

MOVIE MADNESS

by

WINNIFRED REEVE

Chapter VII.

It was the middle of October. Production was at its peak in all the studios in Hollywood. For two weeks they had been "shooting" Jane's story--"Rose Petals". She scarcely left the set. As the picture progressed, her enthusiasm mounted. Her gratitude to Harron turned to admiration and sincere respect for the man's extraordinary ability as a director. While working he seemed to be transformed--a veritable human dynamo, with no thought for anything but the picture he was directing.

Jane would not listen to any of the stories brought to her concerning Harron. Even when Millie attempted to warn her and finished with: "Get away from the Harron atmosphere. I loathe that man", Jane defended:

"It's because you don't know him. He's very exceptional, and one is forced to respect his tremendous ability".

Milly returned peevishly:

"Oh I know him all right. He's on his good behaviour now because ~~because~~ he's working on a picture; but he's raging tiger underneath. You just wait till he breaks loose. He'll probably go on one big drunk and it won't be safe then to be within a mile of him, because when he's drunk he's a maniac".

Johnny Heglin overtook her one day when she was hurrying back to the Harron set.

"Hold on there!"

"I've got to fly. Mr. Harron's waiting for ~~him~~".

"That bird! Let him wait".

"Don't be silly".

Johnny knitted his brows gloomily.

"Jane, look here, do you realize you're being talked about?"

Jane flamed.

"How can people talk about someone they don't know?"

"Easily enough, if you're seen everywhere with Harron. You're labelled. You should know that you can't play with mud and keep clean".

"I'm not playing with mud" denied Jane indignantly.

"I'm simply working, and Mr. Harron has been so good to me that it would be beastly disloyal on my part to say anything derogatory about him. I owe everything to him".

"Hm. Well I'd hate to be in his debt" said Johnny, pulling his cap down over his eyes. "Bye! See you some day, maybe".

Jane was provoked by Johnny's attitude, but she was fond of him and she looked back regretfully toward where Johnny was tramping off, pretending to whistle nonchalantly.

As she was going absently down the little narrow passage between a line of dressing rooms and stages B, D and F, she slackened her pace to let a man pass, who was coming toward her. As she moved back, she glanced up, and suddenly her heart

leaped in her breast like a wild, live thing. A moment of this overtaken fright, and then from some source within her came strength and poise. She found she could even speak to him.

"How do you do" she murmured.

In a low voice he said:

"Jane, what are you doing?"

"Working with Mr. Harron. He's doing one of my stories".

"I had heard that. Jane, will you let me speak to you for a little while---over in my office? I'm only here for a couple of days and there are a few things I want to tell you".

There was something almost humble about his attitude; so different from his old dictatorial manner. Jane did not dare let her eyes meet his. She had a panicky fear that she would not be able to retain her composure for long.

"I'm sorry. I---I have to get back to our set. I'm holding script there, and Mr. Harron needs me--I must be going---

"Tomorrow then--will you come tomorrow?"

She hesitated. An overpowering emotion made her long to put her arms about his neck; she felt a surge of love and of great motherly pity. She could not speak; but she nodded her head ~~dumbly~~ dumbly. Then fearing to look at him or speak to him further, she ran breathlessly down the rest of the passage.

Just as she was mounting the little ladder leading to Stage E. Harron met her.

"Finished for the day. Better skoot on home; get a good night's rest and sleep. Pack a few duds and be here at eight sharp tomorrow morning. We're leaving

for location a little ways out on the Mojave Desert. Bye-
bye, baby!"

Chapter XVIII.

They were running the last of the "rushes" of "The City of Restless Love" in Number 8 Projection room. Blanton sat at the desk at back, with his cutter. A couple of gag men, a title writer, Blanton's assistant and a supervisor also watched the picture.

Suddenly Blanton got up and walked out of the little theatre. His surprised assistant hurried after him. Blanton was striding swiftly along toward his office.

"Anything wrong with the rushes, Mr. Blanton?"

Blanton's reply was strange.

"Barry, where did the Harron company go--do you know?"

"The Harron company?"

The assistant stared. What was the matter with his chief. Talking about Harron in the middle of running important "rushes".

"Yes--Harron. Where have they gone on location?"

"Somewhere on Mojave desert. Their outfit pulled out this morning early".

Blanton took that in; his mind working swiftly, formulating some plan. He must go after Jane. She must not be alone with Martin Harron.

"Shall I help the cutter on---"

"How many went along?"

"Along with what, sir?"

"The Harron company, damn it!"

"Two bus-loads and half a dozen cars for the principal

"Do you know whether Harron's been drinking lately?"

"Not that I know of, sir. He doesn't as a rule when he works you know. Besides they say he's dead stuck on a girl he's writing with. They say---"

The assistant stopped short. Blanton's eyes were blazing.

"Are you paid to repeat old women's tales?" he demanded.

"N-no sir, but its common talk on the lot. I thought maybe you knew." ~~Blanton~~

Blanton glared at him so furiously that the Assistant blanched.

About noon of the same day, the Harron company reached the ~~little~~ tiny Mexican town on the edge of the Mojave desert. Rooms had been reserved at a picturesque old Spanish Inn, that had once been a Mission House. After a washup and a bite of lunch, the company were immediately called for work.

About two miles from the village they set up camp and began the shooting of the desert scenes. The locale was marvelous and Jane was delighted.

"If we could only get the effect of the great distances---those clouds above the cliff--the sandstone colors---the mirage effect".

Harron squeezed her arm reassuringly.

"All taken care of baby. Scene to be done in

technicolor".

His voice was a bit thick; his eyes slightly heavy and bloodshot; but Jane was too interested and excited to notice any change in him.

All day long, under a scorching desert sun, they shot and reshot scenes for the last sequence in Jane's story. Long shots, medium shots, close ups, panorams--- all sorts of camera angles. They were getting some magnificent scenes. The brooding, sultry, smouldering effect of the wide stretching desert. Like jagged sentinels the line of sandstone cliffs etched against an horizon of blood-gold sky. Gradually into the scene little human beings moving like ants across the sand and coming nearer and nearer to the camera. A close up of that strange community in the heart of the desert---tents and screened cabins--the desert home of a group ^{gather} from all parts of the world, seeking in the rare dry air and burning rays of the sun, the antidote for the Great White Plague. An akelay shot followed one figure, a man in khaki breeks and soft shirt. A close up of the young Doctor who had given up luxury, home, friends and love to ~~follow~~ devote his life to an ideal.

It was nine o'clock at night when the dust and grime stained troupe rode back under a sultry moon. Dinner had been served in the cook tent on location. Tired out with the long day's work all hands dispersed to their rooms.

Jane was agreeably surprised to discover a nice little suite, which included a bath had been reserved for her. The lights were lit. She was tumbling out some articles from her grip, when she heard the bath-room door behind her open, and, turning, she saw Harron, coming out, with nothing on him but a

thin silk bathrobe. His feet were bare. Her first thought was that she had been directed to the wrong room. Before she could reach the door however, Harron was ahead of her. With his back against it, he turned the key in the lock, drew it out and dropped it into the pocket of his robe. Jane tried to look anywhere save at the almost naked man before her. She backed to the other side of the table, one which her grip was still standing.

"What does this mean, Mr. Harron?"

"Come baby, you know!"

"Unlock that door at once. How dare you do a thing like this?"

He chuckled.

"I been waiting months for this moment sweetheart".

Jane stared at him, her face congealing into an expression of utter scorn.

"I've had enough of this. You open that door".

"Nothing doing, birdie. I got you trapped.

Be a sport and make the most of it. Come along here, and sit on my knee and give me a kiss. If you don't---I'm going to take one anyway---and then some".

"Oh no, you're not. I'm not afraid of you. I'm strong and young, and you're flabby and fat and middle aged."

Harron's face purpled. He was not ~~sufficiently drunk~~ completely drunk, but he had enough drinks to inflame him.

"Look here, baby, what d'you think I've been blowing you to expensive dinners for? What d'you suppose I've been fooling about with you about a story--putting your name on it".

"Because I wrote that story. Its mine!" she ~~said~~ flashed back.

"Like fun it is. Don't kid yourself. Now you look here--birdie if you want credit you better come across sweet. Nothing for nothing's given in Hollywood. You ought to know that. Come on now, be a pet baby--- come along---"

He was moving stealthily nearer to the table. Jane's hand, still in the bag, closed about something that Joybelle had placed there. She made a swift, mechanical motion. Her imagination took a sudden leap. She thought to herself:

"Now I'm like ~~max~~ the heroine in one of those Westerns pictures. I must defend my honor!"

Her hand came out; she called out crisply.

"I have you covered. Put up your hands".

His jaw dropping, as he stared at that bit of cold steel menacing him, Harron's hands arose. Jane was thinking, with a wild sort of hysterical excitement:

"Oh if only the cameras were grinding now".

Harron was trembling and shaking grotesquely. His eyes were almost bulging out of their sockets.

"Now" she commanded--"Walk to that door, unlock it, and don't forget that I have you covered all the time".

He fumbled for the key. It shook in his hands. He twisted it frantically in the lock. The door was jerked open. He fled.

Jane stared at the now closed door. She leaned against it limply and the revolver dropped from her hand to the floor. She sank

the floor. She sank down on her knees. A wry smile twisted across her face and then her head went back. She began to laugh hysterically, sobbingly, breathlessly, and for fear she might be heard, she crept across the floor to the couch and buried her face in the pillow, muffling the sounds of her heartbreaking mirth.

She repacked her grip. She had brought only a few articles with her, and these she crammed into her bag.

In spite of the terrific heat during the day, the desert was cool at night and Jane put on her coat. There was no light in the hall and she had to feel her way to the stairway. Down in the lobby below a single light showed at the desk. No one was there. The little hotel was plunged in silence and sleep.

With her bag in her hand, Jane opened the door and looked out at the velvety darkness of the desert night. The utter stillness, the sense of vastness and isolation thrilled and awed her. Almost it seemed as if earth and sky were merged in one; as if the stars, bright and luminous, were touching the earth, bathing it in a refulgent glow.

How beautiful was the desert! How peaceful!
How comforting! It was like being put in space, above all the fevered heartaches of the world.

She knew she could scarcely leave the hotel that night; but she was afraid to stay in her room. So she sat on the hard chair in the stone patio, and, presently, she put her head down on her arms on the little rustic table, and from sheer exhaustion dropped asleep.

Hours later--with the stars long since faded out of the sky and the thin pale light of a slowly rising sun lifting the grey veil of the dawn, a high powered roadster swept out of the desert shadows and up the little sanded patch to the quaint port cochere that adjoined the patio.

Edmund Blanton stepped out of his car. He was striding across the patio, when he saw Jane, with her head on her arms. Instantly, unerringly his mind leaped to the sinister explanation of what had befallen Jane. Murderous impulses surged over him. It was well for Harron at that moment that he was safely locked in his room at the hotel.

Blanton put his hand on Jane's head--called to her gently, tenderly. None the less, she awoke with a start, shrinking back from him as if he were Harron.

~~In the grey red dawn, she could not see~~

In the pale light of the dawn, she could not see his face clearly; but she knew his voice, and from sheer relief and joy, she sobbed.

"Jane--why are you here? What has happened?"

She had regained control of herself. She was reluctant to let him know.

"It was quiet and nice out here---I suppose I fell asleep".

"But you're hands are cold---"

She was glad that her hands were cold, because his warm ones enclosed them. She did not even try to question why he was there. One does not analyse miracles or blessings. It was enough that his mere presence warmed and comforted her to their very core of her soul. She had never felt nearer to

She wanted to press her face against his. Tremors of excitement, intoxicating, ecstatic, tingled over her.

With something of the old rough tone, he commanded her.

"Come---I'm going to take you back to Hollywood".

The air was fresh, full of the essence of life. The sky was a sea of mother of pearl. The tawny desert stretched widely on all sides of them, and in the great glow of the early morning, in perfect silence, they rode on and on over the vast desert.

It was four o'clock in the morning when they left the little town on the desert. By six the car was travelling through over roads that were like an interminable length of smooth ribbon, passing through the ranching country. The country was pervaded with the fragrance of orange blossoms.

At half past eight, their car was going down Hollywood Boulevard.

When he lifted Jane from the car and followed her to the door to turn the key in the lock, Blanton spoke for the first time. He asked her if she were tired. Jane shook her head. ~~In the deep pools of her eyes~~ Her eyes were glowing; they were deep pools of light, and the lovely flush on her cheeks made him think of the desert dawn.

Inside the hall, they paused at the foot of the stairs. A scrub woman half way up looked down at them, mused a moment, smiled, sighed.

For a moment they gazed silently at each other,

and a faint, most poignant smile broke over the girl's wistful young face. Blantombent and kissed her on the lips.

Then he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Chapter XLX.

The rainy season had set in with more than the usual downpour. All night long the rain would descend in torrent torrents. During part of the day, the sun would peer out for a minute inspection; then down would pour the heavy rains again.

The streets were flooded. Cars stranded and submerged. Traffic suspended; roads leading out of the city extremely dangerous to navigate. A night storm washed away a score of houses along the beaches of Santa Monica and Venice.

Productionnat Filme was at a standstill. The stages were deserted. Crews let out. Every department shaved down to the minimum of man power. The scenario and cutting departments still functioned and the projection rooms were previewing pictures and running rushes and tests.

Jane was tipped off by the operator when ~~her~~ "Rose Petals" was due to be run. She slipped in in the dark, unobserved. The little theatre was alm st full, but she found a seat at back.

Harron was at the desk, his chief cutter at his edbow. There was a slight pause, and then Harron shputed to the operator.

"O.K. Shoot!"

There was a dancing flare across the sheet, and then a shower of rose petals blew across the screen. This faded out gradually into a si ngle rosebush. A girl's hand tipped into the scene and plucked a full blown rose. From this bit of

colorful imagery, and with the title flecked with blowing rose petals, came the main title sheet of the picture:

FILMO PICTURES CORPORATION LIMITED

Presents

R O S E P E T A L S

This held a moment and Fulton said:

"That's one hell of a title!"

Harron replied:

"It's just temporary. We'll have one with ginger in it before the pictures released.

The screen was now showing the main title sheet.

R O S E P E T A L S

Story, adaptation and continuity

by

MARTIN STUART HARRON

This was followed by the last sheet, with its long list of credits. In vain Jane tried to find even the smallest mention of her name.

The last title sheet faded out ^{into} ~~into~~ a "lap dissolve" of the campus scene of the college town where Jane had been born.

Nine reels of film. A love story, brimful of pathos and humor, whimsical, delicate, charming, climbing through tense situations of conflict and suspense to its huge climax.

There was complete silence in the projection room. Everyone was watching absorbedly this revelation of the talent of Harron, the director. Nothing in his past work had given an inkling of his ability to create and direct such a story and picture as this. Even Jane, whose heart ached dully, realized the directorial genius of the man. She had a confused sense of wonder how one so talented could be so despicable.

The last sequence, tense, almost melodramatic, and yet strangely poetic, with its background of the Mojave desert, took Jane back to that day when she had gone with Harron upon location. A sob rose in her throat. A great tear welled in her eyes and dropped down upon the hand of the man sitting beside her. She whispered in a strangled voice:

"Please let me pass. I want to go out".

The rain beat down in overwhelming sheets. Jane heeded it not. The scenario building was a block from the projection rooms. The streets were rushing streams. She passed through them.

In her office, she leaned breathlessly against the desk. The water dripped in a pool to the floor, and when mechanically she took her hat off, it released a stream that fell over her face and upon her shoulders. She stared out before her unseeingly. Vaguely her hands went through her hair, now soaking wet; then came to clasp and unclasp as she pressed them in mute anguish together.

Her story! The product of her own brain!
The story on which she had expended all of her glowing hopes!
Her story! All her own!

Suddenly she dropped to her knees by her desk and buried her face in her arms. She was torn by an inconsolable grief.

The enchantment of her adventure was gone. She saw the Motion Picture City with its mask off. It terrified her. She was disillusioned, disenchanted---no longer Movie Mad.

She had visualized a charming playland of make-believe where the children of her brain would move across the screen. This pitiful shadow game was a snare and a delusion--a mockery a fraud. Everything was out of focus; abnormal---People acted--they did not live! They were actors--not human beings! The whole point of view was distorted, ~~out of focus~~. *the values all wrong!*

She suffered an immense nostalgia. Oh! to be back in Greenville---back in the simple, quiet nest of--home!

Vague recollections recurred of what she had heard from various readers and cutters and others on the lot. The stealing of stories was a common everyday occurrence on a Movie lot! She had thought it exaggeration; perhaps coincidence? Nothing was more difficult to prove than plagiarism.

If a man stole gold or even a loaf of bread the world branded him as a thief and he was sent to jail to break stones or serve a hard sentence; but when a man was detected in the crime of stealing an author's story, what redress had the author? And yet, thought the unhappy girl, the man who stole gold was far less guilty than he who deliberately stole the brain child of another.

One does not value gold as he does personal creation. One's stories have a kinship to the author as near as flesh and blood.

A crowd of congratulating executives had gathered about the triumphant director in the administration building. His picture was a "wow", a "knockout", a "surefire box office". Every term known to the Movie jargon of speech was expended upon the picture.

As Blanton approached the group about Harron, the latter hailed him pleasantly.

"Ho, Blanton. Saw you in the projection room. Well what do you think of my picture".

Blanton looked the other squarely in the eye. His fist went back and then shot out in a tremendous punch that landed with a thud, flattening the nose on Harron's face. Before anyone of the startled group could recover sufficiently to come in between the two men, and while Harron lay sprawled upon his back on the floor, Blanton was striding over to the General Manager's office. Without waiting to be announced, he thrust the door open and went in.

Minton was dictating, his foot resting against the slim ankle of his comely stenographer. Blanton pulled out a chair, sat down and thrust his face close to Minton's.

"Harron's picture is a damned steal. It was writt by a young girl on this lot. Her name's Mercer--Jane Mercer, and if you know which side your bread's buttered on, Minton, you'll see that she gets the credit for her work".

"How do you know she wrote it?" evaded Minton, blinking.

Blanton was an independent producer, who had a special franchise with the Filmo Company. He was tremendously influential and powerful in the industry. Harron, in his way, was equally important, and he was moreover a friend and poker pal of Minton's. The latter perceived that it was his job to maintain peace at any price between the two.

"Because I read it months ago".

"Harron told me he had this story in mind a couple of years ago".

"He lies".

"Come, come, " conciliated Minton. "Lets not get excited. We'll look into it and see what we can do for this girl. That satisfy you Mr. Blanton?"

"No. She must have credit and be paid for her work as well".

"Well--leave it to me. If she wrote it--and we'll look into that--she probably did it in Filmo time. However, we'll take care of her !"

Blanton had reluctantly arisen.

~~"You're going out of town tonight"~~

"You're leaving for Nevada again tonight, eh?"

"I had intended to go" said Blanton, surlily.

He mistrusted Minton, and he had good reason to.

Barely had the door closed on Blanton, when the General Manager turned back to his stenographer.

"Take this:

Miss Jane Mercer,
Story dept. Filmo Pictures Corp.ltd.

Be advised that on and after this date your services will be no longer required by this company.

Yours truly,
SILMO PICTURES CORPORATION Ltd.

Benjamin Minton,
General Manager".