

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre

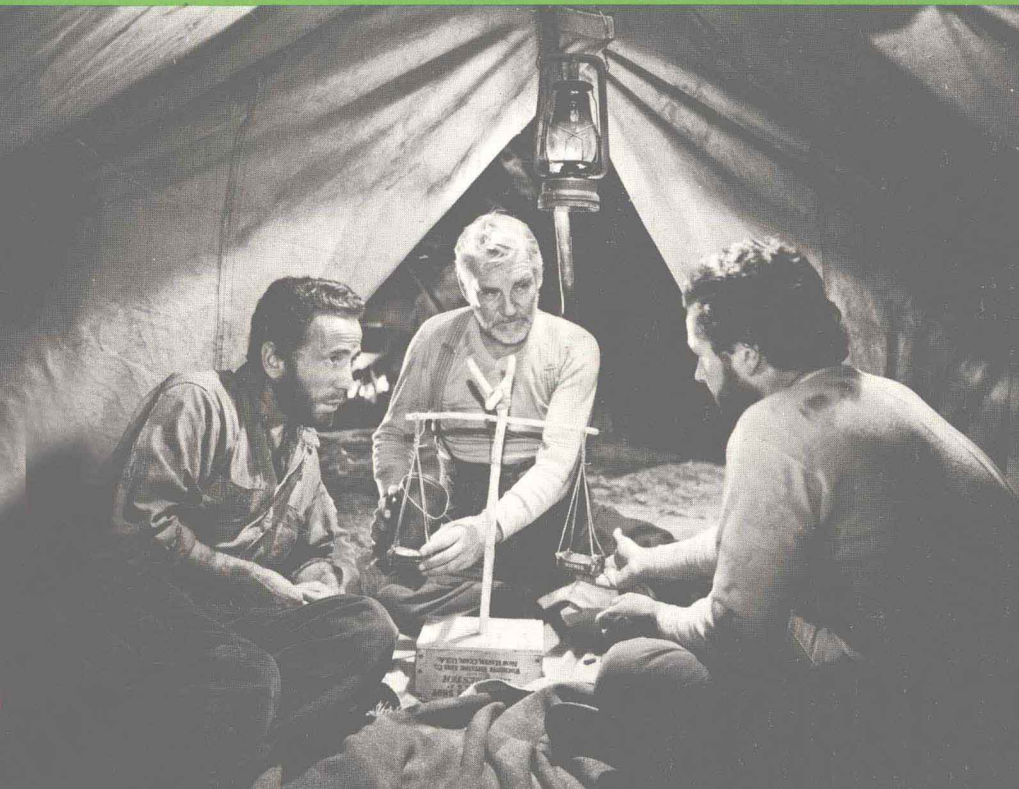
Edited with an introduction by
James Naremore

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WISCONSIN/WARNER BROS SCREENPLAY SERIES

TINO BALIO

General Editor



The Treasure of the Sierra Madre

Wisconsin/Warner Bros. Screenplay Series

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James Naremore

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Foreword

In donating the Warner Film Library to the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in 1969, along with the RKO and Monogram film libraries and UA corporate records, United Artists created a truly great resource for the study of American film. Acquired by United Artists in 1957, during a period when the major studios sold off their films for use on television, the Warner library is by far the richest portion of the gift, containing eight hundred sound features, fifteen hundred short subjects, nineteen thousand still negatives, legal files, and press books, in addition to screenplays for the bulk of the Warner Brothers product from 1930 to 1950. For the purposes of this project, the company has granted the Center whatever publication rights it holds to the Warner films. In so doing, UA has provided the Center another opportunity to advance the cause of film scholarship.

Our goal in publishing these Warner Brothers screenplays is to explicate the art of screenwriting during the thirties and forties, the so-called Golden Age of Hollywood. In preparing a critical introduction and annotating the screenplay, the editor of each volume is asked to cover such topics as the development of the screenplay from its source to the final shooting script, differences between the final shooting script and the release print, production information, exploitation and critical reception of the film, its historical importance, its directorial style, and its position within the genre. He is also encouraged to go beyond these guidelines to incorporate supplemental information concerning the studio system of motion picture production.

We could set such an ambitious goal because of the richness of the script files in the Warner Film Library. For many film titles, the files might contain the property (novel, play, short story, or original story idea), research materials, variant drafts

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of scripts (from story outline to treatment to shooting script), post-production items such as press books and dialogue continuities, and legal records (details of the acquisition of the property, copyright registration, and contracts with actors and directors). Editors of the Wisconsin/Warner Bros. Screenplay Series receive copies of all the materials, along with prints of the films (the most authoritative ones available for reference purposes), to use in preparing the introductions and annotating the final shooting scripts.

In the process of preparing the screenplays for publication, typographical errors were corrected, punctuation and capitalization were modernized, and the format was redesigned to facilitate readability.

Unless otherwise specified, the photographs are frame enlargements taken from a 35-mm print of the film provided by United Artists.

In 1977 Warner Brothers donated the company's production records and distribution records to the University of Southern California and Princeton University, respectively. These materials are now available to researchers and complement the contents of the Warner Film Library donated to the Center by United Artists.

Tino Balio
General Editor

Introduction: *A Likely Project*

James Naremore

It flashed through his mind that he had seen many a movie in which the hero was trapped in a situation like this. But he realized at the same time that he could not remember one single picture in which the producer had not done his utmost to help the trapped hero out again to save the girl from the clutches of a bunch of villains.

—B. Traven, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*

The worst ain't so bad when it finally happens. Not nearly as bad as you figure it will be before it's happened.

—Curtin in Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, B. Traven's novel published in this country in 1935, tells the story of three down-and-out American working men stuck in Mexico at the end of an oil boom. Ragged and almost hopeless, they scrape together what money they have and set out to prospect for gold in the mountains. By extraordinary good fortune they strike it rich, but mutual suspicion, the harsh desert weather, and Mexican bandits all conspire to deprive them of their treasure. There is no Hollywood-style happy ending to the book, and, as the first quote above indicates, the very subject of movies is

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sometimes used as a way of showing the disparity between life and fantasy. (At one point, two of the prospectors discuss using their gold to start up a movie theater in the town of their choice; the most untrustworthy of the two plans to be the entertainment director, leaving the more mundane details of management to his partner.) It is surprising, therefore, that Traven's novel should have become a classic motion picture from Warner Brothers and a winner of Academy Awards for best direction, best original screenplay, and best supporting actor and New York Film Critics prizes for best picture and best direction. Perhaps the prospector Curtin is correct: The worst ain't so bad when it finally happens.

On the other hand, it is easy to see why *Treasure* should have seemed a likely project for its screenwriter and director, John Huston, who was once known as a Hollywood maverick and who seems to have drifted into the movies from a life more lucky but no less vagrant than Traven's characters. Huston's films typically end in failure, though not necessarily in absolute disaster. The people in his stories are frequently involved in a dangerous quest—it may be a search for a jeweled falcon, a bank robbery, a journey down an African river aboard a battered steamboat, a mad chase after a white whale, or, most recently, an attempt to conquer an entire country and become its king. The best of these people behave with grace under pressure, but at the last moment some ironic twist usually makes everything go wrong, so they become philosophers of a sort, like losers at a roulette wheel. Thus Sam Spade, in a gesture Huston invented for him, wryly calls the phony black bird “the stuff that dreams are made of,” and then walks sadly offscreen. Even when the characters do succeed, there is a moment toward the end of the story when all their striving comes to nothing and they have only their respect for one another as reward—for example, in *The African Queen*, where Bogart and Hepburn embrace and collapse on the deck of their boat in complete fatigue, the camera rising above high marsh grass to show the ocean they have sought only a few feet away. For Huston, the human adventure is always arbitrary, absurd, and cruel, but it can be partly re-

deemed by ironic distance, stubbornness, and let-the-chips-fall courage.

The quality of life in Huston's films clearly has roots in his own experience. He was born in 1906 in Nevada, Missouri, a town he claims his grandfather had won in a poker game. The son of actor Walter Huston and newspaperwoman Rhea Gore, he led an unstable and rather sickly childhood. His parents were divorced when he was quite young, and at one point he was confined to a sanatorium where he was diagnosed as hopelessly ill; at nights he began sneaking out of his room and taking devil-may-care slides for life down a nearby waterfall, which miraculously restored his health. Having survived this brush with death, he became an amiable vagabond, taking up risk as a style. As he grew older he gambled on horses, studied painting with an avant-garde group in Los Angeles, became an amateur boxing champion, acted on the stage in New York, and was made an honorary lieutenant in the Mexican cavalry. He then almost casually began a vocation as a writer by selling a few stories to H. L. Mencken at *The American Mercury*.

Shortly after his stories were published, Huston followed his father to the movie studios. After a brief period doing scripts at Universal, he made an abortive attempt at working for Gaumont-British in England, where he quarreled with his boss and was fired. On the same day, he discovered that a ticket he had bought for the Irish Sweepstakes was a winner, giving him just enough money to get his sick wife back to the States. He remained behind, living for a time a sort of Orwellian bum's existence in London, but by the late thirties he had moved again to Hollywood, where he quickly became an important writer at Warners (*Jezebel*, *Juarez*, *Sergeant York*, and *High Sierra*, among others). In 1941 he persuaded Jack Warner to let him direct his own adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*, and that film, made at virtually the same time as *Citizen Kane*, gave him a debut almost as impressive as Orson Welles's. After directing two relatively minor pictures from other people's scripts (*In This Our Life* and *Across the Pacific*), he went to work for the U.S. Army film unit, where he enhanced his

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reputation with three of the most impressive, least patriotic of wartime documentaries—*Report from the Aleutians*, *The Battle of San Pietro*, and *Let There Be Light*.

Immediately after the war, he returned to Warners and began *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which was his second feature as writer/director and the one that brought him the greatest number of personal awards. It still holds up as a spare, relatively uncompromised adaptation of the Traven novel, with a good feel for life in the Mexican provinces, a distinguished performance by Walter Huston, and a vivid, chilling portrayal of the bandit Gold Hat by Alfonso Bedoya. It is arguably Huston's most representative film, in various ways recalling *The Maltese Falcon* and looking forward to *The Man Who Would Be King*. It is also one of his most effective screenplays, as the script published here will show.

Treasure and Falcon: Their Common Themes

Huston had wanted to make a film of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* for some time, and Warners anticipated him by beginning an adaptation before he was demobilized from the war. (B. Traven, incidentally, was a relatively unknown writer inside the United States and was paid only five thousand dollars for the property. By contrast, when Walter Huston was signed on as an actor in the film, he was guaranteed a minimum of fifty thousand dollars for eight weeks' work.) According to some references, Robert Rossen wrote an early draft of the adaptation, but I have not been able to see any versions prior to Huston's entry on the scene.¹ Nevertheless it seems fairly safe to assume that Huston worked directly from the novel, motivated by his longstanding interest in Traven, with whom he shared certain temperamental and intellectual qualities.

By choosing *Treasure* he was returning to the same themes he had explored in *The Maltese Falcon*. Once again he was

1. See, for example, David Thomson's *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), p. 497.

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adapting a tough, "masculine" novel about a group of characters in search of a treasure; once again the search ends in ironic failure—indeed, Walter Huston's burst of Homeric laughter at the conclusion (see figure 24) has the same function as Sydney Greenstreet's philosophic chuckle when he discovers that the black bird is made of lead; once again the quest for riches enables the director to depict a paradoxical blend of human greed, ingenuity, and resilience; and once again the behavior of a small, eccentric group at the margin of ordinary society becomes the vehicle for a satire of the whole culture.

That satire, moreover, has a distinctly leftist quality. By selecting Dashiell Hammett and B. Traven as the basis of his first two films, Huston was indirectly declaring his sympathy with the ethos of Popular Front literature in the 1930s; hence the special appeal of his early pictures lay not merely in their gritty, anti-Hollywood "realism" and in the cleverness of their acting ensembles, but in the slightly muffled, allegorical criticism of social life in America that they derived from their sources. For example, as Steven Marcus has observed in an essay on Dashiell Hammett, the Maltese Falcon acts as a symbol for the history of capitalism and capitalist culture: "It is originally a piece of plunder, part of what Marx called 'primitive accumulation'; when its gold encrusted with gems is painted over, it becomes a mystified object, a commodity. . . . At the same time it is another fiction, a representation or work of art—which turns out itself to be a fake."² The falcon also enables Hammett to show what Marcus calls a "pre-Marxist" or Hobbesian view of human relations, based on universal warfare and instinctive mistrust. Thus the thieves who search for the falcon are in direct competition with one another—like parody capitalists—and Sam Spade's cool head, natural suspiciousness, and practical ethics are the only things that save him from a folly like theirs.

In the case of B. Traven, whose Marxist ideas were more

2. Steven Marcus, Introduction to *The Continental Op* by Dashiell Hammett (New York: Random House, 1974), p. xxv.

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conscious and more foregrounded than Hammett's, the argument is similar: The treasure in the mountains has behind it a long history of colonial, Roman Catholic, and capitalist exploitation of Mexico. Of little utility in itself, the gold becomes a commodity used for filling teeth or for decoration—in the words of one of the prospectors, the nuggets are “just crying to you to take them out of the ground and make them shine in coins and on the fingers and necks of swell dames” (scene 15). When the plunder accumulates, however, it provokes a basic mistrust. “As long as there's no find,” the character Howard says, “the noble brotherhood will last, but when the piles begin to grow, that's when the trouble starts” (scene 13). As Traven himself puts it, once the gold is collected, its owners have “left the proletarian class and neared that of the property-holders.” They have “reached the first step by which man becomes the slave of his property.”

The “Mystery” of Traven

Huston was such an admirer of Traven's work that he became involved in correspondence with the author during the early drafts of the screenplay—a communication facilitated by Paul Kohner, the literary agent in California for both men. Traven had earlier written a complete, unproduced film script based on his book *The Bridge in the Jungle* and was, according to Huston, prone to “digress and go into the philosophy of the camera.”³

Like nearly everyone who had managed to correspond with the man, Huston became curious about the so-called mystery of Traven, who had become as secretive and jealous of his true identity as have writers like Salinger and Pynchon in our own day, and nearly as paranoid as some of the characters in his novels. Little was known about him, except that he was a

3. Gerald Pratley, *The Cinema of John Huston* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes, 1977), p. 59. For further discussion of Traven and the film, see Stuart Kaminsky's *John Huston, Maker of Magic* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

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best-selling writer in Europe and Latin America, and that he claimed to be a forty-seven-year-old U.S. citizen living as a recluse in Mexico. He never even revealed what the letter *B* of his first name stood for, and he wrote angry letters to Paul Kohner when the Warner Brothers contracts identified him as "Bruno Traven."

Ultimately, after their long communication about the movie script, Huston arranged a meeting with Traven in Mexico City. In an interview with Gerald Pratley, he tells this curious story of what transpired:

I was in my hotel room in Mexico City and I awoke early in the morning. I'm one of those people who never locks his door wherever he is. Standing at the foot of my bed was the shadowy figure of a man. He took a card out and gave it to me. I put on the light, it was still dark, and it said, "Hal Croves, Interpreter, Acapulco and San Antonio." I said, "How do you do, Mr. Croves." Then he said, "I have a letter for you from Mr. B. Traven," and he gave me the letter, which I read. It said that he himself was unable to appear but this man knew as much about his work as he himself did and knew as much about the circumstances and the country and he would represent Traven in every way. We had conversations, Croves and I, for the few days I was in Mexico City. I gave him the script, he read it, liked what he read and said he was sure Traven would like it very much.⁴

Naturally Huston suspected at first that Hal Croves was Traven incognito, but he was never able to find out for certain. He hired Croves as technical adviser while the movie company was on location in Mexico, and when the film was released *Life* magazine ran an article comparing a candid photo of Croves on the set with another photo purporting to be a 1927 likeness of Traven. Humphrey Bogart was asked to identify the man in the older picture. "Sure, pal," the *Life* reporter quoted him as saying, "I'd know him anywhere. I worked with him for ten weeks in Mexico."⁵ Huston, however, was less certain, because he thought the personality of

4. Pratley, *The Cinema of John Huston*, p. 59.

5. *Life*, February 12, 1948, p. 36.

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Croves was inconsistent with the “generous” man he had known through the letters. “To this day I have my doubts,” he told Pratley, and the doubts will probably remain because Croves, who in later years allowed himself to be called Traven, is now dead.⁶

Adapting the Novel to a Screenplay

Whatever assistance Huston received from Traven/Croves, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was a slightly more difficult book to adapt for movies than *The Maltese Falcon* had been. With Hammett’s short novel, which was already cast in dramatic form, Huston had made few changes, preserving the dialogue almost verbatim. Traven, however, used the adventure of the three prospectors as a starting point for a series of digressions, giving the reader several minor stories related to the central one. These secondary stories, which are narrated by the characters in the main plot, create a history of Mexican society and an atmosphere of economic determinism, making the three prospectors only the latest agents in a very old process. For example, Howard tells about the legendary Aqua Verde mine, which had been discovered and worked by the ancient Aztecs. He describes the Spanish conquistadors as greedy sadists who tortured the Indian miners Inquisition-style, holding out crucifixes before their victims and giving part of the treasure to the Holy Father in Rome. Indian villages were raided to work the mine, until the Indians took revenge and massacred everyone in sight, covering over the mine entrance and leaving it hidden. Then a party of Americans rediscovered the treasure in 1900, but fell out among themselves. One of the survivors of this expedition was subsequently persuaded to try to find the mine again; when he was unable to locate the spot he was tortured by his suspicious companions, and when he returned home to Kansas his house was burned down by angry, greedy neighbors.

Huston compared Traven’s digressive technique to Melville,

6. Pratley, *The Cinema of John Huston*, p. 61.