Salome on Rye

By Michael Sheridan

Her studio and the press agents had quite a few ideas about Yvonne de Carlo. All of them, apparently, were quite wrong

I GOT the idea one afternoon that I would like to have dinner with the most beautiful girl in the world. I pictured us in an intimate banquette, with pink-shaded lights and practically nothing showing above the tabletop but the most beautiful girl in the world.

She would order ortolan tongues, and the waiter would say, "We ain't got none." He would ask her if she didn't know there was a war on.

Then I would punch his nose for him and call for the captain, the maître d'hôtel, the manager and a guy named Gus who owned the joint. "Look," I would say, "do you realize that you have refused to gratify the wish of the most beautiful girl in the world?"

Then they would all go away and come back shortly with a mound of ortolan tongues, smothered in mushrooms. The captain would pour a bottle of Napoleon brandy over it and set it afire.

The most beautiful girl in the world would say, "Isn't it pretty? I'll have some ham and eggs," and the evening would go on from there, and long before the third highball (mine), and the third orange juice (hers), I would be able to find out just what it took to make this Yvonne de Carlo the most beautiful girl in the world. That, I fondly imagined, would be a cinch.

As long as the ortolan tongues held out, I would also find out just what else it was that enabled her to star in Universal's $2,000,000 technicolor tidbit titled, Salome, Where She Danced! But of course it didn't happen that way at all. In one minute flat, ortolan tongues were out, the maître d'hôtel, a personable and prosaic gent, spoke the King's English, and the most beautiful girl in the world revealed that she had a mind of her own.

The Lady Knows Her Eats

Given a list of six places to dine, she picked instead a spot in Beverly Hills, where the palm trees sway in the wind, the braziers stand well-lit, warm and inviting, and the acacia trees shed their tiny leaves. There one of Yvonne's long, pale hands summoned the waiter. "*We'll* have steak *minute*, with *pommes Parisienne*, and lots of broccoli."

"Sauce Hollandaise," said the waiter automatically.

She shook her head. "Polonaise," she said firmly.

I was looking at the wine list, and Yvonne de Carlo stared wistfully over at it, too. "I love *Liebfraumilch*," she said. "A still wine goes so well with the *diable* sauce. But I'm only twenty, so I can't have any. What's more, I shall be twenty for the next three years, so by the time I can drink it the vintage will be *épuisé*." Miss de Carlo, as you will gather, speaks French.

Three minutes went by. A very full and satisfying three minutes in which this writer was taking in a profusion of luxuriant brown-black hair dotted with red camellias; a vivid, rich, very red mouth, and the pink lobe of

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an ear like a shell nestling against the translucent skin.

Time enough, also, to wonder at the appetite of the most beautiful girl in the world tackling a man's dish, and to ponder everything that had gone before: How one night she had staked out on the studio back lot an effective and quite effortless bid for movie fame and fortune.

Producer Walter Wanger it was, who had scoured the country for a girl to fulfill all the requirements of (a) the most beautiful damsel in the world, and (b) an actress who could act, sing and dance, to boot. The photographs poured in, 21,348 of them—and one stood out. This was a picture submitted by twenty-one young bombardiers of the

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Royal Canadian Air Force in Saskatchewan. They had written in for her portrait when she was a bit player at Paramount. They sent it back, two years later, when Mr. Wagner started his search. To her surprise, she got the part.

All Press Agentry Recoils

That should have made everybody happy, but it didn't. There was a snag somewhere. And what a snag! Strong, not so silent studio praise agents came, saw and wondered. And having done all three, legend has it that many quietly folded their portable typewriters and stole silently away. What they had discovered was that this Miss de Carlo was not running true to Hollywood form in three respects: as the most beautiful girl in the world, as a French-Canadian girl of unquestionable upbringing, and as an actress in good standing. At least that was the story.

For one thing, they had said, she didn't know how to handle the press. She was shy almost to the point of reticence. Miss de Carlo just couldn't manage to turn on either her smile, her voice, or her charm at the mere drop of a newspaperman's hat.

But so far, Miss de Carlo showed no outward evidence of that—not now, as she unpinned her solitary white gardenia from one side of the pitch-black velvet of her rather revealing bodice. "They smell heavenly, gardenias, but overpoweringly, I'm afraid." She smiled, and you could tell why that kind of a smile couldn't be turned on at the mere will of a press agent. It was that real.

Blame it on the atmosphere, blame it on a gullible guy dining alone with the most beautiful girl in the world; blame it, if you like, on the girl herself—but all this didn't fit in with what they said had gone before. Things like twisting her paper napkin at the end of a luncheon interview and planking it in her plate of unfinished food. Hardly the gesture of the M.B.G.I.T.W.

On another occasion the large and limpid eyes of Miss de Carlo gazed unfalteringly at another newspaperman all through his long spiel about Italian food in general, and the merits of chicken *cacciatore* in particular. At the end of five minutes, feeling she should say something, and greatly encouraged by a kick on the shins from the studio press contact, Yvonne murmured enthusiastically, "If you like Italian food so much, you must have tried my favorite dish, chicken *cacciatore*."

Things have been happening like that ever since. One day Miss de Carlo, not informed as to the name of her fiancé of the week, broke an engagement that wasn't due to start till the following Monday's column.

Yvonne has a small, very pretty face, with the largest and occasionally the saddest pair of eyes outside of a Greer Garson picture. Blue-gray, they look at you wisely and frankly, especially when the subject is that M.B.G.I.T.W. stuff. Then they close a little, as if the whole thing were a dream, and not always a very good one.

Anyhow, that's the way they looked when I asked her quite bluntly, "Are you the most beautiful girl in the world?"

"No," she said evenly, "I'm not, because the most beautiful girl in the world is five women. Linda Darnell, Hedy Lamarr, Merle Oberon, Madame Chiang Kai-shek . and Lady Louis Mountbatten. Mr. Wanger didn't look hard enough."

"But," I said, "there were 21,348 contenders. Consensus can't be wrong."

All a Big Mistake?

"But it can err," said Miss de Carlo prettily. "Anyway those twenty-one bombardiers wrote the nicest letter to go with the picture. You see, I had sent them that pin-up picture two long years ago when I was at Paramount, and was signed to do the Dorothy Lamour sarong roles. But Miss Lamour thought a sarong in hand was worth two dramatic roles in the offing, and I was dropped."

"Not too hard," I ventured.

"The sound was heard in Saskatchewan,

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and you know the rest," she said. "But you're not eating." She turned to the waiter. "Pineapple upside-down cake, two coffees, and a brandy *flambée* for the gentleman."

"You're some eater," I said.

"I have to be," agreed Yvonne. "I dance six hours a day, I sing two, and I dream a lot. It's quite a schedule."

She knows very well what she wants—to be another Pavlova—and has studied hard, since a child, to be one tenth as good as the Russian ballerina was. She sings three songs in Salome, Where She Danced!, and wants to be an opera singer one day. Yvonne acts an exacting role in her first starring picture.

Yvonne de Carlo was born twenty years ago in Vancouver, British Columbia. She made Hollywood through playing the small theaters in the Dominion of Canada, dancing at the Florentine Gardens, and at Earl Carroll's. She was a featured dancer at the latter, and earned the undying respect of the producer by tipping the scales at a svelte 115 pounds, standing on the runway at a mere 5 feet 4 inches, and by displaying an 11½-inch neck, a 36 bust, a 24 waist, 32 hips, a 7½-inch ankle, and 5½-inch wrists.

We started talking about her first picture to be released early in May. It's the film version of a Lawrence Stallings play based, according to the studio's press releases, on a true historical incident. The studio would have you know that in the early, thriving days of the West, the good citizens of Drinkman Wells, Arizona, were so impressed by the performance of a dancer in a traveling troupe that they renamed the town in her honor. And that, to this day, it is officially known as Salome, Where She Danced, Arizona.

"Oh, but that's not true," Yvonne said softly, between unstinted mouthfuls of pineapple cake. "That's the press agent's story of the picture. Salome, Arizona, was not named for any dancer in any traveling troupe. I looked it up. It's a trading post for the Happy Valley mining section and was named for its first postmistress, Mrs. Mary Salome Wright."

"I don't think," I said, "the studio will like that very much."

Salome shrugged. "I wish it had been true, then it would have added a little weight to my being a mark on a map. Anyway, I still have to make my mark on another map, Hollywood. If I can't do it with my first picture, perhaps I can do it with my fifth. I'd like to play Diana in The Robe, or a Palm Beach Sadie Thompson with lots of lovely clothes."

"The studio said you never talked with newspapermen. They even thought of sending you to a charm school to meet 'em properly. You're doing all right," I said.

The most beautiful girl in the world pushed over a slim, gold cigarette case. She doesn't smoke or drink. "Have one," she urged. "Have one, on me. You may not want to, after that first picture of mine. It may not be what everybody thinks it is. And then I'll be the most alone girl in the world. Really, it's quite frightening."

She looked very small, very appealing, very helpless. It was hard to know what to say at that particular moment. So I didn't say anything, and somehow she seemed rather grateful and reassured.

THE END

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