

THOSE WERE THE DAYS!

When Villains Were Villains And Heroes Were Virtuous

Written for the "Record"

by "SARI"

"**A**H-HA, my proud beauty, soon the time will come when I shall break your spirit and crush your lily-white form in my arms..."
"Oh, spare me, sir, a fate worse than death, for my dear, departed mother's sake..."

Characters on the screen have never been heard talking like that, except in fun, but there was a time when they looked as if they might be doing it. Those were the silent days, when the movie villain really was a villain. You just knew by his clothes and moustache and the look in his eyes that evil was afoot, and wrong was about to be done.

The young men and women of to-day would laugh heartily, and rightly so, at the crude efforts of those early times; but it is doubtful if they thrill as much now to the glamour of Joan Crawford or the charm of Gary Cooper as their fathers and mothers did to the seductiveness of Theda Bara, the villainy of Stuart Holmes, or the heroics of Maurice Costello. Very likely they thrill a good deal less; for the picture-goers of to-day are blase compared with those of two decades ago, whose enthusiasm over melodramas that would now be regarded as insults to the intelligence was somehow delightfully simple and childlike. That, at least, is how it appears to us from our superior position in Time; though if the film industry progresses with anything like the same rapidity in the next 25 years as it has in the past, we shall probably be regarded with similar good-natured condescension by the film fans of 1963.

PERVERSELY enough, the old-time screen villains often seemed much more appealing than the leading men, for several reasons.

For instance, they usually were dark; they usually were tall; and they wore their clothes well. They were interesting, too; they had the air of having been places and done things.

Like Little Eric

THE heroes, on the other hand, were too often sadly blonde, with too, too much of a goodly atmosphere about them. They were rather like adult editions of Little Eric before that incredible creature, going rapidly to the devil, so far forgot himself to say "Bother" ("to such depths had the wretched child descended!"), and having caught his foot in a septic rabbit-trap, expired horribly.

Like the husband in "East Lynne," who was such a mullothead and so noble and pure that he was sickening, the antique screen hero did not seem to understand the deeper, seamier, more alluring side of life.



COULD you blame Alma Rubens if she gave her husband the air for Lou Tellegen? Remember Tellegen as the villain? How he eyed the tempting bit of baggage he was about to ensnare, and—with great subtlety on the part of the director—proceeded to polish a red apple and take a huge bite out of it with a wicked air? You just knew what he was up to, and delicious thrills and chills chased up and down your spine. Conrad Nagel was dull fare indeed with his righteousness as the husband, after Tellegen made a few passes at that apple.

Good-Bad Man

DEFINITELY, however, the villain was an evil character in earlier films. He was the man you loved to hate. The thicker he laid it on, the better you liked it.

And then Bill Hart came along.

William S. Hart deserves a paragraph all to himself, because to him the movie industry owes the idea of a "good-bad" man, a character who has a good many human faults but who atones for them all in the last reel—when he generally laid down his life for the heroine, or else slipped quietly out the back way, with his face working with suppressed emotion, while the heroine slipped into the arms of the other, nobler fellow. Heroes were models of perfect purity, and villains were whiskeys and rotten to the core for a long

time after Bill Hart's first appearances, but his characterisations proved popular—and producers took the hint.

To-day, the old-time villain's place has been usurped by the modern hero-villain. Edward G. Robinson, Wallace Beery and George Raft are typical of the players who are in direct line of descent from Bill Hart. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, because of their appearance and personalities, they are usually cast in character leads.

For the modern girl is not dumb enough to accept the sugar-coated hero of the early film era. She wants something with more flavour. What does she get? The hero, with all the charm and interest of the villain added. It makes the story not quite so easy to predict, and it is much nearer to real life.

SOME memorable old-time villains who come to mind include Ralph Lewis, leader of the carpetbaggers in "The Birth of a Nation"; (Continued on page 39)...



"... Pursued through many a murky reel."