

R for a THIN MAN

By W. S. VAN DYKE

Director of The Thin Man and After the Thin Man

Looking back into the infinite past, I seem to recall that a certain motion picture was made and that I had something to do with it. It stirs restlessly in my memory, for it was immediately seized by the theatre public as a picture that started a new cycle in screen entertainment. In Hollywood, things are often done by cycles—gangster cycles, G-man cycles, historical romances, sea stuff, even Shakespeare. Somebody starts it and others fall in line to catch the shekels that bounce to the floor after the first jack pot.

Many pictures have been filmed requiring from one to two years to complete and costing in the neighborhood of one or two million dollars. Yet quite a few of these super-colossals failed to arouse the exhibitors' hosannas that *The Thin Man* did.

From the first scene, when Myrna Loy made a perfect three-point, one-take landing on a dance floor, to the final shot of Miss Loy, Bill Powell, and Asta in a train drawing-room, *The Thin Man* was filmed in just sixteen days.

Then why has this picture been accepted as a paragon of perfection for other pictures of a certain type to follow? Even today, three years later, we now and then read of pictures in the critics' reviews . . . "Almost equals *The Thin Man*" . . . "As funny as *The Thin Man*" . . . "Another film in *The Thin Man* mood."

Perhaps there are several answers to that question. It did start a new cycle in screen entertainment. It proved that murder mysteries on the screen necessarily did not have to be morbid nightmares; that, with sparkling wisecrackery and a chain of kaleidoscopic situations that keep an audience guessing to the last frame of the film, a murder mystery can be turned into pleasing, laughable entertainment and still retain every element of first-class baffling mystery.

The picture shattered Hollywood traditions in several other ways. It awakened the theatre public to the truth that romance actually can exist happily among more matured married persons. There had been so many stories, novels, and screen plays of puppy love that audiences sickened of the overdose. Romances among mature people are as old as the universe itself, but apparently they had been obscured by the petting parties of flaming youth on the screen. Mature romances contain more understanding. In them the instabilities of youthful love affairs and quarrels have been overcome, all of the obstacles have been conquered and marriage progresses under full sail. *The Thin Man* was the first example of the possibilities of

happy, mature romance.

Also, the picture had other advantages. It already possessed the title and the story of the best-seller mystery novel in many years, which that admirable and sage critic, Alexander Woolcott, praised as "the best detective story yet written in America," and which was authored by Dashiell Hammett, the unquestioned master of detective-story fiction. It was adapted to the screen by the ablest scenarists, Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich, who faithfully transferred the humor and the mystery of the book to their script without losing one whiff of the original flavor. It was produced by Hunt Stromberg, who possesses a rare insight into mass psychology and the wants of the theatre patrons, who has the touch of Midas in turning daring production ventures into box-office gold and who, as far as I can recall, has never turned out a flop. Then, lastly, the picture had as its stars the ideal Mr. and Mrs. of the screen, Myrna Loy and Bill Powell—not to forget Asta.

The Thin Man already was marching across the theatre screens, kicking the dollars into the cash tills, when rumor arose that a sequel to the picture was to be made. In the Hollywood vernacular, the word "sequel" is a bugaboo that frightens most directors, and I am no exception, for if the sequel fails to approach its parent picture in public favor or financial returns, it is the director who is left holding the bag. Sequels have made money in the earlier days, in such breath-takers as *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Demon Eye*, and, in later years, the *Tarzan* pictures, but sequels of Class-A pictures with Class-A stars offer a different problem.

The Thin Man had the additional advantage of not only being adapted from a best-seller novel that had rung up a sale that reached into the hundred thousands, but also of serialization in a nation-wide chain of newspapers that were read by an additional three million people. Seldom has any film production had the benefits of such advance exploitation. But exploitation alone cannot make a good picture. The picture first must be good upon its own merits and then the exploitation serves as a means to tell the world that it is good.

Hence the apprehension of every one concerned, myself included, with bringing the clever Nick Charles and his amusing wife, Nora, back to the screen in a *Thin Man* sequel to solve another perplexing murder case. The return of Nick and Nora in a second mystery would not have such helpful allies as adaptation from a best-selling novel and universal ballyhoo through newspaper serialization. This time it must be an original story written solely for the screen, yet it must retain an interest equal to, if not greater than, that of the first story. Too, it must be as good, if not better, than the first.

Here was the first problem. To lift a character out of the pages of a popular book, such as Nick Charles, and build it into an idol in the public's imagination is one thing. To transplant this idol to an original screen treatment and keep it at its highest level comparable to the book idol is something else. Hunt Stromberg had the courage to do it and I dared to back him up.

Dashiell Hammett had his problems. In *The Thin Man*, Bill Powell and Miss Loy had brought the story to a happy ending in a drawing-room aboard a train that was speeding them back to San Francisco. And Asta, the frisky, wire-haired fox terrier, had his final close-up in Myrna's hat box.

Obviously, *After the Thin Man* could not be filmed without Powell and Myrna—and Asta. As they were last seen returning by train to San Francisco, the new murder mystery must have its locale in San Francisco. They had trained out of New York about the day after Christmas. Allowing for time to cross the continent, the new story must be picked up on New Year's Eve to permit Nick and Nora to continue their madcap marital adventures without leaving too wide a breach between the two chapters of their hectic honeymoon.

Here, at least, was to be something new in film fare—two distinctly separate motion picture mysteries, linked together with the same major characters and with less than a week's time elapsing between the finale of the first and the beginning of the other. Yet, three years had swept away between the shooting of the last scene for *The Thin Man* and the first scene for *After the Thin Man*. How well we could accomplish that job was the thought that gave us many sleepless nights.

I have felt very fortunate in having the same personal staff on the pictures I have directed for many years, particularly the same script clerk with her photographic mind, the same prop man, the same sound engineer, and others. A trifling thing such as the dog leash that led Asta onto the train in the last scenes of *The Thin Man* could have become an irritating problem had not my prop man not only remembered the style and color of the leash but had kept it stored in his prop box, for Powell leads Asta from the train in *After the Thin Man* by the same leash.

The same scenarists, Goodrich and Hackett, fell heirs to adapting the new original story, but it was no easy task for them to grope back through three years of time to catch the same characteristic idioms voiced by Bill and Myrna in the first story. Too, Bill and Myrna had grown three years older than the original Nick and Nora, and had alienated themselves from those characterizations by many successive screen roles of varied interpretation, so it was necessary for them also to step back three years into the amusing, delightful characters of Nick and Nora. Picking up these threads was no simple job for Bill and Myrna.

The tempo of the second Hammett story had to parallel the first if it were to be as successful and entertaining as its predecessor. New actors had to be carefully selected to adapt themselves to the unusual new characters, as intriguing as *The Thin Man* characters if not more so, created in *After the Thin Man* to muddle the element of mystery, for in such detective fabrics as Hammett weaves, unusual characterization is one of the more important structures of fictional enigma.

Since *After the Thin Man* has San Francisco as its theatre, I chose to capture the true atmosphere of the city so the picture might breathe its true life. Although confronted by many handicaps, such as over-enthusiastic

crowds who interfered with the shooting, and low-hanging stubborn fogs, we did succeed in filming most of our exteriors up and down San Francisco's throbbing streets and around its historic landmarks, with the mighty Golden Gate and San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridges, symbols of the new and greater San Francisco, constantly in the background.

Once the foundation for *After the Thin Man* was firmly laid, no major obstacle presented itself in our path toward completing the picture. We had an excellent story from the author of the parent production. We had a flawless script from the same capable team who had adapted *The Thin Man*. We had the same two stars, Powell and Miss Loy—and we still had Asta, who, though he, too, had aged three years, had been going through three years of special training for his repeat performance.

After the cameras started rolling, the picture progressed with precision and with the finest cooperation from every person who had a hand in it, and I feel that we have turned out a worthy successor to *The Thin Man*.

Such is the prescription for success for any good motion picture: A perfect story written by an expert in his field, a finished script that needs no alteration after the picture is under way, and a wisely chosen cast who can be depended upon to do what the director wants them to do . . . who know how to do it . . . and who do it.

If he has all these, no capable director should fear the bugaboo of a sequel.

W. S. Van Dyke



STAGE

(Date?) 1937