

an made her money fast Friends thought she found But . . . tragedy struck! And  
 it gave it away even faster. the right man in Bill Powell. Powell wept at her grave.



Mother and daughter drove to the lot each morning in their own car, very unusual for a lowly extra. The car was an older but gleaming limousine, driven by a chauffeur in trim clothes and a foreign air. None of the people on the lot, of course, knew that the man at wheel was Mr. Bello.

The right impression was made on the right man at the right time. He was Ben Lyon, male lead in "Hell's Angels." In 1929, when Warner Brothers proved that movies could talk, Howard Hughes had already poured two million dollars into a silent version of the flying-machine opera. Immediately, he appropriated a million dollars more and started all over. Along with reels of useless film, Hughes junked his female lead, Greta Nissen, who professed love in the thickest Swedish accent in California.

Lyon had observed the cheerful, curvy girl with the startling blonde hair around the set and he mentioned her to Hughes. A brief study of her frame and a glance at her hair convinced the producer. A few weeks later, a Hughes press agent invented the phrase "platinum blonde," and a new era in American culture was born.

Everything was on Jean's side: a picture that could talk, machines that could fly, hair that could blind, and a mother who could plan. All of these combined to establish Jean Harlow—in only one film—as America's dream girl.

Hughes figured, however, that a head of hair can go just so far. Meanwhile, the moguls of MGM were theorizing privately that a head of hair couldn't even have gone that far—that America must be reacting not to a hair-hue but to a fetching, winsome girl underneath it. This girl was pretty, delicately funny, delightfully vital, and altogether involved in the business of living. MGM offered Hughes \$60,000 for her contract and he took it.

Already holding a post position, Jean Harlow trotted to easy triumphs in "Red Dust," "Dinner at Eight," "Blonde Bombshell," "China Seas," "Wife Versus Secretary," and "Libeled Lady." To every star and starlet in Hollywood, she came to symbolize the pot of platinum at the end of the rainbow.

Jean Harlow was now making lots and lots of money, and Hollywood spun in an orbit around her. Only now did Hollywood, its gossips and its reporters, its curiosity seekers and its social climbers, take the trouble to learn something about Harlean

Carpentier—the real girl behind the glamorous façade of Jean Harlow. They assumed she was a vain, not-too-bright, mother-dominated lump of sugar. Were they surprised!

What America's dream girl liked to do best with her money was give it away—to Hollywood hopefuls just a few meals from possible success, to charities, to unfortunates, to civic drives. In interviews, she liked to ask more questions than she answered. Her mind was quick, curious, and eager to absorb every experience opened to it. Interviewers discovered an odd, perhaps revealing, mannerism. Whenever they succeeded in getting her to talk about the glamorous life of Jean Harlow, her speech almost always slipped into the third person as though she were talking about somebody else—somebody made, not born.

She used fewer cosmetics than any glamour girl in Hollywood. Some people said she was allergic to them. Others said that in her off-hours she just didn't like artificiality of any kind. Where she chose to be showy, her aim was not pretense but fun. She drove to work in a 12-cylinder Cadillac studded with fire department signs.

At parties, the girl who was sheer physical magnetism, and knew it, had a penchant for exercising her mind. Her favorite game, called "Murder Mystery," required imagination and ingenuity. The player who is "it" in the crime, then must answer questions posed by the other players who try to solve it. Jean preferred writers for her opponents. She found that they thought up the most imaginative crimes and put her to the severest tests.

**T**HIS STRONG LEANING toward the active mind led Jean to her second husband, Paul Bern, a brilliant young producer at MGM. (She had dissolved her first marriage just a few months after eloping at 16 with a young Chicago broker.)

But so soon and so violently did the second marriage end, it seemed to portend that Jean Harlow's lucky star was a meteor in disguise, moving fast but fated for destruction. Just two months after her wedding, on Labor Day, 1932, Paul Bern was found on the bathroom floor of their home, dead by his own hand. He chose this course in preference to facing embarrassment over his past, threatened by another woman in his life.

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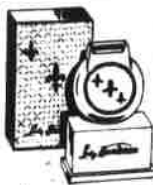
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