

Mortal Actors and Immortal Film Faces

By HELEN BULLITT LOWRY

DID you ever stop to think what happens to the detective in the detective story scenario when the actor doesn't give satisfaction? They juggle the scenario and kill him off. Conan Doyle or the shades of Poe himself go hang; it's got to be done. Then they usher in a person called the Master Detective, who takes over the job and the fired actor's salary.

Or, supposing the vamp doesn't film well, is she allowed to vamp on till a peaceful old age, or at least to the end of the picture? Not she. She cannot be fired outright—not with her face indelibly imprinted upon fifty thousand dollars' worth of film. So they kill off the lady in an automobile accident, earrings, slinky figure and all. A new vamp is fetched and hurled into the plot. Number One proves to have been just an incident in the life of the hero. The movie fans assume that he was just getting in practice for the real game of falling for Cleopatra.

And sometimes Death himself, not his stage version, intrudes on the pictured world of the movies and snatches away the hero, with never a thought of the plot.

That is just what happened after three-quarters of a million dollars had been spent on a picture called "Foolish Wives"—a play that was yet far from completion. It meant throw away three-quarters of a million dollars or go on without Rudolph Christians. Scenario plumbers, who had ruthlessly killed off detectives and vamps, irate fathers and villains and ingenues, were brought up against a stone wall of reality. You cannot kill off the hero's part in the play and yet have the play go on.

And so the country-wide search began for an actor who looked like Christians and who also could act like him—like that shadow of a man which had imprinted a personality indelibly upon a cool \$750,000 worth of film. The agencies of New York and Los Angeles went to work. Pictures of the deceased actor were sent far and near. Established actors came scurrying to find a resemblance, since the prevailing inactivity of the regular producing companies made the opportunity of treble importance.

Many of them did look like Christians. But those that looked like him did not act like him, and those that acted like him did not look like him. And the camera is the one eye that strips off disguises. Yet they found a duplicate at last—in Robert Edson. Not only do his features resemble Christians's, more or less, feature for feature, but he was able to copy the dead actor's mannerisms. With trick lighting to mask the camera's eye, even close-ups have proved successful. The three-quarters of a million dollars is saved that for months hung in the balance.

The number of famous stars that have died, as it were, in their boots—which means in star parlance in the middle of a picture—can be counted on the fingers of one hand. For one thing, they are for the most part young persons, presumably with good arteries.

As for half the dangerous stunts we see in the films—it is merely some lesser actor risking his life to the tune of \$5 a day. Being a star is a sheltered, shut-in life.

These are not my own deductions, but the careful business calculations of one of the important producers, who was explaining his reasons for not insuring his stars. Authorities differ, of course. Studio gossip has it that the insurance paid to a producing company after the suicide of a film beauty saved that company

from bankruptcy. This star's life is said to have been insured for \$100,000.

Sometimes, therefore, the company insures its stars, and sometimes it doesn't, all according to taste. But there is no difference of opinion when it comes to the kind of insurance to put on the small fry. A director named William Duncan was the discoverer of the policy. Duncan was the kind of director that handled the old-fashioned cow-punching picture, with sheepskin "chaps" or trouser fronts and bronchos. They say that a rare bunch of hard-boiled genuine articles were his to direct.

One morning the cowboy named Pete didn't show up. Instead Pete's wife came with the message that Pete had an ulcerated tooth. That tooth is historic in movie annals.

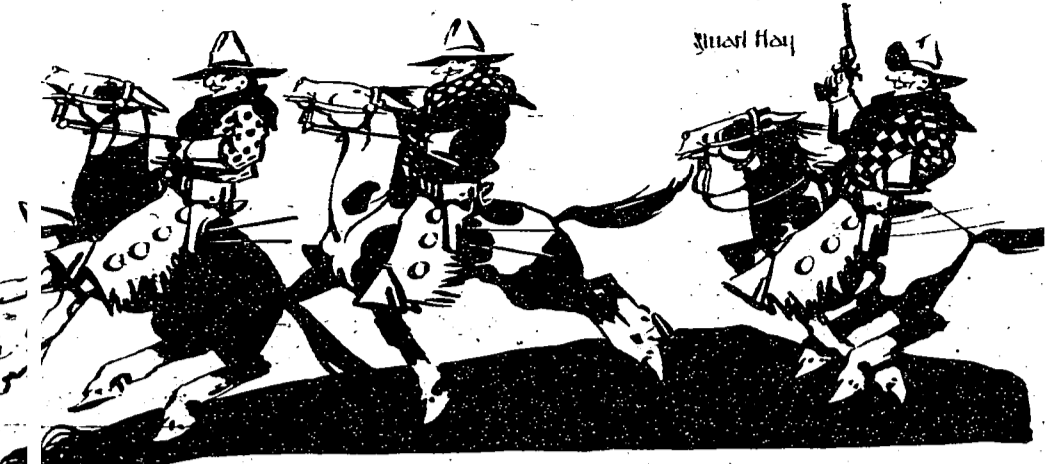
"Go tell Pete that if he doesn't show up he's fired," flashed back the message from William Duncan. "There're only two hard-boiled guys in this camp and I'm both of them." Pete came—with the fine hang-over that had been expected.

"Over the cliff you go today, Pete, and, after him, every last one of you," ordered the director. "I'm through with nervous prostration." And over the cliff the cowboys rode their bronchos, one after another. "I'll cut this film as I need it, insert your death in the picture and fire you when I darned get ready," announced William Duncan. And they do say that there was very little drunkenness in the remainder of that season.

Afterward, for a while, thrifty directors used calmly to corral all the minor actors at the beginning of a play, and deal out violent deaths in bulk—till the actors got so they would not stand for it. It made a man feel spooky. Hence there arose the present-day custom of coaxing a minor actor into a violent death insurance by subterfuge. So picture the emotions of a minor actor when he is directed in detail to fall off a horse. He has of course not read the scenario. He's afraid to refuse the order—he might be throwing down his one great chance to push Douglas Fairbanks off the map in a showy piece of athletics. Thus is his health insurance underwritten.

Such premeditated exits are obviously impractical for the principals. Heroines and heroes can't just be tossed over a cliff as the solution of all their problems. Therefore, on each of the few times on record that such a death has occurred, the problem has had to be met in a different way. There was the case of John Bunny—when John Bunny died the Vitagraph people simply decided to throw out the uncompleted picture and reckon it up to profit and loss. There wasn't any use looking for a near John Bunny.

Harold Lockwood died in the



"Over the cliff you go today, Pete."

"flu" epidemic, right in the middle of an English detective story. Fortunately (though maybe that isn't just the right word), the final scenes had already been taken. But in the Lockwood picture there was a missing link. The solution was found in having the hero condemned to a dungeon. Almost any one will do to double up on the hero if the dungeon be dark enough—and if the one ray of light falls entirely on the lady whom the director in time sends to the rescue. The public saw the picture and never suspected. Indeed, "crush letters" still come addressed to Harold Lockwood.

The case of Beatrice Dominguez

was not solved so neatly. She was a "vamp" lady, equipped with Spanish mantillas and high combs, whose job in her final picture, "The White Horses," was to rescue a treasure. Poor Beatrice was a genuine beauty of a rather individual type. But trust the scenario adjuster, who is fortunately not troubled with a sense of humor. A girl of about the same height was dressed up in the same Spanish costume. She crossed the screen with her back to the camera and addressed herself to an Indian in the unmistakable language of the leader:

"I am called back to my home. To you I intrust my mission." And at that she went out of the picture. The Indian was put on the treasure-searching job.

A far cry from this naïve solution was the heroic measure used by Griffith when the young actress, Clarine Seymour, died suddenly, with "Way Down East" one-fourth completed. Hers had been the second woman's part, that of the ingénue; her piquant young face had been imprinted on scene after scene. Well,

they engaged a brand-new ingénue—went back and retook every scene.

Yet the directors and producers are philosophical about death. It is their temperament that makes them tear their hair. An actress gets started on a picture, gets her face well imprinted—then she develops temperament because she doesn't like her "publicity," we'll say.

Or else somebody comes along and offers the actress more money, just as trouble is sometimes caused in the kitchen when a neighbor slips unscrupulously in and offers your cook \$5 more a week. It is not considered good form in either case. But it has been done.

From the strategic position created by the indelibility of her face on the half-finished picture, the actress goes on a strike. Long battles have been fought out in the courts on the right of the actress to tear up her contract. The upshot is—as conceded in the movie world—that the directors can keep the contracted-for actress from acting for somebody else. He can't make her act for him.

In any case, she has still her "temperament" to enforce her own way.

"And I wouldn't so much mind handling temperament," sighs one director, mopping his brow, "if temperament were indigenous to the movies. It's not. Our girls from Indiana and Ohio weren't born with any more temperament than a shoe clerk. If they once scratched their faces, their jobs would be ruined, and so would their Eye-talian temperament. No, they've taken the thing over intact from grand opera, to get an excuse to get salaries boosted in the middle of a picture."

Be that as it may, Billie Burke once developed so much "temperament" in a picture, and threatened so often to strike, that there literally had to be two plays filmed—one of them to show Billie and the other to be released, in due time, to the general public. The film for private consumption had Billie in every scene, which was what her temperament demanded.

It may be interesting to add the story that an experienced movie man tells about an eminent person in a walk of life remote from the stage. This movie man was taking an educational propaganda film for a famous university. The president at first frowned upon the whole enterprise. Then he caught camera fever and insisted on turning up everywhere in the picture. Particularly he wanted to be filmed in the presidential act in his impressive suite of executive offices. The plot called for no such scene but the astute director waited till he had only some thirty feet of film left in the machine and then went over to shoot the president the way he wanted to be shot. After the thirty feet were exhausted, the operator went on grinding his little crank, while the pleased educator also went on being busy—signing letters, giving orders and so on—sublimely unconscious that no record was being made. Even the thirty feet of actual record were not used in the picture as shown to the public—but the presidential temperament was indulged.



Beatrice Dominguez as a Spanish Beauty.