

HOLLYWOOD MORALS, IF ANY!

Third in a series by our Young Man About Hollywood show-

ing Hollywood is neither East nor West but always itself

BY ERROL FLYNN



A love scene like this from "I Met My Love Again" doesn't mean a thing. That dreamy gleam in the eyes of Miss Bennett and Mr. Fonda is mere thought of home, according to our sage hero-writer. Do you believe it?

FROM what I hear, this must have been quite a town in the days before the Law of Publicity was brought west of Pasadena.

In those days men could pick fights and their women were glad to pick them up afterwards. Not only that, but I understand that they even had sex out here in the old days—great gobs of it—and, in their own naïve way, they thought it was all pretty swell—grand climate, buxom wenches, two-fisted men and an easy living.

If a man wanted to get wall-eyed, by golly, he got wall-eyed and the citizenry lined Hollywood Boulevard in cheering thousands as he rolled home in a colorful if not pious manner.

The ladies (bless 'em!) seemed to feel that the salubrious subtropics of Southern California offered a perfect setup for Beatrice Grimshaw's settings of South Sea love.

But I wouldn't know anything about that. It was all long before my day in Hollywood and I resent it just a little. By the time I had arrived, full of the legends of high jinks in Movieland, the Missionaries had moved in and told Hollywood it was all wrong. Mr. Hays called the girls in and begged them to—please, for heaven's sake—to forget about this sex business for a while.

Well, the first thing people knew, the Sweetness-and-Light Era had hit Hollywood with a bang. On top of that, they found out that they couldn't stay on the screen and earn their living unless their moral and home life was at least a cut better than Caesar's wife. After all, she was above suspicion, which was a lot more than you could say for the lads and lassies who first populated the studios. Maybe they *were* wrong—at least, the papers seemed to think so.

While all that was going on out here, I was rambling blissfully through the Islands among a race of people who hadn't been taught that it was more blessed to be able to read and write than it was to enjoy life. The climate was warm and the girls *really* believed in getting a thorough suntan and a reasonable collection of husbands. The average price for a wife ran about three pigs per mate and everybody was thoroughly content with the whole setup.

But, before I left the Islands, I had seen the workings of civilization and tourist boats on these innocent people. I had seen cotton dresses with long sleeves slip over the astonished bronze bodies and I had seen the creation of jails to take care of the boys who liked a fight before breakfast—and all this to make the Islands safe for the easily shocked eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Tourist.

MUCH the same sort of thing hit Hollywood. It wasn't missionaries equipped with Mother Hubbards so much as it was a sensational press that sent its circulation up by printing things that were only partially true and using salacious composographs to prove it, so that everybody started thinking that

Hollywood Morals, If Any

Hollywood must be worse, if anything, than they said.

Pretty soon the Hays Office stepped up waving a bunch of pictures of young ladies clad in scanties, panties, and smiles. Quite lovely, too, I may add. But it seems as though that was very bad for the young of the nation. Anyway, the Hays Office said, this will never do—why, it's practically the same as sex and we've just found out how bad that is!

Today the moral code is strict to the last detail.

The upshot of it was that everybody agreed that if the papers must have leg art, let them have it, but you can't pose the pictures so any of the inside of the lady's thigh shows on the plate. If I may hazard a comment, that is like splitting a leg between Nor' and Nor'-East. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe that's morals.

The ex-convict trying to go straight had nothing on Hollywood. In both cases, their reputations were against them. And the silly part of it is that Hollywood had never been so terribly bad. In every town there are a few bad eggs, but why damn the whole place for that? The major difference between Hollywood and any place else turned out to be that in Hollywood the mildest misdemeanor, which would be forgotten any place else, was instantly magnified and publicized into a tremendous scandal.

Since I've been here, for example, there have been half a dozen incidents of a more or less unsavory nature, incidents, however, that can and do happen in every other town in the world almost daily. The real difficulty is that a sensational press broadcasts the marital difficulties, say, of an actor and actress throughout the world, not because the difficulties are interesting in themselves to anyone other than the people involved, but because the victims are, in a sense, popular.

Men without number have been sued, rightly or wrongly, for alleged misdemeanors involving ladies in their pasts. No one pays any attention to it. But let that man be a member of the theatrical profession and the same indiscretion, true or false, makes international news.

The result is that Hollywood is the most moral-conscious town that I have ever been in on any of the six continents and innumerable islands. Where else in the world are man and wife forced to consider a projected stag fishing trip as a matter of vital importance? It is no exaggeration to say that if a male star wants to go hunting in the High Sierras and his wife wants to visit relations, they must consult with a round dozen of studio employees for weeks in advance. If they don't it is almost sure to be rumored that they are pff-ft! Everything else that happens in their private lives is proportionately exaggerated.

HOLLYWOOD has been forced, therefore, to adopt a new and passing strange sort of moral code. Of course, being Hollywood, they built the moral code like a studio set—all front and rather undressed-looking behind.

I remember when I first came out here, I wanted to take a woman friend of mine out dancing one night. I asked a pal where to go and he began naming a lot of little hideaways. I told him that I was fresh from Ireland and had heard about the wild life in Southern

Hollywood Morals, If Any

California and was fairly champing at the bit to get at it. Gravely he shook his head. "You've got a lot to learn, my boy. If you go out to one of the big spots you'll get your name linked with hers and—well, don't you see?"

I didn't. I still don't. As near as I can get it, everything is all right in Hollywood providing no gossip columnist sees you and if you're sure Hymie Fink won't pop out at you from behind a bush with his trusty Leica. The cardinal sin of Hollywood is to be caught.

They even have it in all the standard form contracts—a long paragraph about moral turpitude. It's not that anything is ever done here that isn't done in your own home town, but in a normal community if you step out of line a little bit when the family isn't looking, you're not apt to trip over five photographers and seven reporters who will then run like mad to the nearest newspaper yelling, "Looky, looky, looky what I saw!"

Along with the morals came a code of everyday actions that would make the compiled Mosaic Laws look like child's play. Emily Post, for example, wrote with considerable authority that when that awful moment occurs and divorced husband meets divorced wife they should positively not start throwing hors d'oeuvres at each other, but should bow formally, like complete strangers, and move on surrounded in a cloud of dignity.

Try that in Hollywood! The silence of the grave would fall upon every party in town and people would have to start learning to wigwag at each other. The rule out here is to greet each other with a wild show of laughing enthusiasm and slap the "ex-" on the back, after having first made sure that there is no knife in the hand. In other words, "We're the best of friends but, for the sake of our careers, we just had to separate." It's just as well that they did formulate that idea because, otherwise, Hollywood hostesses would have to start giving their dinner parties in relays.

Another thing that is considered very bad form is to make dates with your producer's wife. This is important, but like all generalities, it has its exceptions. If the lady in question is winsome and has shown a predisposition in your favor, and—if the producer in question is out of town, or is dating your own wife on the side—then the rule may be discreetly suspended. On the other hand, if the said producer is known to be jealous and is well entrenched in his job, it is considered the worst taste imaginable to dally around his swimming pool in his absence. Still again, if the gentleman's wife is not lovely, winsome, and so forth—well, what's the use? After all, a code is a code so you might as well follow it sometimes . . .

I HAVE noticed that people all over the world have a tendency to cock an eyebrow or two at Hollywood when the subject of matrimony is mentioned. Suppose, for sake of argument, that there is a difference in that grand old custom when it is applied to the life of this unusual community; very well—why shouldn't there be? Acting is a peculiarly difficult manner of earning a living if you are lucky enough to be within the first five hundred of the profession. It places demands on marriage

Hollywood Morals, If Any

that sometimes cannot be withstood and divorce follows. Immediately there are protests from utter strangers, squawking about the awful example being set to the nation. These Paul Prys don't seem to realize that in most cases, if they closed the divorce courts, they would lower the marriage rates in Hollywood appallingly. Hardly a moral goal, that! The alternative in a professional marriage would mean that one or the other would have to give up a career—which is neither fair to the individual nor to the profession they serve.

Players, of necessity, are a more than average self-centered group of people. They have to be, for they draw upon their own confidence and ability to spend long periods in profound self-analysis in order to articulate later upon the screen the emotions and authentic actions required of them. While they are working they cannot spend the time upon domestic management that is sometimes necessary.

On top of that, many a leading lady has met and fallen in love with an actor, only to find, after marriage, that what she had fondly hoped was love turned out to be nothing more than having been as stage-struck as any amateur fan waiting in the theater alley for an autograph. Don't think that professionals are not so susceptible to their comrades' charm and acts as the public in general. We are, but we also have more opportunity to be subsequently disillusioned.

There are, of course, many contributing factors, such as that terribly obvious and much discussed status when the wife is knocking over three times as large a weekly stipend as the husband. That used to be a far greater hazard in Hollywood than it is now. I, personally, know of several very happy families out here where both people work, and the husband, professionally, is paid in a scale far below his wife's. The girls themselves seem to realize the psychological jeopardy this condition imposes upon their private lives and, consequently, make ample allowance for the matters of petty but important pride in the bosoms of their men, both in courtship and in marriage. Still, it's a hazard.

In many communities a man wouldn't live long if he made love to the wives and sweethearts of four other men in one day. He couldn't live any longer here if it weren't for the fact that professional love-making for the screen isn't much different than boxing or anything else. Half the men I know sweep Sadie Glutz, the big European svelte-and-sex girl from Prague, into their arms before the camera and start thinking about their wives. In other words, they give nothing that means anything from the depths of their own private hearts. Most players' wives and husbands realize that, and nothing much is thought about adolescent jealousies.

Any time that you hear that Hollywood is immoral and a den of iniquity just tell your informant for me that he doesn't know what he is talking about. One thing he should always remember. Glamour is its own best protection. You really can't lose your head over a girl when somebody is always standing by on the side lines telling you not to rumple her hairdress and lipstick, and,

Hollywood Morals, If Any

for heaven's sake, not to throw a shadow on her nose, no matter how passionately you kiss her.



PHOTOPLAY

OCTOBER, 1937

p. 92

OldMagazineArticles.com