

I AWAIT THE DEVIL'S COMING

written by

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**Setting:** A room with a comfortable chair. A box camera is pointed at the chair.

**At Rise:** MARY MACLANE, late 30s, in an evening gown decked out with cowboy gear, sits in the chair, smoking.

GEORGE SPOOR, 40s, an irritable man in a gray suit, cranks the camera.

MARY

Title card to start the scene.

(Both Mary and George turn to the audience and rise, holding their hands before them as though imagining a title card.)

MARY

I Await the Devil's Coming.

GEORGE

(*At the same time*) Men Who Have Made Love to me.

MARY

No George.

GEORGE

But the film is called Men Who Have Made Love to Me.

MARY

The film, George, yes, the film is called Men Who Have Made Love to Me. This particular scene, this scene we are shooting now, is called I Await the Devil's Coming.

GEORGE

This scene, this particular scene we are shooting right now, was not in your script, Mary.

MARY

I added it. The film needed a postscript.

GEORGE

And this scene, Mary, this particular, I have not read this particular, Mary.

MARY

There is nothing to it, George. It is, as I said, a postscript. Single set. Two characters. A few minutes long, if that.

GEORGE

Now, here, this is news. This is a two-character scene? Who are the characters?

MARY

Well, obviously, one of them is me, George. Mary MacLane, the Wild Woman of the Butte, the child writer of Montana, the woman who had men make love to me.

GEORGE

And the other?

MARY

The devil.

GEORGE

And where is this devil?

MARY

Well, I await his coming, George.

GEORGE

Infuriating.

MARY

What's that, George?

GEORGE

This is the most infuriating movie I have ever made. You are the most taxing woman I have ever known.

MARY

This movie was your idea, George.

GEORGE

Had I known the fury it would arouse in me, I might have reconsidered.

MARY

Now.

GEORGE

The constant rewrites. The fighting with the director. And the costumes. I am told you have stolen all the costumes.

MARY

George.

GEORGE

And now this? You call me and ask me to show up at midnight to film a previously undiscussed postscript? It's too much. I tell you, you ask too much.

(Beat.)

MARY

Is your tantrum over?

GEORGE

For the moment.

MARY

Then why don't you work that apparatus and we can put this all behind us.

(George begins to crank the camera. Mary lights another cigarette, sits up, looks at the camera.)

MARY

There is dialogue here, George. As with the rest of the film, I will speak to the camera now, and you will add in the dialogue in the script in the form of intertitles.

GEORGE

Can you say some of the dialogue, Mary?

MARY

Does it matter? All people will see is my lips moving, and will assume I have said whatever is on the title card.

GEORGE

Can you summarize for my sake?

MARY

I am describing how I was once a girl in Butte, Montana. You've read my first book, *The Story of Mary MacLane*?

GEORGE

Yes.

MARY

It is that. It is the story of a young woman in a ghastly frontier town.

GEORGE

Is this the reason for the cowpoke habiliments?

(Mary stands, turns, showing off the clothes. She draws the pistol, waves it around menacingly, like a gunslinger.)

MARY

I found them in your costume room. Do you like them?

GEORGE

Well, they belonged to my former partner, Broncho Billy. Do not steal them.

MARY

They seem right for me. They call me the Wild Woman of the Butte, but when I was a girl, the whole of Montana was wild. Mining town, you know. Red light district. Little graveyard with wooden graves, and the graveyard grew each year.

GEORGE

We are not making a cowgirl movie, Mary.

MARY

George, my first book sold 100,000 copies in one month. Do you think this film will do worse or better if I include some of its content?

GEORGE

Go on.

MARY

Well, you may recall that I found my experiences in this frontier town hideous, just hideous. I had a peripatetic life, wandering, and during my wanders I became convinced of a few things: I was a genius, life should be a grand adventure, and both would be squandered in Butte. And this is where the devil comes in.

(A VICTORIAN DEVIL enters, played by a Black woman.)

THE DEVIL

I am here!

MARY

Just in time!

GEORGE

I am going to stop filming for a moment.

MARY

Oh no, George.

GEORGE

You must know we have moved far afield from what we discussed in making this film.

MARY

Reign in your horses, George.

GEORGE

We had discussed a series of scenes of your love affairs, one disaster after another, until you find the right man.

MARY

Let me explain.

GEORGE

There was no discussion of negresses in Lucifer costumes. This extends far beyond the parameters of our agreement. FAR BEYOND.

(Beat.)

MARY

Tantrum?

GEORGE

Temporarily over.

MARY

George, this is my very dear friend Harriet Williams, the artist.

GEORGE

Charmed.

THE DEVIL

Likewise.

MARY

George, you have read my first book, and so you know the role the devil played in it.

GEORGE

I have some recollection of that applesauce.

MARY

He was my imagined guide.

GEORGE

Your guide, your savior, whatever Satanic fantasies you had, yes.

MARY

And so, for the sake of this movie, I have conceived of the devil as the first man who made love to me.

GEORGE

This is not a man, Mary.

THE DEVIL

But I have a beard.

MARY

She has a beard.

GEORGE

Nevertheless. You might engage in lesbianism and miscegenation in your private life, but it will not be in this film.

(Both Mary and the devil laugh.)

GEORGE

What.

MARY

Of course not, George. This is simply a scene in which the devil warns me of the men I will meet.



GEORGE

That is not how you just described it.

MARY

I know how I described it. This is my area of expertise, George. You may know how to make a cowboy movie, but I know how to titillate. It was not the devil who took me out of Butte, but my own unerring sense of the appetites of men, and how to benefit from them.

THE DEVIL

You tell him.

MARY

Why do you think I endlessly referenced my strong, attractive girl's-body in my book? Why do you think I wrote myself as a wanton, wild young woman desperate for adventures?

THE DEVIL

Why, Mary?

MARY

Because the whole world is one vast landscape of bug-eyed men imagining themselves as either saviors to or corruptors of ample, naive girls on the cusp of womanhood.

THE DEVIL

There you go.

MARY

A hundred thousand of them bought my book in 30 days, George. This is what I do.

THE DEVIL

Listen to the woman.

MARY

You put out a film with a whiff of lesbianism, a hint of miscegenation, people will flock to see it. Does that make sense to you, George?

GEORGE

Damn you, it does.

MARY

So crank the lever on your little box and let's make a movie.

(George begins to film again.)

MARY

This is where the devil will give me warnings, which, as before, will be expressed through intertitles.

(The Devil moves melodramatically, as though offering dire warnings, but this is the dialogue:)

MARY

I read that book you recommended, Harriet. Forest Leaves.

THE DEVIL

Your thoughts?

MARY

I particularly liked the poem about the yonder halls.

THE DEVIL

He Knoweth Not that the Dead Are There.

MARY

The very one. I'm not sure I understood it, however. Is it a poem about a child in a cemetery?

THE DEVIL

I have always read it as a poem about all of us, experiencing the pleasures of life but innocent of our own impending deaths.

GEORGE

I am going to stop filming again.

MARY

God damn it, George.

GEORGE

I have no idea what's going on.

MARY

We are filming the scene in which the devil warns me about men.

GEORGE

You are discussing poetry.

MARY

Be attentive, George. Once again: people will see the discussion in the intertitle cards.

THE DEVIL

It's in the script she wrote.

MARY

But they can't hear what we're actually saying.

THE DEVIL

Movies don't have sound, mister.

MARY

So we can say whatever we want when filming. And, frankly, what could be more tedious than discussing men?

THE DEVIL

Indeed.

GEORGE

I understand all this intellectually, but in practice it's damned confusing.

MARY

Did Broncho Billy whoop and yee haw every time you filmed him?

GEORGE

Yes, although he was from a Prussian Jewish family, so he sometimes yelled for kreplach.

MARY

Well, consider poetry kreplach for lesbians who miscegenate.

GEORGE

I'm still confounded. This is, if anything, a prelude, as it takes place before the action of the film. But you call it a postscript.

MARY

Yes, I see. It is because I am adding one new story. One more man. The last one in this tale. The gravest of the devil's warnings.

GEORGE

Not following.

MARY

The devil will take the role of this man, and act it out. It's impossible to explain. If you start to film again, we'll perform it, and you will understand.

GEORGE

Not if you discuss poetry.

MARY

No, we will deliver the dialogue as written.

GEORGE

Very well. Filming.

MARY

(*To camera*) This was the most dangerous man, the devil told me.

(The devil pulls on a gray suit, holds out a piece of paper. Both act in the exaggerated style of a silent film.)

MARY

He would come to me after all the others, and he would demand the most. Oh, devil, what do you want?

THE DEVIL

I want your stories!

MARY

But why?

THE DEVIL

I shall spin them into gold, and they will be my fortune!

MARY

But what of me?

THE DEVIL

You can have the dust that falls from my table, but nothing more.

MARY

Oh, you fiend!

THE DEVIL

You will meet many men like this, Mary, and they will be the greatest devils. They will take from you and take from you and

--

GEORGE

Stopping again.

MARY

Dammit, George. Why?

GEORGE

Mary, this man in the grey suit, it's obviously me!

MARY

Well, it is every man who wanted to profit from my life.

GEORGE

Did you invite me here simply to insult me?

MARY

No, George. This story must end this way. There is a machine in place that turns the labor of women into profits for men. It is not just that men will make love to a woman, stealing pleasure from her body, but that they will also steal everything else a woman has to offer --

GEORGE

Enough. Enough. Audiences might have a taste for lesbianism and miscegenation, but if we include socialism they'll tear the theater apart. I am done filming this, you are done adding new scenes to the movie, and this movie is done in entirety.

(Exit George, fuming.)

THE DEVIL

Are you satisfied that you embarrassed him enough?

MARY

No, poo. I wanted him to watch the entire scene. I didn't think he would figure out we were making fun of him so quickly.

THE DEVIL

Well, he got a little earful, at least.

MARY

I suppose that will have to do. He left the camera.

THE DEVIL

Yes.

MARY

So I suppose some of it was recorded. I'll take that.

THE DEVIL

Yes.

MARY

All right. Well, I suppose our work is done.

THE DEVIL

Your work.

MARY

My work?

THE DEVIL

Your work. I'm not quite done yet.

MARY

Oh ho. What do you have planned?

THE DEVIL

Well, you showed up today to seize the film, yes? To impose on it, to embarrass the man who made it?

MARY

Yes.

THE DEVIL

I'm here for something similar. I have come to seize your play.

MARY

I beg your pardon?

THE DEVIL

Did you think I was here as a favor? Did you think I had nothing better to do but to dress as a white man and as a white man's devil?

MARY

Yes, honestly, I did.

THE DEVIL

You thought wrong, Mary. Let me take this beard off. I'm not a supporting character in your story. I came here for my own story. What's my name, Mary?

MARY

Harriet Williams.

THE DEVIL

But I'm not here as Harriet Williams, am I? Look at the script. I'm referred to as "the devil" throughout.

(Mary produces a script, looks at it.)

MARY

Oh. Well, that's the role you play, I suppose --

HARRIET

No more. You introduced me as an artist. Do you think there is a soul in this room who has heard of me?

MARY

Well, I'm certain they haven't heard of me either, Harriet.

HARRIET

They all have now, though, haven't they? Your name will keep coming up, again and again. When you die in 10 years, Mary, the fact is in every paper in America.



MARY

Yes, but it's all stories of how I failed to live up to my supposed genius, and after that I'm mostly forgotten.

HARRIET

Forgotten, hardly. All of your works have been republished by now, Mary. This is the second play about you in five years! I'm sure it won't be the last! Your life can always be turned into some avant garde Chautauqua show. But what of me?

MARY

Oh, Harriet. There must be something.

HARRIET

A little something, just a little, yes. I appear in your obituaries. They often refer to me as your maid.

MARY

Oh no.

HARRIET

Oh yes, Mary. The most detailed one has all of this to say: The companion, Harriet Williams, who now has her own studio specializing in miniatures, wept last night as she told the story of the last years of Mary MacLane's life. And here I weep and say: She was my friend, and she was ill, and she needed me.

MARY

That can't be all.

HARRIET

It is. And here is what stings the most about it. I will spend the last four years of your life taking care of you as you waste away from tuberculosis, too poor to even buy your own food. And why are you so broke, Mary? Because you got sued for stealing the costumes from THIS movie, and that's a fact. And what did you write about me? Nothing.

MARY

Well, my work was mostly autobiographical ...

HARRIET

Mary, you wrote an entire book about a girlfriend in Boston. And it's something you can do. You can talk about your strong girl-body. You can write a book-length love letter to another woman. You can even fantasize about love affairs with the devil, and dirty old men will reward you for it. But Harriet Williams? If I did any of those things, they'd put me in prison or in an asylum, and you know that's true. Am I right?

MARY

Yes.

HARRIET

When you die, the obituaries make a big fuss out of your final neighborhood. Oh, she was in decline, they will say, look, she died on Chicago's south side, a black and tan neighborhood, terrible, tsk, terrible. It's MY neighborhood, Mary. It's where my photo studio is. No white writer is ever going to pen a biography or write a play about a Black woman in that neighborhood, do you think?

MARY

No.

HARRIET

But you could have. You could have written about Harriet Williams, who loved you and took care of you. But you wrote nothing. So I'm taking your play. This isn't the Mary MacLane play anymore. It's the Harriet Williams play. Get up.

MARY

What?

HARRIET

Mary, you stand up and you go behind that movie camera. I'm going to sit down, and I am going to smoke, and you are going to film me, and I am going to be the center of attention.

(Mary rises. Harriet points to the camera, and Mary crosses to it. Harriet sits down, pulls out a cigarette, lights it, smoking.)

HARRIET

I'm Broncho Billy now. I'm Mary MacLane now. This is my damn time. I'm just going to sit here and smoke, and you can all watch me. I'll take my time up here. Just going to enjoy this cigarette. You all are going to remember Harriet Williams, that's the truth. You're going to say, I saw a play about Harriet Williams, and it was the best play of the night, and there was some white woman writer and some squirrely little white man, and I don't remember much about them. But I remember Harriet. She was an artist. She was a photographer. She made miniatures. And people will say: what was the name of that play? And you will say:

MARY

Title card!

(Harriet rises, and both turn to the audience, miming that they are holding up a title card. Both speak at once.)

HARRIET AND MARY

HARRIET GOD DAMN DON'T YOU FORGET IT WILLIAMS

END OF PLAY