



PROJECTING THE ARCHIVE

The Frog

Introduced by Vic Pratt, Producer, BFI Video Publishing

Edgar Wallace's 1925 novel *The Fellowship of the Frog* centres on the investigation by two Scotland Yard policemen, Captain Richard Gordon and Sergeant Elk, into the nefarious organisation of the title, run by one of those mysterious masterminds of the criminal kind found only in fiction, known simply as 'The Frog'. Achieving instant popularity on the page (as did all of Wallace's works), the cinemagoing public did not have to wait long before the story made its transferral to the big screen, appearing in serial form in 1928 with its adaptation in ten episodes as *The Mark of the Frog*, a production of the American company Pathé Exchange, that most prolific producer of serials in the silent period (more on serials later). Jack Edmund Nolan cited another film version, now simply called *The Frog*, as having been produced in 1931, although Nolan failed to cite any relevant details that may have been of assistance in identifying the film, namely production country or actors. This film, if indeed there ever was one, remains a mystery, appearing in no other sources.

That latter anomaly apart, the next screen adaptation of the Wallace story was the 1937 British film being screened today, which was based, not directly on the novel itself, but on the 1935 stage adaptation by Ian Hay. Running for two years at the Princes Theatre in London, the stage version had starred, in the respective roles of police officers Gordon and Elk, the two actors who were to repeat their roles in the film version, shot while the play was still running: a young Jack Hawkins, and, one of Wallace's own favourite actors and the star of many stage and film adaptations of the author's works, Gordon Harker.

It was indeed in an Edgar Wallace play that Harker found his first major role, that of Sam Hackett in *The Ringer*. Cast by Wallace himself, the result was, at least according to *Picturegoer Weekly* a number of years later, a 'sensational success', which led to Harker's 'subsequent development as the unrivalled exponent of Cockney characters'. Further Wallace plays were to follow in its wake for Harker in the 1920s and 1930s, including *The Case of the Frightened Lady*, *The Calendar* and *Number Six*. Such was the actor's links with the name of Wallace on the stage that he was a natural to follow a similar path on the screen. In all, Harker was to appear in eight Wallace film adaptations produced between 1930 and 1938, beginning with *The Squeaker* in 1930 (directed by Wallace himself), and including the reprisal of his stage roles in the screen versions of *The Ringer* (1931), *The Frightened Lady* (1932), and, of course, that of Sergeant Elk in *The Frog*.

It was Gordon Harker's participation in *The Frog* that was seen by many at the time as the highlight of the film. While the *Monthly Film Bulletin* believed *The Frog* to be 'too obvious a thriller to be really thrilling', there was at least some compensation in that 'Gordon Harker makes a vigilant and amusing Elk, [although] most of the other characters lack vitality.' Harker was also the primary reason for seeing the film in the opinion of other like-minded reviewers. 'No one outstanding in the cast beyond Gordon Harker' was the verdict of *Variety*, while for Basil Wright in the *Spectator*, 'what life it

possesses is due to the splendour of Gordon Harker ... Armed with drab mackintosh, with bowler hat, with umbrella pregnant with malice, he stumps from reel to reel, turning all dross to gold.'

Although, as evidenced from some of the above quotes, a number of reviewers gave *The Frog* a lukewarm reception ('a humdrum thriller, which establishes the drearier levels of competence only too typical of many British films' continued Basil Wright in the *Spectator*), others actually viewed the film in a glowing light, even comparing it favourably, in contrast to Wright, with American films of the same ilk. *Kinematograph Weekly* summed up the film as, 'a gangster comedy-melodrama made in England with refreshingly English characters, dialogue, humour and locale. This film is more than equal in entertainment values to the best of its popular transatlantic rivals.' *Film Weekly* was equally enthusiastic along the same patriotic lines: 'It is pleasing to find, from our own studios, a comparatively unpretentious picture which compares favourably with some of the best American efforts of the kind.'

As far as the two trade journals *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Today's Cinema* were concerned, any Edgar Wallace adaptation could not go wrong for the exhibitor. They respectively declared that 'the story, motivated by a generous measure of the unexpected, is real Edgar Wallace, and is packed with excitement,' and 'Edgar Wallace is a name to conjure with in the realm of fictional crime and detection. It [*The Frog*] will provide the popular showman with a useful "pull" in exploiting this picture.' The trade journals, in contrast to some of the other reviewers, were obviously on the same wavelength as audiences, for the film's success led to the production of a sequel the following year, *The Return of the Frog*, with Harker again starring, but this time as the newly promoted Inspector Elk.

The story of *The Fellowship of the Frog* managed to retain its popularity for a number of years to come. Adapted by the BBC for their *Sunday Night Theatre* slot in 1958, Wilfred Pickles and Donald Sinden appeared as Elk and Gordon, with a pre-stardom Michael Caine way down the cast list as 'third police constable'. The following year, by which time Wallace adaptations were coming out thick and fast from Germany, *Der Frosch mit der Maske* was produced in that country, a version of the story that even managed to drag the character of Harry Lime into the plot.

John Oliver, BFI National Archive

THE FROG

Director: Jack Raymond
Production Company: Herbert Wilcox Productions
Producer: Herbert Wilcox *
Production Manager: Tom White
Assistant Director: John Harlow
Scenario: Gerald Elliott
Dialogue: Ian Hay
Based on the novel by: Edgar Wallace
Based on the play adaptation by: Ian Hay
Director of Photography: F.A. Young
Editor: Frederick Wilson
Editor: Merrill G. White *
Art Director: David Rawnsley
Music Director: Geraldo
Sound Recording: L.E. Overton, J. Dennis

Cast

Gordon Harker (*Sergeant Elk*)
Carol Goodner (*Lola Bassano*)
Noah Beery (*Joshua Broad*)
Jack Hawkins (*Captain Gordon*)
Richard Ainley (*Ray Bennett*)
Cyril Smith (*Police Constable Balder*)
Felix Aylmer (*John Bennett*)
Harold Franklyn (*Hagen*)
Vivian Gaye (*Stella Bennett*)
Julien Mitchell (*John Maitland*)
Esme Percy (*Philo Johnson*)
Alfred Atkins
Gordon McLeod (*commissioner*)*

UK 1937
75 mins

* Uncredited

A BFI National Archive print

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Hit the Road (Jaddeh Khaki) Continues from Fri 29 Jul
Conscientious Protectors From Mon 1 Aug
The Feast From Fri 19 Aug
Where Is Anne Frank From Fri 19 Aug
Queen of Glory From Fri 28 Aug

RE-RELEASES

The Big City (Mahanagar) Continues from Fri 22 Jul
Paris, Texas Continues from Fri 29 Jul
The Harder They Come From Fri 5 Aug
Burning an Illusion From Fri 19 Aug

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Tue 16 Aug 18:30
Art in the Making: 12 Views of Kensal House + intro by Steven Foxon, BFI Curator (Non-Fiction)
Thu 18 Aug 18:30
Relaxed Screening: Kes + intro + discussion
Mon 22 Aug 18:15
Woman With a Movie Camera Preview: Queen of Glory
Mon 22 Aug 18:30
Terror Vision: Burnt Offerings
Thu 25 Aug 18:10

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