangible thing which establishes the idea—that Jim calls up a vision of Agnes as his imagination pictures her.

Versatile as is the camera, with its tricks and possibilities for deception, *it cannot photograph thought*. If you disagree, feeling that you have seen pictures in which the mental processes of a character were entirely

clear, think back carefully and see if you do not recollect previous action or situation by the use of which you were made to sense that important point. A woe-begone lover is Jim, as we see him swaying at the rail of the ship which takes him far from Agnes; and if he looks at the water and thinks of her, growing more dejected, for a page or so of fiction, all is well. Without some previous situation to indicate what occupies his thought and makes him lean dully over the rail, he would impress you, in a synopsis, as merely a seasick passenger.

For the photoplay synopsis of today, the writer would provide more detail about Agnes; he would, in fact, never *begin* any synopsis with this picture of Jim. Having detailed the relationship that might exist between the young man and the young lady, the screen form, needing some foundation for future indication of thought, would prompt him to show Agnes and Jim together in some situation bringing out the facts about Agnes, her contemplated plan, the predominating selfishness of the girl, forecasting her ultimate decision to marry for money rather than for love and presumable poverty. Quite possibly as Jim stands thinking of Agnes, this suggestion would be incorporated in the sentence relating that situation:

“While Jim stands at the ship’s rail he is reflecting sadly on the course being pursued by Agnes. His fancy conjures up a vision of the cold, careless girl in her new home, surrounded by fawning men whose compli-

ments seem to her to be genuine tributes to her beauty. As the vision disappears Jim is more gloomy than before." ¹

Another writer, preparing the same situation, might describe it by the use of another device, somewhat along this line:

"While Jim stands by the ship's rail, dejectedly looking out toward the heaving water, Agnes is sitting in the magnificent mansion her millionaire husband has provided. She is surrounded by men who pay her idle compliments. The compliments flatter Agnes. She smiles delightedly, never dreaming that she is being made a pawn, even when their flattery doubles with the entrance of her husband. Jim's thought is almost identical with this view of Agnes. He grows more dejected than ever, more hopeless too."

In each case a substitute has been supplied for the unphotographable brain-process of thought.

The technical use of certain arbitrary alternatives for the expression of thought in visual form is a matter that need not concern you just now. These examples are presented merely to let you see how necessary it is, if your synopsis is to be well considered, that you think in action, and so can be certain of your

¹ While not essential to a complete and satisfactory synopsis preparation, nevertheless an understanding on the part of the screen writer of at least the elementary requirements of *scenario* technique would be a decided advantage in helping his treatment of such situations. For a complete study of the photoplay in all its manuscript-forms, see *Writing the Photoplay* (1919 edition), by J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds, published uniform with this volume in THE WRITER'S LIBRARY; and also *The Technique of the Photoplay*, by Epes Winthrop Sargent.

methods when you will need to substitute for action something approaching it in point of visual clarity.

Training Your Plot-Perception

At the same time that you are developing your ability to visualize and acquiring a good vocabulary of movement, you must begin to educate your plot-gathering faculty. Train your perception to the end that you may promptly recognize a bare shred of novel idea, whether it springs into your mind, whether it is noted in the course of your daily activities, betrayed to you by some chance remark, or conveyed to your mind in the course of your reading of the day's news. The ability to catch hold of any slightest clue that may lead eventually to the tracking down of a fresh plot is a faculty only a little more important than is the mental power of retention and tabulation, by the exercise of which you can, so to speak, lay your hand upon the shred of plot-material at the exact instant that it may be needed in your work.

Storing Ideas

A continually replenished storehouse of raw material is your vital necessity. You will be drawing upon it constantly. You must not allow it to become depleted of contents; better far to have a vast reserve of ideas than a paucity of them. So be always on the alert to renew your supply. Train your eyes to note the peculiar mannerisms of your neighbor, your business associate, your seat-mates on train or trolley car, and

school your memory to hold the impressions you gather. Some odd twist of conversation, some queer trait or mannerism of a person met by chance, may be the basis for a character-trait that will inspire a wholly new train of plot-development.

Do not depend alone upon your power of memory in filing away plot-fabric. Keep a note-book about your person. Jot down any stray thought, any chance impression, any oddity of speech that you notice. If this note-book is of the loose-leaf variety, so much the better, for then you can detach the various notes at your leisure, and put them in some sort of file, indexing them so that they will be a source of easy mind-refreshment rather than something to clutter up your desk.

What to Read

Read for inspiration along the lines of plot and situation. Read widely. Read understandingly. Read no trash! Let the material you discover in this field be of high quality. Read books by standard authors, and the best of contemporary fiction. Many a book or short-story has provided an inspiration wholly aside from its own contents. If you have quick perception and a good plot-sense you can often catch one of these barely mentioned ideas, these plot-germs that come from the brain of another but are not properly his since it is your brain that takes cognizance of the mere hints and turns them to account.

Read the trade papers published in connection with the motion-picture industry. They will do much for

you: they will tell you of the changes in production-plan, of the changes in the personnel of the various companies' acting-forces, of new producing companies and their intentions, of the changes of address consequent upon the removal of producing companies from eastern to western or southern studios and back again. In every way these newsy journals will be of benefit to you: they generally review the principal productions of the day, week or month, printing a synopsis of at least the basic plot of such productions; they invariably have a tabulated list of the pictures which have been, are being, or are about to be put on the market; and besides this, they carry virtually all the advertisements that the producing companies send out, so that you can keep track of the trend of the industry, its probable needs, its discontinued demands.

Study the Screen

Go to the picture theatres at every opportunity. Do not go to the same theatre every time, if your situation permits you to vary your place of entertainment. Study the pictures that you see: do not merely watch them for the sake of their entertaining qualities; discover, by later analysis, to what attributes they owe their entertainment. Watch them, also, as the work of your competitors in the idea-producing field. You will be competing with some pretty bright rivals. Keep track of their work, of their methods of presentation, in so far as these are discernible in the screened story.

Go to the screen theatre for another purpose, as well as to study the pictures:

Study Photoplay Spectators

Note how they receive the different types of stories. Try to understand what quality makes a picture evoke their appreciation, what it is that causes the restless stir, the loss of attention, in certain pictures; note the reception given to each "star" who takes the principal rôle in a picture, asking yourself at the same time what particular things go into the story to make it acceptable for production with that star. For it must be understood that different screen favorites require different types of stories, and, in some cases, radically differing methods of story-treatment. The story for Miss Kitty Gordon allows her to wear beautiful gowns, for example: that point will be noted if you watch the screen analytically; it is a point you must consider in submitting to any company for which that capable actress appears. Douglas Fairbanks is so universally known that it would be an obvious superfluity to say that his method of handling a story is far different from that employed, say, by Earle Williams. Yet, can you say offhand just where the difference lies, and what treatment would make a story better for Mr. Williams than for Mr. Fairbanks? To be able to judge of these varying methods of "doing a picture" will be of great benefit in planning your stories, and of inestimable value to you when you get to the marketing stage.

Looking at Your Own Work with the Critical Eye

It is surprising to realize what a great number of people like to have a post to lean against. Not a few

of these are seeking to write motion-picture ideas into synopsis form, and the post they search for is someone, not to tell them where their mistakes lie, but a friendly soul who will be kind enough to write their stories for them, and then put them in shape so that the check will come to the ones who do the leaning.

In other words, an inconsistent writer of this sort possesses himself of an idea. To his untrained judgment it looks like the pink of perfection. The editor sends it back. Immediately this type of writer wishes to find someone who can make that idea salable. He will spend more time trying to get some editor to help, asking some critic to rebuild and reshape and revise—yes, and sell the idea!—than he would consume in mastering the whole method of doing all this for himself. That no editor has the time to expend in cultivating waste ground, and that a professional writer can more profitably devote his hours to producing something he can sell for himself than in working out an idea for you, should be facts too self-evident to need discussion. The moral of the illustration is: Stand on your own feet. Do not waste time hunting for a post to lean against!

All this does not mean that criticism is valueless. In fact, criticism from someone with a viewpoint at variance with your own will often be helpful to you: in proportion to its constructive, or building-up, quality, such criticism will enable you to learn for yourself; but if you could get someone to rebuild and revise and sell for you, when you could not accomplish at least a degree of consideration otherwise—well, you would be

as badly off with your next idea. You would never succeed. You *could* not succeed.

Cultivate the power to turn your eyes inward, to analyze your own work. Treat this work as if it were handed you by someone else for criticism, and "whale into the thing" with the intention of discovering as many flaws as possible. Make believe, for the time being, that you are picking out the faults in the efforts of your best friend. Having seen as many of these as you possibly can, set out to tell this supposititious best friend how to get around the drawbacks, how to remove them and reshape them into beneficial helps. Forget (and you must!) the "wonderful" nature of the material; remember that inflation shows up to much better advantage in the bank deposit book than beneath the hat-band. Be a harsh parent to your brain-child, if by that method you can improve its behavior in the company of editors. To be able to acquire this attitude toward your work is equivalent to a saving in postage wasted on poor material. Truly Uncle Sam's rates are not unfair, but the backs of his postmen are just ordinary human backs; consider their carrying power when you can; conserve in the matter of futile effort on their part and your own.

Last, But Not Least

Finally, and in a way, most important of all, mind your "P's and Q's"; resolve upon Patience and Perseverance; determine upon Quality in Quantity.

If you have come this far and are still resolved to turn to the following page, your sincerity is beyond question, your purpose is worthy of a reward, and your constancy may result in the sight of your name flashing from many a screen, as well as upon a bank deposit book shamelessly displaying its plump figure to the multitude of awed and envious Average Persons—"one of whom you are not which."

CHAPTER III

KNOWING THE "NO'S"

When a fond father presents his youthful son with a first air rifle, he is a wise parent if, before he divulges the mechanics of marksmanship, he lays down definitely a warning about what not to shoot at: otherwise, by the time that science is explained, it may be too late to revive the careless chicken, unperforate the neighbors' window shades, or unshatter the riven conservatory glass.

By the same wisdom, it will be well, ere you set out on your gunning trip for the Big Check, to acquire a fair knowledge of the targets that are, for one reason or another, taboo.

The person best qualified to present this information is the one who passes judgment upon our efforts—the studio script-reader. He reads books and other manuscript, it is true, but he reads the multitudinous synopses most of the time. He knows what is wanted, and is in a position to tell you what is not desirable. Step quietly into his office and unobtrusively let him do the chattering.

Examining Some Synopses with the Studio Reader

Here is a rather amazingly bulky pile of manuscripts—the day's receipts from the free-lance synopsis-writers

whose minds are all bent on coaxing the game into a suitable clearing where a lucky shot will acclaim the huntsman's quality.

The first synopsis has a cheerful title—"The Funeral Passes." Is it any wonder that the reader begins the story with a morose mind? He discovers, in the course of a "skippy" perusal of that sad tale, that the hero, who has been sufficiently out-of-character to spoil a girl's life, is brought to realize his sin too late, when he sees the funeral passing.

No wonder that story is rejected. Yet you would be surprised at the number of stories which, in a degree perhaps less morbid, employ death as a means of bringing about some great realization of error, or to produce what the authors falsely believe is a "strong, dramatic punch." Death is not a welcome subject in any form. Sometimes it must be utilized, and when properly managed and emphatically unavoidable, it is not the real reason for rejection. Usually, however, writers for the screen seem to have the impression that a death scene is powerful. Of itself it is depressing. Tragedy is the most sparingly used form of dramatic expression upon the screen. Morbidness is a thing to be shunned as one shuns the leper. The haste with which the reader consigns this particular story to its return envelope is a warning that you should heed.

Tragedy on the Screen

Tragedy you will see sometimes. In fact, certain stars affect it. But have you noticed the material they

select? It is invariably the work of some really great playwright, novelist or poet. Only by reason of its sheer power does such material find a place, and then only when a player of unquestioned ability enacts its principal rôle. It is a debatable question whether, even then, such a production makes its distribution a very wide one. The cases of successful tragedy-pictures which have made a lasting impression are as rare as the checks that free-lance photoplay writers receive for such material.

Morbidness Is Undesirable

The morbid tale is even less wanted than the tragic story. Some attempts have been made to distribute pictures which, in theme or idea, are morbid. They have created no vogue. One spectator who watched Vitagraph's "Mortmain" (a tale of the grafting of the hand of a dead man on to the living arm of another) left the auditorium in a state of nervousness that kept her away from picture-viewing for some time.

The "Over-Thin" and the "Over-Fat"

The next story the reader finds is a nice little idea of a girl who comes back from her war-nursing in love with a hero who is about to come back from the trenches. His former sweetheart causes her to give him up because that former sweetheart, a spoiled and sickly woman, creates the impression that she and the soldier are secretly married. The heroine finds out the truth before her life is completely ruined.

Now that is not such a poor idea. But the reader feels that it is too slender, as it stands, for a five-reel production. The dramatic points are few and far between. Intermediate incidents will be "draggy" and there is not enough strength in the basic situation to enable it to hold interest over the slow spots.

Quite probably the reader will write the author a more or less definite note about it, for the idea has some possibilities. He cannot take time to say what they are, but he is willing to suggest that the plot needs some building. Had the author been a keen critic in the first warmth of his inspiration, he would doubtless have seen the possibilities for more "complication."

The matter of the war is a thing to be touched on in passing. Some companies want it if the idea upon which it is built is a powerful one. Others do not want war. Their policies change with the changing conditions of the country. That is something you have to study individually—when to write on a topic, when not to do so.

The next story chances to be an extremely complicated one, with some twenty characters weaving in and out of the plot. Their relations, one with the other, are continually shifting. It is hard to keep them in mind. The situations that develop are dependent on a thorough understanding of these relationships—in short, the story is over-complicated and would be confusing to the spectator, without a plethora of explanatory sub-titles, or "leaders," as you prefer to name them.

So, it is a natural deduction that there is a happy medium between the over-slight story and the too-complicated idea. You will be able to find on the screen, at times, examples of each type, stories which possess some quality that has appealed to the producer and caused him to overlook the definite drawback. Your common sense will enable you to profit by a study of pictures, to the end that your own offerings will be satisfying on this score.

The Character Study

The next story to be read is one in which the plot is subordinated to the development of character. This is a type of idea far more suitable to the leisurely fashion of long fiction than to the screen. Moods are more necessary than movement, and the screen does not take well to a lack of movement. Quite possibly the traits of character which give rise to the action are susceptible of treatment in such a manner that they will be surrounded with more "meat," or story-quality. In no other case should such an idea be selected as the basis for a picture plot, except in such cases as may arise when a director of great talent is in close sympathy and equally close touch with a writer who understands him, knows his capabilities, and understands the players to be used: then, of course, conditions govern the production and the results are satisfying to the extent that the director is able to put individuality and feeling in the places usually occupied by movement and situation. Do not waste time trying to meet his exacting demands.

The Wandering Tale

You will next watch the reader shift in his chair and begin to dodge about on the pages of the submitted script. Incident follows incident, but no definite theme is visualized, no situations arise possessed of that close-knit quality which compels interest.

Daisy comes to New York to make her fortune. Hugh stays on the farm. Daisy meets a kind woman and is taken into her home. Hugh makes his farm pay. Daisy meets a theatrical producer. She is given a chance to show her possibilities as an actress. She succeeds. Hugh is popular, now that he is amassing riches from his scientifically conducted farm. Daisy is a popular idol of the stage. Hugh longs for her and finally comes to the city and sees her acting. He meets her after the show and begs her to give up the stage and settle down on the farm. Daisy is sick of flowers, flurry and finery. She agrees. Selah!

At no time except at the start and the finish of this tale is there a meeting between hero and heroine. Nothing happens that is unusual or out of the regular course of natural events. Each point is made by an incident. No situations develop. The tale meanders quietly along. It could start anywhere—and, Heaven knows!—end much sooner, so far as the reader is concerned. You do not want to write the wandering tale. You want to write something that will sell!

Hackneyed Ideas

The story just outlined has another serious fault: it contains no tiny bit of novelty. Freshness of idea is

a necessary ingredient of the salable plot. True, there are no "new" stories—every plot and, one would think, every situation, has been utilized. But it is in the novel combination of situations, in the fresh viewpoint, the clever re-shaping of the garments which cover the ancient skeletons, that a writer may work up to the selling point.

The drunkard father, son or brother who is brought to reform through the efforts of mother, sister or daughter—these are deadly dull to all, for who has not seen them time and time again! Yet who shall say that a new treatment is impossible? It is your duty to yourself that should prompt you to be sure you *have* something new in that line before you send out an idea of the sort.

The same may be said of the child bringing parents together. Still, the child appears, even today, and performs its allotted mission: but in a new way, under novel circumstances, or with a really powerful story-environment.

The moment an idea is screened it naturally becomes a hackneyed story—it may not be done that same way again. So it is hopeless to tabulate a full list of the themes or ideas which are not salable. From such a list one writer has already found a half dozen inspirations which worked into marketable—and check-bringing—stories.

The best attitude to take is that pretty much anything which comes easily to mind has done the same by some other brain. Perhaps by a conscientious ex-

amination of the idea, a long series of revisions and tearings-down, it may be rebuilt. But if it snaps into your consciousness at a time when you have not had much plot training, you can assume with certainty that it is likely to have been used before. The pith of this matter is expressed in the suggestion that you be not too hasty to acclaim an idea as new and original until you have given it a pretty thorough study, looked at it from all angles, sought out every weakness, tracked down every development it offers. If, after all this, the idea, in a revised form, still looks "good," you ought to justify your opinion by trying it on the producer—but not before.

An Indefinite Writing Style

Turning back to the reader, you will see him puzzling over a creased, shabby script that runs on in this way:

Jim loves Mary and Jack loves her and Grace is crazy about him but he isn't interested in her and she does not know that he cares about her——. And so on, without clarity, with pronouns so used that one is totally at sea as to the relations of characters, as to which person is being alluded to at any given point. You do not have to be a fiction writer in your writing style, but you *must* have a knowledge of the proper way to describe your plot. That proper way is so clear that no confusion can possibly exist as to what character you mean when you say "he" or "she." Going further, that proper way is one in which interest develops with the first sentence. Perhaps interest may

not depend on a striking statement—the synopsis opening may simply give the principal traits of Mary's character. If these are worth while, the interest is assured.

Other Unsalable Ideas

The reader will find other plots that court rejection: among them the "sex" story which makes a display of vulgarity or suggestiveness for no purpose other than to cater to a low taste; also, the story which promises much at the start, and then falls flat; as well, the story that is filled with coincidence, such as the chance meeting, the telephone call and a chance mix-up in connections which enables the hero to learn where the heroine is held prisoner, and, again, the coincidental fact that a stolen child comes back, grown up, to work for her father, who seeks to wed her and discovers their relationship through the accidental wearing of a locket—purely because the plot needs such a twist. These types of stories are unwelcome. So, too, is the idea that strikes a blow at any religious sect or political creed. Again, there is no demand for the type of plot in which a too-long period of time must elapse, giving children time to grow up, and losing sight of the parents in a new interest centering about the newly grown children. The interest of the spectators must center about one definite character. While others may share this interest, they do so to a minor extent, and in no case does the interest shift from that original one upon whom it was placed.

Knowing somewhat of the game that should not be fired at, it is well that you discover that there is still something left to justify your gunning.

CHAPTER IV

TABULATING THE "AYES"

In naming the desirable sorts of photoplay material it will be useful to mention also the general as well as the particular classifications into which these ideas fall.

Loosely, the photoplay is divided into two groups: *Comedy ideas* and *Drama ideas*. Comedy, of course, in this broad grouping, may be considered to be anything that deals with the lighter side of life, anything of a humorous nature, while drama naturally describes the more serious problems of humanity, without levity. However, changes of condition, new demands, specializing stars and other influences have allowed a more definite subdivision of these broad classes. These subdivisions and their blendings may be named as follows:

True, or "Polite" Comedy

True comedy is the most highly refined type of humor, depending on the amusing aspect of the basic idea, rather than upon violence of situation or ludicrous acrobatics.

In its best form, this "polite" or "parlor" comedy was capably handled by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew, though they made no attempt, of course, to be the sole exponents of the type on the screen. The "polite" comedy often pokes gentle fun at some pet folly of man

or woman, never in an offensive manner, never with intent to do more than give rise to the chuckle of recognition of the "human-ness" of the trait displayed as a target for the easy satire of its author.

The basic ideas used in true comedy must be thoroughly true to life. They must have no hint of illogicality, or of being far-fetched, or of straining plausibility to achieve situation. Every link of their construction is soundly true to a widely recognized quality, trait or defect of human nature. As an example of the polite comedy, the "comedy of idea," the following is offered:

A FAMILY FLIVVER¹

Charley and his wife are adorably mated: each worships the other. Charley decides to buy a small runabout for "Girlie's" pleasuring. He selects a model, goes home and tells her of his choice. She is delighted, and agrees to go, next day, and see the model, to pronounce final approval.

When the two examine the small car, an adroit salesman subtly calls her attention to a larger car, a sedan. Girlie argues that her mother deserves some consideration, and "her family" would disapprove violently of her flaunting poverty before the neighborhood by driving a cheap runabout. After some argument, Charley compromises with her on the basis of a trial spin in a five-passenger car.

They make ready that afternoon. As they wait for the car to arrive for the demonstration, Charley lets slip the information that he has mentioned the demonstration to his mother, who will drop in to go along: whereupon Girlie mentions that she has made the same plan with respect to her own mother. There will be plenty of room, so no harm is done.

But a complication arises. Ere the car has shown itself, the news of the contemplated purchase and trial has spread through the respective families of Charley and Girlie. Relatives rush to the focal point of interest, Grandad to advise Charley, and take a bit of air for his "rheumatics"—Auntie to help Girlie "choose" rightly—and others to advise—and get an automobile ride. By the time they are all collected it is evident that there is going to be a shortage of riding room: consequent friction develops between the two families.

¹One-reel polite comedy, Agnes Ayres and Edward Earle. Vitagraph.

The demonstration car has broken down in the meantime, and the agent, eager to make a sale, gets hold of a ramshackle car—anything will do for a demonstration.

By the time the ancient ark draws up before the door, Charley and Girlie are at loggerheads, each drawn up with a line of relatives, the two parties exchanging dagger-glances. The welcome "honk!" of the car sends the crowd helter-skeltering out to pre-empt positions. Manifestly the car is both inadequate and unsatisfactory, so Charley and Girlie, realizing that they are being "familied" out of their usual happy understanding of each other, take this chance to refuse to consider the old car, and so get rid of their relatives and resolve that they will do their future purchasing without family coercion.

The eagerness of relatives to advise, to "mix in," with a resulting confusion, is the human quality introduced for purposes of humor. Not so much in action as in the selection of types, and the classes of relatives represented by each, is the idea developed.

This sort of material is not so easy to prepare as one might think, offhand. It depends upon a certain understanding of human nature that has to be even more deep than the construction of other comedy-forms necessitates. When it is found that you can devise this sort of comedy, your market will be as steady as the growth of intellectual attendance at the picture theatre.

True Farce

A type of humor which appeals less to the intellect and more to the appreciation of broadly drawn fun is the farce.

Too frequently the still lower form of comedy which is really acrobatic, or "slapstick," is described as farce. A distinction should be made between the two types.

True farce is as dependent upon humor of idea as is "polite" comedy, but in farce the idea is not so restricted by logicity, nor do we insist on the absence of mere coincidence in the plot-action. There must also be a decided increase in the complications of situation in farce over those in true comedy. Yet there is not the violence of leaping and tumbling that we discover in "slapstick."

The polite comedy example already given might be given a farce-treatment by adding situations in which further obstacles are presented to the enjoyment of the anticipated ride. Grandpa might go out and buy a car on his grandson's account, while Auntie would be doing the same thing for her niece. Girlie might sell hubby's diamond studs to get a first payment on the car she desires, while Charley would, with the same secrecy, be pawning her fur coat to make a like payment on his own choice. The resultant quarrels and mixing up of purposes, situations and disclosures, the far more broad treatment of the climax, would constitute a handling that would place the story in the class of the farce—which, obviously, is less true to life than "polite" comedy.

"Slapstick"

The wildly vigorous type of picture in which a mere thread of plot is required upon which to hang a series of acrobatic falls and situations impossible from the human point of view, is known as "slapstick." It serves only to provide laugh-provoking "rough-house" and in the degree that its continuity allows fresh ways

for achieving indiscriminate mix-ups of bodies will it be satisfying to an audience. Many people sneer at it. But it is surprising how vast an appeal this wild form of comedy makes. Possibly this popularity is due to the vividness of contrast that "slapstick" presents to the usually heavy "drama" which is generally made the feature of an entertainment. The "slapstick" is written in a running outline of description of the general situations, so as to present the freshness of idea: of all the dry reading in the world, that offered by a perusal of the "slapstick" synopsis is the most laborious, yet in inverse ratio to its dryness one may consider its laugh-provoking possibilities the greater.

From the production standpoint, much depends on the quality of mind of the director in making complete demarcations among these three types of comedy. A director accustomed to handling acrobatic players could only spoil the refinement of the polite comedy by handling his action in a ribald, knock-'em-down style. In the same way, a quietly working director with a refined sense of humor might make a dismal failure of an attempt to get the laughs that lie in the rough-and-tumble "slapstick," while neither of these directors would be quite able to take the middle ground necessary for the nice shaping of situations broad enough of action, and yet sufficiently repressed, for the farce.

The "Type-Fitting" Comedy

The screen has developed certain specialists in either eccentricity of face, figure, dress or make-up. Each of these affects a distinctive manner of "getting over" the

points of the material that best fits him. Some do "polite" comedy in a manner all their own; others prefer farce as a vehicle for their peculiar traits; and the high development of refinement to which Charlie Chaplin's quiet method has carried the "slapstick" is universally recognized, and handsomely appreciated.

It is useless to ask this sort of comedian to state particular desires. Many of the specialists work up their own material. If you think you can "strike" the style any one of them displays upon the screen, a submitted synopsis is the form your offering should take.

True Drama

The really sincere drama is as "polite" in its presentation of human ideas as is its humorous counterpart, the refined comedy. It depends on a human problem or a widely recognized condition for its "obstacle"—or basis for the dramatic struggle. It has no violence of action, but develops the situations quietly, though none the less powerfully, by reason of the repression in action. No example need be given, as the true drama is a form to be seen upon every screen.

Several classifications under True Drama may be made:

Romantic Drama is merely a refinement of type, specializing in its appeal to the sentimental chord in every heart.

Historical Drama is a subdivision of type in which the basic situation, or the principal character, is chosen for historical accuracy. It is a seldom salable sort,

though sporadic cases are citable where a company will produce an historical drama when it is sufficiently appealing by reason of the power of its central theme or the value of its central character.

Costume Drama is really no different in aspect from the historical, which necessarily imposes costume as an adjunct to verity of epoch; except that a picture may require costuming in its early scenes, if it has a prologue going far enough back in point of time. It is not welcomed by producers—many will not even consider it. Only when correspondence with a film company brings out a desire to inspect your product in this line should you bother with historical or costume material.

Topical Drama is a decidedly salable sort of product, granted that you are in touch with a company that makes a specialty of themes of wide national or party appeal—and granted also that you have something truly “big” along the line of present interest, something that is thematic enough not to be “a back number” before the film can be produced and marketed.

Melodrama

The melodrama is of a less exacting quality of plot than the true drama. In its best aspects it is no less plausible than drama, yet in movement and in vigor of action it strikes a much swifter pace. It may even approach the line of farce, in broadness of situation. This is especially noticeable in

The Melodramatic Serial, a form of melodrama which is generally divided into separate and distinct

"episodes," one of these being released each week for a predetermined period governed by the length of time the interest can be held. The serial depends upon a more or less logical central story-theme which runs through the entire production: this story is so planned that a crisis or a climax subordinate to the final climax is made to fall about the end of each episode, in such a way that it will not be definitely completed, but will hold over its own solution until the beginning of the next successive episode, when it will be explained satisfactorily, whereupon the story-thread is taken up again, to be carried to the crisis for that episode. Many companies find this a remunerative type of picture, and while the ideas are frequently evolved by staff-writers working in close harmony with star and director, it is not to be thought impossible to land a strong story of the sort, properly planned for the average length of thirty reels, or a fifteen-week series of two-reel episodes.

"Ingenué" Stories

Many companies maintain profitably a certain type of star who makes an appeal through youth, charm, ingenuousness, naiveté, beauty and what for want of a more exact term might be called "girlishness." For this star there is a demand in the line of stories which will bring out the star's particular qualities of conduct or manner. Usually these stories are not true dramas. In many instances they combine a certain amount of refined comedy, often limited to "comedy touches" which build, and seem a part of, the natural plot of the

story. Frequently they combine comedy and melodrama, usually of a somewhat refined quality. The blending of the various classes, and the proper balance to be maintained among them, is often dependent on the especial traits or abilities of the star herself.

"Type-fitting" Drama

This brings us naturally to consider the suiting of stars who have an individuality in dramatic, melodramatic, or comedy-dramatic ability as sharply marked as that of the already-noted comedy types. Mabel Normand affects (when she seems best fitted in material) the farce with melodrama for the constituent addition. Mary Pickford requires a type of story entirely individual. Douglas Fairbanks is approached by no other actor at present in his own especial field, which the screen can show you better than a hundred pages could explain. In planning to write to suit a particular star, remember that it limits your market, but possesses the off-setting advantage that to "land" in this field means that you are "made."

Occasional Specialties

Once in a while the fantasy, the fairy tale, the "kid" story, and the "sex" story will find a market. All require a thorough knowledge of the wants and policies of the producers, and will be best reserved until you are "taking orders ahead" and can afford to waste time on them should they not prove salable types.

CHAPTER V

THE ALL-IMPORTANT PLOT

The three essential elements that enter into the composition of a good photoplay synopsis are :

1st. A strong, vital plot.

2nd. A catchy, magnetic title.

3rd. A clear, smooth-reading style.

In this order of importance they deserve separate examination and study. Each has an individual reason for incorporation in your work. But it would be folly to bother with the second or the third as ingredients of the photoplay until you are thoroughly grounded in their ranking superior—the plot.

What Is a Plot?

In most fiction, in the spoken drama, in the photoplay itself, the plot is the chief concern of the author. However, there is a discernible difference in the requirements of the three mediums of expression, and comparison seems the best way to bring out clearly the points of variation.

In fiction, "The plot is such an arrangement of the events in a story as will bring out effectively the basic situation, the main crisis, the minor crises, if any, and the denouement." ¹

¹ J. Berg Esenwein and Mary Davoren Chambers, *The Art of Story Writing*.

Put in a slightly different way, and speaking generically, "In its simplest, broadest aspect, plot is the scheme, plan, argument or action of the story."¹

But the plot of a fiction story very often hangs its plot upon a complication which presents a struggle indisputably mental. Full license in the use of dialogue and description serves to make the psychology clear. In that respect the plot of the photoplay is more exacting in its limitations.

From the standpoint of the spoken play, "The plot . . . shows, by means of action, a soul in its hour of crisis, what brought about the crisis, what constitutes the problem, and how it is solved."²

Here is introduced a new element—suggested by the phrase "in its hour of crisis." This element is the second limitation on the screen type of plot—elimination of long time-lapses.³

The fiction writer may interpolate a considerable digression at a leisurely-moving point in his story, telling at length and fully of a time long past in which some important action, condition or character-trait developed which bears a strong influence upon the present plot-crisis. The "regular" playwright, by reason of his command of vocalized idea, may select

¹ J. Berg Esenwein, *Writing the Short-Story*.

² Charlton Andrews, *The Technique of Play Writing*.

³ The student is advised to read *The Plot of the Short Story*, Henry Albert Phillips; and the chapters on plot in the following treatises: *The Short Story*, Evelyn May Albright; *The Contemporary Short Story*, Harry T. Baker; *A Handbook on Story Writing*, Blanche Colton Williams; *Short Stories in the Making*, Robert Wilson Neal; *The Art of Story Writing*, Esenwein and Chambers; and *Writing the Short-Story*, J. Berg Esenwein.

some important crisis of his plot for his start, using some brief instant of pause in the movement of plot to put into words some suggestion of the past which has influenced, is influencing, or is about to influence, his developing plot. But in this matter the photoplay plot is held within much more restricted lines. It is not to be supposed that an argument is being advanced for the preparation of plots which occupy exactly as many seconds in their telling as are lived by the chief participant in their crises. That is an ideal sporadically striven for, seldom attained, and then quite frequently proving unsatisfactory. The point is that extremes should be avoided. The medium of expression at your command is *visible action*; if you have reason to present an influencing detail of the past, you must develop it in *action* and by the sheer limitations of your screen you must *displace* the present with the past and so "hold up" your story until you can return to the present. In moderation, this device is permissible, but not with the latitude to which it may be indulged in fiction or in the play.

Furthermore, the fiction plot has the aid of a chapter-division to break off a crisis definitely, so that the next passage may begin after a lapse of years, perhaps, with a fresh situation ready to plunge into, the intervening time being covered by a brief, or extensive, explanation, as may be necessary, at another point of the story.

In the same way, the drama of the theatre lets down a definitely halting curtain at the moment of high tension, raising it upon a different scene, possibly a new set of people who can, by the aid of dialogue, sug-

gest their relation to the formerly-displayed playfolk, and these new characters may chat over a cup of tea as they make the spectator acquainted with some important development of plot which can be spoken of more practicably than it can be acted.

The exact definition of plot, in its photoplay limitations, must be more comprehensive, then, and at the same time more elastic than that of either fiction or the spoken play. It must recognize the exactions of the screen and still permit the usual methods of production to be stretched to a common-sense degree, for the cultivated plot-sense will often discern strength of situation sufficient to warrant a reasonable departure from the set rules: in fact, it is in this wise observance of the limitations of the screen plot, and in the cleverness displayed in a partial ignoring of their *extent* while preserving their *intent*, that one marks the difference between the amateur and the expert plot manipulator.

For a definition of plot which states the exactions of the screen, reduced to the simplest terms that will cover the matter, contemplate this statement:

In photoplay, the plot is a vital episode in the life of a human being, translatable into self-explanatory action, showing how and why an obstacle is placed in the life-current of that individual, what efforts are made to overcome the obstruction, how these efforts are rewarded, and what is the outcome of the success,¹

¹ In this definition the words "outcome of the success" are used with purpose. A failure to triumph over the obstruction presupposes a tragic end to the story. Tragedy is practically taboo. A fuller explanation of this point will be found in a later chapter, under the discussion of "the happy ending."

with the least possible halt of progress between crises.

Since the plot is the one thing of absolute and paramount importance in your preparation of the salable photoplay synopsis, it will be well to go a little more completely into the essentials of this definition.

Plot Must Be a Vital Episode

First of all, a plot must have an underlying quality of human-ness which will cause it to exert a wide appeal. This vitalizing factor is achieved by selecting a *basic idea* that does one of two things—presents a problem founded on a national, or at least a geographically extensive, condition of mind, manners, environment or well-being, by choosing which you enlist the attention of a majority of the people who are more or less affected by this condition; or by making the personally encountered obstacle that holds back the happiness of your principal character so powerful in its influence that the individual spectator will assume a vigorous championship of that character, evince a keen sympathy for the hoped-for triumph over the obstacle, feel a keen sense of personal participation in the problem.

In the first instance you reach the interest through the appeal of the *problem*. Everyone is more or less selfish and is therefore touched by anything threatening his or her own peace of mind, physical well-being, or suitability of environment.

In the alternative method you create a sympathy for the chief participant in your plot: you cause the sym-

pathizer to assume the rôle, to feel the emotion, to grasp the importance of the problem, and so, in the eventuality, you achieve the same result.

The Obstacle or Complication

You might discover a problem of vital importance to the whole world and yet fail to weave it into a plot unless you incorporated an obstacle to the smooth running of the life-current of the character most concerned.

To take an illustration, consider the topic which not only concerns the whole world but which will be of importance for a long while—not the problem of securing peace terms and exacting indemnities in the aftermath of the World War; that is vital as this is written, but it may all be settled when you read; but, arising from this problem is one of far more lasting vitality—the problem of how to keep the various nations of the world eternally in harmony, so that there will never be another carnage like that which still lives vividly in history and in the mind of every human being.

Fasten, then, upon the problem of eternal peace. How is it to be ensured? Your principal character believes that he knows the answer. At once he becomes a figure of vital interest. He has a solution for a world-puzzling question. Beside him the lover who seeks to win Ethel in spite of her father's objection to the color of his hair, pales into insignificance. *Your* character is vital, powerful. Every one wants to know what his idea is, how practicable it will prove. He ex-

pounds his theory. Suppose he believes that by removing any form of government which permits personal selfishness or aggressiveness to rule the wills of the people, and by allowing the populace to participate in every discussion touching national policy, every difference of international policy will be adjusted through a diplomacy dictated by the public will for peace. Suppose that this idea is propounded to the world, disseminated through the medium of willing governments, interested newspapers, speakers and publishers. Suppose that the world accepts it gladly, puts it into practice quickly, and finds it a completely successful solution of the war-problem.

If you should handle your theme in that way, no interest would attach to the plot, except the academic interest presented in the theory expressed. Your chief character would be merely a man with large vision. He would encounter no difficulties, and so would achieve no active interest. Such a treatment of the idea would constitute an essay, not a plot.

But let your leading character tell a neighbor of his idea. The neighbor takes an argumentative attitude and proceeds to explain why he thinks the scheme futile. Opposition is encountered. If one person opposes, others undoubtedly would. The principal character is not shaken in his belief in the basic value of his plan. He determines to win over the opposing neighbor. In his attempt he fights against odds—there is introduced *the element of struggle*. By reason of the apparently insurmountable obstacle of the neighbor's tenacity to his own opinion, one is led to take

more or less active interest in the ultimate outcome according as one sides with the one or the other argument.

Therefore, a smooth account of the realization of an ideal possesses no element of struggle. The adverse opinion of the neighbor and the real opposition that naturally results introduce a *complication* and so creates active, rather than academic, interest in the outcome of the stated ideal.

The plot may be further complicated, new elements of opposition may be interposed between the exponent of the idea and his success in proving it practicable. If he wins the neighbor, he may have difficulty in reaching the people who can help him to put his idea into practice, or they may sneer at him, or he may eventually come to a dead halt by virtue of the fact that no person in power will bother to aid him in putting his theory to the test of actual trial.

Were the plot to end here, the definite halt at the critical point in the idealist's life-struggle would constitute a disappointing anticlimax instead of the expected successful climax, for he would have been taken up to the peak of his struggle and then dropped into an abyss of hopelessness. So the plot would end in tragedy. As a plot it would be technically complete, having an argument of wide appeal, presentable for the most part in action, with a complication creating an obstruction (and so introducing an element of struggle), an effort to surmount the obstacle, with a resultant crisis (which by virtue of its relative impor-

tance would be a climax), and a final conclusion, all covering a reasonably consecutive period of time. Yet, viewed as material for the modern "feature" photoplay, this plot would be lacking in two qualities of recognized value, both aside from its tragic ending; *that* could be made more acceptable by a shift of circumstance to show to the principal character a vision of the future in which he would be hailed as the founder of a great and lasting peace-idea, thus satisfying his ambition, removing the tragedy and providing the more satisfactory denouement.

The two qualities which are lacking do not properly incorporate themselves in a definition of what a plot *is*, though they merit a few words, for while material may fulfill every requirement as a plot without them, their presence within it makes much of the difference between the unsought and the desirable photoplay plot.

The first of these lacks is:

Length of Story Sufficient for the Modern Feature-
Picture

In its present form, the plot would not be successful in a modern feature-subject. This is a matter of as great importance as the procuring of material answering all other requirements for a plot. Of what use is a plot to you if it is not susceptible of treatment in a manner to make it salable? So the place to explain that matter is here.

Physically, photoplays are, as you doubtless know, a series of photographs taken on celluloid strips sensi-

tized and otherwise made suitable to receive the impression of light. These strips, connected and bound in lengths accommodated by the reels which serve to contain them, and from which they are unwound, in process of projection, and wound upon other reels, are standardized in length, each complete reel comprising from nine hundred to a thousand feet of film. The actual length of film to a reel is elastic enough to allow of a few feet more or a very few feet less on a reel, so as to permit the proper continuity of scenes and to allow an important though minor crisis of the plot to occur in the final section of each such division. This standard reel requires approximately sixteen minutes for projecting.

The present-day *feature* photoplay demands a general standard of five such reels to the subject.

Manifestly, then, the present plot is inadequate in the matter of its length, because to make it fill five reels you would have to multiply situations showing the efforts of the principal character to interest various people or groups of people in his idea. This would make for repetition, loss of interest, dragginess and eventual dullness.

Therefore it is safe to deduce that a mere multiplicity of complications would not be the solution of your difficulty. Yet you must conform to the standards of length, or else drop your ambition to use the material as a feature and relegate it to the less demanded type of two- or three-reel productions.

A way out of the woods is offered by the discovery and removal of the second point of inadequacy, which is

The Love Interest

The moment you bring the form of heart-appeal generally understood in the term "love interest" into your plot you engage a fresh attention, provide a new series of possibilities, allow for a great increase of interest, and so permit a more lengthy treatment of the idea. "All the world loves a lover," you know; and certainly all the picture-going world becomes the ardent champion of a man in whose behalf a sweetheart takes an active partizanship. Not every story owes its love interest to the sweethearts, it is true; in some cases the same idea is accomplished by the mother-love or the other forms of heart-interest that produce human relationships, even the firm, staunch friendship between man and man serving the purpose.

In this particular case, the possibilities for the introduction of the feminine character as a help to the formulation of further complications prompts the selection of the sweetheart as an exponent of the required quality.

Suppose the idealist has a sweetheart, a girl of fine intellect, possibly even the daughter of a man who has already flouted that idealist. The young woman believes in the ideal as firmly as does its originator. She brings her efforts to bear in seeking to influence her father to her way of thinking. There she brings

about a complication for herself: and at this point it is well to side-track the exposition of the plot long enough to utter a warning—and a very serious warning—against the great danger of having

The Fatal Division of Interest

The man has begun the story; it is the man who must accomplish his aim. To create an interest in that character and then *drop it* in favor of another interest is a step quite fatal to the attention-holding possibilities of a plot. The plot that does not fasten interest upon *one character* and hold it throughout, fails completely. You may allow another to *share* the interest through contact with the principal, but never must any other than the main character be given the "center of the situation."

Getting back to our illustrative plot, it is safe to allow the feminine character to attain a degree of interest through her participation in the struggle. She would usurp "the center of the screen" if she were allowed to sacrifice her home ties by reason of a quarrel with her father, so it is better to have her exert a sufficient influence to obtain her parent's consent to the supporting of a test of her lover's idea. Perhaps a large tract of land in some out-of-the-way corner of the globe is owned by her father: this she can utilize. So she coaxes for and receives a check that will enable her to let the principal character outfit a small expedition, comprising some of his adherents. They may go to the selected spot and there set up an idealized form of government.

The outcome of the experiment, the complications that affect the developing and retarding of that experiment, the perseverance and eventual triumph of the exponent, in showing that his plan has not only "made good" in the model form of government established, but, as well, has influenced other nearby people—these are possible adjuncts to the inner kernel of plot which will produce all the contributory factors of length, strength, holding power, "grip" (or "punch"), suspense and—finally—satisfaction of the awakened hope for success engendered in the spectator by the girl's faith in her protégé and his ideals.

So, when you have assimilated the definition of plot, and have begun to discover for yourself material which shapes itself into plots satisfying the formula, do not lose sight of the necessity for testing that material also for suitability in the matter of length, and for its unified appeal to the heart and the sympathy of an audience. If its basic idea is vital, endowed with the genuine quality of human appeal, if it contains a sufficiency of complications to hold up at least five reels of story-essence, and if it engages the sympathy to a high degree, you have that most elusive, most salable, most immediately remunerative of all ideas—a good photo-play plot!

CHAPTER VI

CAPITALIZING THE CAPTION

The catchy, magnetic title has been mentioned as the second ingredient of a good synopsis and has been placed ahead of the writing style in the scale of relative importance. Properly naming the photoplay is a matter that is seldom understood by the picture-plot creator; in fact, he frequently regards the ceremony of christening his brain-child as a trivial affair, handicapping his mental offspring at the very start of its career with some unsuitable, ordinary or carelessly considered name, whereby he introduces it to the motion-picture editor very much in this wise: "This child is about like a thousand others. I could not reasonably expect you to drop everything else and interest yourself in its welfare. Sometime when you are not busy, maybe you will take time enough to give it a casual glance."

If you expect your out-of-the-ordinary brain-child to be accorded a more sympathetic welcome, you must provide it with a card of introduction more likely to attract attention than the general run of photoplay titles. To christen wisely, to furnish the right sort of "Here I am, look at me!" you should understand the functions of the title and know how to make it mean something.

Consider, then, what purposes are served by a catchy, magnetic title:

What the Title Does for the Writer

From the standpoint of the author who writes with a higher aim in view than the mere commencing of a collection of rejection slips, the well-considered photoplay title accomplishes a decidedly desirable object: it serves as an advertisement of his novel line of goods, creates in the mind of the consumer of such goods an inclination to look at them without delay, and puts that consumer in a frame of mind quite well disposed toward his task. Any advertisement that does less may very well be adjudged pitifully futile and not worth bothering about. If you put yourself in the editor's chair for a moment, you will grasp the idea more readily.

Here is a comedy subject offered you for consideration under the caption, "What Happened in the Tunnel." Who cares? Anyway, the title is obvious. You can guess the probable quality of the contents of that manuscript from the ordinary, obviously tell-it-all name it bears; a casual glance at pages one, three and five makes your conclusion a certainty; the story is the old, worn-out one about the newly wed man who thinks he is kissing his wife as their train passes through a tunnel, to discover that he has been exchanging osculatory endearment with a lady of dark complexion and kinky hair. Old as the hills? The title advertised that fact, for as editor you have seen title

and plot together a hundred times before, and the resultant reading was casual—a matter of editorial duty, not of desire.

A drama, next, and its advertisement is embodied in the trite, meaningless caption, "Two Sisters." Read it? Not now! The untouched pile of manuscripts is too bulky; lay this pale ghost of an idea aside till leisure is becoming *ennui*, then pick it up to provide yourself a smile or two, for manifestly the story it contains cannot have any great vitality or its author would have given a hint in his title.

Look at this as an example of a catchy, magnetic advertisement for a comedy: "Twelve Good Hens and True!"¹ It recalls the phrase that it juggles to its own amusing twist—"Twelve good men and true." Comedy, of course, and quite likely to be *good* comedy. You want to see at once. You read, and discover that the material embodied in the synopsis is worth second consideration, and, you foresee, eventual purchase. Regard the next title: "The Heart of Humanity."² Drama is suggested, interest is challenged, and it takes you only a few seconds to discover that the advertised contents of the synopsis live up to their caption.

The first two examples given will not linger in your memory any more than the picture plays they christen will merit a second reading. The others are of a different quality: they mean something.

¹ Polite comedy, produced with and by the Drews for Metro.

² Drama of the War, produced by Allen Holubar for Jewel Productions, Inc.

If the titles you choose are made to mean something, to stand for worth-while ideas, to claim attention, to indicate your individuality, to influence reader or editor toward favorable consideration of material, they will repay you for the thought and time you bestow on them.

What the Title Means to the Picture Producer

To realize what a producer looks for in a title resume for a while your rôle of motion-picture editor and turn from the reading of "outside" contributions to the selecting of some already published story that is to form the foundation for an "adaptation"—by which is meant a story already fictionized or produced as a stage play and put into scenario or scene-continuity form. You see possibilities for a good picture in a short-story of the "O. Henry" collection, a story which has been titled by its originator with the rather fetching and "atmospheric" caption, "Brickdust Row." Before you "give out" that story to a staff writer who will have the task of putting the material into suitable scenario form, run over to "the boss" and discuss the matter with him.

"I like everything but the title," he will eventually tell you. You wonder why he dislikes the undeniably suitable expression, "Brickdust Row," for it seems ideally fitted to a story of the city's crumbling tenement houses. He will answer you promptly enough: "It isn't a good 'selling' title."

What does he mean by a "good 'selling' title?" During a slight pause you recall that the motion-picture manufacturer takes story-ideas and has them enacted by his players before the camera, the resulting product being a subject comprised in a certain number of "reels," as already explained. Having brought the story-idea to this stage, the next effort of the manufacturer must be directed toward disposing of the subject. He does this by one of several methods:

If he is a manufacturer with a number of distributing centers maintained under his own supervision—each of which is located in some large city, and from which the reels are sent out to the theatres that will project the film—his method of distribution will be this: He will send to each of these distributing centers, or "exchanges," a certain number of complete subjects, or to put it more clearly, a stated number of multiple-reel units, each containing the complete film for that especial subject, and all of the units containing the same film-story. The exchanges, knowing in advance what the subject will be, have sent salesmen—actually salesmen!—to the various theatres which are in the particular section of the country controlled or handled through that exchange, and it is the business of these film salesmen to interest the exhibitors in the subject to be distributed; it is "up to" these salesmen to make new contracts between the exhibitors and the manufacturers' exchanges so that the pictures will be taken at a certain rental by the exhibitors.

These salesmen must have every "talking point" of the film story at their command. Of greatest importance is the title under which that story will be distributed. If the title is catchy, if it grips the fancy of the exhibitor, if it seems likely to attract patronage, he will be more interested, and can be finally induced to take the subject it represents.

Every manufacturer of film-plays who maintains an exchange system has these salesmen in every possible territory. Naturally the salesman for one company will try to work his way into the confidence of an exhibitor who has been in the habit of using films distributed by another concern. He wants above everything else some strong, snappy title to mention. It is important to *him* to arrange contracts; therefore he is principally interested in the title. It is the affair of the manufacturer himself to see that the story is as good as the title warrants one to suppose.

Another way in which motion-picture subjects are handled is what is known as "on the States-Rights plan." Here the manufacturer has no system of exchanges. He sends out no salesmen. Usually he produces a single subject of national appeal, something based on a "big" theme. This completed in the form of a filmed play, possibly running to the length of seven reels or more, he proceeds to advertise in trade papers that his subject is so-and-so, and that the right to distribute it in certain territories is for sale. The man who takes the place of the salesman and the exchange in the former illustration is in this case what is known as a "States-Rights buyer." He visits the producing

firm, usually calling at the central business office. Here he is taken into a small projection room, where he is allowed to view the projected picture. He decides upon its possibilities. Suppose he is confident that it is meritorious. In that case he will pay the manufacturer a certain sum, say twenty thousand dollars, for the privilege of handling or distributing the picture in the territory comprised in the states of the Middle West, for example. He takes his advertising "literature" and his contract with the manufacturer; with these he proceeds to be his own salesman, or to engage other salesmen to work under his supervision, thus becoming, in himself, an exchange. The picture is sold, or, to be more exact, the privilege to exhibit it is sold, to as many theatre proprietors as can be induced to pay for the special quality or strength of the subject. Here there must be a strong, catchy, magnetic title on which to base advertising talk, a title vital to the theme, alluring in its promise of good entertainment—superior to all ordinary subjects.

In still another way is the film-story put on the market. Some producing companies do not maintain exchange systems of their own, but send out their subjects through an exchange system which is a business in itself, independent of any manufacturing company, but taking the product of all manufacturers who desire to avail themselves of the service. This independent exchange system then sells the subject through its own salesmen and by its own methods. The manufacturer may either receive a lump sum from the concern operating the independent exchanges, when he

turns the subject over to them, or he may take a percentage of the sum the various exchanges will get for their distribution of the film to theatres. In either case his photoplay story must be advertised by a strong, catchy, attention-holding and speculation-engendering title.

So, to come back to your chat with "the boss," you realize what he means when he says that the picture under discussion between you must have a "good 'selling' title." It must have a title which will help its distribution, through some form of exchange or States-Rights plan, to exhibitors—the title must sell the photoplay.

"Why," you venture, "'Brickdust Row' is a well-known story by a well-known fiction writer. People will recall it and want to see the picture. Shop-girls will be especially drawn to see how the shop-girl in the story meets men, innocently, on the street—because the tenement she lives in has no place provided where the girls can bring gentlemen—and how this innocent meeting of various men outside her home comes to be the big obstacle between herself and the man she loves!"

But your enthusiasm for the *story* will not move "the boss" just now. "All very fine," he will answer; "but how many shop-girls can you actually swear to that have read the 'O. Henry' story? How many people in these United States actually remember the title of that particular story, or what it is all about? Who will go three blocks from the home fireside on a wet, sleet-and-snowy night to see 'Brickdust Row?'"

What can you say to him? Pretty nearly unanswerable arguments he has, are they not?

"What you need is a title that we can sell, and that the exhibitor will feel reasonably sure can be depended on to yank the folks into his show house on that same blustry, damp and chilly evening," says your mentor and employer.

So you must cudgel your brains to find a caption fulfilling every forestated requirement. What can it be? Eventually, perhaps, you will decide that the innocent act of the heroine in meeting men outside her residence entitles her to be christened "Everybody's Girl!"¹ You mention that to "the boss" and you are a friend of his for the rest of the day. "Everybody's Girl" will arouse comment and curiosity, suggest and yet withhold the problem that the heroine has been forced to face. Besides, the title has a naive catchiness—a quality hard to describe but one that will help to "yank the people" into the picture house.

It will be realized, then, that a photoplay title is an obligation upon the author of the story long after he has disposed of the synopsis; if he has not met this obligation he will see the advance-announcements of his work put in this statement in the trade journals: "The Graphoscope Company is producing a strong

¹The complete synopsis and the scene-continuity of *Everybody's Girl*, as adapted from "O. Henry's" *Brickdust Row* by the author of this book, A. Van Buren Powell, for the Vitagraph Company, is reproduced by permission in the 1919 edition of *Writing the Photoplay*, by J. Berg Esenwein and Arthur Leeds, published uniform with this volume in THE WRITER'S LIBRARY.—[EDITOR.

story of the Canadian Mounted Police, with Pearl Diamond in the principal role. The story bears the working title of 'His Sister.' ”

“The working title” means that you sold a synopsis for its material, and notwithstanding its name. Maybe you would have gotten fifty dollars more for the synopsis had your title been available. As it is, the brains of every person in the editorial and sales departments of the Graphoscope concern are being racked in an effort to find a catchy, magnetic title for that story, a title which will help to sell the product in its eventual film form.

What the Title Means to the Exhibitor

The photoplay title provides the exhibitor with a “drawing card” or magnet calculated to lure patrons within his doors. He hears it fall trippingly from the lips of the film salesman, takes a liking to it, repeats it and finds it easy to remember: by these signs he knows that the passerby will notice the title on the posters the exhibitor will display in front of his theatre lobby; he knows that if the story is good people who see it will mention it to other people, who will in their turn come to see it if he retains it more than one day; he knows that the word-of-mouth form of advertising will, if it be a commendation, bring more people into his auditorium than all the newspapers and posters in the town. So he considers the title as a very important adjunct to a good picture.

What the Title Means to a Picture-goer

Here is your final target—the eye of the man, woman or child who views the completed, projected photoplay as it flashes across the screen. Curiously enough, the visitor to a picture theatre is always laying out his money in advance of seeing the article he is, in effect, purchasing—that is, entertainment. True, he may read critical reviews if he is sufficiently interested, as he generally is *not!* In most cases he buys “a pig in a poke” and to the degree that the article purchased, on being viewed, proves pleasing he will go away satisfied and return again to “take another blind chance at seeing something good,” as one exhibitor has very pithily put the thing.

If he has seen a catchy, rememberable title preceding a satisfying picture, he will not forget the title. Perhaps he may even be chivalrous enough, having been tickled by the title, to note the name of the author as it is projected with the various announcements which precede the actual photoplay; and if he meets you he will pour nectar into your ears by the remark that he has seen your “Tarnished Silver” and considers it the brightest thing he has ever viewed; and you will be glad that in spite of your title’s context it was not a dull caption.

Now, it is hoped, you see the importance of making the title at the head of each story not only a suggestion to the editor that you are more clever in creating novelty than the usual run of his contributors, but, beyond and beside that, of making it overflow with

“selling” quality for the sake of the manufacturer, packing it with magnetism for the sake of the exhibitor, and, against the time when you will take a “box party” of friends to see it “run” in your own home town, devising it so that the manufacturer will not change it in favor of another caption and so fill your boasting soul with humiliation.

Title Tips

All that the title means to the producer, the exhibitor and to the picture-goer it must also mean to the author, for after all he is the salesman of his own wares.

Make your title snappy! If two words will serve, do not string the idea out into a multiplicity of phrases. “Tarnished Silver” is a better title than “The Silver That Has Tarnished.” Yet you must use common sense in applying this rule, and avoid sacrificing idea-conveying quality for the sake of condensation. For a reverse instance to the former example, “A Crusade for Kitty” is more attractive than “Kitty’s Crusade.”

A title that does not begin with “The” is to be preferred, *except* that you must always consider the “assonance” or pronounceable quality of a title as a thing outranking any pre-verbal limitations. Say this title aloud: “Sally’s Kinsman’s Face!” (Ah, it vocalizes as “Sally skins man’s face,” does it not?) Better far to use the article and make it, “The Face of That Kinsman of Sally’s,” if you ever have to manage such a tricky subject. Or, best of all would be a shift

of angle, so that it would read: "Facing Fear," supposing the latter to be equally appropriate to the subject-matter of the idea.

Make your titles fit the nature of the stories. "Ashes of Hope" would never do for a "slapstick" comedy title; "Hope and Ash-Hoppers" would, though no drama could conceivably be suited with that caption; "His Wife Got All the Honors" is apt as a polite-comedy title; "A Fight to the Finish" presupposes melodrama; yet neither is at all fit for the alternative class of story. So it is with every type of material; one style of title-wording fits one manner of tale, but seldom another. Avoid over-alliteration, the too-sustained repetition of a first letter, in each word, as in "Thirty Thousand Thirsty Throats." Used adroitly, alliteration is good; but in excess it is vicious.

Finally, make your title worthy of your plot, and the two will make you worthy to live up to this title: "An Endorser of Cheerful Checks."

CHAPTER VII

GETTING DOWN TO BRASS TACKS

From the standpoint of sequence it would be proper to devote this chapter to an examination of the third ingredient of the complete synopsis: but that ingredient being the "writing style," and a writing style being of little use without some concrete idea with which to illustrate it, you may very easily allow the discussion of it to wait until a more thorough assimilation of the plot- and the title-requirements put you in possession of knowledge wherewith more discriminatingly to apply the rules of form and expression as they govern the final preparation of the photoplay synopsis. The expert picture-writer sometimes feels that a point in his story will have more force if it is held back until a point later than that in which it would logically appear; he conceals it, therefore, until the time is ripe, then divulges it in a manner to allow it to gather dramatic power by reason of the things that precede it. Thus will the third step of synopsis preparation be delayed, so that it will strike you more forcibly at a later point in your progress.

Heretofore the chapters have dealt with the general rules and basic principles considered necessary to a reasonable comprehension of the actual process of starting to work. These chapters have, in a sense, taken the form of platform lectures, addressed to you

in a somewhat impersonal way. They have given you an insight into the frame of mind in which you should approach your photoplay writing, placed danger signs on the roads unfit for travel, sketched roughly the routes that lead to Salestown as well as given an inkling as to the quality of those roads, described the general aspects of your vehicle of plot and suggested the best way to advertise your approach. Much has necessarily been compressed into a relatively small number of pages and the platform-lecturer's aloofness from his hearers has been sustained. Now, with all these assorted facts kaleidoscoping about in your mind, you may quite well be like the schoolboy who, asked by his teacher to name the fur-bearing animals he had seen, replied: "Mother and auntie!"

He knew his facts, but did not understand their proper application: or else he had been denied the illuminating object-lesson of a trip to the zoo.

In your case the trip to the zoo will be well replaced by a ramble through the devious ways of actual plot-getting, plot-building, criticism, analysis, reshaping and final completion. That trip must take you outside the schoolroom, and so, with your permission, the lecturer will come down from the platform, and accompany you to a mutual destination. It will be a sort of one-sided collaboration, truly; but it will permit a talk-right-to-you, straight-from-the-shoulder style impossible to maintain in any other way and undoubtedly more suitable to the discovery, examination, analysis, revision and ultimate completion of a marketable picture-plot than the platform manner.

Getting an Idea

Now that we are ready to begin photoplay-plot making, what shall we do first? If we were working separately this might be already answered by the simple expedient of letting inspiration supply some subconsciously evolved material, some full-fledged plot needing only a little bolstering up here and there. When you *do* plot alone it is quite likely that you will often get a start that is almost a complete plot, coming into your mind ready-made and needing only to be analyzed, tested for plausibility and adherence to the definition of plot, dressed up with the final label attached, and shot out to an editor. Often you may find your mind revolving a title, recasting it, finding it a good selling-title for you, for the picture maker, and for the exhibitor of films. Then, before you are quite aware of the process of evolution, you have a plot to fit the title. In such a way do most of my polite comedy ideas come to me; that is the way "A Family Flivver" was created—the title popped into my mind; and in about half an hour, during which time no conscious effort was made to evolve a definite plot, the story was making itself real in almost the exact words of the previously given synopsis.

Such a process is not really plot-evolution: it is the result of long practice in taking the slow, laborious steps of building—a practice that comes, in time, to achieve the intermediate steps almost without the necessity of conscious consideration.

But that inspired-idea method will not serve here, for you have a right to participate in the steps of evolution, at least in a passive way. So it will be a good thing for us to consider some other ways by which plots are "started."

We might consult our respective note-books, or you may look with me through my suggestion-file—this card-index box with scraps of note-book leaves pasted on cards which are indexed under the general headings of "Comedy" and "Drama," with sub-guides to indicate the "polite," the "farce" and the "slapstick" divisions of the first, and others to make it easy to find suggestions for various divisions of the latter—as "male-lead melodrama," "girl stories," specialties for the ingenue type, and so on.

This makes a handy reference file, easily gotten at, readily indexed, quickly searched in case an editor sends some story back with the brief comment that his company much prefers to examine material of a certain kind; then we merely have to turn to the proper classification-card, and find, in one of the notes there filed, a tonic for our hesitating inspiration.

Or, we may discuss some abstract truth, some generally accepted maxim, or some widely accepted condition of life, and using the selected point in the form of a theme, found our building upon this understructure. The *theme* is a good thing to understand, and if you can formulate one and properly interpret it, you will have a fine chance of getting attention.

Again, we may view a picture or a theatrical performance together, or see some chance occurrence on the way thence; from these, as well as from books, ideas may be secured.

Still again we may, either of us, know some person who has a most decided view upon some more or less important point. This viewpoint of our acquaintance may serve as a rock upon which to base the superstructure of our idea.

Some of these methods are worth more careful and illustrative examination.

Working from Notes

Let us see if we can evolve a single-reel idea for a comedy—polite, perhaps—working from material in our files of notes.

Suppose we lay aside the card bearing this: "Saw girl's pump come off while she crossed muddy street." In itself it does not offer much inspiration, though an amusing incident is suggested. Let us seek further, feeling that we may find something to add to it. Here we have another note: "Three spinsters trying to amuse young man clearly anxious to talk to girl his own age." There is a situation! Not a story, but a situation for a story. Let us see if we can combine these two things—an incident and a situation.

First of all, the young man and the young girl suggest a love-interest. Suppose we use the pump incident as a means of bringing the two together. Let's try it this way: The girl is wearing new pumps, a little

too large for her; while crossing a muddy street she loses one. Along comes the boy—in an automobile, let us say, to give him “class” and make him seem worth while. He sees the girl’s predicament and lifts her into his car, then, rescuing the pump, suggests taking her home.

Well, we have a start. Now how about the three spinsters? Perhaps they need not be spinsters after all. They can as easily be girls a little older than the girl of the pump. Her sisters? No, we would not be logical in having so many girls so closely related, all so nearly of the same age; better to make them chums. How about making them four girls sharing a room, or an apartment? That is better.

Now, of course, we want contrast. If we propose to have the others take a violent interest in the young man, we want the girl of his choice to be somewhat retiring, or even bashful. Naturally she will take him home, ask him in when he stops before the door. We can see some fun in a view of the others peering from the window, excited at the youngest bringing home a man. Let her take him in and present him. He begins to assume characteristics of his own, for he must be antipathetic to the fuss being made over him by the three newly-met girls. Each sees in him a possibility, a man with a car! Poor Little Miss Mousey-quiet; she must take a back seat; but in that very fact we give her added interest and sympathy if she tries to be “nice” but is not given a chance.

Now we have used incident and situation. Where next shall we take our plot? Suppose that inspiration

does not come, though it should. Let it be suppressed for the time, and we will comb our notes through again. Here! "Salt in pudding—awful!" That shred fits now. We can use it. Let us have the young man go away, planning to try to see the girl outside; but we get a further complication, working toward that salt, by having one of the girls beg him to come at such-and-such a time. He agrees, reluctantly, but we will make him show a hope that the girl of his choice will understand and be on hand. Now we will work in the salt in this way: we will have each of the three competing girls plan a dish for his delectation when he calls. Suppose they plan to have, respectively, a rare-bit, a cake, and a freezer full of ice cream. Little Miss Mousey is not consulted or asked to contribute. Now let us be careful. We do not want her to do any salting; that would be un-nice on a heroine's part. We must keep everyone in character, or, in other words, preserve the harmony of their characteristics. Very good. The three will each do some salting (to improve a bit on our notes).

But what about Miss Leading Lady? We must provide for her. Let us make the trio of spinsters do it for us. Each plans to make her hook a dress, or curl hair, or something of the sort to keep her too busy to get dressed, the while the three alternately dash to the kitchen to supervise their respective cookery. Surely we can build a good situation when the young man arrives and each of the trio tries to be his especial entertainer, while at the same time each tries to keep an eye on the things in the kitchen. We have disposed

of Miss Mousey, and given her some more sympathy by showing her dressing dolefully. Now, let each of the trio of competitors salt the concoctions of the other two, making a triple and unsuspected salting of each article, and the climactic situation will be easy to imagine, with a suggestion that the young man try every artifice known to his growing, necessity-born ingenuity, to get rid of the doses of salt he is handed innocently.

Let us look ahead: we can leave the present situation to do so. What about bringing the lovers together? Why not let Miss Heroine go out disconsolately to a delicatessen shop and buy some crackers and sauer—pardon! Liberty Cabbage!—and a dill pickle or so. She brings these home to eat a solitary luncheon in the kitchen. Let us suppose that the trio meanwhile “gets wise” to the facts about the salt, by natural, and actable deduction. The young man has a forgivable impulse to “scoot.” Let him, but we will make him take the wrong door in his confusion and so land in the kitchen, to find his own girl-choice quite willing to let him share the nectar of dill pickles, flavoring them with a kiss as our discomfited trio observes and deserves.¹

For the sake of seeing whether polite comedy can accord with our previous definition of the proper constituents of a plot, let us pause and run back over the completed idea, in an analytical way.

A plot, we recall, must deal with a vital episode in a human life: this plot is the vital hour in the life of the

¹ As *Courting Betty's Beau* this idea was built as here described, and sold to the Edison Company.

leading character, the Mousey Girl; it is the important time when her love is threatened—with, seemingly, no characteristic developing in her by the aid of which she can surmount this obstacle. There, you see, we have vitality of situation, and thus induce suspense, interest, sympathy, and a bit of pity, perhaps. It is easy to see that we have a struggle, and while at first glance it seems as if we were making the struggle one for the man, thus shifting our center of interest, and so breaking a law (for the maintaining of interest in one character as the chief person of concern amounts to law, in the inevitableness of punishment for its breaking), yet we do not really shift the center of interest; rather, we accentuate it, place it the more definitely upon the girl by the very fact that the man makes such decided, though seemingly hopeless, attempts to get to the point where he can lay siege to her heart. And by showing her as willing to accept his court, but unable to surmount the obstacles thrown in her path by the other characters, we pre-vision catastrophe—and then shift our point of attack so that a surprise is possible in our disclosure of the manner in which the obstacle is removed, giving the happy ending that is so desirable in screen writing.

We have made a story which tells itself almost wholly in action, and the time that elapses between the various crises is really negligible, actually being not more than a day or so in each of three periods of plot-inactivity which must be bridged by time-passage, since nothing happens that is important to the develop-

ing plot. It seems, then, as if we have covered all the points of the definition.

Building Around a Theme

Before we can begin to plan a plot which we will base on a theme, we must be sure that our knowledge of the meaning of "theme" is accurate.

A really surprising number of people have the impression that "theme" means the brief statement of the plot. For example, many would state their idea of the theme of the comedy we have just built in much this fashion:

Betty loves Jack after she meets him when her pump comes off on a muddy street and he helps her home; but three girl friends become rivals for his affection, and after much ado and an afternoon of vying for Jack's commendation by the three girls, while Betty is kept out of it, the three girls by salting secretly the dishes prepared by one another, drive Jack to Betty and happiness.

That is, emphatically, not the theme! That is a single-sentence statement of the principal points of the plot.

We do not care to be bothered with any more definitions, so we will not run back through other books to discover what especial words one or another employs to define the theme of a story. Let us, instead, discover what is the theme of this story, and then we can compare it with the mistaken example previously shown, and see for ourselves the right way to recognize a theme and the proper way in which to state it.

We already see that a theme is not a condensation of the story. Yet we have a general idea that it is a con-

densed something. And so it is—it is the *backbone* of the idea, rather than the skeleton complete. So, in our comedy, the theme is expressible thus: *Selfishly ambitious people, by their disregard for others, provide the means through which their own purposes are defeated.*

Now we had no such complete idea when we began our plotting. In fact, we did not actually realize that we were going to have a theme at all. Yet since a theme is really the basis on which every plot is fabricated, and by the existence of which that plot gains strength and resilience to carry it safe to recognition, any good story would *shāpē* itself around and upon such a fundamental base, though the author might not be consciously attempting to point any moral as he begins work.

Some stories acquire a theme with the conceiving of their title, especially if that title is the start of the plot-building. For instance, a title like "You Can't Get Away With It!" provides at least a loosely formulated theme, which could be more concretely and adequately carried out in this final crystallization of idea: *If you try to practise deception you will be found out.*

So you see that a theme is often really like the moral you would print at the end of a fable. Of course we never intend to do that in a motion picture; we will seek, rather, to devise our material in such a way that the theme will be self-evident, not needing a definite expression in words to make it plain.

Not every story has a positive theme, readily recognizable, easily statable. And of course not all themes

take the forms of truisms like the foregoing. In some stories the theme may be very hazy, indistinct in conception, imperfect in formula, or not fully worked out in the material as planned. Sometimes, even, a story may seem entirely devoid of theme, unless you are willing to accept its pure purpose to amuse as a theme. Yet it is generally a fact that the best and most enduring photoplays, like the real stage successes, can, upon analysis, be found to possess a fairly discernible foundation of moral content, or theme.

More Building

Having dissected one plot to lay bare the backbone, let us see if that backbone is of use to us in any other plot: that is, let us see if we can utilize for the groundwork of some other plot the theme which incorporated itself into our comedy. Having a theme, let us rear another structure upon it.

The method of work is different from that which we employed in the previous instance. Then we took an incident, a situation and a suggestive shred of idea from our catalogued reserve and combined them in such a way that, though unconscious of the actual intent so to do, we developed a story possessed of a theme. Now we must lay that theme before us and search out characters, incidents, situations and other plot-material to put around and upon the basic theme.

Let us state the theme once more, so that we may have it definitely in mind: *Selfishly ambitious people, by their disregard for others, provide the means through which their own purposes are defeated.*

We may take one character from the descriptive idea embodied in "selfishly ambitious." We will endow this character with an aim in life, worthy enough in itself, but rendered unworthy by the characteristic way in which our "lead" "goes after" it. Let us name the first thing that comes to mind in the way of ambitions: perhaps a political ambition—a desire, we might assume, to be the governor of a state.

Now let us give our principal character a name—he is to be John Graham. He wishes to be the governor of his state. This presupposes some political standing already gained, so we will start him off as the mayor of his own city. For the sake of making our theme more definite, let us employ the device of contrast: John is a good mayor, a respected man; thus by developing the selfishness of his ambition through the beginning of the story we will accentuate it, as in contrast to his former unselfishness.

We must, then, have an opening incident to portray the unselfish quality of our hero. (In the comedy, you recall, we had our "villainesses"—as far as the three girls justified this theatrical classification—to carry out the moral; here we will try to work it out with a hero.) A hero would not be such, you may argue, if he were shown as selfish and self-centered. Wait! That selfishness is to be our complication, the obstacle in the path of his happiness. If he realizes that it is there and can overcome it in time, we rename him hero by virtue of his accomplishment.

So comes the element of struggle into our hazy beginning. Struggle in this case will be with a quality

within the man, rather than with some visible, tangible, outside force. Perhaps it will also include something of the latter; we shall see. At any rate, we are running ashore, for we have only one character, and we cannot make a picture with one character. Let us introduce someone else who will be more or less affected by John Graham's struggle with his own inner selfishness. A daughter? Well, we had better look further, for a daughter involves youth, and youth involves love, and love is apt to make the daughter and her sweetheart rather too prominent for the definite purpose we have in view—the purpose of moralizing pictorially, of building to fit our theme. How about using John's wife? She looks to be good material for our purpose. Let us call her Janet.

How will Janet Graham be affected by John's change from unselfishness? *Will* she be affected? Or may she even be the instrument to bring about the change? Let us endow Janet with definite character so that we may tell what to do with her, or what she will do best with herself. We might make her sweet and unselfish. Then she would suffer as she discovers her husband's growing self-centeredness. Or, she might be selfish and careless of any other person, thus inducing a like spirit in her husband. In the first case she would remonstrate with him futilely, until he could be brought to realize how right she was in her protests; in the latter case she would go along with John, somewhat unpleasantly burdening the plot with an overplus of selfishness.

Let us take her sweetness and love for John as the principal attributes of her character. We will find another cause for her husband's change to selfishness in his ambition. We will throw John Graham into the society of low, self-centered politicians, and allow him to gather to himself the same base motive, yet being unconscious of its growth, which we can mirror in the eyes of Janet. Perhaps, to look ahead, we may make her the "goddess in the machine" by whose efforts he is brought to realize the danger of complete destruction to his ambition which is imminent (for this must not turn out to be tragedy; we must keep our eyes on the eventual "happy ending"); or we may make John see his danger and realize his folly, and then let him save himself.

But why go on to the point of tedium? You see the method of building upon a theme—carry out the successive steps for yourself. There is no need to finish the plot, since the purpose of the present discussion is achieved. Besides, we are going to work, very soon, on a plot which we will take through every stage of development, so that we can examine, discuss and *apply* every technical device of which we will learn, in order that we will, at the finish, have the thing for which you are aiming—a marketable feature-photoplay synopsis. What shall it be based upon—notes, or a theme? Perhaps both, possibly neither. Before we decide, let us take up one more way of beginning a plot, and see if that helps us to an idea.

Basing Plots on Life

In the lives of our families, the neighbors and friends we know, the people we work with, even the folk we hear and read about, a capital opportunity is offered us for the gathering of plot-material. But before we ever think of basing our plots on such a foundation, let us make one point very clear: *We must not write into stories the actual lives of people!*

There is no more futile way to plan a story than this one of making it a facsimile of the life-story of someone we know.¹ We may take some incident or situation from that life and weave our imaginary developments around and through that, but if we try to follow it out to the conclusion it reaches in the actual existence of the subject we are going to find it tame and flat. Very few people—an almost negligible number, in fact—live any really continuous series of related, motivated, interest-clutching circumstances. It is in our ability to select the dramatic (or humorous) points from their life-histories, and to combine with these our own in-

¹ The incident narrated is taken from life. The incident is selected, as also is the plot eventually developed from it, with special purposes in mind. It is not offered as a standard plot, nor is the process through which it is built intended as arbitrary. It has been recently evolved by the author, and successfully marketed in the form given eventually. That form may not be adhered to by the producing company, for here the viewpoint of the director enters into consideration. It may never see the screen, for one never knows what conditions may compel a manufacturer to change policy overnight and so shelve a story indefinitely or permanently, whether in synopsis, scenario of produced-film form. However, the story contains certain elements that make it adaptable to the illustration of a good many points of plot- and synopsis-preparation. If you ever view it on the screen, you will have an interesting chance to compare the eventual product with the embryo idea and its evolutionary steps.

ventions, that we may hope for profitable utilization of this method of plotting.

We will not, then, write the life-history of Marion, which has been recalled to me by this discussion; nor will we call upon her family for other characters. What we will do is to consider Marion's point of view, and see if from that simple shred, and some others, we cannot construct a suitable, marketable, five-reel picture play in plot-form first, then in the eventual synopsis.

Starting a Five-Reel Picture Plot

Glance over the notes kept by me in the matter of Marion's possibilities as picture material:

Marion, 17. Father and mother, four sisters and a brother, the children all older than M. Father and mother always speak of M. as "our baby." Sisters and brother never refer to her in any other way than as "the baby," or "the kid." Marion wears hair down her back and goes along the line of lest resistance in life, never realizing that she is no longer, in actual fact, a "baby." Worth watching if she wakes up.

6 mo. later. Marion "woke up" with a vengeance. Heard that she met a man who induced her to go into vaudeville. Family unable to comprehend the thing—dazed.

A week later. Marion brought home. Sulky. Vows she will "show them" (her folks). Probably means she will show them that she can't be "tied down."

2 mo. later. Marion a disappointment. Family forgiving. M. all over her sulks. Has met a "nice" fellow, and so ceases to be unhackneyed plot-material.

These are some memoranda made at various times from my indifferent acquaintance with Marion's family—of course Marion is not really her name.

Obviously, Marion's life-story has had its "vital episode," and it ended in semi-tragedy, and yet in a way far less tragic than "it might have been."

Yet when a letter comes from a certain film company asking for an "ingenue" story with some comedy, a touch of drama, and a possible melodramatic finish, let us seize upon Marion and make her the point of departure for our possible plot intended to suit a known requirement.

Obviously the family is too large. Such a "crowd" of sisters, a brother, a father, a mother, would confuse the main issues that we may seek to develop. We will eliminate everyone except our little lady-with-her-hair-down.

There is a good idea involved in her breaking over the wall, and it leads to the formulation of a possible theme, which may be stated in this way: *Youth ever seeks the privileges of older years, only to find them bitter fruit.* That is a truth easily indisputable. Who does not understand the dreams of youth, dreams of being "grown up," with a consequent planning of what one would do and be in such a case? Who, having come to more mature years, will not admit, if only in the secret confessional of conscience, that the care-free days of childhood were far happier, in the main, with fewer burdens, fewer pains, than the years of discretion?

This theme is worth testing for plot-possibilities. Turning back for a further perusal of the notes on

Marion, let us eliminate at once all that is futile matter for thought, and see what is left of the actualities of the young lady's life.

We will dispense with the man who induces her to run away. He is trite. Perhaps we may employ the general type in another form; that will depend upon our future plot-trend.

Let us delete the vaudeville affair; it also is hackneyed, overdone. Something else will occur when we need it, no doubt.

The "nice" young man comes along too late to be material, unless we advance his position in Marion's life. We can see later on if that will help us any. Just now, let us examine the main thread of plot suggested by what we know of Marion and that part of our knowledge which is available for the developing of our stated theme:

Marion is treated as the "baby" of her family.

That is a good idea to use. It offers possibilities for comedy, and also for eventual drama. Shall we, in getting this main thread woven together, have Marion *discover* that she is growing too old to be treated as a "baby?" Or shall some outside influence bring the matter to her attention? The latter method is more pictorially possible. So we will condense it thus:

Marion is made to realize that she is growing up, a fact not comprehended by her family.

Since we have eliminated the family as it stood in the first memoranda, we must substitute another family, for we do not want Marion to be an orphan.

The members of the family need not be evolved just now—we will follow our basic plot-thread:

Marion decides to "break loose" and make her family realize that she is not a "baby."

We have our basic complication in the fact that Marion discovers, through some incident or occurrence which can be worked up, that she is not being allowed to "grow up" as fast as she would like. We introduce the beginning of her struggle to overcome this obstacle (not a very pronounced struggle as yet, for we have to build from minor to major crises, and must not expend all our ability on the first situation). Now we want to decide *how* Marion will overcome her obstacle. We may suppose that she will do it visibly, so:

Marion puts her hair up and lengthens her skirts to show her family that she is grown up already.

Here is something suggestive of further complications, as well as presenting possibilities for touches of real psychology. The complications may come through the resistance of the family to her *idea* of growing up, or through something that happens as a *result* of her growing up.

The psychology can be made plain in the statement that the mere donning of long skirts and the dressing of one's hair does not constitute an actual advance in sophistication. This bit of psychology offers us tremendous possibilities for complications of the second type—those arising as a result of Marion's attempt to grow up, which she does in the matter of dress, but not immediately in the matter of mind-development, of growth in understanding, of sophistication.

We will be able to set down our next length of plot-thread thus :

Marion's changed appearance makes people take a different attitude toward her. They accept her as grown up in a new acquisition of beauty. But the mind develops gradually, and so Marion is not equipped to avoid the pitfalls of her new state. Through this unsophistication she is placed in a position of danger, brought about by someone who looks at her as a woman, no more a mere child. The powerful reaction of this danger produces the change in her that makes of her a woman in fact, and while she copes with the situation successfully through her new-found sophistication, she realizes the folly of having sought to anticipate the gradual growth of the years.

Now we have set down a definite plot-line—in a sketchy way, it is true, but nevertheless we have a definite working plan which bears out our theme.

Since we cannot revise, rebuild, eliminate from, or add to this sketch without a discussion of some technical points of plot-building, let us just now accept the present form as a workable plot-basis evolved from our knowledge of Marion's life, yet without adhering to that life-story except in fundamental suggestion.

We want a five-reel picture-plot to fit the editorial requirements we have read. Here is our start. Perhaps we may not finish at our preconceived destination, for plots are chameleons for changeableness; but, at all events, we're off!

CHAPTER VIII

SORTING OUT SOME POINTS

If that enthusiastic "we're off!" at the close of the preceding chapter gave you a sense of starting on a frantic race with imagination, turn back and re-vision that earlier saving talisman—the "*slap-it-down*" way of seeking sales is done with forever!

The way we began our work was by "getting down to brass tacks." We are sensible and not impatient; therefore we are not going to bungle the job by accepting commonplace carpet tacks. If *The Complete Life of Marion* has yielded us all that we can use without showing ourselves to be unskilled tack-handlers, let us also prove that we are not lazy by searching for the right sort of material wherewith to carry on our work still further.

We have already looked, but not very thoroughly, in what is likely to prove the storehouse of some good points, so let us turn again to consider *The Matter of Length*.

Footage as a Factor in Plot Building

As the artist must choose his treatment of a subject with some regard for the adaptability of that subject to the size of his canvas, so must we plan the treatment of our plot with some consideration of the limits

of our footage. As has been previously explained, filmed photoplays are marketed as "one-reel," "two-reel," and larger multiples of the standard of length, the reel. This "reel" is an enlarged duplicate of the little metal reel on which you generally find Underwood typewriter ribbons wound. Just take a look at such a spool when you are near a typewriter salesroom some day and you will see what is meant. The picture reel fits on the spindle of the projecting machine, and from it the strip of film winds through the projecting apparatus on to another reel, from which it is afterward rewound upon its original reel, to get it foremost again. The reel is easy to handle, easy to ship, and offers a convenient way to prevent the film from becoming scratched or twisted. The reel has, therefore, become a standard of measurement for films, and since the usual reel holds comfortably a strip of approximately one thousand feet of film, that amount is understood to be "one reel of film." When a photoplay requires five of these reels to contain it, the photoplay will comprise about five thousand feet of film—a five-reel film.

The exhibitor of pictures runs his reels through the projectors at a speed that gives a time-limit of between fifteen and eighteen minutes to the showing of each thousand feet of film. Thus the aggregate running-time of a five-reel picture (the present length for the usual feature-subject) will be about an hour and twenty or an hour and thirty minutes: The time varies because the operators sometimes "slow up" a little at dramatic points when they turn the machine-crank by

hand, and "rush her some" when melodrama is being shown, feeling that they are helping the picture. It is this general habit which prompts me to allow a variation in the projecting time. For our purposes, however, this variation may be ignored and we must figure our material to occupy a footage of about five reels, a running time of close to an hour and twenty minutes.

How are we to know if we have enough—neither too little nor too much—plot to meet these requirements? This is one place where we would be helped considerably by an understanding of the technique of scenario preparation, for such knowledge presupposes the cultivation of the ability to visualize, or imagine pictorially, the action that we would write into scene-continuity, and we would thus be able to estimate, by the scene-contents of our script, if we were within the margin of safety. But, without this scenario technique to aid, we must substitute a pretty-well-fostered fund of common sense, aided by a careful study of the screen pictures we have seen. If we watch the pictures carefully, and learn to understand, by our sense of proportion, how much action, sub-titling, situation and—above all else—*idea* goes into a five-reel photoplay, we can apply that knowledge to the judging of our own material.

It will be obvious, even to the most embryonic understanding of this matter, that the plot we have sketched from Marion's life is totally inadequate in amount of situation and action to fill the regulation feature-number of reels—five. If we build incidents to show the girl playing with cats, pigeons, puppies and

ponies, before we plunge into the real story, we can supply some of the lacking footage, *but* such scenes, while "cunning" in a school or kindergarten educational reel, do not help to tell our story: they can be used only if they contribute to, and come within, the strengthening of the essential story-idea. We must, then, find some other way to build than by padding with meaningless incidents, either at the beginning, or after Marion has begun her "growing up," or toward the close of the picture. The only way we can add acceptably is by adding to our plot. Before we can do this, we must see if our present foundation lacks in any respect other than in its inadequate length. This brings us to another factor in planning the extension of plot-material, and that factor is Strength of Idea.

Strength of Idea in Its Influence on the Footage of a

Subject

The artist in oils, previously mentioned in a comparative way with ourselves, might plan to cover a foot-square canvas. If his Art had not gone to his head he would certainly never attempt to achieve fame by painting, upon so small a canvas, a panorama of a world-battle, with its infinite detail, its need for atmosphere, characterization, and space. He must select some idea more suitable to a confined latitude of expression. But put before him a canvas half the size of his studio wall, and his conception of a battle panorama would be feasible material. No longer would his thoughts be confined to some small idea; he would think and visualize in a way commensurate with the

expanse of his canvas. Would he think of painting a picture of a lonesome kernel of corn, environed by nothingness? Do not laugh! If you could but see how vast is the quantity of waste paper sent into the studios' editorial offices by those who have sought to cover a five-reel expanse of footage with a single kernel of lonely, lost idea!

Perhaps a genius of the palette and brush might fill his huge canvas with a visible, but seemingly empty battle field—torn earth, shattered cannon, upthrown and encrimsoned heaps, just heaps, their constituent substance undiscernible; all one vast emptiness, one deep silence. Yet your eye focuses suddenly on one figure that has an attitude and semblance of life. Just a small girl it is, standing there in all that expanse of wreck and nothingness—a tiny child with clasped hands, looking out at you, her eyes finding yours, no matter how you shift your position, her face seeming dazed and shocked, her blue eyes asking you "Why!" Forgotten is your own present, its picayune selfishness, its narrow and sordid purposes and ends: all your mind holds is a great sympathy for that minute figure in all that waste of space, that figure only the more compelling by reason of the contrast—and perhaps there is a dimness in your eyes as you realize that you are powerless to answer the question her eyes are asking.

That work of genius would be equivalent to the use of a small *figure* to typify an idea; but, oh, the power and appeal of that idea! Your present collaborator realizes that most genius is recognized only after the

one responsible for its expression is no longer of this world: so no claim of genius is made; all that will be attempted is the pointing out of how the everyday artist must, in his pictureplaywriter equivalent, plan his subject to meet the extent of his canvas.

In so far as our ability drops below the requisite standard of power of a single idea to fill a large canvas, to that extent must we find alternative methods of lending to it the necessary strength. We cannot surround it with atmosphere, and depend upon that ethereal quality of environment to give it the needed quality; we must not depend alone upon the complicating effect of more characters to furnish additional strength, for mere characters with no fundamental connection with the plot are like a lot of loose branches stuck around a Christmas tree—they do not help anywhere, they have no reason for being there. We must gain strength for our story by adding the things it lacks, the elements of human interest, heart-appeal, by-plot and "punch." As soon as we are sure of the nature of these four elements, we can stop sorting tacks for a while, and do a bit of driving. But first, let us examine our four kinds of tacks.

Human Interest

Somehow it is as difficult to put into cold words a definite expression of the human appeal of a picture as it would be to set down a bald definition of soul and expect everyone to comprehend just what that actually means. The dictionary definitions do not seem to go

down deep enough, in either case, to stimulate our minds to achieve a conception of the depth, the vital rooting in life itself, of these two expressions—"human appeal" in a picture, "soul" in man or woman. To say of "human interest" that it is the quality that finds a response in every human soul is not enough. It does more than find response—it stirs one to the very depths of one's nature, does this evanescent, elusive, yet vitally powerful human appeal.

Granting that you could view an adequately carried out picture done by a genius from the suggestion of the child alone on a battlefield, what things would you feel and think as you stood chained by the horror-tensed lips, the deeply troubled, questioning eyes that constantly sought your own? Sympathy you would feel, for a child alone in such a place; pity would be aroused by the implied devastation of all that she has known as an environment, by the deductible loss of parents. In a word, you would think: "Poor little thing!" Then, away down deep within you would come an understanding of the personification, in that figure, of all the children suffering from war's devastation, not understanding it, mutely asking "Why!" And *you* would take unto yourself that mute horror in the face of the terrible inhumanity of war, its necessarily wanton destruction of homes, and even of ideals; and as you stood silent, that unspoken question in the eyes of the child would find itself rising in an unspoken question within your own soul—"Why?" and you would turn away sobered and a little touched and somewhat thoughtful. Your reflections would be

deeper, more upon mankind than upon your next day's work: in brief, you would have been lifted out of yourself by the quality of human appeal in the picture.

So, anything of a power and depth of *feeling* capable of lifting humanity, in the individual or in the mass, to a higher level of thought, to a more unselfish contemplation of life and its problems, is possessed of the human appeal. Sacrifice of an unselfish nature makes this appeal. Deeds of valor for an avowedly good purpose will awaken it. The sight of a man with the face of a satyr and the seeming baseness of a snake, going out of his way to stop and help an innocent child to fix a "leaky dolly wif' ve sawdus' all runnin' out!"—that is a situation that touches the deeper consciousness in some intangible way—but touches it none the less powerfully.

Not every picture that you will write, not every picture that you will see, can contain this human appeal in its widest meaning; but the pictures as well as the books and the plays that will endure beyond their usual allotted—and generally brief—space of popularity will last because of their possession of this deep, human quality that makes its presence felt in the consciousness of the dock laborer as well as in that of the intellectual scholar, and stirs them both.

Heart-Interest

We have already had some acquaintance with the element of heart-appeal and have discovered that it is the quality which arouses our sympathy and interest,

as in the case of parted lovers or a mother separated from her child. Father-love, mother-love, any regard or affection borne by one person for another, awakens our sympathy and our championship if any adverse circumstance occurs to emphasize this regard through separation, or other accentuation.

More generally, heart-appeal is conceded to be the power in a story which makes us love, hate, sympathize with, or champion, some one or another of its characters. The appeal to the heart is necessarily a lighter one than that deep appeal made by human interest to the soul. The former evokes a quick response and is readily dismissed when the occasion for it ceases to be; the latter is something far more lasting in its impression.

By-Plots

“By-plots”—No! do not say that we mean “sub-plots.” The two expressions have only one thing in common—a hyphen. The stage-play often introduces characters in a sub-plot to provide a comedy relief for heavy drama, and these characters have about as close an affinity to the basic plot of the play as is possessed by the hen with a brood of tiny chicks for the hovering and dangerous hawk. The sub-plot is a sort of tied-on appendage that could be cut away without affecting any vital part of the basic story-idea; though sometimes, of course, these characters, handled by a clever playwright, may weave in and out of the general situations in a deceptively intimate way. Invariably they serve a set purpose and are devised so to do: that

purpose is to be in contrast to the basic form of classification of the drama; or, in a comedy, to provide a means of adding complications which could not be drawn from the logical basic idea and the characters who evolve it.

Therefore, since the sub-plot is a thing partially separable from the main plot, it can be done away with, and invariably is, in picture plotting. If you ever view the adaptation of a stage-play in its screen translation, or film form, you will, on comparison with the original play, discover that "Maggie, the maid" and "Bill, the taxi-driver" have lost all their individual interest, have ceased to love one another to the entertainment of our drama-leisure with chipper dialogue, and have become what they should be—a quiet maid, and a driver whose car is hired.

Therefore, when we seek to augment our basic material with additional story-elements, we do not employ the sub-plot. We employ something which is definable in different terms, and which has a different purpose. We call it the "by-plot" because it is like a little byway that turns from the highway to bring us to some particularly impressive view, but that returns at once to the highroad, of which it is essentially a part in material and usefulness.

The by-plot of the motion-picture story is like that. It is *not* a sub-plot put in to provide comedy relief for a dramatic subject; it does *not* deal with separate and distinct characters who could be dropped without injuring the continuity and power of the elemental story-idea. We should argue that it is a sort of weaving in

of new characters who will take up an appointed place in the plot proper, and will, by their introduction of new elements, make it the more powerful. A by-plot is part and parcel of the main story-idea as it finally develops, giving the elemental idea a strength and grip it would not otherwise possess.

If Mabel and George love one another and Dad objects to George because he has whiskers, and George won't shave off his whiskers till Mabel gets him to drop off to sleep and lets her little brother, Ted, lather them with glue, the consequent stiffening forcing George to take them off and so win parental acceptance by an action really committed in self-defense—that is a main plot-thread, albeit a farcical one. If, now, we introduce a pair of kitchen-lovers, a cook and a coachman, and allow their antics to be in contrast to those of our main characters, that would introduce a *sub-plot*. But if the cook and the coachman had something essential to do with the development of the whiskers-off part of the story, and yet had a little affair of their own, behind the scenes, as it were, the fact that they were essential characters, and that they built up and embellished the basic idea, would make their introduction a constituent part of the real story-idea, and we would be employing them in a *by-plot*.

The proper and wise employment of by-plot is of great help in building to length, and it often affords a way to build in strength as well.

"Punch"

The fourth of our catalogued necessities for pro-

cedure is the misunderstood "punch." People often describe the "punch" as "something thrilling." Very well, let us use that definition and see where its use lands us. You will admit that there is nothing more thrilling than to see a sky ruddy with the tokens of a terrible conflagration, to hear the swift fire-fighting apparatus speed down the next street, to see the leap of flame like the crest of a furious sea, to hear the roar as a roof crashes inward. Let us use these things as a start for our Marion-story and so give it a "punch" at the very opening. No? Why not? Because it does not have anything to do with the story, and so is merely incidental—as lacking in plot-basis as were the dogs and cats and ponies. Right! So "punch" is more than something thrilling.

In fact, "punch" is kinsman to human appeal, and if your stories possess the latter quality they cannot possibly be devoid of the former, for the real meaning, in the photoplay sense, of the "punch" is the power of any plot-situation *to grip and impress*. A house on fire is thrilling. So are the efforts of the firemen to subdue their arch enemy. But, alone, they do not put "punch" into a picture. Yet in so quiet a situation as the effort of a man, with memory gone, to formulate the vague impression called into his brain by the playing of "Annie Laurie" by his wife, whose face he does not recognize, and who looks on yearningly as his mind battles with its problem—we have "punch." Look at it in your mind's eye. Does it not grip you and impress you? Do you not long to see the man regain his mental equilibrium? Is there not suspense in your

heart as you watch his efforts slowly relax in a futile hopelessness? Do you not wish—long!—to see the fingers of the choking wife touch once more the old familiar keys that bring forth the melody? Perhaps it will succeed. Why doesn't she *try*! And as she does, and the final chord brings a slowly dawning comprehension—think you that the eyes of the spectators would be dry? That is “punch.”

Any situation so powerful in its relation to the basic story-idea, and so strong in dramatic content that it will make the audience sit breathless, bend forward eagerly, or furtively attempt to conceal a little teardrop, may be considered to have “punch.” Any play or book or picture-play that can accomplish such wonders with the usually blasé auditor, reader or spectator, has “punch.” Watch for it as you view the film-plays. Study its psychology, if you care to go into that aspect of the matter; but whether you study it or not, when you write, get it into your picture-story just as positively as the manufacturer of a picture will put it into the resulting check, for there is no more definite “punch” existent than that involved in those magic words—“Pay to the order of”—*you!*

CHAPTER IX

DRIVING HOME THE POINTS

Now that we have selected a certain number of usable "tacks," it is our next purpose to see how we can put them in place. Certainly we cannot take a handful of "human interests" and follow their insertion with a row of "heart appeals" and then some "by-plots," terminating our labor by driving in a half dozen "punches." We must mix the tacks in a clever pattern, so that none of them will stand out beyond any others. Then if we employ an upholstery of imagination to make our work attractive and worthwhile, we shall receive a reasonable recognition for our efforts.

We cannot set about our tack-driving in any other way. Knowing the source of each sort of material, we must not be hindered by the knowledge, but must keep it in the back of our heads, so that we will recognize each sort of tack as it comes to our hands; but the pattern in which we place these different tacks must be created, governed by imagination, yet made to keep within the limits of our needs.

Let us recall our little séance with Marion. We based our idea-gathering upon some notes set down at various times, covered by a complete period of about thirty-five weeks. At once we know that the lapses of time that occurred in actual experience are not in harmony with our idea of the limitations of the defini-

tion of a picture plot; such a plot must have as few time-lapses between incidents and crises as our ingenuity will allow, and yet make plausible and lifelike the continuity of events. We decided to have Marion "babied" and let her realize that she was "growing up." Then she decided to "grow up" all at once, and as a result we got the complication so necessary to plotting—through the employment of the fact that merely donning long skirts and dressing the hair does not give a girl sophistication. Also we got a further suggestion of complication in the changed attitude of those about Marion—people who always treated her much as had her family, but who now regarded her as a young lady. From this arose the main crisis in her life—through her finding herself in some (unstated) danger, which came to a climax in its bringing her womanhood to maturity, so that she could cope with and conquer her obstacle and danger. Then we got out our moral and brandished it by having her realize that she had yielded up her youth for the bitter fruit of mature experience.

Now we want to lengthen these strands into a five-reel feature-plot, and strengthen them to the same end: we desire to incorporate human interest, heart-appeal, by-plot and "punch." Keeping these points in the subconsciousness, that is, "in the back of our minds," we will seek to lengthen, and see if we do not achieve our full result.

Let us be more expansive in dealing with the material we already have. Let us put a situation in the place now occupied by the generalization that

Marion "encounters some danger." We will set down some concrete, visible danger there. What shall it be? The fact that it comes through the changed attitude of some person, logically implies a man—a man who considers Marion to be growing (in charm and, let us say, allurements by virtue of her altered appearance) and who therefore desires to be possessed of these charms for his own: we presuppose him a villain, for the heroic type would not suggest a danger in such a situation. So we arrive at the natural deduction that a man, potentially a villain, who has so far treated Marion as a child, now, upon her growing up "on the outside," decides that she is a personable creature, whose charm appeals to him, and whose naive and innocent acts make her exceedingly desirable, to his way of thinking.

But let us halt imagination here, for we are not being creative, as we should be; the villain who gets the girl into a personally dangerous situation is "old stuff" and very trite. The situation loses dramatic value in proportion to its hackneyed quality. Truly, we may still employ such a situation, but *only* if we make it productive of some fresh development, or surround it with some novel characters, or endow it with some vital and plot-aiding purpose. So let us lay that villain-and-girl situation away as unusable just now, since we have none of the things at hand with which to freshen or vitalize it. But we will call creative imagination to our aid, and without being able to trace exactly the chain of reasoning by which we reach the suggestion, we find that we are thinking: "Why not let

the danger come *through the villain's wife?*" New? Yes, and fertile of possibility.

How can the girl be endangered by another woman? Hate? Can hate on the part of the other woman, because Marion is sought by her husband, create a danger for Marion? Indeed it can! But shall we employ it? And if we do, what form shall the danger assume? And who is to rescue Marion from it—shall she be her own rescuer, or shall we employ a third person, perhaps the villain himself? No, not that, for that would take him out of character, make him do something not in harmony with the traits that make him a villain.

Perhaps Marion will do her own saving. Let us go back a short way in our plot and build up to the situation so that we may see how this suggestion works in. Suppose we say that Marion is treated as a "kid" by a man—just a man, at present—who has a wife. We will not gain any plot-material until we endow our characters with characteristics or traits which will underlie, and influence, their acts. For the present, let us say that the man is fond of other ladies besides his wife. (This suggests an incident which may come to something, showing him with another charmer, perhaps in another town or city.) When he sees Marion in her changed aspect, he decides: "There is a bet that I have overlooked." His characteristic trait, his light shifts of affection, will also presuppose a determined and stubborn purpose to attain whatever ends he may conceive.

Now for his wife. She may be jealous, she may be unaware of her husband's other loves; she may be both unaware and inclined to jealousy. Perhaps because he likes to flit away on occasion, he tries to occupy her time with a gratification of her presumable vanity, allowing her plenty of money, and by that very act making her so useless to herself and to the world that she has little to occupy her mind except jealous thoughts.

Now we will give Marion a little more definite characterization. If she is going to fall into the net of such a man we are sure that she must be naive and innocent of the world's ways. Also, she must be a good deal of a child in her actions, to make her more attractive to the man when she assumes the garments of maturity. Again, she must be capable of eventual clever thinking and quick acting, for we have laid out a general plan for her future that will call these abilities into play.

Now we have three definite, lifelike people to deal with.

Marion must have some sort of family. Let us give her a father who will, naturally, be dotingly fond of her, or else he would not "baby" her so much. Maybe, with creative imagination to help, we may find him a more definite reason for "babying" his daughter; but for the present let him stand merely as a doting father. Then we shall need some other member of the family so as to furnish a contrast with the manner in which

he treats Marion, and that other member of the family might well be an older sister, who also would "baby" Marion.

Now we may suppose that the villain, after Marion has "grown up," seeks to win her, his wife being ignorant of his purpose. Let her find out this purpose and we have Marion in danger. The wife is jealous. She contrives to get Marion to come to see her. Then she threatens to shoot Marion, and Marion, by cleverly "playing" her, humoring her, manufacturing a clever explanation that will remove any cause for jealousy, soothes the roiled waters, her awakening of soul coming with the shock of realizing what "she is up against" in the man's behavior and intentions, her growth in womanly intuition and understanding being indicated by her solution of the problem that endangers her.

But as we look at that climax-situation, we stop, with the sickening realization that we have not made it novel enough. The use of the wife is fresh—different, if you will—but the resulting situation is not strong enough for a "big" picture. It has not sufficient "punch," either. There is very little heart-interest in the story as now planned, and the human appeal is practically negligible. The introduction of the wife as an endangering agent, and the showing of her cause for jealousy, and her resulting importance to the story in its present stage, does furnish a by-plot, indeed, but we are still "short" in the points of length of subject, and strength of idea involved.

The introduction of an eligible lover for Marion would furnish us with more heart-appeal, and, too, we

might use him to save her at the climax. But that would take the center of the stage away from Marion at a point where she should be the big figure of interest. Therefore, let us side-track our villain-and-wife by-plot and take the suggested "hero" as a new point of departure, seeing if his induction into the plot will furnish us grounds that will justify our drafting and retaining him in our growing army of characters.

Where, in our main plot-line, shall we bring in this lover? To give Marion a sweetheart at the start will deprive her of a certain amount of verisimilitude in her character of the baby of the family, for if she has even a boy-and-girl affair, it makes us feel that she is "wiser than her years" in matters of the heart, and she would, then, not be so apt to fall in love with, or even be attracted by, a man of so avowedly inferior a type as our villain has shown himself to be.

Let us try a different point of introduction for our heroine's sweetheart. Let him become such at the logical and psychological moment when she changes her appearance. He may have regarded her in the same light as did the rest of the people about her—as a youngster. Then she becomes, outwardly, a young lady, and love awakens. Ah!—and see here! (Creating again) suppose that we have him attached to the *sister* at the start of the plot! That is a good idea, and gives us a chain of situations that are worth investigating. If he *loves* the sister it is a bad idea, though, to have him shift over so carelessly to another heart-interest for himself. It is much better to have him merely *consider* himself in love with the sister; still,

then he would be governed by a reasonable manliness, and would "stick" to the sister. Well, that offers us a heart-appeal by throwing an obstacle in the path of true love. May it not develop another and more crucial situation? Let us see.

Take it for granted, for the sake of our hero's future acts, that he is tacitly engaged to Marion's sister—engaged by the general understanding that has arisen from his steady visits to the house, his constant regard for the sister. But no ring—no spoken word. Then he sees Marion as a young lady, and in some way comes to realize that she is really the one and only focus of his regard, that he has been showering little tokens of brother-in-law-ly affection upon her when actually he has been subconsciously in love with her all the time.

This also brings a complication into Marion's life, for she must fight against his love, which, logically, she will discover that she returns. She must, being the child in intellect that she is, reason that he has loved the sister and that she, Marion, must make him be true to that affection, no matter what the cost to her. This is unselfish. It possesses a suggestion of the quality of human appeal. It makes us think a bit, perhaps, as to whether she is right or wrong. Anyway, we must not stop to moralize, but scurry along while inspiration urges.

Logically, we may suppose that Marion will seek some definite barrier to erect between herself and the love of this young man who, in Marion's way of look-

ing at it, has been her sister's affianced. Marion might now turn to the villain, not supposing him to be such, since he has always treated her much as the others have done: she may be innocently seeking to make the hero jealous, thinking thus to drive him away from her. She might ask the villain to help her out in this, and so, by her innocent act, and wholly without intention, create in the mind of the spoiled wife a suggestion of jealousy, which would seek and find, in the developments that seem to be coming so naturally, more cause for hatred toward the innocent Marion. Now we have given Marion an added sympathy, on account of her innocently falling into what will prove to be a trap for her innocence; we have endowed her with a fresh charm by reason of her steadfast refusal to accept a love that she feels belongs to her sister.

"Where do we go from here?"

We are at a standstill! We have a fresh idea in the handling of a girl who decides to grow up all at once, without waiting for the regular development of the years; we have a good heart-interest in a hero's realization that he loves Marion after he has apparently come to be the accepted suitor of her sister; we have elements of human appeal in his struggle to be true to his ideals, as well as in Marion's efforts to drive him away, though she longs to have him for her own sweetheart; we have another by-plot when Marion turns to a married man, innocently asking him to aid her in driving the hero away; and another by-plot in the jealousy of his wife, which jealousy makes for a climax. But the climax is not big, for it is easily

foreseen that Marion will extricate herself from her danger, the only point unknown being her method.

Thus, taken separately, the elements are not in themselves big enough for a feature picture, and, taken in sum, they seem to lack some binding force, something to knit them into a close fabric that is woven to withstand the wear of public fickleness. We must find that element.

The father of Marion does not seem to offer us any great possibilities as he stands; nor does imagination at this time seem to help us with him. The sister plays a minor part in the story as it stands. She does not appear to have any immense possibilities. In fact, to build up any of the present characters would make the ones built up apt to dominate the plot. Such a domination would deprive Marion of her rightful place in the spotlight, so to speak, and the leading character must always dominate the central idea; minor characters must always remain such. To take the interest away from the central figure is, as has already been hinted, at several points, a dangerous and generally fatal procedure.

Let us find some weakness, and by building it to strength, see if we can achieve a new situation. From the standpoint of plausibility, the trapping of Marion by the villain is somewhat weak. Girls in real life, girls in plays, girls on the screen, often plunge blindly into a fascinating net spread by some personable villain. The very frequency of such plunges makes this one a weakness in our story, lending to it a degree of triteness that makes for tameness. We must see if

we can find some way to overcome this, and in seeking that way, we must lay aside our plot once more, and take a look at a few more "tack" assortments, for we have used heart-appeal, human interest, by-plot and punch (the latter in the developing of the situations by adroit handling, which we will talk of in proper sequence) and yet we have not a close-knit, unified, satisfying plot-structure.

Therefore we will turn from plotting to sorting our tacks, if you please, and to maintain our purpose of thoroughly mastering every step before we plunge forward to the next one, we will pause and reflect upon the various tacks we have found so far, and then run back over our hammering, and so make certain that we have not lost our ability to recognize them in their applied forms.

CHAPTER X

MORE SORTING AND POUNDING

The active half of our present collaborative team has a superstitious faith in the magic of numbers. We have employed plot-aids to the sum of four; we are at a standstill, and our quartet is not apparently able to further our aims. Let us add a trio of tacks and grip our problem with the aggregate figure of seven helpers, for seven has always been conceded to be a powerful talisman.

The trio we shall investigate consists of the following: Motivation, Suspense and Surprise. Of these, the first is the most important, so let us discuss it without delay.

The Importance of Plot-Motivation

In the motion-picture plot, the providing of a motive or reason for every act performed by any and all characters is as important in the perfecting of the plot as a rudder is to the proper handling of a ship. Our play-people must not do things just because we want to arrive at a foreordained finish-line with them: the plot must not "boss" the characters—*they* must manage the direction of the plot. If our imaginary people are but chips, skittering along over the bay before the breeze, we cannot expect others to take an active interest in their destination; but if—to abandon the figure

—our playfolk have lifelikeness and purpose, we shall see them achieving a greatly-to-be-desired interest in the eyes of others than ourselves. Thus we must let the characters play out their as yet unseen destinies, rather than have them mere pawns of our own fanciful wills.

The ship without a rudder can only drift aimlessly, arriving at no haven of safety from the adverse winds and the buffeting waves: a plot without motivation can but ramble hither and yon, never reaching any convincing conclusion.

Often in real life you perform an act that leads to some situation of interest to yourself; yet you have not analyzed your reason for doing as you do—your *motive* is not apparent to you. Perhaps later on you wonder why you did thus-and-so; and you can discover a more or less cogent reason for your performance. *In the motion-picture plot, every situation, every crisis, every progressing step, must arise from some definitely understood motive on the part of the character controlling that particular situation, crisis, or advancing step.*

There we put our fingers on an essential weakness of our Marion-story, in its present stage of progress. Let us look back and see just how this weakness is apparent.

Has Marion a motive for “growing up?” Yes, her motive lies in her antagonism to her present stage of development and its restraints. Has the villain a motive for his pursuit of Marion? Yes, his motive is

apparent when he finds Marion a woman in appearance. Has the wife a motive for endangering Marion? Yes, it is revealed in the jealous hatred provoked by her realization of the true state of affairs as regards Marion and the villain. Has Marion a motive for rejecting the affection of her sweetheart? Yes, in her knowledge that he is already pledged to her sister there lies a motive—Marion's unselfish desire to keep him true to himself and to her own idealization of him as a man worthy of her love. Has Marion a motive for turning to the villain? She has, in the purpose she reveals—the purpose of seeking to drive the hero from her; and, more powerfully motivating the idea, we can show that she turns deliberately to a married man because she feels that such a presumable affinity on her part for a man already wived will produce in the hero a disgust more potent for his repelling than any mere affair with another single man could produce.

But—Marion has no reason, no motive, to make her continue her affair with the married villain! She cannot really care for him, for we have not suggested her character as capable of cherishing an infatuation for a married man. To create such a motive would be to carry the plot into channels even more hackneyed than those it now follows, so we will not take that argument to supply a motive.

What motive could a clean, sweet girl possibly have to give her a reason for plunging into an affair which will be sustained through the rest of the story? To take the line of least resistance, we will assume that the hero refuses to be disgusted by Marion's attempt

to repel him: he clings to his love for her, and so provides her with a motive for a continuation of her relationship with the married villain. Is that a satisfying motive? No!

Here we must pause long enough to see why it is not satisfying, and to note a further exaction in the matter of motivation.

To have Marion continue her affair for the reason that the hero has not been disgusted, is weak motivation—it is not logical. What takes away its logicity? The simple fact that it is not displaying common sense on the part of our heroine. She might, quite logically, seek to disgust the hero by a brief affair with the married man, but if that did not “work” she would, if we grant her the boon of common intelligence, just say, “Hero, I won’t have anything to do with you. This is final!”

Motive, then, must be logical, or it is worse than no motive at all. Logicity means reasonableness. Motive answers the question, “Why do you proceed along that certain line?” with, “Because both my story-character and my own reason compel me to take that line.” Logical motive adds to this answer by continuing: “You know the facts; you understand the conditions of my situation; therefore your own reason will compel you to agree with me that there is no other sensible, reasonable course for me to follow.”

Logical motivation, then, is the arbitrary line of most reasonable procedure. If there is an alternative line of action that could be taken more reasonably, the

motive for the less sensible act is not logical. Keep this very firmly in mind whenever you are seeking motives for the conduct of your characters. If you make the conduct logical, not susceptible of criticism on the ground of naturalness, you have a well-motivated plot. That sort of plot you *must* provide.

With the present set of characters, with our present by-plots, we cannot find any soundly logical reason to explain Marion's persistence in conducting her affair with a married man to the point where the wife of that man can have logical motive for displaying sufficient jealousy and hate to put Marion in danger. Let us leave her to cogitate upon her problem for a moment, while we proceed with our examination of our still incompletely explained trio of new tacks—*our* logical motive being a desire to know with what elements we are to work before we actually begin to labor.

Considering the Element of Suspense

If we are to sustain interest throughout our five reels of story-idea, we must create within the plot a quality of suspense. This quality is of two differing types: There is what may be termed a "secondary suspense," which is equivalent to the passive interest obtainable through the statement of some fact that presupposes a further development of idea, to the end that another fact may be plausibly brought to light. A friend meets you on the street, let us suppose, and tells you: "My wife has decided to buy that \$400 fur coat, although we have saved only half the amount it will cost." You are interested. You wonder how the

difference will be made up; or whether common sense will not dictate the wisdom of waiting longer until the required amount is in the bank. You do not become violently excited. You will not catch your friend by the shoulders and demand, eagerly, "Tell me, at once! How will you get the coat for her?" Your interest is genuine, but passive. Before many minutes have passed your friend will expand the statement, and confide his solution of the problem. You can wait until that is done; your curiosity is real, but not active enough to make his problem seem to be your own. Until you are put in possession of the final solution of his problem, your suspense is passive, or secondary.

Any motion-picture plot that is worthy of the name of story-idea will contain many examples of secondary suspense—in fact, this element will be created as soon as a character is faced with a complication, confronted by an obstacle. The spectators viewing such a picture on the screen will be in an attitude of partial suspense, not able to foresee just how the obstacle will be overcome, not caring to prophesy how the complication will affect the future of the main character, yet willing enough to sit and watch, to be informed, in proper sequence, on the obscure points. Thus the plot will induce a secondary suspense, a passive interest.

The more important type of suspense, and the one you have to create, whether your plot has the secondary suspense or not, is the "primary" suspense, the active, eager, participating interest. If you should see a friend racing across a field, toward a sheltering fence, with a mad bull in hot pursuit, you would be

actively interested; you would wish to help the friend, to throw some obstacle in the path of the pursuing bull; you would be in a flutter of uncertainty as to the eventual outcome of the situation. Should your friend stumble, your heart would be in your mouth until he rose and got away, just in the nick of time. Should the bull step into an unseen depression of the earth, and fall to his knees, you would exult, and call out for your friend's reassurance, "Hurry! He's down!" Until your breathless friend might roll to safety under the fence, your interest in his fate would be sustained, and even if your help should be prohibited by reason of your aloofness from the scene, in point of distance, you would mentally and vocally take sides against the bull.

That sort of suspense is vital. It is alive, and takes hold of all picture-play spectators. It creates a championship for the oppressed, or endangered, or helpless character.

In our story of Marion, we have a secondary suspense, created by her decision to "grow up." Spectators would be interested in the idea, would be willing to see the outcome, would be ready to be shown how Marion accomplishes her object, how this affects her future. They would not become eager participants in her problem, though, unless she were actually threatened by some danger, or put in some situation from which her extrication is problematical. If a spectator is able to "guess ahead," and so arrive at a certain knowledge of the outcome of any situation, there is no primary suspense—the interest is merely that passive

interest which awaits the solution, feeling sure that judgment has pre-visualized it accurately, merely waiting to see if the guess is right.

“But,” you no doubt argue, “you have told me that motivation must be shown definitely; it must be logical, arbitrarily the ‘only way.’ How, then, can there be any suspense?” Your point is well taken, and your question deserves an answer.

Granted that a logical motive is necessary, it must truly be the only plausible controlling power over action. Nevertheless you can be clever enough to out-guess your eventual spectators. To do this you must provide motives that accord with all the requisites; then you must create unexpected developments in situation, new twists in plot, fresh and not-easily-thought-out solutions to the problems you propound. Here we come to the third factor in our trilogy of governing devices: Surprise.

The Element of Surprise in Plot

If your plot runs along regular lines, taking the line of least resistance, motivated soundly though it be, your onlookers are going to guess the end as sure as taxes!

Your cleverness as a plot-builder will lie in your ability to devise plot-threads that look quite simple, that seem easy to follow, and *then* to give them a sudden, unexpected twist, previously planned in your mind but not readily suspected of being possible. Thereby you “fool” the spectators, yet do not make

fools of them—a nice distinction, and an important one, let me assure you. You can make the onlookers gasp and mentally exclaim, “Why didn’t we think of that!” You cannot, dare not, make them gasp and then realize that the thing they have been surprised by is dragged in for that purpose alone, a thing not of the plot at all, but interpolated like the sting of a harsh practical joke, creative of antagonism, not of surprise.

The element of surprise in a plot must be very craftily handled, very carefully considered. If you start off on a plot-thread with Agnes in love with Billy, and make the girl’s mother object because Billy has no income, you create secondary suspense by causing interest to center about his probable attempt to overcome maternal antagonism. If you start Billy out to seek employment, let him have no experience and so prevent him from “getting a job,” you proceed along a logical channel, his action being properly motivated by his anxiety to win Agnes. If, then, you show him desperate, impersonating some plausible money-getter, such as a street-corner beggar, you show commendable ingenuity of imagination, and the spectator will say, “Ah, now he will get the money and can marry Agnes.” Now for your surprise. You take Billy to Agnes in a hurry and a taxi. And he finds?—Agnes announcing to her mother that she has just met and married a junk peddler!¹

The spectators will gasp! Oh, yes, indeed—they will gasp! But not at the revelation. The sudden in-

¹The “surprise” here instanced is taken from an actual script that came to me some time ago for criticism.

take of breath will be caused by the effrontery of an author who so insults their intelligence as to expect them to credit that sort of situation.

That is not surprise: that is foolishness. To give an example of the right sort of "jolt" let us go back to the point just preceding the insult to intellect, and rebuild. Suppose that Billy hurries toward Agnes, and neglects to remove the masquerade of mendicant. Agnes meets him, and greets him enthusiastically. He rushes away to continue his acquisition of money—and bang! he is seen by Mother leaving the house, grabbed by her Amazonian arms, chucked into the open cellarway and locked in while Mother bawls for a policeman. Now the gasp has been rationally secured. The *contratempus* is certainly reasonable. The (logical) unexpected has happened, and thereby you have made a new twist in your plot-thread.

Surprising twists in plot are slightly different from the ordinary introduction of complications, in this respect: Complications come from a natural evolution of the plot-elements, the character traits, the growing situations; surprises come from the unexpected, though logical, introduction of some point that could be foreseen by a clever guesser but not by the mass of interested spectators.

Now that we have defined our three additional tacks, let us see how their combination with the other four will give excuse for the previously mentioned faith in the magic powers of seven.

Putting the Three Elements to Practical Use

First we will secure a logical motive for Marion's adherence to the villain in our plot. She is a sweet, innocent, unsophisticated girl, yet she is not so idiotic as to be unaware of the marriage tie and what it means. Let us examine some possible motives, not rising out of our present plot-material necessarily, but simply motives that may induce a solution of our present problem. We will tabulate them and discuss them as they come up, to avoid the danger of confusing one with another:

(a) Marion might continue to be seen with the villain because of a childish desire to spite the wife of the latter. That is in harmony with her unsophistication. But it does not lead us toward any "big" developments: it supplies no fresh ground for building.

(b) She might continue her affair because her father or sister, or both, violently upbraid her for the first little mischievous affair with the villain, her motive being pique at their unjust inference, as well as a spite against them. But that involves considerable explaining in sub-titles on the screen, and also lacks sustaining power, since a girl able to continue the association with such a motive would be aware of danger, and so would be able to avert calamity. We must seek further.

(c) Marion might continue her association with the villain, even knowing him to be such, if she knew that he held in his possession some secret of importance to her own future well-being; or, to remove any taint of selfishness from her character, we might say that the

secret would be such as would threaten the future welfare of someone near and dear to her.

That looks hopeful. Let us test it further by trying it in, around, and with our plot.

It would be entirely within the character of the villain, as we have sketched him, to hold the power of some secret over Marion's father, or perhaps her sister. But to involve the father in the situation does not seem to bring much creative inspiration, for he seems rather a hazy figure; to bring in the sister would involve more of the mix-up in the relations of the womenfolk, and so put too much of the sex-play element into our story, an element that is already there in a proportion amply sufficient, though not too pronounced.

How about having the secret involve the future happiness of the hero? Somehow that looks unpromising; and, in another light, it would be dangerous, putting too much stress on the young man. He stands sufficiently strong in his present relation to the plot.

Some as yet untouched character must be sought. Perhaps we can get a clue to this character if we consider the possible nature of the secret. Perhaps the villain knows something about a crime that has been committed some time back, for which some person dear to Marion is paying the penalty of a jail sentence. That looks promising because it induces sympathy for the character we seek, and, as well, for Marion—a sympathy the more pronounced if we assume that the character is innocent, but cannot prove it. Not very new, but susceptible of many fresh treatments.

Now, accepting this as the secret, let us see who the unknown character shall be. Would it surprise you to have me suggest Marion's father? Not her "present" father; that is, not the character we have so far sketched hazily; but a real, flesh-and-blood, sympathy-inducing parent, now in jail. That is a fine point of departure for a strong by-plot. Let us follow it out. Suppose that Marion's own father is serving a life-sentence in prison for the shooting of someone in days gone by. Suppose that we give this situation definiteness by placing the father in a bank, and making the crime that of shooting another member of the bank force. This suggests the making of our villain the bank president, or some such character, who could be involved and yet not be suspected. Now we are progressing. Let us say that the father is incriminated by circumstantial evidence and sent to jail when Marion is a baby. (In later work we will consider this lapse of time and how to handle it.) Let us say that Marion is adopted as a tiny baby by—who more promising of dramatic evolution of situation than the man who sentences her father!

Now our story begins to knit together. Let us allow creative impulse free rein for a while, and pick up the skipped threads as we discuss the later devices by which we shall perfect our work.

Marion is adopted by the man who sentences her father, on circumstantial evidence, for the crime of shooting a fellow bank clerk, or some such character. The evidence is the hackneyed one of a pistol found

beside the body over which stands Marion's father. (We will try to give this freshness later on, too.) Marion grows up in ignorance of her real relationship to this foster father, who is, of course, a judge; and this fact, that he is still a judge, and must be inter-related with others of our building characters, suggests that we stamp the location of our story as a small town where everybody knows everybody else.

Now we have a motive for the judge's "babying" of Marion. What is the motive? His eagerness to keep from her the knowledge of the stain that threatens to blacken her future life; he will keep her young as long as he can, preserve her ignorance. This stamps his character definitely.

Now the complication comes in Marion's life when her real father escapes from prison (a logical surprise) and is bound toward the judge's home, where he (presumably) knows that Marion is being brought up. This involves a threat to the judge who sentenced the (self-styled) innocent father of Marion.

The coming of this threatening person suggests that we may need a sheriff; let us introduce a sheriff and keep him in the back of our heads in case he should be needed. At once the idea suggests itself to me that the sheriff should have known all about the previous crime, the sentence, and the status of Marion. Then he would be something of a friend of the judge's, and this suggests to me that he would be usable when we want to plant, or fore-vision, the story of the past, while we are writing our synopsis, for we will not resort to the old subterfuge of a "preamble," or "pro-

logue," but will use some other device. So we will accept the sheriff as good material, and can foresee comedy possibilities which will be part of the story and so not "sub-plot." Very well, then, let us hurry along.

We will have Marion decide to grow up, and then we will foreshadow danger or at least complication in her life by hinting at the escape of her real father from prison (Introduction of primary suspense—What will happen? Will he molest the judge? Will he change Marion's life? Will she even discover her true relationship to him?). The sheriff will hear of it, thus telling our spectators by telling the judge. They will agree not to tell Marion, hoping the father will go away and not come near (Further primary suspense).

Marion will "grow up" at some novel party or in some clever way, and that night the hero will realize his love and declare it. Marion will resist, and will turn to the villain to help extricate her from her position; but she will not tell him her purpose, masking it under some other guise, and thus will induce jealousy in the heart of the villain's wife (Fast-moving building in of by-plots, with complications coming in each).

Marion will not realize the true situation with regard to the villain and his wife and herself, but will feel at the end of that evening's affair that she has accomplished her purpose toward the hero. Then the sheriff will get word that the escaped convict is near (Fresh gathering of suspense) and will decide to "stick around" the judge's house to capture his man if he shows up there. The sheriff will hear a noise outside, after all have gone to bed. No! Wait, let us change

that. Marion will be up—in the parlor, say—thinking over the sudden disclosure of the pains of becoming a young woman too quickly (“Growing pains” suggests itself as material for a future sub-title). The sheriff will not be aware of the fact that Marion is still up, and will go out to investigate. The escaped father will seize this chance to slip into the house and so will confront Marion, recognize her (There is a “punch” situation) and then, as Judge comes down, the situation will disclose the relationships (More “punch”).

Then we spring a surprise: the sheriff appears at a window. The father, who has just been found, and who has declared his innocence, is to be taken away. Marion believes in him, and declares she will use every effort to prove him guiltless. Then the inevitable happens; the judge admits the sheriff. He has to. (Sympathy for the judge.) The sheriff is not tickled with his job, but he must do his duty (Human touch; heart appeal). The girl is in torture. Her father has just come into her life, only to be taken out of it again. (Pathos.) How will this situation develop? She will take him aside to say her final parting words (Pathos; suspense) and then, suddenly (Surprise) she will snatch down some portières and fling them over the head of the sheriff, and so enable her father to get away to some place of hiding she has already planned. (Suspense: What will happen to the escaped man?) The sheriff will get free and go to search. We will leave the situation thus, to hold or preserve the element of suspense.

The next morning Marion will, as eager as the spectators, go to see the sheriff, and he will tell her (A comedy-relief sub-title suggests itself): "You'll be glad to know I caught nothing but a cold last night." Marion's problem is to supply her father with food and send notes. How? Let us say that she has a dog which has been trained to take little parcels from town to some favorite hiding place of Marion's play-time; why not a small cave?

Then we must go back and "plant" the dog earlier in our story, and show that he is trained, so that his tricks will not seem a dragged-in surprise.

Marion finds out that the villain had something to do with evidence at the trial, a fact her judge-foster-father tells her. She decides to go and cultivate the villain for the sake of getting evidence to save her father (Human appeal). The villain surmises the real truth, though she will not divulge her father's presence in hiding. He, the villain, decides to turn his advantage over her to his own account. Let us say that he has already had an affair with—say—a cabaret girl. He is seeking a fresh conquest; Marion is vital, young, and personable. He will "kid her along," make her think he is helping her, while he gets her in his toils. His wife can be made to suspect, and later to be certain.

But let us not neglect the hero. He will go manfully to the sister and tell her how he feels, and thus learn from her that she is not really in love with him, and so is willing to release him from their tacit engagement. He tries to tell Marion, but she only drives him

away, and he thinks she is sticking to the villain to disgust him, the hero, while she is really hunting evidence to clear her father (Double purpose, and so, a bit of complication and some heart appeal). Marion will realize, at last, the danger, and the fact that the villain is not helping her (Punch) and yet she must continue against her better judgment, else she may lose the help he might be forced to give, for now she will begin to suspect *him* of complicity in the former crime, if not of active participation in it.

Now we must spring another surprise. As Marion is at the cave, at night, secretly, telling her father what has developed, the villain shows up and discovers the hiding place and its occupant (Surprise and suspense—primary, of course). He turns the affair to his own end, and the next day informs Marion that she must go away with him. His wife suspects all along, and now she sends for Marion and springs another surprise—partial to the spectators, complete to the girl (and therefore promising sympathy for her)—by saying: “Now that you’ve come between me and my husband, are you willing to help me get a divorce?” (Punch line for sub-title).

The situation may run on from here with the villain discovered in his true colors by some knowledge in Marion’s possession, but that is not sustaining enough. Her object is to make him disclose any knowledge he possesses that will free her father; he holds the whip hand by his knowledge of her father’s presence in hiding. Let us introduce a twist of plot:

The wife runs away, saying she won't stay in such a mockery of a home, leaving Marion in the presence (and power) of the villain. Then someone comes along; why not the forsaken cabaret girl? She is good material here, for we can suppose that she has some knowledge by which the plot can be more quickly unraveled. She may know that the villain was actually implicated in the crime for which Marion's father has suffered. This suggests that she may have been the original cause of the first crime. Suppose we go further, and see if we cannot define her better. Let us say that she was the daughter of the village postman, that she ran away from home, induced to do so by our villain (a fact to be hidden at the start of our story and held for a surprise). She and he started away, let us say, and were seen by the now-dead bank cashier. He later "held up" the villain by his knowledge of the villain's complicity in the seduction of the girl, for her father, the postman (a growing character now), swore to avenge her loss. The villain had to silence this dangerous cashier, and sought to do so by murder, shifting the blame to the shoulders of another. He placed a revolver near the vault doors, and when the two men were in the vault, the villain fired a shot from another revolver and so killed the cashier, throwing his own revolver out of the window into a handy rain barrel where it would never be sought, since its existence would not be suspected. (The use of the two revolvers puts a fresh vitality into this circumstantial-evidence situation. Also, this situation will be reserved as a climactic surprise and "punch" for Marion to deduce.)

Let us say that Marion knows nothing of this true story of the crime, but some word dropped by the girl who has since become a cabaret singer gives Marion a clue, and she deduces the plot of the villain, and so surprises him into a confession. Thus she obtains her ends, freeing her father.

How about the hero? He must work in off and on, saving Marion from the villain at some road-house, perhaps. Of course he will come in at the finish, and since the sister has no real use for him, and can be shown to have "taken up" with a returned officer from France, we can let Marion have her hero all to herself.

As for the villain's wife, she would be better off never to come back, but we may need her to clear up some point of the past, and so can hold her in abeyance. As for the judge and the sheriff, they have played important though minor parts in our by-plots, and now they can participate in Marion's happiness.

Hurrah! We have actually found, built and completed, a five-reel feature-picture plot. All that remains to be done with the plot itself is a little polishing up, and that we can do quickly enough. So, let us lay it aside to "get cold" before we do any actual polishing. The plan of letting material lie fallow for a while is good; it helps us to get a fresh viewpoint and avoid a few pitfalls, which, very logically, will be the motive of our next chapter. Now we can stop work and celebrate our acquisition of a real, honest-to-goodness feature-plot, with motive, by-plot, suspense, surprise, human interest and heart-appeal, and punch. The "magic seven" did work well, did it not?

CHAPTER XI

THE ART OF BEING COOL WARMLY

Did you notice the flourish of excited trumpets heralding the last bang of the plot hammer? Perhaps it reminded you of that furious blare of brass with which the country circus band ushers into the ring "The Stupendous Caravan of Scintillating Marvels to Wend its Glittering Way Around the Ring in Advance of the Aggregation of Superlatively Gifted Performers." You know!—the band blows "like sixty" and out comes one scrawny donkey, a mangy camel, several lame ponies and a clown with a lame sense of humor. Noise and bluster are expected to conceal the skimpiness of the actuality.

Yet such was not the purpose of the fanfare with which the last chapter closed. The real scheme was to reward Imagination. Imagination is a good deal like a faithful servant, needing only a tiny bit of praise to make that servitor "work his head off" for you. Maybe the zeal of the worker or his excitement makes him try too much or do too many things in too little time, but if he is faithful and really means well, you can generally turn his efforts to very good account by the use of a little praise, and then while he is off resting you can touch up the bare spots in his work without much trouble. So the praise was given, and now that Imagination is through for the day, we can look over the work calmly and yet without too much inclination to

lose heart in it because of a few places where it may need retouching. In fact, we have to coax Imagination by getting all worked up over his speed and accomplishment; but now that we have him out of hearing, let us see if there are any little discrepancies in his output of plot.

Stripped of all camouflaging figures of speech, we are to set to work on the most difficult task a writer has: that of analyzing his own inspired product. We must not approach this ordeal with the least trace of self-esteem in our attitude, for to do so would prevent us from seeing flaws. Nor must we go at the thing with a frigid determination to find fault, with our minds made up to the fact that the work is valueless, for in that way we should kill all chance to improve. There is a nice middle course to be followed, where we keep cold reason to the fore, but temper its harshness with the saving grace of a restrained enthusiasm: reason tells us where we have gone wrong; enthusiasm keeps us from losing heart in the whole matter, and so helps us to improve until reason's chill is overcome.

We have striven very hard to ascertain the nature of the photoplay plot, its limitations and its possibilities; we have sought dilligently to discover the things such a plot *must contain*, and have managed to incorporate them; now we must use an equal effort to learn what a plot *must not* contain, and if we find any of these must-nots, we will exchange our hammer for a tack-puller and get rid of the undesirables.

Let us "halt the action" long enough to chat over these unwanted things that creep into a plot. In number they are three: "implausibility," "coincidence" and "divided interest"—and the "gratingest" of these is "divided interest."

It is always best to dispose of your worst weeds at the start. Therefore, let us dig down and see about this threatening creeper—for it *does* creep in unawares.

Divided Interest—The Unforgivable Sin

We have decided, at certain times, not to do this or that with our plot, for fear some character would get the center of the stage away from our leading play-lady. Possibly we have not lingered with the reason sufficiently long to realize the emphasis with which it should be stressed. Now is the time to get the thing very clearly in mind, and get it straight:

The plot must fasten the attention of the spectator upon one principal character, and this focused attention must never be allowed to shift to any other character.

When the leading lady of a musical-comedy company sings the "big song" the house- and stage-lights are dimmed and she is the one focusing point of a battery of spot-lights. The chorus behind her moves to and fro; occasionally one or another member of the chorus will be within the radius of the brilliant glare, and of course there is sufficient light on the stage to permit the spectator to see the *ensemble*; but always

the point of attraction is the singer, even when the chorus lifts tuneful (or strident!) voices in support of the star.

The whole effect would be spoiled, the entire "picture" would be destroyed, if one ambitious chorus-lady should step, even for the briefest instant, into the heart of the lighted circle.

As the evolutions of the chorus bring one or another of its members into proximity to the star, and so lends that one a brief illumination, so may your subservient characters share the interest that beats down upon your star, but only in such wise as to emphasize clearly the place of such an one as part of the background.

Far oftener than not, the writer of a screen-plot sails along merrily with a story in which the fair Rosamond is the "whole works"—up to a certain point! Then she drops into the background of his developing idea, and Xanthippe predominates as a mentioned name just as the lady of that cognomen dominates the shaping of the plot's destiny. To be sure of giving full measure, in quantity, the writer in question then adds a few situations with Joshua for their chief figure. When such a mixed party appears above the editorial horizon, that famous phrase of the French is hung up for that day's motto—"They shall not pass!"

Often enough, Mary marries Harry, and the stork appears with little Mariette or Hal. Then Mary decides to run away from home, and does it. The infant

develops—by the elision of a time-obstacle—into a fair damsel or a handsome youth. Mary and Harry are dead, perhaps—anyhow, they are negligible plot-shapers. The girl, or the boy, meets new folks, makes love, has complications of more or less concern, and then marries—but why go on to the end, which may still be generations removed from the start of the plot-lessness?

Again, Tom loves Sarah—and then meets a charming vampire. Sarah broods and pines away to a shadow. Miss Vampire is won to be a nice person, through Tom's wonderful control over her by the love way. Tom loves the reformed vampire, and it is with these that the rest of the plot-shy outline deals. Mayhap Mary marries a minister, or else she dies. So does that sort of story!

This is by no means intended to warn you that it is impossible to start off with one generation, and then pass to the next to complete your story, any more than it is meant for a danger-signal against using vampire types—if you can use them freshly, convincingly. But, aside from the time-consuming quality of the two-generation story, the use of such material is commendable only when the people who gave the story cause are still the center of attention when the plot reaches completion; and the vampire is all right if she is consistent and does not attain sufficient success with her lures to charm *you* away from *your* main love—the perfect plot.

If Tim and Jessie start a story, and Jessie is the center of interest, they may marry, have children who

grow up and become involved in the plot: all will be well so long as Jessie is the dominating figure, so long as the complications are hers to be met and conquered, so long as the interest is shifted to any other character for only one purpose—that of strengthening the hold of the plot on Jessie. Never let Jessie slide back into oblivion while Tim does a buck-and-wing dance in the spotlight. Never let the children become so prominent, plotfully, that they overshadow Mamma Jess.

Sometimes, while you are building with the help of an eager imagination, it is impossible to halt progress and examine and balance every character with respect to the whole effect, but after the enthusiasm dies out, look out for the creeper of divided interest, or it will strangle your plot.

Let us now take up our own little construction-exercise and compare our figures with the principal, one at a time, so that we can analyze all relationships and arrive at a correct estimate of the importance of each. If any one threatens Marion's place in the sun we must do some tack-pulling.

The Judge-Father is decidedly not a danger; neither is Sister, for neither becomes prominent in the plot to an extent likely to command preëminent attention. The hero merely *shares* the interest. The real father comes in for a good deal of attention, by virtue of his declaration of innocence, but it is Marion who draws to herself the lion's share of the complications in the situation, and, you will recall, the "old man" is craftily secreted in a cave where he cannot photograph him-

self into the story too often. The villain is surely no endangering factor—in point of fact, his threat over the girl removes his threat to the interest. The villain's wife has no qualities to make her interesting. The postman and his daughter figure only casually—to supply a plot-thread, not to assume the direction of the pattern into which it is woven. It looks as if we were safe on the point of freedom from divided interest. So far, so good.

Implausibility—The Unhuman Element

Now we must tackle a matter that is seldom given the proper amount of thought by the average writer. It shows itself as a distressing lack of understanding of human nature or of the logical development of character. Editors call it "illogicality of situation." Here is an example:

An ignorant, uneducated girl whose life has been spent in the slums meets a rich young man. They fall in love, but he cannot marry her, for if he does his family will disown him. So he tells her the sad news, and they part. But the girl is resourceful! (Note that!) She has some money left her (by chance and a pleasingly convenient dying relative), and with this she buys many fine garments, much rouge and face powder, has her hair curled *a la* Mary Pickford, and goes into society! She does a lot of other things, and finally, having endeared herself to the foolishly reluctant parents of Mr. Hero, she is able to wed him.¹

¹ A plot submitted to a picture-company contained this situation, exactly as stated.

How in the name of all that is sensible could an ignorant, uncultured girl "get away with" any scheme like that? She could not read, she could hardly write a legible hand, she spoke with the colloquialism of the slums and the dialect of Italian parents, yet she is so resourceful that she can assume the aspect, attributes and qualities of mind that will enable her to "get by" with highly cultured people of society. She is super-human, of course! No real person of the slums could accomplish the feat.

That story (how the word is abused!) was not plausible. It was prepared by someone without any understanding of human nature, its capacity for accomplishment, or the limitations of that capacity.

Had the girl been formerly a well-to-do person or even a widely read student, or one who might have associated with some person who knew society life, she could conceivably have acquired a sufficient degree of mental cultivation to enable her to "make good." But as it stood, the situation was illogical.

Illogicality of plot, of situation, of character, arises to condemn an idea just as soon as that idea is allowed to treat with any element that is not within human capability, that is beyond human capacity for accomplishment, that is out of harmony with the characteristic traits of the story-people.

Never devise a plot in which a bookkeeper (who in real life always handles a pen) suddenly leaps at a typewritten cipher-message and figures in a Sherlock-Holmesian manner that it was written on a double

shift-key Corona with the capital shift and the figure shift alternately depressed. Such a man could not logically know "all that much" about the machine in question unless you could save the logic by making him use such a machine before the situation came up. To expect a pen-writer to know the intricacies of a type-written cipher on a special make of machine is asking too much of a credulous public.

To the same class of illogicalities belongs the girl who is always washing dishes and crimping her hair, till the forest catches fire and the engineer who handles the one engine on the single-track road which will bring some cornered souls out of the fire-swept woods is all bunged up with locomotor ataxia; then *she* leaps to the throttle of the engine and the audience leaps to its feet and the picture exhibitor leaps to the phone and cancels that brand of picture forevermore. In the same category is the village maid who sees some cheap "tank" drama, goes to the city, cannot get a chance to "act," and so haunts the theatre where her favorite male lead disports his matinee-idol charms. Then the lady star has a fit of temperament, or becomes suddenly tongue-tied, and up leaps the village damsel, to grab off the honors of that part and wed the leading lady's own (stage) hero. There are plenty of other characters that are unhuman. Sufficient unto the plot is the implausibility thereof.

Test every strand of your every plot for fear that it may tax credulity by reason of its implausibility. If you are a common-sense human being yourself, decide if the situation under advisement would be reasonable

to you, provided it were to be someone else's work. If the decision is against its logicity, change it!

Have we any implausibility in the affairs of Marion? Does she do anything that a "human" girl could not or would not do? Let us think it over. She does nothing that is out of harmony with the disposition and the character we have given her; no situation arises that is incompatible in its development with the traits and mental attitudes of Marion or of the people with whom we have surrounded her. So it may be safely said that the plot is not implausible.

Coincidence

The third of the undesirable plot-hinderers is the matter of coincidence. The coincidence is of two types: the minor, or condoned sort, and the major kind which in itself becomes practically an implausibility.

The minor coincidence shows itself in many ways. In real life it is occurring to virtually every living person in one way or another. You walk along the street and turn a corner—to bump into a friend you have not seen for "ages" and who is in town for only a day. You stroll around your own residential neighborhood some evening and meet a man with whose family you boarded ten years ago; he has been living around the corner from you for the past fifteen months; you meet him now by the odd coincidence of both being out at the same time and taking the same stroll. The examples could be multiplied into infinite numbers.

Since such coincidences occur in daily life, one might assume that they would be practicable material for use in picture plots; frequently they do appear. The minor ones are condoned and often accepted if they are not utilized often enough to make them vicious. The use of these minor coincidences is much like the employment of alliteration: enough is "a plenty," too much is unpleasing.

In our Marion-taking-the-grown-up-air plot we have minor coincidences: such a coincidence is noticeable in the fact that her father arrives at the house on the very night that her party has taken place; but that can be excused by reason of the forceful drama that develops therefrom. Every probability points to his coming; it is spoken of, expected, and in a way prepared against on that very evening by the sheriff. Such a coincidence is the arrival of the villain at the cave when Marion is with her father; but we can remove the coincidental quality to a great degree by having the villain "planted" as using his car till the gasoline is all gone, which occurs in such fashion that he is near, not at, the cave; and the fact that he is attracted to the cave by seeing the dog takes away the coincidental quality still more, for it would be a major coincidence, indeed, to have the villain go into the cave at that time merely because the plot demands it. So we may use minor coincidence with circumspection, taking care to recognize it and nullify its glaring character by every possible device. If we should have to have a man meet a woman at a certain street corner, it would be necessary to indicate or suggest some reason why

each is at that place on the way to some other; it would not do for us merely to let them meet there by accident. Every accidental meeting must be through the designing arrangement of the author, who must manipulate his plot-constituents so that the coincidence is made as indistinguishable as may be; plot-people must not "just meet by chance" if their meeting can be shown to be the outcome of some definite line followed by each. Such things simply "happen" in real life—for the screen they must "come about," not "happen."

Major coincidence is a serious offense. It may be illustrated by such an elementary idea as the following: A little girl, stolen by gypsies, grows up and wanders into the very house where her father and brother are living, to be loved by the brother.¹ Again, this brother, ignorant of the relationship, tries to lure the sister into an unwedded association, and at the time when he is seeking to drag her, resisting, away, the very gypsy of all gypsies who knows the connecting relationship steps in through the window!

These coincidences are forced developments of plot-ideas along arbitrary lines: they do not make for *good* plots; they detract from the plausibility of any story-idea. Rigidly avoid major coincidences. There are none in our working plot. Had we allowed Marion to run away from home, stop over night in some house by the roadside and there meet her father, who would be hiding after his escape, that would make a major coincidence. Again, did this chance to occur, and the girl

¹ Besides the objection on the ground of coincidence, there is the demerit of absolute triteness in this situation—it has been worked to death.—[EDITOR.

“happen” to display some identifying relic of the past, such as a ring of her mother’s, so that the relationship could be established, *that* would be a major coincidence. It is not a coincidence that the banker is the very person who can solve the secret of the father’s past, for they both grew up in the town together. To have brought them both to the same “strange” town after the crime, *would* be coincidence. You see by this time, of course, and will keep your eyes open when you work alone.

Always study carefully after imagination has sped your plot to a desirable completion: study to the end that your imagination may not, in its zeal, unwittingly lead you into planting some one or more of the trio of undesirable weeds; if you do not pull them out before your idea is well grown, it is not likely that any editor will trouble himself to do the weeding for you.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST BIG DRIVE

A scrappy Hibernian, imbued with the fondness of his race for a shindy, eagerly sought to enlist for overseas duty in the army. He declaimed his intentions toward "thim same others" to all who would hearken. Then, of a sudden, he lost interest, became sullen and morose.

"What's wrong, Pat?" asked a friend, "Shure, and ye are not blue because ye are finally goin' over the top!"

"No," said Pat, "but look how far ye must go before ye can start."

Perhaps your attitude toward synopsis-writing is now much the same. But be patient for yet a little longer. Hearten yourself by touching that magic talisman put into your keeping at the very start of this study, to the end that your "synopsis only" would be more than a synopsis only. To make our feature-plot, which we have found satisfactory in length and other essentials, a still better picture-story, let us make ourselves familiar with the polishing ingredients of characterization, "planting," and the technical device that is known as "fading back," to reveal some incident of the past; also, such arbitrary devices as the compulsory happy ending. An understanding of what

these devices are for, and of when, how and why they must or may be used, will not come amiss.

Characterization

By characterization is meant the showing of some character-trait that is important to the developing plot; or else, some inherent characteristic of a play-person who is of such interest to the spectator that it is worth a slight digression from the forward movement of the story. The first-named type of characterization is a part of the plot-development itself; the second is less an actual part of plot-development, although it is employed, even in a digressive incident, to make clear some later development of the plot, and in that way it really becomes a valuable adjunct, if not a portion, of the plot itself.

To illustrate: If Marion possesses an impulsive, childlike nature, the fact may be made clear in the form of a statement in your final synopsis; but it will be conveyed much more convincingly to the spectators by the introduction of some incident that will show Marion doing something that will convey the fact unobtrusively and yet pictorially—our medium of expression being action—so that the onlookers will acquire the necessary information without having it put before them in cold print.

Since we are going to use our heroine's dog, and want that animal to be recognized and accepted at once as her pet, we might devise some incident in which Marion and the dog will figure. If we want to get the

dog's status cleared up at once, we might as well open our story with this characterization incident. To do so will also give us a chance to introduce our leading figure while we are beginning a continuity of events that will drive right into the plot; and we might as well go farther and so devise the incident as to include a touch of comedy, and perhaps a chance to use a speech by the girl to the dog, thus developing her character in action and establishing her relations with the dog and getting the introduction of his name out of the way (though that is not so important a matter) by a sub-title that will be seemingly spoken, rather than merely a statement of fact.

We can accomplish all this by showing Marion with her dog on the porch of her home. She sees the dog scratching (not a difficult thing for the director to make the dog do), and grabbing him, turns him on his back, and runs her fingers through his furry neck-covering. Then she springs back, dismayed, and cries: "Major! I told you not to associate with that war dog! He's just back from the trenches!" The inference is obvious, of course; and the shaking of skirts by Marion will serve also the purpose of emphasizing the brevity of the childish skirts in contrast to her length of limb. Since the short skirts are a part of her characteristic youthfulness, this fact is worth establishing.

Thus do we secure an incident to characterize our leading lady, her ownership of and friendliness with the dog, and her youthful costume. Such is characterization of the second type, which establishes important things in an incident that is not an actual part of

the plot-development, and yet contributes its bit of comedy and gives the picture a natural start. From this point we may go right on into the story by having Marion look up, see the Judge, and rush to him. Their greeting will be characteristic, and if we have the Judge bring home another costume of a sort as youthful and girlishly abbreviated as the one Marion is wearing, we may characterize directly, while also developing plot, by showing how she rebels inwardly at the acquisition of still another of these ungrown-up costumes, though she is to all outward appearances simply "tickled to pieces." The first example shows indirect, or incidental development of character traits, aside from plot progression; the second gives us a combination of plot-advancement—since the story is unfolding its first and exceedingly small crisis—and of character building, by showing an additional trait of love for the old man too strong to allow her to injure his evident faith in his ability to choose appropriate garments for his daughter.

Characterization by incident-not-vital-to-plot-progression is not to be indulged in frequently. At the beginning of a story it is satisfactory, and, at rare intervals, when there comes a definite halt in the advance of the idea, due to the ending of an episode or a life-epoch of some important character, the device of characterizing in this manner may be used; generally, though, it is much better practice to devise your character-revealing incidents so that they may clearly forward the story.

It is generally wise to stamp a character definitely with all of his or her important traits at the very earliest possible point in your plot, unless there are traits which can be brought out or revealed only as a result of some crisis or development that occurs later in the story. Generally speaking, a characteristic must be firmly evidenced before the situation arises which is shaped by that trait; though it may conceivably happen that you will wish to hide the motive for some action and must therefore conceal the characteristic governing that motive, lest the plot-structure be destroyed by a too-early discovery of some necessarily hidden point. This will most frequently occur in planning stories that contain a mystery that is solved late in the development of the story: as, in the case of our villain's wife, to show her as jealous at the first introduction would forecast her ultimate action quite accurately. She must be stamped as a suspicious wife, but it will not be until the mystery of her phone-call to Marion is given explanation by her sudden demand for evidence to help her get a divorce that the audience will realize fully how jealously spiteful she is. Thus they will achieve this knowledge at the same time that it dawns upon Marion, lending the situation a psychological "punch" not otherwise to be secured.

In the same way, the postman must not be made a vengeful man "all over the screen" as he is introduced. His sourness and his moroseness are to be stressed, but only when he actually comes into the climax can we disclose his venomous intention, else the spectator

will ask why others in town did not know all about him and so suspect him at once of the crime he finally commits.

Characterization must be given, whenever possible, in action. Try to avoid mere statements of character-traits: let the action disclose these traits. Once, in a projection room, some prospective purchasers were watching a picture that had been made by an "independent" director, who sought to dispose of state rights to the production. The picture started off with a long statement-leader or sub-title—so long, in fact, that it had to be divided into six sections, each in fine-type, close-packed lines. Several men rose and left the room. One of them, stopped by the surprised director, said that his theatre catered to a crowd that did its book-reading at home. "But," argued the director, "our leading man has to do a thing for a certain reason." The departing man kept right on going. "Why in Tophet," he flung back over his shoulder, "don't you let him do it, and leave the reasoning to the audience?" Had the director been clever, he would have substituted a hundred feet of action for his hundred feet of sub-title and put his characterization into the mind by suggestion instead of by flat statements.

Orientation, or "Planting"

"When some writers want a tree to fall on their hero," says a scriptwright of much experience, "it does not seem to bother them at all to discover that the same little hero is in the middle of the Sahara desert.

'T-r-e-e' goes the typewriter, and lo! up springs a mighty oak, all fixed to flop over at the right instant. How did that oak get into such a place? What has kept it alive in that unfertile and arid spot? Nothing but the tap of the typewriter keys. If a writer *must* get his surprise by having a tree fall on a chap in the desert, for goodness' sake let him go out before he starts his story and *plant that tree!*'

Orientation, the previous planning for some event that is likely to cause wonder as to its logicity, means a careful bit of preparation for that event. The case of the tree in the desert was a bit far-fetched, it is true, but it serves to emphasize the point in question by its very inconsistency. If you were watching a picture in which the hero was in a desert, and suddenly he found himself beneath a big oak, your mind would be diverted from the close attention needed to follow the story; you would wonder how in the world a tree got there; you would lose interest in the story, because your interest would be centered about the solving of that knotty point concerning the tree and its presence in such an unexpected location. Only in one way could the author have held your interest close to his situation, and that way would be by having prepared your mind for the seeing of that tree in that place by some previous incident accounting for the fact that a tree was, logically, in that place. If he could not devise an acceptable reason for the tree's presence there, he might better do the sensible thing and omit or essentially alter the whole situation.

Any situation, any action, any and each point in a story that is likely to cause speculation as to its verisimilitude, requires careful foreplanning, a suggestion of its possibility that does not reveal its approach, though it makes the thing seem natural when it does occur.

The method of accomplishing this preparation varies considerably with varying story-needs. In no case should the preparatory evidence be such as will enable the onlookers to guess its purpose and so leap ahead to the prophesying of what is going to happen. In other words, you intend to "spring" something in the nature of a surprise. You do not say, "Look here! I am going to surprise you." You merely introduce some previous bit of action centered, though not obtrusively, around the thing that will cause the surprise. When the "big stunt comes off" the spectators will instantly recall that previous bit of preparation, and then see for the first time what it meant. For instance, in our working plot, we have decided to let Marion send her father to a cave that she knows about. We do not want to have our cave a secret from the spectators, but we do want to have its eventual purpose concealed from them. You could wait until the cave is to be used, and then have Marion sit down and say to her father: "There is a cave off in the hill just north of the old mill; I use it for a play-place. You go there and I will contrive to send you food and words of cheer." But, my-oh-my, what a dreadfully weak thing that situation would become if handled in that wise! The spectators would know that Marion planned to

help her father to escape. They would thus lose the surprise occasioned by her sudden act of unexpected succor to her father; they would know that he must elude the sheriff later on and go to the cave. The suspense would be gone.

Instead of that, it would be wise to prepare in such a way that the cave may seem unimportant, and even likely to be forgotten, yet there it is when it is needed, and its presence and use, as well as Marion's knowledge of its location, become readily understandable. And of course the preparation must be comparatively quiet and unobtrusive.

Again, the dog is to carry food and messages to the cave. We cannot wait till the time we need him before indicating that he is a trained animal. Let us prepare for both the stated contingencies with one little incident: Let us take Marion when she is disgusted with her youthful costumes, send her down town with the dog and let her purchase some cakes and other tidbits to eat and put these in some sort of carrying device on the dog's back, then send him off, while she goes elsewhere on some errand that will advance the plot. The dog will be shown arriving at the cave. "Oh! He is trained to do that," says the audience, "How cute!" Yet the matter is forgotten in the rise of tension occasioned by bigger things. Marion will go to the cave later on, and we will know that she hides away there when she is blue, or when she wants to be by herself to think. Now when she says goodbye to her father, and then helps him to get away from the sheriff, we do not intimate that she has told him of the

cave. Possibly someone will guess where he is going, but there is no certainty. When the dog is sent off by the girl the next morning with some food, the cave may be recalled by some; the recollection will do no harm to surprise or suspense, for the guess will be shown to be correct almost immediately after it is thought of. Thus we orient, or "plant," the trick of the dog, the existence of the cave, the use to which it is put by Marion.

A further thing we accomplish: Since the dog is already known to have carried away little parcels for Marion, no one in town would connect the dog's trick with any possibility of a convict in hiding, as they certainly would were we to show the dog being sent off thus for the first time after the convict was seen in the town and known to be her father.

If any character in a story of yours suddenly snatches a revolver from a table drawer in a lady's boudoir, you must prepare the audience for that surprise by some previous incident showing that the revolver is habitually kept there, and that the character in question knows that fact. If you intend to have some player pull down a rope to bind a prisoner, the fact that a rope is logically there must be previously hinted at—not harped on, but made understandable; it may be a bell rope, and it may be used in the course of some situation when the lady of the house rings for a maid. That does not suggest that the rope will be needed later, it merely seems a part of the action of the situation, and still it enables the spectators to accept the rope as a reasonable thing when it is needed.

Dealing with the Past

Sometimes in planning a plot you will find it absolutely necessary to depart from a closely-following continuity of events, for the reason that some incident that happened years before has a vital bearing on some big point in your plot.

There are several ways in which you can deal with the previously-happened. You have the prologue to fall back on; there you merely plan the previous incident as a start for your plot, and put it at the beginning of your plot-outline just as you will eventually place it at the beginning of your final synopsis.

But there are several drawbacks to this method: First of all, it keeps the leading character out of the start of the story, and that is not a good plan. "Stars" like to be seen right from the beginning of a picture, and spectators like to see them that way. Often, too, the telling of the past happening as a present one at the opening of a story necessitates the introduction of a set of characters governing that situation, and then, when you come to the real story, the relationships and the grown-older people have to be introduced all over again, for both have changed with the lapse of the years, perhaps even necessitating a new set of actors. In still another case you will feel that to tell your past-tense matter as an opening for the story will put too much information in the possession of the spectators—it will enable them to foretell your climax.

Taking up the working plot again, we can see plainly that if we open the synopsis with a relation of past

events we lose the surprise occasioned by the discovery that Marion has a supposedly criminal father. Besides, the spectators begin to suspect the real villain at the very start, and they will know that the postman is going to find out who took his daughter to the city; thus the whole story drops into insignificance.

Suppose that we do not tell the prologue as such. Let us plan, instead, some way of telling parts of the past where they will be most effective to our plot development. We can let the sheriff tell about the former crime, presumably informing his wife—but of course really informing the spectators—at the time that he gets word of the convict's escape. The spectator finds out only what the sheriff knows: that Marion has a father in jail; that the sheriff had rushed into the bank that previous night and seen that father standing over the dead cashier, a pistol at his feet; that the bank manager (our villain) had dashed in to shout, "Why did you do it?" So the mystery is preserved, and later on in the story we can reveal a little more of the past, until, at the final big moment the last bit of evidence can be explained, and we have neither digressed tediously from our present plot-movement nor foretold what we intend to do with our tangled plot-threads.

Many authors, and especially those who write the spoken drama, exclusively or as a side-line, argue in favor of the old precept that "You must tell your audience everything; keep secrets from the characters as much as you wish, but never hide anything from an audience." Many photoplay directors, graduates from

the stage-play school of producing, hold this same opinion. Yet plays succeed wonderfully well when they break this supposed rule of structure; and pictures do the same, and will continue to be successful notwithstanding their sacrilegious violation of the precept—provided they have merit that is *enhanced* by reason of the departure from precedent.

Some stories will be better for a straightaway exposition. If the past influences the present situation, but does not clearly prophesy it, the prologue is probably the better method of detailing the previous happenings, since the story is thus left free to develop without any delays. If the past would, by its revelations, tend to give away the probable development of the present situations, the alternative manner of introducing it would be found more satisfactory.

The Happy Ending

Now for a word about the necessity for a “happy ending” to virtually every screen-story. The manufacturers of picture plays generally require a twist of plot to bring about the lovers’ embrace, or the satisfying removal of any obstacle to the future happiness of the leading play-folk. The demand for the happy ending often seems to spoil a good plot—from the very nature of their themes, some stories cannot logically end with the cheerful “clinch,” yet seldom does such a story find acceptance. If it is purchased, the studio staff man has to “whack it into shape,” and it is this arbitrary and conventional demand that makes so

many stories seem weak and flat at the finish. Yet the producing firms know, from long experience, that the majority of people in a screen-theatre want to be entertained and taken out of themselves; they do not want to see tragic endings; they like to be gripped by a story with a human appeal that is deep enough to send them away with an undercurrent of serious thought for future pondering; but they want, even above that, to be sent away from the theatre with a feeling that the problem is not essentially a tragic thing, that in its present solution it has not blasted the lives of the people concerned. Let your story clutch the heart-strings and draw them taut with sentimental sympathy; let it bring tears to the eye; let it bury all light matters of self beneath a gripping profundity of serious import to the mass; but if you want that story to keep going and bring you orders for more stories, let it finish up with a smile—not a “horse laugh,” just a smile, engendered by the realization that hope still lives in the world, for no matter how black the horizon, no matter how burdensome the load of care or suffering, no matter how insurmountable the obstacle, your play-folk have come out of it all right, and by so doing they have created a fresh optimism, subconscious but beneficial, in your spectators.

Clinching Our Tacks

Our “getting there” has been long, but now we can put the finishing touches to our plot, and to its analysis, without any further digression for the purposes of acquiring necessary knowledge. It is all at hand.

We shall lay out our plot in the form of a sketchy *plot-outline*—a very different thing from a final synopsis; don't forget that. In this outline we shall set down merely plot-essentials. They will serve to refresh our minds for the future work of building up the expanded form, or the final synopsis.

In order to enable us to see how much we have accomplished, and what polishing still remains to be done, suppose we make a series of consecutively numbered footnotes, as we go along. These will call our attention to the final needs when we want them, and yet will not clog up, or confuse, the plot-material itself.

A Plot Outline

Marion a baby. Father works in small town bank, with others, including man to develop as villain. Villain has met the village postman's daughter, won her, though he is already married; gets postman's daughter to run away and join him in city. They are seen by cashier, who forces villain to "cough up hush money" and becomes so avaricious that villain cannot pay enough. Villain fears the postman's vengeance if cashier tells on him, so plans to kill cashier, putting blame on another—selects Marion's father as target for circumstantial evidence.

That night villain has contrived so all are working in bank; cashier and Marion's father in vault; villain puts a revolver on floor near vault; cashier comes out, villain shoots him with another revolver from main room, flings his pistol out of window into an old rain barrel.¹

¹ In order to facilitate comparison between this outline and the developed synopsis of the same idea, and to show where the latter is built to remove the flaws mentioned in the course of this outline, the footnotes, as just mentioned in the text, are consecutively numbered with similar numbers "keyed" into the synopsis where the point referred to in each footnote is handled. For instance: Here we need to "plant" rain barrel, if we tell this as a prologue; but if possible all this must be told some other way than in a prologue.

Sheriff hears shot, rushes in to see Marion's father standing by dead body.²

At trial, evidence is all against the circumstantially guilty father. The judge sentences him to life imprisonment for the crime.³

Judge sorry for convicted man and motherless infant. Marion. Adopts her.⁴

Marion grows up with Judge and his daughter. Kept in ignorance of past by Judge. He tries to keep her youthful as long as possible, believing that girls of today grow up too rapidly, have the saddening experiences of maturity too early in life. Marion wakes up to a realization that her development is retarded.⁵

Marion decides not to waste time becoming young lady in usual way; she will grow up all at once.

Her real father escapes from prison and both sheriff and Judge expect him to come there to see his daughter.⁶

Judge's daughter in love with young man, who treats Marion as a prospective "kid sister-in-law."

Others in village have same attitude toward Marion, villain's wife among them.

She sends out invitations to a party at which she will surprise the friends she has made, by "growing up," putting her hair up, donning garments of a "young lady."

Wife of villain has shared Marion's secret scheme for party surprise, being only woman in village who knows "clothes" and being Marion's close friend.⁷

² We must plan to have villain clinch guilt of the victim of the scheme by some saying as he rushes in.

³ Reason needed why sentence is not death: there must be some slight ground for doubt, and premeditation not proved.

⁴ This ends the prologue of our story. We will decide, later on, whether to have our synopsis follow the same line as the plot-sketch, or whether to use the facts of the prologue in a later position than at the opening of our synopsis.

⁵ Incident needed to emphasize this.

⁶ It must be explained that father knows that Judge has adopted Marion—Judge probably sent him letters.

⁷ This supplies motive for Marion and villain's wife "getting together" to strengthen the later separating influences.

Party takes place. Marion, in new guise, noticed by sister's lover: he realizes she is grown up, attitude changes.⁸

Marion meets complication; hero's declaration of love, with realization he must be true to sister.⁹

She plans to make him turn against her, and, innocent of wrong intent, employs villain. His wife misconstrues situation; jealous of Marion when the villain shows interest in Marion.¹⁰

Party over; Marion alone thinking out her problem: how to keep hero at arm's length, knowing he will not long remain "disgusted."¹¹

Her real father appears, recognizes Marion. Judge appears, admits truth of real relationship. Father declares he is innocent of crime he is accused of. Marion declares she will prove him so. Sheriff shows up. Marion aids father to escape, sending him to cave she has known of, with secretly imparted directions in very face of sheriff.¹²

Next day Marion finds father is safe. Sends him note and food by using her pet dog.¹³

She talks with Judge about the past, and learns the story of her father as it came out in court.¹⁴

⁸ Situation must be built here to emphasize the point so briefly sketched.

⁹ The sister should be worked into a situation here so as to strengthen Marion's purpose, as well as for the purpose of keeping her affection for the hero in evidence.

¹⁰ Situation must be built to emphasize this point. The wife must see the villain's conduct with Marion in a different light from hero—that which it really means must be hidden from these two, but known to spectators.

¹¹ This is a mental process on the part of Marion, so we must previously "plant," or forecast, some evidential motive.

¹² Novel way must be planned to aid father's escape so that it will come as a surprise, the method being logical, and always in evidence, though unsuspected.

¹³ We must devise an incident, or several, to "plant" the dog and his knowledge of the cave, and his trick of taking things to it.

¹⁴ If we have already used prologue, we will not need to do more than allow this situation to carry itself: if we have not used the material previously, we can use it here, "fading back," as will be described later on.

She fastens on villain as man most likely to be able to help her prove father's innocence. Goes to him. He agrees to help, really admiring girl's beauty, having designs on her. He has another *inamorata* in another city, but is tiring of her.¹⁵

Hero has talk with Marion's sister and is released from tacit engagement. He sees Marion's "carryings-on" with villain, misconstrues; villain's wife ditto.

Marion discovers villain's real intentions toward herself. Disillusioned, flees from him.¹⁶

Marion home: "Villain really guilty?"

She goes to cave, finds father away, while villain drives about country in his car.¹⁷

Villain's wife suspicious: he is out, has been seen with Marion. Wife broods, hatred for Marion grows.

Villain's car breaks down. He sees dog near cave, suspects something.¹⁸

Father has returned meanwhile; has found pistol in rain barrel.¹⁹

He and Marion wonder about it. Villain discovers them; pretends he will keep it secret, but realizes he has a powerful hold on Marion. He goes. She tells father she will send him money, and hurries home.²⁰

¹⁵ This other *inamorata* will, of course, develop to be the postman's daughter; but we will reserve that knowledge, possibly for a later surprise.

¹⁶ The hero could very well come into this situation and "save" Marion.

¹⁷ Incident needed to give him motive—perhaps he has seen the deserted city girl, and has been threatened by her?

¹⁸ Villain must be shown previously as knowing, from the papers, of escaped convict's identity, enabling situation to "carry" or "get over," fact that he knows why girl is so anxious to know about past; also making it clear that villain suspects father is hiding in cave, from seeing Marion's dog there.

¹⁹ We must have this incident expanded, to show how and why he leaves cave, how he gets near rain barrel, how he finds pistol, for the pistol and its hiding place will be Marion's clue to solve the mystery surrounding her father, later on.

²⁰ Incident needed here to show an obstacle put in the way of Marion's sending father money that night, as he will be needed later in the plot and must have reason for remaining in cave when he knows his hiding place is known to villain.

Next morning villain sends Marion word she must go away with him. He has her in his power. He has a row with his wife, and plans to desert her.

Marion gets phone-call from villain's wife—"Come over." Goes, and is asked if she will help wife get divorce, since she has come between wife and husband. Awakening for Marion. Protest.

Postman's daughter shows up.²¹

Postman's daughter takes a hand; situation develops, with villain's wife gone, villain realizing he must get away with Marion, or postman's daughter may make trouble and endanger his life if her father learns truth about past.²²

Postman shows up outside house with mail.²³

He hears excited conversation, and eventually learns from daughter's statement, which he hears from below, that villain was really guilty of her seduction. He shoots villain.

Marion is the only one who sees him do the shooting. Sheriff and hero arrive.²⁴

²¹ The postman's daughter must have several small situations previous to this, with the villain, so that there can be logical reason for her to come in at the opportune time. It may be that she "turns nasty" when she realizes she has been deserted, and wants to make trouble. Anyway, it will be her presence that will reveal the later link of identity between herself and the postman, and that will help Marion solve her problem of the villain's motive for his former crime, for which her father has suffered.

²² This will all have to be carefully planned by previous "planting" of hints, so that the situation will carry without much explanation, for we are getting into fast-moving melodrama, and cannot stop for explanations.

²³ Postman must be "planted" as on his route, so that he will arrive without the seeming coincidence of his arrival and the speeches upstairs.

²⁴ The shooting must be carefully planned so that it will be logical for Marion to be there, and the daughter of the postman also, and yet Marion only can give evidence of actually having seen act committed. Reason: Marion must always dominate situations.

Marion's real father gets a note from her saying she is going away. He figures out the real situation, knowing hold villain has on Marion, and starts out, careless of capture, to stop daughter. He hears of the shooting, goes there, and, seeing daughter presumably accused of crime, takes it upon himself.²⁵

Marion realizes her father's acceptance of guilt is not justified; she is inclined to save him at cost of the postman's life—logically, as the latter committed crime.²⁶

But she sees love of daughter and postman father, realizes her own love for her own father, his act of heroism in coming forth and taking guilt, and she tries to save him without disclosing identity of real criminal, actuated by motives of common humanity, feeling that postman was really justified.²⁷

By clever thinking Marion is able to collect evidence enough to prove that her father could not have been there at time crime was done; saves him and yet does not admit knowing identity of real criminal.²⁸

The villain is not killed, and revives now enough to become involved sufficiently to allow him to say something that will give Marion a clue to the motive for the former crime; whereupon she connects the villain with the former crime, and recalling the two-revolver crime just committed—one revolver in room, other in possession of real criminal—makes shrewd guess as to how former crime was done, and gets it right. Villain confesses. She saves her father, later learns sister is not in love with hero, she and he can "get together" as have postman and daughter, while it is suggested that Marion's own father will be cleared, eventually to find happiness with her. Sister must have another fiancé—soldier, say. All happy but villain, recovering for a long stay behind the bars he let close about Marion's father.

²⁵ Need here for some visual connection for father to suppose daughter criminal—another revolver, as in former crime, may help; it might belong to villain's wife, in which case it must have been "planted."

²⁶ Marion must either have heard, or now hear, the true story of the postman's daughter, from his own lips, to give her motive for siding with him, and so justify her shielding of a criminal for the time being.

²⁷ If we have properly "planted" all our motives and all our explanatory material, this situation will clarify in action.

²⁸ Marion must deduce, and tell in action, what happened on the night of the crime; that is, her story must not be speech, but picture. Refer to the original crime, in prologue, and see if this is not a pictureable crime.

From the footnotes you may gather the impression that there is still much to be done before the story can be put into synopsis form. This would be true in the case of an author who is not thoroughly familiar with the manipulation of the various devices we have gone over; in many cases, though, the work of final building can be accomplished while the synopsis is being drafted from this sort of plot-outline. For instance, we have set down the plot here in exact sequence, including the "past" as a prologue. But we have already decided not to handle it in that way in the final synopsis, so we will plan along the lines previously suggested in respect to this part of the plot. Also, many of the incidents which will "plant" the necessary advance information on certain points may be evolved while the plot is expanding in the drafting of the synopsis.

To go through all the steps by and through which the discrepancies noted are covered would be tedious writing and would make tedious reading. Certainly you have been shown the processes well enough to enable you to learn all you desire to know about the evolution, from a comparison of outline, footnotes and final synopsis.

One thing that you have doubtless noticed is the deliberate omission of any names for characters, except in the case of the already-christened Marion. The omission was purposeful.

It has always been my own personal practice to go this whole distance in the road to plot building without finally selecting a name for a single character, using, instead, either the theatrical characteristic or the rela-

tionship of each, so that there could be no possibility of confusing my mind by forgetting what Bill was, whether the judge or the janitor. If a man is a judge, such he is called; if a girl is the leading character's sister, she is so referred to. In that way relationships do not become involved or over-complicated, for if one has to remember that a character is the sister-in-law of the mother-in-law of the step-child of the hero, the complexity is instantly apparent, and its illogicality is on the way to being corrected. The practice of so retarding the character-naming is not urged upon you; it is merely a matter of choice; you may prefer to name everybody before you have gone very far in your own plotting. But here the practice was adhered to for another reason: because the naming of characters has an importance all its own, like choosing a good title. Neither of these processes is, properly, plot-evolution, so they have been held back, and now deserve attention in a little rest-pause in our work of plotting, with a separate chapter to lend them exclusiveness.

CHAPTER XIII

A HOOVERIZED WHO'S WHO

"What's in a name?" inquired the well-remembered bard, insisting that definiteness was not required of floral nomenclature. Though your specter haunt me, Mr. Bard, the answer to that question will always come from me in this wise: "What's in a name?—a heap!"

No doubt it would influence the perfume-end of a rose to no extent whatever if that flower were rechristened a Jimson weed; yet who would bother to hunt it up under that despised description? Shakespeare asked no one to see a pound of flesh exacted by a gesticulatory Izzy, nor did that "quality of mercy" speech fall from the rouged, coquettish lips of a Susette. It was no sportive Ariel who wanted to decide whether "To be, or not to be." Where would Rosalind's romantic flavor go were she to be reprogrammed as Lizzie?

Why do we allude to a deductive person as a veritable Sherlock Holmes? Because that name was so ideally suited to the fictional character who bore it that it was readily remembered, and incorporated into our language of description; would the same character have met that same approbation with such a name as Bill Billson? Poe's detective is mentally on a par with his later rival, yet you could ask many a

man-on-the-street "Who was Poe's detective?" and get little information; Dupin's name is not so readily recalled.

In our photoplay work, the naming of characters is nearly as important a function as is the choosing of a catchy caption for the picture-play. If your story is titled to gain attention, your play-people must hold that attention, and accomplish other things: they must be readily remembered, and easily distinguished one from the other; they must have names that suggest, as far as possible, their age, station in life, principal traits. There must be no possibility that one will be confused with another. The editor or other reader of your story must not be required to stop reading and look back to the introduction of a character in order that he may refresh his mind as to what or who that one is. Choose names for characters with all this in mind—as we shall now go on to amplify.

First of all, name your principal person with a glove-fitting cognomen. Make that name the one most easy to keep in mind. Make the name a suitable one for that type of character.

The name should, whenever feasible, carry its own suggestion of the characteristics of the leading player: if a vain, silly, selfish girl, do not call her by a name that seems to breathe the very essence of dignity, as would the name of Laura—Coralie would suit her much better; if a man of twenty, very much in love with himself, absurdly egotistical, you would hardly be reasonable if you were to name him Henry Clay Carrington, which seems more suitable for a man much

older, really serious but mellowed into a broad understanding of the world and his own inconspicuous place in it; better to call your little self-esteemmer by a less dignified name, such as Sammy, or a pretentious one, like Percival. Again, in naming your leading character remember that he must be liked, so try to have him named so that he *will* be liked; some names have a quality of "niceness" and others seem to repel us. Billy, Jim, Bob, Clif, Hal—all seem to belong to fellows worth knowing; yet we are apt to take a dislike to a character with a cold, harsh name—plenty good enough for a rascal. It is better to let you fill out such a list for yourself; one never knows what unintentional offense might be given by arbitrarily suggesting names for villains! A sweet-girl lead ought to have a cuddlesome soundy name: Babs, Sue, Molly, for instance. The name of Marion does not seem quite suited to the character we have developed for our little plot-work. We will see, a little later, if it cannot be improved upon.

Less important characters require less care in their naming. It is usually a good plan to use *first names* for the people who "carry the plot" except when some of these are old people, when the family name is a better choice. In our story, first names would be wise for the leading lady, her sister, the hero, and the villain and his wife: but for the Judge, the girl's real father, the sheriff, last, or family names, without any Mr. are best—except, of course, when a mere title is used, like "the Judge."

The Cast of Characters

It is a good plan, though not an arbitrary requirement of synopsis-preparation, to have a cast of characters as a separate part of the whole submitted manuscript, generally preceding the synopsis itself. This cast or list of characters should be on a separate sheet of paper, bound in with the synopsis, just in front of the first synopsis sheet. The cast of characters should be arranged in an orderly fashion, with the names of the principal people coming first, and in the order of their *plot*-importance: the leading character at the head of the list; next the one most nearly related to the chief character in point of plot-carrying importance (not blood-relationship, necessarily); then the lesser figures, and, finally, the smaller fry whose presence contributes to the story in a minor degree. In the cast of characters it is well to give a brief statement of the salient traits of character as each person is named.¹

The cast of characters is a help to the editor or other reader because it enables him to see how large a cast of players is required, what types are needed, and how much of a minor cast of extra or supernumerary people is called for.

¹The Cast of Characters given in this volume with the developed Synopsis will show you both the accepted form for this portion of your manuscript, and the way in which the characters are arranged and their traits described. No arbitrary rule can be laid down for the naming or describing of characters; it is a matter for your own judgment to govern: some writers merely give a word or so of character description, or mention relationships; others go into more detail. Either method is satisfactory.

We will not go into the discussion of how and why our own characters are named; but it will be well for us to consider just one more detail concerning names. Once in a while, the selecting of a name for the principal character will provide you with a good suggestion for a title for the whole play. If your leading character is possessed of some dominant trait, so powerful in its influence on the plot that everything is, to all intents and purposes, subservient to the development of that one trait, you may decide to give the character a name that will, of itself, make a good caption for the whole picture. "Samson" was a picture titled so, because its leading character pulled down the temple of his own ambition about his ears in order to crush an enemy whose chains of cunning bound the hero's life and he had to take the only way of escape offered.

In other cases, the securing of a certain title for your picture will arbitrarily influence the naming of at least your leading player; and to give an illustration, suppose we seek a name for our own built-up plot.

*The Influence of the Picture-Title on the Naming of
the Principal Character*

There is a certain type of picture-title that is widely favored by most companies, at the time this is written; whether it will be so when you write your own stories cannot be prophesied, yet the popularity of the type of title may continue. The sort of caption in question is that which embodies the name of the principal character and a catchy phrase. "Amaryllis of Clothesline

Alley" is a good example; so is "A Romance for Roma." "Molly Make-Believe," "Annie-For-Spite," "The Mysterious Miss Terry," are differing illustrations of the same general class of titles which possess, when cleverly planned, all the qualities of catchiness, and magnetism for the box office.

Suppose we seek out a title of the kind. We do not want to name our plot with any hopelessly trite, though suited-to-material, title such as "Her Sacrifice." We do not wish to handicap interest with a dull title like "The Awakening." We can find a number of suggested titles in an examination of our central plot-thread: A girl wearies of being kept young, and decides not to delay her coming into maturity; she will "grow up" all at once. There we have a title—"Marion Grows Up." That is not at all catchy, though. It has no magnetism. We must seek some more pleasing arrangement to carry out the same idea. Let us seek it in her method of "growing up." She dons long dresses? Then we might say, "Long Skirts for Marion." That would be quite a good little caption; but it has one drawback: the fashions in women's garments change so frequently, the length of skirts varies so much with the differing styles of dress, that we are likely to have our theme obscured by a misunderstanding; the exactness of the meaning is not clear enough. How else does Marion "grow up?" Ah! *she puts her hair up!* Now there is a phrase that is very widely associated with the coming of a girl from childhood into the realm of Miss-dom. The phrase is catchy; it has quite an exact meaning. But there is no magnetism in saying

"Marion Puts Her Hair Up." Let us alter the name of our leading lady to get a quality of smoothness and magnetism into that phrase. Here we have it! We will call her Belinda! That name comes trippingly from the tongue. Linked with the rest of the phrase, it will make a catchy, meaningful, magnetic title.

So here is the one apt title for our story:

"Belinda Puts Her Hair Up."

All right. Now let us get busy and help her *do it!*

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRINCIPAL SYNOPSIS-PRINCIPLES

At last we have come to that third ingredient, that thing of paramount importance in the preparing of the synopsis-only form of picture writing; and the last step is the hardest one of all, the step where many, many writers stumble to an ignominious fall. The all-important plot these writers can devise, the captivating caption they can provide; but when it comes to putting the former under the latter in an interesting, compact, tell-it-all-and-no-more synopsis, they are "stumped."

The cause for their failure is not nearly so much a lack of ability to write as it is a complete misunderstanding of the first principles of synopsis-preparation. For instance, one class of writers continually crops up with this question: "How much action must you put into a synopsis?" Action? Why, it is *all* action! The motion picture is essentially a pantomimic form of dramatic expression; it naturally follows that any material designed for presentation in that form must be conceived as action, plotted for action, then synopsisized in language calculated to visualize in action. What these careless mishandlers of their craft really mean is, "How much *detail* must be put into a synopsis?" Detail! That is the thing they really want to know about. It is important, while action is essential!

Another group of never-will-be writers naively inquire: "How many words do you have in a synopsis?" How many eggs shall we put in a basket? How many houses must we build in a block? How many sentences do you have in a paragraph? All-embracing answer: Enough, and no more!

Words are necessary, detail is important, action is essential; but you cannot apportion your words by any set rule, you cannot incorporate detail by the observance of any set formula, you cannot "get action" by virtue of any set number of words, details or character-movements.

Writing a plot into its synopsis-expansion is a matter of individuality of treatment. No one can formulate rules that will fit the vast differences in treatment required by different plots. All that can be done to help you here is to tell you what a synopsis is, what it is for, what it should accomplish. Synopsis writing is like music composing: every piece calls for a different handling; individuality of expression enables one to override mere technical mechanics and secure the best possible effect. You can buy ruled music-writing forms, but the melody, the rhythm, come from your heart. So with synopsis writing; you can get ready-made rules (start, tell it all, stop), but the thing that puts your story before an editor so that he sees what you saw in it, feels what you felt in it, is something more than an observance of rules of procedure. That which gives your cold type warmth and feeling—life! —is an ability to say what you mean, to say it with un-

misted clearness, to say it with enough fluency to make good reading, and yet without fulsomeness of phrase.

This brings us to a consideration of what a synopsis actually is:

The modern photoplay synopsis is a clear, comprehensive statement of a motion-picture plot, written in readable, interesting fashion, giving sufficient detail of incident and situation to enable a scenario¹ writer to visualize the story in suitable form for production as a photoplay.

The points of importance in this definition are: the need for clarity, the essential of comprehensiveness of matter, the readableness and interest-holding qualities of the material, and the sufficiency of detail to make your idea resolvable into the scenario form by someone who is not close enough to consult you upon obscure points.

Each of these importances deserves separate consideration, more expansive discussion. But, knowing what a synopsis is, let us defer this detailed discussion until we examine the conditions under which it must be considered; in other words, let us define what a synopsis is *for*, and what it accomplishes (if it fulfills its mission).

A synopsis of a motion-picture plot is a simple method of putting the author's idea in a compact form

¹ Every studio maintains a staff, even if that staff be but one, competent to transform the idea embodied in a synopsis into a suitable scenario, or smooth, actable continuity of scenes. Such a translator submerges personal individuality when handling a story from "the outsider," and only asserts that individuality when the originator of the idea fails to supply an understandable explanation of the idea, or provides an idea that is not actable.

before the studio reader, editor and director, so that they may judge the merits of the idea as quickly and with as little effort as possible.

When the properly prepared synopsis passes the first reading—usually a task performed by a reader who does no writing but merely judges the merits of submitted manuscripts—it goes to the editor, who has more complex matters to take into consideration when judging the value of that idea for his particular company. If the editor likes the idea and finds it suitable for production with any star in the roster of the company he buys for, he hands the synopsis to the director who manages the productions in which that particular star appears; and if the director—and usually also the star—stamps the story with approval, the result is a check for the originator of the story.

Therefore, the synopsis has certain things to do, so to say, and must take into consideration certain mental angles. It must convince three or four different people, with widely diverging viewpoints, of the worthwhileness of the story it tells. This, then, is the purpose of the synopsis; the thing it is written for.

Besides all this, and even beyond all this, the synopsis must accomplish a definite thing:

The photoplay synopsis must give the staff scenario-writer everything he needs to enable him to make a workable scenario which will retain the freshness of the originator's viewpoint and not merge his individuality with that of the script-writer who must translate the idea intoactable scenario form.

It has been my own experience with many an idea sent in synopsis form to be made into a scenario that the originator of the idea has failed to convey to me his exact meaning, has left too much to be taken for granted, has neglected to be thorough enough in describing some situation for which novelty of idea was claimed. In such a case what can the staff-writer do but write, under the rush-it conditions usually found in the studio, with his own individual idea of the treatment to be given these incomplete points?

The Essential Nature of Clear Expression

Knowing what a synopsis is (or should be), whom it must appeal to, and what it must accomplish for the originator when placed in the hands of the staff scenario-writer, the importance of making yourself clear should stand sufficiently emphasized. Yet the point of clarity is amazingly neglected by even the supposedly know-better fiction writers who send their ideas to the studios, and it is practically ignored by the mass of screen writers.

What treatment would you give a situation described in this wise?—and this situation was characterized in a separate letter sent with the script as a “brand-new, fresh handling of a big punch”:

Ellen knows her husband goes out with others. (*Other husbands!*) She will do the same! (*Go with other husbands!*) But she cannot bring herself to go out with strangers so she calls on his (*husband's, we think*) best friend, and says to her (*stuck! Thought it was husband's best man-friend, now it is a "her"*) and asks her to loan her her husband to go out with and as they are going out he comes home and sees her with him. . . .

Merciful Heaven! Enough! At sea and no life-belt handy. Who is "he," whose wife is which, and how will what happen? Is it any wonder that such a conglomeration was eventually "passed up" as hopeless of comprehension?

If Ellen has that sort of husband, call him something, as she probably would. Refer to him by the name you hand him. Give the best friend a name, and say whose best friend she is. If that best friend is the wife's, and the best friend has a husband, let him also be named and referred to by name every time he is alluded to. Make relationships clear. Make motives clear. Make it plain that you are talking about this one or that one. Do not get excited and begin to sprinkle in the pronouns as you would drop raisins into cake dough.

Authors of original ideas often complain—and the worst complainants are usually writers of "big" fiction who send in dashed-off ideas to the companies "in between" their more "important" activities—that the "hack" writer in the studio has "butchered" the wonderful originality of the submitted idea, has made it a hopeless jumble, has crushed it into an unrecognizable shapelessness. In nine cases out of ten the fault has been originally that of the idea-provider who did not make his idea sufficiently clear, or whose manner of writing misled the staff-writer as to the real purpose the originator had in mind.

If you want your accepted material to come upon the screen with your individuality of idea retained, transferred intact, set down that idea clearly. Staff

scenario-writers are invariably graduates of the school of originality themselves; but they do not usually take a side-course in mind reading. You may know what you want: if you expect someone else to grasp the idea and put it finally on the screen, tell that one in a way that cannot be misunderstood *what you do want*. If you expect your translator into screen-action to make your work mean what you say, it is "up to you" to make the synopsis say what you mean!

Do not allow any possible confusion to creep into your statements. Be ever watchful of your words. Examine this bit of synopsis:

Tommy loves Mary devotedly. He calls on Miss Jones one night. She is crazy about him. They become engaged. Jessup leaves to get the ring, etc.

Tommy and Jessup seem to be one and the same. Is Mary also Miss Jones? Are we sure of it? Might not Tommy love Mary, and yet become engaged to a Miss Jones? There is no certainty in the synopsis.

Stick to one name for each character, and don't use Jones, Smith and Brown. We are going to call our lady-who-puts-her-hair-up Belinda. Let us never refer to her as Miss Lee (the daughter of the Judge) or as Miss Sanford (if that be her real father's name). Keep the identity of every character clear by adhering to one name for each throughout your synopsis.

If you are writing the above bit of synopsis, say:

Tommy loves Mary devotedly. He calls on her one night, and as she is "crazy about him," they become engaged. Tommy leaves, etc.

And, if he must go to get "the ring" tell what ring he gets; maybe they will be wed secretly, or at any

rate without delay; then the wedding ring is meant; it seems scarcely needful otherwise for him to go get a ring at once, but if it is the engagement ring that he is after in such a hurry, put that fact clearly before the reader.

The Value of Comprehensive Statements

Even when you have managed to acquire the habit of being absolutely clear in everything you put into a synopsis, you must go still further, and say not only what you mean, but, as well, you must say all that you mean. In a sense, this is also a matter included in the art of being clear, but it goes deeper than mere clarity of expression, for it demands full expression as well.

Examine this series of excerpts from a synopsis:

Kathie screams as the shot is fired in the dark hall. John sinks in a heap. Kathie rushes to the hall door, then turns back to John, and finds that he is beyond need of a doctor. She phones for help.

Kathie wonders what her brother was doing out of his sick-bed that day. She questions him, but he cannot understand her allusions, and she dreads to be explicit.

Kathie saves Bob, when the judge is about to sentence him for John's murder, by explaining the events of that past day, when she saw her brother in the hall; sensation! Tom is the culprit! Kathie begs to be heard, and continues, explaining that she knows that the man who . . . fired the shot was the one she saw taking her brother's clothes out of his wardrobe and replacing them, cleaned—but with powder stains in the pocket where the pistol had been thrust by the guilty man—the valet, Perkins!

We pause at the disclosure. It seems to be all right, yet we look back to the situation of the murder and find nothing about a man in the hall or about the girl's seeing such a man, much less any allusion to her mistake in thinking the shot is fired by her brother. In

the light of the final revelation we understand the second excerpt, and know why Kathie is so anxious to question her sick brother and yet not let him discover her purpose. Taken each by itself, the points are obscure, their meaning does not come out fully until the final statement. Yet each of the first two is a clear and unmistakable statement, except that there is little of the *real* meaning of the second to be gathered as one reads it. The girl said nothing of her suspicions, so the author did likewise. He might have explained, if questioned, that he meant the scenario man to go ahead and fill in the discrepancies when he prepared a scenario, that he did not want the man in the hall shown at the time, or, as a third possibility, that he wanted the girl to register, or make apparent, that she saw someone, without letting the spectators know whom she saw. But you see in how many ways that bit of synopsis might be interpreted. When you want a thing done, in order to carry out your full purpose in a story you must be more than merely clear as to who's which and why's what: say *all* that you mean. Do not forget for a second that the man who will make a scenario for you is not gifted with clairvoyance—that he can understand only what he reads, not what you thought while you were writing.

The Importance of Readableness

A thing may be said fully, clearly—and yet be a dry compendium of statistics. A synopsis must be more lively, more vital, than a dictionary, the book of full, direct, clear definitions.

The synopsis must be readable: that does not mean merely typewritten, easy to read; it means more—much more! Here is a situation in point:

Enters Sarah, ready to leave, her husband argues, she is firm, they quarrel again, she leaves, he determines to let go his hold, to have a wild carouse, while Sarah goes home, and her mother won't let her stay there, and she has no place to go, and her husband is having a wild night and she gets home and finds him and . . . and . . . and . . .

And! . . . back that synopsis traipses to its author. It is flat and unreadable. Even if it should possess extremely novel qualities they would be lost in a maze of "ands."

Other forms of unreadableness exist: sometimes a synopsis is all choppy sentences, no variation in length of sentence being considered necessary by careless authors; sometimes involved sentences destroy the reader's interest; perhaps the author is habitually "dry" in his statements, and does not seem able to moisten them with a little lubricative style-freshness.

Try to get your typewriter to talk in lively, pictorial statements of fact. Make your synopses smoothly readable. Make your facts seem to be endowed with a vitality of their own, and your manuscripts will be more likely to pass the reader and get into the hands of both editor and director.

The studio reader is maligned, in a good many instances, as a man who maintains a "show me!" attitude. If this is sometimes the case, if the reader is antagonistic toward the "average" synopsis, the reason is found in the "average" synopsis itself. If you had to sit a good many hours a day, every day, every week,

months and years on end, going over dry-as-dust typewriting, with no redeeming novelty of plot in it, you would come pretty close to pessimism regarding the probable invasion of your sanctum by anything "different." It is your mission in life, if you expect to sell continuously, to break down this barrier of possible pessimism. In actuality, most readers are ready enough—eager, in fact—to find some new reading material that gives "John loves Mary, Bill hates John" a chance for a vacation. The reader is paid to read synopses; it is his duty to the company to give every submitted synopsis "a show." This he does. If he sees the "old dope" written in the old, uninteresting manner and style, he is apt to make the "show" he gives it a pretty short entertainment. But let him get hold of something readable, and his craving for change will keep him reading until he is convinced, beyond chance for doubt, that the story so managed is not suitable for his company's stars or policies.

Let him find that story suitable, and he will cheerfully read it again, make his little comments, and "shoot it in" to the editor, who, in his turn, will be enchanted to discover a writer with sufficient interest in his brain-child to give it a look-at-able garmenture. The editor reads for a different angle of production from that maintained in the reader's consideration of manuscript. The reader judges suitability for policy, weeds out the worst and most hopeless stuff and gets it back into the mails as rapidly as possible. When he passes a story on to the editor, that is a sign of merit in the story; perhaps it fits a star in the pay of that com-

pany, possibly it has some fresh twist of plot that makes it worth more consideration. Anyway, when it gets to the editor, he looks at it for actable possibilities, considers the (approximate) cost of production, fitness of material for not only stars but for other players as well, and, eventually, if he finds the material satisfying from these angles as well as from the story-quality viewpoint, he will pass it on to director, or director and star together. The director looks for action, for scenic beauty of environment or story, background, for novelty of idea-presentation. The star looks for his or her own opportunities to display ability in a new rôle. Each and all of these good folk would rather be shot than to have to "wade through" a bunch of dry facts. You must aim to catch their interest and hold it. The smoothly-written, nicely-worded, neatly-typed manuscript with a real story to tell seldom fails to "make good." The only reasons for a rejection in such a case are the changes of production-policy that come over night in big picture-making concerns, and the total unsuitability of the material, however good, to any star's ability. Policy-changes come through an overabundance of a certain type of productions; through the loss or acquisition, or replacing, of a star; through the reports from exhibitors that such-and-such a style of story is not wanted by the majority of spectators. These things are beyond the control of the best writer living, but there are a million other reasons for the rejection of stories that are not readable, and the million reasons are all summed up in that cold, unsympathetic,

injure-your-feelings little slip that comes along instead of a letter when your work is not up to standard.

The quality of readableness presupposes an entertaining style sufficiently powerful to gain, and hold, attention. Attention begets interest. If you can write in a breezy style, not too flowing, not too long-winded, telling all there is to tell about your plot, and if you have a good plot to tell about in this way, interest is bound to result, and the interest is quite apt to extend beyond that story and attach itself to you in the form of a request from the editor for more of your work. So strive to make your stories readable, plan your plots for strength, and you will be safe in approaching the pessimistic reader, the editor, the director, the star, and the man who signs the checks.

The Importance and Limitation of Detail

To answer the inept question of "how much action" that really means "how much detail" is somewhat difficult, for the reason that every story needs a different method of treatment, requires individual management by its author.

In general, the best rule that can be given is this:

Say clearly and fully everything that is important to the full, complete development of your plot.

Detail can be too far indulged in, and lack of it may often spoil the chances of a story otherwise apt to be salable.

You must be thoroughly conversant with the difference between detail of action and explicitness of description. First of all, then, let us look at an example of detailed action:

Sally and Joe are in love. As she stands by the garden wall he comes to her, takes her hands, she does not resist, and he, won to bravery by her acceptance of the act, asks her the vital question affecting his future.

There is nothing fresh or novel in that situation, nothing out of the ordinary run of lovers' meetings that result in a proposal. The detail is too complete, too full. All the editor needs to know of such an ordinary, widely understood situation is that the two lovers plight their troth by the old garden wall, giving situation, as well as setting it in a picturesque location, but not a novel one.

Do not go into lavish detail in describing ordinary, everyday, easily-pictured situations. But if you have a fresh manner of presenting such a situation, some novel touch in action or in setting (background), it is wise to tell all there is to tell about it. For instance, do not say:

Peter meets Phyllis in a novel locality, and proposes in a way quite different from the usual cut-and-dried fashion of lovers.

That means nothing at all to the editor, and far less than nothing at all to the scenario-writer, who must take what you give and make a scenario from it. Really, however, it does mean something!—it means that you are not competent to think of an original location or a unique method of making love.

Often it is in the novelty of some little opening incident of a story that you find your chance to catch

editorial attention, to predispose the possible picture-player in favor of your story-idea. When you can do so, that is the time for detail of descriptive explicitness. Do not, even then, go into long-winded descriptions of every action, but set forth the things wherein the freshness lies. For instance, it is out of the usual run of love-situations to have hero and heroine on a garden seat beside a little lake wherein swans are seen, to have the heroine winding a ball of yarn, see that the hero intends to propose, use the feminine prerogative of "putting off" the inevitable and drape the yarn over his out-held hands while she winds; and he could be visualized as clever enough to get around the blockaded intention. In such a case you are justified in going into reasonable detail, as you might in such a case, something like this:

Bob loves Betty. She knows it, too, and when even the swans in the lake by which their bench stands fail to divert him from a proposal, she suddenly takes a hank of yarn from her knitting bag and makes him "hold his hands" while she winds it from them into a ball: but Bob can still talk, and he urges her to marry him. . . .

That could be revised, too, into a form that would give it more interest, somewhat thus:

Swans in a lake won't stop Bob from asking Betty to be his—"Your swan?" asks she, and when he tries to take her hands, a hank of yarn is deftly draped over his wrists, while mischievous Betty winds wool. But Bob can talk, and he eventually makes Betty's hands drop into her lap, where the hank of yarn binds them as he loops it over them and compels attention.

That is not too much detail to allow where you have novelty of incident to display.

With any important situation in your story you must be explicit, getting the idea clearly before the mental vision of the reader. To draw an incomplete picture

of the plot is worse than leaving it untitled. A staff-writer can "make up" and supply the lack of title, but how is he going to invent what you do not describe? Only by throwing aside your synopsis and using his own brain: then you will wail vigorously and plaintively because he has not carried out your idea.

All of your synopsis must be action! Ordinary situations, unimportant to your story's vital essence of freshness, can be subdued, sketched with broad, brief strokes. But whenever you have any point that is important, and any incident or situation that must be clearly stamped as out of the ordinary, be sure that you describe it with sufficient detail to permit the reader to see as much novelty in it as you think it holds.

If you have been in the habit of writing the scenario, or action-continuity, in scenes, for your stories, be watchful that you do not carry into your synopsis-preparation a too full depicting of minor acting-directions. The knowledge of scenario technique is a great help in aiding you to "see" what will make good scenes; but you must not write "scenes" in your synopsis: just write a clear, comprehensive, understandable, readable, reasonably detailed statement of your plot, and the result will be a good synopsis. If plot and title are as good as the synopsis, the whole thing will add to your prestige and credit—especially at the corner grocery.

CHAPTER XV

HOW TO SHAKE HANDS

The brain-child is a curiosity: it has only one parent. That parent is itself a monstrosity, possessing a deep love for, and faith in, its offspring, yet never happy until that "young un" has left home for good, grumbling and growling if it returns from a visit to an editor, and elated if the beloved undesirable can be surrendered into slavery in exchange for cold dollars!

You are no exception to this rule of authorial conduct, nor am I. We bring up our respective idea-babies with loving tenderness, and then drive them out into a cold, unfeeling world. But we differ from the greater part of the photoplay-writer group in one respect: we are consistent enough to give our brain-babies every chance in the world to make a good impression when they do sally forth from beneath our cranial roofs.

But to be consistent in this respect we must do more than merely "doll up" our infants in attractive apparel—we must teach them the gentle art of making the first hand-clasp of introduction, and of making it the starting point of their self-advertising search for a new home.

Did you ever stop to consider the psychological impression that is made upon you by the various manners of men and women who have shaken hands with you?

Bored, listless Miss Laisey proffers a limp hand; you take it and feel, in the unresponsive digits, a total lack of interest in you and even in herself. You mentally decide that you won't waste much time cultivating her acquaintance. Flighty, inconsequential Miss Hastie dances over and touches your fingers with her own, simpers a "glad-to-see—" and is off again like a butterfly seeking a more attractive flower. Do you follow her? Not if you are a steady-going, sensible person. Rich, idle, cigarette-smoking young Mr. Dulle proffers you a flabby hand; if any shaking is done it is all on your muscular effort. You wouldn't care a continental if you never come within a thousand miles of Mr. Dulle again.

The salesman for Texas oil-stock breezes into your office on the heels of the girl who brings in his card. Before you have more than glanced at his name he has your hand in his own—just how, you are not fully aware. His grip is warm and strong, breeding confidence and liking. He has not yet finished that instantaneous pressure of the hand before he is telling you, "The man next door to you made a thousand in oil this morning!" Do you have a chance to catch your breath? Not in the presence of Mr. Sellemoil! He convinces you that there is lots of time to take breath—later on; but now you have just a second in which to sign your name on the dotted line and write a check and get your stock or else lose the big dividend that the company is about to declare. Facts—or at least assertions—pour from his lips in a stream; you feel yourself swept along on the current that their falling

torrent produces and when he has safely "landed you" (in several senses of the words) after the little voyage upon to-you-unknown waters, and you are stilled by the prospect of oil that is ever visible on the surface, you cannot do anything less than admire the ability displayed by your pilot, even if you still feel unwilling, or unable, to take his proffered shares. Did Mr. Sell-emoil come in with the hand-grip of Mr. Dulle, his stay in your office would be brief, indeed.

The Miss Laiseys, the Miss Hasties, the Mr. Dulles, send their mental offspring into many studios. These brain-children "take after" their parents; in fact, all three sorts "take after" the parents as quickly as the reader can put them into their return overcoats. And once in a blue moon the bright salesman sends in some of his, and they captivate the editor, the director, and the check.

Thus does Miss Laisey's child shake hands :

Belin da isa girl whos fat her isin jail, So she do not knowthis
but think she is daughter of judg eLee which is amans he is
livin gwith. . . .

and so on, spelling hopeless, spacing irregular, words run together or unsuitably divided into sections, style *nil*, method of expression showing either gross ignorance or net carelessness. The writer of such work is lazy. Ignorance does not excuse such an one, for ignorance can be surmounted; laziness is the obstacle, not ignorance. In this land of free education no explanation except sheer laziness will serve to account for such a style on the part of an author—forgive me, Heaven, for that libel on the fair craft!

Thus does Miss Hastie teach her child to grasp the editorial hand:

Belinda's in love with a chap and he loves her sister only she isn't her sister but is the daughter of the father that Belinda thinks is hers only he isn't for her father is in jail and so Belinda is kept young by him so she won't know and . . .

Well, that is a running start, at any rate, but the very swiftness has led to involved confusion: the ideas came faster than the fingers could deliver their typed translation, or else the writer was so anxious to get the story into the mail that she could not bother with punctuation or with clarity. The editor also will be anxious to get that script into the mail, only his eagerness will be from a different cause.

Mr. Dulle has this manner in handshaking to send along with his offspring:

Belinda is a girl. She is somewhere around seventeen years of age, and she is very fond of cats, dogs and her sister and her father, the Judge, named Lee, who is the one she lives with, and she thinks he is her father.

Belinda likes cats, but especially dogs, and she has a dog. . .

We thought, even with the dullness of the start, that something was going to come of that mention of a man who is considered to be a father. But nay! That would be brightening up the thing too much, so Mr. Dulle's child rambles off on a new trail, and not a very entertaining one, since it has nothing to do with the previous facts and will not, you may be sure, lead to anything that is to come later.

How doth the busy salesman's representative greet the editor? Probably in this wise:

Belinda's father is serving a life-sentence in prison for murder. She has been kept in ignorance of this fact.

Bang! A grab-you fact right in the first sentence. That girl with a father in prison is worth "holding hands with" long enough to find out why she is kept in ignorance of the blot on her life. Such a "punch-fact" as that first one is bound to hold the attention of a reader long enough to enable the next fact to be developed.

This is not by way of saying that your child must put up a threatening left fist as a proof that its right hand is worth shaking. Nevertheless, to stretch the figure a bit, that first hand-grip must get a firm hold on the editorial attention.

The Importance of the First Paragraph

Securing interest with your opening paragraph is half the battle. While the synopsis must run along the lines of smooth, logical story-development, in reasonable orderliness of evolution through cause, complication, situation, climax, denouement, the first paragraph may break this rule if there is no other way open by which to secure attention. Sometimes a story must begin with comparatively unimportant situations, but the synopsis for that sort of story must have some signs of life injected into its premier paragraph or the later "punches" of the idea will never be read. Such a story is our "Belinda" plot. The big things do not transpire until a good deal of important characterization and plot-cause have been developed. So we must plan to prevent our synopsis-start from advertising a probable tameness that is misleading, in view of later

story-events. The thing that will most seriously affect Belinda later on is the escape of her father from prison. If we "plant" the father-in-prison idea we induce in the reader's mind a primary suspense as to what the fact of the imprisonment may mean to the heroine. After that sort of interest is aroused, we can build in our less gripping facts, and so long as we do not drop into dull preachment in setting them forth the interest will be maintained until further developments include the father's escape. With the imprisonment as a starting fact, every minor development will take on a new importance.

Do not take this as an arbitrary method of synopsis-opening. By the nature of its contents every story must govern the manner to be employed in securing an interest-compelling first paragraph for your synopsis of that story. In general, it may be safely said, the opening paragraph needs to include some hint of a later plot-development to carry interest over the apt-to-be monotonous introductory material.

Do not hunt up a dime novel to be used as a guide in beginning your synopses. The dime novel is granted to be a wonderful "attention-grabber," for "Dead-eye Dick's trusty rifle" barks with the first written words, and you keep on reading to discover whether it was an Indian or a chicken-hawk that "bit the dust." The style in which these ruddy tales are cast is too lurid, too melodramatic, for the synopsis. However, if the dime-novel *method* is unsuitable, at least the dime-novel quality of securing attention is worth considering: for attention you must secure in the very begin-

ning, if you expect your work to get past the first reader's glance at the first page. Even though your story-idea be a character-development, tame until the eighth or ninth page of its synopsisization, you must hunt out some "punch fact" to vitalize the opening paragraph.

Perhaps the "punch" may be secured by the mere statement of the principal trait of the character you intend to develop. For instance:

Elda has been brought up among the worst criminals in the slums of the huge city. Yet the parents she never knew endowed her with their own high moral sense, now dormant, awaiting the awakening touch of some better environment, some noble influence.

There is a suggested possibility, which amounts to a probability, of later complication and consequent struggle. The reader is more than likely to be somewhat eager to know what form the conflict of moral endowment with physical environment is going to take.

In such a case care must be taken not to let your statement of facts be beflowered with fancy phrases. The example just given has the inclination to be a little high-flown, but it is made so purposely, for that paragraph has characterization, and, above that, a creating of "atmosphere," for its mission. Some stories depend as much upon their atmosphere as upon the development of character through mental conflict. "Such stories do not possess action enough for the screen!" you may think. Look at the pictures made by Mr. D. W. Griffith, the peer of the greatest directors in handling stories of feeling, sympathy, heart-appeal, atmosphere. If you will analyze the screened stories

that have benefited by the supervision of this master of pictorial craftsmanship, you will find them abounding in little touches of atmosphere, touches that have made these pictures live long past the allotted time of the ordinary plot-crowded thriller. The story of character and atmosphere, given a wide human appeal, is a wonderful, a powerful, picture-idea. When you have such an idea, make noticeable in your first synopsis-paragraph the qualities in which it is supreme.

Danger Signals

Look out for these things: Do not begin a synopsis with atmosphere alone. Atmosphere is, of itself, uninteresting. It is the envioning of powerful idea with suitable atmosphere that gives the latter quality reason for existence. Do not, then, start a synopsis in this way:

Dark was the night, and the huge clouds rolled across the moon's face intermittently, throwing grotesque shadows over the tossing billows that leaped against the cliffs of that forsaken shore, only to fall, gather force and leap again, as though to snatch into their arms the solitary figure. . . .

That is "nice" description, and that scene would no doubt be a very effective background for some powerfully human drama-situation, granting the possibility of achieving it photographically (strong light is needed for camera work, remember), but you are not writing synopses for scenic or educational subjects; you are writing story-idea in synopsis form, and so you must have story, or at least a strong hint of a story to come, even if you begin your synopsis with atmosphere-

creating words; these must also include some hint of a powerful story underlying, or surrounded by, the atmosphere you create.

Do not begin with a slam-bang start if in the later paragraphs of your synopsis you are not going to live up to that sort of opening. Do not, in anything except the most lurid-serial writing, hunt for the "punch" that is a blow! Few editors want to go ahead after this sort of opening:

Anna grips the gun tightly as she cries, "Marry you! I'll die first!"

She dislikes the idea of marrying James because he is namby-pamby, and while he has money, he has no brains.

Fire, blood-and-thunder, arson, are suggested by the first two lines; and then the tamest sort of situation is shown to be the actual fact. If you start with a real "bang" it must be because your story is cast in the mold of melodrama of the furious sort. Do not try to smash the editor between the eyes with a crushing blow in your first sentence and expect him to part with a huge check on the strength of an introduction like that, before he recovers and realizes that the story that follows is as tame as the Filipino Head Hunters they exhibit in the dime museums—head hunters from the darkey contingent of a Missouri hamlet.

Gain interest honestly. Do not cheat by making a false start. The penalty will be an editorial refusal to bother with any more of your shouts of "Wolf! Wolf!"

Do not attempt to tell your whole story in the first paragraph. Let that series of sentences be a promise of future good things, rather than a display of all your goods.

Try to avoid the trite statements so generally used in beginning the synopsis: such statements as, "Mary and Jack are lovers," "Peter loves Susan but her father objects," "Tom comes from college," "Lily is called from boarding school by the death of her father"—or mother, or aunt, or sister, or some other relative. In fact, avoid all the ordinary, everyday ideas that your story contains, and seek out some "different" thing to say when you ask your brain-child to shake hands with the editor.

Keep your starting-off paragraph reasonably short, or it may run to a full page before you can stop it, and too-long paragraphs have the psychological effect of "looking dull." The short paragraph seems to possess an aspect of briskness, of businesslike clearness. But do not err on the side of too much condensation. Say what you have to say as clearly and interestingly as you possibly can, choose your opening with the length of paragraph in mind, and you will be reasonably safe from this danger of paragraph-prolixity. If you do not have the too-much-to-say-briefly fault, there is no likelihood of your running over the bounds.

Introductions

While your first paragraph is gaining attention for your brain-child, let the handshake be either accompanied or followed by a logical introduction of the developing points of the story, and, more important still, let each character in your plot-complement of people be presented clearly—individualized, as it were

—so that the reader may know all there is to know about the characters and their relationships, one to another, each to the rest, as he assimilates the unfolding plot. If you speak of Belinda while putting forward your “punch” opening, present her characteristics immediately afterward, and at the same time so word your sentences that they may not be cold statements like:

Belinda . . . sweet, clever, seventeen.

That sort of description belongs in your cast of characters, if you include such a cast.

Having spoken of Belinda as a girl who does not know that her real father is serving a life-sentence in prison for murder, go ahead and tell what sort of girl she is, and here you may employ such a device as the characterizing incident which we developed while building our plot. See that you make the editor understand what kind of girl Belinda is, as well as tell him what she is doing, and then bring the Judge-father along, if you can build your story along with his presentation. Let his advent in the story come as smoothly and logically as if he were walking “on” in a stage production, where everyone either is spoken of or speaks for himself or herself. If the sheriff comes along with the Judge, to show that they are friends, let your story continue, develop, build; and have the sheriff so clearly put before the editorial eye and mind that that personage will not need to stop in the middle of page sixteen and turn impatiently back to the start of the story, or refer to the cast of characters, to find out who and what and why the sheriff is.

If the person who is introduced is important, let your first presentation give interesting—but not unnecessary—details about that one; if a minor character is brought into play, let the reason for the introduction be seen, though not so much space is to be devoted to unimportant characters as you allow for the thorough first-presentation of the principals.

Except in the case of some character who is so dominant in trait that he or she deserves a place in the spotlight, do not let your introduction of characters definitely halt your story. Try to arrange your synopsis-description of the plot so that the characters will seem to come into the action of the story naturally, and at the same time will almost describe themselves.

When Belinda has been presented, with her dog, and she looks up, it is time to progress the action by presenting the Judge and the sheriff. This is one way in which you can do it:

Belinda sees kindly, lovable old Judge Lee coming, and rushes to greet the man she has always considered to be her father, as well as to smile at the whimsical display of a new "badge" by the Judge's long-time friend, now Sheriff Wingate.

Thus the action is going forward, Belinda is not forgotten, and, in verity, it seems to be Belinda who is taking us to meet the Judge and the Sheriff, not the author of the synopsis.

Having presented the Judge, established his relationship with Belinda, her own with him, his friendship for the Sheriff, Belinda's liking for that "whimsical" official (her smile at him shows her liking, and hints at his being a comedy-character as well as does the badge),

you proceed to develop the story, and whenever a new character comes along, you make that character seem a part of the story, and while you seem to be going right ahead with your plot, you really incorporate your characteristics and relationships in a quietly unobtrusive fashion that helps a great deal toward the attainment of that necessary ingredient of your synopsis—the smooth, readable style of writing.

To sum up: Make the handshake a good, firm grip that wins confidence. At the same time, start your “selling talk,” which is, really, your description of the plot. Keep the plot always moving, even if slowly, through characterization-incident. And as you present new faces make them photographically clear in the reader’s mind, making these new acquaintances seem a part of the progression of the plot while you actually introduce them.

If you are careful to manage this inculcation of ideas of deportment in your brain-child, that offspring will have a fine chance of being editorially invited to “stay to dinner and meet the director and the star.”

CHAPTER XVI

AS THE PLOT THICKENS

Just as soon as you have gotten a secure hold on attention and interest with a punchful first paragraph, and bridged the possible break in idea that may arise from using some late-in-the-story point for that punch, get right down to a statement of what your plot begins with. That is to say, "let the plot thicken." But however you begin to thicken it, do not let that plot become impenetrably dense. Keep it clear, no matter how complicated it becomes.

To do this requires a little weighing of words, a considerable classifying of plot-attributes, and an enormous amount of being-careful-beforehand to avoid being sorry afterward.

While the plot must begin to move right off the reel, so to speak, you must not try to make it move too rapidly, or you are going to lose clearness of comprehension on the part of the reader. The moving forward of plot-events can, and should, be calculated to maintain interest and prevent confusion. At the beginning of a synopsis it is wise to have the plot move in a somewhat leisurely development—not lagging, by any means, but progressing always, even if at a pace slow enough to enable you to keep it absolutely clear. If you try to say too much about your plot on the first few pages, you are going to run upon the snag of con-

fused statements, dulled points, or unemphasized matters of importance.

Planning the Leisurely Start That Will Not Be Draggy

The idea of beginning without hurry may seem inharmonious with the previous likening of a good synopsis to the methods of a capable oil-stock salesman, yet the similarity can be maintained, even here: The oil-stock salesman delivers some punch-fact at you along with his handshake; he does not stop talking at that point, but neither does he let you wonder whether he is trying to sell you egg-beaters or oil-pumps; he puts his proposition into lucid words that hold your attention and make you acquainted with important facts while they do not drown you with detail, even if the flow of speech is torrential—they bear you along on their surface, just as he intends that they shall.

The punch-paragraph of the synopsis gets attention, but if the pace were to be excessively swift in the following paragraphs, too much would be condensed into too limited a space for ready assimilation by a reader.

Therefore it is better to set the tempo of your first page or two to a slow plot-movement, without allowing it to become draggy or saggy. A snail does not progress with a hare's swiftness, yet the snail surely does keep right on advancing. Perhaps the snail's pace is not so good at the conclusion of a race, but then, a synopsis is not a race—it is a form of plot-statement.

A nice discrimination must be exercised in choice of tempo. If the plot is a melodrama, the slow opening

must be laid aside in favor of a slam-right-into-it pace. In writing "slapstick" comedy the "stunts" must be noticeable in the very introductory matter, if that is possible with the particular material you have to set forth. In polite comedy, though, and in the higher, more serious forms of drama, even of comedy and melodrama combined, the leisurely, thorough grounding in plot-essentials is to be preferred to the hasty, rush-to-it way of putting everything into the first few paragraphs, then going back and expanding later in the synopsis. This manner of writing is not to be commended; the condensation of plot into a bare skeleton, to be expanded later, makes the ribs of the plot stick out too prominently, and there is not so radical a difference between ribs, nowadays, as there is between fashions of covering them. It is far better to tell the story in its expanded synopsis-form right from the start, and leave the condensed-plot preface out. If your "punch" is in the first paragraph, the reader will follow it up by reading further. So long as you do not maintain the snail's pace beyond the reasonable point of clear foundationing, there will be no loss of attention.

What the Leisurely Beginning Should Achieve

The leisurely beginning for your synopsis should not be a wordy dissertation on the merits of your plot, or a fictive introduction of dialogue and characterization; those things, carried beyond sensible limits, serve only to destroy interest in the principal thing you are putting forth for sale—the action of your plot.

You must always keep in the forefront of your mind the realization that you are preparing, in your synopsis, a story that must be put into a continuity of scenes, or scenario form, from which it will be produced in action, photographed for ultimate display in a consecutive film-version for spectators who know nothing about the story. If you do not make everything quite clear to the editor, the scenario constructor, the director who produces the eventual acted scene-continuity, how can you expect these entirely human—and therefore not infallible—beings to preserve the individuality and freshness of your ideas? Another thing is to be borne in mind: You are writing in action, or at least describing a plot that lends itself to the acting-manner of story-telling development. You must try to devise movement-pictures that will be readily understandable without the necessity for a superabundant employment of explanatory matter. Good in its place, both explanatory sub-titles and quoted spoken matter become a bore when the on-lookers discover that the action of the picture is merely an illustrating of the same explained facts.

These things being arbitrarily true, and therefore beyond dispute, you must plan your synopsis to show that your grasp on the essential quality of action is firm. The leisurely beginning for a synopsis is one calculated to foster a thorough plan for and a logical motivation of the story-idea, so that when the rush of situations culminating in the climax is being written you do not have to slacken the tension of the situations in order to explain, or to make the editor or reader

turn back to some previous page to discover if Gladys is climbing out of the window in her boudoir robe because her father objects to her marriage to a man with blue eyes, or if she is doing this ladder-act to spite that prudish aunt who says that ladies must always be seen on the street in sober and coversome garments.

Granting the quality of your plot to be good, the editor will prefer to read several pages of comparatively slow-advancing plot-detail at the start if by so reading he can fully grasp the big "punches" when they leap into type.

Your synopsis-beginning, exclusive of that "punchful" opening paragraph, is that portion of the story-depiction in which you thoroughly explain all character-relations, all vital characteristics and traits, all necessity for "planting" motives or things—all of every *essential* that can be treated at this point in the story. In a word, the opening must secure a clear comprehension on the reader's part of all basic facts, must achieve an increasing interest in the future plot-developments, and must produce an eagerness to discover the outcome of all the fundamental points.

The Gradual Increase of Tempo in Synopsis Writing

Just as quickly as you possibly can, commensurate with your desire to make every basic fact clear, you must discard your snail as a speed-regulator and choose some swifter pacemaker.

As you get things thoroughly clarified in the start, so must you continue to maintain clarity, but with a

gradual increase of tension in your story-development as complications come along, situations are incorporated and surprises are sprung, up to the eventual climax, where everything must be understood and readily accepted, so that the reader's mind may be free of all distracting considerations and can grasp the full value and power of your biggest "punch."

Through the body of the synopsis the pace at which the plot develops must constantly seem to accelerate. Put your snail into motion and let him proceed to the railway station where he will be placed on an express train that will start up a short acclivity, only to gather momentum as it races down the other slope, till its very highest speed is reached just previous to that swift putting on of brakes which will bring it to a quick, gentle, satisfying stop where you want to alight.

If it takes three pages of double-spaced typewritten matter to make your introductory facts so clear that they cannot be misconstrued by reader, editor, script-wright and director, go ahead and use those three pages. If it takes ten sheets of paper so covered with double-spaced typing to get you into a big situation, do not despair. If the later pages increase the story tempo, heighten the tension, accelerate the movement of the plot, with an ever-growing swiftness, your slow start—not your draggy start!—will have been worth while.

How is this increasing plot-speed to be accomplished? That is a question that depends for its answer upon your own writing-ability. You must practice writing action-description at every opportunity. You must be a keen and a merciless self-

critical analyst. You must never feel that it is a waste of effort to tear up a few pages and rewrite their contents if by so doing you can secure a smoother-reading manuscript. You must lay out your plot-material in some sort of skeletonized form, so that each fact of the plot-progression is separate from all others, so that each stands out baldly before you, so that each can be weighed in your mind for its plot-value and the amount of typewriting (number of sentences) it will take to put that single fact clearly on paper. You must, until you can "do the stunt in your mind," employ some such mechanical plot-visualization as will be secured by a separation of the various plot-factors into their distinctive groups. Thus you will be able to gauge the importance of each factor and the value of it in relation to the other factors in its group. With the value of the separate and of the grouped factors clearly in mind, the matter of arranging them in an orderly fashion with the tempo of the writing-progression as a governing power should not be difficult for you.

If it is necessary for you to employ a thoroughly mechanical brain-assistant, the following plan may be valuable: Put down on slips of paper, or cards, the various single factors of your plot; put only one on a slip or card, and place it at the top of the slip or card. Then arrange these factors in related groups. Have the facts that begin your plot in the first group, the second containing the developing facts, the third group bringing up complications and further plot-developing

factors, and so on to the climax-group and the final untwisting of the threads on your last cards.

Without altering the plot itself, consider which fact can best be used as a "punch-opening" for your first synopsis-paragraph. Before you decide finally, weigh all the other factors, and make sure that you have the right one, having in mind the smooth unfolding of your plot in a consecutive, though not necessarily chronological, order of events.

On the "punch-card," write your first synopsis paragraph, or at least sketch out its contents. Then gather the first group of basic facts and sketch on their cards the sentences that will best—most concisely and with the greatest clarity—make them understandable as a part of an eventual synopsis. Proceed thus, even though it seems a tedious process, until you have your skeletonized facts supplied with developing sentences or paragraphs as the cases may require. Then arrange them in a logical order of progression, and revise their synopsis-producing contents until you have a smooth, readable continuity of ideas. Go over the sentences carefully; see that the early cards are full enough in their explanation; cut down the explanation in the later ones to the essence of swiftly moving description. Then—criticize, analyze, for the sake of being sure that you have not neglected any important matter, and go ahead with the typing of your synopsis from these guide-cards.

This is not a rapid method of synopsis preparation, but is undoubtedly a wonderful practice in plot-evolu-

tion and synopsis-expansion from plot-factors to completed and acceptable synopsis form.

It would not be a bad idea to employ the card-system when you work out your plot, instead of merely writing it down in a rough skeleton or outline form. You will be amazed to see how much you can shift the plot-factors around, how many groupings they will provide, and how much can be discarded, as well as how much can be added, to this loose and elastic form of plot-visualizing.

Too much trouble, you think? Oh, no! Remember that you are not preparing to try for a ten-dollar check. You must expect to do hard work if you intend to keep the bank cashier's respect for your deposits.

With the cards before you it is no difficult thing to assure yourself that your plot is in its most consistent form; it is no impossible task to arrange the complete plot in its best form for a synopsis-exposition; and, best of all, you can discard some inspired inanities that are likely to creep into your first few synopses from the anxiety you will feel for a good style. One writer sent a synopsis to a studio—his first synopsis to its first destination. He said:

“. . . with a last farewell look around the room, he turned on the gas.

“The vapor flung itself in sinuous coils about him; then you cut to his wife taking a bath, then back to him dead.”

Imagine! “Sinuous coils” certainly are not photographically possible in the case of vapor. And the lady! The writer knew there must be a “flash” to some other action, for he had seen the pictures on the

screen, but he failed to consider the propriety of the "flash" he used, just as much as he failed to understand that a synopsis is not a full scenario. Besides showing you how senseless some hasty synopsis-preparation can make the writer look in editorial offices, this brings us to the natural discussion of the amount of scenario technique that is required of an author who submits his work to be put into scenario form by some studio writer.

*The Influence of Scenario Technique Upon the
Synopsis*

It has been suggested, previously, that an understanding of the technique of scenario construction is a valuable asset to the writer of the synopsis for a motion picture. The statement is now repeated, and emphatically stressed. The knowledge of the proper method of visualizing action in its scenario form, its continuity of developing scenes, will give you a great deal of help in preparing your picture-plots in the synopsis form.

The medium of expression in the scenario and in the synopsis is the same—story-telling by action. You, as well as the scenario writer, must feel, think and write action.

The scenario develops a story in action, by employing a succession of logically related, consecutively progressive scenes, combined with a proper amount of explanatory material. These scenes must start with a moderate action-tempo, gradually accelerated to the

culminating point of high tension. So, also, your synopsis must begin with the same thorough impressionizing of facts upon the ultimate spectator and then logically develop with gradually increasing speed and tension to a culmination as swift and as satisfying as is possible with the idea embodied.

But the understanding of scenario technique, valuable as it is in its aid to your proper visualizing of developing plot in action, can be carried to a point in synopsis-practice where it will be a detriment rather than a help.

You will do well to familiarize yourself with scenario technique, with the art of expressing plot in logical scene-sequence of smooth, understandable action, but you must apply the resultant information with a certain amount of common sense when you prepare your synopsis.

The story must, in each form of development, run along the lines of smooth, logical development. But the synopsis must not be a series of "scenes," in the photoplay meaning of that word: a scene being so much of the action of a photoplay as can be taken in one place at one period of the story-development *without stopping the camera*. In the scenario this "scene" is described in terms of character-action. In the synopsis it would be explained in terms of plot-development.

You must not, if you understand scenario technique, allow that knowledge to turn your synopsis into a detailed scenario in its adherence to action-explicitness

or strict scene-development continuity. Rather, you must turn the knowledge to account by making it help you to see action in a possible sequence of scenes, so that you will not write into your synopsis any material that is impossible from the camera standpoint, as the "sinuous coils of vapor." Also, you must use your knowledge to help you in achieving the best, most logically coherent, plot-development; but you dare not be influenced by scenario technique in describing situations, for in a scenario situations are often developed by contrasting "runs of action;" that is, a girl is seen in her boudoir, a man is shown riding a horse at break-neck speed, another man is breaking in the boudoir door, the wife is seen almost fainting, the door is broken in, a flash is given of the horseman leaping from his steed, there comes a scene where the wife struggles in the villain's grip, the horseless man is now fighting with the villain's accomplice downstairs, the woman is shown struggling, the two men are shown fighting, and so the scenes flash to and fro to keep all the building-threads of action in mind until they converge and finally blend in a single scene.

In your synopsis you must not use this method of conveying *parallel* plot-threads. You would in such a case simply say that while Freda is waiting for her husband, who is riding home on his swift horse, Jordan comes to the boudoir door, and, not gaining admittance, smashes in the panels. Freda struggles in his grasp, and is finally rescued by her husband's timely arrival.

Do not be circumstantial in describing "scenes" in your synopsis. Give a coherent description of one

event, then pick up the parallel event and bring it up to the situation wherein the two combine. Make the two parallels clear and let the scenario writer build in the "cuts" and "scenes."

Not always is it wise to have your synopsis built in the same continuity of events that will appear on the screen. The scenarioist strives to achieve this perfection of continuity in his script, but what you want to do is to tell the editor, the scenarioist and the director all you know about your *plot*. The plot may—nay, must!—have suspense and the other elements we have discussed; but it must clearly state your story-idea, and so it may often begin with a detailing of some situation that will not develop in the final picture until the story is half told. Again, your punch-paragraph may allude to a murder that will not be shown, even hinted at, in the scenario until the characters are all moving along their allotted lines, and most of the introductory matter is disposed of. Still again, the synopsis might begin with an allusion to the past, matter in point of time being logically the story's start; the scenario might reserve that allusion to the past for a "fade-back" way of divulging the points. Or, you might use the "fade-back" method and some director would decide to tell the story "straight."

Often, though, you can decide about the proper way to plan your parallel situations, your runs of action, your method of including information about the past, through an understanding of scenario ways and technique, without allowing yourself to fall into the error of making your work that hybrid, unsalable, half-

baked incongruity, the scenario that is not such any more than it is a synopsis. A synopsis may run along the lines of development that would be followed by a scenario, but neither distinct form must be merged with the other, or the result will be worse than futile.

How Many Words

Some writers wonder what limit is set upon their garrulity in describing plots in synopsis form. The limit of words is quite an elastic one. The best rules to follow are:

Do not use ten words where two will suffice.

Do not use two words if ten are required for absolute clarity.

Write constantly in the synopsis form—that is, write description of action and plot at every possible chance. Practice, study your use of words, seek to increase your vocabulary of movement-words, try to discover how to say a thing that will mentally take on the typing form of action.

Do not say that “Marguerite has all the sensations of joy, anticipation, eagerness, delight, as she slips on her coat, dons her hat, and sets out for her shopping trip, which is a thing she never grows weary of, even though she indulges in a shopping trip every day.”

Say, “Marguerite goes shopping with her usual delight in the habitual trip downtown.”

Do not write, "Felicia hates Jack's tie" when you mean, by "tie," the marriage relation that binds him to Felicia's rival-woman.

Be clear. Be as concise as clarity permits, with due regard for the smoothness and readability of clarity. Be leisurely in making basic things clearly apparent. Then get into motion for a faster pace that will eventually rush to the big race and the finishing point.

Do not be a slave to scenario technique; be its master and it will serve you well in helping your action-visualization in words put into synopsis continuity.

CHAPTER XVII

SOME SYNOPSIS REFINEMENTS

The points to be discussed in this chapter are those which add a touch of refinement to the synopsis—give it, so to speak, a higher quality of literary merit and, at the same time, interest.

It is with some hesitation that these things are introduced, for it is not my purpose to confuse you and cause you to overshoot the mark in preparing synopses for the photoplay market. It would be an easy matter for you to overshoot the mark by incorporating the elements we are about to consider, unless you maintained a due regard for their value to your particular type of story, or if you did not have a complete understanding of their use and the danger of their abuse!

However, for the “you” who have intelligence enough to attack this synopsis-writing as a serious study, and who can temper the danger of too much knowledge with a calm discretion in its application, it is only fair to set forth all the possible ways by which a synopsis may be improved, trusting that you will not be like the photoplay scenario-writing novice who discovered that the studio director said a certain effect would not “register,” and found that “to register” was to put forward an emotion in such a clearly defined manner that it could not possibly be mistaken; whereupon Mr. Novice wrote his scenes thus:

Billy registers he loves her, and May registers that he registers with her, and both register at the hotel desk and so register that their names register.

It was too bad that he did not include a reference to the hot-air-register in the heating arrangements of the hotel. The (possible!) smile having faded from your countenance, let us see what moral there is to be registered from this little digression; here it is: Any technique is dangerous if its purpose is not understood, and its use marks one as hopelessly unintelligent except when the use is logical, and shows a full understanding and appreciation of the wherefore.

Hence, when you discover that sub-titles may be helpfully suggested by the synopsis writer, do not try to see how many sub-titles you can suggest. When you find that "contrast" is a nice adjunct to emphasis of situation, do not pore anxiously over your plot-essence, seeking to imbue it with contrasting elements wholly incompatible with its character. If you find that a little comedy is beneficial to a drama, do not hurriedly plan to have the erring wife tweak her husband's nose just so that there will be comedy-relief in a tense situation. Use the succeeding bits of valuable information as though they were old shoes that fit perfectly and were entirely comfortable—not as if you were breaking in some especially squeaky boots.

When properly, deftly embodied in the synopsis, a suggested sub-title is a valuable thing. We may devote a little space to its consideration.

The Revealing Speech in Photoplay

When a point of plot cannot be made clear by the

employment of pantomimic expression alone, descriptive material must be embodied in the film at that place in the story so that there may be no misconception of the clear meaning of the unactable point.

Usually, you will see statements coming on the screen in *advance* of scenes. If Bill must be presented to the spectators, the scenario writer will often subtitle, or explain by means of a printed statement, thrown upon the screen in advance of Bill's appearance, that "Bill reads Turkish but does not understand it." Then we are prepared, if we see Bill apparently absorbed in some Turkish-looking document with a sidewise cast of the eye toward the professor of languages standing beside him, that Bill is "playing off" on that chap. Without the explanation we might wonder if Bill is contemplating an exploration of the old gentleman's pockets, or what the whole thing is about anyway. This explanatory, scene-preceding form of statement is known to the craft as either a subtitle or a leader, according to your preference in terms; they both mean the same thing, technically. With this form of sub-title the synopsis writer has little concern, except in some such event as this: If you can plan some catchy, snappy way of saying an introductory thing about some character, it will do no harm to embody it in your synopsis, making its prominence apparent by use of the underlining key of your machine, if you so desire, in order to set it apart from the other material describing the character. Thus:

Bill can read French, but he does not understand it, his education having been acquired in the hard school of the streets.

This device is more useful in writing the comedy-type of synopsis than in the straight drama.

There is another form of inserted descriptive matter that is really equivalent to the spoken dialogue of the stage play, though its use in the synopsis is to be vastly more infrequent. This is what is technically known as the "speech title" or "cut-in speech." It takes the form of a speech supposedly delivered by one character to another, and is, like the sub-title proper, a device of scenario technique. For comedy material, it may be employed quite beneficially in the synopsis if you are clever at devising bright sayings, or if you have some fresh way of expressing the thought or feeling of a character.

For instance, suppose that you are planning a situation in which, for comedy purposes, a girl is to be caught blowing bubbles with her daddy's favorite smoking pipe. He is naturally dismayed. This situation would be amusing in itself: but it could be enhanced, several more smiles could be tweaked out of it, by having the insertion of several little speeches revealing the facts and showing the girl's aptness at repartee; you would not say that these quoted speeches were suggestions for sub-titles or cut-in speeches, but would emphasize them by an underline, or in some other way, as will be mentioned in a later chapter on the script form. But here is an example of the use of the technical device in your synopsis:

Mayda is blowing bubbles with her daddy's favorite pipe. He catches her at it, and exclaims in dismay: "*It was the best pipe I ever had!*" Contrite, but undismayed, Mayda assures him: "*They were the best bubbles I ever made!*"

Used with discretion, to bring out character, to emphasize some important comedy-situation, the pat reply is a guide to the author's conception of his picture-folk and their manners of speech, whereas over-indulgence in the speech spoils its good effect. Sometimes the use of speech is actually essential, as in the writing of a synopsis of a story containing a character with some peculiarity of speech, or to bring out the atmosphere of a locality that has its own readily recognizable colloquialisms. In the synopsis, and finally the scenario, of "Kitty Mackaye" (a stage-play adapted to film production for Vitagraph) my problem was to emphasize the comedy of the peculiar Scotch dialect or lose the characteristics and atmosphere of the whole play. Such couplets as "Ye have polish" responded to by the girl with, "Aye, Sir, an' so has *brass!*" gave the girl a chance to show her wit; while pure characterization of the old Scotchman who was presumably Kitty's father lay in her reply, as follows: Meeting the old dominie, she was asked why her father did not come to the "kirk" and her answer came: "Aye, but he doesna come to the kirk because he can sleep better at home."

The original play was full of little clevernesses of the dry, brusque dialect, and so had many suggestions for cut-in speeches. Used adroitly, the little speeches in your synopsis may mean the difference between cleverness and dullness of idea; used maladroitly, they can only indicate the latter.

Other Forms of Interpolated Explanatory Matter

In some sorts of stories a good deal of dependence

may be put upon the wording of a will, a telegram, or some such device. These interpolated forms of communication are frequently resorted to as a better means of conveying information to an audience than the usual slap-you-in-the-face statement of fact in a sub-title. The letter, telegram, will, or other form of written or printed communication of idea, is thrown upon the screen as though one sees it over the shoulder of the character who is photographed as looking at it, hence the important fact comes to the spectators as if they were being taken into the confidence of the character.

This is another device of scenario technique that must not be used just because you know it can be used; it is to be employed only when, to get your own idea thoroughly in the mind of the reader or the editor, you must resort to a letter from one character to another, or a telegram, a portion of an important will or other legal document, and possibly a particularized newspaper item. If you merely want Molika to throw a note over the harem wall so as to have the note found by a youth you expect to have climb in and find the lady anxious to escape, you need not particularize the note: leave it to the scenario writer to decide whether there is not enough conveyed-idea in the tossing of the paper and the resultant wall-scaling. But if the note must contain some important bit of information, you can incorporate your idea of that in the synopsis—underlined, if you wish, or simply quoted. As I have said, these inserted idea-conveyors are not to be used as a means of showing your knowledge of their purpose, but only when needed—as in the case of the note

which Belinda sends her father (in the synopsis used later on as a form), in which it is imperative that the girl say a certain thing in a certain way, so as to give her father a motive for his consequent action and mental attitude.

Sometimes you need only explain what the general contents of a note, newspaper clipping, or like insert is to be, leaving the exact wording to the discretion of the scriptwright; but if your plot, or any important development of it, hinges on a clear understanding of some exactly-worded insert, write it into your synopsis. Here is an example of a bit of drama-synopsis showing both an inserted information-conveying device and a resultant clarifying speech:

Tottie gets the note so hastily dashed off by Jim before he accepted his father's offer of a million dollars for his absolute adherence to parental demands for one year. She reads: "Well, kid, it's all blooey! I'm off for the unknown 'somewhere.' The old man says he will shoot you some dough to salve your feelings at losing noble me, your misled, affectionate Jim." She looks at her friend as the latter is allowed to read the note, then observes, concealing her real heart-break: "Them rich guys think us chorus girls is all alike—love, with us, is spelled 'm-o-n-e-y!'" When the sympathetic friend goes, Tottie gets her big idea: she will show the rich ones their error in her case, at least.

In no other way could the characteristic trait of the easily-led-away rich youth be linked with his misconception of the girl's genuine affection for him. In case you can utilize these devices and not abuse them, you are safe in incorporating them when required in your synopsis.

Contrast as an Aid to Emphasis

Another little technicality of scenario practice that may be found useful at certain points in synopsis

writing is the close juxtaposition of opposed ideas—the employment of contrast to build up emphasis of the contrasting ideas.

If a rich youth has everything his idle heart can desire, and later on he is to meet and be influenced by a girl whose income can be totaled on her right hand digits, it will help to emphasize her poverty if she is mentioned in closer (synopsis) relation to the statement concerning the rich man than the plot would logically demand. For example, she might not need to be employed as a plot-character until about page four of your synopsis; but you could emphasize interest, and gain contrast of ideas, by using her in an allusion such as this:

Jim Randall has so many dollars that he could not count them in two lifetimes. His life is idle, careless, useless—far different from that of little, poverty-stunted Myrtle, whose four dollars a week keep her body together—as for her “soul,” it may amuse Jim some day to discover if she has one or no. But not now: he is too busy keeping track of butterfly Beatrice. . . .

And so the story runs back on to its track, no bit harmed by the switch to another character, for one instinctively sympathizes more with little Myrtle by reason of the allusion to her here than one might if she were not mentioned until Jim, possibly having gone off on a mad “spree,” wakes up in her tenement, whither she has conveyed him from the gutter.

Whenever you have totally different associations of opposed idea, you emphasize each by its close proximity to the other. The scenario writer would, having discovered Myrtle, “cut in” or provide a scene showing her, off and on, in some bit of “business,” keeping her in the story: you need not bother to emphasize each

of the possible "cuts"—your reference to her at the appropriate point has shown a possibility for contrast. Often there is to be secured a considerable heightening of suspense by the employment of contrast, the scenario writer jumping from action to quiet, in some situation like this, described without "cuts" by you:

Up on the roof the men are fighting together, Red Dorgan against his three assailants; he breaks free, and rushes to the fire escape, down which he gets to the room where his wife has been quietly sewing, unaware of the excitement.

Contrast is used in a synopsis merely to indicate its presence and call attention to its possibility for employment by the scenario writer. So do not go around hunting up opposed ideas just for the sake of displaying a knowledge of the device, or there may be a considerable contrast between the editor's idea and yours, of the advisability of exchanging the synopsis for a check.

Comedy-Relief in Drama

The use of comedy-relief in a dramatic situation is not, as you might think, improperly placed here: it is not plotting, or synopsis-writing, exactly—it is more in the line of developing little "touches" or bits of "business," to enhance some point or to emphasize some situation. As contrast of opposed environment enhances and emphasizes both the opposed ideas, so does a bit of comedy, adroitly applied, sometimes help to make the drama of a situation more forcible. It is in the higher refinements of synopsis-preparation, such as the clever employment of touches of this sort, that the careful craftsman stands head and shoulders above his

less able colleagues. Yet his superiority in height is not advantageous unless it is rightfully his: one cannot stand out by merely knowing what a bit of comedy-relief *is*: one must feel the need for it, sense its value; in short, have that divine gift by which we recognize the work of genius—(no, there are not any of these touches in my work with you on “Belinda”).

The proper meaning and employment of the touch of comedy-relief is about as difficult to set down on paper as is the real, inner meaning of the “human appeal.” One has to grasp the thing intuitively—less through reading than through an innate power of higher creative ability. Still, it is one of the refinements of good synopsis-writing, so here is an attempt at setting the thing clearly before you.

The fine touch of comedy-relief in a dramatic situation is achieved by the introducing of some tiny bit of “business” that serves to break the tension of the situation, let down, as it were, the keyed-up spectators, let their tears turn to laughter. In the rare cases where it is employed by a genius, such as one may safely assert Mr. D. W. Griffith to be at his sentimental, whimsical best, the intrusion of a bit of comedy-relief at the culmination of an enthralling incident or situation provides that situation with a peculiar emphasis, gives to it an added touch of drama.

That is a crucial test for comedy-relief: it must provoke no ribald mirth; rather, it should allow one to chuckle a bit, perhaps; or, better, to sigh, and allow the held breath to go in and out about its usual business once more.

Suppose you have a situation of this sort: A soldier is dying in a hospital, surrounded by nurses, the doctor, and several privates who have bunked with him. His wife arrives, panting—hurriedly summoned. If her influence can be made to tell upon her soldier it will give him the one chance for life—the one slim chance he needs. She strives to speak his name, choking back the lump in her throat, but she can only gasp out the first syllable. He continues to toss and moan. She drops beside his cot, and catches his hand. He turns his face: he does not seem to know her, for he twists away his head impatiently. The wife looks up, agony in her eyes. “God,” she breathes a silent prayer, “Make him to know——” and her head bows. The doctor shakes his head at one of the nurses, and the nurse, her face working with pity and sorrow, moves forward to tell the wife that the stillness into which the face of the soldier has fallen is not to be broken on this side of the Grey Wall. But the wife shakes off the hand of the nurse, and rising, wild, eager, listens. Far and faint come the strains of a violin. She is gone from the room but a moment, returning with the instrument, snatched almost forcibly from a surprised *but not funny* soldier. No, there is no comedy wanted here! The wife is back in the room where already the doctor is bending over that silent, quiet form. Then, sweet and clear, thin like the call of a bird to its distant mate, comes the muted sound of the first soft note of the “Miserere”—his favorite! Softly, slowly, the bow moves across the sobbing strings, while there is not a breath drawn in that room: only the doctor’s face

shows the futility of the struggle. But is it futile? Cannot that earnest prayer be answered, even though a soul be winging its way to another realm? Steady is the hand that wields that bow across the singing string! But not steady the lips that form the words of the song. The still hand on the cover moves! The eyes unclose, and the moveless lips yet seem to frame a word of which the eyes seem to hold knowledge. With a sob the wife drops the instrument crashing to the floor as she bows over that face, and by the doctor's change of face we know there is hope. Then the bunkies obey a sign from the doctor, and tiptoe out, one catching up the fragment of broken violin as he passes the bowed form beside the cot. And in the doorway that bunkie pauses for just an instant, and suddenly draws in a breath which he expels in a sharp "Whoof!" The spectators would suddenly discover themselves imitating that soldier—letting go of the held breath in a quick relief that would stimulate the impressiveness, the tension, of the long fight for a life. That sudden "Whoof!" would be a genuinely human bit of "business," and it would be a touch of comedy-relief.

That is as close as I can come to making you see what, how and where the comedy-touch belongs in a dramatic situation. Some authors would make the situation ridiculous by having the owner of the violin sobbing or hugging his spoiled instrument. Others would show him leaping after the wife. Still again, others might have the soldier pick up the violin, and in that tense room, look at it with a wry expression. Any

of these would be relief, but not true, sincere, human comedy-relief: any of them would spoil the whole situation. To take the soldier out a-tiptoe, and *then* "spring" the relieving sigh, would make every spectator realize how much he had been like that soldier, build within him a full comprehension of just how deeply he had felt, and give him a chance to chuckle. Can you do it?

CHAPTER XVIII

CULTIVATING A DISTINCTIVE WRITING STYLE

A director came to me one day with a considerable sheaf of photoplay-synopsis manuscripts. He flung them disgustedly upon my desk and groaned. "I wish you'd skim through these," he said. "I've tried to read a couple, but they are so blamed dull and flat that I can't 'see' the ideas at all."

Examined without prejudice, the manuscripts were found to contain fairly worth-while plot-ideas. That is why they had passed the first reading and reached the director through the editor's hands. The writers had managed to state their plot-developments quite fully, but every synopsis in that group was written in a cold, unentertaining style, with the essential facts set down as dispassionately as one would see them in an old-fashioned plot-sketch of the infancy days of the pictures. Not a single synopsis possessed the slightest spark of vitalizing style. They contained no atmosphere, no attractiveness. It chanced that the company to which they had been submitted had in its employ a reader who was conscientious above the average, a reader who felt that he owed a duty to every contributor with ideas. He would read for plot, and frequently he would find enough to justify him in his conscientious but tedious wading through the mass of material he always had before him.

That reader was an exception, one may say without injury to the reputation of the host of other studio readers. He was an exception in the possession of this abnormal sense of duty to the outside contributor; for, curiously enough, this superconscientiousness was the cause of his downfall—he read so thoroughly, so carefully, for plot, that he was always failing to keep up with the inpour of fresh material. In time, complaints began to reach the editor, wails over long-held-up manuscripts, growls from writers who had received some story back after three months' delay. What happened? The inevitable: a reader was found who could keep his desk clear, and yet give the authors a reasonably just consideration for their material.

The over-conscientious reader gave equal consideration to the work of the expert and the effort of the novice, and he could not possibly find enough quality-material in the latter class of submissions to justify him in holding up the work of all till it became unseasonable or otherwise useless to another company.

Every company expects its readers to be just, and, in fact, retains the reader for the express purpose of seeking good plot-material in the mass of submitted manuscripts. But the company wants its contributors to feel that their work will be given prompt, as well as just, consideration.

It is humanly impossible to read every word of every synopsis in the mass that comes into the editorial department of the average studio. By long experience the readers have come to know that the writer who has originality of idea, cleverness of conception, fresh-

ness of viewpoint, has, as well, a confidence in his own work that makes him give it the best that is in him. The novice at synopsis-writing, or the person who lacks ability to plot or to provide the novel twists that make even the old plots appear new, does not seem to put much thought or effort on his work, and this shows in his output.

A dry, matter-of-fact arrangement of plot-factors in orderly sequence may make an interesting plot—that is, a plot imbued with interesting possibilities for the screen—but such a dull plot-arrangement is quite likely to exert a chilling influence on the reader's enthusiasm for the idea, and if he is rushed with work, or has had a run of impossible ideas in his day's reading, he is very likely to drop the dry facts of a plot and select some bright, vivaciously virile synopsis from a writer who has been as conscientious in his study of all the ways to help his brain-child as he expects the reader to be in welcoming that offspring.

The reader who had too much conscience held to the opinion that if a plot had any merit it should reach the editor, the editor in question agreed with this opinion, and so the dry synopsis would "get by" the reader by virtue of the interest in its *plot*.

But when these dull statements got into the hands of the director, who made his entrance with the start of this chapter, that person, a fair representative of his class, felt the lack of virility, missed the picturizing influence of a smooth, visualizable writing-style, and could not overcome the handicap thus placed before his imagination.

It may seem to you like waste of time to discuss the attributes of mind which evolve the good directorial qualities in a man. Yet such a discussion will provide you with an understanding of the "whyfore" of the cultivated writing-style. If you do not care to spend time enough to develop your own style to the point of highest excellence, it will be best for you to skip ahead to the next chapter and let this one go; the present discussion is aimed at those who intend to succeed, not once, not accidentally, but always, and inevitably, through the cultivation of every talent that makes for success.

"The director," said a chap who has written for a goodly number of the men in question, "is a very odd sort of genius. All he ever gets to work with is a crowd of likely people (sometimes!) and a bunch of cold, typewritten words. From these he is expected to evolve living, soulful screen-plays. Admitting that the players have talent for expressing idea in action, admitting that the bunches of words embody a workable idea, nevertheless, you or I, set down on the studio floor with those same players and the same workable ideas, would probably turn out a sizable bunch of 'junk' film. Why? We are capable of seeing action, else we would not be writing scripts. We can pre-conceive the logical continuity of idea-development. We can go the limit when it comes to telling a director what to do—but could we do that which we explain so lucidly to him? You might; but not any for me. When I'd look around and see players who draw thousands a week waiting to be ordered into action,

when I'd see stage-hands putting up a 'set' that might cost a thousand dollars by itself, when I'd realize that there was little me, about to spend around fifteen thousand 'bucks' of the firm's money—for which sole responsibility would rest on my young shoulder blades!—then I would rise me up and vanish from there.

"And yet I sit up here at my desk and dictate the things that the director who has the 'nerve' to accept the responsibility must do, the sort of settings on which he must spend a lot of money. Then I holler 'bloody murder' if he comes up and tells me I haven't simply tickled him silly with my orders for his execution (no, I should say executing, for I don't want him killed off by my scripts!).

"He tells me he can't 'see' my stuff. He means that it does not make *pictures* in his mind. He is all wrong, of course, from our point of view; yet let one or the other of us get down there with one of his scripts, and—wow! Nothing to 'see' in it at all.

"He has all the responsibility of spending a heap of the firm's money. His is the blame for a poor production. If his pictures don't bring boost-letters from exhibitors he is yanked up on the mat before the boss and asked why. I'd want the same leeway in making what I like, if mine was the same amount of responsibility. I certainly would not try to make pictures from anything that did not *look like pictures* to me."

There you have an argument by a writer in favor of the director's mental attitude toward scripts, whether in scenario form or synopsis form. Seldom does a writer achieve a broadness of mind sufficient to enable

him to grasp the directorial attitude toward either staff-written or outside-contributed material.

The director is justified in his attitude toward these ideas: his is the task of making sellable pictures; his is the blame if they become shelved for any of many reasons—weakness of story, poverty of action, incompetency of cast, as a whole or individually. He will strongly object to accepting any story that does not arouse his enthusiasm, appeal to his executive-creative combination of faculties for making words live in action.

If you were put down on the studio floor and given a chance to direct, only to have your first picture come out as a flabby, weak semblance of the original idea, you—being human—would fall back upon your original contention, made by many directors, that “the idea didn’t look like much—you put it on against your better judgment.”

That is an “alibi” that is the property of every director. When a scenario writer becomes a director by the acquiring of the needful “nerve” and a fortunate combination of circumstances, it is really quite amusing to observe the suddenness with which he acquires every attribute of the directorial class, including the above-mentioned “alibi” against faulty production.

But, all lightness aside, the director is right in desiring to produce that material which inspires him. The point we must make, the lesson to be drawn from this little dissertation, is that the synopsis-writer’s work is

generally submitted to the director for approval. If the director "sees" it, there is only the formality of the business office between the writer and a check. Of course some companies restrict directorial prerogatives in so far as they may be limited by the fact that "the boss," himself, does the picking-out of the stories. In either case, the aim of the writer must be the same: he must make director or "boss" realize the vitality and reality of his story by the vitality and realism of his writing-style.

Individuality of idea-conception is enhanced by individuality of writing-style. Simplicity and directness are the two prime essentials of your word-manipulation. But there is an art in giving to simplicity and directness of expression a vitalizing fire, a quality of actuality. If you have the power to *feel* the emotion you write about, certainly you should be able to transmit that feeling through your written words to the reader.

This does not mean that you are to go into lavish pictorialism of expression. There is a very nice distinction between the fiction-form of action-expression and the photoplay-synopsis embodiment of the same quality. However, it is not likely to harm your chances of a sale if, in "getting it over to the director" you allow yourself an occasional splurge of the fictional style, keeping it within bounds, using it only for the purpose of making a situation "feelable."

Unless you are sure that you can apply the feeling in a sensible way, and so that it will not make a novellette out of your photoplay-synopsis, it will be best for

you to stick to the straight-forward, direct-statement style, and take your chances on the conscientiousness of the readers to whose desks your work may travel.

"I write what I feel," said a man who has many a photoplay to his credit, "then the directors feel what I write." He has the art of synopsis-expression cultivated to the *nth* degree. He never gushes and yet he can make you "see" his stories unfolding before your mind's-eye as though already flickering on the picture-screen.

It is impossible to acquire a flowing, "feeling" writing-style on the instant. That is a quality to be striven for earnestly, fostered, cherished, matured, by gentle care and much practice. You can learn to plot—by rule, almost—though such plotting stifles originality of creative conception; still, that plot-building way is not impossible. But the free-and-easy, get-hold-of-you style comes in one of two ways: by gift of Providence, or after many, many scripts have been written, torn apart, discarded or revised, and then rewritten.

If you can write feelingly, and harness that tendency toward lavishness of phrase that is so apt to be the partner of a mistaken idea of what feeling really is, your ideas will have an added value in the eyes—physical and mental—of the director. Dry, hard statements do not picturize to him. Lavish exuberance of expression is the other extreme of writing, and this over-use of pictorial color is apt to befog the very effect you seek to obtain—the injection of feeling into your writing.

The Pictorial Present Tense

One of the things that will help you to get your ideas into pictorial aspect is the use of the present tense in your synopsis.

Your aim is to make reader, editor and director "see" your picture material. It is obvious, then, that you should use a mode of expression that will best create the desired impression of "now-ness." The idea of that which took place long ago does not seem half so vivid as does that one which comes along and happens before our eyes. Try this on your mind's-eye:

Walworth stood over the body. He felt a growing horror. His hand had held the implement of death. . . .

That is not *happening* before you: it has happened, any length of time before you read about it. The effect is that impersonal sensation which comes to you when you read about a murder in the newspaper: you are shocked, but the criminal means nothing vivid to you, there is no personal interest attached to him except the general class-feeling that crime must be punished. So with the past tense when used in your synopsis. It gives a subtle feeling of being unreal, un-present. Walworth *stood* over a body. You do not "see" a picture in that, half as readily as you would in this recasting of tense:

Walworth stands over the body! He feels a growing horror. His hand holds the implement of death. . . .

There he stands, right in front of you. He is a person of the present. His horror is a present, a feel-able emotion. His hand holds "the implement of death." You see it, you feel the tenseness of the situa-

tion. That is why the present tense is the better one for use in synopsis writing.

For the sake of your hoped-for reputation, do not switch to and fro between the two tenses! Land knows! there are writers galore who do not seem to know much about tense. But, at any rate, do not try to write at all if you cannot hold to one form. Even if the past or pre-story time plays a part in your synopsis, you can describe the action as if it were happening in the present, by referring to it in this fashion:

John sits by the fire, dreaming of the past. He sees himself going to school, he sees the taunting finger, hears the cry of "teacher's pet" and knows that some day he will thrash that taunting bully, Bill.

Back to the present comes John's mind as the door opens and the bully of his retrospect walks in, a grown man.

There you have taken John's *thoughts* into the period-past, but you have kept your picture in the story-present.

Never allow yourself to become careless enough to mix your tenses. See this:

Dorothea lifts her dark eyes to the face bending over her. "Where am I?" she asked, and he told her she was in his boat, he was her rescuer. She thanks him with her eyes and then they closed

You may smile at this, but see that you do not fall into a like error in your next synopsis: many a writer studies photoplay-technique, reads cheerfully about the use of the present tense—and turns in and mixes tenses as carelessly as a chef scrambles eggs. Then he wonders why his synopses come back so promptly. The tense-mixture may be one cause for rejection—and not so remote as it might seem, if the mixed tenses tend to confuse the reader.

Fitting Style to Subject

In still another way may an author achieve a greater degree of picturability for his synopsis. This is by adapting his style, to a degree, to the subject-matter that forms his story.

Words mean action-depiction to the photoplay-synopsis writer. They may mean more: they may mean atmosphere creation, conveyance of feeling, and a subtle suggestion of the lightness or seriousness of the situation they describe.

If your story is cast in sordid surroundings, your choice of words should build that depravity and poverty so logically to be found in such a low environment. If the tale leaps into the millionaire's mansion, the shade of your word-painting should be lighter, the tone more in harmony with the new atmosphere.

If your story is cast in the mold of drama, your introductory material and all that follows must be framed in serious, simple phrase.

If you are writing comedy, the lighter manner of the action should be reflected in your writing-style.

Take a situation for the sake of illustrating the point. We will say that Billy is rich, and that he loves a girl whom he has met in the slums by accident. As a drama, the story would develop perhaps with his renunciation of his riches for the sake of his love, parental opposition seeking to prevent him from taking the seemingly wild leap into poverty. The whole thing would be in deadly earnest. You might write a bit of your synopsis in this sober strain:

Billy looks about the gorgeous room, disgusted with his clinging to affluence and magnificence, while down in the squalor of the slums Rhoda holds his heart in her hands and calls with her soul, though her lips repel his purpose to give up wealth to make himself a man and worthy.

Mayhap the same situation might be planned for comedy, developing along lighter lines. In such a case you would adopt a less sober description and cast your sentences more in this wise:

Billy's magnificent home appeals no longer, for love beckons from the tenements. Rhoda hates money. Why not? She has none to love. Billy decides that he will "chuck" out the gold and let Cupid guide him along the road to Rhoda's esteem.

Melodrama calls for crispness and brevity in its tense moments. Polite comedy requires a pleasing, semi-whimsical treatment. Slapstick is the least stylish of all synopsis types, for it must merely describe things that could not be made to read humorously without a loss of clarity of situation. Slapstick demands terse, dry statements.

Fit your garmenture to the brain-child it is to cover, and do not forget that the most charming gown may have the fewest "fancies" on it!

CHAPTER XIX

A MATTER OF FORM

There is no arbitrary rule governing the manuscript-form in which a photoplay synopsis is to be presented for consideration. There are several methods of arrangement which may be suggested as most easy to handle, and therefore most likely to receive a readier welcome.

There is an emphatic rule, however, in respect to the typographical aspect of the synopsis, and that rule must be obeyed:

A photoplay synopsis must be typewritten.

It will do you no good to try to get around this imperative mandate by saying that your penmanship is perfect, that you write the vertical hand so suitable for librarians, and reasonably easy to read. If you will not play the game according to the rules laid down by the picture manufacturers you need not expect to receive courteous consideration for your work at the hands of their readers, not to mention the others you seek to reach.

Put yourself in the reader's chair, facing a desk full of manuscripts, watch the postman or the office boy dump an armful of new contributions, realize that there are only so many hours in a day, so many days in a week, and that new material will be coming in every day. That deskful is going to assume mountainous

proportions if you take time to read everything that comes in—thoroughly read and consider each submission. Add to your mental state the realization that seven impatient scribes have sent letters to your department head, the editor, complaining because their scripts have been delayed several months. Pick up a neatly typed, businesslike manuscript and its desk-mate, that pale-inked, pen-written screed, with the erasures and the interlineations. Your eyes are weary, your brain is jaded. Which of those scripts will get first attention? Which one will be found lacking in plot with the least effort on your part? The answers are too simple to merit utterance.

It has been found through years of experience that the writer who has brains enough to prepare a good plot has sense enough to play the game according to the desires of the companies; but so many writers are either too lazy or too careless to meet these expressed wishes, so for all such the wish has come to be an order—and not for more stories, either.

You and Your Typewriter

If you have made up your mind to become a successful author of photoplay-synopses, you owe it to your confidence in yourself to get a typewriter. The machine you own need not be a brand-new, just-from-the-factory typewriter; if the type is clear and the mechanism in good order, a second-hand machine is perfectly satisfactory for your requirements. But some sort of typewriter you ought to possess. Some authors rent a typewriter. If you do not feel that you

care to lay out the amount that will bring you even a rebuilt machine, perhaps you can rent a good one in your vicinity from a typewriter agency at an outlay of from three dollars a month to ten dollars for three months, the figure varying with the agency and the quality of the machine you select.

It is urged upon you that you own a typewriter, if possible, for the reason that it is one of the tools of your profession. At any rate, have one under some arrangement. Use it whenever you can. Practice as faithfully as you can. Learn the "touch system" of writing, if you are able, at the very start. If you have not learned it and already own or rent a machine, at least keep in practice so that your typed work will not be full of mistakes in the matter of spacing and lettering.

You may argue that it is simpler to have some typewriting friend, or some paid typist, put your work into shape. This expedient is all very well if you are just "dipping into the game for a try-out." But the plan has disadvantages. First of all, you may depend upon it, the work of some outsider is not likely to be as thorough as your own. The errors will not be as carefully eradicated as would be the case were you typing your own work for the ambitious purpose of adding as many dollars to your check as you can by showing neat, careful, clean typing. Secondly, you will have to pay for this outside work, and if you turn out many synopses the cost will aggregate a sum more taxing to your purse than would be the rental of a good machine for your personal use. In the third place, scripts, however

carefully handled in the studios, are bound to show marks, become soiled, erased, unsightly. Just as surely as you send out a worn manuscript, you are saying to the reader, "Tenth trip!" and he gets the psychological import of that double-nine-times traveling to and from other studios. Your work must always look neat and fresh, as if each trip were the maiden voyage. It helps the ready consideration of the material. Every studio likes to have the first chance at good material. You have to "josh them" a bit and let them think your work is going to them on its original birthday, not after many other rounds.

If you have a machine in your possession you can retype a soiled page, or put on a fresh cover, whenever these things are required to keep the manuscript looking neat and clean.

Typewriter Ribbons

Always use a *record* ribbon on your typewriter. There are copying ribbons: they are used when a copy of a letter is made with a moist cloth and a copy-book, in business offices. But the first time that your copy-ribbon script gets near moisture the copying ink will smudge, and even run, until the typing can scarcely be deciphered. The record ribbon makes a permanent manuscript that will neither run nor smudge.

There is a wide latitude in the choice of ribbon-colors. Most modern typewriters will handle a two-color ribbon—the sort with a black upper half and a red lower half, say. These two-color ribbons are use-

ful in certain forms of synopsis-preparation, as, for instance, when emphasizing suggested letters, sub-title material and speeches, which can be typed in red while the body of the manuscript is in the readable black. Purple and red, brown and blue, are other possible color-combinations, if you wish to use this sort of ribbon. But for the average utility, and the longest wear, a solid-color ribbon, preferably all-black record, is the best. When one portion of the ribbon—the upper strip, say—has become worn so that it does not make sharp, readable impressions, the ribbon-shift device on your typewriter can be set for the alternative color, and since the ribbon is all one color, the unused half will be put into play.

The importance of a clear, easily readable impression from the clean, sharp type, cannot be over-emphasized. Too many scripts are sent out with their contents pale, scarcely to be made out, because their authors are too stingy to put a new ribbon on their machines. Pale typing is almost as bad a practice as pen-writing.

Paper for Your Manuscript

There are many writers who seem to think any sort of paper is satisfactory for their synopses, so long as it will run through the typewriter. They use "legal cap," or excessively long sheets, and fold them into four folds. If you will take up about twenty sheets of this sort of paper, fully typed, and fold it in that way, and then try to make out comfortably what is on it, you

will never fall into the error of employing out-of-size paper for your own scripts.

The proper sort of paper to use is a medium-weight bond paper, not thick enough to be stiff, nor too thin to carry without getting crushed and wrinkled in the mails. The paper known as "twenty pound" is not a bad weight of paper to select. The weight indicated is that of the sheets in a ream—500 sheets—of paper, cut to the size you want. You can buy this weight and size in boxes, all ready for the machine, of course, or you can buy it in larger quantities, perhaps from your local printer, at something of a reduction from the box price, if you happen to be friendly with the printer in question. Anyhow, get the paper of a texture that will not allow the typewriting on one page to show through the succeeding page. When the print shows through it makes hard reading for the studio man, let me assure you. Your mission in life is to make his job as easy as possible, so that he may have more brain-force to put upon the judging of your "grand" ideas.

Do not depart from the standard of size for your paper. Universally, the eight-and-a-half by eleven inch ("letter size") cut of paper is accepted as a standard manuscript size. Do not have this cut into half-sheets. Keep it full size.

The Overcoats

Going and (not too often, it is hoped) coming back, your manuscript will need three different overcoats. The first one is a cover.

The manuscript cover should conform to the shape of the manuscript you send out. If you fold your paper in two creases, making a three-fold oblong package for it, the cover will not need to be anything other than two clean sheets of paper, front and back, on which to type your name and address—on the front sheet—as well as the name and nature of the story.

If you send out flat manuscripts, and this is more in harmony with the up-to-date practice of professional writers who make things easy for the reader as a matter of habit, your covers are to be moderately heavy—not bulky, but of a weight to help them bear the brunt of the mail-man's sometimes uneasy handling. The covers supplied for legal documents, of a rather heavy blue, or buff, paper, quite tough and yet flexible enough to run through the typewriter, make good manuscript covers.

The other two overcoats are the going envelope and the return envelope. The former is to be large enough to contain both the manuscript and the return covering, which, of itself, is to be sufficiently large to allow the manuscript to slip easily into it. If you send out the twice-folded manuscript, the oblong Government envelopes, known as No. 7 and No. 8 are satisfactory, and may be had already printed with a stamp; or plain envelopes of similar size may be had at your stationer's. For flat manuscripts you will want tough manilla envelopes, one large enough to contain the manuscript the other large enough to slip in the return envelope, with the script.

It would seem almost like idiocy to repeat the necessity for fully prepaying the postage on your submitted material, yet there are many writers who do not keep this important matter in mind. The return postage should be prepaid by affixing the necessary stamps on the inner envelope before the outer one is sealed. If you will take your first few manuscripts to the nearest postoffice and have them weighed you will always be sure in the later days of putting the right amount of postage in place, for you will know what it takes to send a given number of sheets, with cover and envelope. Figuring from the weight of your paper, the calculation of your postage is a simple problem in arithmetic.

The Acceptable Form

If you propose to fold your manuscript, it is enough to suggest that you double-space your typewritten synopsis, leaving decent margins at top, bottom and sides of the paper.

Your name and address should appear on at least the first page and at the bottom of the last page of your synopsis, as well as on whatever sort of cover you put over the work. If you do not fasten the pages together in any permanent way (as will be discussed presently) your name should appear at the top of each sheet, and every sheet of the synopsis must be consecutively numbered, excepting, of course, the opening sheet, which identifies itself by the caption and the story-start.

If you send material in the flat form, which is preferable because it makes reading an easy matter, there are two ways of putting up your script: The first is to leave a goodly space at the top of each sheet when you write, then at the finish put two or three holes through the top, on a line with each other across the sheets, and insert in these holes brass binders with big, rounded heads and two strips to be bent apart to form a semi-permanent fastening for the sheets. In such a case it is not necessary to have your name on each sheet; if it is on the cover, and upon first and last synopsis sheets, you will be sufficiently identified.

The second manner of putting up the flat manuscript is by leaving a *wide* margin along the left-hand side of the paper, and putting the three holes vertically along this margin, using the fasteners, and so making the whole open and read as a book—except that but one side of the paper is typed on.

In any case, your cover should be prepared as a sort of advertisement for your work. Your name should appear on it, and the title of the story, as well as a description of the class or type of story, as, "Comedy Drama for female lead." If you have sold any stories to motion-picture companies, note that fact, so that your cover will, except for spacing, somewhat resemble this form:

Jim Jones
Sitka
Alaska

Submitting at regular rates

THE LOST LANDLADY

A comedy for female lead

- by -

JIM JONES

author of

"Selling Samuel"

(Mary Mix - Cryptogram Co.)

and so on with your "sold" stories. To mention them shows that you have already made your initial sale, or perhaps more than one, and so influences the reader in your favor, since he knows that you do not come within the class of never-wills. The parenthetical reference to the star who will play, or has played, in that picture by you, and to the company that released or marketed the picture, substantiates your ownership of the story, for the facts are easy to verify, and so it would be senseless to claim stories by other authors.

In this connection it might amuse you to know that a writer came to me one day and wanted me to read and criticize a synopsis he had. Time was a bit easy, so the favor was granted. He had himself down on the cover sheet as the author of a Vitagraph single-reel comedy, "Suing Susan." It gave me considerable pleasure to prove to his discomfiture that the author was no other than his humble critic. His story was hopeless, by the way; it is not likely that he has since claimed Suing-anybody as his work.

Whatever marginal space you decide to leave, in conformation with your pre-decided method of submitting the script, put your story-title in a prominent place on the cover. If the title is catchy and magnetic,

the interest is aroused at once. Also, the title and the class of story must appear, with name and address, and the inevitable statement of your submitting the manuscript at regular rates, on the first synopsis sheet, thus:

Jim Jones
Sitka
Alaska

Submitted at
Regular Rates

THE LOST LANDLADY

A comedy for a female lead

- by -

JIM JONES

SYNOPSIS

Then you start your "punch-paragraph" about three spaces below the last word, "Synopsis," and continue to write, using a double space between lines.

If you use letters, inserts, or such explanatory material, let them run right along in the body of the synopsis, and simply put them in quotation marks, or, if you prefer, emphasize them by underlining, or by using another color for them, if you employ a two-color ribbon on your machine.

The form may be studied in the synopsis provided as a "sample," so it need not be enlarged upon here.

Whatever form you choose, whatever color of ribbon you prefer, be sure that you typewrite, carefully avoiding errors, and with a ribbon that is fresh enough to give a strong, sharp impression of the type. Do not try for fancy color-combinations in your ribbons; they are not impressive. And of course you will address the return overcoat to yourself. Maybe it might bring back the check.

CHAPTER XX

OFF TO MARKET

There are two ways to submit photoplay manuscripts to the producing companies. The first way is directly, by your own mailing of the manuscript, addressed to the editor of scenarios; the second way is by employing an agent—or photoplay broker, as they are sometimes called—who handles the work for you.

The first way is, by all means, the better one. This is not meant in any way to disparage the agents or their methods, but there are certain definite advantages to be derived from the conduct of your own affairs. First of all, you know whether your work is gaining in favor, for if it is, perhaps you will get little scribbles of encouragement from the reader, and as you progress some editor may send you a bit of a letter. Besides, when you submit for yourself there are no agents' commissions to pay. Your postage, retyping and other incidentals form your sole expense.

If you prefer to have an agent handle your work, it is necessary to select a trustworthy person who has an established reputation, as well as good standing in the various studios. Some writers feel that such an agent can "jack up the price" for them. Certainly it is to the agent's advantage to attempt to do this, for his commission is generally a percentage of the amount of the check. Some agents exact a reading fee when

they look over your manuscript to see if it is worth handling.

Little will be said in the matter of selling through an agent. It is not a matter for anyone to decide but yourself. The agents who are to be recommended generally prefer to handle the work of writers with an established reputation, and others had better not be dealt with.

If you intend to submit your work in the regular way, from yourself direct to the editor, and *always by mail*, there are some suggestions that will keep you from antagonizing the editor.

In the first place, you must keep always before you a realization that there is no use in trying to curry favor with an editor by sending him a long or woeful letter, describing how badly you need the money he ought to send for the enclosed story. This is always considered silly and a mark of inability to write ideas that will stand without the aid of whines to win sympathy for their sad lack of quality. Besides, the letter will probably not be read through. You are offering for sale photoplay plots, not whine-letters. Put your whole mind on the plot, the synopsis, the businesslike handling of your salesmanship; no whining salesman ever sells goods.

Do not address your manuscripts to any person. If you hear that Peter Sinkman is editor for the Quagmire company, forget all about it and address your manuscripts to the Editor of Scenarios of the Quag-

mire Company, at such-and-such an address, wherever the city is, and state the state.

There is a law, you know, against the promiscuous opening of mail addressed to an individual, by some other person. Peter Sinkman may have been "fired" by the time your script gets to its destination: in that case he cannot buy it if it is forwarded to him, and the company cannot open the envelope. If Peter is the editor, and he sends you nice letters, you may answer them nicely, but let the outer envelope of your script-submission go always to the Editor of Scenarios, never to an individual. If Peter is still there, he will get it.

Listing Markets

Do not be misled into the idea that there is to be any list of companies or of markets in this section. There are many logical reasons why a list of the sort should be omitted here. The first and most important reason is a desire to make your study of some value to you. Oddly enough, a list of markets is never of any authoritative help to a writer in the photoplay field, if such a list be published in a *book*, other than to furnish a general list of producers. This is why: The film companies move from New York or its vicinity to the Western Coast studios without much notification to authors. Sometimes the companies move to Florida in the winter. Often the companies will build new studios, and forget all about writing to the book publishers, asking them to bring out a new edition including the new address. A company may have studios in

Fort Lee, New Jersey; in Florida; in California—while the scenario editor, in the business offices on Broadway, New York, may be reading scripts all the time.

Authors have eagerly copied lists of salesplaces as published in books, and wasted a large amount of postage discovering that only a few companies out of the whole lot listed have remained where the list decided to have it.

No, don't you depend on any published list that is not revised every month. The film-manufacturing business is, frankly, set on shifting sands, and the Will-make brand may be in business today and out of business tomorrow, while its place is taken by the Can't fail company, which will suddenly alter plans and jump out to the West coast, or to Oshkosh, perhaps, for a summer picture.

Make Your Own List

If you want to keep your stories going to the correct addresses, you must devise your own list of companies and of addresses.

First of all, you will want to subscribe for a good, live trade-journal pertaining to the picture-making industry. Do not mistake the meaning of this, and take as your criterion the photoplay magazines that cater to picture "fans." These are all very good for the "fans," and they are useful if you want to read their personality-sketches of "stars," though these sketches generally emanate from the facile typewriter

of a good press-agent, but when you want to find out what the picture-companies are doing, where they are located, when they intend to move, who has quit being their "star" and has jumped to another connection, you must select some trade-paper such as *The Moving Picture World* or the *Motion Picture News*, or *Motography*. There are others, but these three would seem to be best suited to the writer's purpose. *The Moving Picture World* is particularly valuable. In it is a department for the photoplay writer that is, at this writing, conducted by one of the most able, astute, sincere masters of photoplay technique in the country, Mr. Epes Winthrop Sargent. His crisp comment on conditions, his little notes of warning or of cheer, his memoranda of company changes, are fully worth your while. The other journals are also of helpfully accurate news-conveying quality.

As you read your trade paper—or papers, if you can manage more than one subscription—keep track of company-changes, star-shifts and address-alterings in your card-index. You will keep an index to note the comings and goings of your scripts, of course, and this record may be kept in the same receptacle as holds the other data, if you wish. A small box with a packet of cards and the usual alphabetical guide-cards is very useful to the script-writer. On the alphabetical cards jot down the addresses of companies that begin with the letter on the card; the plain cards use as records, putting on each the name and class of a story, and then noting below this the company to which it is sent, alongside of that the date it is sent, and, if the tale

returns, the date of its receipt by you to be jotted down alongside the date of the next out-passing. Thus:

A TALE OF TWO TRIFLERS
COMEDY-DRAMA, 5 Reels

TO	SENT	RET'D
Quagmire Co.	Mar. 3, '19	Mar. 18, '19
Petty Pictures	Mar. 18, '19	Sold, May 30, '19

In this way an orderly record of the scripts will be always at hand. Each title-card is to be dropped in the box behind the letter of its first word, except when "A" or "The" begins the title, in which case the second word of the title is your alphabetical file-guide. Thus, the card suggested above would be filed under "T."

If you subscribe for the trade-journals you will find advertisements that will give you at least the office-address of most companies. If there is no other way to get an editorial address, a short and polite note to the main business office, with a stamped and self-addressed envelope accompanying it, will bring you the latest, most accurate information for your address list. Then if your work is at all worth while, the editor will tell you of any change in submission-conditions.

It is wise to study the screened pictures of as many different companies, and of their various "stars," as you possibly can view. Note on your cards, perhaps with the address of a company, any special thing you notice about a "star's" talent, capability or peculiarities. Do not write stories entirely to fit these traits, but keep them in mind so that when you do have a story that ought to fit them you will know where to send it to give it the best possible chance of selling.

Keep your eyes open, and do not skip through the trade-journals, or you will miss some change of address or notice of a company's dissolution and be sending scripts to a defunct address. Keep your list up-to-the-minute, noting changes wherever you learn of them—in "stars," policies or wants of the various manufacturers, and particularly addresses.

If you watch the "stars" on the screen, you will not have to ask an editor what he wants; his company wants stories to suit its "stars' " capabilities, not stories *like* those you see, but stories with similar qualities but a different plot.

At the present writing the companies are taking considerable time to consider material. It is not always easy to judge how long a company should be allowed to hold a story. In general, if your story does not come back within a month, it is either lost in the mails or being particularly considered. Some companies are courteous enough to write you, in the latter case; others do not bother. If you put your return card (your own name and address) on the going envelope, there is little danger of a misfire in the mail handling. If you do not hear from your story within six weeks, it will be wise to send the editor of scenarios a politely-worded inquiry as to whether the script reached him, having been sent on such and such a date by you. If you enclose a self-addressed stamped reply-envelope he will let you know the facts.

Make the submitting of your material just as much a study of types, needs and company-changes as you can; make each submitted script do its own talking,

and do not ask a serious drama to sell itself to a company as notably restricted to high-class farce as that of Charlie Chaplin.

One thing more may be said about the marketing of scripts: that is the utterance of a solemn warning against the prevalent, propagandist-sounding assertion that all companies steal their picture-material from such as you. It is false! The company that will spend up to sixty thousand dollars to produce a picture cannot afford to stoop to stealing ideas when it has that much money to devote, at least in part, to paying for ideas.

CHAPTER XXI

SOME ALWAYS-NEVERS

Always bear in mind the fact that *plot* is the thing you will sell: never allow yourself to imagine that clever synopsis-writing will conceal the absence of real, human-life story-quality.

Always remember that a plot is a human document, an episode of vital concern to its chief participant, bringing him or her into sharp conflict with some genuine obstacle that must be overcome before the smooth current of life can flow onward in channels of happiness and contentment. Never be satisfied with any plot-material that falls short of this ideal.

Invariably expend your utmost effort on the preparation of a strong, vital plot before you even think about your synopsis. In no circumstances begin your synopsis until you are certain of the completeness of your plot, until you know that plot intimately, backward and forward, and until you are convinced that it is impossible for you to improve it.

Always give your creative imagination full sway when you are working out your plots. Never allow your imagination to get the better of your calm common sense when plausibility of idea is in question. Continually allow imagination free rein in order that there may be freshness and virility in your plot-structure. At no time let imagination run away with

judgment, lest your plot become inconsistent, or illogical, or inharmonious in its characters and their relation to its situations.

Without fail, choose your vitally-concerned character as the pivotal figure in your plot, and make that one the focal point of every plot-development. In no circumstances allow any other character, however near in relationship to that central figure, to absorb the interest that should rightfully be continuously, and permanently, held by your chief character.

Always keep your plot moving along the straight line of logical development—never permit digressive side-issues to confuse the real course of the plot.

Persistently seek themes possessed of a powerful, widespread human appeal, an absorbing heart-interest, a grip- and “punch-possibility;” in no case must you omit these essentials of strength.

With unrelenting vindictiveness pursue the dangerous weeds of digression, implausibility, illogicality; in no moment of weakness permit them to gain a foothold in your idea-garden.

Always be your own keenest critic, and apply the acid-test of analysis to your plots, to the end that these plots may be as perfect as you can possibly make them. Never relax your critical attitude toward your work because it is *your* work.

Invariably think, plan, visualize, plot, and write in terms of screen-action. In no circumstances deceive yourself into imagining that thought, unrepresented by

some visible sign indicative of that thought, will photograph.

Persistently plan the first paragraph of each synopsis to secure attention, gain interest, create pleasant anticipation, engender a liking for the story and its chief character. Never allow yourself to fall into the errors of dullness, long-windedness, discursiveness.

Always seek to create an atmosphere in harmony with the general nature of your story, by your manner of writing, your choice of movement-words. Never let style in writing overshadow story-quality.

Throughout your entire synopsis keep the interest of the reader on an up-grade, building the tension and suspense until they reach their highest pitch in the climax-moment. Shun a draggy story-development as you would avoid a plague.

Always untangle the threads of your plot at the end of your story, as swiftly and satisfyingly as you know how. Never leave any chance for disappointment in the ending that you provide.

Always typewrite your synopses, and never write on both sides of the paper.

Continually set the good appearance of a manuscript above any slight saving to yourself occasioned by the use of cheap, easily torn paper, poor, shoddy-looking covers, or slimpsy, insecurely-sealing envelopes. Never show carelessness or lack of faith in your stories by sending them out in such shabby, poor condition.

Always address your outer envelope to the "Editor of Scenarios;" never to an individual. Invariably

omit any personal letter, other than a possible short, courteous note mentioning the fact that you appreciate any favor or comment that may have come previously from the editor; but never permit yourself familiarity on the strength of a bit of well-meant criticism coming from reader or editor.

Consistently preserve an optimistic attitude toward the film manufacturers and their inherent honesty of intention toward your work. Never accuse a film concern of theft because you see some situation in one of their filmed stories that seems to resemble some situation in a story of yours that they have returned: there are no *new* ideas, and many coincidences of similarity in idea have happened, with the multitude of people writing and the quantities of stories that have been produced. Be justly reasonable; don't "fly off the handle" unless you are convinced that there is intentional, unmistakable duplication of your rejected idea.

Always make, and preserve, a carbon copy of each synopsis you prepare. Never send this carbon copy away, but retain it in case your original may be lost in the mails.

Always make up a list of markets from sources that you can depend upon for accurateness, such as the address that each company will supply to you, if you request it, of their home (business) office, with an enclosed return-envelope, stamped and addressed to yourself. Never depend on lists of studio addresses published in a book; obviously, these lists can not be absolutely up-to-the-minute.

never spend the checks until you get them.

Always keep a record of your synopses, the places you send them, the date they are sent, and the date of their return to you, or of their acceptance by the companies. In no circumstances must you trust to your memory in this important matter, else you are apt to find yourself wondering where "Lazy Ladies" went last, and will be asking the Flickerfilms people for it when they are considering "Busy Buying."

Persistently strive to improve your mind by reading widely, studying the screen, observing humanity, to the end that your creative power may attain its highest degree of perfection; to the end that your stories may reach their greatest simulation of life-actuality. Never be content with mediocrity in your plotting or in your big checks that come in exchange for big ideas: but writing.

Always make your picture-plot synopses worth the big checks that come in exchange for big ideas: but never spend the checks until you get them.

A COMPLETE PHOTOPLAY SYNOPSIS

BELINDA PUTS HER HAIR UP

By

A. VAN BUREN POWELL

NOTES

"Belinda Puts Her Hair Up," the synopsis of which follows, has been accepted by the Vitagraph Company of America and is being produced by them as this volume is going to press. The Vitagraph Company owns and controls all photoplay rights in this plot and its production. The plot and its synopsis are fully covered by copyright and all writers and others are earnestly warned against attempting to use or sell this story, in whole or in part.

Production by the Vitagraph Company is mentioned here in order to show that the author's work, developed in detail throughout this volume and given thus in complete synopsis form, is not a mere academic example of plot-building and synopsis writing, but is based on actual studio practice. While the idea and the synopsis were originally developed for use in this volume, the author feels that the stamp of editorial approval already received will add to the instructional value of the synopsis.

Naturally, this synopsis is not offered as an arbitrary form to be followed by the writer of picture-play material in slavish fashion: it is given merely as the

author's individual conception of the treatment best suited to the particular plot it outlines. It may be said, however, that the form is one entirely acceptable in literary form and in typographical arrangement, and one containing a motion-picture plot that is satisfactory material for screen production. The treatment given the embodied idea is somewhat comprehensive—that is, the situations are expanded in more detail than is absolutely necessary, although not more circumstantially described than is consistent with a thorough definition of the story-idea.

The marginal numbers printed alongside the synopsis call attention to points brought up in Chapter XII of this book, and show how the discrepancies and deficiencies mentioned in similarly numbered footnotes in that chapter are handled in the synopsis.

In the original manuscript the speeches were typed in red record-ink ribbon, while the body of the manuscript was in black record, making the speeches stand out without having to separate them from the body of the material or even to underline them.

A. Van Buren Powell

Address

Submitted at Regular Rates

City and State

BELINDA PUTS HER HAIR UP

A Comedy-Melodrama for Ingenue Lead

By

A. VAN BUREN POWELL

CAST

- BELINDA** Living with her foster-father, Judge Lee, and resentful of his endeavor to "baby" her beyond what she considers to be a reasonable limit of years.
- BOB** Eventually Belinda's sweetheart, a clean, wholesome, likeable young man.
- ROSE** Judge Lee's own daughter, somewhat older than Belinda.
- JUDGE LEE** A lovable, kindly old gentleman who has sentenced Belinda's own father to a life-term for murder and who seeks to keep Belinda young and free from mature knowledge and consequent sorrows.
- JOHN SANFORD** Belinda's real father, who breaks out of jail and comes into his daughter's life.

HORACE PRENTISS A mean, unprincipled man, president of the town bank, married but not very glad of it.

FLORENCE His wife, a jealous, spiteful woman who has too little to do.

The village postman, John Hobbs.

His daughter, now a cabaret dancer, Lorita.

The dancing partner, Carlos.

The village sheriff, Wingate.

Storekeeper, Servants in Lee home, Village types.

Belinda's Newfoundland, Major (no especial tricks).

A. Van Buren Powell

Address

Submitted at Regular Rates

City and State

BELINDA PUTS HER HAIR UP

By

A. VAN BUREN POWELL

SYNOPSIS

- (1) Belinda does not know that her father is serving a life-term in prison for murder. This fact has been kept from her deliberately by the judge who sentenced her own father and who has brought her up. So eager has he been to keep her youthful, so consistently has he "babied" her, that Belinda is far less developed in sophistication as well as in actions than the usual girl of seventeen.

¹ Handling of plot will be apparent. "Planting" of rain-barrel comes in a later part of synopsis, as does all of Prologue.

- (13) An example of her naiveté is seen as she watches her big Newfoundland dog, Major, assiduously scratching: she rushes across the big porch of the suburban villa, and, overturning the dog, runs her fingers exploringly through his neck-fur, to spring back, dismayed, shaking her abbreviated skirts and crying in reproof: "Major! I told you to keep away from that war-dog! He's just back from France and I don't want any trench-souvenirs!" Her attention is distracted by the arrival at the gate of kindly, adoring Judge Lee, the "big man" of his community, accompanied by the newly elected Sheriff Wingate, who is very much "set up" over his new badge.

Judge Lee makes a great secret of the parcel he carries, and Belinda affects to ignore it, fixing her attention on the star that Wingate tries hard not to display proudly. As they go to the house, she congratulates Wingate, who smiles expansively as he says: "Yep, I got elected at last, by the grace of Heaven and your Pa's political pull." Belinda dares him to arrest her as they enter the house.

- In the cozy library back of the parlor, Judge Lee (5) allows Belinda to open the secret-containing parcel—disclosing its contents to be a dress, which she excitedly holds up before her; but her face drops, for it is no longer of skirt than the one she has on, and she says: "Daddy, I'm getting to be a pretty big girl——" but Judge Lee's face clouds and he is so openly hurt that she hides her discontent and tells him how wonderful

¹⁸ "Planting" dog. Trick of going to cave comes later.

¹⁹ See corresponding number in Chapter XII.

the dress really is, now that she looks at it more carefully. He is mollified. With a kiss she hugs the new garment close and rushes out of the room.

In her own dainty boudoir Belinda opens a closet, revealing a row of similarly short dresses, and as she compares them with the new one she sighs and says to her dog, Major, who has followed her: "Oh, dear! I wish Daddy would realize that I'm too old to be so young!" and she hangs up the dress with a little frown. Youth always seeks maturity, never realizing its burdens, its pains!

Over cigars, Sheriff Wingate and Judge Lee fraternize, and finally Wingate observes: "Don't you 'baby' Belinda a mite too much?" Judge Lee bends forward quickly to say: "*Of course* I 'baby' her. I want her to remain care-free as long as she will." Earnestly, noting the comprehension on Wingate's face, Judge Lee expands his idea, saying: "The girl of today grows up too soon. She has experiences at eighteen that make her weep for having been over-eager to exchange her dolls for the pains and responsibilities of womanhood." Wingate, aware of the circumstances of Belinda's relationship with the Judge, agrees, and when, going out, he meets Belinda, off for a ramble, he paternally chucks her under the chin and otherwise makes such a baby of her that she with difficulty conceals her annoyance. He goes home, to have his adoring wife give him an extra big dinner in honor of his new star of service.

Belinda takes Major down to the sell-everything store and there buys crackers, tea-biscuit, and sweets. With her packages she starts down the street, but as

she nears the bank she meets the president of that institution, Horace Prentiss, about to get into his new and racy-looking motor car. He hails her as one chum would hail another, and she stops only long enough to adjust a "shopping harness" on Major. The shopping harness is an arrangement of leather straps to fit the

(13) dog so that he can be made to carry small parcels. Having adjusted this and whispered to the dog, which trots off alone, Belinda jumps into Prentiss's car. It is evident that Prentiss likes her as a man of forty would like a child of thirteen—for her precocity in being able to handle his car, for her naiveté and freshness.

They set off for a wild though short ride, under the wheelmanship of Belinda. Major races contentedly along till he gets to a small hill outside town, where he goes through some cleverly arranged brush and lies down within the small cave which is Belinda's favorite retreat and where she keeps all her dolls and girlish treasures.

Belinda ends her joyous ride in front of the Prentiss home, but does not go in, merely waving a gay greeting to Florence, the spoiled, time-wasting wife, who has so little to do that she makes frequent trips to the nearby city to buy clothes and discontentedly cast them aside

(7) when they come home. She likes Belinda, for the latter is about the only girl in town who does not look upon Florence as a waster and a "silly."

¹³ "Planting" trick of the dog, and later, the cave.

¹ See Chapter XII.

Florence snaps up her husband when he tells her that he must make a trip to the city, and be away for a day or so. She wants to go along, but he vetoes the idea brusquely—there is little love lost or gained between these two.

Belinda goes to her cave and relieves Major of his parcels and harness; then she gives him a share of the goodies as she sits reflecting, with growing discontent. Of a sudden her dissatisfaction comes to a climax, and crystallizes into a determination to take action to remove its cause. She grabs Major and tells him: "Everybody treats me as a child: I'm tired of it!" and as the assertion brings a swift train of thought to completion she cries: "It takes too long to 'grow up' the regular way! I'll have a 'growing up' party and do it all in one evening." Eagerly she considers the idea, and when she is at home she gets some correspondence cards, on which she writes happily.

Rose, the daughter of Judge Lee, and regarded as an older sister by Belinda, is sitting in an arbor on the lawn with needlework, when her "young man," Bob Somers, a clean, wholesome chap a year her senior, drops in on his way from the bank, where he is cashier. There is no pledge between the two, but his constant calls and evident regard have come to create between them, as well as among others, the feeling that they will be bride and groom in time. While they are chatting, Belinda comes in with a package of addressed envelopes. Meeting the surly-looking old village postman, Jim Hobbs, she naively asks: "I'm out of stamps. Would it be making you break the law if I were to ask

you to deliver these with just a stamp of my foot?" He is so surprised that he does not answer, but finds his hand holding the envelopes as Belinda laughingly rushes off to avoid his refusal. He goes with a frown.

Belinda sees a name on the envelope the postman has given her, and with a whoop calls for Rose. Locating her in the arbor, Belinda rushes over, and, before she can stop, bumps into Bob, who is leaving. He treats her, as would any other young man-friend in town, as a "kid," and shakes her well. Belinda escapes and runs to Judge Lee, to coax and wheedle until he indulgently gives her several bank-notes of respectable size, but without finding out her intended use for the money, for Belinda is most mysterious about the whole affair.

With the money she races to the general store, buys fashion books, several bolts of silks, some paper patterns, and with these rushes to Florence, the only woman in town whose ideas of clothes-style appeal to Belinda. Apprised of the new scheme, of its importance and its secrecy, Florence consents to help Belinda with her new preparation of garments. But when Belinda sees how long it is going to take to make clothes, she throws her hands in the air and says she will go to town and get some, all ready to put on. Florence gives her the names of some good shops in the nearby city.

The errand of Prentiss in town proves to be the (21) visiting of a cabaret, where he meets one of the

²¹ First "planting" of postman's daughter, Lorita. No allusion to her real identity.

dancers, Lorita, who "shakes" her dancing partner, Carlos, to leave with Prentiss, while Carlos scowls his displeasure over a bottle of wine.

Belinda asks her foster-father, Judge Lee, that evening: "How many bills would you pay without asking questions?" and will say no more, teasing and coaxing until the amused Rose says: "Belinda is planning to elope, Father—with all this secrecy." Belinda retorts: "Not planning to elope with secrecy—but with—who knows? It may be Bob." A little shadow crosses Rose's face and Belinda teases and "pretends" till Rose might be justified in thinking there is something concealed behind the banter.

The next morning Belinda is off, bright and early, for the city, where she has a gay time with her shopping. As she is looking into a shop window she is hailed jovially by Prentiss, in his car. He offers to take her 'round, but she will not listen, although she agrees to save return railway fare by letting him drive her back home. They arrange for him to meet her at five that afternoon, and he goes for another call on Lorita, the dancer.

Back in the village, Sheriff Wingate is called to his phone to be informed that a spectacular prison-escape has set at liberty one John Sanford, a "lifer." Wingate is greatly excited, and then perturbed. He says to his wife: "I wonder what it will mean to Belinda." And when she presses for an explanation, he tells how, (4) years before, the village sensation came about. This is his recollection:

* Prologue partly told here instead of as start for synopsis.

First of all, Jim Hobbs, the postman, finds that his daughter has left home, a note saying that she is forsaking dullness for life, light and laughter. Then, on top of that, Wingate is walking home from an attempt to console the furious postman when he hears a shot fired, and, rushing into the bank, which is open late because of some shortage in an account, he sees John Sanford standing dazed over the body of a dead bank-teller, a revolver lying on the floor by his foot. The bank president, Horace Prentiss, rushes in from the main room to the scene of death before the open vault (2) and cries: "John—why did you?—" And the dazed man does not reply.

At the trial, the postman, bereaved of his runaway daughter, briefly tells how, delivering mail that morning in the bank, he heard a quarrel between the dead teller and John Sanford over a shortage in some account—a quarrel interrupted by the pacificatory efforts of Prentiss. No extenuating circumstances can be shown, and Judge Lee, presiding on the bench, with great sorrow delivers the eventual sentence, (3) modifying it to life imprisonment, since Sanford has declared his innocence, and no actual eye-witness could say the shot was fired by him. Judge Lee then adopts (6) the thus fully-orphaned Belinda, Sanford's child, a tiny babe.

Coming back to the present, Sheriff Wingate hurries off to tell Lee of the news of the prisoner's escape.

² Villain's speech covers fixing of guilt without seeming forced.

³ See Chapter XII.

⁶ It will come out later—in a speech he will make to her—that Sanford knows. This speech will carry a marginal (6) also.

Belinda meets Prentiss in the city where she has been shopping and they drive home, passing his wife, Florence, in such haste that they do not see her. Florence does not attach any importance to the companionship of the two at the time, but it is to come up in her mind, later.

Judge Lee, on being informed of the escape of Sanford, tells Wingate how he dreads an explanation to Belinda. Wingate tells him: "If Sanford comes around, as he likely will, I hope I see him first; then Belinda—won't need to—know!" Here they let the matter rest.

Belinda notices a look of worry on the Judge's face when she comes in, but she has a secret of her own and realizes the justice of his reminder that others have the same privilege, for he cannot bring himself to speak now—it is harder than ever.

Bob, at his home, receives from the postman one of the correspondence cards written by Belinda, and he is both surprised and amused to read:

SAT-UR-DAY, EIGHT-THIRTY P. M., BE
 AT THE HOUSE AND YOU WILL SEE
 THAT WHICH WILL MUCH SUR-PRIZE THEE,
 A WON-DER-FUL CHANGE IN

BELINDA LEE.

IF YOU DON'T COME, I'LL BE
 M A D ! ! !

There is no doubt in Bob's mind that Belinda means what she says in her postscript. He decides to humor her mysterious whim. Others in the town get invita-

tions, including Wingate and his wife, a half-dozen other friends of Belinda, and also Prentiss. Florence is invited, but for another purpose and in another way.

As the fateful evening arrives, Florence is the first to appear, and is whisked upstairs by Belinda, after the parlor doors have been securely locked. Belinda has been opening huge boxes of garments, and has been so impatient that she has tried several hats on the disgusted Major. Now she allows Florence to take charge of things.

The locked parlor contains a line of chairs set facing an improvised curtain, portières strung across the room on a picture wire so that they can be drawn off to one side gradually. What is behind them no one must yet see, for Belinda has locked the communicating folding doors to the library.

Wingate, arriving, and squinting through the keyhole as Judge Lee takes him into the library, is unable to see anything, and turns to inform Lee that the escaped convict was reported in a nearby hamlet the evening before; so he is inclined to stay at the Judge's home all night, a suggestion agreed to by Judge Lee, in view of the likelihood that Sanford will come here to try for a glimpse of his daughter, or of Lee, whom Sanford holds to blame for the sentence.

Rose comes down and helps Lee entertain Wingate and his wife, and the two women are deep in a discussion of "dress" when Bob arrives. He waits in the hall, not caring to go into the library, hoping that Rose will come out. And as a vision of feminine loveliness comes lightly down the stairs, a veritable young lady

- (8) in long skirts and with hair done in the most approved style, he swings about. The lady, startled, trips and falls into his arms. He starts to apologize, when suddenly he observes a wonderful truth, and gasps: "Belinda!—You scamp!"

Belinda gets free, but Bob holds her hands, a growing admiration in his eyes as he notes her changed appearance. Finally he says: "Won't you give me one transitory kiss?" She deliberates, then says: "Well—for my future brother-in-law—" and she purses her lips most primly. But as Rose, breaking from the Sheriff's wife, pauses in the dark back-portion of the hall, her eyes convey something to her brain that is like a scorpion-sting, for in the kiss between Belinda and Bob she senses that something takes place that means much to them all: He suddenly feels the tense passion of awakened, realized love, while she yields her supple body and gives pressure for pressure—then breaks

(9) free, and with a little catch in her voice rushes to the parlor door, unlocks it, dashes in and slams it, just in time to see Rose, with a choking sob, flee past Bob and up the stairs.

Belinda, in the parlor, stands transfixed. Suddenly she realizes what that kiss meant, and what Bob's fervor signified. She is dismayed, and then firm, as she decides that she must not yield to the new passion flaming in her heart; and being unsophisticated, un-grown in spite of her change of garments, she selects a course of procedure that would show flaring danger-

• Developed situation to emphasize dawn of mutual love.

• Sister sees, to make Belinda's realization more complete.

signs to a worldly-wise person. Rose, in her own room, sobs a bit at the revelation of Bob's real regard for Belinda, but she is not deeply in love with him herself, though Belinda is unaware of this.

Presently other guests arrive and Belinda is compelled to unlock the door and retire out of sight. When Prentiss, Florence, Bob, Rose and the other guests have assembled, the portières begin to sweep slowly aside. They halt part way, revealing to the gaze of the spectators first the parlor sofa, on which are spread the many rattles and other toys of Belinda's babyhood, with her infantile garments draped on the back of the sofa. A further move of the portières discloses the big easy-chair, with books, dolls and the like, and a suggestion of a six-to-twelve-year-old array of garments. Then another drawing aside of the curtains still more exposes the garments Belinda has recently worn, as well as the skates, books and dolls that go with the suddenly discarded age.

At last Belinda herself stands revealed, and the applause is spontaneous. But Belinda looks rather doleful as she says: "I had meant to say an incantation of revocation to all my young-day things—" and she smiles weakly; "but it seems sort of silly—in these clothes!"

The spectators vociferate their denials, but Belinda is firm, brightening as she says: "But there's cake and things—we needn't revoke them," and she demurely leads the way to the dining-room, where she sees to it that Prentiss is seated next to her, while Florence, thinking nothing of this arrangement, sits some ways

off, with Bob and Rose ostentatiously placed together. Then Belinda, totally unmeaningful of harm, whispers to Prentiss, and intimates that she thinks Bob loves her. Prentiss grins, and hints that Bob is a "lucky devil;" but she intimates that she is not sure, and wants Prentiss to help her find out "by seeing if Bob is jealous of me—and you!" Prentiss sees growing suspicion and anger in his wife's jealous eyes, and agrees, more to spite Florence than for other reason; and Belinda, never dreaming of the pending havoc, plans only to disgust Bob so completely by her "carryings-on" with a married man that he will "stick" to Rose.

Florence is the first guest to prepare to go, and she hurries upstairs to get her wraps from Belinda's room, while, the tableaux "stage" still set, Belinda waits with Prentiss in the hall until Bob appears, when she begins to stare into Prentiss's eyes with a gone-madly-in-love look, while he "pretends" an admiration that he is actually beginning to feel as he watches the grown-up girl being submerged in the old "babyish" actions, and yet struggling to be triumphant as a grown-up. Bob (11) is disheartened, but not disgusted; rather, he wishes to protect Belinda from what he considers a bad break; but she dismisses Bob shortly, while from the upper (10) hall Florence watches her and Prentiss, and grows more jealous than ever as she recalls how these two flashed past her in the auto, and intuitively feels the change her husband is undergoing in his attitude

¹¹ See Chapter XII.

¹⁰ See Chapter XII.

toward the budding young woman he has so far treated as a child.

Florence's good-night is sugary, but there is spiteful anger in her eyes, and somehow it "gets" Belinda, making her creep into the parlor later, alone with Major, to sit in the dark, feeling surprisingly old and care-burdened, yet helplessly young and inadequate.

Wingate prevails on Judge Lee to be allowed to stay in the library that night. Lee leaves him and goes up to his room without noticing Belinda in the dim parlor.

On his lonely walk homeward Bob makes up his mind to be manly enough to see Rose and tell her the truth; Rose, in her own room, after a few moments' thought, feels no resentment toward Bob for his change.

The house settles into a midnight stillness and the moon peeps in through the front window of the parlor, to see Belinda sitting doleful and downcast. Sheriff Wingate thinks he hears a sound, and rising, goes into the hall, and thence through the back of the hall, eventually to go out on the side porch and leave the door ajar while he takes a look outside. Belinda hears, and wonders. She stills Major, and goes to the front window, to see what the Sheriff is doing outside the house, having seen him disappear down the back of the hall after his quiet steps had aroused her.

Out on the side porch, the door is seen softly drawn to from the inside by some unseen force. There in the moonlight outside the front of the house Belinda can

see the Sheriff looking about. Then she wheels, as a quick, sharp gasp comes from the dim hall beyond her. Sanford has gotten in and locked the Sheriff out! Sanford, the convict at large, is looking into a patch of moonlight and seeing a vision of his dead wife! No! it is not that—it is Belinda, clinging to Major, stilling his growl. As she looks in fright, the agony of the man in the hall wrings from him the gasp: "Belinda!—Daughter!—"

Wingate goes back to the side door and finds it locked. He does not know how else to get in without rousing someone and having to explain, so he tries several windows.

Just then Judge Lee, anxious about his friend's comfort, comes down and is horrified to see facing the dazed Belinda the man whom he sentenced. Lee switches on the hall light. Sanford wheels, and as he sees the Judge, cries: "It's lucky for you that my daughter has been well cared for!"

Belinda is amazed, somewhat stunned, as the relationship is mentioned; then, as her face shows her lack of comprehension, the convict turns back to Lee, who is suffering an agony of remorse and self-deprecation, and sneers: "Preferred to pose as her Pa, and not let her know her Dad was a jailbird!" Then as he sees the suffering in Belinda's eyes he stops, and Belinda, reading acknowledgment of the truth in answer to her questioning glance toward Lee, runs to her real father. But, seeing the prison garb showing as his old, makeshift protector of an old, torn coat drops back, she recoils.

When Sanford sees that look in her face—the revulsion and the growing horror—he is stung with sudden remorse and, almost sobbing, he says: “Maybe—maybe it was better that she didn’t know—” Then as the fire of injustice done flames up in his bosom, he cries fiercely: “—Though God knows I am innocent!”

Belinda stares, sees the misery in Lee’s eyes, the pain in those of this convict-father, and at his declaration she leaps into his arms. Then she looks keenly into his face, probing his soul. The look in his eyes drives all doubt away—he IS innocent! She can see it, feel it! With a sob she holds him tightly as she cries: “Father!—I’ll give the rest of my days to proving you innocent!—I will—” but sobs stifle her utterance.

And at that instant the three freeze into stone as the face of Wingate appears at the window of the parlor; he is the Law, come to wrest away its prey!

Trapped, the prison-breaker looks about like a hunted animal, but he makes no move, for Belinda is clinging to him, choked with sobs. Judge Lee goes heavily to the front door, and opening it, lets the Sheriff in. Wingate enters, looking like a man in no wise fond of his duty, though he must do it. Belinda looks piteously at Wingate, and then asks if she may have a moment to say farewell. Wingate nods, and (12) goes to the piano, near the door between parlor and hall, while Lee stands near him, his lip quivering—and Belinda draws her father to the sofa, flings aside her infant-dresses and draws him down to a seat, clinging, her lips to his. Nor does she betray by a sign the real

¹² See Chapter XII.

purpose hidden by her farewell words, whispered with a tremulous mouth.

Finally the girl leaps up and buries her head in the portières at the side by the piano, while Sanford rises heavily and moves toward Wingate. Like a streak of light, Belinda whirls and leaps, carrying the massed portières over the Sheriff, and bringing him down in a helpless heap, while Sanford leaps past Lee and out of the door to freedom!

Belinda snatches the revolver that Wingate has dropped, and holds it over him until she feels that the pose is useless longer, when she reluctantly surrenders it, and Wingate leaps out the door, though hopeless of finding his escaped quarry.

Belinda, choked with emotion but sweet, puts an arm about quivering Judge Lee to say: "I've found a father—but I still love my 'Daddy-Judge'!" And Lee can only draw her close—yearningly, hungrily.

The next morning Belinda answers the phone in the hall, and hears Wingate's whimsical statement: "You'll be interested to know that I caught nothing but a cold last night." Belinda is deeply interested, and as her suspense is dissipated, the reaction brings on tears. Rose, demanding an explanation, is assured: "It's only that—I'm growing up too fast—and the growing pains—hurt!" Rose feels keen sympathy, not knowing of the events of the previous midnight, and thinking that Belinda loves Bob.

Belinda hurries out, gets Major, puts on his shopping harness and goes down town. There she makes some

purchases, and putting the packages in Major's harness, she is about to go with him when she runs abruptly into Sheriff Wingate. She has just time to bend and whisper to Major, and to let the dog trot off alone, then she faces Wingate and apologizes a little tremulously for her assault the night before. He waves her plea aside with pretended gruffness; but who can accuse Wingate of hard-heartedness?

Major goes to, and into, the cave, and there Sanford is! He calls the dog, finds that the packages contain food, and makes friends with Major by feeding him.

Belinda goes along with the Sheriff, and he tells her (14) all he knows of the incident of her father's crime, as he told it to his wife. Belinda thanks him, and goes off alone to think. She can reach but one conclusion: one face only seems to linger through the recollection of the past—that of Prentiss: he can help her.

She hurries to the bank—Bob stops her, asking her to listen to him, but she brushes past him and is admitted to Prentiss's office. He smilingly lays down the paper he has been reading, and notices the trimness and development of the figure that looked so spare in its short-skirted days, as he listens to Belinda saying: "I have just learned the truth—about my—father." (18) Saying nothing of the report of the criminal's escape, of which he had just read in his paper, he nods as she begs: "You were there—that night! Please help me to establish his innocence." Prentiss sees unexpected

¹⁴ Repeating only hints of the past here, to keep the crime in mind.

¹⁸ See Chapter VII.

good fortune thrown into his hands, and while his purpose is not such a generous one as one might hope, he allows Belinda to see him as willing to aid her, as he says: "We must work together—and of course we must see a good deal of each other." Belinda agrees eagerly and innocently, and hurries away to seek Major and send by him a note of cheer to her father. Prentiss (21) nods to himself, and it is surmisable that now Lorita will be neglected—just as his old fancy, Florence, was neglected in the pursuit of Lorita.

Bob, seeing Belinda go out, allows her to pass without speech, though he wonders what she has been to see Prentiss about. Belinda sends a note to Sanford, tucking it under Major's collar and letting him out the front door. That evening Prentiss calls in his car, and suggests that they go for a ride and talk things over. Belinda agrees, and while Rose, seeing, does not approve, the latter says nothing to Judge Lee, who seems sunk in a stupor of sadness.

Bob calls on Rose and explains his true feeling, and she very gently assures him that she understands and is not too badly hurt by his defection.

The night-rides in the car continue, and they usually take into their radius a stop at the Evergreen Inn, a "fast" roadhouse in the city suburbs. Belinda is too innocent to see that the explanation of the need for quiet is the camouflage for Prentiss's true, eventual intention. The frequent absences of Belinda are noticed by Bob when he calls to see her, and when he

²¹ Referring again to Lorita, lest she be forgotten.

asks Rose she explains, and Bob worries—to such an extent that finally one evening he hires a car for himself and when he sees the racer dashing away with Belinda beside its driver, Bob pursues discreetly.

- (21) In the meantime Lorita has begun to wonder that a promised visit has not been paid by Prentiss. The protestations of love by her dancing partner annoy her and she breaks the partnership and goes away “on her own,” secures an engagement at the Evergreen Inn cabaret, and is singing and dancing when Belinda comes in with Prentiss on this fateful evening. Lorita falters in her song, but catches it up. Prentiss has seen her, however, and is eager to get out of her sight before she finishes. He beckons a waiter and whispers to him. Bob is an unostentatiously interested witness at another table. Prentiss tells Belinda: “I have brought you to see someone—of importance in our search.” Eagerly Belinda accompanies him to an upper floor. The room door shuts behind them, and
- (16) Belinda, wheeling in surprise, as no one else is seen in the room, notices the look on his face and shrinks back; then she cries: “You coward!” and leaps back as he advances.

Bob, below, calls the waiter, and for appropriate gold, the latter explains what Bob wants to know. Meanwhile Lorita is fuming as she realizes that she is thrown aside; anger becomes a purpose of spiteful vengeance. Bob knocks at the door of the room signi-

²¹ Lorita again used, to keep her in sight and build her eventual motives gradually.

¹⁶ Note how far differently sequence runs in synopsis and in plot outline.

fied by the waiter, and hearing the cry of Belinda, breaks in the door and tackles Prentiss. There is a brief struggle, and then Prentiss sinks down, vanquished. Bob seizes Belinda and with compressed lips leads her out and to his car.

The drive home is a silent one, for Belinda is stunned and humiliated. Bob, too, is quiet, grim.

- (17) Lorita drops in on Prentiss as he is washing his bloody face, and her vituperative tongue inflames him to the point where he flings out of the room, leaps into his car, and rides furiously about the country, ignoring speed-laws or the endurance-possibilities of the "gas" supply.

Bob leaves Belinda at her home-door, saying nothing. She goes up to her room, and there, sitting down with Major at her feet, she thinks over her sad plight.

Florence, alone at home, is beginning to wonder about these nocturnal trips of her husband, and she guesses rightly as to their reason, though she fails to appreciate Belinda's real sincerity of purpose in this association with a married man.

Suddenly, in her room, Belinda starts to her feet, hand pressed to heart! A great comprehension has come over her: *The man she has been with does not intend to help her!—He may even be guilty himself!* Startled, and forgetting the light she leaves burning, Belinda hurries off with Major to seek her father and communicate her unaccountable yet intuitive suspicion. She reaches the cave: her father is not there! What

¹⁷ See Chapter XII.

has happened? Is he safe? Terrified, in utter suspense, she waits.

Meanwhile, Prentiss reaches home fagged out and meets a furious, sarcastic Florence. He does not refute her accusations, but turns and leaves again, once more resorting to furious driving as the only outlet for his fury—while Florence becomes suddenly very calm, even as Lorita at the Inn is lashing her hate into wilder emotion.

Belinda, at the cave, hears a step: she is in a torture of dread until the moonlight reveals her father's face as he stoops and enters the cave. At its mouth they talk: he listens to her suspicion, but does not seem able to credit such a surmise as that Prentiss fired the fatal shot—how could he?—he was in another room. Then he draws an object from his pocket, and while he holds a rusty, water-soaked revolver, he explains (19) to Belinda how, just having taken a night-ramble to visit the scenes of his former residence, he has passed the bank, seen Hobbs, the postman, evidently coming home late, and hid from him in a huge old rain barrel in an alley alongside the windows of the bank. Fortunately, the barrel is nearly empty, and in its secure hiding he has found this old weapon. He wonders what to do with it, and finally decides to keep it, as he feels that he must not stay too long at the cave, and he wants something to help protect him if he ventures out and is assailed.

Prentiss drives till his gasoline runs out, and then starts to walk home on the lonely highway. His atten-

¹⁹ See Chapter XII.

tion is attracted by the sight of Major prowling near a hill. He pays little attention until the dog seems to respond to a call. Carelessly Belinda has allowed Major to wander, and it is her own call that brings suspicion on the dog and leads Prentiss to investigate the dog's sudden disappearance. He comes near the cave. Belinda stops breathing; her father crouches, but she holds him with main strength as a match is struck outside, and Prentiss fires some brush and thrusts it into the cave—recognizing Belinda—and Sanford!

Hopeless, dismayed, Belinda comes forth into the moonlight. Prentiss has thought swiftly, and instead of being the man she expects him to be, ready to use his powerful hold upon her, he appears very sympathetic and apologetic, and assures Belinda, as she pleads piteously, that her secret will be safe. He urges her to go with him, but she refuses, and he leaves by himself, while Belinda is torn with misgivings, and tells her father: "I will get money for you—and you must go away at once."

(20) Taking sad leave of her father, she calls Major and hurries home: but her plan is upset, for the neglected light in her room has aroused Rose; who, finding Belinda not there, has awakened Judge Lee. Both, worried, are waiting, and so sternly does Judge Lee speak to Belinda, in the light of Rose's revelations of the association between Belinda and Prentiss, that the poor girl dares not speak the truth, and dawn is break-

²⁰ See Chapter XII.

ing before she can get to her room. It is manifestly too late for Sanford to attempt escape.

The next morning Prentiss discharges Bob summarily, and there is quite a scene as the young man states his opinion of Prentiss. He goes, however, downcast.

About noon Belinda gets a note from Prentiss, and it carries a threat that her father's safety lies in her hands. The writer suggests that she pack at once for a "little trip to New York." Helplessly Belinda accepts her fate, to save her father. She packs quietly, Major keeping close, as if knowing something is amiss.

Finally, after dinner, Belinda writes a note to her father and tucks it under Major's collar, and as the clock strikes two in the lower hall she lets him out. Rose coming in at the same time, sees but says nothing, guesses nothing.

Rose has scarcely gone upstairs when the phone rings, and to Belinda's surprise the voice of Florence suggests that she run over for just a minute. Belinda, wondering, agrees.

- (22) In the meantime, Lorita has been making some investigations, and on discovering that Prentiss is married she determines to visit his wife and then wreak a belated vengeance on her deceiver. Carlos, smarting under her flouting, has found out where Lorita is now engaged as a dancer and hurries to the Evergreen Inn to see if she will not listen to him.

Florence has dismissed all the servants, and now

²² Building situation from here on to carry climax in *action*.

with her own hand she admits Belinda and takes the wondering girl past the umbrella rack in the lower hall, up the stairs to her second-floor boudoir, where with a strange, tense quiet in her manner she turns and faces Belinda. Suddenly Florence says: "You have come between my husband and me: are you willing to help me get a divorce?" Belinda is stunned, and cannot speak for a moment. Florence will not listen when Belinda does try pitifully to explain; she rises to terrific heights of fury and vituperation, and suddenly snatches a revolver from a table drawer. Belinda springs forward and the two struggle for the weapon. Panting, Belinda secures it at last, and drops it on the table, backing against the table to prevent Florence from reaching the revolver.

Neither knows that Prentiss, having left the bank early, is in his own room, adjoining the boudoir, an intensely interested spectator. Florence suddenly changes front, and cries out: "Since you can make him happy, I leave you to make a home for him!" She rushes out, and as Belinda starts after her she is arrested by Prentiss's detaining hand on her arm. She turns with a shrinking dread, and sees his evil smirk. He makes a gesture to indicate that he will let his wife go, and while Belinda pleads with him he remains adamant, and finally, with a shrug, says he will get his bag and they can start.

He goes into his own room, and Belinda hesitates between escape and compliance, when she sees a woman standing in the doorway, eyeing her with surprise.

Lorita, having reached the house just as Florence is fleeing, sees the door open and walks upstairs unmolested. Seeing Belinda, close upon her view of the runaway woman, Lorita sneers: "I came to drive out the Missus, but you beat me to it, Kid!"

Belinda stares in horror as she comprehends the other's meaning. Then she turns and, with all her force and earnestness displayed in her tremulous, working features, tries to explain. The unexpectedness of Belinda's attitude, her evident unsophistication, touches some chord in Lorita's heart, and she ceases her sneering as Belinda says: "I'm only trying to clear my father—John Sanford."

Lorita starts, and goes close to Belinda, a great surprise in her eyes. As they stand there, the one questioning, the other bearing her searching look with the sincerity of honest purpose, Prentiss comes back into the room, while downstairs the postman, Jim Hobbs, (23) seeing the door open, steps into the hall to lay some mail on the rack.

In the boudoir Lorita throws her head back and laughs, as she says: "And you came to John Sanford's old associate to find out about the crime? Why, Kid, Horace Prentiss has got more reasons than one for—" (24) Just then Prentiss comes in and flings Lorita, stunned, into a corner. And outside, Carlos, who has pursued his love in a taxi, is seeking to discover the number on the open door.

²³ See Chapter XII. •

²⁴ See Chapter XII.

Before Lorita can recover her senses, Prentiss has caught Belinda by the arm. She has flung herself free and given him a push. In the dark hallway outside the door, a shot lights up the gloom, and Prentiss staggers into the room, reels, and drops in a heap. His watch has dropped out and been broken in the fall, and has stopped.

Lorita, recovering, gets to her feet, and looks dazedly about. Carlos is seen rushing for his taxi, around the corner. Belinda, oddly, leaps from the room: then it is apparent why, for she turns into an alcove, and catches hold of Hobbs, the postman, and is about to scream—but he stills her with a face positively compelling sympathy. Belinda hesitates, and, snatching his slender opportunity, Hobbs tells her: “You couldn’t blame me, if you knew—” Stammering, he calls up a vision of the past, of his daughter Laura—yes, of her (15) who is now known as Lorita!—and of her sudden disinclination to be happy at home, of his finding of the note, his anger toward the unknown “man in the case,” (26) of his discovery just now that his daughter and Prentiss were together—that Prentiss was the blamable man.

Belinda hesitates, and then a call from Lorita causes (26) her to turn—and at that instant Hobbs slips past her and is gone down the stairs.

Meanwhile Bob has called to see Belinda and has been told by Rose where she went. He is anxious, and

¹⁵ See Chapter XII.

²⁶ See Chapter XII.

²⁶ The story is told here to avoid delay in a swifter situation later.

goes to the Prentiss house, and so hears the shot. He joins Wingate as the latter rushes up the steps, meets the postman and inquires what is wrong. Hobbs dissembles, and Wingate, taking Hobbs by the arm, motions to Bob and the trio go in and up the stairs.

There is a cry from Lorita—or Laura—as her father steps into the room, and with a face convulsed with sorrow she leaps across and clings to him, begging forgiveness, pleading her sorrow and longing to atone.

Wingate sees the body of Prentiss and signs for Bob to call for a doctor. Then, after a hasty examination, he shakes his head, and he bids Bob and Hobbs take the limp form into the bedroom. Then he turns on Belinda, viewing her with amazement. Wingate then recognizes Lorita as Laura Hobbs, and demands what this business means, seizing the revolver from the table at the same time. Belinda is torn between her sense of duty and her sense of human justice: she knows that Hobbs shot Prentiss; she, alone, was a witness and in the flash of light had recognized the postman. Lorita lay stunned in the corner at the time. Lorita clearly does not suspect her father. Shall Belinda speak the truth?

Bob stays in the other room, but Hobbs comes out, and at sight of the yearning in the father's eyes, the remorse in those of the daughter, Belinda is touched with pity, and as Wingate demands: "Who done this?" Belinda closes her lips tightly. Wingate recalls her association with Prentiss and his heart misgives him, though he hates to suspect her, and turns, instead,

accusingly toward Lorita; but Belinda speaks up in her sister-woman's defense, without implicating Hobbs.

Sanford has received Belinda's note, having torn it in removing it from under Major's collar, so that a bit still remains there. The contents of the note have alarmed him so much that he has decided to risk capture in order to see Belinda and warn her of danger, for he suspects the use to which Prentiss has put his powerful grip upon the girl. Sanford, with Major, reaches the Prentiss home, hears of the shooting from the gaping crowd at the gate, and rushes in with Major at his heels. The coroner comes after him, and both hurry up the stairs.

(25) There is a sensation when Sanford steps into the room, but he is paying attention only to the look on Belinda's face, and the view he gets of the pistol which Wingate has again laid on the table. He is worthless, a jail breaker! He must save Belinda! He steps forward and takes the guilt on his own shoulders.

Belinda is again torn with doubt: Shall she speak and clear her father? The coroner comes from the other room with the broken watch, displaying it, and Belinda, seeing it, suddenly sees a way to compel them to clear her father of at least one suspicion: she turns to her father, and asks him if he got the note. He produces it and she sees that the corner is torn off. Rose and Judge Lee, summoned, come in, and Belinda stays their eager questions as she turns to the Sheriff and asks: "How long would it take for a dog to run from my home to the cave in the North Hill?" Win-

* See Chapter XII.

gate, amazed and stunned to know where Sanford has been hiding, summons his fortitude and replies: "About a quarter of an hour—running!" Belinda nods, and asks again: "And how long would it take a man to run from the cave to this house?" The Sheriff considers, then says: "It couldn't be done under a half hour!" Belinda shows her first signs of elation as she hands him the note and shows the torn bit under the dog's collar, then asks Rose: "When did I let Major out?" and she visualizes the clock striking *two*, and Belinda shows the watch, marking 2.25—her father could not have accomplished the journey to the house, and this is clear to all. Then suspicion turns again upon Belinda, but Hobbs steps forward and declares himself guilty, with a forlorn look at his daughter—who breaks down.

The coroner comes to ask Belinda into the adjoining room, and as he ushers her in, Prentiss, still alive and somewhat recovered from the shock of the bullet, sees the crowd in the other room, the boudoir. As Belinda comes in he snaps, querulously, to Bob, who is still with him: "I tried to run away with another girl once; that time one man saw me—this time—it looks as though the whole town turned out."

Belinda starts, and her mind begins working like a flash. Suddenly she wheels, while Sanford, Wingate, Rose, Judge Lee, Hobbs and Lorita come in by the bed. "YOU committed the crime for which my father has paid!" she cries. But Prentiss lifts himself by frantic strength and cries: "It's a lie! The man who shot me did it!" and he points to Hobbs. But Belinda

will not listen, and she silences Hobbs' protestations as she says to Prentiss: "I will tell you how you did (28) it!" Swiftly she visualizes Prentiss with the younger Laura-Lorita, on the way to a train, seen by the dead teller; later the teller demanding a huge sum of hush-money; Prentiss planning the quarrel between Sanford and the teller; Prentiss seeing a chance to silence his threatening enemy and put blame on another; the work later than usual; PRENTISS PUTTING A REVOLVER BEFORE THE VAULT IN WHICH SANFORD HAS STEPPED WITH THE TELLER; PRENTISS FIRING A SHOT FROM ANOTHER REVOLVER, THROUGH THE DOOR FROM THE OTHER ROOM, AND FLINGING HIS OWN WEAPON THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOW INTO THE RAIN BARREL.

Sanford at this point in Belinda's accusation hauls out the weapon—it is marked "H. P.," and the accused man collapses, confessed guilty by his face. The coroner assures them: "He'll live to serve quite a spell behind bars," and Wingate takes Hobbs with him, while Belinda takes leave of her father; and a small boy, running in out of breath, gasps: "I seen the feller what done it!" The amused Sheriff asks: "What did he look like?" and the boy pants: "Looked like he was in a thunderin' big hurry!" This takes off the strain as the group begins to break up: and later on it is refreshing to see Belinda with her exonerated father, and the smiling Judge Lee, meeting Rose's real love, a dashing young officer back from France; while a

²⁸ See Chapter XII.

rather sombre and repentant Lorita is forgiven by her father.

Then Bob knocks on the door from the parlor, where the group is massed, and Belinda runs to see what he wants. He wants her, of course, and as he takes her hand he asks: "Once you had a kiss for your future brother-in-law. Who will get one now?" Belinda dimples and is mischievous as she cries: "Nobody, smarty!" and puts the table between them. But Bob has a low cunning that prompts him to dive under the table and so, as he grabs her, he demands once more who will get a kiss, and the answer comes, with bent head: "The future husband of the future Mrs. Bob." And it isn't fair to ask the camera-man to stay any longer on the job.

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