

Truffaut on Hitchcock

The definitive study of Alfred Hitchcock by François Truffaut
Revised Edition

audience's undivided attention for a continuous dialogue. I suspect that here again the real achievement is that something very difficult has been carried out in a way that makes it seem quite easy.

And speaking of facility, I'm aware that it's easier to reply to criticism than to praise, but just the same, I would appreciate your comments.

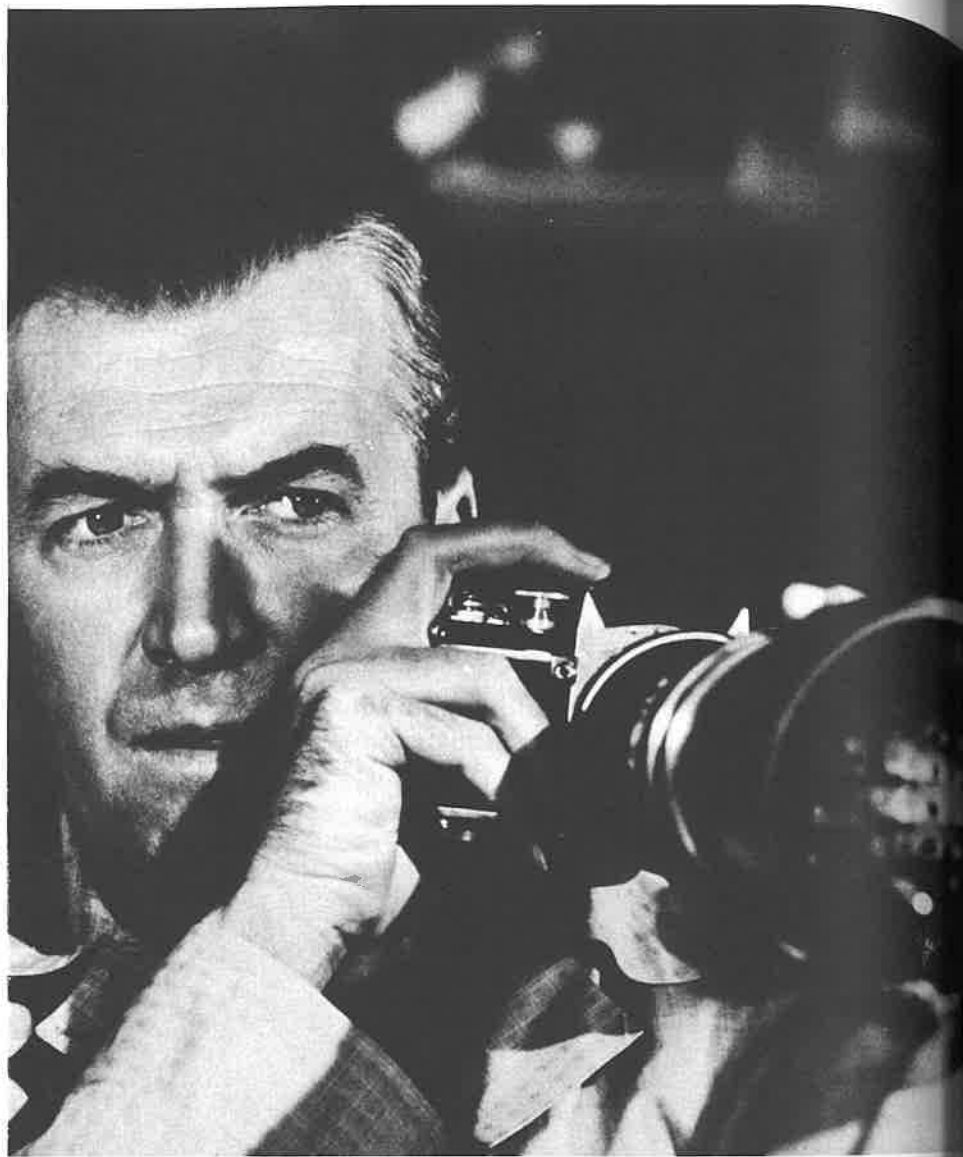
A.H. I just did my job, using cinematic means to narrate a story taken from a stage play. All of the action in *Dial M for Murder* takes place in a living room, but that doesn't matter. I could just as well have shot the whole film in a telephone booth. Let's imagine there's a couple in that booth. Their hands are touching, their lips meet, and accidentally one of them leans against the receiver, knocking it off the hook. Now, while they're unaware of it, the phone operator can listen in on their intimate conversation. The drama has taken a step forward. For

the audience, looking at the images, it should be the same as reading the opening paragraphs of a novel or hearing the expositional dialogue of the stage play. You might say that a filmmaker can use a telephone booth pretty much in the same way a novelist uses a blank piece of paper.

F.T. My two favorite Hitchcock pictures are *Notorious* and the one we are going to talk about now, *Rear Window*. I know it's based on a Cornell Woolrich short story, but I've never read it.

A.H. It dealt with an invalid who was confined to his room. I think there was a man to look after him, but who wasn't there all the time. The story described all the things the invalid saw from his window and showed how his





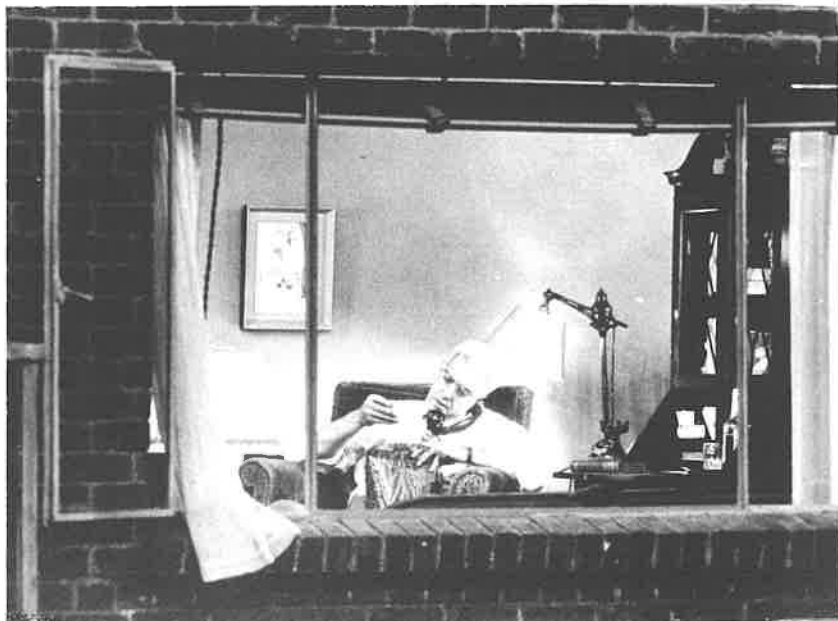
life came to be threatened. If I remember it correctly, it climaxes with the killer taking a shot at the man from the other side of the yard, but the invalid manages to grab a bust of Beethoven and hold it up in front of the window so that Beethoven gets the bullet!

F.T. I imagine that the story appealed to you primarily because it represented a technical challenge: a whole film from the viewpoint of one man, and embodied in a single, large set.*

* A news photographer (James Stewart), confined to a wheelchair by a broken leg, gazes idly at the behavior of the neighbors across the courtyard of his Greenwich Village apartment. His observations lead him to suspect that one of the neighbors (Raymond Burr) has murdered his wife, but he is unable to convince his fiancée (Grace Kelly) and his detective friend (Wendell Corey)

A.H. Absolutely. It was a possibility of doing a purely cinematic film. You have an immobilized man looking out. That's one part of the film. The second part shows what he sees and the third part shows how he reacts. This is actually the purest expression of a cinematic idea. Pudovkin dealt with this, as you know. In one of his books on the art of montage, he describes an experiment by his teacher, Kuleshov. You see a close-up of the Russian actor Ivan Mosjoukine. This is immediately followed by a shot of a dead baby. Back to Mosjoukine again and you

that he is right. Eventually, when Stewart's fiancée discovers incriminating evidence confirming his suspicions, the killer discovers he is being watched and tries to kill the photographer. The snooper is saved in the nick of time, though his second leg is broken in the course of the rescue operation.



read compassion on his face. Then you take away the dead baby and you show a plate of soup, and now, when you go back to Mosjoukine, he looks hungry. Yet, in both cases, they used the same shot of the actor; his face was exactly the same.

In the same way, let's take a close-up of Stewart looking out of the window at a little dog that's being lowered in a basket. Back to Stewart, who has a kindly smile. But if in the place of the little dog you show a half-naked girl exercising in front of her open window, and you go back to a smiling Stewart again, this time he's seen as a dirty old man!

F.T. Would you say that. Stewart was merely curious?

A.H. He's a real Peeping Tom. In fact, Miss Lejeune, the critic of the *London Observer*, complained about that. She made some comment to the effect that *Rear Window* was a horrible film because the hero spent all of his time peeping out of the window. What's so horrible about that? Sure, he's a snooper, but aren't we all?

F.T. We're all voyeurs to some extent, if only when we see an intimate film. And James Stewart is exactly in the position of a spectator looking at a movie.

A.H. I'll bet you that nine out of ten people, if they see a woman across the courtyard undressing for bed, or even a man pattering around in his room, will stay and look; no one turns away and says, "It's none of my business." They could pull down their blinds, but they never do; they stand there and look out.

F.T. My guess is that at the outset your interest in the picture was purely technical, but in working on the script, you began to attach more importance to the story itself. Intentionally or not, that back yard conveys an image of the world.

A.H. It shows every kind of human behavior—a real index of individual behavior. The picture would have been very dull if we hadn't

done that. What you see across the way is a group of little stories that, as you say, mirror a small universe.

F.T. All of the stories have a common denominator in that they involve some aspect of love. James Stewart's problem is that he doesn't want to marry Grace Kelly. Everything he sees across the way has a bearing on love and marriage. There is the lonely woman with no husband or lover, the newlyweds who make love all day long, the bachelor musician who drinks, the little dancer whom all the men are after, the childless couple who dote on their little dog, and, of course, the married couple who are always at each other's throat, until the wife's mysterious disappearance.

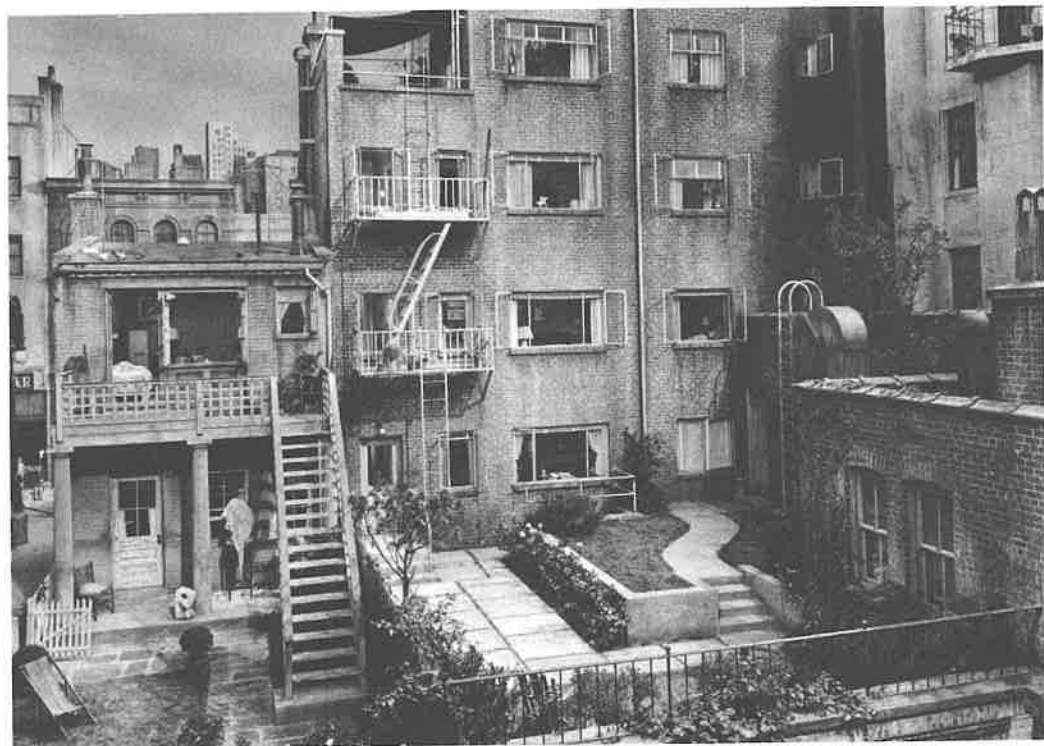
A.H. The symmetry is the same as in *Shadow of a Doubt*. On one side of the yard you have the Stewart-Kelly couple, with him immobilized by his leg in a cast, while she can move about freely. And on the other side there is a sick woman who's confined to her bed, while the husband comes and goes.

One of the things I was unhappy about in *Rear Window* was the music. Do you know Franz Waxman?

F.T. Didn't he do the musical score for several Humphrey Bogart movies?

A.H. Yes, and he also did the score for *Rebecca*. You remember that one of the characters in the yard was a musician. Well, I wanted to show how a popular song is composed by gradually developing it throughout the film until, in the final scene, it is played on a recording with a full orchestral accompaniment. Well, it didn't work out the way I wanted it to, and I was quite disappointed.

F.T. Well, that notion is conveyed in the final part of the picture when the old maid, who's about to commit suicide, changes her mind after hearing the musician play the completed song. And isn't it at the same moment, as he's listening to the music, that James Stewart realizes that he's in love with Grace Kelly? Another potent scene is the one in which the childless couple learn that their little dog has



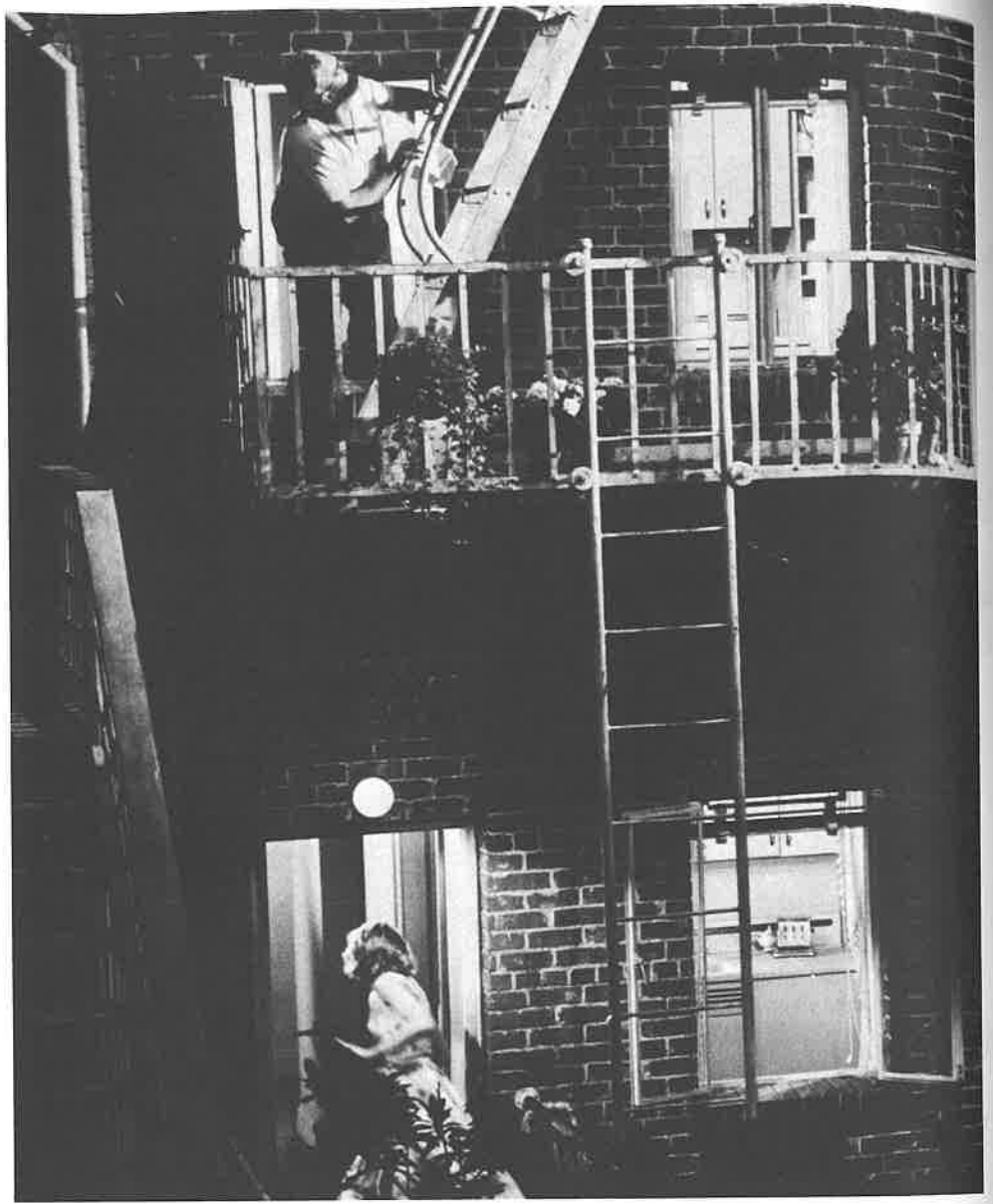
been killed. The thing that's so good about it is that their reaction is deliberately disproportionate. There's a great hue and cry . . . it's handled as if the death of a child were involved.

A.H. Of course, that little dog was their only child. At the end of the scene you notice that everyone's at his window looking down into the yard except for the suspected killer, who's smoking in the dark.

F.T. This, incidentally, is the only moment at which the film changes its point of view. By simply taking the camera outside of Stewart's apartment, the whole scene becomes entirely objective.

A.H. That's right, that was the only such scene.

F.T. Isn't this another illustration of one of

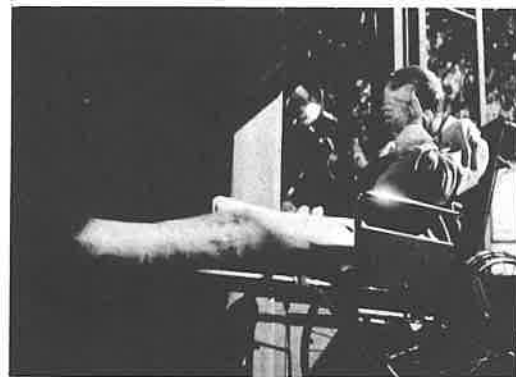


your working rules, which consists of not giving an over-all view of the setting until a scene reaches its dramatic peak? For instance, in *The Paradine Case* fifty minutes of action inside the courtroom are climaxed when a humiliated Gregory Peck walks out on the case. Only then, with the camera showing his departure from a distance, do you give a full view of the courtroom. And again, in *Rear Window* the first time you show the whole courtyard is when the woman begins to scream over the death of her dog and the neighbors all rush to their windows to see what's happening.

A.H. Absolutely. The size of the image is used for dramatic purposes, and not merely to establish the background.

Just the other day I was doing a television show and there was a scene in which a man came into a police station to give himself up. I had a close shot of the man coming in, the door closing behind him, and the man walking up to the desk; I didn't show the whole set. They asked me, "Aren't you going to show the whole thing so that people know we're in a police station?" I said, "Why bother? The sergeant has three stripes on his arm right next to the camera, and that's enough to get that idea across. Why should we waste a long shot that may be useful at a dramatic moment?"

F.T. That concept of waste, of saving the image for future use, is an interesting one. Something else: At the end of *Rear Window*,



when the killer comes into Stewart's room, he says to him, "What do you want of me?" And Stewart doesn't answer because, in fact, his actions are unjustified; they're motivated by sheer curiosity.

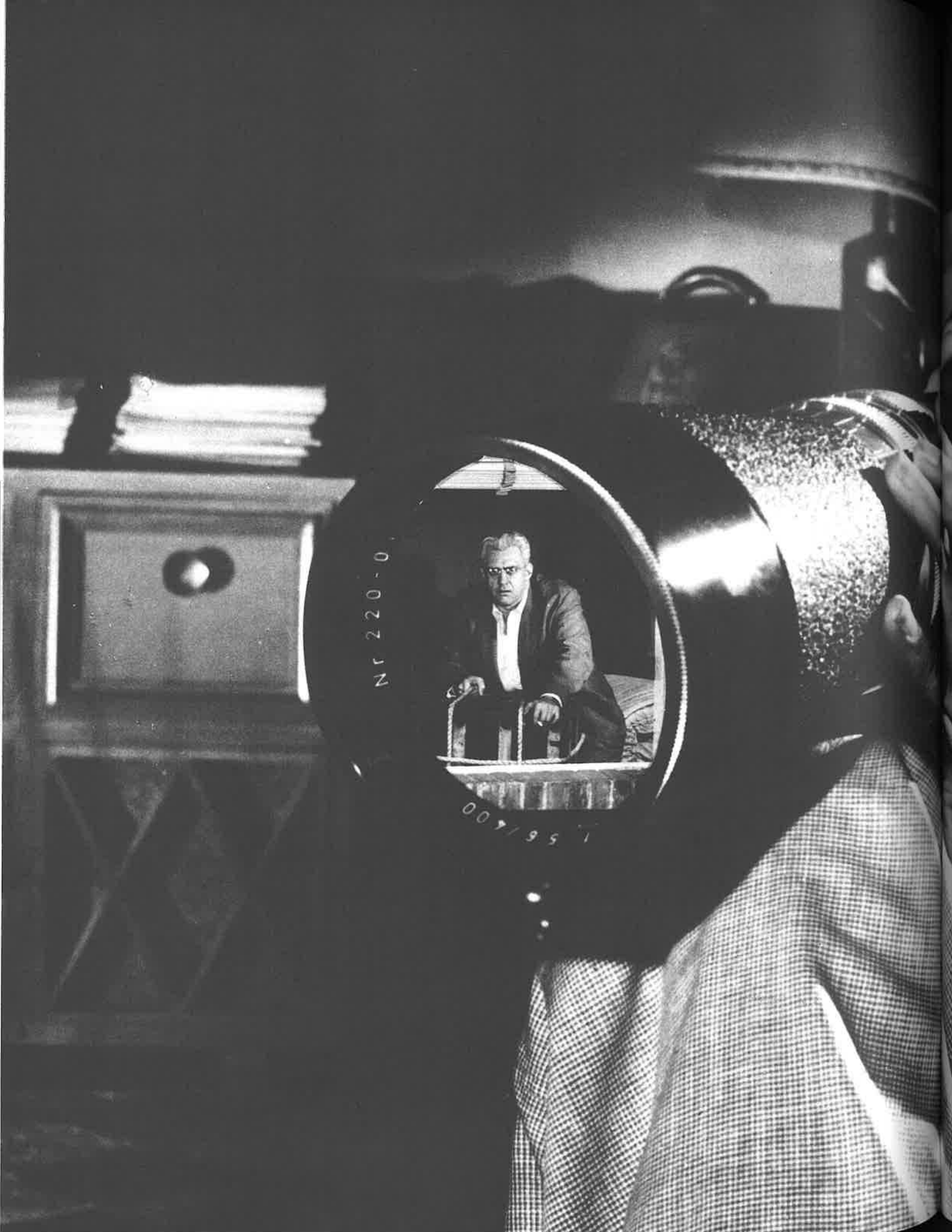
A.H. That's right, and he deserves what's happening to him!

F.T. Still, he will defend himself by blinding the killer with his flashbulbs.

A.H. Those flashes take us back to the mechanics of *The Secret Agent*. You remember, in Switzerland they have the Alps, lakes, and chocolate. Now, here we have a photographer who uses his camera equipment to pry into the back yard, and when he defends himself, he also

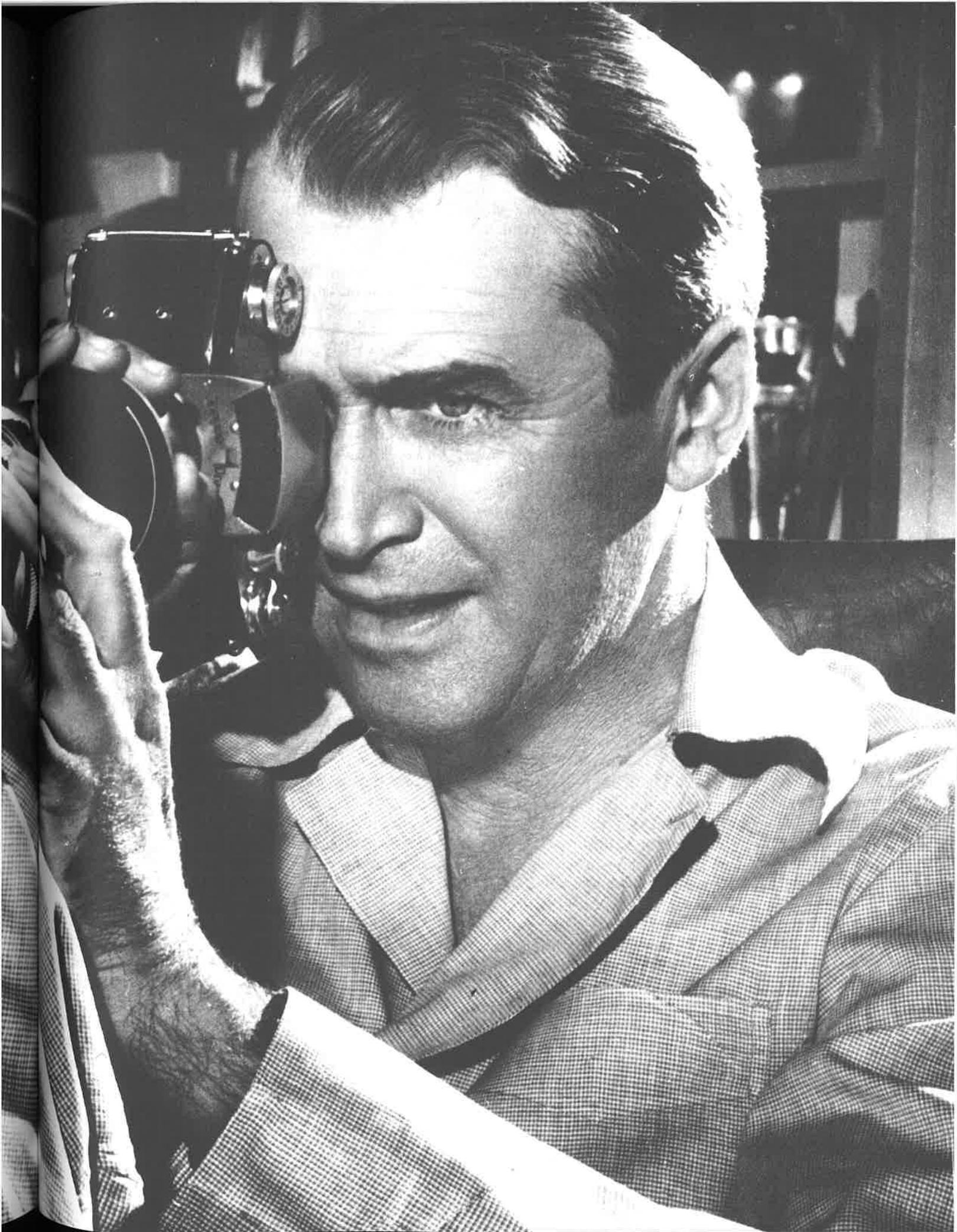
uses his professional equipment, the flashbulbs. I make it a rule to exploit elements that are connected with a character or a location; I would feel that I'd been remiss if I hadn't made maximum use of those elements.

F.T. In this respect the exposition of the film is truly remarkable. You open up with the perspiring face of James Stewart; you move on to his leg in a cast, and then, on a nearby table, there is the broken camera, a stack of magazines, and, on the wall, there are pictures of racing cars as they topple over on the track. Through that single opening camera movement we have learned where we are, who the principal character is, all about his work, and even how it caused his accident.



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A.H. That's simply using cinematic means to relate a story. It's a great deal more interesting than if we had someone asking Stewart, "How did you happen to break your leg?" and Stewart answering, "As I was taking a picture of a motorcar race, a wheel fell off one of the speeding cars and smashed into me." That would be the average scene. To me, one of the cardinal sins for a script-writer, when he runs into some difficulty, is to say, "We can cover that by a line of dialogue." Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms.

F.T. Something else I've noticed is the way you dispense with the build-up to a love scene. Here, James Stewart is alone at home, and all of a sudden the face of Grace Kelly comes into the frame and they are kissing each other. Why do you do it that way?

A.H. Because I want to get right to the important point without wasting any time. Here it's the surprise kiss. In another case there might be a suspense kiss, and that would be completely different.

F.T. Both in *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief* the kiss is a process shot. Not the kiss itself, but the approach to the faces is jerky, as if you had double-printed that frame in the cutting room.

A.H. Not at all. These are pulsations that I get by shaking the camera by hand or dollying backward and forward, or sometimes by doing both. One scene I meant to shoot for *The Birds*, but didn't, was a love scene in which the two heads would have started apart, to gradually come together. I was going to try to get a very quick pan from one face to the other by whipping the camera. I would have whipped from one head to the other, and as the two faces got closer to each other, the whipping would decrease until it became a slight vibration. I must try it sometime!

F.T. To my mind, *Rear Window* is probably your very best screenplay in all respects: the

construction, the unity of inspiration, the wealth of details.

A.H. I was feeling very creative at the time, the batteries were well charged. John Michael Hayes is a radio writer and he wrote the dialogue. The killing presented something of a problem, so I used two news stories from the British press. One was the Patrick Mahon case and the other was the case of Dr. Crippen. In the Mahon case the man killed a girl in a bungalow on the seafront of southern England. He cut up the body and threw it, piece by piece, out of a train window. But he didn't know what to do with the head, and that's where I got the idea of having them look for the victim's head in *Rear Window*. What Patrick Mahon did was to put the head in the fireplace and light the fire. Then something happened that may sound phony but is absolutely true. Like in a stage play, just as he put the head in the fire, a thunderstorm came on, with lightning and thunder. Somehow, the heat of the fire made the eyes open wide, as if they were staring at Mahon. He ran out to the beach screaming, with the storm pouring down on him, and didn't get back until several hours later. By that time the fire had burned the head.

Several years later one of the four chief inspectors of Scotland Yard came to see me. He had handled the investigation after Mahon's arrest, and he told me they'd had a problem in getting hold of that head; they only found traces of it, but not the head itself. He knew the head had been burned, but he needed to have some indication of the time at which it was put in the fire and how long it had taken to burn. So he went down to the butcher shop, bought a sheep's head and burned it in the same fireplace.

In all cases involving mutilation, you see, the biggest problem for the police is to locate the head.

Now, Dr. Crippen lived in London. He murdered his wife and cut her up. When people noticed his wife had disappeared, he gave the customary explanation: "She's gone to California." But Crippen made a crucial blunder that turned out to be his undoing. He allowed his secretary to wear some of his wife's jewelry, and this started the neighbors talking. Scotland Yard