The Theater Upstairs

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A weird and uncanny story about a motion-picture show, in which dead actors and actresses flickered across the silver screen

"LOOK, a picture theater—who'd expect one here?"

Luther caught my arm and dragged me to a halt. We'd been out on a directionless walk through lower Manhattan that evening—"flitting" was Luther's word, cribbed, I think, from Robert W. Chambers. The old narrow street where we now paused had an old English name and was somewhere south and east of Chinatown. Its line of dingy shops had foreign words on their dim windows, and lights and threadbare curtains up above where their proprietors lodged. And right before us, where Luther had stopped to gaze, was a narrow wooden door that bore a white card. CINEMA, it said in bold, plain capitals. And, in smaller letters below: Georgia Wattell.

I was prepared to be embarrassed by that name. Everyone suspected, and a few claimed to know positively, that Georgia Wattell had committed suicide at the height of her Hollywood career because Luther had deserted her. But my companion did not flinch, only drew up that thick body of his. A smile wrinkled his handsome features, features that still meant box-office to any picture, even though they were softening from too much food and drink and so forth.

"Wonder which of Georgia's things it is," Luther mused, with a gayety slightly forced. "Come on, I'll stand you a show."

I didn't like it, but refusal would seem accusation. So I let him draw me through the door.

WE HAD stairs to walk up—creaky old stairs. They were so narrow that we had to mount in single file, our shoulders brushing first one wall, then the other. I was mystified, for doesn't a

New York ordinance provide that theaters cannot be on upper floors? There was no light on those stairs, as I remember, only a sort of grayness filtering from above. At any rate, we saw better when we came to the little foyer at the top. A shabby man stood there, with lead-colored eyes in his square face and a great shock of coarse gray hair.

"Admission a quarter," he mumbled in a soft, hoarse voice, and accepted the half-dollar Luther produced. "Go on in."

With one hand he pocketed the coin and with the other drew back a dark, heavy curtain. We entered a long hall, groped our way to seats—we were the only patrons, so far as I could tell—and almost at once the screen lit up with the title: THE HORLA, by Guy de Maupassant.

"Creepy stuff—good!" muttered Luther with relish, then added some other comment on the grisly classic. What with trying to hear him and read the cast of players at the same moment, I failed in both efforts. The shimmering words on the screen dissolved into a pictured landscape, smitten by rain which the sound apparatus mimicked drearily. In the middle distance appeared a cottage, squat and ancient, with a droopy, soft-seeming roof like the cap of a toadstool. The camera viewpoint sailed down and upon it, in what Luther called a "dolly shot." We saw at close quarters the front porch.

Two women sat on the top step, exchanging the inconsequential opening dialog. Georgia Wattell seated at center with her sad, dark face turned front, was first recognizable. Her companion, to one side and in profile, offered to our view a flash of silver-blond hair and a handsome, feline countenance.

"It's Lilyan Tashman," grunted Luther, and shut up his mouth with a snap. He might have said more about this uneasy vision of two dead actresses talking and moving, but he did not. A third figure was coming into view at the left, shedding a glistening waterproof and a soaked slouch hat. My first glimpse of his smooth black hair and close-set ears, seen from behind, struck a chord of memory in me. Then his face swiveled around into view, and I spoke aloud.

"This can't be!" I protested. "Why, Rudolph Valentino died before anybody even dreamed of sound pic——"

But it was Valentino nevertheless, and he had been about to speak to the two women. However, just as I exclaimed in my unbelieving amazement, he paused and faced front. His gaze seemed to meet mine, and suddenly I realized how big he was on the screen, eight or ten feet high at the least. Those brilliant eyes withered me, his lip twitched over his dazzling teeth—the contemptuous rebuke-expression of an actor to a noisy audience.

So devastatingly real was that shadowy snub that I almost fell from my seat. I know that Luther swore, and that I felt sweaty all over. When I recovered enough to assure myself that my imagination was too lively, Valentino had turned back to deliver his interrupted entrance line. The show went on.

So far there was nothing to remind me of de Maupassant's story as I had read it. But with Valentino's first speech and Georgia Wattell's answer the familiar plot began. Of course, it was freely modified, like most film versions of the classics. For one thing, the victim of the invisible monster was not a man but a woman — Georgia, to be exact — and it seemed to me at the time that this change heightened the atmosphere of helpless horror. Valentino might have done something vigorous, either spiritual or physical, against de Maupassant's Horla. Georgia Wattell, with her sorrowfully lovely face and frail little body, seemed inescapably foredoomed.

The remainder of the action on the porch was occupied by Georgia's description of the barely-understood woes she was beginning to suffer at the Horla's hands. Miss Tashman as her friend and Valentino as her lover urged her to treat everything as a fancy and to tell herself that all would be well. She promised—but how vividly she acted the part of an unbeliever in her own assurance! Then the image of the porch, with those three shadows of dead players posed upon it in attitudes of life, faded away.

THE next scene was a French country bedroom — curtained bed, *prie-dieu* and so on. Georgia Wattell entered it, unfastening her clothing.

"Ho!" exploded Luther somewhat lasciviously, but I did not stop to be disgusted with him. My mind was wrestling with the situation, how items so familiar in themselves — lower New York, the motion picture business, the performers, de Maupassant's story—could be so creepy in combination.

Well, Georgia took off her dress. I saw, as often before, that she had a lovely bosom and shoulders, for all her fragility. Over her underthings she drew an ample white robe, on the collar of which fell her loosened dark hair. Kneeling for a moment at the *prie-dieu,* she murmured a half-audible prayer, then turned toward the bed. At that moment there entered—just where, I cannot say—the Horla.

It was quite the finest and weirdest film device I have ever seen. No effect in the picture versions of *Frankenstein* or *Dracula* remotely approached it. Without outline or opacity, less tangible than a shimmer of hot air, yet it gave the impression of living malevolence. I felt aware of its presence upon the screen without actually seeing it; but how could it have been suggested without being visible? I should like to discuss this point with someone else who saw the picture, but I have never yet found such a person.

It was there, anyway. Georgia registered sudden and uneasy knowledge of it. Her body shuddered a trifle inside the robe and she paused as if in indecision, then moved toward the bed. A moment later she moaned wildly and staggered a bit. The thing, whatever triumph of photo-dramatic trickery it was, enveloped her.

She went all blurred and indistinct, as though seen through water. Doesn't de Maupassant himself use that figure of speech? Then the attacking entity seemed to pop out into a faint approach to human shape. I could see shadowy arms winding around the shrinking girl, a round, featureless head bowed as if its maw sought her throat. She screamed loudly and began to struggle. Then Valentino and Miss Tashman burst into the room.

With their appearance the Horla released her and seemed to retire into its half-intangible condition. I, who had utterly forgotten that I saw only a film, sighed my inexpressible relief at the thing's momentary defeat, then whispered to Luther.

"I don't like this," I said. "Let's get out, or I won't sleep tonight."

"We stay right here," he mumbled back, his eyes bright and fascinated as they kept focussed on the screen.

Valentino was holding Georgia close, caressing her to quiet her hysterics and speaking reassuringly in his accented English. Lilyan Tashman said something apparently meant for comedy relief, which was badly needed at this point. But neither Luther nor I laughed.

Georgia suddenly cried out in fresh fear.

"It's there in the corner!" she wailed, turning toward the spot where the Horla must be lurking.

Both her companions followed her

gaze, apparently seeing nothing. For that matter I saw nothing myself, though I well knew the thing was there.

Valentino made another effort to calm her.

"I'll put a bullet into it, darling," he offered, with an air of falling in with her morbid humor. "In the corner, you say?"

From his pocket he drew a revolver. But Georgia, suddenly calming her shudders, snatched the weapon from his hand.

"Don't!" she begged. "How can a bullet harm something that has no life like ours?"

"Here, don't point that gun at me!" begged Miss Tashman, retreating in comic fright.

Georgia moved forward in the picture, looming larger than her companions. "You can't kill spirits," she went on, tonelessly and quite undramatically. "Bullets are for *living* enemies."

She gazed out upon us.

Right here is where the whole business stopped being real and became nightmare. Georgia moved again, closer and closer, until her head and shoulders, with the gun hand lifted beside them, filled the screen. She looked as big as the Sphinx by then, but grim and merciless as no Sphinx ever was. And her enormous, accusing eyes weren't fixed upon me, but upon Luther.

My inner self began arguing silently. "That's odd," it said plaintively. "A gaze from the screen seems to meet that of each member of the audience. How can she be looking *past* me at——"

Georgia spoke, between immense, hardened lips, in a voice that rolled out to fill the whole theater:

"Jan Luther!"

And she swelled bigger, bigger beyond all reason, too big for the screen to contain. Suddenly there were only the hand and the gun, turned toward us like a cannon aimed point-blank.

Luther was on his feet, screaming.

"You can't!" he challenged wildly. "You—why, you're only a shadow!"

But the screen exploded in white light, that made the whole hall bright as day for just the hundredth part of a second. After that I was trying to hold Luther erect. He sagged and slumped back into his seat in spite of all I could do. Blood purled gently down his face from a neat round hole in his forehead.

I glanced wildly at the screen. The picture had shrunk back to ordinary dimensions now, showing again the bedroom, the three performers and everything else exactly as it had been.

Georgia was offering Valentino his pistol again. "Thanks, Rudy," she said.

I SUPPOSE I must have run crazily out of there, for my next memory is of panting the story in broken sentences to a big blue-coated policeman. He frowned as I tried to tell everything at once, then came back with me to the street with the foreign-labeled shops. When I couldn't find the door and its lettered card he laughed, not very good-naturedly, and accused me of being drunk. When I tried to argue he ordered me to move along or go to jail and sleep it off.

I haven't seen Luther since, nor heard from him. There has been plenty in the papers about his disappearance, though several editors have put it down as a publicity stunt. Three times recently I have gone into the part of town where I lost him, and each time I have seen, at a little distance along a sidewalk or across a street, the white-haired, leaden-eyed man who admitted us to the theater. But, though I always tried to hail him, he lost himself among the passers-by before I reached him.

At length I have decided to stay away from there altogether. I wish I could stop thinking about the affair as well.