

PHOTOPLAY

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The Tragedy of 15,000 Extras



These two girls came to Hollywood and found jobs in the studios as extras. But now, after months of unemployment, they are living in a tent, clinging desperately to the hope that by some stroke of magic the studio gates will open to them again



By Sara Hamilton

OUTSIDE the gates of the studio stand a large group of people, waiting. From all walks of life they come. The ex-vaudeville actor, the ex-jockey, former businessmen, Chinese girls, one-time millionaires, hobos, young men, old men, girls, old women—and still more heart-rending, former stars and featured players discarded by the changing movies.

All hoping against hope that some miracle will happen and they will find themselves inside the gates, headed for the casting office.

"Had any luck lately?" I asked a slim, young girl.

She smiled. "One day's work in seven months. I'm used to having a tough time, though. But see that guy up there with the blue flannel jacket? I can remember when he was an imaging director, himself."

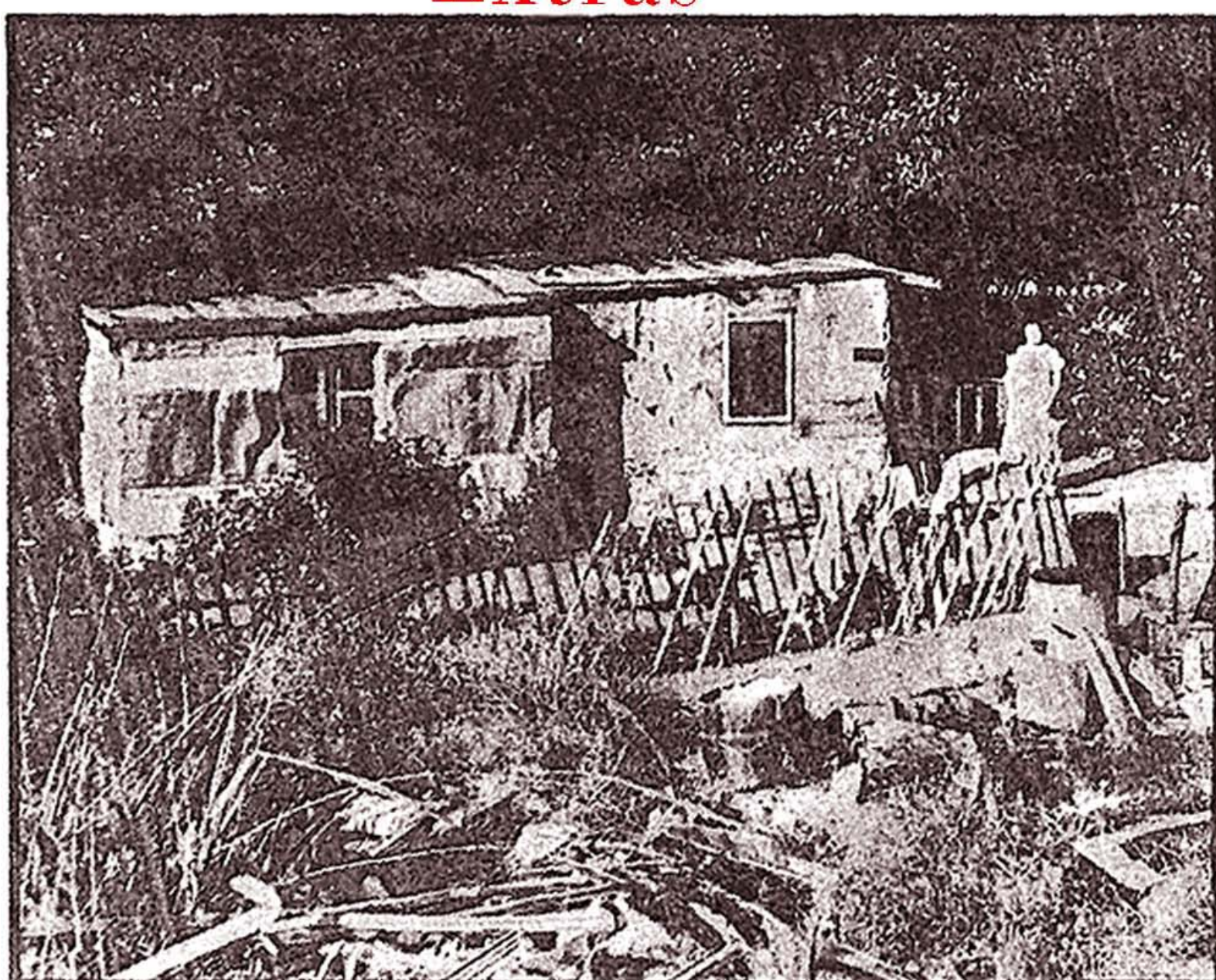
Hollywood we know as a bright and tinselled land of romance. But now beneath its surface boils and bubbles a mass of trouble which threatens to burst through the glamour-coated crust of Moviedom and cover Hollywood with a lava of grief.

For, fifteen thousand people in Hollywood's motion picture industry will soon find themselves completely cut off from any chance of earning a living there. Their earnings were always meager enough! Mostly they lived on hope. And now that is being taken from them, too. Hope. Hope . . . Hope . . .

It's the watchword of thousands who call themselves extras in this business of making motion pictures. It's the thing that keeps them going on day after day, hungry, anxious, tired, waiting in the hot sun or standing in the rain outside the studio gates, wearing a fixed, false smile because a director, an assistant director, a producer, anyone, someone, might notice the smile and beckon them into the magic portals of the motion picture studio.

And now, for fifteen thousand, that hope is being taken away.

For, there are 17,541 people registered at the Central Casting Office as extras. And the list now is being cut down to approximately fifteen hundred names. A mere pencil mark, and fifteen thousand would-be actors and actresses will be flung out of the world of motion pictures forever, into the streets of Hollywood.



Dreams of stardom and living in a palace have vanished for the little group of extras who have begun to build themselves a shantytown near Universal City out of junked lumber and tin. In the film colony there is now no way for them to earn a living.



When a studio asks for extras, here's the answer. Thousands wait day after day, hungry but ever hopeful that a casting director will call for them. Before long, 15,000 extras will be cut off the lists of the Central Casting Bureau. Then all hope will be gone

Struggling to win a place in the cinema sun, hungry, dispirited, they must put behind them forever their dreams of screen success

What will Hollywood do with this mass of hungry, hopeless people?

And who is to blame for the tragedy?

Strangely enough, the extras themselves are greatly to blame for their own pitiful plight.

Tossed out of other work by the recent depression, attracted by the false stories of Hollywood's squanderings and extravagances, excited by the thrill of living and working in the same town and the same industry with world famous personalities, they drifted to Hollywood and attached themselves to the motion picture industry. They registered with the Central Casting Bureau, and joined the great army of extras.

The Central Casting Bureau, bewildered and harassed by the ever-increasing demands for work, overburdened with the growing army of ambitious, inexperienced extras, looked about for some solution.

Not the drifted-in extras. But the men and women who for years have made the business of being an extra their life work.

These people saw no glitter, no romance, no bright mirage of stardom. To them, it was hard work and serious work. To it they gave all their thought, time and strength, exactly as any man or woman who loves his job. All the money they could possibly spare went into the replenishing of their wardrobes, so necessary to the ten and fifteen dollar pay checks. They gave time and money to maintaining their appearance. Hair must be waved, clothes pressed, hands manicured. But less and less money



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came in as the mob of unqualified drifters increased. And the amount of work had to be distributed over thousands of pleading, starving people.

Furthermore, the type of picture being made cut down the demand for extras. The gorgeous spectacles, with the exception of an occasional De Mille picture, gave way to homey little dramas demanding few supers.

Now the professional extra was fortunate if he worked one day out of three or even four months. When the hue and cry of these people grew louder and louder, the NRA Code Committee took the matter in hand. A committee composed of men and women entirely outside the motion picture industry was formed. Its job was to whittle down the extra list so that, instead of thousands of extras eking out less than a bare existence from motion picture work, hundreds might earn a livable wage.

The committee asked each casting director from every studio to send in a list of recommended extras. These lists were gone over carefully. If Mary Smith was recommended by three casting directors, Mary was put down as having three votes, and it looked pretty good for Mary.

If Jack Jones was recommended by one director, he in turn was given one vote. Naturally, the extras receiving the most votes, or, in other words, the extras considered capable by the most studios, remain on the list.

Hollywood is waiting now, fearfully, anxiously, to see what this great army of discarded extras will do. There are no factories, no sweat-shops, no mills in Hollywood to swallow them up. And among these hanger-on extras there exists a strong bond of friendship and cooperation not found in the professional extras. They were ever-eager to help each other in work. What will they do in unemployment?

ONCE I saw an extra come dejectedly out of the casting office at M-G-M and join the group that lingered about the gate.

"No luck?" someone asked him.

"I could have the job if I had a pair of glasses. It means five dollars—God knows I need it."

Without a word, an old man removed his glasses and handed them to the young chap.

"Here, Buddy," he said, "I can't see much without them, but I'll sit right here and wait."

The young fellow reached eagerly for the glasses, then stopped suddenly. "But look—I can't do that! You know how this business is. I might be in there till late tonight."

"That's all right. You're hungry, aren't you? I'll wait in the alleyway."

All day the old man sat there, unable to move because, without the glasses, the world was a foggy blur. After sundown, a chill wind came up.

It was past eight o'clock when the young fellow came out with the spectacles, and found the old man shivering but uncomplaining in the alleyway.

"It's tough on you, my being so late," the boy apologized. "But at least, we can eat now! I'll bet you've been hungry as long as I have!"

IT is quite usual, among these extras, for five or six of them to live together in one room. When a call from the studio comes for one, there begins the hectic business of assembling a decent outfit. This fellow's suit, that one's shoes, another's best tie, and so on. Until the lucky one is sent off looking quite well-dressed. And the others sit around pantless, coatless, shoeless, till their pal returns with their clothes and a few dollars. Then they eat again.

Two extra girls have been driven to the extremity of living in a tent. Other forlorn souls have retreated to a shantytown near Universal City, where they manage to exist in huts crudely fashioned from scraps of tin, iron and lumber from the junkpiles.

Some extras who hang about the M-G-M studio have banded together, into a sort of little club. They take turns, sitting in a broken-down automobile in a vacant lot across the alley, while another member is stationed near the telephone in a nearby pool hall, in case a message for one of them should be relayed there by Central Casting. No such message has ever come, but who knows? That's the sort of hope the extra feeds on—pathetic, futile.

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"No work—nothing today—no work—no work—I'm sorry—nothing today." Hour after hour the monotonous drone goes on in the Central Casting Office.

Occasionally it is broken by a frantic voice.

"YOU'VE got to help me! Anything!" And the next second the drone begins again, "No work—I'm sorry—nothing. No work."

And yet they still pour in, demanding jobs, demanding to register, demanding to know why they haven't been called.

"You can see that some adjustment had to be made," Miss Mell, of the Central Casting Bureau, said to me. "It isn't so much the young ones I'm worried about. It's the older ones—the old men and women."

The telephone rang, and Miss Mell answered. I could hear the frantic hysteria in a girl's voice as it carried over the wires. Miss Mell talked to her patiently, calmly. But the girl's wild accusations, pleadings, oaths and denunciations, grew louder.

"Please, please," Miss Mell tried to talk to her.

Finally the girl broke into tired sobbing. There was a click of the receiver, and the room was quiet again.

"You see, it isn't really I whom she hates," Miss Mell said. "It's the thing I represent to her—security. Someone who possesses a job."

THESSE scenes will be eliminated when the fifteen thousand names are struck off the list. But what scenes will take their place?

It's Hollywood's burden, certainly. And yet, Hollywood is not to blame. For years it has done everything in its power to discourage the influx of movie-struck people drifting in. For years warnings and pleadings have been sent out that there are no jobs in the motion picture industry.

And still they came, thousands upon thousands.

What will become of them now?

Hollywood doesn't know the answer. The extras certainly don't know the answer.

"Charity—it will help out some," an old man said in a shaking voice.

"We don't want any of that Russian stuff, is all I know," said another, discussing their fate.

"You mean Communism?" I asked him.

"Yea. We don't want that. We'll get along—somehow."



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