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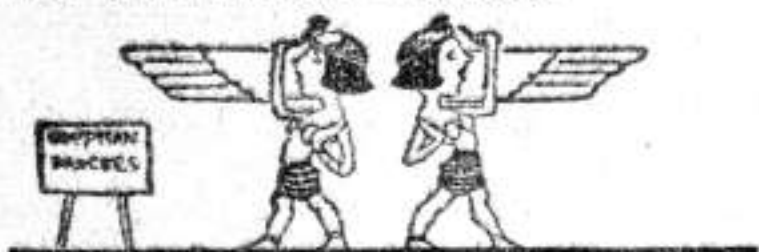
IT is given to few works of art to triumph thrice in different modes of expression but General Lew Wallace's "Ben Hur" not only has accomplished that difficult feat but has gained strength and beauty in each new venture.

As a novel it was a fascinating history of romantic old Rome; as a play it swept to victory wherever it was presented; and now as a cinema spectacle it has made its former successes seem puny by contrast.

"Ben Hur" was presented at the Twelfth street theater last evening in a magnificent dramatic spectacle far outdistancing all of its cinematic predecessors and fully justifying the time and money that has been expended on its production in the satisfaction it provided the first nighters.

In adapting the colorful pages of the Wallace book the motion picture producer has been able to give an infinitely more comprehensive record than the stage permitted because of its obvious limitations. There is a scope and breadth to this presentation that far overbalances the missing declamations of the players in another day.

And in recollection the pounding of the racing horses on the Erlanger tread mill of yesterday seems puerile and inadequate when measured up with the sweep and majesty of the joust of the charioteers in the picture version. It was an unimaginative observer who was not carried back to Antioch and made one of the crowd that cheered the vallant Ben Hur to noble victory over the wicked Messala.



The chase has always been the backbone of the movies but here it is glorified to an extent whereby it seems no longer a mechanical instrument in the hands of designing purveyors of entertainment, but something apart, inevitable and momentous. And what a chase it is! How the blood races through the veins of the passive spectator as those charging blacks of Messala and those white chargers of Ben Hur's fight for position on the rounded turf.

It is difficult to describe the thrill that attends this section of the film, as difficult as it is to number the things that lead up to it, the capsized chariots, the maddened horses, the furious drivers, and all the pomp and panoply that was on display from beginning to end in this sequence of the tale, the story of a young man who sought vengeance and achieved it at the risk of his own life and after untold suffering. Yet the chariot race, while it climaxed the picture, is but one of the thrilling episodes that have been translated faithfully from the book.

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The story starts with a picture of a happy Jewish family in old Rome. The members are torn asunder by the hordes of the conquering Roman warriors, the mother and daughter are imprisoned, and the boy sentenced to a living death as a galley slave. He escapes, rises again to power as the ward of a Roman officer whose life he saved in a glorious sea battle, and ultimately is restored to his family after countless adventures.

General Wallace intended his story to be a tale of the Christian-Roman era and he has set his principals up against a background of religion dominated by the Christ. In the reproduction of this the motion picture people have been most faithful. In fact there has been no attempt to distort the original tale and the producers have been content to stand on the melodrama of the manuscript and make their appeal more through this than photographic effort.

Ramon Navarro gives a sterling performance of Ben Hur and Francis X. Bushman is an admirable foil in Messala. Others who win attention for the completeness of their work are May McAvoy as Esther, Claire McDowell as Hur's mother; Nigel de Brulier as Simonides, the slave girl; and Frank Currier as the Roman patron of Ben Hur. But the chief praise goes to Fred Niblo, the director whose work was masterful and whose handling of the tremendous mob scenes was inspired.

"Ben Hur" will stand for a long while as the greatest of cinema spectacles.