

FANS—

“A Chronic Disease”

FANS, like the events in Ronald Frankau's song, are “extraordinary, wonderful, fascinating, queer,” writes Gale Pedrick in the “Radio Times” (London). They range from the young man who pastes pictures of his favourite film stars on the inside of a baby saloon-car to the generous unknown who once sent Sir Seymour Hicks a gold cigarette-case with a great wad of pound notes inside it, and the woman who had the autograph of a Hollywood idol stencilled on the brass plate of her coffin. Between these extremes, fan-worship flourishes in a bewildering variety of forms.

The mildest is the urge to write letters to stars of the radio, the stage and the screen. Consider the phenomenon of “fan-mail” which, especially in the United States of America, has become the standard for judging the popularity of artists. From being merely a symptom of the modern outlook on entertainment fan-mail has assumed the proportions of a chronic disease. Fans—Murray's Dictionary informs us that the word is a “jocular abbreviation of ‘fanatic’”: it was certainly used in connection with baseball as far back as 1889—write thousands of letters every day to the objects of their admiration. Radio itself has provided a vast new field for the fan. Not only radio's “ready-made” stars, but members of the B.B.C. staff—announcers in particular—have their daily post-bag.

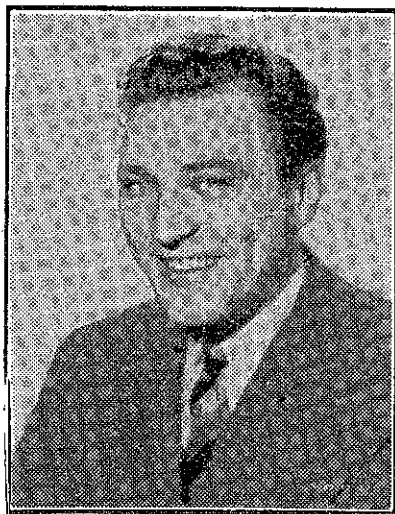
Fan-worship is not a twentieth-century manifestation. Doubtless, the victorious gladiator had his idolaters, no less than Arsenal's centre-forward. But in these days, when entertainment has become a powerful influence upon the lives and habits of the masses, fan-worship has got out of hand. I know a case—and this was in England, remember—of a sick girl being brought to an actor so that he might take her hand and touch her, as it were, for the King's Evil.

I have seen scores of women fighting, kicking, and scratching their way to the stage-door of a music-hall. They tore the door from its hinges: and then the firemen turned on the hoses. All those women wanted was a glimpse of a young Mexican film star. When Rudolph Valentino, who was a dancer and had been a landscape-gardener, came to London, women tore off their jewellery and threw it at his feet.

A great deal of fan-worship is perfectly natural—and not at all unhealthy. It was real affection that inspired five hundred students to draw Edna May's carriage through the streets of London when she was playing in “The Belle of New York”.

FOR years we laughed good-humouredly at the men who used to hang round stage-doors with bouquets and chocolates. “Stage-door Johnnies” we called them. They were by way of being a national joke. We teased our sisters when they kissed a photograph of Owen Nares good-night. But that was only human.

The stage-door Johnnie is dead. His successor has made a cult of fan-worship, and into it has crept a note that is often unpleasant and violent. Irving, of course, had his fans. So had Macready and Mrs. Siddons. But there was a note of reverence and awe in their admiration of these masters. They were beings apart; one could not rub shoulders with them or clamour for autographs and souvenirs.



THE DIMPLED, SMILING DANE, Carl Brisson (above) had a real matinee-idol following. Sir Seymour Hicks (left) once received a most unusual present from a “fan.”

Lewis Waller was the first actor in this country to inspire organised fan-worship. His admirers got together, appointed a secretary and founded a club. They called it the Keen Order of Wallerites. There had been nothing like it before. I have met a number of middle-aged ladies who were fervent members of the “K.O.W.'s,” as they were called.

The club chose a badge. On one side was a device depicting Waller's favourite flower: on the other a picture of Waller, in powdered wig, as Monsieur Beaucaire. The entire membership turned up in force at Waller first-nights, wearing mauve and violet favours. They stood guard at the stage door afterwards. Hardly a performance was given without representatives of the “K.O.W.'s” being on duty in the theatre. Patrols, they were called.

Waller loathed the whole business, avoided the stage door as much as he could, and always tried to slip away unrecognised. Part of this was natural modesty: but Waller also realised that half the actor's magic lies in maintaining the illusion.

Waller, out of costume, was rather short, did not dress remarkably well—and knew his limitations. He preferred, and with great commonsense, to be the Lewis Waller of the footlights, remote and romantic.

THE Keen Order of Wallerites was the beginning of it all. Gradually, the fan demanded (and was given) more licence. Tree—a jolly, companionable man—was quite approachable. The theatrical garden parties brought the play-going public into closer touch with the green room. The old barrier was broken down. Actors no longer “kept themselves to themselves.”

Then came the picture-postcard era. Millions—and this is no over-statement—were sold every year. Phyllis and Zena Dare were each photographed in a hundred different poses and costumes. Portraits of Marie Studholme and Gabrielle Ray adorned every other mantelpiece in the kingdom. “The Merry Widow” made history, and Lily, Elsie and Joe Coyne were always three weeks behind in answering their enormous fan-mail. Queues waited hours to see Owen Nares—the last of the matinee idols.

At one Theatrical Garden Party, a shilling was charged just to see Gaby Deslys. They took £700 in shillings. When Gladys Cooper appeared in a new play at the Playhouse Theatre, Craven Street was blocked for hours. Can anybody who was there

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