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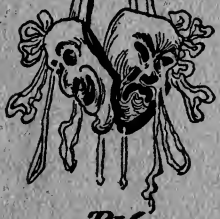
The Photoplay Writer



By

Leona Radnor

How to Write Scenarios that Sell and where to sell them

Price
50¢

THE

PHOTOPLAY WRITER

By

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PHOTOPLAYS

The demand for photoplays is greater to-day than ever before, and, according to authoritative accounts, this demand will go on steadily increasing. New companies are starting up; new theatres are being opened; and everyone who has made a study of this wonderful and fascinating motion picture industry is of the opinion that it is merely in its infancy.

Before getting right down to information and instruction and advice, I am going to say a few words of encouragement. I realize that among those who will read this little book are many who have ideas, but have lacked either the courage or the technical knowledge or the power of expression to mold these ideas into stories or dramas. To those timid or unversed ones, let me say emphatically that photoplay writing offers great opportunities to them, provided, always, that their ideas are of such quality and quantity as to form sterling photoplays. Here there are no requirements of style and sparkling dialogue to fill; you are not restricted to three or four acts into which all the action must converge, as in the stage play; nor are you called upon to display literary ability in the powerful and graceful handling of narrative and imagery, as in a story.

All such difficulties are cleared away from the path of the photoplay writer. When an idea occurs to him, he has simply to jot it down and add to it as his imagination pictures the developing plot (subject to a few simple rules) until he has a sequence of incidents that form an interesting story.

For that is all a photoplay is—just a story told in pictures. And everyone has a story—if not a bag of stories—tucked away in the corners of his mind. One doesn't have to live where life is teeming and surging in order to write a successful scenario. Some of the most applauded

photoplays are those simple little tales of country or home life in which the main theme is a strong heart interest. This theme may be the love of sweethearts, of brothers and sisters, of parents and children, and the story may be of the simplest; but it must consist of incidents that reach and hold the spectator and stamp upon his appreciative faculties an impression that is not obliterated as soon as the reel is finished.

For instance, one of the prettiest and most appreciated photoplays I have seen is one by the Edison Company called "Home. A Thanksgiving Story." It is the old story of a patient and loving mother looking for her absent boy's return. On Thanksgiving Eve she is preparing the morrow's dinner. She goes out to the post-box at the gate. The postman has just left the mail, but there is no letter from the boy. Sadly she stands gazing down the road. Her husband comes from the field, puts his arm about her in sympathy and leads her back to the house. That evening, the mother writes an advertisement and sends it to a city paper. This is the advertisement: "My Child, come home. Then it will truly be Thanksgiving Day. Mother."

Then follows a number of scenes showing the effect of this appeal on dwellers in the city. The first one to be affected is the editor of the paper to which the advertisement was sent. Upon reading it, he has a vision of his old home in the country, and the longing comes upon him to visit it. He puts on his coat and hat, and, to the astonishment of the office force, he rushes out. A "man about town," an actress, a clubman—each in turn reads the advertisement and prepares to take a train back to the country home. The clubman, in his haste, throws the newspaper out of the window. It falls at the feet of a boy—a boy who is down at heel and out at elbow, wandering the streets looking for a job. And this is the boy for whom the advertisement was intended. He picks up the paper, reads the few appealing words, looks helplessly at his

shabby clothes, feels despairingly in his empty pockets. He has no money—but he must go home. He goes to the station and slips into a box car. He reaches home and quietly enters the house without being seen or heard. The lonely father and mother are standing at the table saying grace over the Thanksgiving dinner. There is a third place for the absent boy, and the wanderer approaches and stands with bowed head. When grace is finished, the father and mother look up to find their prayers answered—their boy is home again and their Thanksgiving Day is made joyful.

You can see how simple, how everyday a story the above is, yet each time that I have seen it, the spectators applauded heartily. It is the human interest, the heart throb in it, that causes it to register.

Now, in everyone's life, there is *at least one good story.* In every little village, there is a score of romances and comedies. If one of them is not sufficient to fill out a photoplay of the desired length (from fifteen to twenty minutes), take incidents from several and weave them together. If the incidents are humorous, so much the better. Every producer is anxious to get hold of humorous plays. There is a great scarcity of them. The sort of humor wanted is not the rough variety—not an attempt to make people laugh at cruel jokes nor at accidents that mean injury to someone, nor at mere foolishness. The incidents must be of humorous situations that are innocently funny.

Another encouraging point in connection with photoplay writing is that practically everything is possible in photography. Scenes that could not be presented on a dramatic stage are worked out by the moving picture actors and the camera men. People can fall down cliffs; they can be apparently blown up in an explosion; they can be shown struggling for breath in a fire-swept mine—so, if you have a tale of extraordinary happenings to relate, don't hesitate for fear that it cannot be produced.

But also bear in mind that there are limitations. Be sure to have your incidents within the bounds of possibility; do not concoct a play that would tax the credulity of spectators.

THE PRODUCTION OF PHOTOPLAYS

For the enlightenment of those who are in the dark, I will give a brief account of the production of photoplays.

When a scenario is accepted by the scenario editor of a producing company, he turns it over (perhaps with some changes and suggestions) to the stage director. This director studies the scenario, alters it to suit his purpose, makes a choice of actors from the stock company maintained by the producer, plans his scenes, and rehearses the actors thoroughly (either in the studio or out of doors) before the camera man is called in. Then, as the scenes are gone through, the camera operator turns the crank that reels off the film on which the photographs are being taken.

The film is a celluloid ribbon, the standard size being one inch and three-eighths wide. Sixteen pictures a second are taken, each picture being an inch wide and three-fourths of an inch deep. (The magazine of the camera holds from 150 to 300 feet of film.) When that length is used, another reel is put in and the picture-taking goes on. These lengths are glued together (after the developing and printing processes) thus making one continuous film.

The film in the camera is the negative, and, like kodak films and the plates used in still photography, has to be developed. From it many positives (also films) are printed. These are tested in the factory by being thrown on a screen. The photography and the acting are criticized. Often the actors are present at these tests, and their faults are pointed out to them by one of the managers or directors. Scenes that are poorly done are cut out of the film and, if necessary, they are re-enacted. Defects in photography are remedied, and, when the company is satisfied

with the film, it is released to exchanges and these in turn supply the theatres.

The developing and printing of those long ribbons of films are very wonderful processes. They are wound on frames and dipped into the developing baths, and, when dry, are run through machines to be printed by electric light.

When a photoplay is shown in a theatre, the film passes from an upper to a lower magazine on the projecting machine. The pictures are magnified by a powerful lens through which a very strong light is thrown from the "lamp house," or lantern, on the machine.

YOUR SCENARIO

"Scenario" is a term that has been brought into the photoplay vocabulary from the dramatic stage. There it is applied to the bare plot of a play—its action as distinct from the dialogue. When the writing of photoplays developed into a profession, the term "scenario" was adopted as the most fitting for the form in which plays are offered to film producers. It means an outline of the plot, situation by situation, arranged in scenes as the action changes its base of operations.

In the course of a talk with Mr. Horace G. Plimpton, Manager of the Negative Production of the Edison Company, he said: "There is no secret, no mystery about the writing of scenarios. All that is required is the ability to think up good, effective plots, and the skill to present them in scenes of telling action. And the best way to develop ability and acquire skill is by going to moving picture theatres and studying the films."

From the start, you must get firmly fixed in your mind the demand that something must be doing all the time. There must be something interesting, something pointing to the development of the story every second of the time. You cannot have, as in a story or a spoken play, a couple

of men sitting and calmly talking to each other, without anything to explain the meaning of their conversation. Remember, the photoplay is dumb—its meaning has to be expressed by action.

You will probably be puzzled at first as to the gauging of the length of your play. You should plan to have it last about fifteen minutes. When you have your plot sketched out, it would be a good idea for you to take your script and deliberately go through the action. Do not hurry, for every scene is worked over by the director of the company producing the play, and he fills in the chinks with realistic and artistic details that tend to lengthen the duration.

So, as I say, do not hurry when testing the time required to go through your play. If it covers about fifteen minutes, you can feel easy on the score of its length. Many novices send in scenarios that could be reeled off in less than ten minutes, while others send them in so crammed with incidents that they would require over a thousand feet of film (the usual length) if played as written.

Now, to get to work on your scenario. The first step is, naturally, the idea for your plot. You may have a single plot of consecutive events, or you may have a primary and a secondary theme interlacing.

Be absolutely original, if you possibly can. If you take an idea from a newspaper or magazine story, work it out with original incidents. You will notice that magazine stories are usually copyrighted. A disregard of that fact is apt to bring punishment through the heavy hand of the law.

Nearly every company has a scenario editor, and he, as well as the directors of plays, is constantly on the lookout for plots in newspapers, magazines, and books. So, unless you inject originality into your play, you are liable to send in a duplicate of one already written and produced, with the result that you will have wasted your time and postage.

Some writers have been unscrupulous and foolish enough to write scenarios of photoplays that they have seen on the screen, and have sent them to other companies. To say nothing of the dishonesty of it, it is an absurd thing to do; for scenario editors occupy their responsible positions because they know their business. And that business requires that they be conversant with the productions of other companies and that they detect at a glance if the plot of a submitted scenario is stolen. They are also abreast of magazine reading, so it is futile for a scenario writer to attempt to "get by" with a plagiarized story.

Now that I have impressed upon you not only the advisability but the necessity for originating your plots, we can proceed with the writing of the scenario.

Some film companies advertise that they want only ideas, but I would advise always sending in a scenario, as very little is paid for mere ideas. And given a good plot, the more workmanlike, the more professional a scenario, the more money it will command.

To demonstrate the scenario form, I shall take the familiar story of "Cinderella."

The first step is to write a short synopsis—that is, outline of the story. This synopsis must be as brief as it is possible to make it and still give the reader a clear idea of your play. Confine yourself to 200 words—250 words at the most. Make it interesting, so that the reader will wish to go on with your scenario. Write it on a sheet by itself and let it be the first page of your script, so that it will meet the reader's eye immediately.

CINDERELLA

Synopsis

Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters, being ugly of disposition as well as of feature, are jealous of her. They ill-treat her and make a drudge of her. While they are at a ball, Cinderella's fairy godmother pays the lonely girl a visit. Learning how she is treated, the fairy transforms

Cinderella's rags into beautiful clothes; turns a pumpkin into a carriage, and rats and mice into coachman, grooms, and ponies. She then sends the radiant Cinderella to the ball. There, she meets and charms the prince. She will not tell who she is. Running from the ballroom at midnight, she loses her little glass slipper. The prince picks it up and, next day, goes in search of the wearer. He tries the slipper on the feet of many girls. Cinderella's stepsisters cannot squeeze their toes into it, but Cinderella slips it on easily. The fairy godmother again appears and transforms Cinderella into a beautiful princess, and the prince leads her away to become his bride.

Now, from the synopsis we work out the scenario. Each time the action changes from one place to another, it means a new scene. A scene is the action taken by the camera in one spot without stopping.

Besides numbering each scene, you must indicate the setting—that is, whether it is in a room, in the woods, on board a ship, etc. Under the title of your scenario, write out a cast of the characters of your play.

CINDERELLA

Cast of Characters

Cinderella	The Prince
Her Stepmother	The Fairy Godmother
Her two Stepsisters	Guests at the ball, heralds, etc.

For the first scene, you have the picture of Cinderella's home life. She is unhappy, being nagged and forced to do drudgery for her stepmother and stepsisters, while they think only of their own pleasures. Finally, they go upstairs to dress, while Cinderella crouches on the hearth, sifting the ashes for the seeds the malicious stepmother has thrown down just to make her work.

Now, that is all that can be shown in the first scene, for that is all that takes place at that time in that set. So the first scene will be as follows:

SCENE I

An old-fashioned kitchen with large fireplace

Cinderella, in rags, polishing a copper kettle. Her stepmother and stepsisters enter and begin scolding her and ordering her from one task to another. These finished, the stepmother maliciously throws a handful of pumpkin seeds into the ashes on the hearth and commands Cinderella to pick them out. Stepmother and daughters laugh at her dismay and weariness and leave the room.

Note—You cannot end your first scene with "Stepmother and daughters go upstairs to their rooms and dress for the ball." As the camera from its present position cannot take the mother and her daughters in their room upstairs, we make another scene of that view.

SCENE II

Daughters' Room

The two girls are dressing for the ball. They powder and rouge their faces and simper at their images in the mirror. Mother enters, handsomely attired. They admire her, arrange her hair, pin on a flower, etc. She does same to them, then they all take court patches from a little box and stick several on their faces. Quite satisfied with themselves, they leave the room.

SCENE III

Same as Scene I

Cinderella kneeling on hearth. Stepmother and daughters enter and flaunt their finery before the little drudge. They give her final instructions, order her to open the door for them, and sweep out, laughing among themselves. Cinderella goes to the window and wistfully watches them depart.

Note—You cannot say "They sweep out, get into a coach and are driven to the palace, where they enter the ballroom and are greeted by the prince." As the camera is focussed on the room, the mother and daughters are out of the scene as soon as they pass through the door. To show them driving to the ball would entail another scene,

and their arrival at the palace yet another. As there is no interest attached to these incidents, we omit them.

SCENE IV

Ballroom in the Palace

Guests are dancing the minuet. The prince is strolling about. Stepmother and daughters arrive. The prince greets them stiffly and passes on. Women smile at him and attempt to interest him, but he pays no heed to them.

SCENE V

Kitchen, same as Scene I

Cinderella on the hearth sadly gazing at the fire. Suddenly her fairy godmother appears. She asks Cinderella what is the matter and why she is in rags. The girl tells her how she is made to drudge. The godmother treads a measure of the minuet and, by gestures, asks the girl if she would like to go to the ball. Cinderella answers "Yes" enthusiastically. Fairy waves a wand and Cinderella is beautifully dressed. She dances about in delight. Fairy motions to door for Cinderella to pass out. Then stops and points to figure twelve on large clock and indicates that Cinderella must return by midnight.

SCENE VI

Ballroom, same as Scene IV

The friends of the prince urge him to dance. They bring up beautiful women to present to him. He turns them over to other partners and walks wearily away. Nothing interests him.

SCENE VII

Garden in front of Cinderella's home

Cinderella and fairy godmother enter from house. Fairy carries a trap containing rats and mice. Fairy waves a wand over a large pumpkin and it is transformed into a dainty carriage; she waves wand over the rats and mice, and they become coachman, grooms, and ponies. Cinderella gets into carriage and is driven off.

SCENE VIII

Ballroom, same as Scene IV

Guests dancing. Cinderella enters. She creates a sensation. The prince is immediately charmed with her. He approaches and leads her into the dance. Her stepsisters, not recognizing her, make deep curtseys as she passes them with the prince.

SCENE IX

Leader: Midnight

An alcove off the main hall of the palace. Clock on mantel or standing in corner

Cinderella enters as if trying to make her escape. She looks at clock and starts toward the hall. A number of young men rush in pursuit of her and surround her begging for a dance. She refuses them all, glancing at the clock. The prince enters and claims a dance. She is about to place her hand in his, when she starts and listens, her hand involuntarily keeping time to the strokes of the clock. (Flash clock dial with hands pointing at twelve.) With sudden resolution, she flings off the prince's hand and runs out through the archway. One of her slippers drops from her foot. The prince stops to pick it up, then runs after her. He stops at the archway, looking in all directions. He indicates that she has disappeared.

SCENE X

Kitchen, same as Scene I

Cinderella enters hurriedly, out of breath. All of her finery has vanished, with the exception of her little glass slipper, which she carries in her hand. She looks at it, then thrusts it quickly into the pocket of her ragged skirt. She sinks down upon the hearth. Her stepmother and stepsisters enter in great excitement, talking and gesticulating. They scowl at Cinderella and order her to help them undress.

SCENE XI

Leader: Next Day. A Street.

People leaning from windows. The prince and heralds in street. The prince holds aloft the glass slipper. The heralds proclaim (Cut in): "The prince will wed the maid who can wear the slipper." Girls press forward eagerly.

SCENE XII

A living-room

Stepmother and her daughters peering from window and talking. They look at their feet and nod approvingly. The sisters will try on the slipper. They begin to prink.

SCENE XIII

Street, same as Scene XI

The prince comes from a house. He shakes his head and proceeds next door. Crowd is curious and tries to look in window. Prince comes out shaking his head in discouragement.

SCENE XIV

Living-room, same as Scene XII

Stepmother and daughters still looking from window. Suddenly turn and assume dignified attitudes. They call Cinderella and order her to open the door. She does so and conceals herself behind the door. Prince and page enter. Prince indicates that he wishes to try on the slipper. The sisters try to force it on, but they cannot squeeze their toes into it. The prince is about to leave when he catches sight of Cinderella. He calls her to him and tries the slipper on. It slips on easily and she draws the mate from her pocket. Enraptured, the prince kisses her hand. The fairy godmother appears and, with a wave of the magic wand, transforms Cinderella into a beautiful princess. The prince leads her away, while her stepmother and stepsisters look on with astonishment and envy.

There you have a model of the scenario form. This contains fewer scenes than the majority of scenarios. From

eighteen to twenty-five scenes usually go to make up a photoplay, and as many as thirty-five have been used. While it is not advisable to keep your characters in one scene for any length of time (spectators grow restless if one scene is kept in sight too long), it is also advisable not to have your play cut up by a lot of short scenes. But these points all hinge upon the nature of your play. In an out-of-doors play, it may be necessary to move from place to place rapidly. In a domestic play, you may be obliged to use the same setting repeatedly. You must use your judgment in the matter. When the greater part of the action passes in a certain setting, change frequently to another setting, then come back to the former. In this way you will obviate monotony.

Plan your action so that the play advances logically and the scenes follow each other in natural sequence. When characters are to appear later in a different setting, you must first take them off the preceding scene; or, do not have them appear immediately, but, instead, introduce another scene in which they do not appear.

With the "Cinderella" scenario as a guide you should be able to outline any plot. Some writers reverse the working plan I suggested—they first write the play and then the synopsis.

An invariable rule that will help you with editors is this: Be as brief as possible; don't fill your scenarios with trivial explanations.

In Scene IX, in parentheses is the sentence: "Flash clock with hands pointing at twelve." The terms "flash," "close view," "cut in," and "screen" are used as directions for the presentation of something outside the action of the scene then progressing or something within the scene to be enlarged. You have noticed in some motion pictures that the action will be interrupted to show a hand, enlarged, writing a letter or opening a locket, or, as in this scenario, there will be a clock or watch dial showing the time; a let-

ter or telegram will be "screened"; there will be a "cut in" of another scene shown for a few seconds only, to accentuate a comparison or show what is taking place somewhere else at the same moment.

You have also noticed that on motion picture films sub-titles, or "leaders," are flashed on the screen to explain the coming scenes. When you write your scenario, it is not necessary for you to put in these sub-titles. The scenario editor or the director supplies them as a rule; but if you think you have a set of "leaders" that are to the point, write each directly under the number of the scene it elucidates.

Experienced writers usually furnish their own "leaders" and indicate in parentheses the number of words used, so that the director can see at a glance how many feet of film will be required. For example:

Scene I

The Little Drudge. (3 words)

An old-fashioned kitchen with large fireplace

Cinderella, in rags, polishing, etc.

Scene VIII

The Belle of the Ball. (5 words)

Same as Scene IV

Guests dancing. Cinderella enters, etc.

Once in a while, it is permissible to use a sentence of dialogue to emphasize the action. This usually comes at the end of a scene and is often used as the sub-title. For instance, you have a domestic episode—the husband, leaving the house, embraces his wife affectionately. He takes out his watch, points to the figure two on the dial. "Meet me at two o'clock." Or, a son has disgraced his family. The father denounces his conduct and, in a rage, points to the door. "Go! and never return!"

In the foregoing "Cinderella" scenario, in Scene XI, I used the sentence: "The prince will wed the maid who can wear the slipper." That bit of dialogue explains the

proclamation of the heralds, and can be used as a sub-title. But let me caution you against indulging in frequent dialogue—at most, it must be only a short, enlightening sentence. And use telegrams and letters only when absolutely necessary to the working out of your plot. "Leaders" cannot be more than twenty words in length, and the shorter they are the better. Letters and telegrams must be as condensed as possible. A letter should not contain more than thirty to forty words.

Always indicate an appreciable lapse of time between scenes. If you have a scene between a young girl and a boy, you must not, without warning, have them walk on in the next scene years older. Designate the lapse of time after the number of the scene, thus:

SCENE V

Leader: Ten Years Later

"Ten years later," used as a "leader" on the screen before Scene V is shown, prepares the spectators and makes the situation clear.

When you have a vision or dream in your play, describe as follows:

Scene 6—A garden.

James enters. He greets the young couple. They shake hands with him cordially, then walk away out of picture, smiling and looking back. He looks after them and nods, laughing. He seats himself under a tree, resting his head against the trunk. He grows drowsy, closes his eyes, sleeps. (Fade into DREAM.)

THE DREAM.

Scene 7—A busy city street.

James stands on a corner watching the passersby, as though in search of someone. A young girl approaches his corner. He starts, steps in front of her, and bows. Etc.

When the scenes of the dream are completed, write: "(Dream fades away. Back to Scene 6.)" The number of the next scene will follow that of the last scene of the

dream. For instance, if the last scene of the dream was 10, the next scene will be 11.

Sometimes, a vision is but momentary and does not require a change of scenes. In that case, express as follows: "(Fade into vision.) THE VISION: Marie appears at the door holding out her hands appealingly. (Fade away. Back to picture.) Jack stares before him, etc."

If your play deals with a historical subject, give the period under your cast of characters.

In your cast of characters, it is a good idea to signify the occupation of each or his relation to the others; for instance, taking an imaginary cast:

Richard Price.....a mine owner
Jenny .....his daughter
John Wheeler.....a mining engineer
Philip Dean.....supt. of the mine
Mrs. Ross.....friend of John Wheeler
Jim .....a miner

Think up a good title for your play. A short one is always preferable to a long one. The choice of a title may seem a very simple matter, but I assure you that it is of considerable importance. A commonplace or much-used title will often discourage a tired editor before he begins a reading of the play. Such obvious and ancient headings as "A Mother's Love," "The Power of Gold," "Married in Haste," and others that were old in story before moving pictures were born, will not prejudice the editor in your favor when he opens your envelope. Show originality in the christening of your play as well as in its plot. Let the name be expressive of the play, let it be crisp and a stimulant to the editor's curiosity.

YOUR STORY

Your story must be of such strength and interest as to hold the attention of spectators from start to finish. Begin with a situation that rouses interest, then develop the

theme logically, putting in only such minor scenes as are indispensable, and work for a climax at the end. The last scene should be the final clearing up of the preceding events—it should show the solution of the problem or puzzle, if there is one—and should, when possible, contain a surprise or "snapper."

Remember that the central plot of a play must depict some episode in the lives of two or three leading characters. Do not introduce others with side complications and separate interests. It does not require a big cast nor a pretentious stage-setting to make a big impression. A good play, strong in its appeal, rarely demands more than three or four leading characters. The other characters are subordinate and should be kept in the background. Any secondary business must serve merely as a "feeder" to the main story.

Aim to have your story human; your characters natural, true to life. Identify your principal characters in the first scene or in those closely following. Have each one do something characteristic of his position in life or of his disposition—in a word, of his significance in your play. If he is a villain, have him do something to establish that fact immediately, so that the spectators, instead of being puzzled and irritated, will understand at the outset and follow the picture absorbedly and without effort.

Never lose sight of the fact that the photoplay is dumb. There can be no subtleties in it; the characters and their acts must be obvious. Plots that are interesting and gripping in short stories and novels are often unsuitable for photoplay production, for the reason that on the screen there can be no explanation of motives, codes of morals, mental and spiritual processes. Nothing but *action* can be shown and such underlying incentives and mental and spiritual workings as can be readily interpreted by gestures and facial expression. Fear, worry, anger, horror, remorse—all these can be expressed by attitude and facial expression.

But impulsive acts that cannot be easily understood and other acts that are the result of certain trains of reasoning that it would be impossible to explain in a picture must be avoided.

It is probably superfluous to state that, in order to write successfully, you must visualize your play—you must in imagination see your characters perform their parts. This faculty of imagination must be cultivated, if you do not possess it naturally. Otherwise, your efforts will lack concentration, sharpness, and strength—and, consequently, value.

Write about things with which you are familiar. Do not write about people and localities of which you know nothing. If you are not acquainted with the customs of certain distinct types, such as the mountaineers of Kentucky, do not attempt to dramatize them. Know the conditions you wish to deal with before you commit yourself to paper or your play to the critical scrutiny of an editor.

Visit motion picture theatres and familiarize yourself with the essentials of the photoplay. Pay attention not only to the manner in which the interest is kept up and brought to a climax, but note also the technical side of it. A study of the sequence of scenes, the "leaders," the "cut ins," the exits of the characters in one scene and their entrances in the following scene, will help you more than you would at first deem possible. In fact, it is this study that will give you "technique," which means an expert and artistic handling of your story.

When you do not like a picture you are viewing, ask yourself why; criticize it and try mentally to reconstruct it so that it would be more interesting to your way of thinking. When you like a play, think over the plot, the manner of its presentation, scene by scene, and store it away as a reference for future assistance—not to copy, but to recall as a guide when you are facing puzzling problems in the planning of your characters and scenes.

BUILDING YOUR PLOT

A plot will not leap into your mind in a whole and finished state. It is a growth. You may be inspired with the basic idea, but you have to construct your plot. Your story must be thought over and dreamed over until you have your facts. Then begin shaping it. Throughout the growth of the plot, the problem is to build up the interest by adding one complication after another. When the grand climax is reached, the problem is to remove the complications in such a way as to retain the interest.

Every plot must have an object. That object must be settled upon at the start, then kept distinctly in view as the situations are introduced. When the plot is completed, that object must have been accomplished.

A plot is made up of conflict, of struggle, of opposition. There is always an obstacle to be removed; there is always a problem to solve. If the action of a play were direct, it would soon come to an end. The purpose must be retarded by an obstacle; then the obstacle must be overcome; the action speeds again toward the goal; it is again delayed; and so on to the end.

The clash of interests between the characters is the result of good motives being thwarted by bad motives. The good must always win out in the end, though defeated in some of the scenes in order to create suspense. The conflict of interests is not always confined to the virtuous and the wicked. Oftentimes, circumstances, misunderstandings, selfishness, carelessness, ignorance, or indifference will bring about situations as dramatic as if a villain had planned the opposition. In comedy, the clash usually comes about through misunderstandings or blundering.

The incidents of a plot must be "motived"; that is, *the cause* of every incident must be apparent in some incident that has gone before and has established a motive for what follows. Every event should grow naturally out of the preceding incidents and lead naturally to those that come

after. Without well-defined cause and effect, you have only a string of episodes. You must learn that mere action does not constitute a plot, nor does mere sentiment, nor romantic scenes. Likewise, foolery or the playing of tricks does not make a comedy.

An absolute requisite of your plot is SUSPENSE. It is the art of keeping the solution of the complications doubtful. Suspense begins with interest in the action; it is increased through sympathy with the characters; it is further increased by curiosity as to the winding up of the play. If spectators can be kept in doubt as to the outcome, their interest is held to the end, and the writer has achieved suspense. Suspense has been called the nervous system of the drama. If it is a necessity in the spoken drama, it is much more so in the photoplay. For, in the former, dialogue can be made to absorb the attention, while the picture play makes its appeal to the intelligence and the sympathies solely through action. Suspense should be kept up to the very end, although it must be relieved from time to time to loosen the tension and allow of its being renewed with more force. Not until the end should it be utterly removed and every vestige of doubt cleared away.

In each situation in which a clash brings about a result that appears to be decisive, you have a CLIMAX. Climax means the height of the action. It is the result of a growth, a piling up of cause and effect to the apex of the situation. There may be several climaxes in your play, but each one must be stronger than the preceding one until the GRAND CLIMAX is reached. The grand climax is the turning point, the crisis, the goal of your plot. After that comes the *denouement,* which means the *untying of the knot.* In fact, the climax may be compared to a knot that is gradually and forcefully formed by the action of the plot. When it can be drawn no tighter, the grand climax is reached and the untying begins. This untying, or clearing up, is called the "anti-climax," or "fall." It must be as

brief as possible, for when the strain of the suspense is removed, the interest wanes rapidly and the effect of the preceding scenes is speedily lost.

A writer who intends to persist in this work should begin to collect "scrap"—clippings from newspapers and magazines of incidents that strike him as suitable ideas for photoplays, jottings of incidents that he witnesses or hears recounted, imaginary happenings that flash into his mind. All these should be kept in a scrapbook so as to be at hand when needed. These are the germs of future plots. William T. Price, in his "Technique of the Drama," says: "Every true play fashioned under a creative hand has its germ. This germ may be a pregnant and suggestive trait in some character, a happening—of personal knowledge in life, an incident in history, a paragraph in a newspaper—in short, a dramatic idea from any source. Charles Reade admittedly sought with diligence the history of each day as the press abundantly gathered its comedies and tragedies."

To illustrate what can be done with a suggestion, we'll suppose that you have clipped from a newspaper an account of the finding of the body of a young man in the river. The article describes him as well-dressed, tells of a label on his coat and identification card in a pocket. These point to the fact that he comes of a good family in Virginia. The police state that he has been involved in a number of bold robberies and lost his life trying to escape after a burglary.

Now, there you have the germ of a plot. The thing is clouded in mystery. Why should this well-bred young man become a burglar? What were his relations with his family? How are you going to lift the veil? How are you going to expand this meager account into complications, conflict, climaxes? Let us work this out together. First, what is to be *the purpose* of our plot? Shall we prove this to be a case of mistaken identity and clear the young Vir-

ginian's name and bring joy to his shamed family? Very well. Then, we'll assume that the body is not that of the young Virginian (we'll call him "Jack"). Then, whose body is it? And where did the drowned man get Jack's clothes and pocket-book? Now, the plotting begins. We must go back and account for Jack's being away from home. We'll imagine that he has quarreled with his parents over a girl whom they wish him to marry. He is infatuated with a vaudeville actress. His father, in a rage, drives him from the house. He goes to the actress; she laughs at him when she learns that his family has cast him off. Humiliated, he goes to New York. There a thief steals his clothes from his room. The thief wears the clothes. He belongs to a gang of motor boat thieves. Running from a house near the river, they jump into their boat. The thief wearing Jack's clothes is last; he misses the jump, falls into the water. The police are pursuing and the others will not stop the boat. The thief sinks out of sight in the water.

Now, we have accounted for the drowned man and for the mistaken identity. But where is Jack that he does not deny the false report? We must have him away from the city, in some place where he will not see the daily papers. Suppose we take him up to a logging camp in the mountains. Our big climax, we have settled, is to be an unexpected meeting between Jack and his parents, who suppose him to be dead. We cannot go straight to that end, for that would make the play too short and lacking in interest and suspense. We must create conflict and suspense. What obstacle can we introduce to make trouble for Jack? We might have another character—say a cousin, Bert—who is jealous of Jack and in love with the girl, May. This cousin also expects to inherit from Jack's father, so he is glad on every count that Jack is out of the way. We must plan the scenes that lead to our big climax. For that reason, we'll have Jack's parents, Bert, and May go to a bungalow in the mountains. Before filling in the scenes, we

must decide on the nature of our grand climax. It must be as thrilling as possible, as it is the very height of the play. A forest fire occurs to us, with Jack saving the lives of his parents and May. But May has had so little to do so far. We must invent something to make her more interesting and sympathetic to spectators and to make it plausible that Jack should love her at last. Suppose we have her rouse Jack's father and mother, when she discovers the fire, and guide them through the smoke to Jack. We can add to the thrill by having her refuse to escape with Bert. That brings another idea. Let us have Bert the cause of the fire. Soon after his arrival in the mountains he will run across Jack in the woods. He is startled and annoyed. He must keep Jack from his parents; so he pretends to be there alone. He plans to have Jack driven from the camp. At a card game in a cabin, he accuses Jack of cheating the men he is playing with. Jack calls him a liar. They fight. A lamp is overturned; the cabin burns; the fire spreads to the forest. Jack and men try to stop the blaze. Bert rushes to the bungalow; gets out the automobile. He calls May and tries to persuade her to escape with him. She indignantly refuses. She rouses Jack's father and mother and urges them to leave the bungalow. In the smoke, they become bewildered. They rush toward a clearing. Jack sees the party and goes to help them; saves them from a falling tree. Here we have the grand climax. There is an emotional meeting. Jack then leads them to a safe spot.

Now, we have the fall, or anti-climax, which we must get over as quickly as possible. The next day, Jack will call at the bungalow. He will realize May's love for him and will also realize that he is in love with her. But we have not disposed of Bert. We could have him killed while passing through the fire zone, or we could have the automobile run over the edge of a precipice, or we could have him return the next day to see what has happened to May

and the others. Perhaps this will be the best way. Some lumber jacks see him and, blaming him for the fire, they surround him and drag him from the car. They treat him roughly. Jack and May arrive on the scene. Jack orders the men to release Bert. Jack then advises him to go if he values his life. He slinks away.

There you have an example of plot-building from an item in a newspaper. Every paper is full of suggestions. Get into the habit of reading with the intention of finding those suggestions. Be curious as to the "whys and wherefores" of every occurrence you see, hear of, or read of. You will find that the practice will lead to a fertility of invention that will often surprise you. When your plot is built up, you are ready to construct your photoplay scene by scene. And don't forget to boil down your plot into a synopsis of 250 words, as described in connection with the CINDERELLA scenario.

WHAT FILM PRODUCERS WANT

All the companies demand *original* ideas.

Stories of everyday life stand the best chance of acceptance.

You have doubtless seen on the screen many photoplays adapted from well-known dramas and novels. A company that produces such plays prefers that its own editorial staff prepare the scenarios.

As I said in the beginning, there is an unwavering demand for comedy. What is wanted is novelty of plot or a fresh, original treatment of an old theme. Comedy of action must be there as well as the comedy of idea. An ordinary, prosy series of events leading up to a comical climax does not constitute a comedy; humorous situations must follow each other as the play develops. And the development must be logical and natural; forcing ridiculous situations for the sake of a "scream" results in foolishness that is far from what is desired. There is a lot of good

comedy going on about us. For one who knows how to grasp it and present it there is an avaricious and insatiable market.

Comedies are usually only half a reel in length, as it is difficult to find humorous incidents to fill a full reel. You will sometimes see two comedies on a reel, or a comedy and an industrial, educational, or scenic picture.

"Features" are photoplays of unusual character and of more than one reel. Every company likes to get hold of a play that will make a good feature of two, three, or four reels. In writing a feature photoplay, divide into parts, heading each part "Reel 1," "Reel 2," etc. End each part with: "End of Reel 1," "End of Reel 2," etc. Have the first scene of each part follow numerically the last scene of the preceding part, instead of writing it down "Scene 1." If Reel 1 finishes with Scene 22, Reel 2 begins with Scene 23.

When you go to a moving picture show, pay close attention to the producers' names and note what class of pictures they specialize in. Some of them prefer cowboy plays, others like plays dealing with business, others lean toward educational and social reform subjects. By observing the preferences of the various producers, you may save yourself many pangs of disappointment and many postage stamps.

Producers do not care for scenarios requiring trick photography. When in the mood to produce such a film, it is originated and worked out by the company's staff.

Also take into consideration that a producer encourages economy in the filming of the majority of his plays. A scenario that demands expensive costuming and stage-settings or such accessories as special trains, palatial yachts, or aeroplanes will not receive as cordial a welcome as one that makes more modest demands.

TO SAVE YOUR ENERGY, TIME, AND POSTAGE

Do not send scenarios dealing with foreign subjects to American companies.

Do not send cowboy and western plays to New York companies, unless you know that they have western companies doing field work.

Do not send plays with a Chicago setting to New York companies, and *vice versa.*

Do not send plays with children dominating the scenes to companies that use children but seldom and in only minor parts. Learn through the films at the theatres which companies favor children.

Do not send promiscuously scenarios requiring work of trained animals. The Selig Polyscope Co. is the only one I know of at present that maintains a menagerie.

Do not write plays containing acts of violence or crimes. All photoplays have to be passed upon by the National Board of Censors, and the censorship is very strict. If a crime is committed, as an incident in the play, the method of its commission may not be shown in the picture, but the perpetrators must be caught and punished. If the play deals with a minor offense, the culprit or culprits must be shown repentant. Kidnapping must not be shown. Also, there must be nothing in a photoplay to offend good taste or morals, nothing to offend the various religious creeds and nationalities. There is no reason for such plays anyway—there are so many phases of life strong in human interest from which we can draw our plots.

Do not submit scenarios that are founded on copyright plays or stories. The penalty for the infringement of a copyright is severe. If you draw your inspiration from a play or a story that is not copyrighted, state the source under the title of your scenario.

PREPARATION OF YOUR SCRIPT

If it is possible, always have your scenario typewritten. If you cannot type it yourself and know of no one who can do it for you, write it legibly in ink. This advice is very important, for the editorial departments of producing companies receive so many scripts that they have no time to puzzle over anything. Typewritten copy is always given preference over handwritten; and some of the editors refuse to read any but typewritten script. Among them are the editors of the Vitagraph, Kalem, and Edison companies.

Use either foolscap sheets or business letter size—that is, 8½ by 11 inches.

Write on one side of the paper only. Always keep a carbon copy of your script; in the event of its being lost in transit, you will not then have all your work to do over again. But do not send the copy to a company while the original is still under consideration with another. Wait until your scenario is rejected before you submit it elsewhere.

Do not roll your script. Fold it in as few folds as possible and enclose in a legal size envelope with a stamped and addressed envelope for return. It is best to have the enclosed envelope a shade smaller than the outside one in order to obviate folding it; yet it should contain the script without making additional creases in the latter.

Write your name and address on the first and last sheets of each script. Do not trust to the return envelope—it may become separated from the script. A short time ago, a play was accepted and immediately produced by one of the big companies. The writer had neglected to send either name or address, consequently he did not hear from the producer. However, soon after the play was released to the theatres, the author saw it and wrote in indignantly to the producer practically accusing him of stealing the

play. This time, he did not forget to send his name and address, so the company was able to explain the dilemma and send the writer a check.

It is not necessary to write a letter when sending a script to a producer. Your object is self-evident and, if you do not forget to affix your name and address, you will hear from the company within a couple of weeks. But you need not worry if that space of time is exceeded; you must make up your mind to be patient, for those scenario editors are very busy men and they make their decisions as promptly as is compatible with deliberate judgment.

PRICES PAID FOR SCENARIOS

It is usual to leave the price of a script to the judgment of the editor, but if you have any definite idea of what you want for your play, mark the price on the first page. But I advise you not to make it exorbitant. There is a mistaken idea abroad that enormous prices are paid for scenarios. It is as well to eradicate that idea at once and save yourself future disappointment. Prices range from five dollars to one hundred dollars, according to originality and value to the purchasing company. The average price is twenty dollars. But any company is only too glad to pay fifty dollars for a good plot that is worked out with original situations. Such a scenario, they say, is a rare find. A writer who gets as much as one hundred dollars is either a writer of note or one who submits a wonderfully brilliant piece of work.

So, don't listen to the wild tales of fortunes to be made, but buckle down with the sane idea that there is a big market for good photoplays and that for a writer who has the ability and observes the suggestions laid down in this book and works honestly, there is a nice little revenue to be counted on.

LIST OF PRODUCING COMPANIES.

American Film Co., Ashland Block, Chicago, Ill. La Mesa, California. (Western studio). The Chicago studio wants plays of society life, dramas and comedies. The Western studio wants modern cowboy dramas and comedies.

Biograph Co., 11 E. 14th St., New York. Strong dramas, comedies, and comedy-dramas. Comedies must be clean and clever.

Edison Co., Decatur Ave. and Oliver Pl., Bronx, New York. Plays of all types that are out of the ordinary. Plays pointing morals or with educational tendencies, if interesting and dramatic. Good, clean comedies.

Essanay Film Mfg. Co., 1333 Argyle St., Chicago, Ill. Original dramatic stories with strong heart interest. Sparkling comedies with plenty of action. Not in the market for Western plays.

Great Northern Feature Film Co., 7 East 14th St., New York. Special features of great themes. Plots must be of great originality and worth to be accepted.

Kalem Co., 235 West 23d St., New York. Strong dramas of modern American life, novel in plot and full of action. Split-reel (half a reel) comedies, novel, farcical, and full of lively action. Western dramas, novel and full of thrilling action. Military plays, based upon daring exploits and sensational military maneuvers in which large armies may be shown in spectacular action.

Kinemacolor Co. of America, 1600 Broadway, New York. High-class comedies and dramas.

Lubin Mfg. Co., 20th St. and Indiana Ave., Philadelphia, Pa. Plays of modern American life preferred—society, home, and business life. But plays of any character are accepted if they possess strong, unusual features.

Majestic Motion Picture Co., 540 West 21st St., New York. Strong, emotional dramas. Clever, original full-reel comedies or comedy-dramas.

PATHÉ FRÈRES, 1 Congress St., Jersey City Heights, N. J. All types of plays. American comedies and dramas; comedies preferred.

PILOT FILM CORPORATION, 120 School St., Yonkers, N. Y. One-reel features—dramas that are different from the usual run.

RELIANCE CO., 540 West 21st St., New York. Strong dramas of American life. Original and dainty comedies. Emotional two-reel dramas—those dealing with the big social problems of present-day American life. Costume plays not wanted.

SELIG POLYSCOPE CO., 20 East Randolph St., Chicago, Ill. Uses very few outside scripts.

SELIG WESTERN CO., Allesandro St., Los Angeles, California. Plays in which the old missions can be used. Historical plots or historical incidents introduced into plays.

SOLAX CO., Fort Lee, N. J. Spectacular dramas. Stirring melodramas. Clean, lively comedies.

UNIVERSAL FILM MFG. CO., 1600 Broadway, New York. This is a company that controls those listed below and considers scenarios for all of them: Bison Co., Champion Co., Eclair Co., Crystal Co., Gem Co., Imp Co., Nestor Co., Powers Co., Rex Co., Victor Co. A rejection slip from one of these companies serves for all of them, as the scenarios are read with reference to the needs of each.

VITAGRAPH CO. OF AMERICA, East 15th St. and Locust Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y. This company releases six reels weekly; their demand is therefore greater than that of any other single company. They buy good dramas, melodramas, comedies, and farces. Anything interesting, strong, and original is available.