

1 The Embankment at Midnight

Earth had fairer things to show than the view from Westminster Bridge on the night of 24 February 1926. Wordsworth, at the start of the nineteenth century, could imagine the city asleep at dawn as one of nature's spectacles, silent and still; twentieth-century London, even at midnight, was neither. The brightness in which the scene was steeped came not from any natural source, but from the beams of six massive arc lights, lined up along the parapet and directed toward the Victoria Embankment.

Down by the river's edge, a film journalist, on meeting a casting agent, "severely criticised the unconvincing appearance of the large crowd that had assembled, but was told that they were not professional but the real thing."¹ A. Jympson Harman, film critic of the *Evening News*, reported that police "were specially detailed, from midnight until six in the morning, to 'keep a ring' for the camera, and they even held up the trams while the cables were manipulated" for the lights.² Inside the ring was another crowd, this one of professional extras, and in the middle were actors: one playing a policeman, and one a reporter; one playing a witness, and another a corpse. The fog in which they were all enveloped, at the heart of a city synonymous with the stuff, had to be simulated.



Daily Graphic, 26 February 1926. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

“No one could have believed there was such a number of people with nothing to do at 2 a.m.,” wrote Walter Mycroft in the following weekend’s *Sunday Herald*, “but the director, Mr. Alfred Hitchcock, who is expected to do big things, was imperturbable—tactful and commanding by turns amid the unexpected crowd.”³ It was the first day of production on the first film Hitchcock would make in England. Later he would recall that “the thing I wanted above all else was to do a night scene in London, preferably on the Embankment. I wanted to silhouette the mass of Charing Cross Bridge against the sky. I wanted to get away from the (at that time) inevitable shot of Piccadilly Circus with hand-painted lights.”⁴ As Iris Barry

reported in the *Daily Mail* on the morning of the shoot, he had been “out daily with his camera man in search of coffee-stalls, bits of the Embankment, and street corners for the exterior scenes of this new London murder mystery,” *The Lodger*.⁵

Also behind the camera that night, though unmentioned in the press, was Hitchcock’s assistant director, Alma Reville, recently profiled in *Picturegoer* magazine as a “super-woman, whose eye is sharper than an eagle’s,” and the occupant of a “unique position in European films.”⁶ The article ended with “two deadly secrets,” one cryptic—“she possesses (but never wears) a pair of horn-rimmed glasses”—and one less so—“she has never had time to get married!” Around Christmas 1925, shortly after the article was published, during a rough crossing from Germany, where the pair of them had made two films almost back to back, and side by side, Hitchcock had proposed to her, and she, too seasick to speak, had made “an affirmative gesture.”⁷

Neither of the two German films, *The Pleasure Garden* and *The Mountain Eagle*, had been released when the couple began work on *The Lodger*, but the first of them had been shown privately to the film critic of the *Express* newspapers, G. A. Atkinson. “The technical skill revealed in this film is superior, I think, to that shown in any film yet made by a British producer,” he had written earlier in February.⁸ “It is improbable that Mr. Hitchcock chose this hectic story of his own accord,” Atkinson went on, “but the point is that he has produced it with remarkable power and imaginative resource.”

About the same time, Hitchcock was made the subject of his own *Picturegoer* profile, three months after his fiancée, in which “the world’s youngest film director”—he was twenty-six—was presented as “the man who starts on the bottom rung and achieves his aim purely by his own industry and enterprise.”⁹ At fifteen, wrote Cedric Belfrage, a studio publicist, “his education at an Art school was suddenly interrupted by the death of his father, and he was left alone—practically penniless.” The adolescent Hitchcock had joined an advertising firm as a clerk, Belfrage continued, his hard work ensuring that he was soon “laying out and writing copy.” Having gained a degree of financial security, he “began to take up the old dreams where they had been cut short years before—the old dreams of his old love, the kinema.” At twenty, he won a job writing and designing

title-cards in the editorial department of what Belfrage simply called “Famous.”

Product of the merger in 1916 of the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company and Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players, “Famous” was Famous Players-Lasky, led by Zukor and increasingly known by the name and logo of its distribution arm, Paramount. By either name it was not merely a film studio, but a trust or combine, vertically integrated from where the cameras rolled to where the projectors whirled. Ten years after the merger, in the midst of a great scramble for possession of cinema chains, Paramount and a handful of rivals, chief among them Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, dominated the screens of the United States, and their ambitions did not end at the three-mile limit.

Famous Players-Lasky had opened a studio at Poole Street, on the border of Hoxton and Islington, in 1920, partly to be close, as Lasky said at the time, to “famous British authors” and “famous British players” from the West End stage, and to film British stories “in their original settings.”¹⁰ Less conveniently, the studio was also, as one British trade paper pointed out, “not only well within the London fog-belt, but on the very banks of a canal.”¹¹ Hitchcock would describe himself as American trained, and Belfrage pictured him seizing the opportunity “to stay down at the studio often for hours after his own work was finished for the day, to make himself familiar with the essentials of scenario writing and art direction,” but the apprenticeship was brief. In February 1922, just months after perfecting the plant’s fog-suppression apparatus, the Americans shipped out. Behind their decision was the realization that a film studio need not be anywhere in particular. In 1913, when Lasky’s “director-general” Cecil B. DeMille arrived in Hollywood, still “bowered in orange and pepper trees,” to shoot the longest film yet made there, he worked in the open air.¹² But in the month FP-L’s London unit came home, less than a decade later, Lasky could write that “Los Angeles’ sunshine is no longer a necessity; indeed many of our pictures in Hollywood are made entirely inside the Lasky studio by artificial light.”¹³

Los Angeles had become the center of world film production in the interim, and if its sunshine was no longer a necessity, it was certainly no deterrent. The novice screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, in California for

the first time in February 1926, wrote to his wife, Sara, that it was “delightful beyond belief with its tropical vegetation and its mad, colored, pretty bungalows.”¹⁴ London—or Roman, or Russian—landmarks could be recreated on the Lasky lot, which by 1926 was spread over two city blocks bordered by Sunset Boulevard and Vine Street, now major thoroughfares in a Hollywood that had lost the scent of citrus. Writers more famous than Mankiewicz were prepared to come to it. Famous players, whether from the West End or Broadway, could be brought out too, but nor were they strictly a necessity. Rudolph Valentino, whose latest film *The Eagle* was playing all over London on the night of 24 February, had no such pedigree. And Hollywood was already attracting established talent from Europe—Ernst Lubitsch at Warner Brothers, Mauritz Stiller and Victor Sjöström at MGM. February 1926 saw the premiere of the first American film of their compatriot Greta Garbo, *Torrent*.

Though Paramount had abandoned its London studio, it had not abandoned London. On the morning of the 24th, journalists were shown around its new West End “shop window,” the two-thousand-seat Plaza cinema, within sight of Piccadilly Circus on Lower Regent Street. At the press lunch afterward, held in the Kit-Cat Club beneath the Capitol cinema, in nearby Haymarket, J. C. Graham, Paramount’s London chief, tried to impress upon his audience the venue’s Britishness. But as part of a chain that ran, in the evocative phrase of Paramount’s historian, “from Vienna to San Francisco,” the Plaza was inescapably an emblem of the American cinema’s global supremacy.¹⁵ Its foyer, reported the *Star* that evening, was filled with “handsome antique Italian furniture,” while its ceiling conjured up “memories of decorations in the Palace of Versailles and the Louvre.”¹⁶ The construction of this ostentatious gallimaufry had been overseen by Al Kaufman, Zukor’s brother-in-law and fixer since their days in the Chicago fur trade. Twenty years earlier, in the mid-1900s, Kaufman had managed Zukor’s first nickelodeon on Union Square, in the middle of immigrant Manhattan, and was on good terms with the neighborhood’s gangsters. Now he aimed to entice the carriage trade.

It was a development that Hitchcock regarded with ambivalence. When François Truffaut, in their famous interview, made his notorious remark on the “incompatibility between the terms ‘cinema’ and ‘Britain,’” Hitchcock’s reply went into the question of cinema’s changing status in

the 1920s.¹⁷ Whereas films had once been “held in contempt by the intellectuals,” and “No well-bred English person would be seen going into a cinema,” he recalled, in the mid-1920s the tide began to turn.¹⁸ The Plaza provided his example. “The management set up four rows of seats in the mezzanine which were very expensive, and they called that section ‘Millionaires’ Row.’” Indeed, as the *Star* reported, its 7s, 6d seats were “so spaciouly arranged that the wearer of a crinoline skirt could move comfortably between the rows.” Readers of the *New Yorker* learned that “the most stirring event of the month is the appearance in *The Times* of an editorial on the opening of London’s new movie cathedral, the Plaza. What the editorial said is beside the point.”¹⁹

Poole Street, Britain’s best-equipped studio, had not lain fallow in the four years since the Americans’ departure, but had been leased, along with its complement of American-trained technicians, to a variety of British producers, most consistently Michael Balcon, who had been quick to notice Hitchcock’s promise and ambition. At twenty-three, as Belfrage recounted, Hitchcock was “scenarist, art director and general assistant” to Balcon’s chief director Graham Cutts, with Reville as second assistant and editor. Gainsborough Pictures, as their company was known from 1924, had done well to survive. British production was at a low ebb: of the 283 films offered for distribution—“trade-shown”—in the first half of 1926, 226 were American, 20 German, and 19 British; and those 19 had a slim chance of being seen widely or in the better and more profitable cinemas.²⁰ Many firms had gone under or were dormant.

Gainsborough, however, was flush with the success of Cutts’s *The Rat*, which had opened in London in December 1925, then nationally in February 1926, and was still playing on the 24th. Its star and coauthor was Ivor Novello, a player who had become famous as a songwriter during the Great War, and was supposedly drawn into the film world after the director Louis Mercanton saw his photograph. Having tried and failed to establish a serious stage career, Novello and his friend Constance Collier—later to appear in *Rope*—had come up with *The Rat*, a “good old-fashioned melodrama,” in his words, of the Parisian underworld.²¹ Heedless of the critics’ chortles, an audience of predominantly female film fans had flooded into theatreland to see it. Cutts’s adaptation had needed the insurance policy of an American costar, Mae Marsh.

At the end of January 1926, Iris Barry reported in the *Daily Mail* that although “tempting offers of film work have recently been made to this actor by American film companies, in whose eyes he is the ‘Latin Lover’ type so popular on the screen,” Novello had instead signed a contract with Gainsborough, the first fruit of which would be *The Lodger*.²² It would not occupy all his energies. On the night of 24 February, a West End theater-goer could have chosen between two future Hitchcock films, *The Farmer’s Wife* at the Court or Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* at the Royalty, a small theater in Soho; or gone to see Noel Coward’s *Hay Fever*, Tallulah Bankhead in *Scotch Mist*, a revival of J. M. Barrie’s *Mary Rose* at the Haymarket—or Ivor Novello in *The Firebrand*, at Wyndham’s. It would continue through most of the *Lodger* shoot.

Novello also had nighttime duties as part-owner of a Soho nightclub, the Fifty-Fifty, occupying the upper floors of 37 Wardour Street. Decorated with “life-size caricatures of famous contemporary stars,” it had opened on Armistice Night 1924, “which in those crazy ‘twenties,” recalled Novello’s business partner Henry Kendall, later to star in Hitchcock’s *Rich and Strange*, “was an occasion for celebration.”²³ Though it was intended to provide cheap meals for stage folk, the club had instantly been taken up by fashionable society. It had also attracted the less welcome attention of the police; “officers in plain clothes, with female companions” visited three times in the weeks before the *Lodger* shoot, as a prelude to a raid, which would come on the night of Saturday 27 February.²⁴

Novello’s costar, known simply as June—her surname, Tripp, had been excised by the impresario Charles B. Cochran on the grounds that it “sounds a bit comical for a dancer”—had been a fixture of the West End stage since childhood, and of the gossip columns more recently.²⁵ In January 1926, while performing nightly at the Hippodrome in *Mercenary Mary*, a musical comedy imported from Broadway, and rehearsing daily for another, *Kid Boots*, destined for the Winter Garden, she had collapsed on stage, suffering from appendicitis, an event that made the front page of the *Daily Express*. Two weeks later, the paper’s theater columnist, Hannen Swaffer, wrote that she “will not be able to dance for six months” following her appendectomy, and that “her representatives are trying to find for her a straight play suitable to her unobtrusive charm.”²⁶ June did not leave her nursing-home until early February—this too was widely reported—and then went to recuperate in the countryside. On the 17th, just seven days

before Hitchcock set up his lights on Westminster Bridge, Swaffer reported that June was in Brighton—and that she “leaves in a few days for the Riviera.”²⁷ It was there, by her own account, that she received a telegram from Novello with an offer of work. “No dancing required. You will act beautifully and we shall have fun.”²⁸ With Novello and June in the lead roles, *The Lodger* was the first Gainsborough film without an American star.

Novello’s apparently carefree attitude belied a need for respect. In the days between the Fifty-Fifty raid and his arrival, reportedly delayed by a bout of bronchitis, at Poole Street, he published an article in the *Daily Sketch* titled “Why I Loathe My Looks,” ironically phrased but sincerely meant.

Having always experienced a deep, though kindly, contempt for those mummies, pedestalled and aloof, known as “Matinée Idols,” it is not without disgust and anger that I find myself having to struggle against what I might almost call a plot to cover me with the same inglorious treacle and impale my repute as an artist on a profile for which I am in no way responsible.²⁹

Having claimed that he “lives for the theatre,” and without bothering to mention his imminent employment in the cinema, Novello went on to declare that his “great ambition is to create Raskolnikov in ‘Crime and Punishment.’”

A film adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s novel, made in Berlin by Robert Wiene in the Expressionist style of his earlier film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, with players from Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre, had recently been shown in London, and Novello is highly likely to have seen it. Its single screening, on 20 December 1925, at the New Gallery cinema in Regent Street, had been arranged by the Film Society, a new organization whose membership also included Hitchcock and Reville. Its principal object, according to a prospectus published that autumn, was to present films that the trade would not touch, or that the censor forbade, “to the most actively-minded people both inside and outside the film-world.”³⁰ Founder members included H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and John Maynard Keynes. Hitchcock described it to Truffaut, in the course of the same exchange in which he discussed the Plaza, and with the same ambivalence, as “something for the intellectuals to do on Sunday afternoon.”³¹

The Film Society's organizers included the critics Iris Barry and Walter Mycroft—both of them friends of Hitchcock and Reville's—and a number of other figures who would take part in the production of *The Lodger*. Novello was named in the weekly *Sphere* as one of the "inevitable celebrities" who attended its first performance in October 1925.³² *Crime and Punishment* had been the centerpiece of its third. On that occasion the *Daily Graphic's* correspondent described an audience composed of "men in brown jumpers, brown shirts, brown boots, and brown hats, and women in black jumpers, black bow ties, black boots and sloppy black hats," with a leavening of aristocrats.³³ "A feature of the performance," reported the *Westminster Gazette's* society columnist, "was the absence of music, and the extraordinary number of people afflicted with coughs."³⁴

Marie Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger*, published as a short story in 1911 and as a novel in 1913, was not *Crime and Punishment*. Nor, however, was it a penny dreadful, though Lowndes feared it would be regarded as one.³⁵ Indeed, there were points of contact between the two books apart from their being about misanthropic lodging-house killers. What would become the most resonant image in Hitchcock's film appears in both. On the very first page of the short story, published in the American magazine *McClure's*, the landlady Mrs. Bunting hears or imagines hearing "her lodger's quick, singularly quiet—'stealthy,' she called it to herself—progress through the dark, fog-filled hall and up the staircase," and the same scene, which Lowndes recounted as having been the germ of her story, taken from life, occurs more than once in the book.³⁶ Meanwhile Raskolnikov, on the first page of Dostoyevsky's novel, is heard to "creep down the stairs like a cat and slip out unseen," and does the same again, "cautiously, noiselessly," when setting out with murderous intent later on. It was Hitchcock who chose to film the scene from above, with only the Lodger's hand visible on the banister. In January 1955, on his first substantial encounter with Truffaut and Chabrol, when asked whether he accepted the common perception of "le vrai Hitchcock," meaning a mixture of comedy and suspense, he said "I would be more interested in filming Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, for example; that would be very easy for me."³⁷

Lowndes's *The Lodger* was and continues to be known as a "Jack the Ripper" story, but almost all of it unfolds inside a house on Marylebone Road, on the northwestern fringe of the West End, and the murders—in

the novel, though not in the short story—take place in roughly the same area. Jack the Ripper, however, was distinctly a creature of the East. The murders of 1888 were committed in or near Whitechapel, and the mass-produced and mass-disseminated image of the Ripper, from the first newspaper reports onward, exploited what was already popularly believed of the East End—teeming with immigrants, ridden with vice, its women-folk preyed upon by slumming aristocrats—and intensified it. Thus in D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, from 1919, Limehouse, where Hitchcock had spent part of his childhood, was introduced in a subtitle as the place “where the Orient squats at the portals of the West.”

The first murder in Hitchcock's *The Lodger*, by contrast, is discovered not at the portals but at the very center of the Empire on which the sun never set. The Victoria Embankment was itself, in the words of the historian G. M. Young, a “visible symbol” of “the conversion of the vast and shapeless city which Dickens knew—fog-bound and fever-haunted, brooding over its dark, mysterious river—into the imperial capital.”³⁸ Dickens had died a few weeks before its opening, by Victoria's son, the future Edward VII, in 1870. Built on land reclaimed from the water, and displacing what had been a Dickensian mess of wharfs and warehouses downriver, to the great new docks past Limehouse, the Embankment was also an invisible symbol of London's modernity, containing a branch of the underground railway and electricity, water, and gas mains, while decorously concealing the city's main sewage pipe.

Rising above the tree-lined roadway, as inevitable an image of London as Piccadilly Circus, was Big Ben, more pedantically the clock tower of the Palace of Westminster, completed in 1859. The neo-Gothic palace itself contains the Houses of Parliament; the new Westminster Bridge, completed in 1862, replacing the one Wordsworth had crossed sixty years earlier, was expressly designed to complement it. As befitting the seat of a maritime empire in the electrical age, Big Ben was synchronized by telegraph signal with the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, since 1884 the source of standard time around the world. In Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*, which Hitchcock would adapt as *Sabotage*, the titular agent's controller proposes an attack on the observatory, rather than a conventional political target, because it would strike at the “sacrosanct fetish” of the

bourgeoisie—at “the source of their material prosperity.” Since 1924 the chimes of Big Ben had been broadcast daily over the BBC’s 2LO station, itself based just back from the Embankment at Savoy Hill. Westminster’s dominion extended even over the fourth dimension and the ether.

The same stretch of the Embankment housed an authority more local in its operations: the Metropolitan Police. Norman Shaw’s New Scotland Yard, under construction at the time of the Whitechapel murders and completed in 1890, was as characteristic a building of the late Victorian era as the Palace of Westminster was of the middle part. As well as the office of the Commissioner and the headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department, the building in its lower depths contained what a writer in 1926 called “a depository of relics of remarkable crimes and their detection,” history narrated “in blood-rusted razors, revolvers and a whole arsenal of other implements of violence”—the Black Museum, originally intended for the training of detectives, but accessible to a select few outsiders.³⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle had visited in 1892, early in the career of Sherlock Holmes, and read the original letter signed “Jack the Ripper.” Lowndes almost certainly visited too; one of the few scenes in *The Lodger* to take place outside the lodging-house is set there. Hitchcock would follow them.

The view down the Embankment framed in *The Lodger*’s first shots was a visual distillation of the self-confident nation Hitchcock had been born into in August 1899, on the eve of the Second Boer War, a conflict that began, as the historian Jan Morris put it, with “the British at the apogee of their imperial advance,” but that by its end in 1902 “had cracked the British mirror.”⁴⁰ It was in the foreground of this panorama of power, amid the Embankment’s enormous masonry, almost under the shadow of Big Ben, the most famous emblem of national, imperial, and temporal authority, within hailing distance of Scotland Yard, “that great organism which fights the forces of civilised crime,” as Lowndes called it in her novel—it was here that Hitchcock chose to stage *The Lodger*’s first murder. The choice marked the real beginning of a film career in which appearances deceive, identities divide, and authorities are undermined.

Hitchcock’s river prospect was not Wordsworth’s but G. K. Chesterton’s. He began his film on or near the spot where Gabriel Syme, the titular Man Who Was Thursday of Chesterton’s 1908 novel, “walked on the

embankment once under a dark red sunset” and was recruited by a passing policeman for undercover detective work among the philosophical anarchists, having been persuaded that “the most dangerous criminal now is the entirely lawless modern philosopher.” In the course of Chesterton’s story, in which all but one of the anarchists turn out to be fellow detectives, Syme finds himself in disarray “recalling the dizziness of a cinematograph”—vertigo, perhaps—and confronting “that final scepticism which can find no floor to the universe.” At the first night of a theatrical adaptation of his novel, in January 1926, Chesterton told the audience at the Hampstead Everyman that he had written it “during a period of youthful and turbulent doubt.”⁴¹ Hitchcock’s cinema would be a cinema of profound doubt, forged in an age of ceaseless turbulence.

The view down the Embankment had changed hardly at all in the years since Hitchcock’s birth, but beneath the surface all had changed utterly. The international order to which its monuments belonged had been shattered by the Great War. There was, wrote H. G. Wells in his best-selling *Outline of History*, published in 1919–20, “a universal desire for the lost safety and liberty and prosperity of pre-war times, without any power of will to achieve and secure these things.”⁴² The facade was nonetheless impressive. Indeed, in the autumn of their preeminence, the British could be encouraged to believe that the world as they imagined it to have been in the high summer of 1914 had after all been restored, or even improved upon.

Doubting intellectuals were starting to discover a terminology for the postwar condition in the writings of Sigmund Freud, whose notion of the sovereign individual as a fiction, imperfectly masking the effects of conflicting unconscious drives, was itself the distinctive product of another disintegrating empire—Austria-Hungary, riven beneath its well-ordered surface by irreconcilable forces, even before they engulfed the rest of the continent. Looking back, Freud’s countryman Arnold Hauser saw in his work “the same anxiety, the same loss of confidence in the meaning of culture, the same concern at being surrounded by unknown, unfathomable and indefinable dangers” as was characteristic of fin-de-siècle art.⁴³ Had Chesterton known of Freud in 1908, he may well have included him in the “purely intellectual conspiracy” that Syme was recruited to counter. Freud’s work, translated, glossed, and popularized, came into wide