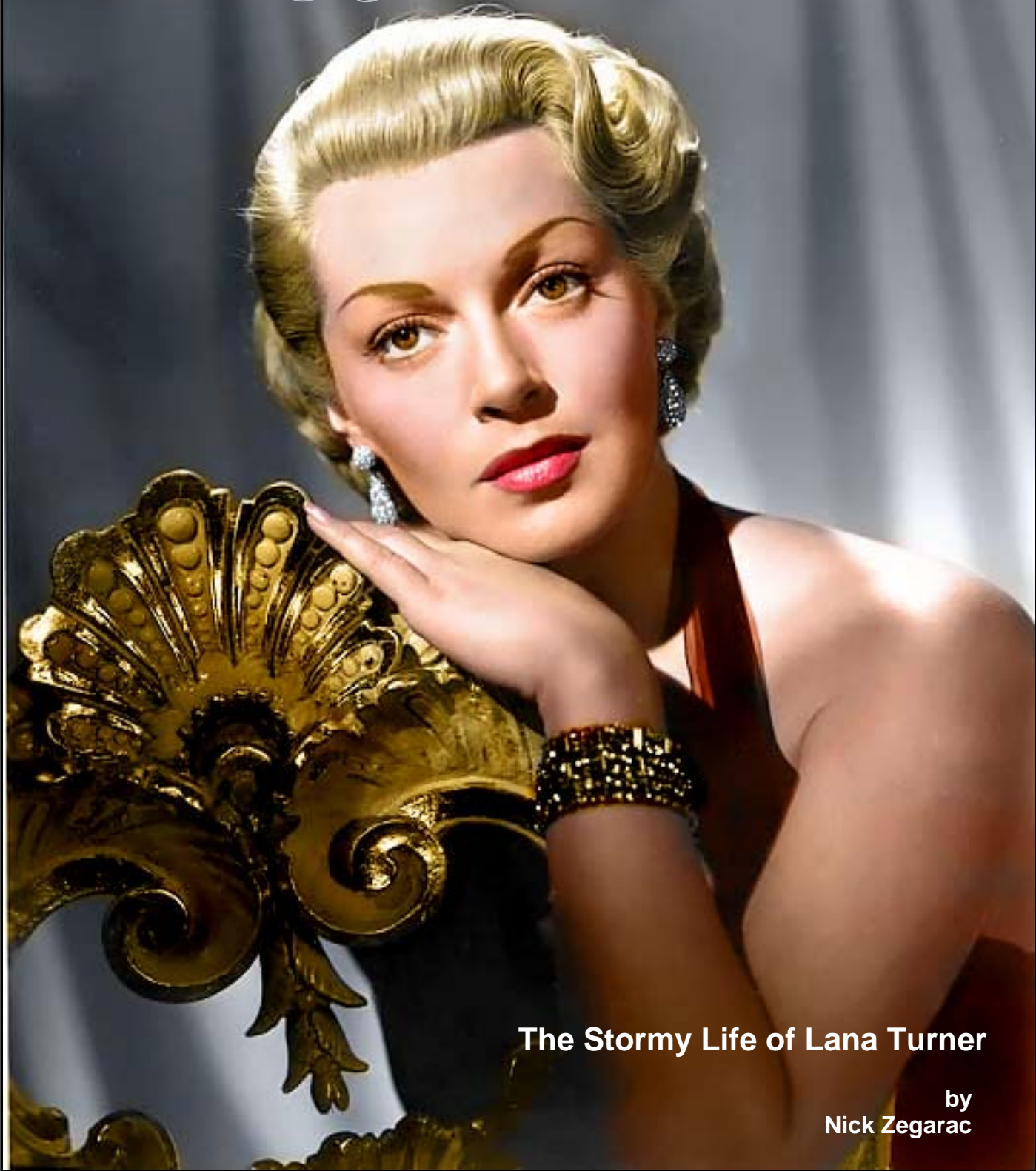


# Too *Beautiful* to Be Bad



**The Stormy Life of Lana Turner**

by  
Nick Zegarac



Ostensibly, **Lana Turner** was a star before she was born; a dream child emerging from behind the velvet curtain of a studio system that knew how to manufacture glamour. From the start, she was fully-formed – her bulbous cleavage trademarked at the age of 16; loosely bobbing just beneath the thin angora of a tight fitting sweater in her first on camera appearance.

Off screen she was tagged ‘queen of the nightclubs’ before the age of 19 in reference to her bottomless stamina for endless partying with the fast and rich. To the world who only knew her from the movies, she was quite simply the most stunningly beautiful embodiment of stardom yet to be discovered – the girl every other girl wished she could be and the only one that any man should ever want as his own.

It was, of course, all just an illusion. For, behind the glycerin smile and false lashes, Lana Turner was just a girl; a tender and mildly insecure waif from a broken home, plucked from obscurity by accident under the watchful eye of Warner studio publicist, Irving Fine.

There was nothing in Lana’s youth that should have suggested the riches to come.

She was born into hardship on February 8, 1921 in Wallace Idaho to Virgil Turner and his wife Mildred. A traveling salesman and con-artist, Virgil was found murdered on a San Francisco street when Lana was only 9 years old. To make ends meet, Mildred took in laundry. But the long hours were hardly conducive to motherhood and Mildred placed her daughter in foster care for a time, where Lana endured physical abuse for several years.

In 1936, Mildred decided to move her and Lana to Los Angeles. They arrived in town with nothing but a pair of modestly packed suitcases. Shortly thereafter, Mildred took a job as a hairdresser, working 80hr. days to maintain a modest household. In the meantime, Lana, now a teenager, enrolled in Hollywood High School located just across the street from Schwab’s Drug Store – a popular hang out with students, but also with publicity men and free agents looking for the next hot young talent. With her attractive 5’3” frame and sultry blond locks, Lana certainly

fit that bill.

Eyeing her from across the counter, respected talent scout Billy Wilkerson asked the teen if she would like to be in the movies. Lana’s unabashedly naïve reply – “I’ll have to ask my mother” became one of the most celebrated beginnings to a Cinderella fairytale that sadly, was all too meteoric and fleeting.





(Previous page, top: an MGM glamour shot circa 1937. Previous, bottom: Lana, age 3.

This page: above: Lana with her parents, Mildred and Virgil shortly before Virgil's murder.

Center, top: Lana mugs for the camera in her mother's apartment 1936. Center, bottom: Lana as a high school senior, already exuding sex appeal beyond her years.

Right, top: Lana and Mildred shortly after Lana signed her first contract. Right, bottom: Lana and Mildred after her break up with attorney Greg Bautzer. Below right: MGM's reigning sex goddess of the early 1930s – Jean Harlow.

## MGM's New Harlow

*"It was a club then...and you were very happy to be invited to the party!"*

– Carol Lombard

In retrospect, it seems prophetic that Lana's first movie at Universal for producer/director **Mervyn LeRoy** should be titled **They Won't Forget** (1937). Lana, once seen, was hardly forgettable. Though she appeared for mere moments on the screen, the sight of her bouncing un-tethered breasts loosely tucked into a sweater instantly trademarked her *'the sweater girl'* a moniker Lana reportedly abhorred. She was





(Above, left: Harlow in her signature bed gown from *Dinner At Eight* (1933) and right: MGM's first attempt at fabricating the Harlow mystique with Lana Turner, 1940. Below: Lana with press agent, Billy Wilkerson and MGM's new producer/director Mervyn LeRoy, circa 1934.)



also mortified by the cameras adulation with that particular part of her anatomy.

Nevertheless, Lana was on her way. When the 29 year old LeRoy migrated from Universal to MGM he took Lana with him as his protégé. Lana signed her MGM contract for \$100 a week, telling Mildred ***“quit your job, ma. You’ll never have to work again!”***

Lana’s arrival at the grandest motion picture studio in the world could not have been more fortuitously timed. Jean Harlow – the resident bombshell – had died six months earlier at the age of 26 from uremia, leaving MGM without a suitable replacement. At least on the surface, there were certain similarities between Harlow and Turner. Both were cut from the same ilk of platinum and both were mere children when first discovered. But while Harlow’s early career had begun at playing rather severe and slightly campy femme fatales with voracious sexual appetites, Turner’s personality leant itself to a strange and



intoxicating blend of innocence and raw animal magnetism.

Set under acting coach **Lillian Burnes** (left), Lana excelled at picking up the business of becoming a star. Her first appearance in an MGM film was as **Mickey Rooney**'s latest romance, Cynthia Potter in **Love Finds Andy Hardy** (1938); a cameo where Lana's feminine wiles clearly outweighed the clean cut wholesome boyhood of Rooney's title character.

While teaching Lana how to walk, it suddenly became obvious to Burnes that despite Lana's youth – she was only 18 - MGM had suddenly discovered not a new child star, but a full-fledged female starlet. Within a few short months, MGM's publicity would take advantage of Burnes's 'discovery by billing Lana



as their new Harlow.

To say that Lana took to her celebrity as a duckling does to water is an understatement. Assertive and in complete understanding of the value and power of her own beauty and stardom, Lana aggressively made the rounds at all of Hollywood's 'seen and be seen' nightclubs. One of her more popular dates from this period was actor Robert Stack (above), though when it came to encouraging men's affections, Lana was certainly not selective. She had bracelets made with the inscription 'love, Lana' and frequently handed them out to all her male admirers.

Inside MGM's front office, studio mogul L.B. Mayer (right) was slightly appalled. Lana was fast becoming a



creature of dangerous habits too difficult to break. Though Mayer encouraged a more restrained lifestyle, Lana continued to party it up with the boys in the backroom until the wee hours of the morning, but never missed her 6:00am call at the studio. Lana would later joke that ***"I can't face the day or an audience without vodka."***

In her first two years, she would appear in 8 films for MGM including the impractical, but amusing, **Rich Man, Poor Girl** (1938) and **Calling Dr. Kildare** (1938), opposite **Lew Ayres**.



**Above: the glitter of a goddess – Lana Turner circa 1943. Above, top: Lana as a teenager before the glamour treatment, 1932. Above, center: mugging for the camera on the set of Love Finds Andy Hardy (1938). Right: getting minor retouches by make-up artist Del Ruth for publicity photos. During the 1940s, Lana Turner was MGM's #1 sex goddess – a moniker more innocently applied during those years.**

# The MEN of LANA'S BOUDOIR



*"A gentleman is simply a patient wolf."*  
– Lana Turner

It is perhaps a sign of the times that today Lana Turner's lengthy list of male conquests would more easily brand her a loose woman. That she pursued men relentlessly, but frequently found less than happiness in their arms, is a matter of public record. However, and for their time, Lana's antics with men were deemed flirtatious fun and mildly obsessive boy-craziness at its best.



On one of her frequent outings, Lana met brilliant young attorney and ladies man **Greg Bautzer** (top right, bottom left). Soon, the two became inseparable. Lana was Bautzer's first live-in romance. For Lana, the affair was a love match. However, Bautzer was not entirely convinced that his days of bachelorhood should come to an end. Though Lana pressed for an engagement, Bautzer repeatedly delayed any concrete plans to marry. Hence, after standing Lana up on her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, the impetuous starlet grabbed her ermine and darted off in the direction of her favorite



nightclub; the Mocambo.

There, band leader **Artie Shaw** (left) caught her eye. On a whim, Lana agreed to marry Shaw – the two eloping to Vegas for the start of a life together that proved anything but kismet.

To say that the elopement was impulsive is putting things mildly. Shaw was already twice divorced by the time Lana entered his life. A misogynist with definite ideas about a ‘woman’s place’ in the home, Shaw also had a penchant for carousing with many starlets on the fly and drinking to excess until he became violent. In hindsight, it seems obvious that such a marriage should last only a mere four months. But for the moment, Lana truly believed that she had found her great love.



At MGM, **L.B. Mayer** (left) was modestly concerned that Lana’s steadily crumbling marriage to Shaw would impact her box office appeal. It did not. Instead, Lana was more popular than ever. She had transcended the pitfalls of a starlet, emerging instead as Teflon-coated Hollywood royalty to whom no scandal stuck. When, the ink had officially dried on her divorce from Shaw, Lana disregarded that brief tenure in the press with spry nonchalance and a devilish wink. “*Artie was my college education.*” she said.

In an effort to capitalize on Lana’s new image as a woman of the world, Mayer cast her in the plum role of Sheila Regan for MGM’s **Ziegfeld Girl** (1941). As the chorine gone bad, Lana brought a smoldering sensuality and unerring grand gesture of tragedy to the part – delivering an iconic performance in an otherwise largely forgettable musical melodrama. The film’s success earned Lana Mayer’s appreciation. She graduated to the first tier of MGM’s female roster, received her own private dressing room and a salary increase to the then staggering amount of \$1500 per week.



To celebrate her new financial independence, Lana went out and bought a shiny red convertible. She also began to see a lot of men, including matinee idol **Robert Taylor** – whom she costarred with in **Johnny Eager** (1941, left). Although she publicly regarded Artie Shaw as a ‘learning experience’, Lana scaled up her association with musicians – frequently seen in the company of Gene Krupa, Frank Sinatra and Benny Goodman; all ardent admirers. For Lana,





life had become one ongoing party. *"I like the boys and the boys like me!"* she proudly told a reporter, *"I think men are exciting and the gal who denies that is either a lady with no corpuscles or a statue!"*

In 1942, Lana appeared with **Clark Gable** in **Somewhere I'll Find You** – a playful romantic comedy that created mild sparks on the set. Well aware of Lana's frequent libidinous flirtations with her costars, and determined not to have the pattern repeat itself with her husband, Gable's spouse **Carol Lombard** kept a watchful eye throughout the production shoot. Weeks later, Lombard perished in a plane crash leaving Gable a distraught widower. Gable, who perhaps otherwise would have wound up on the rebound in Lana's arms, instead abandoned his Hollywood career for a stint in the air corp.



## PIN UP GAL - PLUS

It is perhaps a tad harsh to suggest that Lana Turner was transparent. To be certain, she possessed a frank openness with no hidden motives. What Lana was to the people she interacted with was quite simply herself – no false airs or modesty. If that sense of self was utterly trusting and absent of the guile often celebrated in her movie roles than she made no apologies for this lack of subterfuge.



During WWII, many of MGM's top male film stars served in the armed forces, causing a significant change in the line up of male talent being put before the cameras. But at least for Lana little in Hollywood seemed to change. She remained the 'dream queen' of the silver screen. In this wartime interim, Lana worked to reshape that dream into a legacy. Her painted likeness decorated the sides of fighter planes and bombers. She was one of the most popular pin-ups and her tireless attendance at bond rallies made her the very essence of the accessible star.



To state that Lana was impulsive is not to insult her intelligence, but rather, merely to suggest that she presented a void in common sense where men were concerned. Lana's latest romantic hiccup had materialized one evening at the Mocambo; 21 year old **Steven Crane** (left center and bottom).

Outwardly, Crane represented himself as a Phi Beta Capa graduate with former connections to the New York stock exchange. In reality, he was a Crawfordsville Indiana dropout with ties to organized crime. Crane's larger than life flash and style were the result of lucrative betting and illegal card games he ran out of a Beverly Hills address. In short, Crane was an elegant sponge, his most notable accomplishment knowing how to manipulate the odds in his favor.

But on the eve that Lana decided to elope with him to the same Justice of the Peace that had married her to Artie Shaw, none of these shortcomings were obvious. Standing before the judge, Lana jokingly instructed, "Tie it tighter this time." The judge needn't have bothered.

Crane had yet to become legally divorced from his first wife, leaving Lana out in the cold. Angry and hurt by Crane's betrayal, Lana also discovered that she was pregnant. L.B. Mayer put the machinery of his studio's P.R. to work on damage control, with legal council granting Lana a speedy annulment and custody of her as yet unborn child – Cheryl. Eventually, legal council would also finagle a quickie divorce for Crane and an equally speedy remarriage of Crane to Lana. One year later, Crane and Lana would legitimately divorce.

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1943, **Cheryl Crane** was born to Lana with a rare RH incompatibility. To save the child's life, baby Cheryl received lengthy transfusions until all of her blood had been changed. To his discredit, Crane held Lana personally responsible for the child's illness. Worse, Cheryl's costly two month stay in hospital had depleted a large amount of Lana's savings, forcing her back to work. The strain proved too great. Lana arrived on set for her latest film, *Slightly Dangerous*, looking haggard and careworn. "***If we can't photograph Lana Turner...***" Mayer suggested, "***...we might as well close the studio!***"

As the war raged on, Lana continued to throw caution to the wind. Now a divorcee twice removed, she indulged in several affairs with Peter Lawford, Frank Sinatra and Rory Calhoun. To look after Cheryl, Lana hired Scottish governess, Mae Margaret McMurray – an attentive nanny primarily responsible for Cheryl's rearing throughout most of her childhood while Lana pursued her career and many more romances, living a life largely apart from her daughter.

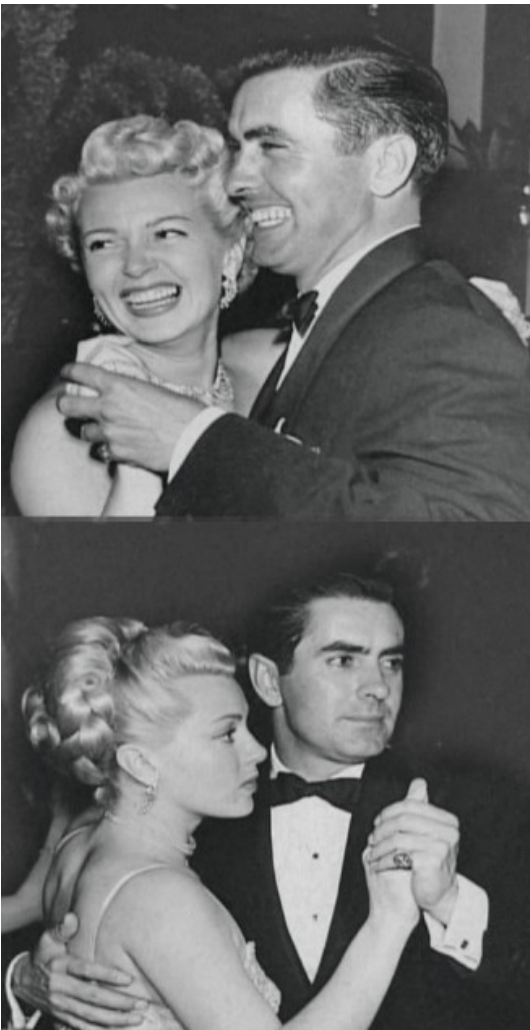
It was at this junction that Lana appeared in one of her best film roles; that of ruthless mantrap Cora Smith in ***The Postman***





**Always Rings Twice** (1945). Costarring opposite serious actor **John Garfield**, Lana found little to amuse herself. In fact, she was quite displeased with Garfield in general and frequently made that displeasure known. Nevertheless, 'Postman' was a critical and financial success and Mayer immediately put Lana to work in the costly, **Green Dolphin Street** (1947) – an epic melodrama.

Meanwhile, Lana began a torrid liaison with 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox's heartthrob, **Tyrone Power**. Once again, Lana assumed that Power's affections for her would be the basis of a lasting love match, though as the year wore on both she and Power continued to see other people on the side. However, when news of Lana's public dalliances in New York reached Power in Spain his affections for Lana began to rapidly cool.



To patch up their differences, Lana gave Power a lavish \$10,000 catered affair at the Mocambo. It proved to be a parting gesture. Weeks later, Power announced his marriage to actress **Linda Christian**. For Lana, the sting from this latest romantic fiasco was immediate and lasting.

Though her personal life had spiraled to a new low, professionally Lana was at her zenith. She was MGM's number one box office draw, earning a salary of \$200,000; making her one of the ten highest paid women in America. To this success, Lana accrued another husband – Henry J. Topping. At the start of their affair, Henry ('Bob' to his closest friends) had been a married man. Nevertheless, Topping openly courted Lana and, as production wrapped on **The Three Musketeers** (1948), proposed marriage. It was an offer too good to refuse.

Four days after his divorce, Lana and 'Bob' Topping were husband and wife. By all accounts, Topping was the most giving and forgiving of Lana's spouses. He lavished his new wife with the gift of an opulent mansion nicknamed 'Maple Top' and adopted Cheryl as his own. For two years, the Toppings resided at this blissful paradise, indulging in an ongoing series of lavish parties that eventually and severely strained Topping's financial

resources. During this tenure, Lana retired from making movies. However, the day eventually came when Topping discovered he was broke. Becoming a reclusive alcoholic, Topping continued to quietly fade into the background of his own financial shame, leaving Lana once again as the sole bread winner of her family.



**New man/same problems:** top left: Lana's third marriage to Henry 'Bob' Topping. Top right: Maple Top, the fabulous home the couple bought. Bottom left: By all accounts Topping was a dotting father figure to Cheryl, seen here with a pony for her seventh birthday. Bottom right: picture perfect...but only on film. Reportedly, after Topping's financial demise, Lana's mother Mildred told her, *"You're too expensive to keep a millionaire!"*



## BAD TIMING LATER YEARS

*"It's said in Hollywood that you should always forgive your enemies - because you never know when you'll have to work with them."*

– Lana Turner



The last act finales in most actors' careers rarely equal their debuts and, in the final analysis, the choices made by Lana Turner immediately following her divorce from Henry Topping carried a faint odor of embalming for the wild-eyed existence that had preceded their marriage, though tragically, refused to perish.



In Hollywood, times and tastes had begun to change. Movies were increasingly more expensive to produce and, with the advent of television stealing away audiences, were not guaranteed the box office once merely assumed and expected. In the wake of this growing exodus away from the theater, Lana's comeback movie, *A Life of Her Own* (1950) was a box office disappointment. That same year, L.B. Mayer – who had been the guiding hand behind Lana's career – was fired by the New York office, leaving Lana without a mentor at the helm of her future prospects.



It is one of Hollywood's ironies that Mayer's replacement, Dore Schary had little regard for the star system Mayer had worked so hard to create and foster at MGM. To Schary, Lana Turner was an expensive diva and an expendable commodity that had run its course in profitability for the studio. Precisely to illustrate this point to Lana and set the record straight as to who was now in charge of whose career, Schary cast Lana opposite **Ezio Pinza** in **Mr. Imperium** (1951), an abysmal musical programmer that severely damaged her public reputation as a bankable star.

As far as Schary was concerned, after Lana's embarrassment in this film his reprieve for her sagging career would make sufficient recompense; the studio's expensive remake of **The Merry Widow** (1952), opposite

**Fernando Lamas.** Unfortunately, **The Merry Widow** was ill received by the public, though for Lana it yielded a brief and volatile affair with her costar.

Now, divorced from Topping, Lana obliterated his memory with Cheryl, removing from her home all photographs that bore his likeness. Lana further asserted authority in her private life by ditching Lamas for muscled Tarzan hunk, **Lex Barker** (right). At work, Lana delivered the most revealing performance of her career in Vincent Minnelli's **The Bad and the Beautiful** (1952) – a seething melodrama about the ugly underbelly of Hollywood royalty.

In the backdrop of this zeitgeist in personal activity, Lana wisely assessed Maple Top as a liability. More than that – it was a direct and very tangible reminder of her failed marriage to Topping. Henceforth, and to save on expenses, more than half of the property was closed up. The grounds crew and staff were reduced to all but a cook and one gardener and Mrs. McMurray who continued to look after Cheryl in the massive shell that had once been the family home.

In the meantime, Lana and Lex traveled, partied and jetted back and forth between Hollywood and Europe. But Barker carried a deeper secret beneath his loin cloth. Eventually, Cheryl would reveal to her mother that the Tarzan hunk had repeatedly raped her during his three year stay while living under their roof. For Lana, the news was devastated. However, more bad news was to follow.

At 36, Lana Turner was not quite the desirable sex goddess she had once been and studio chief Dore Schary – sensing that the end had at last arrived – put a period to Lana's career at MGM following lack luster returns on **The Prodigal** (1955, right).

Accepting the role of sexually repressed Constance McKenzie in 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox's **Peyton Place** (1957) for a percentage of the gross instead of her usual salary, for the first time in her career Lana began to speculate that perhaps her best years as an actress were behind her. Fortunately, **Peyton Place** was a colossal hit with Lana's percentage providing handsome returns.





(Sometimes a picture isn't worth a thousand words. Above: publicly, the affair between Lana and Johnny Stompanato had all the ear-markings of a blissful romance – seen here together at the Mocambo, the beach, and with a happy Cheryl at the airport. However, behind closed doors, Stompanato was abusive and frequently beat Lana where the bruises wouldn't show.)

Whether it was willful spite for all the years of maternal neglect or retaliation for the abuse endured at Barker's hand, on the home front Cheryl Crane was becoming increasingly difficult for Lana to manage. After an alleged homosexual incident, Cheryl was sent to an institution. Now, alone and living in the mausoleum that Maple Top had become, Lana chose a new live-in companion, **Johnny Stompanato**; a front man for mobster Mickey Cohen. It was a match made in hell.

Stompanato's lack of couth and patience resulted in frequent outbursts between him and Lana. On more than several occasions, Stompanato also left bruises on Lana's person. Before long, the relationship degenerated into one of fear and loathing. When Lana elected to take Cheryl and her mother as guests to the annual Oscar telecast instead of her boyfriend, Stompanato flew into a jealous rage. It would be his last.



On April 4, 1958 their volatile association reached a most tragic and bizarre climax. Reportedly, Cheryl awoke to a confrontation between Lana and Stompanato in Lana's bedroom, whereupon she instinctively grabbed a knife from one of the kitchen drawers and cut Stompanato clean through his pelvis with a fatal blow.

Even if these attested facts continue to resonate with more than a hint of implausibility today, the jury sitting in judgment at the time of Cheryl's arrest found them more than sufficient to acquit her of the crime of murder but place her in a juvenile detention hall until her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

The severity from fallout derived from this trial branded Lana an unfit mother and social pariah in the court of popular opinion. And now, even her closest associates inside Hollywood seemed to enjoy the exploitation and spectacle of Lana's private life.



On screen and at the age of 39, Lana was hired by producer Ross Hunter for his remake of **Imitation of Life** (1959) – a syrupy melodrama that echoed many of the incidents in Lana's real life.

Lana also acquired another husband; **Fred May**. While Cheryl was placed in a sanitarium May and Lana lived luxuriously – if briefly - in Malibu. Lana's final film role followed in 1966 in **Madame X**. Although Lana officially retired from movies thereafter, her personal life continued to have its ups and downs through two more failed marriages.



When, in 1993, she was diagnosed with cancer Lana, who had already retreated from the public spotlight, now became a veritable recluse in her own home.

To her credit, **Cheryl Crane** – who, remarkably harbored no ill will towards her mother - returned to Lana's side for this final act in her life. On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1995, Lana Turner died of throat cancer – her personal demons finally resolved.



(Conflicting views: top, a repentant Lana delivers a dramatic monologue – part apology/part fiction at the inquest following Stompanato's murder.

Middle and bottom left: Lana's demeanor before and after the trial is suggestive of her state of mind going in and immediately following the verdict. Right: a Universal Studio portrait of Lana for Ross Hunter's remake of Imitation of Life 1959.)





# QUOTA

- A GODDESS BIDS FAREWELL

*"I expected to have one husband and seven babies. Instead, I've had seven husbands and one baby!"*

- Lana Turner

Superficially and in hindsight, the life of Lana Turner resonates with a faint air of the perverse and utterly tragic – that is, until one stops to reconsider that Lana Turner never regarded herself as such. In fact, she lived her own life on her own selfish terms. That she failed to find personal contentment in her brief span on earth is perhaps tragic, though even in reassessing the trajectory of her tenure, one fact remains openly clear. That Lana Turner enjoyed herself immensely while riding the tidal wave of stardom to its inevitable end. **"MGM prepared us for stardom,"** Lana once said, **"They didn't prepare us for life."**



In many ways Lana Turner retains the luster from that stardom because her private life became such a ravaged public spectacle. But the darkness that so often intruded in those later years should not eclipse the filmic legacy Lana Turner has left behind. She was and remains one of cinema's most elusive, surreal and enduring screen goddesses. Her talent – endlessly debated amongst critics even today – is second only to her ardent fan following and Lana's ability to suspend her own reality in that quest for impossible perfection quantifiable only on the screen.

In the final analysis, Lana Turner is stardom plus: a great lady giving her art her all. The inevitable shortage in her own life comes up in those moments when the movies fell out of love with her rather than her with the illusion they provided: that perhaps someday it could all become a reality...at least in her mind's eye for that world now and quite sadly, a dream remembered.

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