

# behind the scenes with FU MANCHU



In "The Face of Fu Manchu" Christopher Lee follows in the shivery Manchu footsteps of Warner Oland and Boris Karloff. Producer Oliver Unger has acquired the film rights to the Fu Manchu novels from the widow of Sax Rohmer, and the Technicolor thriller currently making the rounds is only the first of an entirely new film series starring Lee as "the most evil man in the world."

The directing chores were handled by Don Sharp, familiar to *Castle* readers as the director of *WITCHCRAFT* with Lon Chaney Jr. and the tastefully-done and off-beat vampire-cult film, *KISS OF THE VAMPIRE*. To rejuvenate Fu Manchu, Sharp and producer Unger took their cameras to Ireland where Dublin's historic and grim Kilmainham Jail provided a sinister setting for several sequences. Built in the late 18th Century, its network of shadowy torture chambers and claustrophobic cells were designed to cast fear into the hearts of the Irish people of the time. The cells are often referred to as "prison straightjackets," tiny unheated holes with small barred apertures near the top, packed in tiers, one circular row after another. All but two of the signers of Ireland's 1916 Proclamation of Independence were shot in the yard at Kilmainham; the exceptions were Roger Casement, who was hanged in London, and Thomas Kent, executed in Cork. The jail was abandoned in 1924 and rapidly deteriorated until, in 1960, a restoration project began—leaving the area in perfect condition for Fu Manchu art director Frank White, who converted the edifice into the palace of the High Llama of Tibet.

To create the Imperial Palace of Justice in Shanghai for another scene, White brought in a huge 5-foot Buddha, ancient Chinese pennants and a gruesome collection of execution instruments.

Birgit Lee, the attractive Danish-born wife of Chris Lee, was on hand for the "execution" of her husband. At each end of the courtyard, White had constructed curving Chinese gates, and a stark head-chopping block was situated midway between the two gates. A mandarin walked through one gate and read from a scroll the announcement of the doom of Fu



Manchu. Stretched out, waiting for the fateful ax, Christopher Lee faced the ordeal of not one, but six takes as director Sharp attempted to get the most realistic execution possible into his film. Each time the massive guillotine-like blade descended toward Chris's neck, Birgit gasped, almost forgetting that she had brought a color camera to record the experience. "It was very cold and I kept thinking that the executioner's fingers might slip, but everything turned out well," she commented. "And now I have it all for the family album."

"Even though we were acting, it was a very nerve-wracking experience," added Chris.

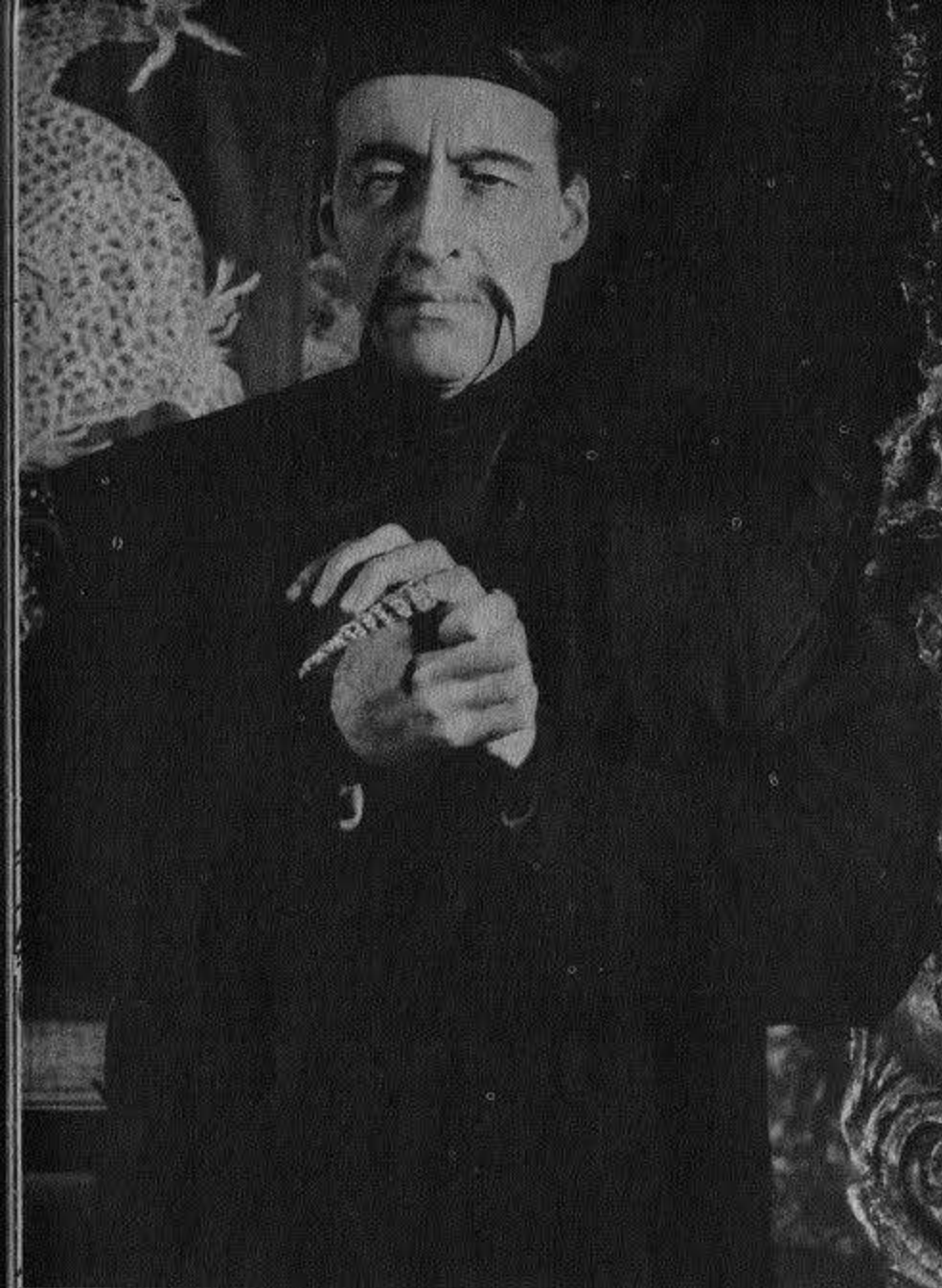
A few hours later and 17 miles

from Kilmainham, Chris was sitting in comfort, minus make-up, in the bar at the Montrose Hotel where he spoke about the revival of Fu Manchu for *Castle of Frankenstein*. "I think Fu Manchu is one of the most absorbing characters ever created. Sax Rohmer described him in one of his novels as 'one of the most gigantic and most amazingly horrible form.' That's pretty strong language, but I suppose it was quite merited."

"The more I found out about Fu Manchu by reading all the old Rohmer books the more he fascinated me, thinking how far ahead his mind was working in plotting some new scheme."

"I think it's a very good idea to keep all the new Fu Manchu





The world has been full of Fu Manchu and various oriental types—Fu's even been in full view on TV in a series so diluted of "mystery" that we didn't even have the energy to get a still (but take our word for it, it was pretty crummy). Above left is Lee gloating appropriately in the newest version. Next to him is Fu's daughter by a death mask. But it was the fabulous Warner Oland (below) who became the first Fu in Paramount's 1929 MYSTERIOUS DR. FU MANCHU with Jean Arthur. For many years, Oland remained filmdom's Number One Oriental, playing villains (Fu, Dr. Yagami in WEREWOLF OF LONDON, etc.) and heroes—such as his immortal Charlie Chan essayed until his death in 1938 at the age of 58. Oriental typecasting obscured the fact that Oland was born a full-blooded Swede. On the opposite page is the old maestro, Karloff, fuing it up in front of his equally evil daughter, Myrna Loy, while Charles Starrett suffers as the tortured hero in MGM's 1932 MASK OF FU MANCHU. Starrett went on to greater fame as the Durango Kid. A few years later Karloff wore Oriental makeup again in Monogram's MR. WONG series.



stories in the background and atmosphere of the 1920's the period in which they were originally created."

**THE FACE OF FU MANCHU** is the sixth picture produced by Oliver Unger in the past 18 months, and every sequence of each of these films was shot entirely on location. The **FU MANCHU** crew of 24 technicians was shooting in Dublin at the same time Richard Burton strode into town to do **THE SPY THAT CAME IN FROM THE COLD** at Ardmore Studios. Occasionally, the Unger group borrowed some accessory from Ardmore, but since they

had never intended to rent any studio space, there was no disappointment when the **SPY** unit ran far over schedule and stayed on at the studio.

Unger agrees with Lee that today's audiences are seeking the type of screen adventure that made films big business in the Twenties and Thirties. Convinced that Fu Manchu can be an even bigger draw now, Unger has already begun work on the second in the series with screenplays in preparation for the third and fourth Manchu pictures.

—Edward Pickman Derby

