

Confessions of a Scenario Editor

One of the leading and oldest scenario editors in the business tells of the "inner workings" of the editors' offices. Last month he told about how he "broke into the game." This month he tells how plays were put on; how ideas were stolen; how judges were bribed; how "favoritism" operated; and finally, he tells how the film business has been lifted to a higher plane.

THE boss and I got along wonderfully well—because he was fat and good natured, but stern nevertheless. After it became known that we were in the market for photoplay stories—we didn't call them scenarios at first—the boss said to me one day:

"Don't you think we'll get into trouble, trying to buy plays for film use? Won't every Tom, Dick and Harry and every school girl try to write them; won't they take their plots wherever they can find them, in magazines, books and novels?" I saw what he meant at once, but I had more faith in the coming photoplaywrights than to acknowledge or confirm his question.

"You see," the boss added, puffing at a big black cigar, "you're on the job as scenario editor now; you're not one of the don't-blow-out-the-gas-put-a-hot-iron-in-my-bed sort of fellows, and we'll expect more of you than you can imagine, but your happy days are over, from the looks of the manuscripts pouring into the office—*rot*, most of it, *stolen*, a lot of it and—" But I laughed him into seriousness and we got down to business.

The first three months that the public knew we were buying scenarios or photoplay stories, we received about eleven hundred scripts, and over fifteen hundred inquiries, mostly reading like this:

"What is a scenario? How much do you pay? Must they be written like regular stage plays? Can I copy from a book and please tell me what a plot is."

To answer these, we had several thousand rejection slips printed.

How to pay for accepted stories was the hardest thing I had to arrange. Several of the directors were against paying over ten dollars because they said "most of them must be revamped anyhow," but I insisted that real, worth-while plots were worth more. I was overruled. A five and ten-dollar price prevailed for some time, until writers got wise, mastered the technique of

photoplay writing and sent in better plays. Then they began *demanding* a certain price generally averaging twenty-five dollars each, and they began getting it, too. Many ideas were bought, *ideas alone*, for five dollars each. I am satisfied the owners or authors of the ideas never could have put them into tangible, dramatic shape. They came from everywhere, even from asylums. I noticed, with pride, that stories from certain writers, mostly newspaper men, breaking into the film writing end of the picture business were generally much the best stories submitted—with a grip and a "punch." I read many stories from fiction writers of reputation, and they were in the same class with hundreds of others—unacceptable. Four writers I remember well. All of them have made good in scenario work since. One is now editing a magazine devoted to photoplays, another is a staff writer with Edison, a third has been given the directorship of a Lubin company in the West, and the fourth is free lancing and making, on the average, \$150 a week. There were several women writers, too, all of whom have "made good" but who do not devote all their time to the work.

But the hundreds, the thousands failed utterly. These, unsuccessful either through lack of ability or of application, were the first to yell, "There's no money in writing scenarios and when you get a good idea they'll steal it!"

I wish I could take each discouraged author and tell him *why* his work is nil!

The merit of some of the new "free lance" plays began to have its effect on the studio, especially on some of the players, who up to this time had written most of their own plays. I remember we had a story entitled "The Mountaineer's Daughter," one of the first moonshine plays. Our leading man was cast for a part, and it so fitted him that he came to me with:

"Who wrote this story?" I told him a

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young woman, Miss Castner, of Cattleburg, Kentucky.

"She didn't, I wrote this," he jerked out, his lips twitching, "someone has been 'kitting' my stuff—" He got no further.

"You lie," I snapped out, grabbing the manuscript from his hands, "you never saw, you never heard of that story; I read it and sent the check that bought it myself. You've played 'boss' 'round here long enough; I'm editing and buying this company's plays and you'll act in what we tell you to act in—and hereafter you'll not handle any of the stories in my office as you have been in the habit of doing—looking them over, taking what you wanted, rewriting them under your own name and claiming the credit that belongs to someone else."

"It's a damned lie," he blurted out, picking up an inkstand—but the real boss entered. I had the floor, but the player was the favorite. The boss heard the affair rehashed and said:

"My boy,"—meaning me—"Podge is right." (I call him Podge because that isn't his right name.) "He has privileges here that others have not, because, well, my boy, his name is known to every picture fan" (we didn't say "movie" then) "in the country and it counts. Understand, it counts!"

"Let it count," I answered back, hotly, "but you'll count hereafter without me, for I will not steal, *steal*—get the word—*s-t-e-a-l*."

"Now, take it easy, my boy," the boss tried to console me. "You'll get over this bit of sentiment. It's business with us, a matter of dollars and cents. Send the girl ten dollars and she'll never know the difference."

"Yes, but I will know it," I responded, putting on my coat. "If these are to be your tactics go to it, but I leave and I leave *now*."

"Well, leave and be damned," Podge sputtered. "I've stock in this company and I'm not going to let any so-called scenario editor run me," he went on sneeringly.

"Shut up," I cried, "while I tell the boss that you are the man that urged Painter of the Tiograph company to buy a certain Indian story, only to have it 'shelved' and later returned to the author, a friend of yours, to re-sell elsewhere and then *you* split the proceeds of two sales; that's the sort of business *you're* doing and if the American people have to see plays on the screen that are made from stolen ideas,

then I go back to my city desk—but I'm going to tell the people through my paper what you are doing, see?" Neither one answered. I continued:

"It's no wonder film producers are getting a bad name, being accused of plot-stealing, when even the leading man stoops to it. You," pointing to Podge "want the credit for writing, directing and starring plays, when you are entitled only to the starring."

I quit!

The boss told me to get my money. I got it. I also got twenty-five dollars for the Kentucky scenario writer. But Podge staged the play as his own.

But that day is past. Film companies are not playing to that sort of a game now. The boss of that company lost his position when I told the board that I intended to publish the affair, but later he was taken back and when he returned, he sent for me. Podge, the boss and myself have worked harmoniously since. The Podge affair got to the ears of other player favorites and one by one they condescended to allow me to select their plays, although many of them are capable of writing plays and do turn out some clever ones.

About this time one of the other companies linked with our group advertised a scenario contest for amateurs with a view to procuring some new and clever ideas for production, expecting to get them to take care of a new company, a subsidiary, soon to be put in the field. I was chosen one of the judges. I declined to serve, pleading business. But I watched the contest with manifest interest. About two thousand plays were submitted. The winner proved to be a cousin of one of the judges, who controlled the others apparently, and a young woman in the west took first money. An editor, whom I shall call Hedgeman, because that is not his real name, and who was on another company's staff, entered forty stories, any one of which, I am sure, was superior to the winning one. It simply shows that the contest was unfair. One man connected with the company, or rather who was very close to several of the officials and judges, took it upon himself to select what he wanted of the submitted stories, the ideas only, and he paid \$800 to some one for them. But the owners of the stories did not get the money. Unfair, yes, and it *can't* be done in any studio today.

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As soon as the proper officials found out about the \$800 purchase, the buyer was threatened with an injunction if he used any of the ideas so he lost his \$800, unless he has since been able to rewrite some of the stories and sell them under an assumed name.

The scenario game from either an editor's or a writer's standpoint is not an easy one. Success does not come with the writing of a few good stories or many poor

ones. Success does not mean favoritism. The free lance has as good a chance as the professional staff writer. Stories can be submitted without fear of their being stolen. When a dishonest reader is found, he goes and goes very suddenly. The editors are a courteous lot of fellows, all capable, honest, willing and eager to have new writers enter the field. One does not have to be acquainted with any one in the studio to sell scenarios.