

Lonely Lew



By *George Gordon*

EVERY time one of those overnight success stories goes out from Hollywood, there are a thousand boys and girls in these United States that believe devoutly they can go and do likewise.

They start for Filmania with a railroad ticket, ten dollars in ready cash and all the youthful hope in the world. Perhaps one or two of them make good, the rest go hungry for a time and then go back to the foundry and the laundry. Overnight successes are as rare as hen's teeth, but once in years there is an exception that proves the rule.

Young Lewis Ayres will undoubtedly start another caravan to the land of the leaping shadows. Here, without a doubt, is one of the most amazing stories ever told in Hollywood. Here is a boy of twenty who will be famous when Universal releases "All Quiet on the Western Front."

It is his second picture. In the very first he played opposite Greta Garbo in "The Kiss." Before that, with the exception of one small bit, nothing, not even extra work. It is the most fabulous story since Betty Bronson and "Peter Pan."

Lewis is a handsome youngster with dark hair and eyes. He has a sensitive face, and an uncanny faculty of fading into the background when crowds of people are about. He is introspective and a dreamer. He may be popular with the fans, but he will never be a "good mixer" in Hollywood society.

Like Nils Asther, the film colony will never see much of Lewis. Already one interviewer has had a "mad" at him. The writer said that he was conceited and that his "head was in the clouds." The first charge is wrong, the second is correct. His head is in the clouds.

"Everything has come so suddenly," he said. "I can't realize it yet. I sort of expect to wake up at any moment. But my good luck wasn't as spectacular as a lot of people think. I'd quit my job in an orchestra to try pictures, and I couldn't even get extra work. I hung around the casting offices for a month before I had enough nerve to go up to the desk. I heard others ask, 'Is there anything for me?' Finally I mustered enough courage to ask myself. There never was anything for me."

ONE afternoon, when things were as black as they ever get to be, he wandered into the Blossom Room at the Roosevelt Hotel during the tea dance hour. He knew some of the boys in the orchestra. Lewis had played the banjo and sang in the orchestras at the Ambassador Hotel and Montmartre. He saw a pretty girl sitting alone at a table, and he asked her if she would like to dance. He didn't know until long after that the identity of his dancing partner. It was Lily Damita.

A manager saw him on the dance floor and placed him under contract. It was his manager that introduced him to Paul Bern, then in charge of production at Pathe. It was Paul Bern that made the "good breaks" possible. Bern, who has been the friend of so many screen aspirants, had faith in Lewis.

Bern gave him a six-months' contract at Pathe. He played a small bit in "The Sophomore," but when the six months were up Lewis was out. Bern, who had transferred over to M-G-M, had not forgotten him. He suggested the boy for the difficult dramatic rôle of the youthful lover in Greta Garbo's picture, "The Kiss."

When that picture was finished, he suggested that Lewis go out to Universal and try for the leading rôle in "All Quiet on the Western Front." It seemed hoping against hope, for every juvenile in the business wanted the rôle of *Paul*, the young soldier. Dozens of well-known juveniles had tried out, but Lew got the rôle and a five-year contract.

"Mr. Bern has been wonderful," he said, simply. "And I only know him to speak to. When I got that rôle I tried to thank him. He said, 'You can thank me by making good, Lew.'"

So, the boy who hocked his thousand dollar collection of banjos and mandolins a year ago in order to eat and continue his attempt at a screen career, is going to be a star.

If the boy in the war story is his greatest rôle, the thrill of playing with Garbo was almost as great.

The first sequence made in "The Kiss" was an ardent love scene. He was terribly embarrassed, for Garbo had been an idol, and he had not even been introduced.

They say that Garbo is cold and aloof, but she made a friend of Lewis.

"Won't somebody introduce me to this young man?" she asked. When they weren't working, she would talk to him.

"She was always teasing me," he smiled.

LEW AYRES

"She would ask me about love. She's the sort of woman I admire the most. I don't care so much for flappers. I guess it is because she is older and more experienced, and I am so young."

HIS own life has been as amazing as his brief, meteoric career in pictures. He was born in Minneapolis, and until he reached his "teens" he had no other name with his playmates than "Fat" Ayres.

He now carries just 150 pounds on his five feet, eleven inches of height.

He came from a musical family. His mother was a pianist, and his father had played with the Minneapolis Symphony. His grandmother has taught piano there for fifty years, and it was she who started his musical education. He didn't really become interested in music until he took up the banjo. He wanted to be the greatest banjo player in the world. Now he thinks that it is a "tinny," limited instrument, and he never plays it. He prefers the organ, and more than once he has played all night.

The height came to Lew while he was attending the San Diego high school, and the weight was lost during the months he attended the University of Arizona, going out for basketball and track. His mother was delighted in the change. She wrote to her mother that Lew was taking interest in music at last, and that he was "actually handsome."

For the last four years Lew has been away from home. He says that there is no one dearer to him than his family, but he wants to be alone. During those four years he has played with musical revues, had a season with the orchestra at one of Detroit's leading hotels, and played in the smartest hotels and cafes in Los Angeles.

When he was eighteen, for a lark, he played and sang for several months in a Mexicali cafe. He sang love ballads while congenial drunks grew maudlin and wept bitter tears into their cocktails. Mexicali is a drear, blowsy border town. Agua Caliente is the smart resort that draws the movie crowds. They even stop at Tia Juana for a last look at the galloping dice, but it is unlikely that any of them ever saw him in Mexicali.

Lew lives alone in Hollywood.

"I couldn't live with anyone," he explained. "It would worry me. I like to play for hours at a time, and that would probably drive another person crazy. I don't like to play jazz any more. I had enough of that when I was playing in dance orchestras. I don't go out very much. Big parties scare me. I get lonely and think that I would like to go to a party. I go, and then have such a miserable time that I wish I had stayed at home."

LEW AYRES

-Played the banjo in a jazz band.

-Made love to Greta Garbo as his first job in pictures.

-Has the leading rôle in "All Quiet on the Western Front" as his second film rôle.

-Is just twenty years old!

"**W**HAT else do you like to do besides play?" I asked him.

"I like to model," he answered. "I carried a big hunk of clay around with me. I had to give it away because you have to keep it cool, and it smelled up all the food in the icebox."

LEW AYRES

Lewis is about the quietest boy among the many youngsters on the "All Quiet" set. When he finishes a scene he retires to some corner, and then when he is wanted they have to shout for him. William Bakewell and Russell Gleason have had a marvelous time on the picture, joshing each other about their shaved heads. They are lively, humorous—and good showmen. Lew is friendly with everybody, but his own natural aloofness would preclude many warm friendships.

NATURALLY a great deal depends on the outcome of this picture. Lewis is not the type that will go on for years as a moderate success. He will either be a tremendous hit or a failure. He makes one think a bit of Richard Barthelmess and Charlie Ray, the wistfulness of the one and the simple youth of the other, in the days when they first appeared on the screen horizon.

If Lewis is the success that Universal predicts of him, a great deal will be written about him. Not many people will understand him, for Hollywood has little time or patience for people that are hard to know. He will be called "high-hat," of course. He will have few friends because not many people will take the time to batter down that wall which he has built around himself. And he will be unhappy most of the time, the usual reward for people who build such a wall.

But he will be one of the most interesting young male stars in pictures. At least he will have the courage to be himself.

