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116 comedienne. The uncertainty was compounded when Thalberg suddenly died in September 1936, and the studio faced a future in which Mayer's own preferences in stars, stories and treatment came to predominate. Wholesomeness, family sanctity, love for one's mother, respect for one's father – even when these all-American qualities were as likeably accommodated as they were in the Andy Hardy series, which Mayer initiated in 1937, they were not the best ones to enhance or advance Crawford's career. Financially, too, the studio was having a rough time. After an all-time record profit of \$14,388,000 in 1935–6 (on a production budget of \$22,916,999 and forty-five films) came a slump to \$5,855,000 (on an investment of \$26,835,000 and thirty-five films) in 1936–7. Thalberg's last two productions before his death, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Good Earth*, together accounted for a loss of \$1,500,000. Expensive risks, which included prestigious as well as off-beat productions, no longer had a place in Mayer's plans. Signs of playing safe with Crawford are apparent in the enquiry he personally addressed to Sam Eckman, MGM's London head, in November 1936. How did Eckman view Crawford's starring in a remake of *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*? This was Frederick Lonsdale's society drama of the adventuress who robs the aristocrats of their jewels and exposes their morals as paste. Eckman's reply, though favourable, should have put Mayer on his guard against the datedness of this theme: '*Last of Mrs Cheyney* one of the most successful early Norma Shearer films even in industrial areas, contrary to original opinion. Therefore favour remake.'

The Last of Mrs Cheyney (19 February 1937) was not a success. Crawford's disquiet is reflected in numerous imperious memos during shooting to the publicity department: 'I am anxious to have still No. 972/72 killed. Please advise,' is typical. In other ways too, it was a 'disturbed' production. Director Richard Boleslawski died in the middle of it; George Fitzmaurice was assigned to take over; at the last minute this was countermanded; the person who completed the film, though uncredited, was Hollywood's only woman film director at that time, Dorothy Arzner.

She and Crawford took to each other at once. Arzner was four or five years older than her star, but looked like a youth in her mid-twenties and could be mistaken for a boy. She was invariably impeccably turned out, usually in twill trousers or tweeds tailored with a chic yet masculine line. She affected a slouchy hat on the set. Yet the effect, instead of being 'butch', was the crisp statement by a talented and shrewd woman of the qualities she wore comfortably in the Hollywood studios where she freelanced. In this almost exclusively male world where people in power were concerned, exceptional female talents like Arzner and Margaret Booth, one of MGM's pre-eminent editors, were accepted, even admired, but as workers first, and then (and a long way after) as women.

It was Franchot Tone who recommended Crawford to take a look at Arzner's work. Together, they screened the last film she had directed, *Craig's Wife*, in the cinema at

Crawford's home. Oddly, it was this film that Crawford herself remade (as *Harriet Craig*) some years later; even more bizarrely, it is a film that anticipates, and may have contributed to, the marked change of life that overtook Crawford as her temperament was toughened to meet the challenge of the gathering years. Harriet Craig, who wants a home of her own, symbol of security and love, gets married so as to gain her heart's desire and then, to secure her conquest, turns her husband into just another bit of the furnishings. This woman (played by Rosalind Russell in Arzner's film) patrolling the dustless rooms in all her loneliness presages the desperate withdrawal into her own shell from which a later Crawford would re-emerge toughened and regenerated.

Arzner had been assigned by MGM to direct Luise Rainer in *The Girl from Trieste*, based on an unperformed play by Ferenc Molnár. Molnár's version was about a prostitute trying to go straight, but discovering that the so-called High Society she mixed with was much more vicious than her own class. But Rainer dropped out for reasons that are still obscure. Instantly Crawford snapped up the film, whereupon, to her consternation (and, one guesses, Arzner's, too) Mayer ordered it to be rewritten as a Cinderella story for Crawford entitled *The Bride Wore Red* (8 October 1937).

Because the story's original heartlessness has not been satisfactorily masked by the blander re-write, *The Bride Wore Red* is an acutely uncomfortable film to watch. Its author's distaste for the rich constantly undercuts our sympathy for the heroine who panders to them in order to become one of them. This girl is Crawford, a cabaret singer in a tawdry Trieste cellar, sent off at the whim of a cynical count to spend two weeks in an expensive hotel in the Tyrol and win his bet that, with the right deportment and wardrobe (by Adrian, of course, and including the eponymous red creation of some 2,000 – or was it two million? – bugle beads), she can pass for a lady of breeding among the aristocrats in residence. The film makes the mistake (and Crawford's almost neurotic anxiety compounds it) of emphasizing the callous purposiveness of her imposture. With never a moment of self-mockery, but only nervous concern lest her ruse be detected, she snaps at her social inferiors among the hotel domestics (her *superiors*, if the truth be known) and calculatingly grasps at the chance of marrying a rich young snob, played by Robert Young, who has unfeelingly jilted his own fiancée the minute Crawford appeared. For once, only Franchot Tone looks at home as the single man of integrity in the Alps, though incongruously cast as a flute-playing postman and even more bizarrely costumed in *lederhosen* of a length that Bavaria might dispute with Bermuda.

It is one of the few films concerned with rising above one's origins in which Crawford fails to make the grade. Possibly because, in a European setting, she is shunned for not being what she seemed; whereas, in an American milieu, according to Hollywood, status comes with successful economic assimilation and her lowly social origins would have been forgiven her. //

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