

November 14, 2007

Beatrice Roberts



A couple of trusty character actors go face to face in this short scene from *Scarlet Street* (1945). Rosalind Ivan, laden with parcels, specialised in mean, unpleasant women and was consequently awarded the nickname, "Ivan the Terrible" by mean, unpleasant journalists. Arthur Loft, playing the gallery owner, was "a fussy-looking man who appeared as if he had been weaned on a lemon", according to the only reference work I can find that can be bothered to include him,⁽¹⁾ and appeared in many small roles as pushy or officious old men.

However, they're far too famous to bother about, unlike the silent

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Beatrice Roberts

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woman watching them from behind her desk. She's Beatrice Roberts and, by the time *Scarlet Street* came around, she'd spent over 10 years playing anonymous pretty girls, secretaries and, increasingly, nurses, like this one flitting by in *The Killers* (1946):



She didn't get into the movies until she was in her 30s, and, therefore, too old for her first career, which involved standing around looking beautiful. Here she is 20 years before *Scarlet Street*, when she was Miss Greater New York:

**Prize Beauty in Evening
Gown, Is Business Expert**



MISS BEATRICE ROBERTS,

That's not an evening gown. I don't know what she's wearing, but whatever it is, I'm pretty sure it shows a lot of leg for 1925. The newspaper tells us that she's been named "the most beautiful girl in America in an evening gown"⁽²⁾ for the second year running and justifies using such a prurient photograph by pretending that the picture is needed to illustrate the crazy fact that a gal with a set of gams like that is also in possession of a university diploma in business. The story doesn't mention that she was also in possession of a husband who drew cartoons for the New York Globe. He was Robert Ripley, and, in a few years, his "Believe it or Not!" series

would become a worldwide success, making him the first millionaire cartoonist and enabling him to spend the rest of his life travelling the world taking pictures of mermaid skeletons, two-headed cows and men with horns growing out of the back of their heads.

Beatrice wasn't married to him by that point, though. They divorced just after her beauty pageant successes, and, after a brief spell in vaudeville, she married a Los Angeles attorney called William Van Rensselaer Smith and moved out west.

Her new husband appears to have been stinking rich. The Van Rensselaers were old, old money. In the 17th century, they owned a large chunk of what is now New York state, having made a fortune in the colonial diamond and pearl trade in the previous century. By the early 20th century, the descendants' main occupation appears to have been suing each other for shares of the masses of cash that were sloshing around. Witness this selection of headlines about the family from the New York Times:

"J.A. VAN RENSSELAER ACCUSED BY MOTHER; Arrested for Writing a Letter Demanding Money and threatening to Kill Her. ADMITS THAT HE WROTE IT" (July 21, 1908)

"VAN RENSSELAER ESTATE NOT MYTH, SAYS LAWYER -- Letter Shows the Lumberman Refused \$500,000 to Renounce His Claim" (Nov 12, 1904)

"RICH SPINSTER HAD GAS LIGHTED AT NOON -- Relatives [contesting her will] Contend That She Was Unduly Influenced By A Relative" (Jan 4, 1912)

This marriage didn't work out for Beatrice, either. By 1933, gossip columnists were romantically linking William with an actress called Nancy Carroll. Oddly, the stories don't mention Beatrice, although she was still married to William, with whom she had a three-year-old son. They divorced in 1935, by which time Beatrice had started to appear in films as attractive set dressing: a passenger on a luxury cruise; a guest at a glamorous party; a fashion show mannequin; and so on.

Her run of background parts was broken in 1937, when, seemingly

out of the blue, we find her starring in two films. Okay, so perhaps *Park Avenue Logger* and *Love Takes Flight* were B-movies, and pretty silly ones at that (their taglines, respectively, were: "A social lion turns mountain wildcat, in a Northwest lumber camp!" and "TOGETHER - they followed the Adventure Trail in a Blazing Romance of the Airways! It's an Air-Thriller!"), but a lead role is a lead role! There were adverts in the papers and everything, even if the spelling mistake in the first line of this one suggests that the studio didn't exactly see the need to put its brightest and best ad-men on the job:

**YOUR FAVORATE
OUTDOOR STAR**
... cutting a fighting trail through
the Big Timber country

... as a society lion who turned
Northwoods wildcat when a
gang of timber thieves got too
reckless! ... Romance hewn
from a rugged land ... in a
pulse-pounding story of grit
and speed and breathless ex-
citement!

**GEORGE
O'BRIEN**

**PARK AVENUE
LOGGER**

**With
BEATRICE ROBERTS**

Actually Filmed Amid the Scenic
Beauty of the Great Northwoods

And were those timber
thieves surprised when
the "sissy" turned
loose a punch like
the kick of a mule!

Added Short Subjects
Comedy - News - Cartoon

**MONDAY
TUESDAY CAROLINA**

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So how had she managed it? Simple. Leaving aside looks, talent and the ability to wear an evening gown in a reliably beautiful manner, it turns out that all a girl needs to do, if she's really serious about her career, is to become the mistress of the head of MGM!

"Merchant of Dreams", Charles Higham's biography of Louis B Mayer, which mentions Beatrice just twice, explains what happened:

"Mayer had noticed her when she appeared as a guest in a party scene in *San Francisco* [1936]; soon afterward, he began dating her. He fell in love with her; for years, she was the love of his life. She shared with him a passion for operettas and Viennese waltzes; she was an accomplished pianist, which, of course, appealed to him."

However, after those two starring roles, Beatrice quickly slid down the cast list again, via a few supporting roles, and was soon off the credits altogether. What could have gone wrong? Charles Higham attempts an explanation:

"[Mayer] would have liked to have built her as a star, but his executive staff refused to believe she had acting ability and would not agree to her being cast in anything. Not even Mayer could force a producer to take on an actress. Miss Roberts accepted the situation, and Mayer insisted on keeping her under contract, loaning her out for picture after picture ... He had an under-the-table arrangement with Universal to have her placed on semipermanent loan-out, and for years she appeared in Universal films as maids, nurses or secretaries, glimpsed for an instant; an attractive, fascinating dark presence, living out a ghostly career on the sidelines."⁽³⁾

That's astonishing. "Not even Mayer could force a producer to take on an actress." Really? Louis B Mayer, the highest-salaried executive in America, the most influential man in Hollywood, couldn't get his mistress decent roles in any of the hundreds of films that were pouring out of his studio at the time? She must have been *really* bad. However, a review of one of the films in which she was a supporting player carried this headline:

Stirring Drama Unfolded in "The Devil's Party"—New Star Is Born in Beatrice Roberts

Didn't the reviewer know that she had absolutely no talent? He mustn't have heard. Annoyingly, the review doesn't say anything more about her performance, but we can assume that she wasn't entirely horrible on screen -- certainly not so horrible that a producer would risk offending Louis B Mayer just to keep her out of his film -- so there must be another reason for her "ghostly career on the sidelines". The simplest explanation strikes me as the likeliest: she didn't get any high-profile work because Louis B Mayer didn't want her to get any high-profile work, because the last thing he would have wanted, as the head of a studio whose reputation was founded on "family values" pictures with a strong moral tone, is a high-profile mistress.

Perhaps I'm being too uncharitable, but it wouldn't be the worst thing that anyone has justifiably claimed about Mayer. Scott Eyman's "Lion of Hollywood", another Mayer biography, claims that it was common knowledge among insiders that Mayer used the contract list for "his own private harem" and quotes the director, Max Reinhardt, on Mayer's tactics:

"Mayer often saw to it that someone he could trust went ahead of him with a girl, just so the dame could never claim he had corrupted her. It was his way of putting them in the position of whores."⁽⁴⁾

In 1943, when Beatrice was in her early 40s, the 60-year-old Mayer "lost interest" in her and took up with a presumably more interesting 27-year-old called Ginny Simms.⁽⁵⁾ The nurse and secretary roles kept coming Beatrice's way until, in 1949, she left Hollywood and went home to Massachusetts.

The only role for which she appears destined to be remembered, due to the obsessive nature of science-fiction fandom, is the one she had in the 1938 Saturday morning serial, "Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars", when she was cast as Queen Azura, the supporting evildoer (under Ming the Merciless, obviously). Here she is with

Buster Crabbe in her final scene⁽⁶⁾. She may have lived as a secretary, but she died a Queen!



Sources -- imdb.com, (1) Hal Erickson's Movie Guide; (2)The Bridgeport Telegram, September 21, 1925, via newspaperarchive.com; (3) "Merchant of Dreams", Charles Higham, p.276; (4)"Lion of Hollywood", Scott Eyman, p.316; (5) "Merchant of Dreams", Charles Higham, p.348; (6)"Look Magazine", March 29, 1938, via www.flashgordon.ws; still from Scarlet Street, public domain; still from The Killers, (c) Universal Pictures.

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October 08, 2007

Faith Bacon

We're in an empty nightclub, it's late afternoon. The club is owned by a gangster called Frankie Terris, who runs the town's numbers rackets and is only a few scenes away from being sent to Alcatraz for murder. No one's around, except for a young dancer, Maxine, rehearsing for that evening's show. She strikes a series of oddly stilted poses, awkwardly turning and swaying in a manner that