

V A N I T Y F A I R

March, 1918: p. 59

Writing for the Movies

*Proving That the
Scenario Authors Are
Sometimes Human*

By **DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS**



SOMEHOW, everything in the movies is just a little more so than it is on the stage. Haven't you often noticed it yourself? Comedy, on the stage, can be accomplished with a line, a fragment of profanity, or, at the most, a slammed bedroom door. On the screen, comedy necessitates, at the very least, a crate of siphon bottles, a half-mile of bursting hose, and a battalion of trick policemen.

It's the same way with serious plays. On the stage, a serious play is just a serious play; on the screen, it's an orgy of gloom. And as for melodrama—why, even the mildest movie melodrama would make the most press-agented stage thriller seem like a dramatization of one of the Elsie books.

THERE was that movie melodrama I saw the other night, for instance. It was made on the pattern of all perfectly respectable movie melodramas—a thrill every hundred feet. The heroine, too, was on the pattern of all perfectly respectable movie heroines. She was a self-made blonde, with the conventional curls. She was one of those sweet young things, vivacious to the point of St. Vitus' dance, and innocent to the verge of imbecility. She wouldn't even think of asking a strange conductor for a transfer unless her mother was present. (Historical note: No reflection on Miss Elsie Janis.) Her mother—the regulation property mother—with the 1887 model dress and the Royal Family coiffure, had great ambitions for her only chee-ild. She had mortgaged the old farm just to keep her daughter in white spats, and she had worked, starved and suffered—she said so herself—ever since the passing of her husband, a legendary personage who didn't even come into the scenario, just so her daughter could grow up to marry a man strong enough to lift the mortgage—a man who owned a Ford, but came from a good family.

Mother was always harping on her fondness for her daughter. In fact, it was her principal subject of conversation. She combined her affection with a pleasant watchfulness for her own future. "There is no love like that of a mother," she repeatedly told her daughter, "Remember, where you go, I go"—which was probably the principal reason why Daughter was still unmarried.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Writing Movies

BUT Daughter, despite Mother's plans for an expensive future, loved what is always known in melodrama as Another. And so she told her mother that she was far too young to think seriously of matrimony. But she couldn't get away with that, even to her own mother.

Her parent was quite put out about it.

"So that's the game, is it?" she cut-in, furiously. "After all I've done for you! And now that I am getting old and the mortgage is due, you tell me to wait."

The heroine promptly registered the stop-look-listen emotion.

"You are the only mother I have in the world," were her proud words. "I love you even more than my course in Dramatic Art. But I must have time to decide my future. Give me until morning to think it over."

AND all of this, naturally, led right up to a flash of the hero—"Oyster Jim," a man's man. His name was a result of his occupation; he was the proprietor of the town's leading chowder emporium. He wore one of those Francis Bushman shirts, and boasted a virile homespun suit that he wore only during Prune Week and other spectacular local celebrations. He was a model hero—never known to touch liquor, tobacco, cards, or fireworks. He was unfailingly kind to animals and flowers, and he never even swore at his grandparents. But as the village gossips said, "he's a bad actor, once he's started, and he's always ready to help a woman in distress."

He and the heroine loved with true moving picture devotion—the kind of devotion that necessitates a fade-out every few minutes. He told her all the old ones—about the little rose-covered cottage they would be paying installments on, some day in the happy future, when his salary was doubled and he would be earning eighteen a week.

IN fact, everything was getting along beautifully—when Mother wasn't looking,—and then the villain had to come into the plot. You knew he was a villain the moment you saw him, because he had a Hohenzollern mustache, a riding crop, and a pair of chamois gloves—which photograph a soft white.

WITH the entrance of the villain, things started. Evidently he had never seen a woman before, for he fell heavily for the heroine. The villain and the hero, on the contrary, had for each other that deep and lasting affection which the Messrs. Shubert always feel for Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger.

These villains *do* have the quaintest little ways of showing their feelings. This particular villain was a firm believer in the "treat 'em like dogs" system with women. Just because the heroine wouldn't marry him, he tied her to a railway track, and left her there to receive the train. Though the road wasn't mentioned, it was evidently the Erie, for the hero had ample time to stroll up and untie the heroine and walk away with her long after the train was due but hours before it was even sighted. When the villain saw that that little prank had been foiled, he gave vent to some quite visible curses, and tried again. This time he lured the heroine to the old mill, locked her in, and then nonchalantly set fire to a cunning little nest of dynamite. But who do you think happened to be passing the old mill, at the time, on his way to the Y. M. C. A? You're way ahead of me—of course, it was Oyster Jim.

He burst in the door, just as the O. M. blew up in a blaze of red light. The heroine, of course, was not hurt,—movie heroines never are; the film would have to stop in the very middle if they were—but the hero got all the credit for saving her, and could stagger around

Writing Movies

through the smoke with a carefully torn shirt, just like a regular hero.

The villain's imagination gave up, after that, and he could only think of old stuff like blowing up bridges, just before the heroine's train came to them; shoving her off the roofs of tall buildings; strewing her in the paths of runaway horses, and showing her a variety of like delicate attentions. But the hero always appeared just at the right moment to claim the Carnegie medal, and the heroine wasn't damaged two dollars' worth. In fact, her adventures seemed to do her good. (*Continued on page 98*)

FINALLY, when the scenario writer got fed up and bored with the whole thing, the villain met the hero on the top of a cliff—I think I recognized it as third Palisade beyond Fort Lee, going north from One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street. It was a good battle—I speak from the standpoint of a connoisseur in that branch of movie art. The hero won, by the simple trick of seizing the villain when he was looking the other way, and throwing him off the cliff. This feat was followed by a pleasant interlude showing the villain falling through the air and into the water. The lady who sat back of me (who was one of those "inside information" hounds) confided to most of the audience that it wasn't really the villain—it was just a stuffed dummy. Thus, for *me*, was the thrill removed from the throbbing Big Scene.

The scenario writer must have wanted to catch his train, after that, for the next scene was just a brief glimpse of Oyster Jim clasping the heroine to his Hart, Schaffner and Marx's. He was telling her that they would always have enough to eat—during the months with R in them.

Here the light faded out—and the next picture was entitled "The Birth of a Caterpillar—from egg to cocoon."

I have often wondered what became of Mother. Not another word was ever said about her!

Ah, well, these scenario writers are only human after all! Poor Mother! Wherever you are I send you my love and my sympathy!



VALDA VALKYRIEN

Vanity Fair remembers very well when, three years or so ago, this Scandinavian artist landed in America and began her career here as a dancer. For the past year or so she has limited herself to the screen, on which she has been appearing with great success as a co-star with Derwent Hall Caine, the son of Hall Caine