

Crusader Against Provincialism

By
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Today one of America's foremost directors. Eleven years ago a seven-dollar-a-week packing room employee of the Simpson, Crawford and Simpson department store on Fourteenth Street, New York, and barely able to speak English. Above, a portrait study and, left, a scene from his latest Universal production, "The Devil's Passkey"

TODAY one of America's foremost directors. Eleven years ago a seven-dollar-a-week packing room employee of the Simpson, Crawford and Simpson department store on Fourteenth Street, New York. And barely able to speak English.

After that, a soldier in the United States Army.

Then a life-saver on Lake Tahoe.

Next a riding master in Los Angeles.

Such has been at least a part of the variegated career of Erich Von Stroheim, producer of "Blind Husbands" and "The Devil's Passkey."

"Between 1909, when I landed in New York, and 1914, I was everything but a bartender or a waiter," smiles Von Stroheim. "I was born in Vienna and, as a matter of course, I took up an army career. Schnitzler, the famous playwright, was the physician of my regiment. I was young and adventurous—and finally I came to America. I had heard all sorts of fantastic tales of New York, and I was confident that I would be a multi-millionaire in a year.

"But, after several months in Simpson, Crawford and Simpson's packing room at seven dollars a week, I began to figure out my finances and I saw that I would n't clear a million the first year, at least. So I decided to try my luck at something else in the evening. Perhaps I could sing in restaurants. I applied to a German rathskeller in Second Avenue. I spoke German, it being my mother's language. That evening I made my debut, doing the things I had once done in the officers' messes back in Austria. The owner had promised me dinner for the try-out and three dollars a night if I made good.

"I did my best, but nobody laughed. The *restaurateur* called me aside and told me he could not use me. Then the waiter brought my check. I was too timid and retiring to argue the thing—and I paid, altho it took every



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cent I had. Back out in Second Avenue, I found myself penniless — and with my room in Brooklyn some miles away.

"I did not have enough nerve to ask any one for carfare, so I started down thru the Bowery towards the Brooklyn Bridge. Suddenly a tall man stepped out of a doorway, seized me by the collar and demanded my money. I was so scared that I lapsed into German. With that the tall stranger collapsed into loud laughter and dragged me into a saloon. There he offered me a stein of beer and carfare, telling me he was German and had once been a professor in the fatherland. I drank the beer, but, when he kept eyeing my fur coat, which I had brought over from Austria, and kept asking me if I didn't feel warm, I began to doubt his intentions. So I darted out the saloon side-door and ran until I came to the bridge.

"Then I slowed up and started across. But my night's adventures had not ended. Right in the middle I stumbled across the body of a woman. All sorts of horrible visions came into my mind—of innocent people hung because they had been found beside murdered people. I started running again. At the Brooklyn end of the bridge, a huge Irish policeman yelled to me to stop and demanded to know why I was running. I was so frightened that I told him all about the body, and he made me retrace my steps. The woman proved to be an ordinary drunk and, after the policeman called a patrol, he let me ride as far as my place.

"I drifted West after that and some friends got me a job at Lake Tahoe as a life-saver. I never had an opportunity to save any one and, with the end of the season,

I worked my way to Los Angeles by taking care of twenty-six horses being shipped by train. There I landed a job with their purchaser as a riding master.

"About that time I began trying to stage a vaudeville act, but my finances soon ran out. The actors in the sketch told me of motion pictures and I began to haunt the studios. I selected the David Griffith lot and for two and a half months I walked eight miles to the place each morning and waited about without a single person noticing me. I was still too timid to ask for anything outright.

"I remained in the background until one day I saw an actor pass in what was apparently supposed to be the costume of a chamberlain. I knew the costume to be inaccurate and I summoned up enough courage to approach him. The man was John Emerson, and he was costumed for the rôle of Alving in the film version of 'Ghosts.' He accepted my suggestions in good part. Emerson



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later withdrew from the rôle and it was given to Henry Walthall, who also played the son, Oswald.

"But that little suggestion proved to be the turning point in my career. A few days later Mr. Emerson sought me out. 'I am doing "Old Heidelberg,"' he told me, 'and I want you to help me.' It was in the nick of time, for I you to help me.' It was in the nick of time, for I

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owed my landlady exactly eighty-three dollars. That launched me upon my screen career, altho the fight to the point of directing 'Blind Husbands' for Universal was no easy one. I was with Mr. Emerson for a long time."

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Von Stroheim's method of thinking is distinctly Continental. He wants to produce only the Continental type of story. Indeed, he sums up the weakness of our native photoplays in this fashion:

"The exhibitor is the bugbear of the American producer. He takes it upon himself to say whether the public does or does not want a certain type of story. Now, nobody on earth can foretell what the public wants. That is beyond the public itself. But the exhibitor holds your photoplay in an iron-bound rut.

"Motion picture audiences have been educated down to accept drivel until they have lost all perspective. It will take time to again build up a sane balance and an artistic judgment. The happy ending is an instance of this fallacy. Stage audiences accept a tragic conclusion when it is logical and inevitable. Then why not in the films?

"Beyond this I see the American photoplay bound by, let us say, a moral provincialism. The hero goes spotless thru the story, a Christ-like bit of perfection. The villain must pay for his crimes in the last reel with his life. Continental audiences will smile at my 'Blind Husbands,' because, in my rôle of the Austrian officer, I am caused to expiate my very human longings by falling over an Alpine ledge and losing my life. Judging from American photoplays, men must be white or black morally. There is nothing between these extremes. Either they are completely and angelically good or they are completely worthless. Yet we know in our hearts that everyone is moved by human impulses and weaknesses, by sex longings and desires, by dreams and disillusionments. How long before we can present *real* people on the screen? If American producers do not watch out, European photoplays, possessing this very breath of life, will step into our theaters.

"I want to do the Continental type of story because I understand the life and viewpoint better. There are, of course, American stories I would like to film. Frank Norris' 'McTeague' for instance. But something like Schnitzler's 'Affairs of Anatol' would be better suited to me. I want fearlessly to reveal life. I say this, not as a film producer, for I am just beginning to learn how to produce, but as an observer of humanity."