

That Marvel—The Movie

A Glance at Its Reckless Past, Its
Promising
Present, and Its Significant Future

By

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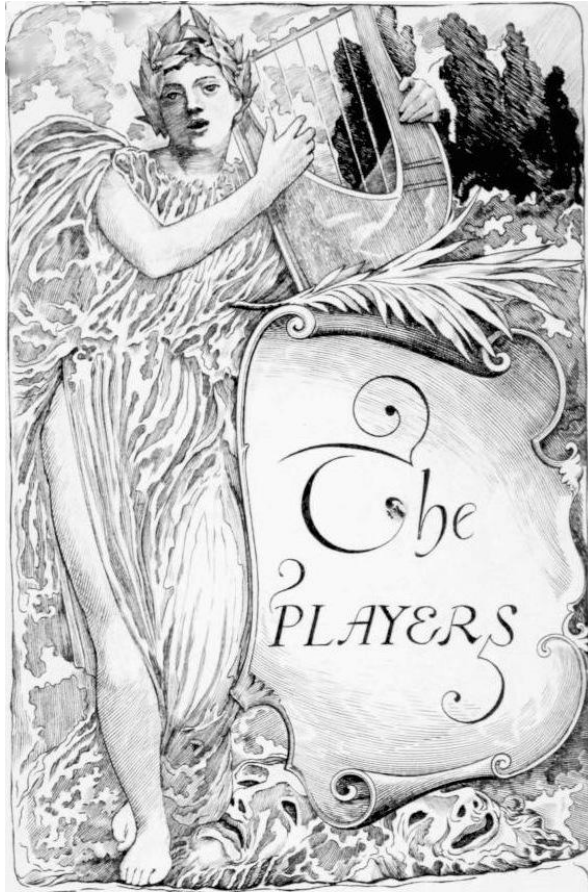
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EITHER · FOR · TRAGEDY ·
COMEDY · HISTORY ·
HAMLET · ACT · II ·
SCENE II ·

H. PYLE.

E. D. F. 8. 1894

N^o

INTRODUCTION

To grasp the past progress, the present significance and the future possibilities of the motion picture; to express them with restraint and yet with clarity; and to impress the mind of any reader with the logic, as well as with the sincerity, of his viewpoint: these are a few of the qualities in this book which make it interesting and important. Mr. Van Zile visualizes the motion picture as more than an entertainment feature; and if his prophecies of its future seem over-optimistic to some, they need only to recall the flickering, crude apparitions of twenty years ago and the total cinematic blankness before that.

If, in twenty years, the motion picture has advanced from an awkward toy in a laboratory to the marvelous screen art and drama of to-day, who shall say what are the limits of its progress and its power?

The other arts are old. Music was born with speech and architecture came soon thereafter. Literature and sculpture were created when the first primitive man hacked an image on a bit of rock or bone. Misty ages have cradled their growth. The art of the screen is new, and yet in its quarter of a century of life it has produced achievements as valuable in affecting human thought, as notable as those many great plays and operas and pictures have produced.

To the extent that it has grown so rapidly its importance is intensified. It is better that we should learn to crawl before we walk, and run before we fly.

As the representative of leading producers and distributors of American films, I can say that in no industry or art will be found men and women more earnest to progress in the right way. With a full sense of our responsibilities, and an ardor toward perfection, we are at work to do the best possible things for the motion picture and its world-wide audience. Mr. Van Zile not only gives us a word of cheer, but he puts into the public mind some thoughts about pictures which will pay for their lodging.

WILL H. HAYS.

That Marvel—The Movie

CHAPTER I

THE MOVIE'S NEW SIGNIFICANCE

Civilization in Peril—Leaders of Thought give Warning—Mankind Repeats Old Errors—Needs a Universal Language—The Motion Picture the Only Esperanto—Can the Screen Save the Race?—Why a History of the Movies is of Crucial Importance.

CHAPTER I

THE MOVIE'S NEW SIGNIFICANCE

WITH striking unanimity contemporary writers dealing with the problems vexing humanity to-day express amazement at the fact that the race has learned so little from its variegated past, that age after age it commits, under new conditions and with changes in terminology, ancient blunders resulting, as they did aforesaid, in the tragedies of war, revolution, famine, epidemics and poverty. As of old, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse periodically sally forth, to have their evil way with men; more potent, through long practice, in their iconoclasm, as they have proved in recent years, than they were in the days of our ancestors. The individual, unless he be a moron, learns lessons from experience, avoids committing errors that marred his past and may become, eventually, worthy the name of a civilized, even a highly civilized, being. But there are many experts in mob psychology who despondently assert that, while the individual may demonstrate his well-nigh infinite superiority to his jungle progenitors, the seeming progress of the race as a whole has been merely illusory, that mankind is inherently as savage to-day as it was countless centuries ago.

But why should not the race at large follow the course pursued by the average individual and derive from its past errors a mandatory enlightenment enabling it to avoid those recurrent retrogressions that furnish the cynic with arguments against the proposition that mankind is gradually ascending to a higher plane of civilization? Various answers may be given to this query, but the one to which this chapter calls attention is to the effect that to the vast majority

of the human race the story of mankind's struggles and failures, triumphs and defeats, attainment of high civilizations only to lose them again, is a sealed book. The individual man can recall every detail of his experience of life and can pursue a course of safety by aid of the lighthouse of his past. If this prerogative of the individual could be magnified to include all mankind might not the time come presently when no generation would repeat the costly errors of preceding generations? Would not the mass learn and profit by experience, as does the unit?

Now, is there any possible method whereby the human race can be induced to go to school to its recorded past, to the end that our posterity may establish eventually a civilization permanently safe from the internal and external forces of disintegration that have destroyed so many mighty civilizations founded by our forefathers? Is there any way by which men in the mass may employ mass history in the same advantageous manner adopted by individuals who use their "dead selves as stepping-stones to higher things?" Lothrop Stoddard's recent book, in which he demonstrates most ably the disquieting fact that contemporary civilization is menaced by many and grave perils, presents to a public that habitually resents disturbance of its self-complacent optimism an array of startling data making the above queries, to put it mildly, extremely pertinent. "Of the countless tribes of men," says Stoddard, "many have perished utterly while others have stopped by the wayside, apparently incapable of going forward, and have either vegetated or sunk into decadence. Man's trail is littered with the wrecks of dead civilizations and dotted with the graves of promising peoples stricken by an untimely end."

But wrecks, whether they be of former civilizations or of vessels lost upon fatal rocks and reefs, have their value for succeeding

nations and mariners. They serve to point warning fingers away from the shoals of destruction toward the far-flung deeps where progress and safety are to be found. It was with this thought in mind, we have no doubt, that Wells and Van Loon gave to the reading public recently their absorbingly interesting volumes dealing with the rise of man from the amœba to his present status as lord of the earth. Both these authors have been shocked and horrified by the race's manifestation in recent years of its tendency to revert at times to the murderous practices of its cave-man progenitors. That an antidote against periodical returns upon mankind's part to the evil practices of the past might be found in the popularization of histories telling a coherent story of our race's ups and downs was a thought that must have come to both Wells and Van Loon when they essayed the stupendous tasks that they have so worthily accomplished. But while the basic idea underlying their activities as historians is sound—for mankind must take cognizance of its past errors if it is to indulge in hope for the future—the depressing fact confronts us that the printed book, no matter how great may be its apparent vogue, reaches but a very small percentage of even the highly intelligent public. No. If the evils afflicting mankind were to have been cured through books the race would be free to-day from the major disorders that threaten the health, if not the life, of existing civilization.

Upon this point, Frederick Palmer, in his interesting and inspiring book, "The Folly of Nations," says:

Our increasing library shelves are heavy with the records of all human activities, colossal accumulations of historical and scientific researches and the literature of imagination and philosophy—but one who seeks works on how to keep the peace finds that he has meagre references.... I have before me a list of the books and pamphlets the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace has published. If I have found little

new in them, or in any books on the subject, it is *because it may be needless for me to search among their details for the great truths I have seen in the vividness of gun flashes on the field of battle....*

The sentence in italics above, in which Palmer asserts that the great truths that have been revealed to him have come to him not from books but from the vividness of gun flashes on the field of battle, brings us to the crux of our argument, and will be used presently as a point of departure for what may prove to be a constructive suggestion of some value. If mankind is to be taught to follow the method employed by the individual in using the errors of the past to ensure a better future *the race must be enabled to visualize its past*. If it refuses to gain enlightenment through books some other medium for making history the savior of posterity must be found. And it has been found. The great truths that were revealed by gun flashes to Frederick Palmer can find their way to the hearts and minds of the masses of men if we are wise and far-sighted enough to make full and intelligent use of a new medium through which Man may gaze upon the mistakes and shortcomings of his past, and, forewarned, avoid them in the future.

The race has found at last its universal language, its Esperanto not of the ear and tongue but of the eye. The evolution of the motion picture, developing in a few years from a toy kinoscope to a Griffith wonder-worker, has made possible, for the first time in the history of humanity, an appeal to the heart and mind and soul of man that overcomes the ancient handicap of the confusion of tongues. After many centuries the check to human progress given at the Tower of Babel has come to an end at the entrance to the motion-picture palace. It has been made possible at last for history to reveal its secrets, and vouchsafe its warnings, not to the comparatively few who read scholarly books, but to the millions

who, as democracy conquers the earth, have become masters of the destiny of nations.

In a brilliant and impressive address delivered last July by Will H. Hays at Boston, Mass., before the National Education Association, the speaker presented facts and figures demonstrating the marvellous progress made of late by the motion picture as a medium for instruction in both schools and colleges. He said:

To reflect on the possibilities of the motion picture in education is to regret that one's school days were spent before this great invention came to us as a poultice to heal the blows of ignorance, but there is consolation in the fact that since the advent of pictures the whole world, regardless of age, can go to school.

“Regardless of age”—yes, and, also, regardless of race, language, inherited or acquired prejudices, and the hot passions that result in man's inhumanity to man. In other words, the human race may now sit before a screen and learn through the universal medium of the eye those great truths that have been revealed to Frederick Palmer by the vivid flashes of the battle-field.

Dreams, you say? Generalities? A vision that begets nothing but vain hopes? Suppose, then, that we make a concrete suggestion that, should it arouse interest and create discussion, might result eventually in giving to what you call “airy nothings” a “local habitation and a name.” The insuperable obstacle that has prevented heretofore the establishment somewhere upon earth of a university designed for the educational needs of the race at large has been linguistic. In a polyglot world a great central station for the dissemination of knowledge was impossible so long as that knowledge could be inculcated only by means of the written or spoken word. But to-day, as Mr. Hays points out in the address quoted above, instruction is given, from our primary schools up to

our universities, through the method of visualization; and, furthermore, repeated tests have shown that students prepared for examinations by aid of pictures obtain higher marks than examinees whose coaching was confined to the media of books and lectures. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the significance of the above in connection with the dream we have taken the liberty to dream. A world university, a fountain of all acquired knowledge for the race at large, became practicable the moment the linguistic problem was solved by the Esperanto of the Eye. No longer was the vision of a race finding, as do individuals, strength and wisdom for meeting the perils of the future by contemplating the mistakes of the past a vague, shadowy mockery, destined to vanish with a return to common-sense. On the contrary, common-sense had become suddenly associated with a project that had left the realm of the abstract to enter the domain of the concrete. For what, in the name of common-sense, could make so impressive an appeal to the practical man of affairs as the perfecting of a method whereby the recurrent set-backs to progress that peoples, and mankind at large, inflict upon themselves can be reduced to a minimum or, perhaps, rendered permanently obsolete?

Let us suppose that what we will call, tentatively, our Lighthouse of the Past had found its Rockefeller or Carnegie, that several hundred million dollars were available for the establishment of a world centre of enlightenment wherein all the peoples of the earth could study what man has done in his dual character of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, is it not certain that the evil influence of the latter would lose its grip eventually upon a race that is so strangely compounded of the god-like and the diabolical? Seeing is believing. Show mankind both the glories and the horrors of the past, let each tribe, nation, race ponder its own achievements and its own failures,

reveal to the pilgrim students flocking to our lighthouse from every corner of the earth both the microscopic and the telescopic aspects of history, to the end that they may return to their respective native lands inspired and eloquent advocates of a better world, and, lo, the problems seemingly insoluble to us to-day will be solved through a mass enlightenment that, before the advent of the screen, was beyond the wildest dreams of the most optimistic visionaries.

And where, you ask, shall our Mecca for the pilgrims of progress be located? For many reasons, there is but one country to-day available for the project briefly outlined above, and that is the United States. Geographical, historical, diplomatic, financial, educational and racial factors interwoven in the enterprise combine to make ours the only land in which this Lighthouse of the Past, this university of universities, could stand a fair chance of functioning successfully. Somewhere in our country there is an ideal location contiguous to one of our great cities adapted by man and nature to the needs of our experiment in racial regeneration. Where this location may be is a question to be answered in the future. Upon this site, however, when it has been chosen, can not you who have read the foregoing, and have begun, perhaps, to dream my dream, picture a vast group of buildings, both beautiful and utilitarian, within which all that mankind has done of good or evil shall be revealed, year after year, generation after generation, to the critical but hopeful eyes of the race at large? Give full rein to your imagination in this connection! Here shall be shown to our Mecca's pilgrims all of Man's achievements in the realms of science, art, government, industry, commerce, social betterment. Here shall be revealed, also, the blunders, the failures, the tragedies that were the price paid for these achievements.

Here may you visualize the epic tale of Man's rise from protoplasm to power, from an amœba to ruler of the earth. Here may a Chinaman study the past of his people through forty centuries of weal and woe; the modern Greek glory in the splendors of ancient Athens or appraise his compatriots' achievements of yesterday; the Norseman, the Slav, the Teuton, the Celt, the Anglo-Saxon, the Latin, the Jap, the Arab, the East Indian learn from the screen what his race, or nation, or tribe has done for or against—and they have all done both—the cause of advancing civilization. There shall radiate, if our dream comes true, from this great centre where all knowledge is visualized a light that shall grow ever brighter, as the generations come and go, routing the errors of ignorance and racial prejudice and making possible that for which the great hearted of the race have so long striven in vain, namely, the brotherhood of man.

Let me transpose two sentences from a timely book from which I have already quoted. Says Frederick Palmer on the last page of his enlightening volume "The Folly of Nations": "The world of to-day thinks through its eyes looking at the screen. Where are our millionaires who seek worthy objects for their benefactions?" And, from another recently published book, "The Salvaging of Civilization," by H. G. Wells, can be most aptly quoted the following pertinent excerpt:

It has become clear that the task of bringing about that consolidated world state which is necessary to prevent the decline and decay of mankind is not primarily one for the diplomatists and lawyers and politicians at all. It is an educational one. It is a moral based on an intellectual reconstruction. The task immediately before mankind is to find release from the contentions, loyalties and hostilities of the past, which make collective world-wide action impossible at the present time, in a world-wide common vision of the histories and destinies of the race. On that basis, and on that alone, can a world control be

organized and maintained. The effort demanded from mankind, therefore, is primarily and essentially a bold reconstruction of the outlook upon life of hundreds of millions of minds.

During the past eight years the human race has undergone the bloodiest ordeal of the ages and, succeeding it, the bitterest disappointment that mankind has yet been forced to endure. A confusion of tongues that made European diplomacy helpless at a great crisis rendered a world war inevitable and the lack of a common medium of enlightenment at Versailles postponed indefinitely the establishment of permanent peace upon earth. Had Wilson, Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Orlando been obliged every morning at the Peace Conference to spend several hours, before tackling the affairs of a disordered world, in front of a screen upon which was depicted before their keen eyes the immediate tragic past and the deplorable present of the nations of the earth the final outcome of their deliberations might have been of greater value to the cause of civilization than it has proved to be. Had the Esperanto of the Eye been adopted as the official language at Versailles could not the Conference have avoided a repetition of the fatal errors that crept into its verdicts as an evil heritage from its century-old predecessor, the Conference of Vienna? Did not Wilson and Lloyd George fail to take advantage of a new medium of enlightenment that was denied a hundred years ago to Metternich and Talleyrand? Is it not even possible that had the cinema played an enlightening part at Versailles that which is of real value in the basic idea underlying the League of Nations might be exercising greater potency in a quarrelsome world to-day than it appears to be?

These queries and conjectures are put forward not for the purpose of stimulating further controversy regarding the details of what I

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