

Truffaut Hitchcock

The definitive study of Alfred Hitchcock by François Truffaut
Revised Edition

this period with the Jesuits that a strong sense of fear developed—moral fear—the fear of being involved in anything evil. I always tried to avoid it. Why? Perhaps out of physical fear. I was terrified of physical punishment. In those days they used a cane made of very hard rubber. I believe the Jesuits still use it. It wasn't done casually, you know; it was rather like the execution of a sentence. They would tell you to step in to see the father when classes were over. He would then solemnly inscribe your name in the register, together with the indication of the punishment to be inflicted, and you spent the whole day waiting for the sentence to be carried out.

F.T. I've read that you were rather average as a student and that your only strong point was geography.

A.H. I was usually among the four or five at the top of the class. Never first; second only once or twice, and generally fourth or fifth. They claimed I was rather absent-minded.

F.T. Wasn't it your ambition, at the time, to become an engineer?

A.H. Well, little boys are always asked what they want to be when they grow up, and it must be said to my credit that I never wanted to be a policeman. When I said I'd like to become an engineer, my parents took me seriously and they sent me to a specialized school, the School of Engineering and Navigation, where I studied mechanics, electricity, acoustics, and navigation.

F.T. Then you had scientific leanings?

A.H. Perhaps. I did acquire some practical knowledge of engineering, the theory of the laws of force and motion, electricity—theoretical and applied. Then I had to make a living, so I went to work with the Henley Telegraph Company. At the same time I was taking courses at the University of London, studying art. At Henley's I specialized in electric cables. I became a technical estimator when I was about nineteen.

F.T. Were you interested in motion pictures at the time?

A.H. Yes, I had been for several years. I was very keen on pictures and the stage and very often went to first nights by myself. From the age of sixteen on I read film journals. Not fan or fun magazines, but always professional and trade papers. And since I was studying art at the University of London, Henley's transferred me to the advertising department, where I was given a chance to draw.

F.T. What kind of drawings?

A.H. Designs for advertisements of electric cables. And this work was a first step toward cinema. It helped me to get into the field.

F.T. Can you remember specifically some of the films that appealed to you at the time?

A.H. Though I went to the theater very often, I preferred the movies and was more attracted to American films than to the British. I saw the pictures of Chaplin, Griffith, all the Paramount Famous Players pictures, Buster Keaton, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, as well as the German films of Decla-Bioscop, the company that preceded UFA. Murnau worked for them.

F.T. Can you single out a picture that made a special impression?

A.H. One of Decla-Bioscop's most famous pictures was *Der müde Tod*.

F.T. Wasn't that directed by Fritz Lang? The British title, I believe, was *Destiny*.

A.H. I guess so. The leading man, I recall, was Bernhard Goetzke.

F.T. Did you like Murnau's films?

A.H. Yes, but they came later. In '23 or '24.

F.T. What films were being shown in 1920?

A.H. Well, I remember a *Monsieur Prince*. In England it was called *Whiffles*.

F.T. You've often been quoted as having said: "Like all directors, I was influenced by Griffith."

A.H. I especially remember *Intolerance* and *The Birth of a Nation*.

F.T. How did you happen to go from Henley's to a film company?

A.H. I read in a trade paper that an American company, Paramount's Famous Players-Lasky, was opening a branch in Islington, London. They were going to build studios there, and they announced a production schedule. Among others, a picture taken from such and such a book. I don't remember the title. While still working at Henley's, I read that book through and then made several drawings that might eventually serve to illustrate the titles.

F.T. By "titles" you mean the captions that covered the dialogue in silent pictures?

A.H. That's right. At the time, those titles were illustrated. On each card you had the narrative title, the dialogue, and a small drawing. The most famous of these narrative titles was "Came the dawn." You also had "The next morning . . ." For instance, if the line read: "George was leading a very fast life by this time," I would draw a candle, with a flame at each end, just below the sentence. Very naïve.

F.T. So you took this initiative and then submitted your work to Famous Players?

A.H. Exactly. I showed them my drawings and they put me on at once. Later on I became head of the title department. I went to work for the editorial department of the studio. The head of the department had two American writers under him, and when a picture was finished, the head of the editorial department would write the titles or would rewrite those of the original script. Because in those days it was possible to completely alter the meaning of a script through

the use of narrative titles and spoken titles.

F.T. How so?

A.H. Well, since the actor pretended to speak and the dialogue appeared on the screen right afterward, they could put whatever words they liked in his mouth. Many a bad picture was saved in this way. For instance, if a drama had been poorly filmed and was ridiculous, they would insert comedy titles all the way through and the picture was a great hit. Because, you see, it became a satire. One could really do anything—take the end of a picture and put it at the beginning—anything at all!

F.T. And this gave you a chance to see the inside of film-making?

A.H. Yes. At this time I met several American writers and I learned how to write scripts. And sometimes when an extra scene was needed—but not an acting scene—they would let me shoot it. However, the pictures made by Famous Players in England were unsuccessful in America. So the studio became a rental studio for British producers.

Meanwhile, I had read a novel in a magazine, and just as an exercise, I wrote a script based on this story. I knew that an American company had the exclusive world rights to the property, but I did it anyway, since it was merely for practice.

When the British companies took over the Islington studios, I approached them for work and I landed a job as an assistant director.

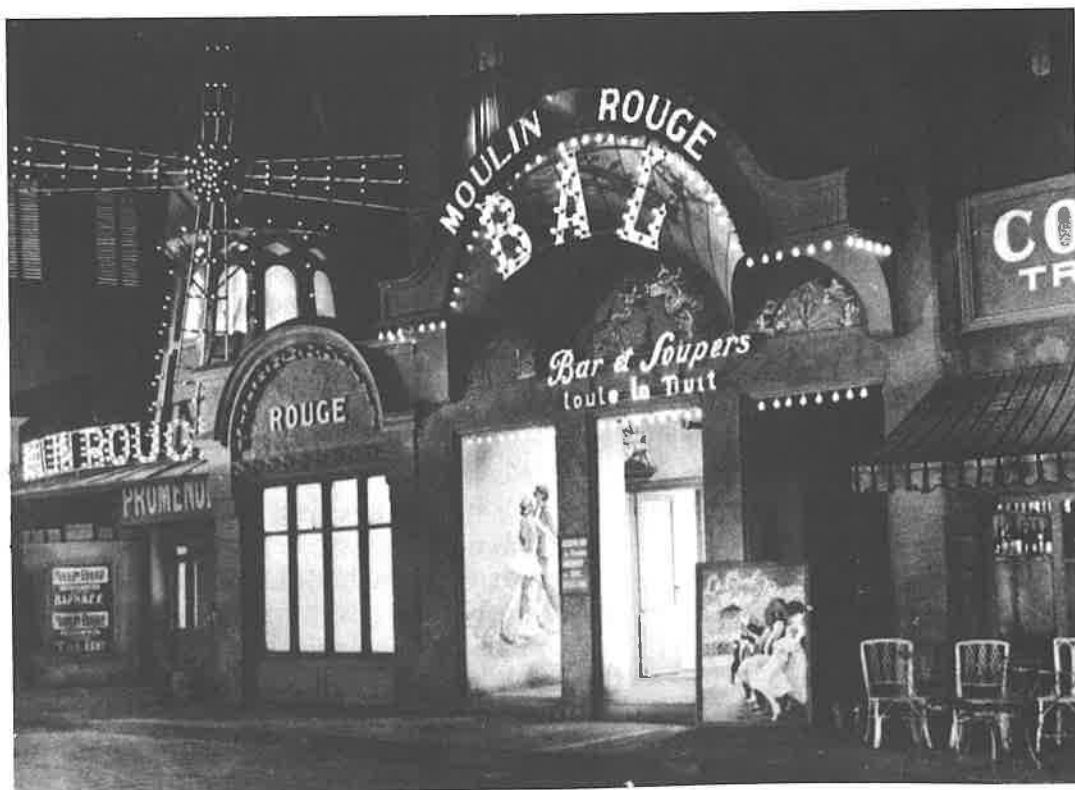
F.T. With Michael Balcon?

A.H. No, not yet. Before that I worked on a picture called *Always Tell Your Wife*, which featured Seymour Hicks, a very well-known London actor. One day he quarreled with the director and said to me, "Let's you and me finish this thing by ourselves." So I helped him and we completed the picture.

Meanwhile, the company formed by Michael Balcon became a tenant at the studios, and I became an assistant director for this new venture. It was the company that Balcon had set up



Betty Compson and Clive Brook in *Woman to Woman*.
Set created by Hitchcock for *Woman to Woman*.





Number Thirteen, 1922.

with Victor Saville and John Freedman. They bought the rights to a play. It was called *Woman to Woman*. Then they said, "Now we need a script," and I said, "I would like to write it."

"You? What have you done?"

I said, "I can show you something." And I showed them the adaptation I'd written as an exercise. They were very impressed and I got the job. That was in 1922.

F.T. I see. You were then twenty-three. But didn't you direct a little picture called *Number Thirteen* before that time?

A.H. A two-reeler. It was never completed.

F.T. Wasn't it a documentary?

A.H. No. There was a woman working at the studio who had worked with Chaplin. In those days anyone who had worked with Chap-

lin was top drawer: She had written a story and we found a little money. It wasn't very good, really. Aside from which, it was just at this point that the Americans closed their studio.

F.T. I've never seen *Woman to Woman*. In fact, I don't even know the story.

A.H. As you said, I was twenty-three at the time, and I'd never been out with a girl in my life. I'd never had a drink in my life. The story was taken from a play that had been a hit in London. It was about a British Army officer in World War I. On leave in Paris he has an affair with a dancer, then he goes back to the front. He is shell-shocked and loses his memory. He returns to England and marries a society woman. And then the dancer turns up with child. Conflict . . . the story ends with the dancer's death.



The White Shadow (1923).

F.T. Graham Cutts directed that picture. You did the adaptation and dialogue, and were assistant director as well?

A.H. More than that! My friend, the art director, was unable to work on the picture. I volunteered to serve as art director. So I did all of this and also helped on the production. My future wife, Alma Reville, was the editor of the picture as well as the script girl. In those days the script girl and the editor were one and the same person. Today the script girl keeps too many books, as you know. She's a real book-keeper. It was while working on that picture that I first met my wife.

Then I performed these various functions for several other films. The second was *The White Shadow*, the third was *The Passionate Adventure*, and the fourth was *The Blackguard*. And then there was *The Prude's Fall*.

F.T. As you recall them now, would you say all of those pictures were about the same, or do you have a preference?

A.H. *Woman to Woman* was the best of the lot and the most successful. When we made *The Prude's Fall*, the last one of this series, the director took his lady friend along on location. We went to Venice. It was really quite expensive. The director's girl friend apparently didn't approve of any of the locations, so we came back to the studio without shooting a single scene. When the picture was finished, the director told the producer he didn't want me anymore. I've always suspected that someone on the unit had been "political."

F.T. How long did it take to turn out these pictures?

A.H. Each one took six weeks.

F.T. I suppose that one's talent was measured by the ability to make a picture requiring the fewest titles?

A.H. Exactly.

F.T. Still, weren't many of the scripts adapted from stage plays?

A.H. I made a silent film, *The Farmer's Wife*, a play that was all dialogue, but we tried to avoid using titles and, wherever possible, to use the pictorial expression instead. I suppose the only film made without any titles at all was *The Last Laugh*, with Emil Jannings.

F.T. A great picture, one of Murnau's best.

A.H. They were making it while I worked at UFA. In that film Murnau even tried to establish a universal language by using a kind of Esperanto. All the street signs, the posters, the shop signs, were in this synthetic language.

F.T. Well, some of the signs in Emil Jannings' house were in German, but those in the Grand Hotel were in this Esperanto. I imagine you were by then becoming increasingly interested in the technical aspect of film-making, that you were studying . . .

A.H. I was very much aware of the superiority of the photography in American movies to that of the British films. At eighteen I was studying photography, just as a hobby. I had noticed, for instance, that the Americans always tried to separate the image from the background with backlights, whereas in the British films the image melted into the background. There was no separation, no relief.

F.T. This brings us to 1925. Following the shooting of *The Prude's Fall*, the director doesn't want you to continue as his assistant. And that's when Michael Balcon suggests that you become a director.

A.H. Balcon said, "How would you like to direct a picture?" and I answered, "I've never thought about it." And in truth, I had not. I was very happy doing the scripts and the art direction; I hadn't thought of myself as a director.

Anyway, Balcon told me that there was a proposal for an Anglo-German picture. Another writer was assigned to the script and I left for Munich. My wife, Alma, was to be my assistant. We weren't married yet, but we weren't living in sin either; we were still very pure.

F.T. This was *The Pleasure Garden*, from the novel by Oliver Sandys. As I remember it, there was lots of action.*

A.H. Melodramatic. But there were several interesting scenes in it. I want to tell you something about the shooting, because that was the very first picture I directed, and it was natural for me, I suppose, to have a sense of drama. So, at twenty minutes to eight on Saturday evening, I'm at the station in Munich, ready to leave for the location shooting in Italy. In the station, waiting for the train to start, I'm saying to myself, "This is your first picture." Nowadays, when I leave on location, I have to go with a crew of a hundred and forty people. But then there was only the leading man, Miles Mander; the cameraman, Baron Vintigmilia; and a young girl who was supposed to play a native woman who is drowned. There was also a newsreel cameraman, because we were going to do a ship-departure scene in Genoa. We were going to shoot the ship's departure with one camera on the shore and another on the ship's deck.

* Patsy, a chorus girl at the Pleasure Garden Theater, gets her girl friend Jill a job in the troupe. Jill is engaged to Hugh, who is stationed in the colonies.

Patsy marries Levett, a colleague of Hugh's, and following a honeymoon at Lake Como, Levett also sails for the colonies. Jill, who is having the time of her life in London and enjoying the attentions of other men, keeps on postponing her departure for the islands, where her fiancé awaits her.

But Patsy leaves to join her husband. On her arrival, she discovers him in the arms of a native woman and totally depraved. When she announces her decision to leave him, Levett, in a panic, maneuvers the native woman into drowning, making her death appear a suicide. Then he turns against Patsy, and just as he is about to kill her, he is shot down by the local doctor. Hugh, abandoned by Jill, is drawn to Patsy, and the two embark on a new life together.



And the ship was going to stop outside the harbor to allow us to get the actors and the newsreel cameraman back to the dock to photograph the characters as they waved their farewells.

The next scene was to be shot in San Remo. This scene has the native girl wading out to sea to commit suicide, and Levett, the villain in the story, is to rush out and make sure the girl is dead, by holding her head underwater. Then he's to bring the body back to shore, saying, "I did my best to save her."

The following scenes take place at Lake Como, in the hotel of the Villa d'Este. Honeymoon, love scenes on the lake, beautiful romance, etc. My wife-to-be is there on the platform at Munich that evening and we are talking together. She's not coming with us. Her job—you know, she's only as tall as that; she was twenty-four then—was to go to Cherbourg by herself to pick up the leading lady, who was coming in from Hollywood. She was Virginia Valli, a very big star at the time, Universal's biggest—and who played Patsy. My fiancée is to pick her up from the *Aquitania* at Cherbourg, take her to Paris, buy her a wardrobe there and then meet us at the Villa d'Este. That's all.

The train is scheduled to leave at eight o'clock.

It is now two minutes to eight. The actor, Miles Mander, says to me, "My God, I've left my makeup case in the taxi," and he runs off.

I shout out after him, "We'll be at the Hotel Bristol, in Genoa. Take the train tomorrow night, because we're shooting on Tuesday." I should remind you that this was on Saturday evening, and we were to arrive in Genoa on Sunday morning to get ready for the shooting.

It's now eight, but the train hasn't left. A few minutes go by. Eight-ten. The train begins to move. And suddenly there's a great row at the barrier and I see Miles Mander leaping over the gate, with three railway officials chasing him down the platform. He had found his make-up case and just manages to hop into the last car.

The first bit of film drama is over, but this is only the beginning!

The train is now on its way. We have no one to handle the accounts and I must take care of them myself. The accounting is more important than the directing. I'm terribly concerned over the money. We are in sleeping cars. As we reach the Austro-Italian border, Vintigmilia says, "Be very careful. We're not to declare the camera. Otherwise, they will charge duty on every lens." "What do you mean?"

Carmelita Geraghty in *The Pleasure Garden*.



"The German company told us to smuggle the camera through," he tells me. When I ask him where the camera is, he tells me it's under my bunk. As you know, I've always been afraid of policemen and I begin to sweat. And now I am also informed that the ten thousand feet of unexposed stock in our baggage is not to be declared either.

The customs men come into our compartment. Big suspense for me. They don't find the camera, but they discover the film. And since we haven't declared it, they confiscate it.

So we land in Genoa the following morning with no film. And we spend the whole day trying to buy some. On Monday morning I decide to send the newsreel man to Milan to buy some raw stock from Kodak. And I'm still busy with the bookkeeping: lire to marks, marks to pounds—it's all terribly confusing. The cameraman returns at noon, bringing with him twenty pounds' worth of film. And now we are advised that the ten thousand feet of unexposed film that had been confiscated at the border has arrived and I must pay the duty. So I've wasted twenty pounds, a very large amount in our small budget! We have barely enough money left for the shooting of the location scenes.

On Tuesday the boat is scheduled to leave the dock at noon. It's the *Lloyd Prestino*, a large ship that is on its way to South America. We have to rent a tugboat to go out of the harbor. That's another ten pounds. Well, everything is finally settled. But at ten-thirty, when I take out my wallet to tip the tugboat man, I find it's empty. There isn't a sou!

Ten thousand lire gone! I run back to the hotel, look under the bed, everywhere. No sign of the money. I go to the police to report that someone must have entered my room while I was asleep. "It's a good thing I didn't wake up, or I might have been stabbed," I think. I'm very miserable, but the work must go on. And in the excitement of directing my very first scene, I forget all about the loss of the money.

But when the shooting's over, I'm very depressed again. I borrow ten pounds from the cameraman and fifteen from the actor. Since this doesn't cover our needs, I write a letter to London requesting an advance on my salary. I also compose another letter to the German

company, in Munich, saying, "I may need a little more money." But I don't dare to mail this request, because they might say, "How do you know you may need more money so early?" So I only mail the letter to London.

Then we go back to the Hotel Bristol, where we're to have lunch before setting out for San Remo. After the meal, I go out in the street. And there is my cameraman, Vintigmilia, with the German girl who is to play the native who throws herself into the sea. With them is the newsreel operator, who has now completed his work and is about to return to Munich. The three of them are standing there, with their heads together, talking very solemnly. I go up to them and say, "Is anything wrong?"

"Yes," they answer. "The girl. She can't go into the water."

I ask, "What do you mean, she can't go into the water?"

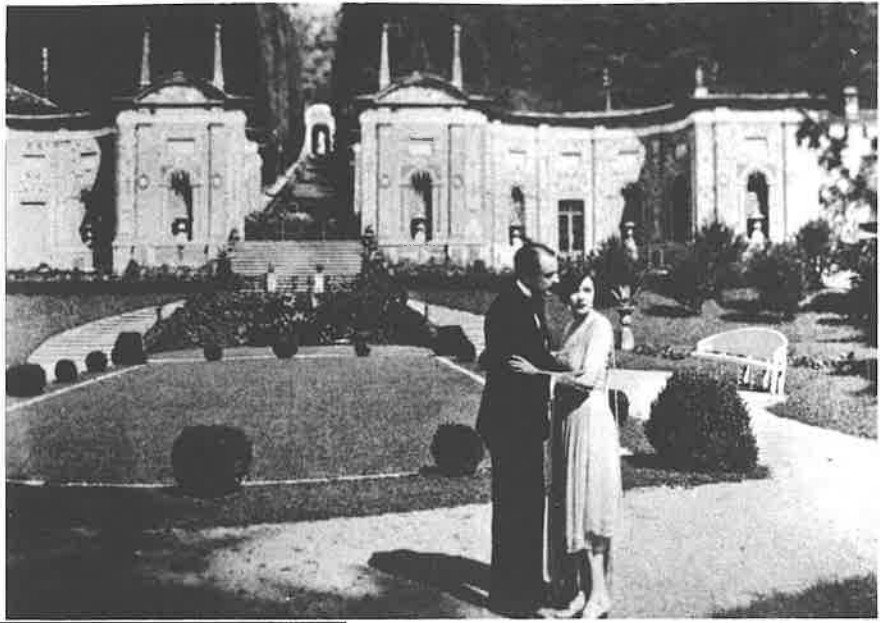
And they insist, saying, "That's right, she can't go into the water. You know . . ."

Bewildered, I reply, "No, what do you mean?"

So then and there, on the sidewalk, with people walking back and forth, the two cameramen tell me all about menstruation. I've never heard of it in my life! They go into great detail, and I listen very carefully to what they have to say. When they're through with their explanation, I'm still cross. All I can think about is the money I've wasted in bringing the girl with us, all those lire and marks. Very irritated, I mutter, "Well, why couldn't she have told us about it in Munich, three days ago?"

Anyway, we ship her back with the cameraman and we proceed to Alassio. We manage to find another girl, but this one was somewhat plumper than her ailing predecessor and my leading man was unable to lift her. At each attempt to haul her out of the water, he lets her drop, to the delight of a hundred onlookers, who are howling with laughter. And just as he finally succeeds in carrying her out, a little old lady, who had been quietly gathering sea shells nearby, saunters right across our scene, staring straight into the camera!

Next, we board the train, on our way to the Villa d'Este. And I'm very nervous because Virginia Valli, the Hollywood star, has just arrived. I can't let her know that this is my first picture.



The first thing I say to my fiancée is, "Have you any money?"

"No!"

"But you had enough," I point out.

"Yes, but she brought another actress, Carmelita Geraghty. I tried to take them to the Hotel Westminster on the Rue de la Paix, but they insisted on the Claridge."

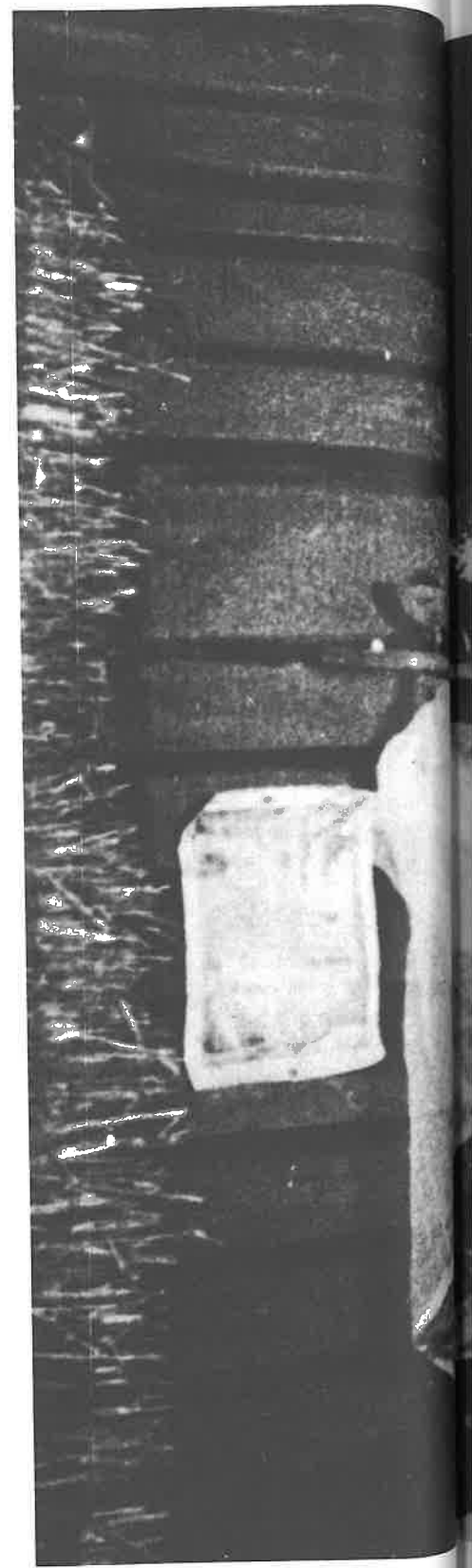
So I tell my fiancée all about my troubles. Eventually, we start the shooting and everything works out all right. In those days, of course, we shot moonlight scenes in the sun and we tinted the film blue. After each shot I'd turn back to my fiancée, asking, "Was it all right?"

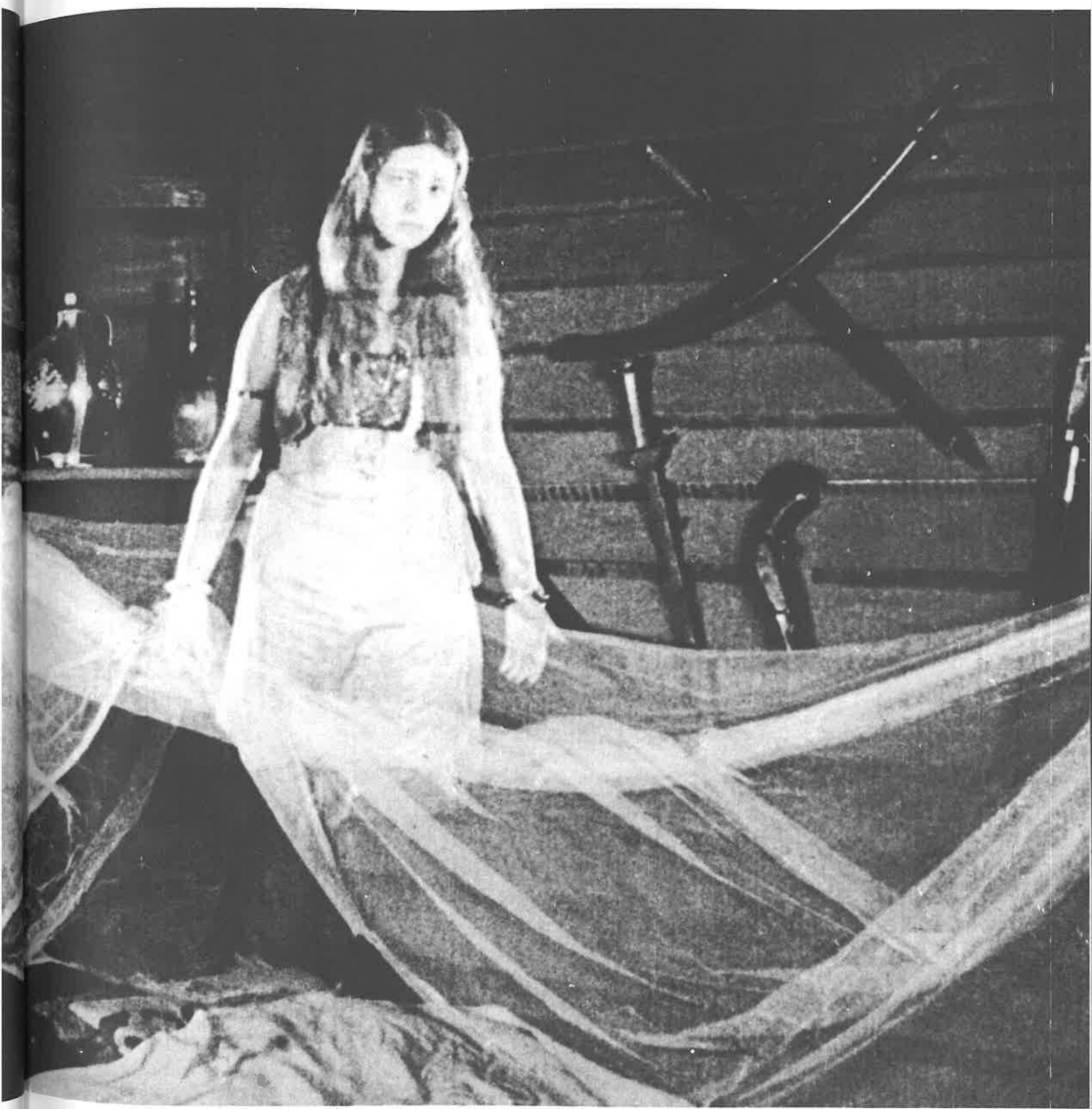
Only now do I work up the courage to send a cable to Munich saying that we need more money. Meanwhile, I have received the advance on my salary from London. The actor, being a very mean fellow, demands his money back. When I ask him why, he tells me that his tailor insists on being paid. Which wasn't true, you know!

And the suspense continues. I get some money from Munich, but am still fretting over the hotel bill, the rental of motorboats, and all sorts of incidentals. On the night before we're to leave for Munich, I'm terribly nervous. You see, not only don't I want the film star to know it's my first picture, but I don't want her to know that we're short of money either—that we're a very impoverished unit. So I do a really mean thing. I manage to twist the facts and put the whole blame on my fiancée, for bringing the extra girl. "Therefore," I say, "you've got to borrow two hundred dollars from the star."

She tells the star some story and returns with the money, enabling me to pay the hotel bill and buy tickets for our sleepers. We are to change trains at Zurich, in Switzerland, to arrive in Munich the following day. At the station they make me pay for excess baggage because the two American girls have trunks this high! By now we've almost run out of money.

I must begin my scheming again—always those damned accounts! And, as you know, I always make my fiancée do all the dirty work. I tell her to go and ask the two Americans whether they want to have dinner. And to our relief they reply that they won't eat the food on these foreign trains; they have brought sandwiches from the







The young man with the mastermind, in full action; behind him, his script-girl and fiancée, Alma Reville.

hotel. This means that the rest of us can afford to have dinner. I go back to my calculations and notice that in transferring lire into Swiss francs there is a loss of a few pennies. The train is late and there is a connection to make in Zurich. At nine P.M. we see a train moving out of the station: it's our train! This means that we will have to spend the night in Zurich. But there's so little money! Just then the train comes to a stop. The suspense is almost more than I can bear. The porters rush up but I wave them away—too expensive—and I start to haul the bags myself. On Swiss trains, as you know, the windows have no frames. The bottom of one of the suitcases hits a window, and there is the loudest noise of falling glass I've ever heard in my life!

A railway official dashes up to us, saying, "Monsieur, this way please."

I'm taken to the office of the stationmaster, where I'm informed that the broken window will cost me thirty-five Swiss francs. So after paying for that I landed in Munich with one pfennig. That was my first location shooting.

F.T. That's quite a story—in fact, it's more exciting than the scenario. But it raises a point I'm curious about. You claim that, at the time, you were ignorant about sexual matters and totally innocent. Yet, in *The Pleasure Garden*, the two girls, Patsy and Jill, really suggest a couple, the one dressed in pajamas, the other wearing a nightgown. In *The Lodger* this same inference is even more explicit, with a little blonde who is shown sitting on the lap of a masculine-looking brunette in a loge. In other words, from your very first pictures on, there is a distinct impression that you were fascinated by the abnormal.

A.H. That may be true, but it didn't go very deep; it was rather superficial. I was quite innocent at the time. The behavior of the two girls in *The Pleasure Garden* was inspired by something that happened when I was assistant director in Berlin in 1924. A highly respectable British family invited me and the director to go out with them. The young girl in the family was the daughter of one of the bosses of UFA. I didn't understand a word of German. After dinner we wound up in a night club where men danced with each other. There were also female

couples. Later on, two German girls, one around nineteen and the other about thirty years old, volunteered to drive us home. The car stopped in front of a hotel and they insisted that we go in. In the hotel room they made several propositions, to which I stolidly replied, "Nein, nein." Then we had several cognacs, and finally the two German girls got into bed. And the young girl in our party, who was a student, put on her glasses to make sure she wouldn't miss anything. It was a *gemütlich* German family soiree.

F.T. I see. At any rate, I take it that the studio work of *The Pleasure Garden* was shot entirely in Germany?

A.H. Yes, in Munich. We showed the finished picture to Michael Balcon, who came over from London to see it.

At the end of the picture there was a scene in which Levett, the heavy, went berserk; he threatened to kill Patsy with a scimitar, and the doctor arrives with a gun. What I did was to have a shot with the gun in the foreground, and we placed the madman and the heroine in the background. The doctor shoots from a distance and the bullet hits the madman. For a moment the shock returns him to sanity. The wild look leaves his face as he turns to the doctor and says in a completely normal manner, "Oh, hello, doctor." Then, noticing that he is bleeding, he says, "Oh," then collapses and dies.

During the showing of this episode, one of the German producers, a very important man, got up and said, "It's impossible. You cannot show a scene like this. It's incredible and it's too brutal." At the end of the screening, Michael Balcon said, "The surprising thing is that technically it doesn't look like a continental picture. It's more like an American film."

Anyway, it got a very good press. The London *Daily Express* ran a headline describing me as the "Young man with a master mind."

F.T. The following year you made your second picture, *The Mountain Eagle*. It was filmed in the studio and on location in the Tyrol.

A.H. It was a very bad movie. The produc-



ers were always trying to break into the American market, so they wanted another film star. And so, for the part of the village schoolmistress, they sent me Nita Naldi, the successor to Theda Bara. She had fingernails out to there. Ridiculous!

F.T. I have the scenario here. The story is

about a store manager who is after an innocent young schoolteacher. She takes refuge in the mountains, under the protection of a recluse, whom she eventually marries. Is that right?

A.H. I'm afraid it is!

These six photos are probably all that remains of *The Mountain Eagle*.