

Why Your Scenarios Come Back

Richard A. Rowland,
First National Pictures.

Illustrations by
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The salesgirl sends me a scenario of society life; a bookkeeper tries to sell me a tale of adventure in foreign lands



Even accusing the studio people of the theft of their ideas

SOMEONE has said that the United States is a nation of story writers. I won't go quite so far as to affirm that, but I do believe that of all the people you meet, one out of three has either tried to "write for the movies" or has contemplated doing so. And that, for the whole of the country, makes a vast total, writes Richard A. Rowland, First National Pictures, in the New York Tribune.

The promising thing about it all is that what all these thousands of individuals are trying to do is not to pour water into the ocean, but to meet a need that really does exist. There is, unquestionably, a dearth of suitable material for screen use. The professional writers cannot keep pace with the demand, nor can they go on writing forever. Novels, some of them later successful and others that are not, are bought up for the screen while still in proof-sheet form. Magazine stories are contracted for before they appear in print. It is said that such, at first sight, unlikely material as Wells' "The Outline of History" is to be used for the screen, and it has even, somewhat facetiously, been suggested that either the telephone directory or "Who's Who" is next in line for picturization. Certain it is that the first basic need of every motion picture producer is good stories. Without that it is foolhardy to go ahead. Stories replete with dramatic situations and human appeal are what the movie producers are hunting for, high, low and all the time.

The situation is unique. On the one hand a vast number of people eagerly trying to write for the screen, and on the other hand scores of producers falling over each other in their anxiety to find good material. Yet for one amateur writer who succeeds, a thousand fail. Wherein lies the trouble? What is the remedy?

Of the multitude of people aiming at screen story success a big percentage have the desire, but lack the proper mental equipment to further it. Still, there must be thousands of others who have that equipment—imagination, education and leisure, and some others of the necessary qualifications. Of these, some are early discouraged by the difficulties of the task, and so fall by the way, while others persevere and yet fail to sell their scripts.

This failure may be laid to one of two main causes. Either behind that perseverance lies insufficient talent, or perseverance is not accompanied by such adaptability to art as eventually to ferry the author across the line which divides the amateur from the skilled writer. For after all, as one producer points out, what reason is there why the raw amateur should succeed as an amateur? Except for an occasional instance of native genius, it is only after the amateur has practiced and practiced and actually progressed beyond the amateur stage that success can come, which is true of practically all lines of endeavor, not merely of screen writing. Rupert Hughes, highly successful author and now prominent in screen writing, is reported to have collected hundreds of printed rejection slips before he succeeded in selling a story to an editor. Had he been possessed of less perseverance the world might never have heard of him as a writer.

Except in an occasional case, the days when off moments of leisure could bring quick success are gone by. Scenario writing is a business requiring as much attention as any other business if you are to achieve success. But do not misunderstand me. If you cannot sell stories wrought out in idle-line time, that does not mean you cannot practice in that time. But don't expect to sell until practice and study have finally equipped you to cross the amateur line.

One great shortcoming, as I see it, in amateur writers for the screen is a general tendency to overlook the necessity for constant action of a direct or symbolic nature. They send their characters on long journeys while they describe the minute details of preparation and incidents en route which do nothing to further the movement or help build toward the climax. The result of such material in picture form would be extremely draggy and uninteresting.

Frequently, again, they have but a single situation, but seize upon it to build what is intended to form five or six reels of picture material. That situation is perhaps unusual, or it may at least possess some slight element of novelty. But that is not enough.

In the great majority of scripts by amateurs the characters are overdrawn, and consequently are grotesque or inconsistent with the typically human instincts and with the things that motivate and actuate the average person. In other words, they fall of being life-like, and so fall of conviction.



Maybe your trouble has been that you have tried to sell comedies

Guy Bates Post, who, in turning from a long and highly successful stage career to motion pictures, has read scores of manuscripts, says:

"The main trouble with amateurs is that they persist in trying to write about things they do not know. The sales girl sends me a scenario of 'society' life; a bookkeeper tries to sell me a tale of adventure in foreign lands! And so it goes. We seek for romance even in our writings. We ourselves may find it thus, but we cannot bring it to others in this fashion. To be interesting one must be convincing, and we cannot be that unless we really know the life of which we write. But there is a trend both on stage and screen for intimate stories, and there is the field for the amateur scenario writer of average experience."

"Another great fault with would-be writers is that their imagination is extensive rather than intensive, with the result that the action is scattered from pole to pole or even to a locality as unfamiliar as Mars. Many an amateur's story would take two years to picturize."

Richard Barthelme finds that in his experience nine out of every twelve stories he reads are wholly lacking in one real idea, one original theme. It is said that there is nothing new under the sun, therefore the greater is the necessity to give some novel twist to an old theme. Without that your story is pretty sure to be "returned with the scenario editor's regrets." Mr. Barthelme declares that so much space is taken up with unnecessary and wasteful side issues, not to say dialogue, that in most cases any real "meat" a story might have is buried under useless encumbrances and so out of juxtaposition to the central story that no editor will wade through it, and your manuscript "comes back."

"I do not believe," says this star, "that any amateur's story requires more than 1,000 words to set it forth and tell its plot. Leave the working out to the continuity man and the director. The idea is what counts."

I have heard writers complain that after their story has come back they have recognized in a later picture just the sort of action or scene they originally submitted, and these writers have been angry to the point of suggesting, nay, even of accusing, the studio people of the theft of their ideas. As a matter of fact, the explanation is that what the author imagined original with himself or herself was nothing of the kind. Unconsciously and unwittingly, it may be, there has remained in their minds the unrecognized memory of some scene they have seen in a since forgotten picture and unconsciously it is reproduced in the scenario. Thus the plagiarism attributed to the studio lay rather with the would-be author. "Plagiarism, unconscious or otherwise, sticks out all over them," says Colonel J. E. Brady, editor of Metro Pictures corporation, who declares that the number of good stories does not begin to meet the demand for them. "The trouble is that 90 per cent of the scripts received haven't a grain of originality in them."

Joseph M. Schenck is another producer of note

who tells the same tale of shortage of acceptable material. Of late he has gone mostly to the big novels for material for Norma Talmadge.

Lest you be appalled by the seeming hopelessness of your case, right here let me cheer you up somewhat. If, as the so-called scenario textbooks tend to make you suppose, you had to turn out the finished product to get your story accepted, you might well feel ready to quit. But the opposite is the case. In fact, the amateur need not, and should not, concern himself with anything beyond a real story, simply and directly told. You need not and should not worry about entrances, exits, fadeouts and other technicalities. Leave that to the specialist—the man or woman whose business it is to put the accepted story into practical screen form. The amateur is not expected to write "continuity"—that is a job separate and apart and is the task of the studio expert.

"It is true that only a small percentage of the stories submitted to motion picture producers by amateur authors is accepted," says Marshall Neilan, one of this country's most notable producers. "Yet the reason for this seems rather obvious. If a man advertises for original plans for a country home and a hundred different plans are received, 90 per cent being submitted by amateurs and 10 per cent by professional home builders, there is little doubt that the accepted plans would be from one of the 10 per cent."

"While among the plans submitted by the amateurs there doubtless would be found many exceptional ideas, yet the individual plans on the whole could hardly be expected to measure up to those submitted by the professionals."

Turning for a moment from the producer's point of view, let us see what is the newspaper critic's angle on desirabilities in screen stories. If what I quote may seem to smack more of production than of writing, there is, too, a lesson for the author whose business, after all, it is, rather than the director's, to supply the situations.

"Many of the scenes have been made meaningful as motion pictures." (I quote the critic of a leading New York newspaper on a recent film.) "For instance, there is one in which Henry Garnett, knowing that he must die soon, sits listening to an inexorable clock. It ticks and ticks, counting off the seconds of his life. Finally, in futile desperation, he seizes the pendulum and stops it, but as he holds the metal bar, a phantom pendulum behind it swings on. Here is cinematography. Here is complete expressiveness within a picture!"

There it is in a nutshell. A real idea, logically and simply worked out without needless discussion, directly and clearly, to an inevitable conclusion. Therein lies one way where your story won't come back.

Hope Hampton, whose latest starring vehicle is "Light in the Dark," tells me that the reason so many scenario writers fail is because they cannot or do not put themselves in the place of the audience. In other words, they cannot properly visualize their work.

"It should always be borne in mind," says this star, "that thought and impression can be effected only by action. Perhaps the ideal film would be one in which there were no subtitles at all. I do not know whether that could be, but the next best thing is where the action is so clear, so convincing, and the conclusion so inevitable that only a minimum number of subtitles is necessary."

After all, you can't blame the producer, even though he may err in sending your story back. It's different with, say, a magazine editor, and even he sends stuff back—lots of it. The magazine editor may, with not very disastrous results, use a mediocre or even a poor story, provided he makes sure his magazine contains at the same time two or three good tales. The strong stories will carry the weak. But with the photoplay producer it is very different. All his eggs, so to speak, are in one basket. In accepting a story, or rather in making a picture from it, he risks the possibility of losing something like \$100,000. It makes him more than careful of his choice.

You can, however, be practically sure of one thing. If your story has real and full screen merit and you keep it going visiting long enough it will stop coming back at last. In its place will come a check. More writers than one, by sticking eternally at it and refusing to quit, have ultimately sold their product, for it is the very act of writing and re-writing that ultimately makes a professional out of an amateur.

The AMERICAN LEGION

(Copy for This Department Supplied by The American Legion News Service.)

URGES BUDDIES TO PAY DUES

Major General Tyndall, National Treasurer, Advocates Financial Independence.

Credit of the American Legion's sound financial standing is given by Legionnaires to Maj. Gen. Robert Tyndall of Indianapolis, recently re-appointed national treasurer of the ex-service men's organization.

At all national conventions and Legion gatherings of various kinds, General Tyndall has insisted upon the adoption of a financial policy whereby national headquarters shall be able to stand upon its own feet without incurring any outside obligation forcing the Legion to lose a bit of its independence and freedom of action.

General Tyndall's message to Legionnaires this year is a reiteration of his advocacy of financial independence with a request that Legion members pay their dues early in order that the posts may find themselves free to carry out the program of relief for disabled, Americanism and other important measures.

General Tyndall believes that too much energy is expended in the collection of dues which should be paid to the post finance officer upon notification of the member.

The military career of General Tyndall dates back to 1897, when he enlisted as a private. He served in Porto Rico during the Spanish-American war, on the Mexican border as commanding officer of the One Hundred and Fiftieth artillery of the Forty-second (Rainbow) division in the World war, participating in all major offensives. He now commands the Thirty-eighth National Guard division.

HELPED WIN THE WORLD WAR

National Vice Commander, of Wyoming, Typifies Spirit of the West in Great Conflict.

Chiles P. Plummer of Casper, Wyo., national vice commander of the American Legion, typifies the spirit of the West in the World war. Although he was thirty-eight years old at its outbreak, he couldn't stay out of the scrap. So he threw away his four-gallon campaign hat, spending two months in the service.

Mr. Plummer Chiles Plummer served as captain of artillery in the One Hundred Sixteenth ammunition train, composed of two battalions of the old Third Wyoming Infantry, remaining fifteen months in France, where his organization was a part of the Forty-first division.

An organizer of the George Vroman post of the Legion at Casper, Mr. Plummer served as its first commander. He was active in outfitting clubrooms for that post and in its general development. A fighter for the rights of disabled ex-service men, Mr. Plummer's activity in their behalf obtained national recognition, resulting in his election as national executive committee member, and later as national vice commander. He is a lawyer, was educated at the University of Illinois and is proud of the fact that he is a fraternity brother of Alvin M. Owsley, Legion national commander.

NOT TO ASK RED CROSS AID

American Legion Posts Will Not Request Funds in the Hands of the Local Chapters.

Funds in the hands of local chapters of the American Red Cross will not be asked for by American Legion posts, according to Lemuel Bolles, Legion national adjutant.

"The American Red Cross is co-operating with the American Legion in every way in the furnishing of funds for service to the sick and disabled, and in many localities is furnishing direct relief to service men and their families," Mr. Bolles said. "Funds in the hands of local chapters of the American Red Cross should not be confused with the residue funds of the war chest, or other emergency war organizations which, during the war raised money for work among soldiers and sailors, but which ceased to function at the conclusion of hostilities."

Based on court decisions at Athens, O., and Vevay, Ind., the Legion has directed its posts to obtain all funds in the treasuries of emergency organizations which are no longer concerned with relief of World war fighters.

ACTIVE IN LEGION AFFAIRS

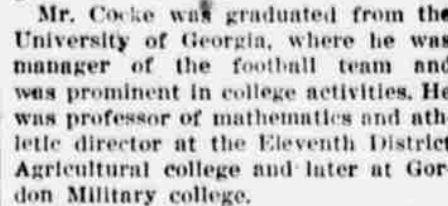
National Vice Commander Cooke of Georgia Gets Results With His Financial Policies.

Rehabilitation of disabled ex-service men and the establishment of sound financial policies have been the hobbies of E. Earle Cooke of Dawson, Ga., national vice commander of the American Legion.

Mr. Cooke was one of the founders of the Georgia department of the Legion and has been active in Legion affairs ever since. Serving as a member of the state executive committee, he advocated a financial policy which was largely responsible for Georgia's obtaining the largest membership increase of any department during 1922. Mr. Cooke is alternate national executive committee member from Georgia and represented his state on the committee at the Legion convention in New Orleans.

Mr. Cooke was graduated from the University of Georgia, where he was manager of the football team and was prominent in college activities. He was professor of mathematics and athletic director at the Eleventh District Agricultural college and later at Gordon Military college.

During the war, the Legion officer served as a second lieutenant with the Sixteenth Machine Gun battalion in the Gerardner sector of the Vosges mountains, a defensive sector and in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Since discharge he has been state editor of the Macon (Ga.) News and managing editor of the Athens Banner. He is now a farmer and real estate man.



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HONORS FOR TWO AMERICANS

Louisiana Men Are Named as Honorary Members of the Belgian Veterans' Legion.

The signal honor of being made honorary member of the Belgian Veterans' Legion came to Clarence J. Bourg, Louisiana American Legion national executive committee member, and Mayor Robert Mouton of Lafayette, La., during the Interallied Veterans' association convention in New Orleans. There are only five honorary



Clarence J. Bourg and Mayor Robert Mouton.

members of the Belgian ex-service men's organization.

The Louisiana men acted as hosts to the Belgian delegation at the New Orleans gathering. Presentation was formally made by M. Joseph Janne, assistant minister of labor for Belgium, a vice president of the association and commander of the Belgian Legion. The diploma and badge will be presented to the Americans by King Albert at the next association gathering at Brussels in 1923.

WELL RECEIVED IN HAVANA

American Legion Men Report Marked Hospitality While on Recent Visit to Cuba.

Tales of excellent hospitality from American Legion members in Havana have been brought to this country by Legionnaires who journeyed to Cuba following the recent national convention in New Orleans.

The program held by the Havana buddies included a visit to Legion headquarters, a trip to the Jal alai game at the Havana-Madrid Fronton, which provided front boxes for the visitors and visits to Morro castle, Cabanas fortress and other interesting points. Hotels and restaurants welcomed the Legionnaires with elaborate decorations and special rates in addition to providing information booths and other conveniences.

Havana has one of the largest foreign posts of the Legion. It is composed of veterans from nearly every branch of the service. The reception arrangements were conducted by Capt. George T. Street, post commander, and John Blavka.

Hear Radio Address.

When a representative of the United States Veterans' bureau broadcast a radio talk on the "Possibilities of a Rehabilitated Ex-Service Man" at Atlanta, under the direction of Joe Sparks, the new chairman of the American Legion's national rehabilitation committee, his remarks were listened to with interest by 200 veterans in a training school at Cookeville, Tenn., 800 miles away.