

'I had come to this'

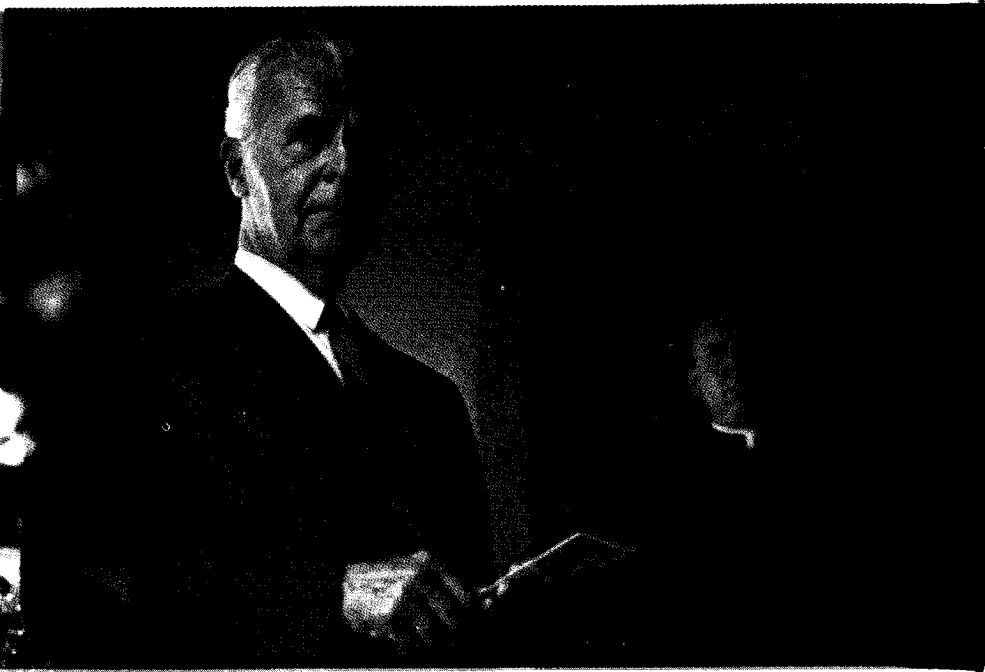
The moving story of Neil Hamilton's return from disaster



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BY LESLIE RADDATZ

I was afraid. Afraid I would lose my nerve. This was the day. It was to be my last. This day I would kill myself. . . ."

The speaker was Neil Hamilton, veteran of more than 300 movies and half a century in show business, now at

66 playing the part of Police Commissioner Gordon in ABC's *Batman*. The occasion was the annual Communion Breakfast of Roman Catholics in motion pictures and television. More than 1500 persons were in the ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel that Sunday morning last winter. Bob Crane, star

of Hogan's Heroes, was master of ceremonies, and only moments before, the crowd had been laughing at his quips. Then came what someone there described as "thunderous silence—I never heard such silence in my life," as Hamilton began to speak.

"Looking back on it now, it seems like utter madness. It was over 20 years ago, and yet at the time I was convinced it was the only thing to do. I knew it was wrong, but my compulsion to do it stemmed from the fact that it offered a solution—or at least it seemed to. Insurance—money for my family, money that would pay three months' back rent, money for food and the dozen and one essentials necessary to existence. . . . From the top of the heap with a house that took five servants to run, with the second-largest swimming pool in the State of California, I had come to this—the end. . . ."

When Neil Hamilton came to Hollywood in 1925, he had already been in the movies seven years. He had arrived in New York in 1917 with the proceeds of the sale of a \$50 Liberty Bond and the ambition to be an actor. At Fort Lee, N.J., the Hollywood of the day, he appeared in such topical pictures as "The Life of General Pershing" and "The Beast of Berlin" and with popular movie stars like Tom Moore, Madge Kennedy, Mae Marsh, Rod La Rocque and Marion Davies.

When acting jobs were scarce, he modeled for the top illustrators in New York—James Montgomery Flagg, Charles Dana Gibson, Howard Chandler Christy, Norman Rockwell and Joseph Leyendecker. It was Leyendecker who painted the early Arrow Collar ads, and Hamilton gained his first fame as "The Arrow Collar Man."

His first big break came when he was put under contract to D. W. Griffith, for whom he made three pictures, "The White Rose," "America"

and "Isn't Life Wonderful." In his first five years in Hollywood, Hamilton made more than 70 movies, including the first "Beau Geste," in which he played Ronald Colman's twin brother. When talking pictures came along, he moved into them with ease, appearing in such early classics as "The Sin of Madelon Claudet," "Dawn Patrol," "The Animal Kingdom" and "One Sunday Afternoon."

"The reason or reasons for my loss of position, money, friends and career are unimportant now—water over the dam. Everyone that I had turned to in desperation was very sorry—oh, so very sorry—but where I needed a thousand dollars, I was offered 10. Did I say everyone had let me down? You might wonder why a young man who had once planned to enter the priesthood wouldn't know there was One who would never let me down. . . . I had been blessed with a fine religious mother and father, whose teaching, by word and by example, put the rock of faith solidly under my feet. . . ."

Neil Hamilton, an only child, was born in Lynn, Mass., on Sept. 9, 1899. His school years lasted only until his second year of high school, when the principal called him into his office and told him not to come back. This settled any ideas he or his parents might have had of his becoming a priest. For the rest of the term he left home every morning, climbed to the top of a tree and watched the world from there. When his father discovered that Neil was no longer going to school, he told him that he would have to go to work. The boy was used to work. Before he was 15 he had worked in a clothing store, a drug store, a toy factory, an ammunition factory and a hardware store.

But it was a menial household chore that led to his decision to be an actor. Each day during the

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summer it was his job to collect garbage for his father's pigs at the summer home of theatrical producer Morris Gest, which adjoined the Hamilton farm near Athol, Mass., where the family had moved. Today Hamilton says, "I didn't know anything about acting or actors, but these people were wonderful. They laughed all day, and I wanted to do what they did."

"Through all my troubles, there was one person who never let me down—my darling and wonderful wife. She never found fault, never complained. . . . As I headed toward my goal, I hated myself for what I was about to do to her. The horror, the shame, the bitter disappointment would always be hers, but it was the only way out. I knew it. . . ."

This year, Neil and Elsa Whitmer Hamilton celebrate their 44th wedding anniversary. When they first met, he was the leading man of a stock company in Toledo, Ohio. Elsa was, he says, "the youngest and prettiest theater manager in the country." When the company let him go, he stayed on in Toledo, where he worked at a variety of jobs to be near his fiancée, but finally she persuaded him to return to New York and acting. As soon as he found a berth in a stock company in Brooklyn, they were married. Today, he refers to her as "my girl" or "my exquisite wife." She tried to warn him against the disastrous investment he made in an exhibit at the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair, which wiped out what he had left after the 1929 Crash. There were no acting jobs now for the middle-aged leading man.

"There was a spot high in the mountains above Santa Monica—from which I planned to leap off into space. Four or five hundred feet straight down

was the remains of an old quarry, the bottom of which was a honeycomb of big deep holes that wouldn't be explored for years to come. . . . As I climbed toward Sunset Boulevard, I found to my great surprise that I'd turned from the sidewalk and had climbed a steep flight of stone steps that I'd never climbed before and found myself in front of a big front door I'd never seen before. It was the door of the Newman Club on the edge of the UCLA campus, presided over by a gracious, kindly man, Father Benjamin Bowling. . . . I rang the bell. No answer. I rang again. This time the door opened, and there stood Father Bowling. . . . I told him the story—the whole silly, shabby story. . . ."

The priest and the actor talked for many hours that day. Father Bowling told Hamilton about St. John Bosco, "wonder-worker of our own day," and suggested that he make a novena—a nine-day regimen of prayers—to the saint. Hamilton did so. At the end of those nine days, he got an acting job at Universal Studios.

There have been ups and downs since, but Neil Hamilton has never again known despair. For 13 years, he was away from Hollywood, appearing on the stage in "State of the Union" and "Solid Gold Cadillac" and doing television in New York and Philadelphia. In 1957 he and his wife went back West (their adopted daughter still lives in New York). They live in a modest apartment in an older section of Hollywood.

Most of his friends of the movies' early days are dead now. But his friend St. John Bosco is always with him, and he carries with him printed copies of the novena prayers, which he passes out to acquaintances and people he meets. Often he speaks at church meetings in the Los Angeles archdiocese, retelling the events of that dark day a quarter of a century ago, urging others to share his faith.