

EXPORTING AN IMAGINARY AMERICA TO MAKE MONEY

THERE is one American article of export out of which fortunes are being coined in every corner of the world, and which, under its rightful name, does not appear upon a single steamer's manifest. This is the picturesque—what is bizarre, exciting, and unusual in American life, chiefly scenes of cowboys and Indians. This picturesque, a real, definite commodity of genuine commercial importance, goes with many another moving picture film across the seas, and Britisher, Frenchman, German, Spaniard, Italian, South American, Australian, and South African clap their hands with joy, or otherwise show their approval, when the exploits of their "Yankee" brothers are flashed upon the screen.

Exporting the picturesque has thus become a money maker. The average American film on other subjects is not apt to "take" with the foreigner. He likes, beyond all, dash and action. The cowboy and Indian, especially when they have a strong, simple story behind them that he can readily catch, appeal to the most uninformed peasant and the most stolid mechanic. The story must be simple, for his delight is not at its keenest unless he fully understands what the strange figures are doing. Then they are very much to his taste.

It does not seem as if too many of these Indian and cowboy films could be fed to the moving picture goers of the rest of the world. From Liverpool to Moscow and from Stockholm to Melbourne the patrons eagerly watch the unfolding of every one of the highly colored dramas of the prairies and the mountains. It does not matter if the story is only slightly different from what they have seen before. This is the America that they have long imagined and heard about.

The crouchers on the benches of many a darkened room in far away foreign cities are quite aware that there are big cities in America teeming with gold for the workers, wonder places when one gets to them. These are not, just the same, the real America of their dreams. Outside of them, just beyond the skyscrapers, they know there is a great, open wild-land, filled with almost savage beings. Nothing like these real Americans exist anywhere else in the world. They do the maddest, most exciting things. And though the foreigner of the moving picture show does not say this in so many words, these scenes fully realize the ideal long tucked away in his head of what the Americans must be.

Of course, this exporting of the picturesque and making it into a big, profitable

trade has not come about by chance. The film-makers of America, like those of any other country, and like other purveyors of amusement the world over, have made it a point to study audiences everywhere. They have sent out experts to visit the nickelodeons of the various nations, with instructions to penetrate into even the smallest cities and find out what people want. When it is remembered that a year ago it was figured out that fifteen million dollars was invested in moving picture studios for the making of films all over the world, more than a million dollars in America alone, and that these figures have since materially increased, it will be seen that meeting the tastes of audiences is a matter of much importance. Motion pictures, the "canned drama," has one distinct advantage over the regular drama—it is quite easily possible to see what class of films "go" the best, and then stick to that.

The experts discovered one very interesting thing. What people liked to see on the screen—it did not matter what country they belonged to—was something that agreed with their preconceived notions.

The more a series of pictures differed with what they believed the less popular it proved. That, then, was simple.

Europe, Asia, Africa, and all the Australias believed in the existence of the cowboy of romance, of the "Deadwood Dick," the "Alkali Ike," "Deerfoot," and "Uncas," the "big, heap chief," the prairie wagon, the beautiful young white girl carried off by a masterful, lank savage, the squaw, the papoose, the Indian village, and, perhaps, the detachment of United States troops arriving just in time. Nothing easier. They should have them.

As a matter of fact, these exciting Western plains films do exceedingly well in this country, perhaps because of the many foreigners that crowd the moving picture theatres. They are profitable investments before they ever become articles of export. The export trade in them is a fresh profit, and one that is steadily growing larger. Some audiences will take an interest in Niagara Falls and New York's and Chicago's giant buildings. But the field of these is uncertain. Every time, though, the foreigner will sit with open-mouthed joy at the "round-up," the adventures of the fearless scout, the battle of the redskins. It is wonderful how such a film never fails.

If anything, the nations abroad have

Moving Picture Lovers in Foreign Cities Prefer Indian and Cowboy Films to All Others.

taken to the moving picture even more than this country. In England alone, according to the latest reliable statistics, there are more than two thousand theatres showing moving pictures. New ones are being opened constantly, but they only seem to be meeting a very evident public demand. A curious feature is that all over Great Britain the American films, particularly those of this Western life, are the most popular of all. The stolid British workman likes them, and his pennies go in an unceasing stream to the

purveyors who realize what he wants to see. The only real rivals to the American films in England are some produced by energetic and enterprising Italian manufacturers.

For the American firms engaged in this exporting of the American picturesque the situation is ideal, for London is rapidly becoming the great selling centre for films for all sections of Europe, and even Australia and New Zealand. The great demand all over England for the cowboy and Indian films has spurred on the

agents for "houses" in other countries to compete for the pick of these. Thus there is an active market for every new subject of this order, and fresh stories of the life of the plains cannot come across the ocean fast enough.

In Germany the importation of these melodramatic American films is constantly increasing. Each programme now has at least one American story. If it shows some sort of a battle it meets with great favor. Here the Indian and the cowboy unflinchingly score.

Spain and Italy, even Russia, the big cities of South America and far-off Oceanica tell precisely the same story. Russia, curiously enough, is getting to be a stronghold of moving pictures, and the most insignificant towns and villages, even in remote districts, are being well provided with these amusements. There are reported to be 1,200 electric theatres alone in the Russian Empire. On Sundays and holidays the crowds, as a Moscow visitor recently wrote home to this country, "are so great that additional police officers are often required to keep the immense number of people moving and to prevent possible accidents."

An American film that met with immense success, showing Napoleon at St. Helena, was made, as a matter of actual record, on the shore of Coney Island. And thus, there need be no surprise that practically every one of these thrilling Indian and cowboy scenes are "put together" in the suburbs of New York City, actually photographed in fields and woods that are not further, at the most, than half an hour from Broadway. If the trusting foreigner in far away Russia or the villager of Spain or Cathay should ever know this, it might disgust him. In all likelihood, though, he would never believe it. The pictures as they are unveiled before him look too good and real.

Once upon a time, it is related, a film manufacturer wanted to reproduce with great accuracy and completeness the scenic story of Custer's last fight. Disregarding expense and plunging enthusiastically into details—he brought a band of Sioux Indians on from the West. Three of them were actually chiefs who had taken part in the tragedy. The films that resulted were naturally magnificent and made a large sum of money for their owner.

Such trouble and expense as this is seldom worth while, however. That film manufacturer was an exception, and this is why the story of his production has been told. In practically every case it is possible, no matter how elaborate the drama, to "stage it" with ordinary scenery of the New York suburb brand, carefully selected, of course, and with regular actors of the "company."

Thus each time that in Naples, the Tyrol, Vladivostok, and Johannesburg the worthy day worker settles down in his seat and witnesses the most exciting of double-distilled romances of the plains he is really seeing a "canned drama" made up on the outskirts of New York, with its Indians and cowboys simply actors. In reality this is a great advantage. Actual red men and true heroes

of the plains could never act half so well for the purposes of the camera. There have been player dukes on the stage that seemed more true to life than the genuine article. In the moving picture drama trained actors are even more an essential than on the regular stage. Real Indians might whoop and dash through a show at a Broadway theatre with great effectiveness; they would fail on a film where professional actors would make themselves vivid red men.

This picturesque that makes such a valuable commodity when it is exported has to be prepared with the greatest care. Just the proper sort of country has to be chosen, in the first place, for a background. As exploits of the sort that are popular must cover a wide territory, and as frantic long rides and thrilling stern chases must be included great attention must be paid to the landscape. Then, before ever the camera is brought out, the manager must drill his corps of men and women in the part they are to play. Over and over again must they act the scenes that are to be photographed, but not until each actor and each horse is "letter perfect." A film play like this depends for its success upon its absolute naturalness. It must seem to have really happened and anything that is "stagy" in the least will spoil it utterly.

With a good manager, these Western dramas are very easily run off, however, and an astonishing degree of perfection attained. For several years, now, the moving-picture studios have had excellent companies of actors. The "trick" is a little different from that of the regular stage, but is quickly learned by the ordinarily clever of the "profession." Constant practice makes them perfect. The cowboy and the redskin, the kidnapped maiden and the settler's wife in the prairie wagon, after they have rammed through a dozen of these melodramatic stories, become far better from foreign consumption than their originals would be.

Nor is this new and profitable article of export difficult to get in its raw state—that is, the material of the story or the scenario. The form and general idea are so well laid out that a novice can make the necessary variations. There are even "properties" to be bought, for every moving-picture studio has long since had all the equipments and accoutrements of the plains and of Indian braves. The moving-picture plant can today almost as easily fill an order for another of these dramas as the corner grocer can for a peck of potatoes. And great is the manufacturer's profit thereby.