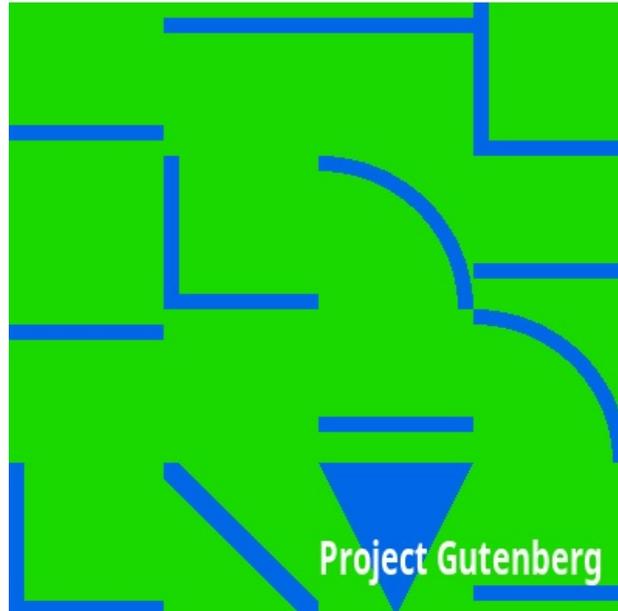

Reel Life Films

Sam Merwin



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK REEL LIFE FILMS ***

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At least a contributing factor to the current cycle of science fiction movies being made in Hollywood is the touchiness of minorities having their nationals being portrayed as villains. Cinema-makers are now trying to avoid further boycotts by using space aliens for villains. But suppose some of our Extraterrestrial neighbors are also a bit touchy?

reel
life
films

by ... Jacques Jean Ferrat

Pity the poor purveyor of mere entertainment in today's world. He can't afford to offend a soul, yet must have a villain.

TWENTY-FIVE years ago Cyril Bezdek and E. Carter Dorwin would have met in a private railway car belonging to one of them. They might even have met in a private train. At any rate they would have met in absolute privacy. But it being the present, they had to be content with a series of adjoining rooms taking up less than one half of a car on the Super-Sachem, fastest coast-to-coast train in the country.

Their meeting in private was very important. Upon its results hinged the future of Gigantic Studios, one of Hollywood's big three production companies.

Dorwin was the powerful plenipotentiary of the Consolidated Trust Company of Manhattan and backer of Gigantic's multimillion-dollar productions. He was on his way West to make sure that the interests of his bank were being adequately served by the studio.

Bezdek was Gigantic's supreme production boss. Former office boy, writer, prop man, assistant-director, director, producer, and story editor, he was the works—unless Dorwin decided otherwise during this meeting and pulled the props out from under him. He had thought Dorwin's trip sufficiently important to fly to Kansas City and get aboard the Super-Sachem to be with the banker during the remainder of his trip.

They had dined in the privacy of Dorwin's suite—Bezdek as befitted his tortured duodenum on yogurt and Melba toast—Dorwin on caviar, consommé, a thick steak with full trimmings, and a golden baked Alaska accompanied by Armagnac.

"How do you manage to keep thin?" Bezdek asked him, honestly envious. "Polo, tennis? Golf would never do it."

"I haven't exercised in ten years," said the banker, biting off the end of a Havana Perfecto. He studied the little movie-maker over the flame of his lighter. Outside, the flat expanse of Kansas rushed past through the night at close to a hundred miles an hour.

"Some people are lucky," said Bezdek, adjusting the broad knot of his hand-painted Windsor tie. He was remarshaling his thoughts and ideas. It was very important that he and Dorwin be in perfect accord before they reached Hollywood.

The banker, who was new to the movie-making branch of his business, spoke first. "I presume," he said finally, "that you're aware of the current feeling in our New York office?"

The movie magnate gestured carelessly with a Saxony gun-club sleeve, revealing a platinum wristwatch strap. "We hear rumors now and again," he said. "It's about our science fiction films." Bezdek avoided making it a question. He was far too shrewd for that.

The banker, finding himself thus at a disadvantage, said amicably, "It's not that the fantasy series isn't making money, understand." He paused, looking faintly distressed. "It's just that, frankly, we feel they're getting too far away from reality. Trips to Mars and Venus—strange creatures.... It's not real—it's not dignified. Frankly, we question whether an institution like ours can afford to be connected with anything so—so ephemeral. After all ..."

He paused as sounds of a scuffle in the corridor penetrated the room and something or somebody was banged hard against the door. Bezdek, frowning, jumped up nervously and went to the door, opened it, looked out.

"What's going on out there?" he inquired tartly. "Ty!"

"Sorry, Mr. Bezdek," said Ty Falter, the mogul's private secretary, bodyguard and constant companion. He was leaning against the far wall of the corridor, mopping a cut lower lip with a bloody handkerchief. He was a tall, deceptively sleepy-looking young man who virtually never slept.

At the end of the corridor two lesser aides were half-dragging a tall figure between them. Bezdek frowned as he caught a glimpse of a nodding head in half profile—a near-perfect profile which

showed no sign of a bruise.

"How did that creep get in here?" he snapped. "That's the same character who tried to nail me at the K.C. airport."

"Yes, sir," said Ty Falter apologetically. He glanced at his skinned knuckles. "It was like hitting a brick," he said. He shook his head, added, "Sorry, Mr. Bezdek. I don't know how he got in here."

"Your job is to keep crackpots like that away from me," said the mogul. He turned and went back inside the compartment. Dorwin was still sitting as before.

"Eavesdroppers?" the banker inquired with unruffled poise.

"Not likely," said Bezdek, dropping into his seat. "Probably a movie-crazy kid trying to chisel a screen test."

The incident had brought back his heartburn. He wanted to take a couple of his pills but not in front of Dorwin. The banker might think he was cracking up. These damned New Yorkers had no idea of the pressure under which he labored. He sipped a glass of flat soda water.

"Where were we?" Dorwin said quietly. Somehow to Bezdek he gave the impression of remorseless rationality. "Oh, yes, these fantasy movies—we're a little worried about them."

"I thought you might be," said Bezdek, leaning forward and using the full magnetism of his personality. Now that the issue was out in the open his discomfort was eased. "Actually we don't think of our interplanetary cycle as fantasy, Dorwin. We think of them as forecasts of the future, as prophecy."

"They're still a far cry from reality, or even the usual escapism," said the banker. "Confidentially, I happen to *know* that it will be years—perhaps decades—before we make any live contact with the other planets. Our national interests demand that we prevent atomic power from superseding older methods before investments have realized on their holdings to the fullest extent. And it is upon development of atomic power that space-flight hinges at present."

"Certainly I understand that—sound business," said Bezdek with his one-sided smile. "I hope they wait for many years."

Dorwin looked faintly astonished. "From these pictures of yours I must confess I had derived a totally different impression of your theories," he said slowly, flicking two inches of pale grey ash into the silver tray at his elbow.

"Listen to me," said the movie-maker, again leaning toward his vis-à-vis. "We're making these pictures now because when the first man or men come back from other planets our science fiction cycle is finished. It will cease to be *escape*. We will then be faced with the reality of what they really find—and that's bound to be a great deal different from the sort of thing we're feeding them now."

"It's a point I hadn't considered," said the banker, reaching for the brandy. He nodded to himself as he poured it, then looked up at Bezdek and asked, "But why this—space opera is the colloquial term, I believe? Why not stick closer to real life?"

Bezdek sat back and the slanting smile creased his features again. "Minorities," he said. "That's why. Crackpot minorities object loudly at being portrayed in films they don't like. We don't want to tread on anybody's toes—there's trouble enough in the world as it is. People want villains. But unless we make our villains—even minor villains—people from nowhere we get boycotted somewhere by somebody. And that costs us money."

"Yes, of course," said the banker, "but I fail to see—"

"It's simple." Bezdek was in full cry now and interrupted openly. "People like conflict in their movies. If it's a Western they want their heroes to fight Indians or Mexicans or rustlers. The Indians and Mexicans object to being the villains and they've got big sympathetic followings. Okay, so we use rustlers or renegade white men and we still make Westerns—but not many. No plot variety."

He sipped more soda water. "It's the same with everything else. Unless we're in a war with a legitimate enemy to hate we can't use villains. It's almost enough to make a man wish—"

"Not with the H-bomb, Bezdek," said Dorwin frigidly.

"Of course not—I was only speaking figuratively," said the movie-maker hastily. "I'm as much against war as anyone. But that's what makes these interplanetary movies great stuff. We can run in all the villains we want—make them just as bad as we want. Audiences really like to have someone they can hate."

"I see," said Dorwin. He permitted himself to look faintly pleased. "After all, a Martian can hardly protest what we do with him. I see your point now."

"You've got it," said Bezdek, beaming now. He leaned forward and added, "Furthermore, we've got four new pictures in the works for the space cycle that are really going to—"

He broke off, interrupted by a knock at the door. He stared at the banker, seeking someone to share his annoyance, found Dorwin staring out the window, frowning.

"The train seems to have stopped," said the banker.

Bezdek turned to the window. It was true. The night was clouded and dark but he could make out a single tree in faint silhouette and it was not moving. The knock on the stateroom door came again.

"I'd better see who it is," said Bezdek, rising. "Maybe something is wrong."

He opened the door quickly—all but fell back into his seat. The tall young man with the too-perfect features—the man who had tried in vain to speak to him at the Kansas City airport, who had been forcibly evicted earlier from the car—stood there!

The young man smiled and it was much too cold to be ingratiating if that was its intent. He said, looking down on both men, "I think you will wish to talk to me now."

The sheer effrontery of it rendered Cyril Bezdek speechless for the first time in years. Looking past the intruder through the angle of the open door he could see Ty Falter sitting on the corridor floor, leaning against the wall. His eyes were closed, his head canted at an odd angle.

It was Dorwin who first found words. "Who are you?" he inquired. "What do you want?"

"I am from Mars," said the stranger. "I have come here to enter a protest against the manner in which Mr. Bezdek's motion pictures are portraying my people."

The movie-maker's mouth dropped open. He closed it quickly, glanced across at the banker, saw equal bewilderment on that usually poker-face. On impulse, Bezdek reached for the buzzer that would summon aid and pressed it firmly several times.

"No one will answer," said the intruder in a voice remarkable not for its accent but for its lack of any. "We have been forced to—to immobilize this train in order to see you. It has been very difficult to reach you, Mr. Bezdek, I am sure through no fault of your own. But the people of my planet feel very strongly about this matter and I must get some satisfaction for them."

"So help me," said the mogul, his thin face purple with anger, "if this is a gag I'll see you jailed for it! And before you're jailed you're going to have a very unpleas—"

"No, Mr. Bezdek—Mr. Dorwin—this is not a joke. We of Mars are proud of our culture, our civilization. We do not like being portrayed as evil and ridiculous creatures. We're not like those filthy Venerians. We Martians have a great self-respect."

"*Ostrich feathers!*" Bezdek roared at the dead-panned intruder. "You may not be aware of it but there are severe penalties for holding up a train on this—in this country. You can't go around slugging people either. Look at Ty out there."

"Your servant will be all right," said the intruder, "as will the others aboard this train. I can release them whenever you agree that my mission is to be taken seriously."

"All right," said Bezdek, whose mind was nothing if not acrobatic. "Suppose you are from Mars. Tell me why your people object to our movies. Surely they aren't seeing them on Mars?"

"No. But your Earthmen will reach our planet soon and your opinion of us will be shaped in some degree by these movies they have seen. And since the relationships of the near-future are of vital import to us now we must not be represented as other than we are. Such misconceptions could breed interplanetary war." He shuddered.

"I think you're crazy!" said Bezdek. He turned to the banker, who was again staring out the window.

"There's something out there—look," said Dorwin.

"That is our ship," the intruder told them blandly. "That is why we stopped the train here. It is the only flat area sufficiently unsettled for our landing and departure without detection. We must return at once or lose perihelion."

"Let me see," said Bezdek. He peered through the window. There *was* something out there—something black and vague and shaped like an immense turtle with jagged projections. He tried to tell himself he was seeing things, failed.

"Amazing!" said E. Carter Dorwin. "It's utterly amazing!"

"Incredible is the word for it," Bezdek said wearily. He faced the intruder, said bluntly, "Very well, you say you're from Mars. And I say to your face that you aren't!"

"You seem remarkably sure, Mr. Bezdek."

"And why not?" The movie-maker was in his element now, delivering the clincher in an argument. "Our scientists have proved conclusively that Earthmen cannot exist on Mars without space-suits. You say you're a Martian. Yet you look like one of us. So if you can live on Mars, how can you live in our atmosphere without a space-suit of some sort? There's one for you to answer!" He chortled.

"But I *am* wearing protection—a protective suit arranged to give the impression that I am an Earthman." A flicker of something akin to distaste passed over his singularly immobile face.

"I'd like to see what you *do* look like," said Dorwin, suddenly entering into the eerie conversation.

Something like a sigh escaped the intruder. Then he said, "Very well. It is important that you believe me, so—" His hands went to the top of his scalp and deliberately he peeled the life-like mask slowly from the hidden features of his thoroughly Martian face!

It was a very odd face—not at all human. It reminded Bezdek a little of an immutably sad Bassett Hound he kept in his Hollywood kennel. It made Dorwin think of his mother-in-law. It was not a frightening face and the single eye in the center of the forehead held them with its mournful regard, held them, held them ...

When they were thoroughly under its hypnotic spell the Martian began to speak softly ...

Ty Falter was slow in waking up. But when he realized that he was lying there in the corridor he came to with a start. If Bezdek ever found out about this he'd be cooked as far as Hollywood went!

He got to his feet, his unsteadiness helped not at all by the fact that the train chose that moment to start with a jerk. He grabbed at the wall as a meteor flashed through the dark of the Kansas night outside the window.

Funny, he thought, the damned thing was going *up*, not *down*. But he forgot about the meteor as he heard the voices coming from the stateroom he was being paid to guard. He reeled over to the partly opened door and listened.

Bezdek was talking volubly, enthusiastically as he did when he spoke of the actual making of a picture. "... so we'll only have to reshoot a few sequences, Dorwin. The cost will be nothing compared to the returns. Think of it! Our space-pilot hero crashes on *Venus*. He has to fight horrible slimy swamp creatures—we can make them look like crocodiles with six or eight legs—to reach the mountaintop where the girl is hiding ..."

He paused and Dorwin said gravely, "I'm glad, since these space operas seem to be necessary, that you have decided to locate them on a *real* planet like Venus rather than a *fictitious* one like Mars. If minority pressure groups force us to use fantasy then it is as well to stay as credible as possible."

"Right, Dorwin! Right on the nose!" cried Bezdek. "And we can make real villains out of these Venerians, real bang-up nasty heavies!"

The banker's voice came through the door again. He said doubtfully, "But how can we be sure about the Venerians ..."

"Because I can feel it *here*!" cried the movie-maker. The thump that accompanied his final word told Ty that his boss had smote himself dramatically over the heart as he delivered the climactic line.

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