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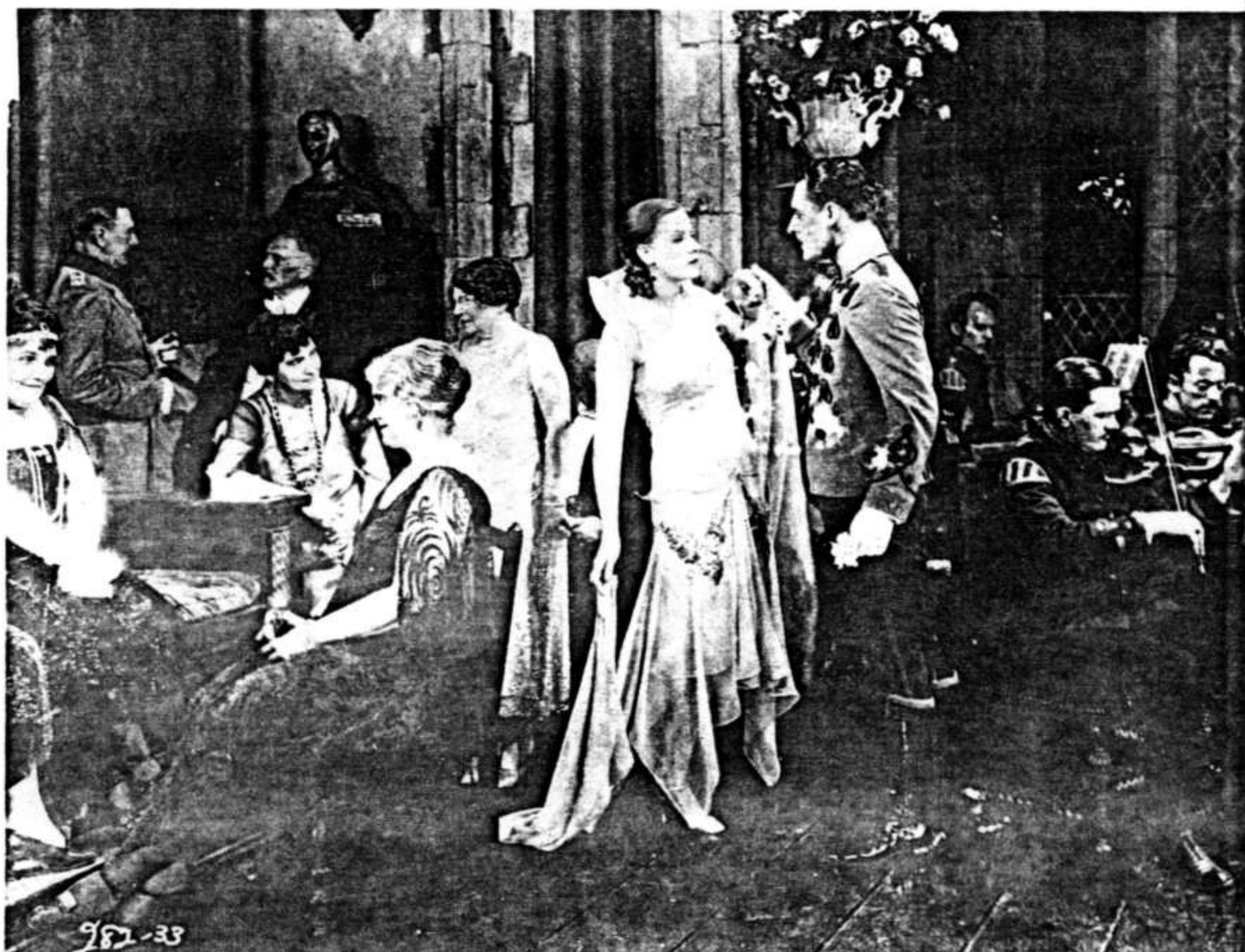
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The classic triangle: Lars Hanson, Greta Garbo and John Gilbert.

Flesh and the Devil, 1927

An officer in the Austrian army, John Gilbert is prepared to throw away his career for the love of socialite Garbo. But he is not prepared to throw away his honor, and it comes as something of a shock when he finds that she is actually married to an ageing nobleman, played by Marc McDermott.





Steamy love scenes like this one between Garbo and Gilbert helped make *Flesh and the Devil* a standout success, especially since it was no secret that the two stars *were* romantically inclined at the time.

Without being a great film in itself, *Flesh and the Devil*, the first of the Garbo-Gilbert romances, was quite certainly a box office milestone—and it also represents something of a high-water mark in the sheer elegance and “bigness” of movies in their most glamorous era. The sets have a solidity and glossiness which is staggering, and the technical proficiency of the trick effects—stunning matte-shots, for example, which literally make today’s efforts look crude by comparison—is unsurpassed. The photography gleams and shimmers. And dramatically, the picture is big in every sense of the word. Honor, loyalty, love—strong emotions all of them, are given full expression in a story which permits no facile solutions but demands a duel, a ravaging sickness, a desperate pursuit across a frozen lake, and similar ingredients, before a happy—or at least, a satisfying—ending could be reached. And with those torrid Gilbert-Garbo love scenes to top everything off (love scenes that, Hollywood gossip had it, were very much

the real thing), this was an “audience” picture in every sense of the word.

With such polish and visual elegance, it is a pity that the film couldn’t also have been a great one. It certainly had all the potentials in Hermann Sudermann’s original novel, *The Undying Past*. But its basic story-line, of two Austrian army comrades whose lives are disrupted when they both fall in love with a married temptress, was so obviously an ideal subject for Garbo, that, inevitably perhaps, it was too much reshaped as a vehicle for her (even though John Gilbert got top billing) to retain much stature of its own.

But as a piece of slick, glossy romance—too stark to be called “hokum”, yet still too romanticized to have much contact with a reality—it remains a thoroughly enjoyable film, possibly a trifle too slow and ponderous, but thanks to the playing of Garbo, Gilbert and the Swedish actor Lars Hanson, and the smooth direction of Clarence Brown, a consistently interesting and entertaining one.