

# SELLING THEMSELVES TO THE MOVIES

By ALISSA FRANC

A SHORT time ago I had business to transact with a motion picture concern. It was one of those offices where everybody's conversation was wafted across space and the phrase "One dope fiend and 500 dancing couples in full dress at 7 o'clock to-morrow morning" registered itself automatically in my brain to leave me no peace for days afterward. Was there then a department store for human beings, with special delivery, so to speak?

I traced the mysterious phrase to its source and discovered that it had indeed related to an order given at 3 o'clock in the afternoon for 500 dancing couples and one dope fiend to be delivered at a certain studio at 7 o'clock the next morning. Furthermore, I was informed that this was a mere bagatelle—one thousand—two thousand men and women to represent one particular species were often supplied in less than twenty-four hours.

## THE MOVIE MARKET IS LOCATED SOMEWHERE IN THE ROARING FORTIES.

Then did my curiosity take me to one of the purveyors in question, to find him living in one of the old-fashioned small dwellings which are still permitted to exist among the West Forties.

No need to wonder whether I was in the right spot.

People on the pavement outside, people in the garden, people on the stairs, people in the corridors, among whom I wended my way to the crowded office, where behind a barrier (well did he need it) sat "the boss" with his two assistants plus the usual pretty-slim-pink-georgette-waisted stenographer.

I stated my quest.

"Could I be allowed to come in and watch?"

"Gladly," I was smilingly assured. The barrier door was opened and I found myself regarding every conceivable kind of human being civilization had managed to evolve, all perfectly, courteously and pleasantly demanding if "there was anything doing" of the equally courteous men in charge.

Here was a striking fact. The old-fashioned theatrical agent, with his emphatic "private" office, a cigar hanging from the end of his mouth, intrinsically a bully—sometimes amiable, sometimes stern, sometimes unpleasantly affectionate, but always an object to inspire terror into the hearts of his applicants—had nothing in common with these trim, alert young men, efficient, impersonally kind and always strictly businesslike.

They confided in me that their business was based on this extreme courtesy. They never knew when they would need these people, so patiently coming day after day; they had to be kept good tempered at all costs. Even this frank admittance showed the healthy spirit of the concern.

People of every sort and description from 7 in the morning until 8 at night,

averaging 3,000 per day. A vast throng changing from moment to moment—it seemed like a vessel placed under a tap of water—as fast as the vessel overflowed more came in.

People representing every conceivable station in life—elegant young chorus girls, men one would assign to the diplomatic circles, schoolgirls, women as our aunts from the provinces always were and always will be, men to be met at every thé dansant, men we see sleeping on the park benches, the evident actor out of a job, alas, many white heads and stooping shoulders—a democratic crowd indeed.

They were all "types" was explained to me. Make up of any sort, beards that might wobble, wigs that might slip were no longer allowed in the movies. Everybody had to be made by nature to suit the camera man.

So was I allowed to look into the voluminous card index, which among others contained the names of 6,000 full dress people and 8,000 other types. I found there Italians, Syrians, men of every conceivable nationality and race, a man with a whole tribe of Indians at his command, a hunchback, a one-legged man (who could appear without a leg—with a cork one or with a hook one, by desire), a man who played a dozen weird instruments, ladies with curls to the floor black as the raven, men with gray locks to their waists, everything the imagination of the scenario writer could devise was, so to speak, in stock. Truly, a department store of human beings.

All very well, but how could they within twenty-four hours get from one to two thousand people exact to one type?

The reply was simple.

## IF THEY HAVEN'T WHAT YOU WANT, THEY'LL FIND ONE IN THE STREET.

Firstly, there were 10,000 people of various descriptions known to be following the various motion picture concerns. If these did not fill the demand they were literally picked from the streets of the neighborhoods where they were known to dwell. Six or seven men sallied forth and collected them. Sometimes they were bribed from the large department stores, or from their occupations, whatever they might be—they had to be obtained from somewhere.

No matter whether they could read or write, no matter whether they could sing or dance, they had but to fulfil one command—be true to their type.

I was interested to hear how the unwarned public took such an unlooked for invitation to "join the movies." To my surprise I was told that in most cases they found nothing unusual therein, having grown accustomed to such requests (I felt vaguely hurt that neither I nor my friends had), but sometimes,



of course, it was conveyed to the inviter that he was being "fresh" in terms more or less polite, as the case might be.

Pay ranges from one to five dollars, depending on the "type" and the clothes they needed to come provided with. Expenses of every kind are paid, including any meal occurring during the time they are working, so that the sum handed out at the end of the day is always clear profit.

The manager seemed to know every single one by name and to be able to catch their eye in turn, and without the slightest flurry or fuss was each one spoken to.

"Would you come back at 5:30, Mr. Smith?"

"Sorry nothing for you to-day, Mrs. Jones."

"Good afternoon, Miss Ethel," to a superior blonde. "Yes, I do want you with your evening clothes to-morrow morning at 11."

She came forward, her name was entered in a book, and a pink ticket with the name of the place and hour handed to her. This, after being signed by the director, eventually to serve as check for the day's payment.

One thin-faced lady, who could not possibly have been anything but a New England schoolmistress on her holiday, was among those needed for the morrow. Very evidently this was to be her debut, and duly flurried was she.

"You are to be one of the four hundred getting off a steamer," she was told, "so come armed with a large handbag, a travelling rug and a thick travelling coat over your arm."

I longed to remark that these days nothing short of a second class passenger, certainly not the upper four hundred, would deign to be seen descending the gangway armed with a large handbag, a travelling rug and a heavy coat.

I was invited to call again the next morning to see if there had been an interesting call from one of the studios. At midday I duly appeared to learn that a tough mob was required for a scene to be enacted "somewhere outside," which mob was to leave in a few moments.

I waited, but could discover no signs of a mob, tough or otherwise.

"Where was it?" I inquired. And was told to look out of the window.

There truly stood, leaning against the wall of the house on the opposite side of the street, a collection of men of the kind I never thought to exist, except in the gas chamber which was destined to see the last of Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

"Yes," cheerfully commented the manager, "they telephoned at 10 this morning for a hundred men of the 'tough' variety, to be accompanied by thirty lean women and twenty lean children. It's 12, and here they are already to start." Just then the lean women and children entered.

This strange procession now wended its way across Fifth Avenue to the Third Avenue L.

There was a complete segregation of the men and women, the women leading, followed by the men.

It was cheerfully explained to me that of the men, half of them were gunmen—some were burglars, most of them had come out of jail. Far was it for me to contradict his statement, judging from appearances.

Up to 131st Street we rode, and descended to walk a few blocks until we arrived at a certain bridge.

Two and a half hours we literally stood in the blazing sun and waited, nothing happening. At the end of the said two and a half hours there arrived an automobile with four male occupants, which drew up and silently waited. Presently came another automobile, this time containing four female occupants, which drew up and silently waited.

Then appeared an automobile, evidently containing the blooming young heroine, chaperoned by the lady vampire; they also drew up and silently waited.

They were followed by the young hero and the this time young villain, respectively, seated in a taxi, and they also followed the formula of silent waiting.

## THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WAIT THE CAMERA MAN'S COMING.

These stars had evidently brought the silent waiting to a fine art, for they sat immovable as if carved of stone, their faces bearing an expression I am sure never existed on the countenance of man or woman before the invention of the movie director.

Incidentally, it shed a light on the peculiar atmosphere underlying the screen expression being registered. I at last discovered that joy, sorrow, hate, love, jealousy, etc., were all laid over that stone mask, produced by the everlasting silent waiting.

I should not forget to mention that an enormous audience, which grew from minute to minute, had by this time gathered from the neighborhood. Luckily it elected to watch by hanging over

the bridge above. Otherwise we should probably have been crushed to death.

At last, by this time three and a half hours had elapsed—spent under that baking stone bridge facing a wee shop marked the "Recorder," afterward to play an important part—there arrived another automobile accompanied by two gentlemen, the long-haired camera man with his cap back side front, and the check-suited agonized looking director, naturally unarmed by any apology.

By this time even our mob was hypnotized into a comatose condition, and did not betray the slightest emotion at his coming.

## A PLACARD PUTS THE MOB IN A PAROXYSM OF RAGE.

The crowd we had brought was hurriedly mustered together before the aforementioned shoplet marked "Recorder"—thus was our newspaper office complete. A placard was hoisted up, bearing in the large letters so well known to the film fan words to the effect that "another outrage had been committed against the workingman," followed by the equally large lettered query as to "how long he would stand for such treatment."

The check-suited agonized director proceeded to inform the mob simply that this placard was supposed to put them into a paroxysm of rage, fists were to be shaken by the men and the arms of the women and children were to be raised in fury.

It was amazing to see how little instruction and direction these men needed, who certainly had not been inoculated with theories of the art of the theatre. No self-consciousness, no single false gesture—here truly had one not known they were being merely themselves would one have heralded art beyond criticism.

It occurred to me wouldn't it solve the question of realistic art of the stage to gather types true to the part? Why should a man be given several hundred dollars a night to play the part of a hobo, more or less badly, when a real nobo would play it for less than five dollars a night infinitely better than he ever could, judging from these men.

After fists had been shaken at the placard there was instructed to drive up the taxi containing the young and handsome villain (nearly knocking down the director, who did not seem in the slightest to mind); he now regarded the ominous placard. Whereupon he was recognized by the crowd, and this time fists and arms were shaken at him.

All was over for the day, and naught remained but to take the "mob" back to the office for his pay.

Surely is genius always prophetic, but truly marvellous was he that wrote: "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players," for instinct must have warned him of the coming of the movies.

# THE WEE SMA' ONE'S HOURS

the day has begun for you and your family.

You hold your breath. There is a creaking from the crib, indicating that its occupant has raised himself up on his hands. He may lie down again. He did yesterday morning. It was a quarter to six yesterday morning when he finally woke up and you got the 8:57 and met Balch on the train and he had on a new green hat like the peasants you saw in the Tyrol and how the Tyrol must have changed since you were there with the Italians overrunning it, and Italy doesn't seem to have been doing much in the war until lately, but you wouldn't dare tell that to Enrico who runs the restaurant because it would start a fight there like the one in the—

"Ya-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!"

There he goes! Is it the first time this morning? No, he has done it once before.

"Ya-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!"

The engagement is on.

"Let him cry for a minute. Maybe he'll stop and go to sleep."

Indignant creakings from the crib.

"Ya-a-a-a-a-a-a-a! Bla-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!"

Your Wife then says: "Well, I suppose that he might as well get his bottle if he's going to keep this up."

You: "I guess you're right."

Your Wife gets up and you hear her slippers flapping down the stairs.

There is another series of shrill signals from the crib. You wonder if it would do any good if you were to get up and give him his rubber walrus. That would mean that you would have to get out on the cold floor and feel around for your slippers and, like the man in the funny pictures, step on a safety pin and get blood poisoning like Harris, and how did he ever come out, you never heard whether he had to have his foot cut off or not, and it certainly would be tough to have to have your foot cut off, and likely as not it would spread to your leg, and then you would have to have that cut off, and—

"Whaa-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!"

What is that woman doing down there? She has had time to heat twelve bottles. Probably she is reading the paper or something. Doesn't she realize that the child's crying is disturbing the neighbors? You can hear the tinkle of the bottle against the sides of the glass measuring-beaker. Here she comes! In a minute or two he will have the bottle and will have stopped yelling. What will it sound like when he has stopped? He doesn't cry all the time, and yet you cannot exactly imagine to yourself just how it will sound when he isn't crying. It will be like stopping the ruing of the spheres. There, she is turning off the gas. He hears the approaching meal and doubles up on his

exhortations. Through them you hear a crash. What was that?

Another minute and your Wife enters. Very tragic.

"What do you think has happened? The bottle dropped against the stove and broke—we haven't a drop of milk left in the house—and the milkman doesn't come until almost 7. And he's in a perfect rage now."

You do not stop to ask her whether she means that the milkman or the baby is in a rage. You don't have to.

"Well, the only thing to do is to entertain him until the milkman comes. Where are my slippers?"

You go to the crib, while she goes downstairs again to get the rest of the ingredients ready so that the milk can be rushed in as soon as it has come. The entertainment is up to you.

"Hello, sir!" you say, in a poor attempt to be conversational. "How's the boy this morning?"

"The boy" himself sees the absurdity of this remark and goes about showing you in words of one syllable just how he is this morning.

"Well, well, well, there, there, there," you say, picking him up in contravention of all laws of civilized mother-craft, "what's this?" And you point to a picture on the wall.

The boy doesn't give a hang what this is, and says so in so many words.

"Hey," you shout down stairs to your wife, "I don't suppose that you could put him down on the floor and let him

lap up the milk that spilled, could you?"

This draws no answer.

It is now 5:40. The milkman is due at 6:55. What is there that will entertain him for an hour and fifteen minutes? He isn't quite old enough to play penny-ante. That's too bad. Penny-ante would solve the problem. How about looking at the leaves on the calendar?

"Here, son, what's this? Nice calendar?"

"Ya-a-a!" That for the calendar.

"Here, want to pull daddy's hair?" This makes a big hit, but has its limitations as a pastime to last for an hour. Didn't know the boy was so strong.

"Here's something nice. Pretty bath-thermometer?"

It certainly is a pretty bath-thermometer, and is immediately swallowed as far as the handle.

"Here, here! None of that. Here, try this."

A box of absorbent cotton ought to be all right for a baby to mouth. It's got a red cross on it. So you watch him with relief until you see that the blue is coming off, giving him the appearance of a man with a false beard.

"Hi, there! Drop it! Drop it! Give it to daddy. Give-it-to-daddy." If you pull it, it will tear and leave a great piece in his throat.

"Look, see what daddy's doing. Ta-ta-tarata-ta."

Imitation of a silver cornet band. Big hit.



Band decides to parade around the room. Tremendous ovation. Knocks over small table with reading lamp. Unparalleled success.

This is the key to the situation. Forty-eight times around the room, playing tunes through the side of the mouth, ranging in repertoire from "Under the Double Eagle" to "Under the Double Eagle."

In the distance comes the sound of approaching wheels. They draw up to the curbing. A man jumps out and runs to the back door.

"Clink-clink." It is the milkman.



WILL HE —

TIME: 5 a. m.  
Voice from the crib: "Ya-a-a!"  
You awake. Your wife awakes. There is a period of one minute, during which you figure the situation out as follows: It may be that he was only going "Ya-a-a" in his sleep. In this case, there will be no further disturbance, and you may roll over. It may be that he is awake, but affable, in which case he will follow up his initial cry with a series of low cooings and blowing of bubbles, and you can get another half hour's sleep. Or, in the third place, he is awake and militant, which means that