**TOPICS THUS FAR \*\* excerpts forwarded to Elaine**

**INTRODUCTION 972**

**DOMERGUE, Faith**

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***JOHNNY MOCCASIN* (TV)**

***KING AND FOUR QUEENS, THE* (1956) \*\***

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**INTRODUCTION**

Over the past three years or so I have been privileged to get to know a lady named Elaine Hollingsworth, a current resident of Australia, who once lived and worked in New York City and Hollywood. She was a Powers model in the Big Apple and a contracted actress under the name of Sara Shane in Tinsel Town, firstly at MGM and later with Universal International. For the sake of expediency I shall refer to her as Elaine throughout this volume.

Beginning with an uncredited ‘bit’ in *Easter Parade* in 1948, Elaine appeared in a total of ten movies and thirteen television series, plus a stint as herself on *Lux Video Theatre* in 1954 when she and Ronald Colman were invited to chat before a live audience as ‘Intermission Guests’ one evening. There were scores more screen opportunities throughout the decade and a half she lived in Los Angeles, but Elaine was never overly enamoured with the movie business even in the beginning. Consequently, she passed on numerous auditions arranged by her agent, preferring instead to focus on her main passion, the purchasing, refurbishing and selling of run-down homes in high-class residential areas in Los Angeles. ‘I was determined to make my fortune before turning forty’, she informed me, ‘and this business I chose enabled me to do so. My agent would call about an audition or a reading, but I would have a ‘concrete pour’ or whatever scheduled, so I would tell him ‘no’. Not surprisingly, he eventually hit me with an ultimatum – acting or building? I chose the latter.’

This book is not a biography, but a collection of Elaine’s reminiscences and observations in post-war America in the movie industry, at a time when the studio moguls ruled the day. She also happened to be wed to a very wealthy man for the best part of eight years (from 1949 to 1957), and that opened many society doors for her. She mingled with the rich and famous on a daily basis, attending and hosting parties and soirees and vacationing at all the playgrounds of the rich.

Biography or not, it is still necessary to tell you a little about this remarkable lady and her life. She came into this world as Elaine Sterling on 18 May 1928 in the inner suburb of Kirkwood, St Louis, Missouri. As a teenager her outstanding beauty soon landed her work as a face and hand model for cosmetic ads in St Louis at the tender age of thirteen. America’s entry into the Second World War in December 1941 took place a few months before her fourteenth birthday. Although a very bright girl, Elaine found that school held very little interest for her and she sometimes cut classes whenever modelling opportunities presented themselves.

The war was in full swing by the time fifteen year-old Elaine volunteered as a nurse in St Louis in 1943. ‘I was quite possibly the worst nurse in all of St Louis’, she openly admits. ‘At the first sight of blood I tended to faint and the surgeons would step over me.’ But she stuck at it, living the mixed life of a model and a nurse. However, St Louis was always going to be too small to hold her, especially when her parents encouraged their only daughter to have the strength to make her own decisions and to pursue her dreams.

In 1945 she travelled to the bright lights of New York City and quickly gained work as a Powers model. She was seventeen and already an outstandingly attractive young woman. ‘I didn’t have the figure to be a fashion model’, she recalled, ‘because I was too, I guess you would say, rounded. I didn’t have that stick figure. What I did mainly were face and hand modelling, you know cosmetic ads, skin care ads. ‘The hair you love to touch’, that type of thing. And even that I didn’t do terribly well.’

Even so, by 1946 in New York City, she was working and living the dream. When Elaine met top model Myra Keck, the two beauties hit it off at once and became firm friends. Myra was being squired around town at that time by multi-millionaire Huntington Hartford, heir to the A & P Supermarket chain. Elaine thought him a lovely, generous man, although he certainly had a roving eye for the ladies, his list of conquests long and distinguished. However, he was completely besotted with Myra and wanted to take her to Hollywood to try her luck in the movies. She agreed, but only if Elaine could accompany her. Huntington put both girls on the Super Chief and set them up in an apartment in Los Angeles where they were quickly introduced to high society.

At the exciting age of eighteen, Elaine suddenly found herself in the movie capital of the world, about to embark upon an adventure that would see her mixing with many of the legendary stars of an industry that had captured the imagination of millions around the world. Her great beauty and intelligence would sweep millionaire real estate tycoon Bill Hollingsworth off his feet and their marriage would pave her way into high society. Over the next two decades she would act alongside some of the greatest movie and TV actors of all time and be on a first-name basis with the likes of Howard Hughes, Orson Welles, Gloria Swanson, Hedy Lamarr, Lana Turner and many, many others. Her screen career would never reach great heights but that was never her primary goal anyway. Her intentions were to become independently wealthy, travel the world meeting people, and live a full life. And she has surely accomplished all those goals and more. Now in her 90th year, Elaine lives on her property in Queensland, Australia. I am honoured to call her my friend.

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***THE KING AND FOUR QUEENS* (1956)**

During the filming of *The King and Four Queens* in 1956, Elaine worked (as Sara Shane) under director Raoul Walsh and alongside some highly credentialed and established stars. The experience had its ups and downs professionally. Clark Gable, by now in his mid-fifties, played the male lead. Fittingly, perhaps, ‘the King’ portrayed the king in the title. His career was slowly winding down and he was resolved to making just one or two features a year from 1956 onwards. Indeed, after *The King and Four Queens* he would make only six more pictures in the four years before his death and one of those, (*The Misfits*), would not be released until 1961, the year after his demise. Clark had formed a production company that churned out *The Tall Men* (1955) and this picture, but the stress of producing both films took its toll on his health and he decided never to produce another.

Jo Van Fleet portrayed Ma McDade, the mother of the four ‘queens’. Hot off her Academy Award winning stint in *East of Eden* (1955) and the recipient of a Tony a year earlier for *A Trip to Bountiful*, Jo was a long-standing member of the Actors Studio since 1946, a woman who credited Elia Kazan for much of her success, both in film and on Broadway. Her unforgiveable altercation with Elaine on the set of this movie may well have been her flaunting her resume in front of the totally inexperienced young actress. Whatever the reason, her actions were inexcusable, but more of that later.

Elaine, Eleanor Parker, Barbara Nichols and Jean Willes were chosen to play ‘the four queens’, the daughters of Ma McDade. Thirty-four year old Eleanor was at the pinnacle of her considerable beauty. She had worked with Walsh before when she was cast in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). He left her performance on the cutting room floor. Perhaps, it was this that sparked their flare-up on the set of *The King and Four Queens.* ‘Eleanor Parker was terrific to work with. A very lovely lady’, said Elaine. ‘She was just sort of my cup of tea. I liked her a lot. She was a big star and she had courage. The director had done something terrible to her. I don’t know the details, but she let out at him and called him every name in the book. It was wonderful. This was my first important picture and I was scared, so I wasn’t about to tell him what I thought of him, but he was a complete bastard! A horrid man.’

Twenty-eight year old Barbara Nichols was a fine actress, a year away from her Oscar-nominated turn in the brilliant film noir *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). In that same year, however, she would be badly injured in an auto accident in which resulted in the loss of her spleen. Another accident in the sixties severely tore her liver and these injuries would combine to shorten her life. Never a leading lady, Barbara was often cast as a floozy, cigarette girl, bartender, gun moll, stripper etc. Sadly, her damaged liver (and possible complications from radioactive dust) would ultimately lead to liver disease and her early death at 47 in 1976.

Jean Willes was one of those B-actresses whose face was instantly recognizable, yet her name was not. She was a smarter version of Barbara Nichols (on screen that is), usually playing unsympathetic roles. She landed a small role in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) as Annette, the club receptionist (uncredited), but was scarcely noticed. Jean was a prolific television actress, appearing in scores of series from the fifties until 1976. In all she racked up over 200 screen credits, mostly television guest roles, but there were 65 movies in her resume so she was never idle for long. Liver cancer claimed her in 1989.

Raoul Walsh was a Hollywood director for over 50 years. He was even an uncredited assistant director on DW Griffith’s 1915 classic *The Birth of a Nation*. In fact, you can see him emoting away as John Wilkes Booth in the picture. His movies as a director included *The Big Trail* (1930), *High Sierra* (1941), *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941), *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), *Gentleman Jim* (1942), *Battle Cry* (1955) and *The Naked and the Dead* (1958). The one-eyed director was completely blind by the end of his life. He lost his right eye back in 1928 when on location making *In Old Arizona*. A jack-rabbit leapt into the windshield of his car.

During filming, Jo Van Fleet struck Elaine across the face, knocking her off her feet. There appears to have been no reason for the attack and the director was livid, not out of any personal concern for Elaine’s well-being, but because any physical damage to her face might have resulted in delays in filming. ‘She was a complete bitch’, recalled Elaine. ‘We had this scene together and that woman did something that was so unprofessional. She hauled off and hit me! It wasn’t even in the script. She hit me in the side of the face so hard that she knocked me out of frame. Blood came out of my mouth. It was terrible. But I didn’t stop acting. I came right back into the scene again. They didn’t have to cut it’, she proudly proclaimed. ‘But the director was furious with her. I mean she could have put me out of business as far as filming was concerned.’ Van Fleet never did explain why she hit her. Once he realised that no serious damage had been done to his actress’s face Walsh evidently lost interest and the incident went unrecorded.

Elaine’s experience working with the former ‘King of Hollywood’ was entirely the opposite. ‘I got to work with Clark Gable’, she recalled with glee. ‘It was just wonderful. He was the kindest, most unassuming man. He knew I was inexperienced so he helped me in our scenes together. He would turn me with his hands, so that I became the focus of shots involving the two of us. That was something big stars rarely did for new-comers. Few are ever that considerate, but he was. A lovely, lovely man.’ Significantly, the two stars that impressed Elaine most in this movie happened to be the two biggest ones – Eleanor Parker and Gable.

It is interesting to note that John Wayne’s *The Conqueror* (1956)was shot just before *The King and Four Queens* at the same locations in Snow Canyon and St George, Utah. An inordinate number of the cast and crew from that lamentable film succumbed to some form of cancer and, it has been said, that the nuclear tests conducted nearby and the radiation deposited in the dirt and sand in the area contaminated them. ‘In our film’, said Elaine, ‘the cast were rolling around in all that red dust. I was not rolling around in it because I played a kind of staid character who wouldn’t be doing that. I heard that Jo Van Fleet died of cancer and that Barbara Nichols and Jean Willes died of liver cancer. Now, I don’t say it was this, but they’d been doing the testing before we got up there. It is rather curious.’ Stuntman and part-time actor Chuck Roberson also succumbed to cancer. He had been in *both* movies.

**ROMANOFF’S**

It was 1939 when a few friends of the self-named ‘Prince’ Michael Romanoff pooled together and presented him with $8,000 to open his own restaurant at 326 North Rodeo Drive in Hollywood. Financiers Harry Crocker and John Hay ‘Jock’ Whitney, along with celebrities Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Cagney, Charlie Chaplin, Robert Benchley, Darryl F. Zanuck and Joseph Schenck, were responsible for Romanoff’s Restaurant, an establishment that has become part of Hollywood folklore.

Mike Romanoff was a rogue, a liar and an impostor, but a most likeable one. Born in Lithuania in 1890, he grew up in the slums of New York City before embarking on a life of mingling with high society and Hollywood celebrities. His restaurant became the place where, in the daytime, young starlets and models came to be seen in the post-war years. ‘It was the perfect place to meet a nice guy, a genuinely nice guy’, Elaine remembered. ‘You would get a table and wait to see who noticed you. It had a bar although she only ever drank non-alcoholic beverages.

In the evenings the place was booked out by celebrities, movie stars, directors, you name them. The general public, the fans, hung around outside the front door hoping for a glimpse of someone famous. It was the same at The Brown Derby, Chasen’s or Perino’s, each establishment patronized by stars who dined there before going on to the night clubs, places such as Ciro’s, The Mocambo, The Coconut Grove or The Trocadero, to name a few of the more popular ones. For up and coming starlets of the late forties and early fifties, Romanoff’s was the place to see and be seen.

Humphrey Bogart had the No 1 table preserved at all times, right up until his death in 1957. By then Romanoff’s had started to slip. Mike and his actor cronies were often out of town in places like Vegas with Sinatra and his Rat Pack. With celebrities no longer dining at the restaurant, business dropped off as patrons began to go elsewhere. The same thing happened (for the same reason) in Mike’s other two establishments in Palm Springs and San Francisco. This, combined with the government’s crackdown on expense accounts, ultimately brought about Romanoff’s closure in 1962. Mike sold the joint a year later for a tidy sum. The building was demolished and an office complex erected where history once stood.

**ORSON WELLES**

Back in 1947, in the restaurant’s heyday, Elaine ventured in one afternoon, dressed in her finest and sat down at a table. Before long, comedian George Jessel asked to join her and struck up a conversation. He and Elaine were making polite chit chat when in walked Orson Welles. He was in his prime. ‘He was the most gorgeous looking man I had ever seen’, she recalled. This was long before he encountered serious weight issues. He looked around the room, spotted Elaine and George and sauntered over. ‘You don’t mind, do you George?’ Orson enquired rhetorically, as he took Elaine by the arm and escorted her to his table and friends. ‘I just went with him’, she said. ‘It just seemed the natural thing to do. Besides, that *voice*…’

Elaine was around eighteen years old and new to Hollywood when she befriended the legendary creator of the so-called ‘Night that Panicked America’. On 30 October 1938, the as yet undiscovered ‘boy genius’ broadcast his version of H G Wells’ *War of the Worlds* to the American people. Folklore tells us that his fictional broadcast was mistaken for a real invasion of the Earth by Martians; that millions of Americans panicked and there were heart attacks and suicides out of sheer fear! It has since emerged that very few people even heard the broadcast, much less ran screaming into the night. It was all a media hype, helped along by the testimony of a certain Sylvia Holmes of Newark, New Jersey who just happened to be a totally fictitious person, yet researchers often cite her as their most viable source. When Elaine met Orson it was almost a decade since the night that made him famous and he had long since moved on.

He often rang her in the ensuing weeks, inviting her to join his table of intimates at *Romanoff’s*. ‘I would sit there and listen’, she said. ‘I was too young and naïve to even think of contributing to the conversations.’ Orson nursed a passion for boxing and took her along to the fights. Of course, he always insisted on ring-side seats. ‘I remember accompanying him one evening dressed in a beautiful designer gown and carrying a mink coat. It was *horrible*. Every time a fighter landed a punch blood and perspiration was sprayed all over the front row patrons. My hair, my beautiful dress and my coat were covered in what appeared to be mostly blood! The dress was ruined.’ On a personal level she stressed that Welles always behaved towards her with the utmost respect and in a gentlemanly manner. Stories of a contrary nature came much later in his life, long after their friendship had ran its course and they had gone their separate ways.

**RUTH ROMAN**

One of Elaine’s closest movie friends was actress Ruth Roman who was aboard the SS *Andrea Doria* when it collided with the *Stockholm* on the night of July 25, 1956. The two friends had been in London, having a wonderful time attending parties and dining out. ‘If I was invited to a party I would take Ruth’, Elaine recalled. ‘If she was invited, she would take me.’ Elaine and Bill were separated by then and headed for divorce. A couple of months being squired around London accompanied by her pal Ruth, provided a much needed break from the rigours of the divorce action.

Ruth was married to Mortimer Hall, the wealthy son of publisher Dorothy Schiff, but was in the throes of suing him for divorce. They had a three year-old little boy named Richard whom she adored. They were about to fly back to the States when, according to Elaine, Ruth was putting on her make-up in the bathroom the morning of her intended departure when she heard a voice telling her, ‘Don’t go on the plane you’re booked on. It’s going down’. Quite shaken, she heeded the voice and had her agent switch Richard and herself to the ill-fated *Andrea Doria* instead!

She was in the *Andrea Doria*’s Belvedere Lounge when the vessel collided with the *Stockholm*. Richard was asleep in his bed below deck. Panic-stricken, Ruth had to frantically feel her way along corridors to retrieve him from their cabin. When it came time to be rescued her experience became even more harrowing. Richard was handed down to a rescue boat that sailed off to the *Stockholm* before his mother could join him. Ruth was loaded aboard the next boat which took her to a different rescue vessel, the SS *Ile de France*. Happily, mother and son were ultimately reunited in New York. In all, forty-six people had lost their lives by the time the majestic *Andrea Doria* slipped beneath the waves. Ironically, the airliner on which she had originally been booked arrived safely at its destination. Ruth would marry four times but Richard would be her only child. He is now in his sixties. She died peacefully in her sleep in 1999 at the age of 76.

**LANA TURNER**

One of the earliest questions Elaine put to me when we first met in late 2017 was: ‘Did you know that Johnny Stompanato was killed in *my* house?’ I had researched the mobster’s death extensively but had not the slightest inkling of that. Her husband had rented their enormous home on North Bedford Drive to Elaine’s friend Lana Turner who moved in soon afterwards with her fourteen year-old daughter Cheryl Crane. ‘I never liked that place’, Elaine told me. ‘It was way too big.’ It was Cheryl who would be charged with killing Stompanato, although a great many people, even today, remain convinced that the teenager probably took the rap for her mother. Cheryl was a minor and defended by the slippery Jerry Giesler, the same attorney who got Benjamin ‘Bugsy’ Siegel off a murder charge years earlier.

Giesler was a trial attorney possessed of extraordinary capabilities; the Perry Mason of his day. The tougher the case, the more likely he was to emerge victorious. Jerry soared into prominence when he successfully defended theatre mogul Alexander Pantages in 1929. The aging Pantages had already been found guilty over a trumped up rape charge (almost certainly set up by Joe Kennedy who wanted control of the Pantages theatre chain), and sentenced to 50 years gaol. Jerry had the decision overturned in the second trial and Alexander walked out a free man in 1931.

In the ensuing years Giesler triumphantly defended Errol Flynn on his statutory rape charges. When director Busby Berkeley was charged in 1935 with drunken driving resulting in the deaths of two people, studio intervention, bribes and pay-offs resulted in two ‘hung jury’ trials before Giesler stepped in and got him acquitted in a third. When Walter Wanger shot agent Jennings Lang in the testicles because his wife Joan Bennett was having an affair with the man, Jerry was called to defend the cuckolded Mr. Wanger and did so successfully by mounting a ‘temporary insanity’ defence and throwing himself on the mercy of the court. Walter got four months in a County Honour Farm just outside Los Angeles. Years later, it emerged that he had also stalked Errol Flynn, another of Joan’s lovers, intent on shooting him as well! All things considered, Wanger got off cheaply.

Other famous clients included Robert Mitchum, Charlie Chaplin and Lili St. Cyr. He also represented the likes of Rudolph Valentino, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Joan Crawford, Barbara Hutton and Shelley Winters in their divorce cases. When Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe split, it was Jerry who handled MM’s case. When Johnny Stompanato supposedly ‘walked into’ Cheryl’s knife, who better to present her side of the story than Hollywood’s number one ‘fix it’ trial attorney?

Elaine was a friend of Lana’s and has always been happy to accept her explanation for what took place that evening. ‘Lana told me all about it’, she said. ‘How Stompanato had threatened to cut her face and end her career, and how Cheryl was privy to the threat. How the girl ran downstairs to the kitchen, got *my* knife, (the house was rented with my furniture still in it), to protect herself against this man who was threatening her mother and ran back upstairs. And how he ran right into it. I can see how that could happen.’ Many of Stompanato’s family and associates, however, were equally certain that Lana had stabbed her boyfriend to death as he slept and that Giesler had brought in ‘fixer’ Fred Otash to arrange the murder scene to fit the Cheryl scenario. It was all conjecture, of course. Only Cheryl and Lana knew all the details. Even Giesler knew only what they told him and what he saw for himself.

One thing that most people agreed on was that the dead man was not a nice fellow. ‘He was a terrible, terrible man’, remembered Elaine who met him at a party he had attended as Lana’s escort. ‘You couldn’t say enough bad things about him, yet he was all talk and no action. Sean Connery punched him out in London. Sean let him have it because Stompanato was not as tough as he thought he was. Lana was very pretty, of course, but she wasn’t the smartest girl on the block, by any means. She often picked the wrong guys. Moments after Stompanato died, Lana rang Jerry. He was the man everyone went to if they were in trouble and he was a real smart cookie. I wish I had got him to handle my divorce’, she added wistfully. ‘Anyway, he accompanied Lana throughout the trial, was right by her side all the while, telling her what to say.’ A verdict of ‘justifiable homicide’ was returned by the 12 man coroner’s jury after listening to Lana’s stirring testimony. Some say her performance on the stand was the best of her career.

Outside the courtroom, a friend of the deceased made a scene in the hearing room. He said he had wanted to testify but was forbidden to. His opinion of Lana’s testimony was scathing. ‘It’s a lie’, he exclaimed. ‘The girl was in love with him. There was jealousy between her and her mother.’ However, when he added that Stompanato ‘was a gentleman, and that’s more than the rest of you Hollywood people are’, his credibility understandably nose-dived. Even the dead man’s closest confidantes baulked at describing him as ‘a gentleman’.

In 1988, Cheryl wrote in her autobiography titled *Detour: A Hollywood Story*, that it was indeed she who did the stabbing. She alleged that Johnny had been sexually abusing her, just as one of Lana’s former husbands (Lex Barker) had been doing years before. On that occasion Lana grabbed a pistol and stormed down the hill to the guest-house on her property where Barker was living (they had been arguing), waved it in his face and ordered him out. He soon left.

The waters regarding Stompanato’s demise, however, were muddied yet again in 1996, when Lana’s last companion, Eric Root, penned a sensational book in which he claimed she had confessed her guilt to him. ‘Yes, I killed the son of a bitch’, she told him, ‘and I’d do it again.’ Root was ‘hairdresser to the stars’ and her companion for the final 20 years of her life. Most critics found him quite believable, but the fact that he published his book the year *after* Lana shuffled off this mortal coil continues to provide cynics with considerable doubt.

Elaine was in Africa, taking photographs on a safari, when she heard of the Stompanato killing and saw a newspaper snapshot of his body lying on what was still *her* pink master bedroom carpet. She could scarcely believe it. There are at least three photographs of his lifeless corpse, each from different angles and showing a police officer kneeling over him. Intriguingly, there does not appear to be any blood on the carpet in any of them. Stompanato had been knifed in the abdomen and had (presumably) bled to death right there on the bedroom floor, yet there is not a drop of blood to be seen anywhere around him. Of course, he may have toppled over onto his back and expired at once, the blood soaking into the carpet *underneath* his body, without a speck falling anyplace else. But is that really feasible? To Elaine’s great credit she remains loyal to her friend and her friend’s account of what took place that night in 1958. And she may well be right. Only Cheryl can now change the official story. As of 2018 she is living in Hawaii with her lesbian lover of many years and has held her silence on the whole macabre episode for decades. Indications are that she has spoken her last on the incident. And who could blame her?