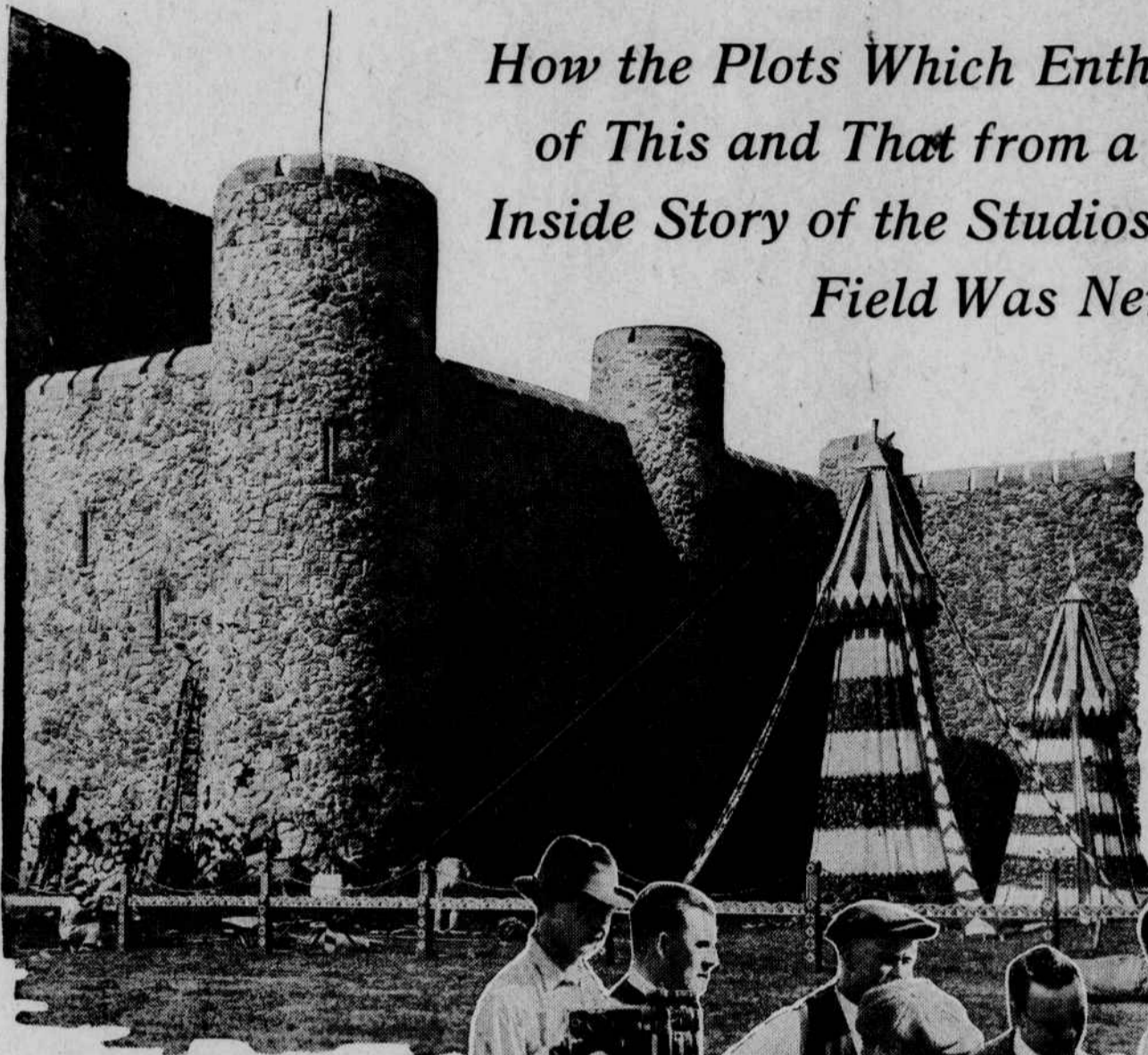


The Confession of a Successful Scenario Writer

How the Plots Which Enthral Millions Are Made and How a Little of This and That from a Scrap Heap Becomes a Thriller—the Inside Story of the Studios as Told by One Who "Broke In" When Field Was New—Stars Who Rose to Fame Over Night



The scenario writer may jump from the present back to "Old England," as suggested here, without effort. This old castle wall is part of the newest and most imposing Fairbanks-Pickford picture.



Maidens whom the scenario writer has sent back to the twelfth century for "Robin Hood," eating twentieth century lunches between twelfth century climaxes.

By One of Them.

It is doubtful if there is any one profession in the world at the present time that is more discussed and envied by the multitude than that of scenario writing.

There are three distinct types of professional scenario writers—there are many types, but I am going to enumerate only the three that are really the recipients of the fame and fortune one hears so much about. First, there is the well known author or playwright whose novels or plays are celebrated. He does not find the road to celluloid fame especially difficult as his reputation will carry him over the top wherever he goes.

This type usually became famous long before motion pictures were heard of, and he is indeed a fortunate individual in many ways. He can delve into an old trunk in the store room and bring forth manuscripts that were rejected by every publication in the civilized world before his name became valuable, and he can actually sell his drivel for very large sums of money.

The second type is not quite so fortunate as he really is obliged to work for all he gets and it is necessary for him to have a more advanced knowledge of screen material. This is the type who can write original scenarios. He does not necessarily have to be a writer in every sense of the word, in fact as a rule he is not a writer at all, and it does not matter. If he is familiar with what is known as "picture sense" and can think along the lines of "pictures" rather than words his products are marketable. He must, of course, have a knowledge of drama, and by this I mean drama as it is known on the screen, and he must know plot, technic and possess an uncanny ability to create suspense and be able to characterize his imaginary puppets.

The third type is more numerous but not perhaps as well paid, except in unusual instances. His occupation consists of revising, or rather adapting, the story some one else has written and putting it into proper form for screen material. Of course it is also necessary for this type of writer to be familiar with screen craft, but he is not by nature as creative as an original writer. This work is called continuity writing, or adapting. Occasionally the name of the adapter is given credit on the screen, but more often than not, in the case of a well known author, the adaptor's work does not receive much attention.

The favorite themes for stories are ever and ever the same, hashed up perhaps in a little different style, but the underlying plot never varies. The "fan" can recognize the villain, the hero, the baby vamp, the reformed crook or the hard hearted society girl long before the film has flickered its way through the second reel. He always knows what is going to happen, and no matter how complicated the plot or how muddled the suspense a good dyed in the wool fan cannot be fooled. So, I repeat, the original stories received are read carefully, always with the hope that one out of a batch will prove to contain

an original idea. This sometimes happens, though rarely.

Occasionally an idea contains a germ of originality or a phrase that is different, perhaps a title that is worthy of consideration, but on the whole the plots submitted are as trite as those concocted by the regular staff. When an idea is discovered which can be used by one of the staff writers a reliable company will purchase it for a small amount. There are many unscrupulous companies who do not hesitate, however, to steal such ideas without paying for them.

The average prolific writer usually finds himself destitute of plots very quickly. During the first year of producing manuscripts he usually manages to have enough material on tap to keep going, but as soon as this is exhausted he becomes desperate for plot germs. If he is so fortunate as to hold a long term contract with a production company he lives on his reputation. A company that has spent a great deal of money in making an author's name popular hesitates to lose him, and will go to almost any extent to retain his services because of his name, which is, in a way, a trade mark.

In one instance a well known woman scenario writer in desperation for plots appealed to the producer to give her assistance. She declared that she could not write another photo play, and the producer was loath to release her. It was suggested that some one be obtained to help her with original ideas. A young woman who was employed in the company and who had betrayed unusual skill for adapting and suggesting changes in stories was consulted. It was agreed that she should accompany the scenario writer on a trip abroad and that she should provide to the best of her ability ideas and suggestions for new plots.

She seized this opportunity, as it meant a larger salary and a chance to travel, with the expectation that if she was successful she should eventually be given a chance to write original stories. Hilda, as she was known, did not receive

credit for her part in the work of the writer, but at the end of a year's tour the stories the woman scenario writer produced were better than she had ever been able to do previously. The enthusiasm and youth of Hilda, combined with her quick brain, was sufficient inspiration to the woman to create some worth while material.

Scenario writers do not lead the life of ease which is usually attributed to their profession. The work is tedious and involves more routine than almost any other occupation. They are sometimes commanded to produce a manuscript at very short notice, perhaps three days, and this means that they must work day and night in order to finish it. After they have submitted it at the appointed time it very often lies around on the editor's desk for a month, and when it is finally read it is discovered that the company has either made changes in its plans about producing it or that it does not like the script at all.

A scenario writer will often resort to desperate measures when he is seeking a new plot. Without intending to be exactly dishonest, he will often purloin ideas which suggest themselves in reading old classics or even modern literature. Everything within range of his immediate vicinity—police reports, confidences of friends—becomes potential plot material for his work, and although the guileless public believes that the scenario writer is an inspired creature dwelling on a higher plane, if it could but know the hours of agony the writer suffers while seeking ways and means to work over an old plot in a new way, I dare say it would be amused rather than awed.

There is also a great deal of "graft" involved in the scenario business, as in almost every other field. There was an instance not so long ago which was never made public because of the prominent persons involved in it. A production manager in one of the largest companies contrived to carry on a system over a period of years which was enormously

profitable. Several scenario writers he knew well entered into the conspiracy with him in order to sell inferior stories to the company at large prices. As his position was one of authority he was at liberty to judge on material purchased without interference. His scheme was this: He would purchase from a writer a story for about \$10,000, with the understanding that the writer would pay back to him half the amount, and the company bore the burden of the excess charge.

The scheme worked well until one of the writers became unduly avaricious and threatened to expose him. A quarrel resulted and the matter was brought to the attention of the owners of the company. Of course the man was dismissed, but no further action was taken because of the notoriety which would have ensued.

I, like many others, was fortunate in choosing an opportune moment to enter the field of scenario writing. It was not difficult at that time to gain admittance nor to convince the company that I was worth a great deal of money to them. They welcomed me with open arms. I will frankly admit that I did not make a place for myself in the days when the opportunities were many I would never have attained admittance at all, as conditions have changed rapidly since then. I knew little or nothing about scenario writing, but that did not matter. I soon learned that few of the great staff employed knew more about it than I. I met all sorts of persons, from all stations in life, who were turning out scenarios at a rate of one special feature a week, and those who had a sense of humor admitted that their occupation was a stroke of luck and that they laid no claims to genius.

My next desk neighbor had been a saleswoman in a department store who had cherished dreams of becoming a writer. She had invested in one of the mail order courses and the thing had given her so much courage that she had immediately quit her occupation and had applied for

instrumental in uplifting the silent drama from the slough of piffle if ever I were given the opportunity to be taken into its fold. Now I had that opportunity, and I must confess that my chances to uplift anything but a fat salary envelope were slim.

My first assignment to write a strong drama for a prominent woman star convinced me that I would have to delay my altruistic purpose. I was told to study the characteristics of the star in question and to discover all her salient qualities. After spending several weeks around the studio I discovered the following details: She had been a waitress in a lunchroom in Chicago previous to her advancement as a celebrated star. This was not to her discredit, but the circumstances surrounding her rise to fame caused a few of my illusions to disappear.

She was a vain, patronizing and slangy young person when she was quite herself, and she had no more idea of the art of acting than a kitten. As it is in the case of most motion picture stars who have risen from low origin to a place of public adoration, success had turned her head. I learned that her position in life was due to influence. This was not an unusual case, as I soon learned. Almost every star had been financially aided. There were, of course, a few who had won out on their own ability, and they will always remain as worthy screen celebrities, but for the most part I found that they had risen from the rank and file of the musical chorus or worse, with few claims to intellectual superiority.

My next assignment for a story was a well known star, whose chief attraction, if it can be so called, is athletic feats. She had been reared in a circus and was never so happy as when she was leaping from express trains or risking her neck on horseback. She was downright cheap and coarse in manner, and although I had seen her many times on the screen and had admired her girlish innocent face, I soon had reason to change my

a chance to be a opinion of her after I had heard her in a writer, just as I burst of temper.

I had done — and I should ever know of the Art of the Screen as I had hoped to find it. I soon became blasé, however, and forgot about art as it is recognized in literature, music and drama, and I found that when I had sufficiently silenced all my ideals I was on the road to success as a scenario writer. I wrote "thrillers" and deep dyed emotional plots and I concocted stories of villains, vamps and sacrificing mothers, forgetting my ideals, which had become so bruised and sore I would hardly have recognized them, I learned that if I wished to be popular I must relinquish any hint of refinement or "high brow" culture. In the studio a manner of aloofness or too much knowledge was looked upon as swellheadedness. One could brag about one's work continuously, as no one listened, but if one suggested an air of disapproval toward one's fellow creatures it was not forgiven.

I found that most of the directors knew little about their art. They were unfamiliar with the drama, literature or even the ordinary courtesies one would naturally expect from men who are instructed with the interpretations of the world's classics. Most of them had been connected with theatrical enterprises in some form or another, some were second rate actors and others had been stage managers of burlesques and slap stick vaudeville. I might also state here with all truth that some of the prominent ones had not even been connected in any way with theatricals previous to their entrance into the movie field.

A certain well known producer who is worth millions of dollars is so illiterate that he employs a secretary to write and read his correspondence, because he is not quite capable of handling these details himself. The articles he supposedly writes for the magazines in which he bases his belief that we will have fewer and better pictures are written by press agents. Likewise most of the articles signed by stars are written by persons employed by them.

Now that the censorship laws have taken things in hand it is even more difficult for the scenario writer. He is no longer a free individual to create thrillers from an addled brain. There is no doubt about it that if "fewer and better pictures" ever become an actuality it will be because the censors have brought it about and not because the producers honestly desire to achieve this purpose in an industry that is based first, last and always on how much money can be made out of clever mechanical devices.

I cannot view it all from any other angle than purely commercial production. When a writer is governed entirely by footage, not by words, he becomes a machine. There is always footage to consider, three feet for a kiss, so many more feet for a death scene, and so many more for a close up. The star, her clothes, her versatility, or lack of it, the limitations of the camera (which are many), the expense and numerous other details must constantly be borne in mind in whatever mood the author finds himself during creative work.



The specialists who translate the scenario writer's plot into drama. They are "working out" "Robin Hood," one of the new film plays. Allan Dwan, Miss Pickford's director, is fifth from the left, and W. W. Kerrigan, her manager, is second from the right.