HARRY LEON WILSON

MERTON OF THE MOVIES

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CHAPTER I. DIRTY WORK AT THE BORDER

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At the very beginning of the tale there comes a moment of puzzled hesitation. One way of approach is set beside another for choice, and a third contrived for better choice. Still the puzzle persists, all because the one precisely right way might seem—shall we say intense, high keyed, clamorous? Yet if one way is the only right way, why pause? Courage! Slightly dazed, though certain, let us be on, into the shrill thick of it. So, then—

Out there in the great open spaces where men are men, a clash of primitive hearts and the coming of young love into its own! Well had it been for Estelle St. Clair if she had not wandered from the Fordyce ranch. A moment's delay in the arrival of Buck Benson, a second of fear in that brave heart, and hers would have been a fate worse than death.

Had she not been warned of Snake le Vasquez, the outlaw—his base threat to win her by fair means or foul? Had not Buck Benson himself, that strong, silent man of the open, begged her to beware of the half-breed? Perhaps she had resented the hint of mastery in Benson's cool, quiet tones as he said, "Miss St. Clair, ma'am, I beg you not to endanger your welfare by permitting the advances of this viper. He bodes no good to such as you."

Perhaps—who knows?—Estelle St. Clair had even thought to trifle with the feelings of Snake le Vasquez, then to scorn him for his presumption. Although the beautiful New York society girl had remained unsullied in the midst of a city's profligacy, she still liked "to play with fire," as she laughingly said, and at the quiet words of Benson—Two-Gun

Benson his comrades of the border called him—she had drawn herself to her full height, facing him in all her blond young beauty, and pouted adorably as she replied, “Thank you! But I can look out for myself.”

Yet she had wandered on her pony farther than she meant to, and was not without trepidation at the sudden appearance of the picturesque halfbreed, his teeth flashing in an evil smile as he swept off his broad sombrero to her. Above her suddenly beating heart she sought to chat gayly, while the quick eyes of the outlaw took in the details of the smart riding costume that revealed every line of her lithe young figure. But suddenly she chilled under his hot glance that now spoke all too plainly.

“I must return to my friends,” she faltered. “They will be anxious.” But the fellow laughed with a sinister leer. “No—ah, no, the lovely senorita will come with me,” he replied; but there was the temper of steel in his words. For Snake le Vasquez, on the border, where human life was lightly held, was known as the Slimy Viper. Of all the evil men in that inferno, Snake was the foulest. Steeped in vice, he feared neither God nor man, and respected no woman. And now, Estelle St. Clair, drawing-room pet, pampered darling of New York society, which she ruled with an iron hand from her father’s Fifth Avenue mansion, regretted bitterly that she had not given heed to honest Buck Benson. Her prayers, threats, entreaties, were in vain. Despite her struggles, the blows her small fists rained upon the scoundrel’s taunting face, she was borne across the border, on over the mesa, toward the lair of the outlaw.

“Have you no mercy?” she cried again and again. “Can you not see that I loathe and despise you, foul fiend that you are? Ah. God in heaven, is there no help at hand?” The outlaw remained deaf to these words that should have melted a heart of stone. At last over the burning plain was seen the ruined hovel to which the scoundrel was dragging

his fair burden. It was but the work of a moment to dismount and bear her half-fainting form within the den. There he faced her, repellent with evil intentions.

“Ha, senorita, you are a beautiful wildcat, yes? But Snake le Vasquez will tame you! Ha, ha!” laughed he carelessly.

With a swift movement the beautiful girl sought to withdraw the small silver-mounted revolver without which she never left the ranch. But Snake le Vasquez, with a muttered oath, was too quick for her. He seized the toy and contemptuously hurled it across his vile den.

“Have a care, my proud beauty!” he snarled, and the next moment she was writhing in his grasp.

Little availed her puny strength. Helpless as an infant was the fair New York society girl as Snake le Vasquez, foulest of the viper breed, began to force his attention upon her. The creature’s hot kisses seared her defenseless cheek. “Listen!” he hissed. “You are mine, mine at last. Here you shall remain a prisoner until you have consented to be my wife.” All seemed, indeed, lost.

“Am I too late, Miss St. Clair?”

Snake le Vasquez started at the quiet, grim voice.

“Sapristi!” he snarled. “You!”

“Me!” replied Buck Benson, for it was, indeed, no other.

“Thank God, at last!” murmured Estelle St. Clair, freeing herself from the foul arms that had enfolded her slim young beauty and staggering back from him who would so basely have forced her into a distasteful marriage. In an instant she had recovered the St. Clair poise, had become every inch the New York society leader, as she replied, “Not too late, Mr. Benson! Just in time, rather. Ha, ha! This—this gentleman has become annoying. You are just in time to mete out the punishment he so justly deserves, for which I shall pray that heaven reward you.”

She pointed an accusing finger at the craven wretch who had shrunk from her and now cowered at the far side of the wretched den. At that moment she was strangely thrilled. What was his power, this strong, silent man of the open with his deep reverence for pure American womanhood? True, her culture demanded a gentleman, but her heart demanded a man. Her eyes softened and fell before his cool, keen gaze, and a blush mantled her fair cheek. Could he but have known it, she stood then in meek surrender before this soft-voiced master. A tremor swept the honest rugged face of Buck Benson as heart thus called to heart. But his keen eyes flitted to Snake le Vasquez.

“Now, curse you, viper that you are, you shall fight me, by heaven! in American fashion, man to man, for, foul though you be, I hesitate to put a bullet through your craven heart.”

The beautiful girl shivered with new apprehension, the eyes of Snake le Vasquez glittered with new hope. He faced his steely eyed opponent for an instant only, then with a snarl like that of an angry beast sprang upon him. Benson met the cowardly attack with the flash of a powerful fist, and the outlaw fell to the floor with a hoarse cry of rage and pain. But he was quickly upon his feet again, muttering curses, and again he attacked his grim-faced antagonist. Quick blows rained upon his defenseless face, for the strong, silent man was now fairly aroused. He fought like a demon, perhaps divining that here strong men battled for a good woman’s love. The outlaw was proving to be no match for his opponent. Arising from the ground where a mighty blow had sent him, he made a lightning-like effort to recover the knife which Benson had taken from him.

“Have a care!” cried the girl in quick alarm. “That fiend in human form would murder you!”

But Buck Benson’s cool eye had seen the treachery in ample time. With a muttered “Curse you, fiend that you are!” he seized the form of the outlaw in a powerful grasp,

raised him high aloft as if he had been but a child, and was about to dash him to the ground when a new voice from the doorway froze him to immobility. Statute-like he stood there, holding aloft the now still form of Snake le Vasquez.

The voice from the doorway betrayed deep amazement and the profoundest irritation:

“Merton Gill, what in the sacred name of Time are you meanin’ to do with that dummy? For the good land’s sake! Have you gone plumb crazy, or what? Put that thing down!”

The newcomer was a portly man of middle age dressed in ill-fitting black. His gray hair grew low upon his brow and he wore a parted beard.

The conqueror of Snake le Vasquez was still frozen, though he had instantly ceased to be Buck Benson, the strong, silent, two-gun man of the open spaces. The irritated voice came again:

“Put that dummy down, you idiot! What you think you’re doin’, anyway? And say, what you got that other one in here for, when it ought to be out front of the store showin’ that new line of gingham house frocks? Put that down and handle it careful! Mebbe you think I got them things down from Chicago just for you to play horse with. Not so! Not so at all! They’re to help show off goods, and that’s what I want ’em doin’ right now. And for Time’s sake, what’s that revolver lyin’ on the floor for? Is it loaded? Say, are you really out of your senses, or ain’t you? What’s got into you lately? Will you tell me that? Skyhootin’ around in here, leavin’ the front of the store unpertected for an hour or two, like your time was your own. And don’t tell me you only been foolin’ in here for three minutes, either, because when I come back from lunch just now there was Mis’ Leffingwell up at the notions counter wanting some hooks and eyes, and she tells me she’s waited there a good thutty minutes if she’s waited one. Nice goin’s on, I must say, for a boy

drawin’ down the money you be! Now you git busy! Take that one with the gingham frock out and stand her in front where she belongs, and then put one them new raincoats on the other and stand him out where he belongs, and then look after a few customers. I declare, sometimes I git clean out of patience with you! Now, for gosh’s sake, stir your stumps!”

“Oh, all right—yes, sir,” replied Merton Gill, though but half respectfully. The “Oh, all right” had been tainted with a trace of sullenness. He was tired of this continual nagging and fussing over small matters; some day he would tell the old grouch so.

And now, gone the vivid tale of the great out-of-doors, the wide plains of the West, the clash of primitive-hearted men for a good woman’s love. Gone, perhaps, the greatest heart picture of a generation, the picture at which you laugh with a lump in your throat and smile with a tear in your eye, the story of plausible punches, a big, vital theme masterfully handled—thrills, action, beauty, excitement—carried to a sensational finish by the genius of that sterling star of the shadowed world, Clifford Armytage—once known as Merton Gill in the little hamlet of Simsbury, Illinois, where for a time, ere yet he was called to screen triumphs, he served as a humble clerk in the so-called emporium of Amos G. Gashwiler—Everything For The Home. Our Prices Always Right.

Merton Gill—so for a little time he must still be known—moodily seized the late Estelle St. Clair under his arm and withdrew from the dingy back storeroom. Down between the counters of the emporium he went with his fair burden and left her outside its portals, staring from her very definitely lashed eyes across the slumbering street at the Simsbury post office. She was tastefully arrayed in one of those new checked gingham house frocks so heatedly mentioned a moment since by her lawful owner, and across her chest

Merton Gill now imposed, with no tenderness of manner, the appealing legend, “Our Latest for Milady; only $6.98.” He returned for Snake le Vasquez. That outlaw’s face, even out of the picture, was evil. He had been picked for the part because of this face—plump, pinkly tinted cheeks, lustrous, curling hair of some repellent composition, eyes with a hard glitter, each lash distinct in blue-black lines, and a small, tip-curled black mustache that lent the whole an offensive smirk. Garbed now in a raincoat, he, too, was posed before the emporium front, labelled “Rainproof or You Get Back Your Money.” So frankly evil was his mien that Merton Gill, pausing to regard him, suffered a brief relapse into artistry.

“You fiend!” he muttered, and contemptuously smote the cynical face with an open hand.

Snake le Vasquez remained indifferent to the affront, smirking insufferably across the slumbering street at the wooden Indian proffering cigars before the establishment of Selby Brothers, Confectionery and Tobaccos.

Within the emporium the proprietor now purveyed hooks and eyes to an impatient Mrs. Leffingwell. Merton Gill, behind the opposite counter, waited upon a little girl sent for two and a quarter yards of stuff to match the sample crumpled in her damp hand. Over the suave amenities of this merchandising Amos Gashwiler glared suspiciously across the store at his employee. Their relations were still strained. Merton also glared at Amos, but discreetly, at moments when the other’s back was turned or when he was blandly wishing to know of Mrs. Leffingwell if there would be something else to-day. Other customers entered. Trade was on.

Both Merton and Amos wore airs of cheerful briskness that deceived the public. No one could have thought that Amos was fearing his undoubtedly crazed clerk might become uncontrollable at any moment, or that the clerk was mentally parting from Amos forever in a scene of tense

dramatic value in which his few dignified but scathing words would burn themselves unforgettably into the old man's brain. Merton, to himself, had often told Amos these things. Some day he'd say them right out, leaving his victim not only in the utmost confusion but in black despair of ever finding another clerk one half as efficient as Merton Gill.

The afternoon wore to closing time in a flurry of trade, during which, as Merton continued to behave sanely, the apprehension of his employer in a measure subsided. The last customer had departed from the emporium. The dummies were brought inside. The dust curtains were hung along the shelves of dry goods. There remained for Merton only the task of delivering a few groceries. He gathered these and took them out to the wagon in front. Then he changed from his store coat to his street coat and donned a rakish plush hat.

Amos was also changing from his store coat to his street coat and donning his frayed straw hat.

"See if you can't keep from actin' crazy while you make them deliveries," said Amos, not uncordially, as he lighted a choice cigar from the box which he kept hidden under a counter.

Merton wished to reply: "See here, Mr. Gashwiler, I've stood this abuse long enough! The time has come to say a few words to you—" But aloud he merely responded, "Yes, sir!"

The circumstance that he also had a cigar from the same box, hidden not so well as Amos thought, may have subdued his resentment. He would light the cigar after the first turn in the road had carried him beyond the eagle eye of its owner.

The delivery wagon outside was drawn by an elderly horse devoid of ambition or ideals. His head was sunk in dejection. He was gray at the temples, and slouched in the shafts in a

loafing attitude, one forefoot negligently crossed in front of the other. He aroused himself reluctantly and with apparent difficulty when Merton Gill seized the reins and called in commanding tones, “Get on there, you old skate!” The equipage moved off under the gaze of Amos, who was locking the doors of his establishment.

Turning the first corner into a dusty side street, Merton dropped the reins and lighted the filched cigar. Other Gashwiler property was sacred to him. From all the emporium’s choice stock he would have abstracted not so much as a pin; but the Gashwiler cigars, said to be “The World’s Best 10c Smoke,” with the picture of a dissipated clubman in evening dress on the box cover, were different, in that they were pointedly hidden from Merton. He cared little for cigars, but this was a challenge; the old boy couldn’t get away with anything like that. If he didn’t want his cigars touched let him leave the box out in the open like a man. Merton drew upon the lighted trophy, moistened and pasted back the wrapper that had broken when the end was bitten off, and took from the bottom of the delivery wagon the remains of a buggy whip that had been worn to half its length. With this he now tickled the bony ridges of the horse. Blows meant nothing to Dexter, but he could still be tickled into brief spurts of activity. He trotted with swaying head, sending up an effective dust screen between the wagon and a still possibly observing Gashwiler.

His deliveries made, Merton again tickled the horse to a frantic pace which continued until they neared the alley on which fronted the Gashwiler barn; there the speed was moderated to a mild amble, for Gashwiler believed his horse should be driven with tenderness, and his equally watchful wife believed it would run away if given the chance.

Merton drove into the barnyard, unhitched the horse, watered it at the half of a barrel before the iron pump, and led it into the barn, where he removed the harness. The old

horse sighed noisily and shook himself with relief as the bridle was removed and a halter slipped over his venerable brow.

Ascertaining that the barnyard was vacant, Merton immediately became attentive to his charge. Throughout the late drive his attitude had been one of mild but contemptuous abuse. More than once he had uttered the words “old skate” in tones of earnest conviction, and with the worn end of the whip he had cruelly tickled the still absurdly sensitive sides. Had beating availed he would with no compunction have beaten the drooping wreck. But now, all at once, he was curiously tender. He patted the shoulder softly, put both arms around the bony neck, and pressed his face against the face of Dexter. A moment he stood thus, then spoke in a tear-choked voice:

“Good-by, old pal—the best, the truest pal a man ever had. You and me has seen some tough times, old pard; but you’ve allus brought me through without a scratch; allus brought me through.” There was a sob in the speaker’s voice, but he manfully recovered a clear tone of pathos. “And now, old pal, they’re a-takin’ ye from me—yes, we got to part, you an’ me. I’m never goin’ to set eyes on ye agin. But we got to be brave, old pal; we got to keep a stiff upper lip—no cryin’ now; no bustin’ down.”

The speaker unclasped his arms and stood with head bowed, his face working curiously, striving to hold back the sobs.

For Merton Gill was once more Clifford Armytage, popular idol of the screen, in his great role of Buck Benson bidding the accustomed farewell to his four-footed pal that had brought him safely through countless dangers. How are we to know that in another couple of hundred feet of the reel Buck will escape the officers of the law who have him for that hold-up of the Wallahoola stage—of which he was innocent—leap from a second-story window of the sheriff’s

office onto the back of his old pal, and be carried safely over the border where the hellhounds can’t touch him until his innocence is proved by Estelle St. Clair, the New York society girl, whose culture demanded a gentleman but whose heart demanded a man. How are we to know this? We only know that Buck Benson always has to kiss his horse good-by at this spot in the drama.

Merton Gill is impressively Buck Benson. His sobs are choking him. And though Gashwiler’s delivery horse is not a pinto, and could hardly get over the border ahead of a sheriff’s posse, the scene is affecting.

“Good-by, again, old pal, and God bless ye!” sobs Merton.

CHAPTER II. THAT NIGHT—THE APARTMENTS OF CLIFFORD ARMYTAGE

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Merton Gill mealed at the Gashwiler home. He ate his supper in moody silence, holding himself above the small gossip of the day that engaged Amos and his wife. What to him meant the announcement that Amos expected a new line of white goods on the morrow, or Mrs. Gashwiler's version of a regrettable incident occurring at that afternoon's meeting of the Entre Nous Five Hundred Club, in which the score had been juggled adversely to Mrs. Gashwiler, resulting in the loss of the first prize, a handsome fern dish, and concerning which Mrs. Gashwiler had thought it best to speak her mind? What importance could he attach to the disclosure of Metta Judson, the Gashwiler hired girl, who chatted freely during her appearances with food, that Doc Cummins had said old Grandma Foutz couldn't last out another day; that the Peter Swansons were sending clear to Chicago for Tilda's trousseau; and that Jeff Murdock had arrested one of the Giddings boys, but she couldn't learn if it was Ferd or Gus, for being drunk as a fool and busting up a bazaar out at the Oak Grove schoolhouse, and the fighting was something terrible.

Scarcely did he listen to these petty recitals. He ate in silence, and when he had finished the simple meal he begged to be excused. He begged this in a lofty, detached, somewhat weary manner, as a man of the world, excessively bored at the dull chatter but still the fastidious gentleman, might have begged it, breaking into one of the

many repetitions by his hostess of just what she had said to Mrs. Judge Ellis. He was again Clifford Armytage, enacting a polished society man among yokels. He was so impressive, after rising, in his bow to Mrs. Gashwiler that Amos regarded him with a kindling suspicion.

“Say!” he called, as Merton in the hallway plucked his rakish plush hat from the mirrored rack. “You remember, now, no more o’ that skylarkin’ with them dummies! Them things cost money.”

Merton paused. He wished to laugh sarcastically, a laugh of withering scorn. He wished to reply in polished tones, “Skylarkin’! You poor, dull clod, what do you know of my ambitions, my ideals? You, with your petty life devoted to gaining a few paltry dollars!” But he did not say this, or even register the emotion that would justly accompany such a subtitle. He merely rejoined, “All right, sir, I’m not going to touch them,” and went quickly out. “Darned old grouch!” he muttered as he went down the concrete walk to the Gashwiler front gate.

Here he turned to regard the two-story brick house and the square of lawn with a concrete deer on one side of the walk, balanced by a concrete deer on the other. Before the gate was the cast-iron effigy of a small Negro in fantastic uniform, holding an iron ring aloft. The Gashwiler carriage horse had been tethered to this in the days before the Gashwiler touring car had been acquired.

“Dwelling of a country storekeeper!” muttered Merton. “That’s all you are!”

This was intended to be scornful. Merton meant that on the screen it would be recognized as this and nothing more. It could not be taken for the mansion of a rich banker, or the country home of a Wall Street magnate. He felt that he had been keen in his dispraise, especially as old Gashwiler would never get the sting of it. Clod!

Three blocks brought him to the heart of the town, still throbbing faintly. He stood, irresolute, before the Giddings House. Chairs in front of this hostelry were now vacant of loafers, and a clatter of dishes came through the open windows of the dining room, where supper was on. Farther down the street Selby Brothers, Cigars and Confectionery, would be open; lights shone from the windows of the Fashion Pool Parlour across the way; the City Drug Store could still be entered; and the post office would stay open until after the mail from No. 4 was distributed. With these exceptions the shops along this mart of trade were tightly closed, including the Gashwiler Emporium, at the blind front of which Merton now glanced with the utmost distaste.

Such citizens as were yet abroad would be over at the depot to watch No. 4 go through. Merton debated joining these sight-seers. Simsbury was too small to be noticed by many trains. It sprawled along the track as if it had been an afterthought of the railroad. Trains like No. 4 were apt to dash relentlessly by it without slackening speed, the mail bag being flung to the depot platform. But sometimes there would be a passenger for Simsbury, and the proud train would slow down and halt reluctantly, with a grinding of brakes, while the passenger alighted. Then a good view of the train could be had; a line of beautiful sleepers terminating in an observation car, its rear platform guarded by a brass-topped railing behind which the privileged lolled at ease; and up ahead a wonderful dining car, where dinner was being served; flitting white-clad waiters, the glitter of silver and crystal and damask, and favoured beings feasting at their lordly ease, perhaps denying even a careless glance at the pitiful hamlet outside, or at most looking out impatient at the halt, or merely staring with incurious eyes while awaiting their choice foods.

Not one of these enviable persons ever betrayed any interest in Simsbury or its little group of citizens who daily

gathered on the platform to do them honour. Merton Gill used to fancy that these people might shrewdly detect him to be out of place there—might perhaps take him to be an alien city man awaiting a similar proud train going the other way, standing, as he would, aloof from the obvious villagers, and having a manner, a carriage, an attire, such as further set him apart. Still, he could never be sure about this. Perhaps no one ever did single him out as a being patently of the greater world. Perhaps they considered that he was rightly of Simsbury and would continue to be a part of it all the days of his life; or perhaps they wouldn't notice him at all. They had been passing Simsburys all day, and all Simsburys and all their peoples must look very much alike to them. Very well—a day would come. There would be at Simsbury a momentous stop of No. 4 and another passenger would be in that dining car, disjoined forever from Simsbury, and he with them would stare out the polished windows at the gaping throng, and he would continue to stare with incurious eyes at still other Simsburys along the right of way, while the proud train bore him off to triumphs never dreamed of by natural-born villagers.

He decided now not to tantalize himself with a glance at this splendid means of escape from all that was sordid. He was still not a little depressed by the late unpleasantness with Gashwiler, who had thought him a crazy fool, with his revolver, his fiercely muttered words, and his holding aloft of a valuable dummy as if to threaten it with destruction. Well, some day the old grouch would eat his words; some day he would be relating to amazed listeners that he had known Merton Gill intimately at the very beginning of his astounding career. That was bound to come. But to-night Merton had no heart for the swift spectacle of No. 4. Nor even, should it halt, did he feel up to watching those indifferent, incurious passengers who little recked that a future screen idol in natty plush hat and belted coat

amusedly surveyed them. To-night he must be alone—but a day would come. Resistless Time would strike his hour!

Still he must wait for the mail before beginning his nightly study. Certain of his magazines would come to-night. He sauntered down the deserted street, pausing before the establishment of Selby Brothers. From the door of this emerged one Elmer Huff, clerk at the City Drug Store. Elmer had purchased a package of cigarettes and now offered one to Merton.

"'Lo, Mert! Have a little pill?"

"No, thanks," replied Merton firmly.

He had lately given up smoking—save those clandestine indulgences at the expense of Gashwiler—because he was saving money against his great day.

Elmer lighted one of his own little pills and made a further suggestion.

"Say, how about settin' in a little game with the gang to-night after the store closes—ten-cent limit?"

"No, thanks," replied Merton, again firmly.

He had no great liking for poker at any limit, and he would not subject his savings to a senseless hazard. Of course he might win, but you never could tell.

"Do you good," urged Elmer. "Quit at twelve sharp, with one round of roodles."

"No, I guess not," said Merton.

"We had some game last night, I'll tell the world! One hand we had four jacks out against four aces, and right after that I held four kings against an ace full. Say, one time there I was about two-eighty to the good, but I didn't have enough sense to quit. Hear about Gus Giddings? They got him over in the coop for breaking in on a social out at the Oak Grove schoolhouse last night. Say, he had a peach on when he left here, I'll tell the world! But he didn't get far. Them Grove

lads certainly made a believer out of him. You ought to see that left eye of his!”

Merton listened loftily to this village talk, gossip of a rural sport who got a peach on and started something—And the poker game in the back room of the City Drug Store! What diversions were these for one who had a future? Let these clods live out their dull lives in their own way. But not Merton Gill, who held aloof from their low sports, studied faithfully the lessons in his film-acting course, and patiently bided his time.

He presently sauntered to the post office, where the mail was being distributed. Here he found the sight-seers who had returned from the treat of No. 4’s flight, and many of the less enterprising citizens who had merely come down for their mail. Gashwiler was among these, smoking one of his choice cigars. He was not allowed to smoke in the house. Merton, knowing this prohibition, strictly enforced by Mrs. Gashwiler, threw his employer a glance of honest pity. Briefly he permitted himself a vision of his own future home—a palatial bungalow in distant Hollywood, with expensive cigars in elaborate humidors and costly gold-tipped cigarettes in silver things on low tables. One might smoke freely there in every room.

Under more of the Elmer Huff sort of gossip, and the rhythmic clump of the cancelling stamp back of the drawers and boxes, he allowed himself a further glimpse of this luxurious interior. He sat on a low couch, among soft cushions, a magnificent bearskin rug beneath his feet. He smoked one of the costly cigarettes and chatted with a young lady interviewer from Photo Land.

“You ask of my wife,” he was saying. “But she is more than a wife—she is my best pal, and, I may add, she is also my severest critic.”

He broke off here, for an obsequious Japanese butler entered with a tray of cooling drinks. The tray would be gleaming silver, but he was uncertain about the drinks; something with long straws in them, probably. But as to anything alcoholic, now—While he was trying to determine this the general-delivery window was opened and the interview had to wait. But, anyway, you could smoke where you wished in that house, and Gashwiler couldn’t smoke any closer to his house than the front porch. Even trying it there he would be nagged, and fussily asked why he didn’t go out to the barn. He was a poor fish, Gashwiler; a country storekeeper without a future. A clod!

Merton, after waiting in line, obtained his mail, consisting of three magazines—Photo Land, Silver Screenings, and Camera. As he stepped away he saw that Miss Tessie Kearns stood three places back in the line. He waited at the door for her. Miss Kearns was the one soul in Simsbury who understood him. He had confided to her all his vast ambitions; she had sympathized with them, and her never-failing encouragement had done not a little to stiffen his resolution at odd times when the haven of Hollywood seemed all too distant. A certain community of ambitions had been the foundation of this sympathy between the two, for Tessie Kearns meant to become a scenario writer of eminence, and, like Merton, she was now both studying and practising a difficult art. She conducted the millinery and dressmaking establishment next to the Gashwiler Emporium, but found time, as did Merton, for the worthwhile things outside her narrow life.

She was a slight, spare little figure, sedate and mouselike, of middle age and, to the village, of a quiet, sober way of thought. But, known only to Merton, her real life was one of terrific adventure, involving crime of the most atrocious sort, and contact not only with the great and good, but with loathsome denizens of the underworld who would commit

any deed for hire. Some of her scenarios would have profoundly shocked the good people of Simsbury, and she often suffered tremors of apprehension at the thought that one of them might be enacted at the Bijou Palace right there on Fourth Street, with her name brazenly announced as author. Suppose it were Passion's Perils! She would surely have to leave town after that! She would be too ashamed to stay. Still she would be proud, also, for by that time they would be calling her to Hollywood itself. Of course nothing so distressing—or so grand—had happened yet, for none of her dramas had been accepted; but she was coming on. It might happen any time.

She joined Merton, a long envelope in her hand and a brave little smile on her pinched face.

"Which one is it?" he asked, referring to the envelope.

"It's Passion's Perils." she answered with a jaunty affectation of amusement. "The Touchstone-Blatz people sent it back. The slip says its being returned does not imply any lack of merit."

"I should think it wouldn't!" said Merton warmly.

He knew Passion's Perils. A company might have no immediate need for it, but its rejection could not possibly imply a lack of merit, because the merit was there. No one could dispute that.

They walked on to the Bijou Palace. Its front was dark, for only twice a week, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, could Simsbury muster a picture audience; but they could read the bills for the following night. The entrance was flanked on either side by billboards, and they stopped before the first. Merton Gill's heart quickened its beats, for there was billed none other than Beulah Baxter in the ninth installment of her tremendous serial, The Hazards of Hortense.

It was going to be good! It almost seemed that this time the scoundrels would surely get Hortense. She was speeding

across a vast open quarry in a bucket attached to a cable, and one of the scoundrels with an ax was viciously hacking at the cable's farther anchorage. It would be a miracle if he did not succeed in his hellish design to dash Hortense to the cruel rocks below. Merton, of course, had not a moment's doubt that the miracle would intervene; he had seen other serials. So he made no comment upon the gravity of the situation, but went at once to the heart of his ecstasy.

"The most beautiful woman on the screen," he murmured.

"Well, I don't know."

Miss Kearns appeared about to advance the claims of rival beauties, but desisted when she saw that Merton was firm.

"None of the rest can touch her," he maintained. "And look at her nerve! Would your others have as much nerve as that?"

"Maybe she has someone to double in those places," suggested the screen-wise Tessie Kearns.

"Not Beulah Baxter. Didn't I see her personal appearance that time I went to Peoria last spring on purpose to see it? Didn't she talk about the risks she look and how the directors were always begging her to use a double and how her artistic convictions wouldn't let her do any such thing? You can bet the little girl is right there in every scene!"

They passed to the other billboard. This would be the comedy. A painfully cross-eyed man in misfitting clothes was doing something supposed to be funny—pushing a lawn mower over the carpet of a palatial home.

"How disgusting!" exclaimed Miss Kearns.

"Ain't it?" said Merton. "How they can have one of those terrible things on the same bill with Miss Baxter—I can't understand it."

"Those censors ought to suppress this sort of buffoonery instead of scenes of dignified passion like they did in Scarlet

Sin," declared Tessie. "Did you read about that?"

"They sure ought," agreed Merton. "These comedies make me tired. I never see one if I can help it."

Walking on, they discussed the wretched public taste and the wretched actors that pandered to it. The slap-stick comedy, they held, degraded a fine and beautiful art. Merton was especially severe. He always felt uncomfortable at one of these regrettable exhibitions when people about him who knew no better laughed heartily. He had never seen anything to laugh at, and said as much.

They crossed the street and paused at the door of Miss Kearns' shop, behind which were her living rooms. She would to-night go over Passion's Perils once more and send it to another company.

"I wonder," she said to Merton, "if they keep sending it back because the sets are too expensive. Of course there's the one where the dissipated English nobleman, Count Blessingham, lures Valerie into Westminster Abbey for his own evil purposes on the night of the old earl's murder—that's expensive—but they get a chance to use it again when Valerie is led to the altar by young Lord Stonecliff, the rightful heir. And of course Stonecliff Manor, where Valerie is first seen as governess, would be expensive; but they use that in a lot of scenes, too. Still, maybe I might change the locations around to something they've got built."

"I wouldn't change a line," said Merton. "Don't give in to 'em. Make 'em take it as it is. They might ruin your picture with cheap stuff."

"Well," the authoress debated, "maybe I'll leave it. I'd especially hate to give up Westminster Abbey. Of course the scene where she is struggling with Count Blessingham might easily be made offensive—it's a strong scene—but it all comes right. You remember she wrenches herself loose from his grasp and rushes to throw herself before the altar,

which suddenly lights up, and the scoundrel is afraid to pursue her there, because he had a thorough religious training when a boy at Oxford, and he feels it would be sacrilegious to seize her again while the light from the altar shines upon her that way, and so she's saved for the time being. It seems kind of a shame not to use Westminster Abbey for a really big scene like that, don't you think?"

"I should say so!" agreed Merton warmly. "They build plenty of sets as big as that. Keep it in!"

"Well, I'll take your advice. And I shan't give up trying with my other ones. And I'm writing to another set of people—see here." She took from her handbag a clipped advertisement which she read to Merton in the fading light, holding it close to her keen little eyes. "Listen! 'Five thousand photoplay ideas needed. Working girl paid ten thousand dollars for ideas she had thought worthless. Yours may be worth more. Experience unnecessary. Information free. Producers' League 562, Piqua, Ohio.' Doesn't that sound encouraging? And it isn't as if I didn't have some experience. I've been writing scenarios for two years now."

"We both got to be patient," he pointed out. "We can't succeed all at once, just remember that."

"Oh, I'm patient, and I'm determined; and I know you are, too, Merton. But the way my things keep coming back—well, I guess we'd both get discouraged if it wasn't for our sense of humour."

"I bet we would," agreed Merton. "And good-night!"

He went on to the Gashwiler Emporium and let himself into the dark store. At the moment he was bewailing that the next installment of The Hazards of Hortense would be shown on a Saturday night, for on those nights the store kept open until nine and he could see it but once. On a Tuesday night he would have watched it twice, in spite of the so-called comedy unjustly sharing the bill with it.

Lighting a match, he made his way through the silent store, through the stock room that had so lately been the foul lair of Snake le Vasquez, and into his own personal domain, a square partitioned off from the stockroom in which were his cot, the table at which he studied the art of screen acting, and his other little belongings. He often called this his den. He lighted a lamp on the table and drew the chair up to it.

On the boards of the partition in front of him were pasted many presentments of his favourite screen actress, Beulah Baxter, as she underwent the nerve-racking Hazards of Hortense. The intrepid girl was seen leaping from the seat of her high-powered car to the cab of a passing locomotive, her chagrined pursuers in the distant background. She sprang from a high cliff into the chill waters of a storm-tossed sea. Bound to the back of a spirited horse, she was raced down the steep slope of a rocky ravine in the Far West. Alone in a foul den of the underworld she held at bay a dozen villainous Asiatics. Down the fire escape of a great New York hotel she made a perilous way. From the shrouds of a tossing ship she was about to plunge to a watery release from the persecutor who was almost upon her. Upon the roof of the Fifth Avenue mansion of her scoundrelly guardian in the great city of New York she was gaining the friendly projection of a cornice from which she could leap and again escape death—even a fate worse than death, for the girl was pursued from all sorts of base motives. This time, friendless and alone in profligate New York, she would leap from the cornice to the branches of the great eucalyptus tree that grew hard by. Unnerving performances like these were a constant inspiration to Merton Gill. He knew that he was not yet fit to act in such scenes—to appear opportunely in the last reel of each installment and save Hortense for the next one. But he was confident a day would come.

On the same wall he faced also a series of photographs of himself. These were stills to be one day shown to a director who would thereupon perceive his screen merits. There was Merton in the natty belted coat, with his hair slicked back in the approved mode and a smile upon his face; a happy, careless college youth. There was Merton in tennis flannels, his hair nicely disarranged, jauntily holding a borrowed racquet. Here he was in a trench coat and the cap of a lieutenant, grim of face, the jaw set, holding a revolver upon someone unpictured; there in a wide-collared sport shirt lolling negligently upon a bench after a hard game of polo or something. Again he appeared in evening dress, two straightened fingers resting against his left temple. Underneath this was written in a running, angular, distinguished hand, “Very truly yours, Clifford Armytage.” This, and prints of it similarly inscribed, would one day go to unknown admirers who besought him for likenesses of himself.

But Merton lost no time in scanning these pictorial triumphs. He was turning the pages of the magazines he had brought, his first hasty search being for new photographs of his heroine. He was quickly rewarded. Silver Screenings proffered some fresh views of Beulah Baxter, not in dangerous moments, but revealing certain quieter aspects of her wondrous life. In her kitchen, apron clad, she stirred something. In her lofty music room she was seated at her piano. In her charming library she was shown “Among Her Books.” More charmingly she was portrayed with her beautiful arms about the shoulders of her dear old mother. And these accompanied an interview with the actress.

The writer, one Esther Schwarz, professed the liveliest trepidation at first meeting the screen idol, but was swiftly reassured by the unaffected cordiality of her reception. She found that success had not spoiled Miss Baxter. A sincere artist, she yet absolutely lacked the usual temperament and

mannerisms. She seemed more determined than ever to give the public something better and finer. Her splendid dignity, reserve, humanness, high ideals, and patient study of her art had but mellowed, not hardened, a gracious personality. Merton Gill received these assurances without surprise. He knew Beulah Baxter would prove to be these delightful things. He read on for the more exciting bits.

“I’m so interested in my work,” prettily observed Miss Baxter to the interviewer; “suppose we talk only of that. Leave out all the rest—my Beverly Hills home, my cars, my jewels, my Paris gowns, my dogs, my servants, my recreations. It is work alone that counts, don’t you think? We must learn that success, all that is beautiful and fine, requires work, infinite work and struggle. The beautiful comes only through suffering and sacrifice. And of course dramatic work broadens a girl’s viewpoint, helps her to get the real, the worthwhile things out of life, enriching her nature with the emotional experience of her roles. It is through such pressure that we grow, and we must grow, must we not? One must strive for the ideal, for the art which will be but the pictorial expression of that, and for the emotion which must be touched by the illuminating vision of a well-developed imagination if the vital message of the film is to be felt.

“But of course I have my leisure moments from the grinding stress. Then I turn to my books—I’m wild about history. And how I love the great free out-of-doors! I should prefer to be on a simple farm, were I a boy. The public would not have me a boy, you say”—she shrugged prettily—“oh, of course, my beauty, as they are pleased to call it. After all, why should one not speak of that? Beauty is just a stock in trade, you know. Why not acknowledge it frankly? But do come to my delightful kitchen, where I spend many a spare moment, and see the lovely custard I have made for dear mamma’s luncheon.”

Merton Gill was entranced by this exposition of the quieter side of his idol's life. Of course he had known she could not always be making narrow escapes, and it seemed that she was almost more delightful in this staid domestic life. Here, away from her professional perils, she was, it seemed, "a slim little girl with sad eyes and a wistful mouth."

The picture moved him strongly. More than ever he was persuaded that his day would come. Even might come the day when it would be his lot to lighten the sorrow of those eyes and appease the wistfulness of that tender mouth. He was less sure about this. He had been unable to learn if Beulah Baxter was still unwed. Silver Screenings, in reply to his question, had answered, "Perhaps." Camera, in its answers to correspondents, had said, "Not now." Then he had written to Photo Land: "Is Beulah Baxter unmarried?" The answer had come, "Twice." He had been able to make little of these replies, enigmatic, ambiguous, at best. But he felt that some day he would at least be chosen to act with this slim little girl with the sad eyes and wistful mouth. He, it might be, would rescue her from the branches of the great eucalyptus tree growing hard by the Fifth Avenue mansion of the scoundrelly guardian. This, if he remembered well her message about hard work.

He recalled now the wondrous occasion on which he had travelled the nearly hundred miles to Peoria to see his idol in the flesh. Her personal appearance had been advertised. It was on a Saturday night, but Merton had silenced old Gashwiler with the tale of a dying aunt in the distant city. Even so, the old grouch had been none too considerate. He had seemed to believe that Merton's aunt should have died nearer to Simsbury, or at least have chosen a dull Monday.

But Merton had held with dignity to the point; a dying aunt wasn't to be hustled about as to either time or place. She died when her time came—even on a Saturday night—and where she happened to be, though it were a hundred miles