

# The Screen in Review

Comment and criticism on recent screen offerings, which are offered for your guidance in choosing your entertainment.

By Alison Smith

SOMETIMES the film world seems to have no more continuity than a Mack Sennett comedy. Often it seems just as funny. The incident that has inspired this perfectly good-natured and not at all cynical thought, is the state of affairs that must have brought forth Eric von Stroheim's extraordinary production of which the present title is "Foolish Wives."

It all happened in dim and distant Hollywood where as we know, almost anything might happen—that is part of its fascination. Now, writing as I am from the farthest possible point East, I might as well be in darkest Russia so far as any accurate knowledge goes as to just what went into its making. All I have is the curious finished product which finally reached the New York theaters after a year and a half of advertising. But this is my guess about how the picture got that way.

At the time it was started, nearly two years ago, several prominent producers were engaged in a neck-and-neck race to get some elaborate and sensational films out on the market before the impending agitation for censorship all over the country began to bear fruit. These were the sort of pictures that, if they didn't actually go the limit in risky themes and display, at least skated up to the very limit and retreated as gracefully as possible. You know the sort of thing—wine, woman, and song, with very little song. Three of these pictures were started fairly close together—"The Queen of Sheba" by Fox, "Man-Woman-Marriage" by Allen Holubar, and the third (the present specimen) by Von Stroheim.

Now "The Queen of Sheba" and "Man-Woman-Marriage" got under the wire safely and reaped the sort of



Photo by Freulich

*Von Stroheim's own acting in "Foolish Wives" surpasses anything he has ever done.*

reward that goes alike to the just and the unjust—if the advertising campaign is well enough planned. But "Foolish Wives" was so much longer and more elaborate that the censorship agitation reached its height long before it was ready to be shown. So the present American version represents only what was left after it was pruned with the censors' "thou must nots" in mind. It might very well be entitled, "You Don't Know the Half of it, Deary!"

This theory would at least account for the strange lapses in its action, for the many things that the villain starts and doesn't finish—you often wonder why—during the five days in which the story wanders through a confused medley of incidents centering around Von Stroheim, who, as a wicked count, pursues a somewhat flabby wife of a stupid American diplomat through many reels of action. These many reels had been cut to fourteen thousand feet by the time it reached New York and they were cut again after the opening night, so you can imagine the coherence of the remaining scenes. All that really remains is the splendid background which Von Stroheim has succeeded in making truly Continental. He has not lost that genius for making a California studio lot look like the real thing in Europe which he

demonstrated so skillfully in "Blind Husbands." The nearest I ever got to Monte Carlo was in the pages of Marie Corelli's novels, but his film version looks like the real thing as shown by the Pathé Weekly. Even the smallest interior had an unmistakably foreign touch. But apparently he couldn't get the foreign touch out of his plot—it collided with the censors and it wasn't the

censors that were smashed. There isn't any moral to this—it just strikes me as interesting, and as a proof that the film world gets "curiouser and curiouser," as Alice said when she crashed through the looking-glass.

Although the stories which were whispered "among the trade" indicated that the picture was to be about the most sensational one that ever came out of Hollywood, the final censor-passed version, as you probably have guessed already, contains nothing that could be seriously objected to. If any one goes to it expecting to be tremendously shocked he will be disappointed.

If you like to see reproduced only the cheerful and happy side of life, this picture is not for you, for it certainly is what might be called an "unpleasant" type of picture. But if you enjoy the superb skill with which Von Stroheim creates his archvillain types, you may be well repaid for seeing "Foolish Wives," for his acting in this picture surpasses anything he has done before, and you have, thrown in, one of the most massive, expensive, and spectacular productions ever made.

#### "Saturday Night."

Now, apropos of the above, I never could see the relationship between dollars and craftsmanship and this is one of the things that has left me quite cold when confronted with a typical Cecil De Mille production. I have always felt that Mr. De Mille thought more of his palatial beds and tricky baths and telephones modestly swathed in chiffons than he did of his plot or his people. But it is a pleasure to record in "Saturday Night" he has not only caught a definite and logical idea but has developed it with characters which have the real human touch.

It's an old movie idea—set to reverse action. Of course you've seen dozens of those films where the millionaire's son marries the little kitchen drudge and where the aristocratic family snub her at first because she says the bathroom looks so nice that she can hardly wait till Saturday night to take a bath. But always in the end she reforms—her table manners become perfect, she learns how to wear clothes and we leave her chattering to the abashed family in almost perfect French—taken at a glance.

But this sort of thing simply doesn't happen in real life. So Jeanie Macpherson has written a story about what really would occur if the rich young man were to marry the washwoman's daughter. Only in this case there are two pairs of misguided lovers—a beautiful young heiress married to a burly Irish chauffeur joins the amusing and ironical set of circumstances.

Briefly, love's young dream is lost in the shuffle. The washwoman's daughter hates the fuss and feathers all about her which keep her from being natural. The heiress finds that love in a tenement is a nightmare of noise, cheap wit, and dirty

dishes. Through a series of most exciting incidents (including the best fire scene I have ever watched on the screen) the couples are reassorted—the chauffeur marries the laundress, the young millionaire the heiress. It is quite as romantic as the old motif of King Cophetusa and the beggar maid and much more common sense. After all, would the beggar-maid have liked the stiff and formal court etiquette and would the king have continued to love her when she chewed gum and addressed the courtiers as "Kid?"

Both Miss Macpherson and Mr. De Mille owe much to their excellent cast in this picture. Edith Roberts as the rowdy little laundress is a splendid foil to Leatrice Joy as the proud but puzzled heiress. These two girls are certainly the most stunning brunettes on the screen and they know how to be brunette in different ways, if you get what I mean. Conrad Nagel is the rich young man and Jack Mower the chauffeur. They each present their respective characters, not as heroes, heroines, or villains, but as human beings caught and spun along by the mysterious force called Fate. It wasn't anybody's fault—it just happened. Which is my idea of what Jeanie Macpherson meant when she wrote this excellent scenario.

#### "One Glorious Day."

It's a cold and dreary month that leaves us without a Will Rogers picture and it's a joy to report that the Will Rogers output for this month is funnier than ever. (I've been saying that about Will Rogers ever since he struck the screen, but it's true—they do get more and more hilarious.) Perhaps one reason is that he is never content to rest solely on his personality, though Heaven knows he is one actor in a thousand who could get away with it. But always he needs must have a theme to satirize—something to catch up in that easy laconic humor of his exactly as he entangles the steers with his lariat when at home in a purely social capacity.

This time it is spiritualism. An outlaw soul without a body descends upon the person of a shy and lanky professor with most happy results. Absurd as the story is, you feel a sneaking belief in its weird situations—after all strange things have happened, especially since the war. Needless to say it is Rogers who makes it real. Lila Lee, as the placid sweetheart, also helps.

#### "Back Pay."

It pains me to write so much about the censors but I must because they explain so much in the present output of films. On account of their restrictions, this story of Fannie Hurst's has been rewritten for the screen version. The salient feature, which explains the heroine of



In "Rent Free," Wally Reid meets a pretty girl, impersonated by Lila Lee.