

Headaches of a Movie Censor

By **STANLEY FRANK**

"THIS one just came in and I don't know a thing about it," Mrs. Helen Tingley said. "I have a feeling it's an awful turkey. You learn to expect the worst on this job."

Mrs. Tingley settled into a swivel chair behind an executive-type desk and went to work. She watched a movie. It is a chore she performs on the average of eight times a day as a member of the Maryland State Board of Motion Picture Censors. Last year, Maryland reviewed 2004 original films—features, shorts, newsreels and cartoons—and Mrs. Tingley missed only eighty, while she was on vacation. She has endured the ordeal for four years with remarkable fortitude and good humor. The movie industry, which has been fighting reformers and restrictions since 1896, regards Mrs. Tingley, a former high-school teacher and delegate to the Maryland legislature, as the most liberal of the twenty-six censors now functioning in the seven states which have censorship.

The first picture on the schedule for April first—an appropriate day, as Mrs. Tingley remarked, for checking your brains at the movies—was *Honeymoon*, starring Shirley Temple and Franchot Tone. The opening scene showed Miss Temple in the Mexico City railway station beetling her pretty brows in bewilderment at the quaint characters who persisted in speaking Spanish.

"Oh-oh," Mrs. Tingley muttered. "Hands across the border again. I wonder what the Mexicans will make of the silly Americans after this dose of the good-neighbor policy."

As Temple pouted and batted her big blue eyes at Tone, who looked coy and confused, Mrs. Tingley counterpunched the insults to her intelligence from the screen with a running commentary of caustic cracks. She listened attentively, however, when Mr. Tone, portraying a vice-consul in the American Embassy, was given a small box containing the cremated remains of a countryman. Mr. Tone handled the box and the dialogue with a light, ghoulish touch.

"The scene is in bad taste and will offend some people," Mrs. Tingley said, "but we can't object, because it's played for laughs. It will get them too. There always are morons in the audience who feel superior because they're not dead themselves."

She stirred restlessly with the approaching climax, which had been telegraphed in the second reel. The plot turned, or creaked, on the startling premise that true love came to Miss Temple only when she was knocked unconscious in a swimming pool by an ardent young man with a careless sense of direction off the diving board. Mrs. Tingley winced when Miss Temple hit the bottom of the pool for the third time en route to the altar. The lights went up in the board's private projection room in downtown Baltimore. Mrs. Tingley and her associate, Miss Agnes Noon, shook their heads lugubriously.

"Under the law," Mrs. Tingley said, "we can reject pictures that are sacrilegious, obscene, indecent, immoral or inhuman. Too bad we can't bar this little gem for inhumanity . . . to the audience."

The lights were dimmed and, after a newsreel, came a Western in which the Durango Kid again headed off a passel of no-goods at Eagle Pass. There was a short recess for lunch, and then Mrs. Tingley reviewed *I Live as I Please*, an Italian film. She followed the dialogue with an English translation of the script, required by law, and checked for *doubles-entendres* with two Italian-speaking priests, two merchants and a law student who had been invited to the showing. Nothing objectionable was found in the picture except a tired boy-girl plot garnished with Italian corn, which is no more palatable than the domestic variety. One more feature-

length picture still had to be seen, an all-Negro production, *Going to Glory*, in which sin lost in a photo finish to good clean living.

Mrs. Tingley, a brisk, attractive woman, didn't look her age—call it fifty—in the morning, but by five o'clock she was somewhat peaked and distraught. She quickly protested that it had been an easy day compared to the usual week-end rush, when local theaters submit new programs for the Saturday and Sunday trade. On the previous Friday, March twenty-eighth, the board received seventy-three reels, which had to be cleared through its one projection room within twenty-four hours. There are easier ways of earning \$2400 a year.

"I'd like to scream after a whole day of B pictures," Mrs. Tingley confessed, "and I frequently do. Since taking this job I've become nearsighted and I get raging headaches, but I'm crazy about it. I've never done anything that's more fun. Maybe this proves I'm cracking up, but if the governor didn't reappoint me, I'd pay the state to let me stay on as a censor."

There are many degrees of rabid movie nuts—and then there is Mrs. Tingley, the undisputed champ. At least twice a week, after a full day of official reviewing, she goes to the movies on her own time with her husband, Thomas J. Tingley, who represents the city of Baltimore in adjustments of public-utility rates. Both like the same pictures, but Mrs. Tingley admits her busman's holidays are not entirely a labor of love.

"It's necessary to see movies where they are meant to be shown—in theaters, where public opinion can be gauged. After all, the public decides what is offensive and acceptable. I think anyone who sees a great many pictures is apt to have a more tolerant attitude toward morals than the occasional moviegoer. This has nothing to do with personal standards or private prejudices. It's simply a case of sitting through so many stinkers that when a picture comes along with a fresh idea expressed imaginatively, you're so grateful that you have a tendency to pass a questionable scene just because it's done

This is what life is like for Helen Tingley, watchdog of Maryland's movie morals. She sees eight pictures daily, bans the sordid and the super-sexy, moans like the rest of us at Hollywood's endless banalities.

well. If there is tittering and giggling in a theater, I know a slip has been made. Sure, it's happened loads of times."

Like the morose symphony violinist who didn't care for music, Mrs. Tingley is disturbed by one aspect of her job. She is opposed in principle to all censorship and she despises professional bigots who sponsor it to undermine personal liberties. This might be shrugged off as a hypocritical speech. But Mrs. Tingley submitted voluntarily a poem written by her husband, an enthusiastic versifier, when she voted to ban *The Outlaw* for undue exposure—among other things—of Miss Jane Russell's interesting balcony.

ODE TO FILM CENSORS

*I'm so wholly blasé that I flout law,
And order is not in my ken.
I visit such films as The Outlaw
To prove I'm a man among men.
Don't argue that children or others
Should be sheltered from such tripe and souse;
To hell with my jittering brothers,
Don't feed me on Mickey, the Mouse.
Why, Felix, the Cat, is a sinner,
I haven't a doubt about that,
If one could examine the inner,
Or absolute Felix, the Cat.
Then ho, for the wide-open pictures,
Uncensored, unhampered, uncut,
Where the audience lingers like fixtures
On its almost-anesthetized butt.
And away with all silly restrictions,
And honor the showman enough,
So that he will not suffer eviction
Because people won't look at his stuff.*

"I'd subscribe to that if there weren't irresponsible commercialists who fail to observe the

The ardent John Gilbert and the lovely Greta Garbo in a famous and sensational scene from *Flesh and the Devil*. Love sequences have been cooled down since then, and kisses are much shorter.



CULVER



Mrs. Tingley watches another, prepared to cut anything indecent, immoral, sacrilegious or inhuman. It's the corn that gets her—"old guys and dames acting cute, tough males throwing their sex around."

This scene from *Two Alone* would not get out of Hollywood today. The fatal fault is that bed, for under the Johnston Office purity code, the double bed, although popular, may not be photographed.



amenities," Mrs. Tingley asserts. "I like to justify my position by thinking it serves the same purpose as the cop on the corner. He and I patrol our beats to prevent offenses against society.

"Hollywood is always bleating that it's persecuted by bluenoses who want to stifle freedom of expression. If the producers listened to the criticism of thoughtful people, maybe they wouldn't be under the constant threat of censorship. This business of knocking out cheap, sordid pictures that make crime and sex attractive, then tagging on a sappy, happy moral in the last hundred feet to conform to the code, is a trick that doesn't fool anyone. Although I dislike the sound of the phrase, I think there ought to be a ceiling on sin—that is, a limitation on the quantity of it presented. One gangster picture doesn't cause a crime wave, but the repetitive effect is bad when they come in cycles, as they always do. Movie executives give you a lot of loose talk about their self-regulation controls, but they apply only to incidents, not the type of pictures made."

Despite the furor raised recently by such films as *Duel in the Sun*, *Scarlet Street* and *Wicked Lady*, unofficial guardians of the republic's manners, morals and mores have been far rougher on the movies than legally appointed censors. Seven states—Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Maryland, Kansas and Massachusetts—the latter only for Sunday programs—require seals of approval before pictures can be exhibited commercially. Approximately fifty large cities in other states have set up reviewing agencies, but most operate sporadically, and only when a picture has aroused controversy elsewhere. Considering the mass of material submitted, censorship boards are slow on the scissors.

Maryland, in 1946, for example, banned just one picture, *Parole From the Big House*, a seamy quickie made in 1936. The board saw 5,457,010 feet of original film and eliminated ninety-eight scenes from pictures which were otherwise approved. In the first quarter of this year the Maryland censors made muscles and threw out thirty-two pictures, but thirty were strip-tease shorts bootlegged into a Baltimore penny arcade. Two features were banned, *The Outlaw* and the French version of *Carmen*.

There is no question that the movies today are more circumspect than they were a generation ago. Modern producers and distributors would run into serious trouble if they attempted to duplicate Theda Bara's open-air costumes, John Gilbert's breath-taxing kisses, Clara Bow's hip swinging and Cecil B. de Mille's elaborate bathroom scenes which titillated customers in

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Joan Bennett's role in *Scarlet Street* raised a hubbub. She was cast as an unblushing tramp.



HEADACHES OF A MOVIE CENSOR

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the 1920's. Skirts are longer and necklines are higher on the screen than current fashion decrees. If courtships were conducted in real life on the austere platonic heights of Hollywood, the institution of marriage probably would be as moribund as free lunch with nickel beer. In *Easy Street*, made with Charlie Chaplin more than thirty years ago, a close-up showed a dope addict using a hypodermic needle. Last December the Johnston (formerly Hays) Office was thrown into a dreadful tizzy when Monogram Pictures acquired rights to *Cocaine*, an independently produced opus. A directive was issued, sternly warning the studios not to dwell with loving care on the illegal drug traffic or facets of same.

The movie industry likes to believe it has done such an effective job of reforming itself that no censorship act has been enforced since 1922. This would be a good story if it were true. The threat of Federal control of movies has been stayed only by the traditional aversion of the American people to censorship and by the violent opposition of the press to infringements on free expression in any medium. The people and the press have carried the ball for the movies, which were sent to

the side lines with a bad attack of the fumbles early in the game.

Spokesmen for Hollywood point to the well-advertised Production Code Administration as proof that the movies are in there pitching to elevate the public's artistic and moral standards. The P. C. A., which supervises the products of most major studios from the inception of story ideas to final cutting, lays down rules governing screen treatment of crime, sex, religion and antisocial malfeasances. As we shall see in a moment, the P. C. A. was a hollow flop until box-office receipts went into a tail spin. Between 65,000,000 and 85,000,000 admissions are paid into 16,475 theaters in the United States every week. When the barometer of public opinion falls to sixty-five, a chill wind sweeps through Hollywood.

Critics of the cinema maintain that self-regulation is a fancy synonym for precensorship that has made the movies inane and infantile. They charge that the movies, always pandering to the lowest element in the mass audience, have failed utterly to fulfill their vast cultural and educational potentialities. Robert Boothby, Member of Parliament, recently declared, "Anyone who suggests that American films portray the American way of living is an enemy of the United States." Quick as a flash movie people retort that the public everyone worries about consistently gives the back of its neck to "good" artistic pictures. Bet-

ter movies, they say, are like better government—the public is the ultimate authority for what it wants. This leaves both sides breathing heavily and groping for a snappy comeback.

These wrangles have been going on since 1896, two years after the first commercial exhibition of Thomas A. Edison's kinetoscope. Victorian propriety was outraged by the chaste kiss John C. Rice bestowed on May Irwin in *The Widow Jones*, and less prudish people joined in the rising protest as nickelodeons batted on thriller-chiller melodramas and leering peeks at social—pronounced "sex"—themes. The first rock that really hurt the young industry was thrown by Mayor George B. McClellan, who revoked the licenses of all movie houses in New York City on Christmas Eve, 1908. An injunction was secured against the order, but McClellan's action thoroughly frightened the flesh peddlers. They were very happy, therefore, to promise full co-operation with the National Board of Review, a group formed in March, 1909, by Dr. Charles A. Smith and 300 citizens of New York, who proposed to preview pictures and suggest changes in offensive material. But it soon was evident that the basic problem remained unsolved. The N.B.R. had no authority to enforce its decisions and came to be regarded as nothing more than a shill for the industry.

State censorship was instituted by Pennsylvania in 1911, followed by Ohio and Kansas in 1913 and Maryland in 1916. The press fought hard to defend the generally indefensible cinema, but all helping hands were ready to quit in disgust after World War I. Pictures stressing marital infidelity flooded the screen. Advertising was suggestive even for innocuous films. A typical ad of the times promised "brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp . . . the truth—bold, naked, sensational."

Fan interest in stars' private lives and enormous salaries boomeranged as popular idols made loud noises falling off pedestals. Mary Pickford, billed as "America's Sweetheart," shocked her public by leaving Owen Moore to marry Douglas Fairbanks. The murder of William Desmond

Taylor, a prominent director, disclosed addiction to narcotics in the movie colony. Fatty Arbuckle, the most popular comedian of his time, was tried for manslaughter after Virginia Rappe, an obscure extra, died at a wild party in San Francisco in 1921. Arbuckle was acquitted after two jury disagreements, but his pictures were withdrawn permanently. Reformers, emboldened by the liquor prohibition, succeeded in introducing movie-censorship measures in thirty-six state legislatures. Similar bills—eventually twenty-two in all—appeared in Congress.

Bemused historians would have you believe that producers examined their consciences at this point and suddenly recognized the obligation they owed the public. Objective reporters have found a more compelling reason that made Hollywood hit the sawdust trail. New York State passed a censorship bill in 1921. On December second, a delegation of movie bigwigs offered Postmaster General Will H. Hays \$100,000 a year to serve as the movies' czar—a title popularized by baseball, which had hired Judge Kenesaw M. Landis to save it from itself. Hays accepted on January 14, 1922, and concentrated all his efforts on beating a censorship bill coming up in Massachusetts. When the measure was defeated by a vote of 553,173 to 208,252—with the conspicuous help of newspapers—Hays was hailed as the Great White Father.

Hays' attempts to clean up the movies were solemnly endorsed in print and sabotaged by hotcha and hot-gun epics ground out in Hollywood. At his insistence, the list of taboos generally observed today were incorporated into the code written by the Rev. Daniel A. Lord, a Jesuit professor of English at St. Louis University, and Martin Quigley, a Catholic layman who published several trade papers and magazines. Adopted on March 31, 1930, the code was reduced to a glossy scrap of paper by a steady flow of tawdry gangster pictures and honky-tonk musicals.

Public opinion was the night stick that once more whipped the movies into line. In April, 1934, five Catholic bishops announced the formation of the Legion of Decency to fight salacious pictures—a campaign enthusiastically supported by many Protestant

and Jewish leaders. Coming in the depths of the depression when RKO and Universal were in receivership, Paramount was in serious difficulties and Fox Films was in the process of reorganization, the legion threw a greater scare into the industry than all previous threats of censorship. An organized boycott in Philadelphia cut box-office receipts to the vanishing point. Overnight, 1,500,000 members joined the legion in Boston, Brooklyn and Chicago. Cars broke out in a rash of We Demand Clean Movies windshield stickers in Detroit. Stunned by the customers' reaction, major companies fractured speed records in scrambling aboard the code bandwagon. In the last decade the only serious challenge to its authority has been *The Outlaw*, made by Howard Hughes, an independent producer. *Duel in the Sun*, which was toned down by the Pennsylvania censors because of its "puerile slobbering over sex," as one critic described it, managed to get by the code.

Duel in the Sun—also known in the trade as *Lust in the Dust*—was so objectionable, even in antiseptic versions, that it scared Hollywood out of a year's gross by reviving the dormant issue of stricter censorship. The Southern Baptist Convention, representing 6,000,000 members, adopted a unanimous resolution at St. Louis on May tenth condemning pictures that "have probably become a contributing factor for delinquency, divorce and broken homes because they tend to glamorize loose morals." Bosley Crowther, restrained movie critic of the New York Times, took a full wind-up at David O. Selznick, producer of *Duel in the Sun*, for turning out a film "designed plainly to spread coarseness over the screen, without getting any real meaning or edification out of it.

"For a business which makes so much pretense of being explicitly moral and which proudly polices its members with a pious Production Code," Crowther went on, "the motion picture business has been pulling some mockeries of late. Meekly, this side-line observer would like to ask who's kidding whom? Do the industry's moralistic guardians think that the public is being easily fooled—or are some of its less considerate members slyly slipping the business the bird?"

Sex and morality generally are handled with sterilized gloves, but Hollywood currently is under fire on another count. Gathering demands for censorship have been heard in protest against the screen's preoccupation with violence and brutality, thinly disguised by the suddenly popular documentary technique. The intense realism that was permissible during the war has been extended to other themes, notably psychiatry.

Although the documentary form hardly is a revolutionary dramatic device, it was dusted off and used with spectacular results in *Fighting Lady* and *The House on 92nd Street*, reputed to have returned a higher gross in relation to costs than any other movie ever made. The imitation-of-life treatment has been enormously effective.

Mrs. Tingley, who has been waiting patiently in the wings during this run-through of movie history, voices a complaint against documentaries that is heard with increasing frequency. Her particular gripe is directed to movies doing a once-over-lightly on psychiatry, a field which led indirectly to her

appointment as a censor. After graduating from Goucher College in 1917, Mrs. Tingley did graduate work in biology on a scholarship at Johns Hopkins and then taught at Western High School in Baltimore until her marriage in 1920. Devoting her time to women's-club activities, she was shocked by the public's indifference to the plight of mental patients at Springfield State Hospital in Sykesville, Maryland. One day in 1942, while discussing her pet project, Gov. Herbert R. O'Connor suddenly suggested that she run for the legislature. Mrs. Tingley laughed gaily and said her battles on real-estate assessments with Boss Billy Curran and Howard Jackson, mayor of Baltimore, had not endeared her to those gentlemen. O'Connor made the necessary diplomatic overtures and Mrs. Tingley was nominated for the House of Delegates as the Democratic candidate from the Third District.

"They put me on as a blue-ribbon candidate to dress up the slate," she says blandly. "It's an old political dodge, but I didn't know it at the time. I thought they wanted me for myself, if you'll pardon the expression." Much to everyone's astonishment, Mrs. Tingley led the ticket in Baltimore and began a four-year term in January, 1943. Two reasons impelled her to resign as a legislator in June to fill a vacancy on the movie-censor board. She always had been crazy about movies, and the Maryland legislature, which meets only every other year, was not as absorbing as she thought it would be.

"I came to the censor job with no axes to grind," she confides, "but I've got a dandy one now I'd like to bury in Hollywood's skull. I think its treatment of psychiatric themes is disgraceful. The movies have created the impression that all mental patients are violent nuts with homicidal tendencies. Any authority will tell you that only three per cent of the people in mental institutions are dangerous. The movies should show the dramatic struggle made by patients to restore themselves to society. I suppose that wouldn't dish out enough horror to fatten the box office though."

The ultimate argument for censorship stresses the need for protecting children from the screen's harmful influences. Mrs. Tingley believes the whole thing is a false alarm.

"Every expert I've consulted tells me violence and horror presented dramatically have very little effect on children. As a matter of fact, Dr. Leo J. Connor, head of the children's clinic at Johns Hopkins, says there's something wrong with a youngster who's disturbed by anything seen at the movies. Mothers are unwilling to accept that, of course—they're constantly asking us to list pictures fit for children. We're not empowered by law to do that, and anyway, I don't think it would do any good. As soon as you put a 'For Adults Only' label on a movie, kids will break their necks to see it. They'll read all sorts of suggestive meanings into innocent lines and situations."

Foreign pictures, according to Mrs. Tingley, are far less offensive than the provincial public believes. Sometimes there is too much exposure of what is delicately referred to as cleavage. Continental attitudes toward morality occasionally clash with the American code of conduct, but on the whole, European movies can be distributed freely without fear of jarring our sensitivity. Mrs. Tingley actually has

found that transplanted national groups, eager to see the old country presented favorably, raise more pica-yune objections to foreign films than all the bluenoses in Boston. Some of our native prejudices amuse Mrs. Tingley, such as the substitution of "dastard" in Henry V for Shakespeare's original word, to be found in every school library in the country. She also wonders out loud why the Johnston Office ordered additions, involving the reshooting of twenty scenes, to the bodice of the authentic Restoration costume worn by Miss Margaret Lockwood in Wicked Lady, a British picture, but makes no attempt to curb the wave of gangster movies America exports, to the detriment of our prestige abroad.

"The headaches of a censor's life," she grouses, "are not inconsistencies or tricky interpretations of policy. Endless clichés and corny situations are what get you down. I'm going to throw something the next time a lovers' quarrel winds up with an oaf, male or female, saying, 'If that's the way you want it ——' I'm fed up with juvenile stars, particularly when cast as band leaders, with old guys and dames trying to act cute, and with crazy scientists who make apes out of men, or vice versa. I get ill when I see actresses who try to look like cocker spaniels—you know, the Lauren

Bacall and Lizbeth Scott hair-do—and tough males like John Garfield throwing their sex around. Garson can have Gable too. I've seen so many Westerns that I'll whinny if you hold up a bag of oats."

There are compensations, however, for the exquisite boredom Mrs. Tingley suffers in performance of her duty. She knows how to halt an elephant stampede. ("Just yell, 'No cooky.' It always works for Tarzan.") She can tell instantly whether a picture has been made on a lavish or limited budget if the action calls for someone to fall down a flight of stairs. (Stunt men get \$150 for taking a dry dive on stone and only \$75 for the same job on wood.) She knows an actress is on the down grade when she is tricked out in a negligee that was worn in another picture. Watching movies in the board's private projection room has distinct advantages. She doesn't have to repress her inhibitions when banality is rampant on the screen, and she can take off her shoes and enjoy a good, uninterrupted cry on those rare occasions when a good picture comes along.

"One nice thing about this job," Mrs. Tingley says wistfully, "is that it makes you an incurable optimist. You're always hoping tomorrow will bring a British film, or even an American movie with a new idea." THE END