

Acme of Scenarios

—By John Galsworthy
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The Story of a Starving Genius, Who Simply Would Not Abuse His Art For Money, and a Friend Who Did His Best to Get Him Some Money—With Result Surprising to Both.

IN these days no man of genius need starve. The following story of my friend Bruce may be taken as proof of this assertion. Nearly sixty when I first knew him, he must have written already some fifteen books, which had earned him the reputation of "a genius" with the few who know. He used to live in York street, London, where he had two rooms up the very shabby staircase of a nondescript house. I suppose there never was a writer more indifferent to what people thought of him. He profoundly neglected "an original" a nomadic spirit, a stranger in modern civilization, who would leave his attics for long months of wandering and come back there to hibernate and write a book.

He was a tall, thin man, with a face rather like Mark Twain's, black eyebrows which bristled and shot up, a bitten greying moustache, and a fuzzy grey hair; but his eyes were like owl's eyes, piercing, melancholy, dark brown, and gave to his rugged face the extraordinary expression of a spirit remote from the flesh which had captured it. He was a bachelor, who seemed to avoid women, though he must have been very attractive to them.

The year of which I write had been to my friend Bruce the limit, momentarily speaking. With his passion for writing that for which his age had no taste—what could be expected? His last book had been a complete fiasco. He had undergone, too, an operation which had cost him much money and left him very weak. When I went to see him that October I found him stretched out on two chairs, smoking the Brazilian cigarettes which he affected—and which always affected me, so black and strong they were, in their yellow maize-leaf coverings. He had a writing-pad on his knee, and sheets of paper scattered all around. The room had a very meagre look. I had not seen him for a year and more, but he looked up at me as if I'd been in yesterday.

"Hello!" he said. "I went into a thing they call a cinema last night. Have you ever been?"

"Ever been? Do you know how long the cinema has been going? Since about 1900."

"Well, what a thing! I'm writing a skit on it!"

"How—a skit?"

"Parody—the widest yarn you ever read."

He took up a sheet of paper and began chuckling to himself.

"My heroine," he said, "is an Octoroon. Her eyes swim, and her lovely bosom heaves. Everybody wants her, and she's more virtuous than words can say. The situations she doesn't succumb to would freeze your blood; they'd roast your marrow. She has a perfect fiend of a brother, with whom she was brought up, and who knows her deep dark secret and wants to trade her off to a millionaire who also has a deep dark secret. Altogether there are four deep dark secrets in my yarn. It's a corker."

"What a waste of your time!" I said.

"My time!" he answered fiercely. "What's the use of my time? Nobody buys my books."

"Who's attending you?"

"Doctors! They take your money, that's all. I've got no money. Don't talk about me!" Again he took up a sheet of manuscript, and chuckled.

"Last night—at that place they had—great Caesar!—a race between a train and a motor-car. Well, I've got one between a train, a motor-car, a flying machine, and a horse."

"May I have a look at your skit?" I said, "when you've finished it?"

"It is finished. Wrote it straight off. Do you think I could stop and then go on again with a thing like that?"

He gathered the sheets and held them out to me. "Take the thing—it's amused me to do it. The heroine's secret is that she isn't an Octoroon at all; she's a De La Casse—purest Creole blood of the South; and her villainous brother isn't her brother; and the bad millionaire isn't a millionaire; and her penniless lover is, it's rich, I tell you!"

"Thanks," I said dryly, and took the sheets.

I went away concerned about my friend, his illness and his poverty, especially his poverty, for I saw no end to it.

I've Got a Gold Mine

AFTER dinner that evening I began languidly to read his skit. I had not read two pages of the thirty-five before I started up, sat down again, and feverishly read on.

Skit! By George! He had written a perfect scenario—er, rather, that which wanted the merest professional touching—to be perfect. It was excited. It was a little gold-mine if properly handled. Any good film company, I felt convinced, would catch at it. Yes! But how to handle it? Bruce was such an unaccount-

able creature, such a wild old bird! Imagine his having only just realized the cinema! If I told him his skit was a serious film, he would say: "Great Caesar!" and put it in the fire, priceless though it was. And yet how could I market it without carte blanche, and how get carte blanche without giving my discovery away? I was deathly keen on getting some money for him; and this thing, properly independent, might almost make a priceless museum piece which a single stumble might shatter to fragments. The tone of his voice when he spoke of the cinema—"What a thing!"—kept coming back to me. He was prickly proud, too—very difficult about money. Could I work it without telling him anything? I knew he never looked at a newspaper. But should I be justified in getting the thing accepted and produced without his knowing? I revolved the question for hours, and went to see him again next day.

He was reading.

"Hallo! You again? What do you think of this theory—that the Egyptians derive from a Saharan civilization?"

"I don't think," I said.

"It's nonsense. This fellow—"

I interrupted him.

"Do you want that skit back, or can I keep it?"

"Skit? What skit?"

"The Acme"

I TOOK the gold-mine away and promptly rough-shaped it for the film. Then I was faced with the temptation to put his name to it. The company as an authorless scenario I should only get authorless terms; whereas, if I put his name to it, with a little talking I could double the terms at least. The film public

check, lodged the money at my bank, drew my own check on it for the full amount, and, armed with that and the contract, went to see him.

He was lying on two chairs smoking his Brazilians and playing with a stray cat which had attached itself to him. He seemed rather less prickly than usual, and, after beating about the bushes of his health and other matters, I began:

"I've got a confession to make, Bruce."

"Confession!" he said. "What confession?"

"You remember that skit on the film you wrote and gave me about six weeks ago?"

"Yes, you do—about an Octoroon." He chuckled. "Oh! ah! That!"

I took a deep breath, and went on:

"Well, I sold it; and the price of course belongs to me."

"What? Who'd print a thing like that?"

"It isn't printed. It's been made into a film—super-film, they call it."

So Much Vulgar Money

HIS hand came to a pause on the cat's back, and he glared at me. I hastened on:

"I ought to have told you what I was doing, but you're so prickly, and you've got such confounded superior notions. I thought if I did you'd be biting off your nose to spite your own face. The fact is it made a marvellous scenario. Here's

The question worried me terribly, for I didn't feel entitled to consult others who knew him. It was the sort of thing that, if talked over, would certainly leak out. It was not desirable, however, to delay cashing a big check like that. Besides, they had started on the production. It happened to be a slack time, with a dearth of good films, so that they were rushing it on. And in the meantime there was Bruce—starved of everything he wanted, unable to get away for want of money, depressed about his health and his future. And yet so completely had he always seemed to me different, strange, superior to this civilization of ours, that the idea of going to him and saying simply: "This is yours, for the film you wrote," scared me. I could hear his: "I? Write for the cinema? What do you mean?"

A Confession

WHEN I came to think of it, I had surely taken an extravagant liberty in marketing the thing without consulting him. I felt he would never forgive that, and my feeling towards him was so affectionate, even reverential, that I simply hated the idea of being wiped out of his good books. At last I hit on a way that by introducing my own interest might break my fall. I cashed the

didn't know his name, of course, but the inner literary public did, and it's wonderful how you can impress the market with the word "genius" judiciously used. It was too dangerous, however; and at last I hit on a middle course. I would take it to them with no name attached, but tell them it was by "a genius" and suggest that they could make capital out of the invention. I knew they would feel it was by a genius.

I took it to an excellent company next day with a covering note saying: "The author, a man of recognized literary genius, for certain reasons prefers to remain unknown." They took a fortnight in which to rise, but they rose. They had to. The thing



"Last night—at that place—they had—great Caesar!—a race between a train and a motorcar."

"The thing you gave me yesterday. That! Light your fire with it. This fellow—"

"Yes," I said; "I'll light a fire with it. I see you're busy."

"Oh, no! I'm not," he said. "I've nothing to do. What's the good of my writing? I earn less and less with every book that comes out. I'm dying of poverty!"

"That's because you won't consider the public."

"How can I consider the public when I don't know what they want?"

"Because you won't take the trouble to find out. If I suggested a way to you of pleasing the public and making money you'd kick me out of the room."

And the words: "For instance, I've got a little gold-mine of yours in my pocket," were on the tip of my tongue, but I choked them back.

"Daren't risk it? I thought. He's given you the thing. Carte blanche—cartes serres!"

was too good in itself. For a week I played them over terms. Twice I delivered an ultimatum—twice they surrendered. I could have made a contract with two thousand pounds down which would have brought at least another two thousand pounds before the contract term closed; but I compromised for one that gave me three thousand pounds down as likely to lead to less difficulty with Bruce. The terms were not a whit too good for what was really the "acme" of scenarios. If I could have been quite open I could certainly have done better.

Finally, however, I signed the contract, delivered the manuscript and received a check for the price. I was elated, and at the same time knew that my troubles were just beginning. With Bruce's feeling about the film how the deuce should I get him to take the money? Could I go to his publishers and conspire with them to trick it out to him gradually as if it came from his books? That meant letting them into the secret; besides, he was too used to receiving practically nothing from his books; it would lead him to make inquiry, and the secret was bound to come out. Could I get a lawyer to spring an inheritance on him? That would mean no end of lying and elaboration, even if a lawyer would consent. Should I send him the money in Bank of England notes with the words: "From a lifelong admirer of your genius? I was afraid he would suspect a trick, or stolen notes, and go to the police to trace them. Or should I just go, put the check on the table and tell him the truth?"

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"Great Caesar!" he said.

"Yes, I know. But it's all nonsense, Bruce. You can carry scoundrels to altogether too great length. Tainted source! Everything's tainted, if you come to that. The film's a quite justified expression of modern civilization—a natural outcome of the age. It gives amusement; it affords pleasure. It may be vulgar, it may be cheap, but we are vulgar, and we are cheap, and it's no use pretending we're not—not you, of course, Bruce, but people at large. A vulgar age wants vulgar amusement, and if we can give it that amusement we ought to; life's not too cheery, anyway."

The glare in his eyes was almost paralyzing me, but I managed to stammer on:

"You live out of the world—you don't realize what humdrum people want; something to balance the greyness, the—banality of their lives. They want blood, thrill, sensation, of all sorts. You didn't mean to give it to them, but you have, you've done them a benefit; whether you wish to or not, and the money's yours and you've got to take it."

The cat suddenly jumped down. I waited for the storm to burst.

"I know," I dashed on, "that you hate and despise the film—"

Suddenly his voice boomed out: "Bosh! What are you talking about? Film! I go there every other night."

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(Copyright, 1924.)

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Drinking the Ozone
THE clergyman had taken some of his poorest parishioners for a trip to the seashore. During the afternoon he met them returning to the railway station. "Well," he said to one of them, "and have you all been drinking in the ozone."
"I don't recollect the name o' the pub, vicar," answered the man, "but it was oppo-site the pier."

IN A SHALLOW GRAVE
A well-preserved skeleton has been found about 8 feet under the ground during excavations near the site of the old church of St. Martin in Battle Abbey, Sussex.



A plank was the sidewalk substitute, but the fowl had to wade in the water to get fed near Walton-on-Thames, England, recently, when the rise of the river made a miniature lake of the backyard.



Here's a toboggan load of fun "all set" for a slide down one of High Park's hills, Toronto.



Here are some of the winners of a beauty contest held in Paris during a series of screen tests for a motion picture which is to be made at Nice. From left to right, they are: "Miss Russia," Leonora; "Miss France," Christiane Favier; "Miss Denmark," Lily Dreyer, and "Miss Ralium," Suzu Pierson.



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