

A SINISTER TIME WAS HAD BY ALL

Written by KENNETH ALLSOP

Photographed by THURSTON HOPKINS

Alfred Hitchcock, master suspense-spinner of the cinema, passed through London—and paused to pick out a sinister scene or two.

IT was like (Alice Through the Looking Glass fashion) merging into a Hitchcock film. An eye like a camera swung upon us as we entered. Somehow in that brightly lit hotel suite he had managed to find, between a desk and a standard lamp, a sinister shadow to lurk in. A successful brewer, apparently, was using the telephone—but the voice was straight off a Hitchcock sound-track. Raspy, meaningful, and with a trace of microphone-crackle in it, it uttered the ordinary words: "Yes, Dick, why sure. Okay, swell. Okay." Then the word was used—sinister. "Well, that's a sinister way of putting it, Dick, but okay."

The telephone clicked. The shadow was temporarily vacated. The twin lenses under their heavy lids tracked towards us. We sat down to talk to Alfred Hitchcock, arch-terrorist, master-craftsman of the cinema.

Physically, it is a very different Hitchcock now: not the old twenty-one-stone version. One meal a day, and vats of orange juice, have whittled down the famous outline. He is still, as you might say, a fine figure of a man, at thirteen stone. Now the effect is of a Flying Fortress put on fighter duty, but the personality seems all the more edged and evident. A hippo poised to leap.

What, we asked, accounted for his preoccupation with murder and the sinister (*Dial M for Murder, Strangers on a Train, Rear Window*). It was easy, he explained: "I'm just an ordinary, uninhibited fellow. I attribute it to clean living." The smile was sardonic.

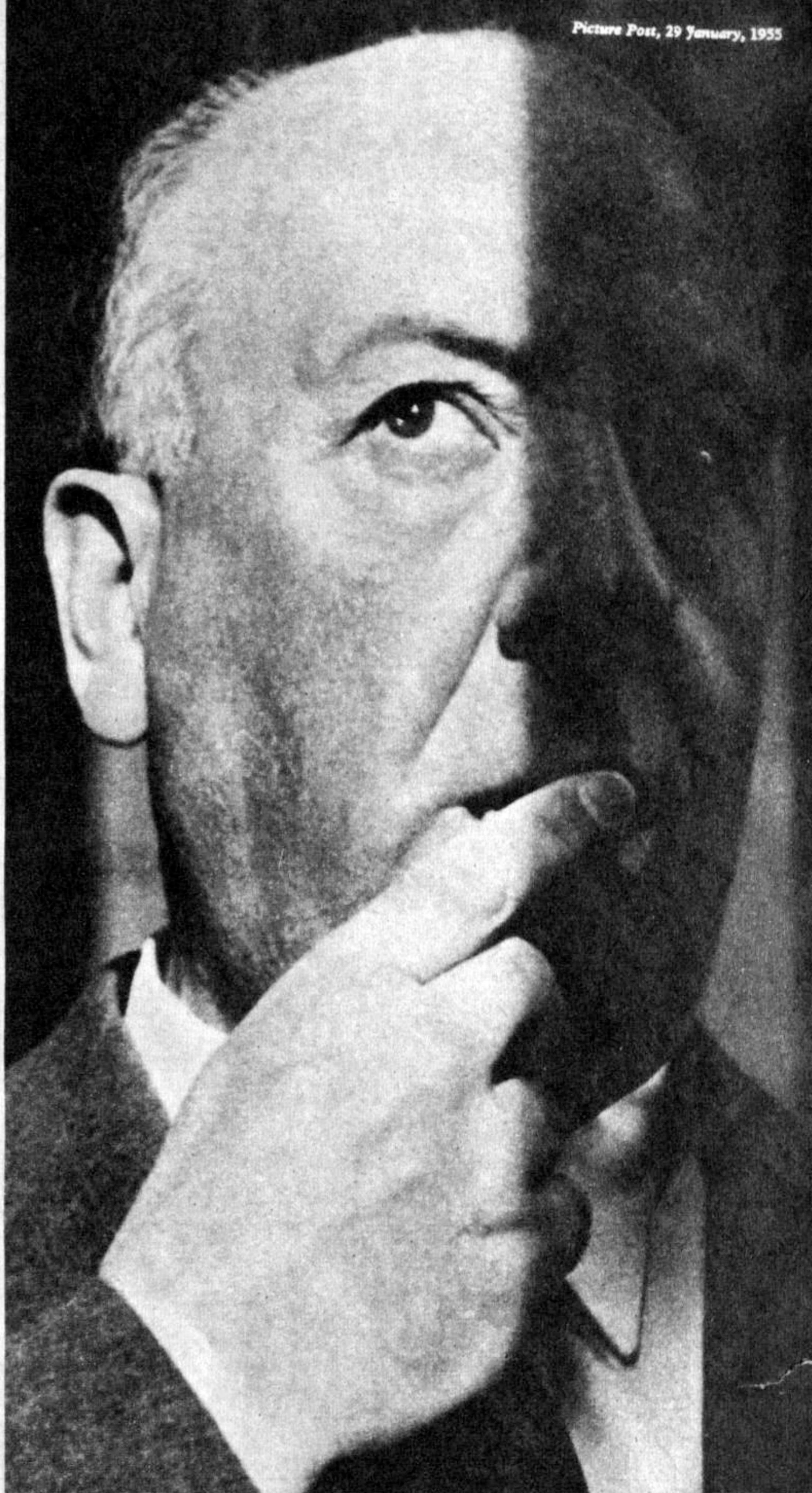
Hitchcock's craftsmanship is really more complex. Son of an Essex poultry-dealer, his first job in films was writing sub-titles. ('Came the dawn' and 'Her petals were bruised, but she was the flower of his heart.') At twenty-eight he was a director making £17,000 a year. Since then, the suspense has never been let up.

His ambition is a simple and benevolent one: to make us bleed internally with fear. But not by splashing us with gore—it is never, in a Hitchcock film, more than a subtle smear. When Hitchcock hears the word gun, he reaches for Culture.

His carnage has a coating of sophistication; there is an art-paper patina upon the corpses and the cut-throats; he will eventually, you suspect, have a character murdered with a stuffed olive. What matters to Hitchcock is taking murder as a central point and weaving around that a web of nightmare tension.

For instance, he has just finished a film called *The Trouble With*

HITCHCOCK EXPLAINS murder techniques: "Scissors are an excellent weapon used from this angle." (Remember Grace Kelly's lethal scissors-work in *Dial M for Murder*?) "But you get a more serrated wound with pruning shears."



Harry. Harry is a body. It is a 'mood' film, a 'pastorale', he says with a macabre lift of an eyebrow. The tension is woven from the embarrassment and danger that Harry the stiff causes to his acquaintances.

Hitchcock puts a profound point: "It is much easier to make an artistic movie than a good commercial movie." And he is that rare case in films; a director with an unblemished record for box-office success who has never surrendered intelligence. For thirty years he has strung the public up by their nerve-ends, and made them enjoy it, but he also demands from them an adult attitude to sudden death—horror-comics for the intelligentsia. His pictures may not have much 'reality' about them, but his acute and sensitive mind always puts the

sort of people you know in surroundings you're familiar with, and the resulting situation is artfully heightened by as brilliant a technical sense as there is in the business.

He was passing through England with his wife on the way to St. Moritz, 'for nostalgic reasons': it was there they honeymooned in 1926. He spent a short time looking around the old London scenes. We went with him as far as the British Museum. There, beside a pillar, was an irresistible shadow, vacant possession. With a sinister side-step, he was lurking half in it, finger menacingly to lips, cold eye cast beyond the camera to speculation about future blood-lettings. It was a fitting Hitchcock fade-out.