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A SCENARIO-WRITER AT WORK.

As an Australian Girl Saw Him.

(BY FYVIE DAWSON.)

THOUGH I am the least important part of this adventure, a word about me, since I began it.

During a "pretty" submarine escapade aboard the Strathnaver en route for Australia I collided with a jovial man—he was Captain J. O. C. Orton. He forgave me, and we chatted. He told me that he was looking for a secretary, and asked me if I was qualified for the job. Supplying negatives to his interrogatives I eagerly confessed an ability to pen the rapid line and a desire to know how to type. After his next dive, my Big Boss, taking me on faith, inquired: "Will you begin this afternoon?" So, I became a secretary, a machine recording a great scenario-writer's mind in action. And it turned into a delightful experience. My job soon became my day's interest and I ended it, not a jaded typiste-stenographer, but bright-eyed with the glamorous stories that I was told of his life, his rise to success, his philosophy, his friendships.

As I ponk, ponk, ponked on the keyboard while the tropic shadows fell, I began to feel the little (yet definite) wavelet that I was in the big wave that J. O. C. Orton is about to break and boom with Australian seas on the film shores of the world.

I asked him how he conceived the plot of "Bulldog Jack." He replied, "Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." The idea came in a flash. An underground train hurtled through a tube station. It was the British Museum Station, and it was out of use. I noticed its disrepair and desolation. . . The British Museum Station, right under the British Museum, out of use! What a plot! As the tube wound again into its dark, subterranean passageway, I had it. I thought how advantageously a gang of crooks could use the station as a headquarters, and bore a tunnel right under the British Museum, to commit the theft of precious treasures."

NANCY O'NEIL'S CHANCE.

"Jack Ahoy" was a whimsical Nature's child, born of boredom.

"I was fishing in Norfolk," he recounted, "in some sandy shallows, at the point on one of those capricious rivers where it nearly joins the sea, then changes its mind and turns inland. I hate fishing, and was very bored, and eventually lay back in my boat and fell asleep. When I awoke, an hour later, the tide was out and the boat and I were stranded on a sandbank. Meditating on my plight, I suddenly saw, in imagination, a submarine in a similar enforced static state. I visualised the crew, thinking that they were stuck on the bottom of the ocean . . . devising all sorts of schemes of escape to safety . . .

and then discovering that they were on a sandbank, above the surface of the sea. What a fish I'd caught!"

Talking of "Jack Ahoy" recalls another of his stories, of how Nancy O'Neil had her first "big break." There was a movement to teach film-acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and Captain Orton, ever interested in young talent, was in charge of the course of lectures and practical experience. The students were taken to a film studio and given experience in acting before the camera. One of them was Nancy. Her talent was outstanding, and she was remembered. A year later, having again returned from Australia, she was standing in a long queue, almost despondently waiting for an audition. Captain Orton happened to pass, and, remembering her face, asked if he could help. She explained her patient wait, and he at once telephoned to the man who was giving these actors their auditions. Nancy walked straight in, and came out with a "lead," playing with Jack Hulbert, the envy of every eye.

TO PORTRAY US AS WE ARE.

Australians will be glad to know that J. O. C. Orton, the man, has a genuine desire to depict our life as it is (and as we would hope it is). His sincerity will rapidly make itself felt. His interest in Australia and his admiration for her pioneers is as limitless as our far horizons. He admires the Australian physique and sense of freedom.

"Do you think they will like me?" he asked, simply.

I assured him, on our behalf, that it was inevitable, that we always "fell" for sincerity and geniality and simple tastes.

A scenario-writer, I learnt, must have years of experience in film studios. He must work his passage for years as an "editor" in the "cutting" rooms, learning how films are made, sequences of pictures joined together and cut. Then he must spend years "on the floor" studying the dictates of directors, how they want cameras to be placed and moved, etc. I was also assured that a scenario-writer who is really worth his salt must have had experience as a producer himself, so that he can appreciate another producer's reactions to his stage directions.

I learnt that the scenario-writer has a very different task from the playwright, whose first act must end on a crescendo, with a breathless effect on the audience, whose second must end similarly (but, for a very different reason—because the critics and producers always leave at the end of the second act), and whose third must satisfactorily clear up the mess and restore calm. The scenario-writer must lead, by gradual crises, entangling the evidence and confusing the issue for a steady hour and a quarter, to the one big moment when fears are dispelled, expectations realised, and tension removed; when the audience bends for its hat, and, "peanuts and chocolates," says the boy upstairs.