

NINA BYRON

**NINA
BYRON
1900–1987**

NOTES ON A
NEW ZEALAND
MOVIE STAR

by

Ian St George



Nina Byron

CONTENTS

Chapter 1: family

Chapter 2: New York

Chapter 3: Hollywood

Chapter 4: Dunaew, dancing and divorce

Chapter 5: the Follies and Paris

Chapter 6: marriage and divorce again

Chapter 7: l'après-midi d'une faune

Cover: Nina Byron in 1919.

Chapter 1: family

Nina Clarice Betts was born on 27 July 1900 in Christchurch. Her parents, George Arthur Betts and Grace Goodman (born 1979) had married earlier the same year.

There is little in the public record about them. In October 1905 the Christchurch City Council successfully claimed £3 from George and Mrs Grace Betts.¹ A year later George Betts was fined 10s in the Christchurch Magistrates' Court for having been drunk while in charge of a horse and cart in Chester St.²

In 1909 the partnership of George Arthur Betts and George Parkin was dissolved in Wellington by mutual consent, with all accounts to be paid to Parkin.³

Nina Betts was awarded a "second-Class Certificate" in Standard IV at the Te Aro School end of year event in December 1911.⁴

A "Mrs Grace Betts, Elocutionist" recited "New Year's Eve" in a concert in aid of "Sister Esther's work among the aged, the sick, and the destitute of the city" (ie, Auckland) in June 1914.⁵

Some time in 1915 or 1916 Grace Betts left her husband and took Nina to New York.

On 2 September 1916 the *NZ Herald* reported,

CARPENTER'S DEPRESSION.

An inquest was held by Mr. E. C. Cutten, S.M., yesterday into the circumstances of the death of George Betts, a carpenter, aged about 45 years, who was found dead behind some gorse in Bridgewater Road, Parnell, on Thursday afternoon.

Constable Waterman stated that he found the body of the deceased lying behind some gorse in Bridgewater Road. The body was decomposed, and apparently had been there a few days. The body could be seen from the footpath by anyone looking for it, but would probably not be seen by persons going past. On removing the body a bottle which had contained poison was found under it. In the pockets of the deceased were a watch and chain and 2s 5d in money.

Dr. Bewes, senior resident medical officer at the hospital, stated that he examined the body. The lips and cheeks were burned, as if by some corrosive fluid.

Evylyn Gillies stated that deceased had been boarding with her. He was a native of Christchurch, and had been working at Onewhero prior to staying with her. He left home on Monday morning, and she did not see him again alive. He was a carpenter by trade, and of late was very low spirited. His wife left him 12 months ago, and went to America with their one daughter. He received a letter about a fortnight ago, since when he had been very depressed. She was of opinion that he had committed suicide.

A verdict was returned to the effect that deceased committed suicide by taking poison while of unsound mind.⁶

Five years later, when Nina's first husband, the Russian writer Nicholas Dunaew was angrily suing her for divorce, he wrote that Mrs Betts had left her husband...

... in New Zealand and when she heard that he had committed suicide, she laughed. Nina also laughed—these women who had practically killed a man with cruelty laughed at his action in putting himself out of his misery.⁷

1 Lyttelton Times 21 October 1905.

-
- 2 *Star* 5 October 1906.
 - 3 *Evening Post* 17 June 1909.
 - 4 *Evening Post* 16 December 1911.
 - 5 *New Zealand Herald* 30 May 1914.
 - 6 *New Zealand Herald* 2 September 1916.
 - 7 *Los Angeles Times* 21 June 1922.

Chapter 2: New York

In January 1919 *Motion Picture Magazine* carried an interview with Nina Byron written by Eleanor Brewster,

That Hungry Look Brought Her a Chance

The Story of Nina Byron

ALMOST every actress who has won her way to fame thru her own struggles and persistence has a corking human-interest story to tell.

Nina Byron is a diminutive actress who has recently come to the front. While at present playing the feminine lead in Wallace Reid's new vehicle "The Dub," three years ago, at the age of 15, she was alone and friendless in New York, broke, and unable to obtain a part because she didn't have the necessary spiffy and fashionable clothes.

Nina was born in Christchurch, New Zealand. She is a little thing, with soft, dark brown hair and beautiful brown eyes. There is a touch of mystery and sadness about her expression, the suggestion of latent dramatic ability that you'd think would lead any casting director in the pictures to give her a job. But, after all, what do these things count for when you haven't got the clothes?

"Why decide to go into the pictures?" said Miss Byron, "For two reasons—because I wanted to do it and because my mother was ambitious for me. You see, my mother had longed to become an actress when she was a girl, but parental objections had kept her from it. But the hope was deep in her, and when she found she couldn't fulfil it she did what so many mothers do, transferred to her daughter.

“So we set sail from New Zealand to this country and a month later were in New York.

“In New York my mother left me with some friends, and thinking that I should be all right, went up into New England on a mission of her own. But the friends that I stayed with soon proved that they weren’t friends at all, and I found myself completely on my own.

“I was fifteen and I put my hair up on top of my head to make myself look older and tried to get work. But my clothes were the old-fashioned kind I had been wearing in New Zealand, and I couldn’t help but see that they were quite different from the clothes the fashionable New York girls were wearing.

“I was too proud to write and tell my mother that things weren’t going well, but my money dwindled so that I frequently went hungry. I rented a little room way up next to the roof of the New York lodging house and renewed my efforts to get work.

“Then something finally happened. I went out to a studio where Nicholas Dunaew was co-director with James Young. And he looked me over and asked me how old I was. I told him, and he must have noticed how pale I looked.

““When did you eat last?” he inquired.

“That was rather a personal question, but I answered truthfully. Then he wanted to know the whereabouts of my mother. I told him that, too, and he sat right down and wrote to her, telling her to come to New York and look after me.

“But the best thing he did was to give me parts. They were only small parts, but I was very happy, and I worked awfully hard. However, the lack of a good-looking wardrobe hampered me.

“One day I sent a photograph of myself to Thomas H Ince. He was in New York and he sent for me. He talked

with me for about ten minutes, then he offered to send me out to his studios at Culver City, California. I reached heaven in one step when he made that offer.

“In Culver City I played small parts and I was finally given a lead with William S. Hart in ‘Truthful Tulliver.’ Then I had some good parts with Frank Keenan, and, still later, I played a lead with House Peters in the ‘Heir to the Ages.’ Last winter I was in the east again, playing leads in the picturization of some O. Henry stories, and when I came west again this summer I went to the Lasky Studio.

“First I played rather a small part with Wallace Reid in ‘The Source’; next came apart in ‘Johnny Get Your Gun,’ in support of Fred Stone. And in Lila Lee’s first Paramount Picture, ‘The Cruise of the Make-Believe,’ I had a good part.

“Now comes a lead with Wallace Reid in “The Dub,” his latest picture, which is being made now. And do you remember the director I mentioned, Nicolas Dunaew, who gave me my first part? Well, he’s a playwright now, and he and I are—are engaged.”¹

Dunaew later told the story,

... he met the girl when she was Nina Betts. She was having some photographs taken in the Lumiere studio in New York. He instantly fell in love with her, he declares, and showed her every attention. Later he came to Los Angeles and brought her and her mother here.

Upon their arrival the girl and Dunaew were married and lived at 1504 McCadden Place, Hollywood.²

She had been in New York a year.

¹ *Motion Picture Magazine* 1919; 16: 63, 105.

² *Los Angeles Times* 21 June 1922.

Chapter 3: Hollywood



Nina Byron at 17 on 1917;
by Hollywood photographer Nelson Frazier Evans,
considered one of the creators of pin-up photography.

There is no record of any film with Frank Keenan and Nina Byron. She went to Los Angeles in 1916 to make *Truthful Tulliver*, an American silent western film directed by William S. Hart, produced by Thomas Ince and starring Hart, Alma Rubens and Nina Byron. The *Motion Picture World* synopsis tells us,

Truthful Tulliver, a Westerner and a journeying newspaperman, followed by Silver Lode Thompson, printer and compositor, arrives in Glory Hole to start a newspaper. He is visited by York Cantrell, an Easterner, whose mining interests keep him in the vicinity. They stand at the office window watching two sisters, Grace and Daisy Burton. The girls are insulted by men hanging around the Forty Rod saloon and dance hall, run by "Deacon" Doyle and secretly owned by York Cantrell. Tulliver rushes to their assistance and incurs the enmity of Doyle. The next day Truthful states, under big headlines, that Doyle must go, and the following morning finds a notice on his door that Doyle will be in the Forty Rod Saloon at ten o'clock, and there is not a pen pusher in Arizona that can run him out of town. Truthful surprises Doyle and his henchmen by coming into the saloon through a rear door, and, from his horse, lassoes and pulls them out into the desert, where he tells them never to return to Glory Hole. That night Truthful is shot at from York Cantrell's room by Doyle, who has returned. Truthful then drives both from town, not knowing that York has wronged Daisy Burton. Daisy confesses to Grace, and Grace finds Truthful, who, misunderstanding, thinks she is the one who cares for Cantrell. He promises to bring him back, and reaches the railroad, intercepts Cantrell, and forces him to return. Then understanding comes. Cantrell wants to marry Daisy and live a new life, and Truthful comprehends his mistake. Grace turns toward him, with her thanks and

relief, and sees him watching her with such eloquent eyes that hers fall for a moment. Then she comes to him and with happy faces, hands clasped, they see York Cantrell married to the sister, and as the priest blesses them, Truthful clasps her close.¹

Nina is Daisy, Alma Rubens played Grace, Hart is Truthful Tulliver and Norbert Miles is York Cantrell. The film was shown as early as January 1917. The *Vicksburg Evening Post* thought Nina “did creditable work”.²



Nina (centre) in a scene from *Truthful Tulliver*.

The *Auckland Star* noted, “The other girl in the double love story which is charmingly interwoven into all the Glory Hole sudden death and adventure, is Nina Byron, who is amazingly pretty and daintily effective”.³

AMUSEMENTS.

FINALLY SCREENING TO-NIGHT.

Hayward's Pictures.

W. S. HART, W. S. HART,

In the stirring Triangle-Ince Drama,

TRUTHFUL TULLIVER.

Truthful's qualifications for Editor are:

His gameness to tell the truth.

His Al use of his fists.

And TWO FINE REVOLVERS.

The first Editor good with the lasso.

He ropes two enemies with one swing and drags them through windows and all.

A splenoid double love story introducing two new and pretty Trianglettes,

ALMA BEUBENS and NINA BYRON.

BILLIE BURKE in **TANGLED THREADS.**

10th Episode of Gloria's Romance.

THE DORIAN FRONT (War Topical).

The *Colonist* 10 September 1917.

She was Abby Hope in *The Heir of the Ages* also in 1917. The *Los Angeles Times*:

“Heir to the Ages” is piffling patchwork at best.... Nina Byron is a new leading woman, who looks as if her genius lay far deeper than the Mary Pickford curls and girlish laughter which were all that was required of her in this picture play.⁴

The *New Zealand Truth* took notice,

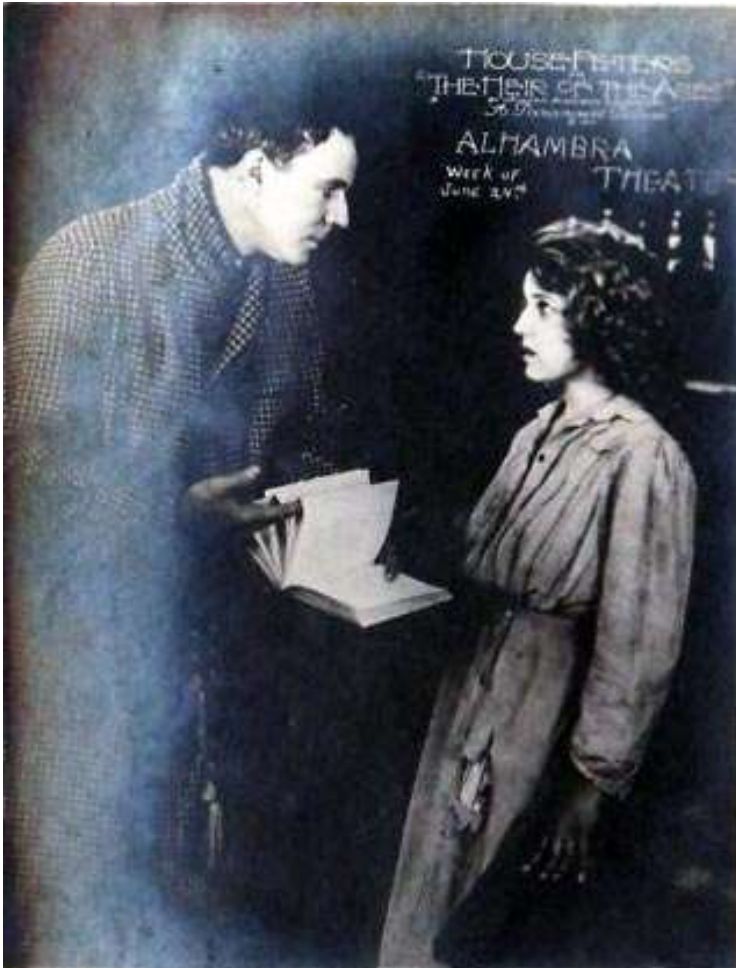
Nina Byron, the clever ingenue supporting House Peters in “The Heir of the Ages,” makes her first appearance on the Paramount programme in this production. Miss Byron is still in her teens, and her splendid performance

in support of Mr Peters in this Pallas-Paramount production promises a brilliant future.⁵

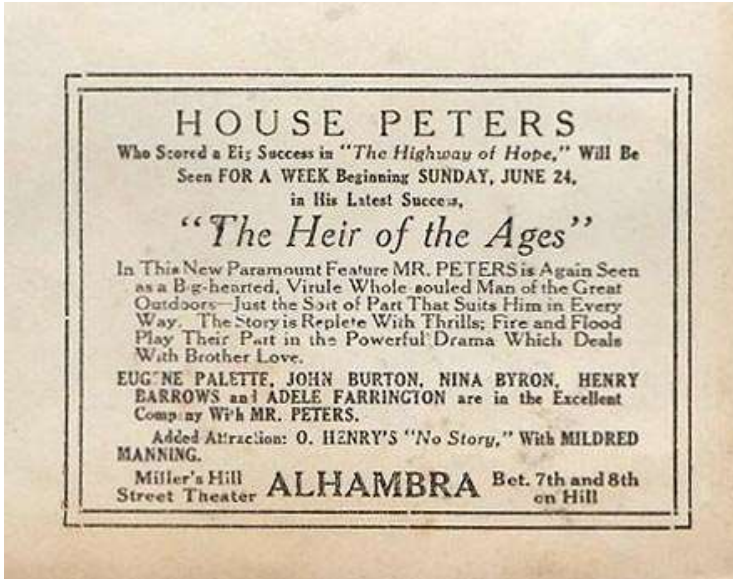
London's *Bioscope* said, "the waif Abby is cleverly played by Miss Nina Byron".⁶



Heir of the Ages poster.



Nina Byron in a marketing shot from *Heir of the Ages*.



The back of the marketing photograph.

She played Enid Crane, a supporting role in *The Cruise of the Make-Believe* (1918), starring Lila Lee.

Bessie Meggison lives in the slums with her drunken father Daniel Meggison and presides over a boarding house. Gilbert Byfield, a wealthy youth who is writing a book, lives nearby in a cheap room. He becomes acquainted with Bessie and together they sail on many imaginary voyages on an improvised yacht in her back yard. Gilbert gives her father permission to take Bessie to his estate in the country for a month's vacation. Daniel Meggison invites his slum friends and drinks to his heart's content while Bessie entertains dozens of urchins. Gilbert returns and learns that Meggison has told Bessie that the estate belongs to him. Gilbert is also confronted


by his fiance, and Bessie realizes that all of her family wealth is a sham. Heartbroken, she returns to her slum home. Gilbert finds her on the make believe ship and promises her that her dream of riches will come true.⁷

“Lila Lee is a pleasant little girl of sixteen, whose potential ability is not revealed in her first film vehicle,” said the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*.⁸



Nina Byron in *The Cruise of the Make-Believe*.

RICHMOND THEATER TONIGHT



WALLACE REID
"The Source"
A Paramount Picture

Wallace Reid

in

"The Source"

Portrays role of Derelict who is reclaimed to manhood through love for a girl who treats him with disdain.

The story of this picture is dramatic, and every scene is filled with thrills.

Also A Keystone Comedy

The Source (1918) was next, a drama starring Wallace Reid and directed by George Melford. Nina Byron played Ruth Piggins. It is about a bad man who reforms via the disdain of a lovely girl.

The Dub (1919) was a silent comedy directed by James Cruze, starring Wallace Reid with Nina Byron in the lead female role and produced by Paramount Pictures. A penniless young contractor, thought to be a coward (a “dub”), is engaged by a crooked lawyer to secure an option on a mine owned by another crook. He, however, bravely captures it and finds incriminating evidence against the gang. He rescues Nina from her “prison” in the crook’s home and they get married.⁹

Pretty Nina Byron, whose work in recent Paramount and Arcraft pictures has won her many admirers, has the leading feminine role....¹⁰

... screenland’s newest find (is) a leading lady in the person of Nina Byron, a talented and beautiful society girl.¹¹

The girl is a bit negative but she hasn’t much to do—so that’s all right.¹²

She is an excellent actress.¹³



Great Falls Tribune 11 February 1919. Nina at right.



The Dub poster.



Nina Byron in scenes from *The Dub*.

STRAND THEATRE.
GREAT HOLIDAY PROGRAMME.
 At 12, 2, 4, 6, and 8.
 "The Dub." WALLACE REID. "The Dub."
 "The Dub." WALLACE REID. "The Dub."
 Supported by Two Well-known
 CHRISTCHURCH ARTISTES,
 WINTER HALL and NINA BYRON
 WINTER HALL and NINA BYRON
 Comedy, Pictograph, Cowboy Sports.

"At the Strand Theatre this week two Christchurch performers, Winter Hall and Nina Byron, are being featured in 'The Dub,' a comedy-drama of merit." *The Sun* 1 January 1920.

The *Manitoba Free Press* gave her some column space,

NINA BYRON'S CAREER
Young Actor Support to Wallace Reid in National
Picture "The Dub."

Nina Byron, who plays the lead in "The Dub," Wallace Reid's latest picture, which will be presented at the National Theatre all next week, is a young actress, who has worked her way up to the limelight through sheer grit and determination. Not that she hasn't acting ability—she has both—but it was her grit that enabled her to utilise them.

Three years ago she came from Australia to New York. A child of fifteen at the time, she found herself in that Metropolis with very little money and with no fashionable clothes—and it was quite important then for an actress to have a splendid wardrobe, for the picture actresses were expected to supply their own clothes.

Yet she persisted until she was given a small part, and later attracted the attention of Thomas H. Ince and was sent west to work in his companies. She has played leads with William S. Hart and House Peters, and recently she

appeared in support of Fred Stone in his Artcraft picture, "The Goat," in "The Cruise of the Make-Believe," and in Wallace Reid's picture, "The Source." Now she plays the lead opposite Wally, and does excellent work.¹⁴

The Goat, starring Fred Stone, was released in 1918.¹⁵ Nina Byron is not included in any surviving cast list, but she did appear with him in *Johnny Get Your Gun* (1919).

Mr Stone is perhaps the most athletic comedian in show business and in his latest picture, "Johnny Get Your Gun," he appears at his best and proves conclusively that as a lariat thrower, tight rope walker, bareback rider, skater and pantomime player, he has no equal.¹⁶

Johnny Get Your Gun was a comedy directed by Donald Crisp and starring Fred Stone, Mary Anderson, Casson Ferguson, James Cruze, Sylvia Ashton, Nina Byron and Mayme Kelso. It was released by Paramount Pictures. Johnny is a cowboy stuntman whose friend Bill goes to jail. Bill's sister Janet (Nina Byron) is an heiress being wooed by a phony Count who needs Bill's signature to marry her. Bill can't get rid of the Count because he is in jail, so Johnny offers to pose as him and go East. Johnny gets rid of the Count and finds a girl, Janet finds a decent young man.



"Don't get excited, missus!"
FRED STONE in "Johnny Get Your Gun"
 An ARTCRAFT Picture

The Boomerang (July 1919) was a silent film drama directed by Bertram Bracken and starring Henry B. Walthall, Melbourne MacDowell and Nina Byron.

Walthall is George Gray, son of a wealthy meat packer, engaged to Rose Cameron (Nina Byron), the daughter of his father's rival. George is wrongly caught in a scandal, Rose's father breaks their engagement and George's father turns him out. George goes away, succeeds and becomes district attorney. Meanwhile his and Rose's fathers have formed a price fixing alliance and George files suit against them. They become aware of their responsibilities and Rose comes back to George.

Miss Nina Byron, one of the most beautiful and talented young movie stars of the day, plays opposite Mr Walthall.¹⁷



Screenshot from *The Boomerang*.



Henry B Walthall and Nina Byron in *The Boomerang*.

Her entry in *Motion Picture Studio Directories 1919 and 1921* reads,

BYRON, Nina: b. New Zealand, 1910; screen talent discovered by Nicholas Dunaew; screen career, Ince-Triangle (“Truthful Tulliver”), Pallas-Paramount (“The Heir of the Ages”), Lasky (“The Source,” “The Dub,” with Wallace Reid, “Johnny Get Your Gun,” with Fred Stone), Pioneer (“The Boomerang”). Dances, fond of all outdoor sports, reads, art, music. Hght., 5' 3; wght. 110; light brown hair, brown eyes. Ad., Lasky Studio, Hollywood, Cal.

Her next film, *The Broken Butterfly* (1919) was a silent drama directed by Maurice Tourneur and starring Lew Cody, Mary Alden, Pauline Starke, Peaches Johnson and Nina Byron.

Out in the Canadian bush naïve Marcene meets composer Darrell and they make love. Darrell writes a symphony, calls it “Marcene” and asks her to come to New York. She refuses, fearing the anger of her Aunt Zabie. She has the baby and her aunt rejects her so she tries to kill herself. Her aunt tells Darrell Marcene is dead. He goes abroad to get over his grief and meets Marcene's sister who is an orchestra conductor. They get married but on returning to Canada, discover that Marcene is alive, but dying, and she has a daughter. They hide their marriage from Marcene who dies happy and Darrell adopts the child. Nina plays Marcene's sister, the conductor.

ROBERTSON-COLE PRODUCTIONS

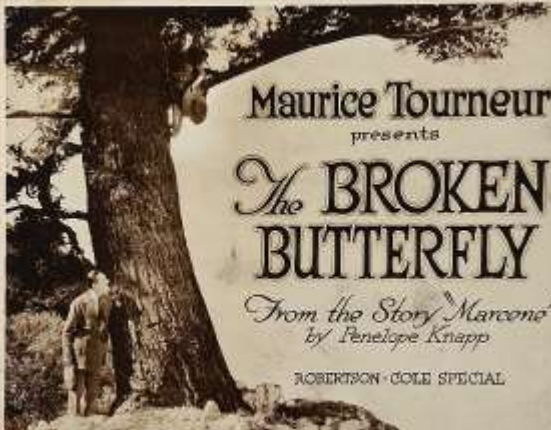
**MAURICE
TOURNEUR**
presents
The **Broken
Butterfly**



It is one of the supreme achievements of Maurice Tourneur, a magnificent blend of charm, pathos, and dramatic force. Above all, it embodies all of his artistic, creative ability and genius.

And a typical Tourneur cast.

Available at all
ROBERTSON-COLE EXCHANGES



Maurice Tourneur
presents
The **BROKEN
BUTTERFLY**
*From the Story "Marcone"
by Penelope Knapp*

ROBERTSON-COLE SPECIAL

ROBERTSON-COLE PRODUCTIONS
MAVRICE

TOUR NEVER
 presents

The Broken Butterfly
 From the Play by PHILIPPE AUPIRE
 By the Playwright

Available at all
 ROBERTSON-COLE
 EXCHANGES

ALL the scenes of this drama are set in the city of Gloucester, and the story is told in a way that is most interesting and successful way. All the characters are well drawn, and the treatment of scenes and the dialogue is excellent. The film is a real masterpiece of the art of the motion picture.

ALL the scenes of this drama are set in the city of Gloucester, and the story is told in a way that is most interesting and successful way. All the characters are well drawn, and the treatment of scenes and the dialogue is excellent. The film is a real masterpiece of the art of the motion picture.

Nina plays to Lew Cody in *The Broken Butterfly*.

-
- 1 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0007479/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl#summaries.
 - 2 5 February 1917.
 - 3 *Auckland Star* 14 April 1917.
 - 4 *Los Angeles Times* 25 June 1917.
 - 5 *NZ Truth* 2 March 1918.
 - 6 *Bioscope* 15 August 1918.
 - 7 Reviews: The Cruise of the Make-Believes. *Exhibitors Herald*. 7 (13): 35. 21 September 1918.
 - 8 24 September 1918.
 - 9 *Evening Star* (Washington) 13 January 1919.
 - 10 *Intelligencer* (Lancaster) 31 January 1919.
 - 11 *New York Herald* 19 January 1919.
 - 12 *Chicago Tribune* 20 January 1919.
 - 13 *Ithaca Journal* 11 February 1919.
 - 14 *Manitoba Free Press* 22 February 1919.
 - 15 <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/492455/The-Goat/#>.
 - 16 *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette* 2 March 1919.
 - 17 *Des Moines Register* 6 July 1919.

Chapter 4: Dunaew, dancing and divorce



Nicholas Alexander "Kolya" Dunaew, by an unknown photographer.

Nicholas Alexander (“Kolya”) Dunaev (Dunaew or Dunay) was a White Russian of aristocratic family and Nabokovian conceit, born 26 May 1884 in Moscow, a graduate of the University of Moscow Law School. He married Edith Donnerburg in 1914 and was 33 when he married 18 year old Nina Byron in September 1918. By then he had been in about 25 films. He was also a film director who wanted to make anticommunist movies.

Nina left him on 4 January 1920 after fifteen months’ marriage. He was living at the Green Room Club in New York in June 1922 when he sued her for divorce. The *Los Angeles Times* got hold of the letter that accompanied his petition for divorce and divulged the details. He cast himself as the victim...

LOVE .. TURNS .. INTO .. DISGUST

Sordid End of Romance Told by Cinema Director

A ROMANCE that began with a great love and ended with sordid disgust was revealed yesterday when Nicholas Dunaew, former leading man with Pauline Frederick and cinema director, sued Nina Byron, Follies beauty, and former member of the “Hitchykoo” company, for divorce. The present residence of the wife is unknown, according to the complaint, but Dunaew, also known as Nicholas Dunay, is living at the Green Room Club in New York.

Dunaew, who first attracted attention here when he announced that he was about to produce a series of anti-Bolshevist pictures, declares in a letter that accompanied the complaint, which was filed by Attorney Theodore Gottsdanker, that he had “attempted to lift his wife from poverty to his own level, but failed.”

“One cannot make a silk purse from a sow’s ear,” the statement concludes.

The complaint charges simple desertion. Behind that lies the romance. Duneaw says that he met the girl when she was Nina Betts. She was having some photographs taken in the Lumiere Studio in New York. He instantly fell in love with her, he declares, and showed her every attention. Later he came to Los Angeles and brought her and her mother here.

Upon their arrival the girl and Dunaew were married and lived at 1504 McCadden Place, Hollywood. Later the girl studied dancing and went on tour. She later joined the “Hitchykoo” company and Duneaw says he saw her no more. Later, through letters from friends, he learned of her reprehensible conduct, he states. He asked her to return to her, but she refused. She then joined the Ziegfeld Follies, he says.

One of the paragraphs in Duneaw’s letter says, “She has treated me even as her mother treated her father. She left him in New Zealand and when she heard that he had committed suicide, she laughed. Nina also laughed—these women who had practically killed a man with cruelty laughed at his action in putting himself out of his misery.”

The complaint states that the couple were married in September, 1918, and separated Jan. 4, 1920.¹

He referred to her dancing: “Later the girl studied dancing and went on tour. She later joined the ‘Hitchykoo’ company and... he saw her no more.... She then joined the Ziegfeld Follies,” he wrote.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on 14 December 1919 that the December meeting of the Drama League would be held at the Little Theater and among the guests of honour would be “Miss Nina Byron, who will give two groups of dances”.²



"Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Dunaew"
Los Angeles Times 21 June 1922.

She danced with the great Martha Graham,

The drama department of the Ebell Club met Thursday, and presented an elaborate program, which included an address on "The Religious Drama" by Mrs W.S. Bartlett, and a representation of the dance in religion given by Miss Martha Graham and Miss Nina Byron of the Denishawn School of Dancing....³

The Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts was founded in 1915 by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in Los Angeles. It became the first dance academy in the United States to produce a professional dance company and was renowned for its influence on ballet and experimental modern dance.

By December 1920 she was with the Hitchykoo company.

"Hitchy-Koo, 1920."

Gorgeous costumes, elaborate scenery and a company of performers who rank with the best in America in their respective lines helps to make up "Hitchy-Koo 1920," this week's attraction at the New National Theatre. Last season's production was an eye opener in the way of scenery and costumes, and there is but little change noticeable in this year's offering.

Raymond Hitchcock, as "the master of ceremonies," is the centre of attraction. Opening with his humorous address before the show proper gets underway, he talks on the blue laws, and is given hearty approval. Mr Hitchcock carries "the master of ceremonies" throughout the piece, although at times he assumes a grotesque costume or helps out with a song or two. An effective assistant is G.P. Huntley, as a stage Englishman, whose earnestness and close attention to detail make the character of unusual prominence. The third star of the organisation is Julia Sanderson, as handsome and

talented as ever. It might be added that a little more work for Julia might brighten up things a bit here and there. She was in good voice last night, and, with Hitchcock, sang topical songs with pronounced success. Doyle and Dixon, artistic dancers; Charles, Louis and Verna Mosconi, acrobatic dancers; Ann Mason, a petite shimmy dancer; Madeline Van and Nina Byron, complete the group of principals who contributed liberally to the evening's performance....⁴

She was with *Hitchy-Koo of 1921* at the Grand Opera House in Cincinnati in February 1921, when "Other entertainers who deserve mention are Ann Mason and Nina Byron seen in dances".⁵

Dunaew was merciless and his press releases were widely published. He played the sympathy card,

Nicholas Duneaw Prosecutes Suit for Divorce Against Nina Byron From Sick Bed in Roosevelt Hospital

When Nicholas Duneaw, the Russian actor, went to Roosevelt Hospital seven weeks ago, he was informed by surgeons that several serious operations would be necessary and that he might not live, and he answered:

"Then I must free myself of that woman who unfortunately is my wife."

And he notified his attorney to start suit for divorce immediately against Nina Betts Byron, the dancer.

Yesterday, with head swathed in bandages, convalescent from seven operations, Nicolas Duneaw told for the first time the details of the remarkable romance between him and the girl whom he is seeking to cast out of his life.

*Nicholas
Dunaew,
Russian
poet-actor,
marries
dancer to
fulfill
dead wife's
wishes.*



*But now
he charges
Nina Betts
Byron
cruelly left
him for
pleasure,
and
prosecutes
divorce
suit from
sick-bed.*

NINA BETTS BYRON

He married her, he said, in compliance with the wish of his first wife, and since he had paid a tremendous price for that sentimental obedience.

“She has destroyed my faith in mankind and womankind!” the Russian exclaimed. “Is it any wonder then that I seek to obtain my freedom through a court of justice, though justice can never mend a broken life?”

Exotic Romance

It was in 1915 that they met. Dunaew was then happy with his first wife, Edith Donnerburg, a Russo-Danish girl of striking beauty and literary talent, who had written several novels and books of verse. She was studying at Columbia, and Dunaew was writing Russian plays.

“In a studio in the city, we met Nina Betts,” said Dunaew yesterday. “She was nearly destitute. We helped and grew to like her much. Then came the war and Edith, my wife, volunteered as a nurse and went overseas. Before she sailed, she begged of me:

“Should anything happen, should we not meet again, remember to take care of Nina.”

Mme Donnerburg-Dunaew died in the service, the actor said, and then:

“I was mindful of my wife’s wishes and I did watch over Nina. I learned to care for her greatly. I lavished attentions on her and her mother. Then we married.

Happy at First

“At first everything went well. Nina had only to voice a wish to me and it was granted. I was starring in motion pictures. I rented a bungalow in Hollywood and supported her and her mother there. I obtained small parts for her and later as she advanced under my instruction she played leading parts, opposite stars.

“Suddenly she decided that she must learn to dance, too. After she went on tour with the Denishawn dancers. I agreed that she might go for a short time”—

Dunaew paused, and his haggard face—its haggardness accentuated by the bandages that framed his features—hardened.

“But the short time lengthened into a long time. It was awful on me, just trying to keep track of her. She wrote to me finally that she had joined the Follies and she said some things about the players which I knew were untrue. I could not maintain communication with her.

“I came to New York after receiving a wire that she was ill. When I arrived here, she had gone to Boston. I followed, hoping desperately. Finally, she came to me as I waited for her in the lobby of the theatre, but she was changed— so changed. It had been two years since I had seen her.

“When I asked why she had kept me waiting, she said that she had been seeing the sights of the town with a gay party. Soon after that, I became ill and I begged her to come to me, and stay with me. She refused. To know that this girl, for whom I had done so much, would repay me in such a heartless manner, only made my condition much worse. Is it a wonder that I have lost faith?

“Then I wrote to her that there was just 40 cents between me and starvation. To this she replied that she could do nothing for me because Christmas was coming and she needed all the money she had for herself.

“For herself! Think of that! She wasn’t going to play Santa Claus to me or anyone else. Then there followed a letter from her saying that she was through with me, because I could no longer give her what she desired.”

Dunaew stopped and mopped the perspiration from his face. Then he added:

“I am no longer worried about my own future. I will get well now after these operations and I can earn my living writing. But I will be free of that ungrateful

woman, who has proved again that beautiful faces do not always reflect beauty of mind.”

Suit has been instituted by the actor-author for divorce in Los Angeles on the grounds of desertion. He said yesterday that he did not know where his wife is, but that he suspected she was dancing in New York under a new name.⁶

Several sobbing melodramatic versions of this were published in many newspapers around the United States. Few sympathised with Nina. *Variety* magazine got the Boston story completely wrong,

Boston, Oct.26 (1921).

Nina Byron, the New Zealand dancing beauty who replaced Florence O’Dennishawn in the Ziegfeld “Follies,” was married here last week to Nicholas Dunaew, the writer and motion picture actor. Miss Byron has been a protégé of Dunaew for the past six years, they having met when he was with the Famous Players Co. in New York. After she had appeared in several screen productions she took up dancing.

Dunaew arrived here from Los Angeles a week ago, and after the wedding went to New York, where he is placing several novels with his publishers.⁷

One Louis Bernheimer interviewed Dunaew and his article was published in October. It portrays a strange man,

Romantic Career of a Strong Man

There are at least two men in the United States strong enough to bend a dime with the first three fingers. One of them is Zbyszko. Another is Nicolas Dunaew, actor and author, whose marriage to Nina Byron of the Ziegfeld follies, kept secret for three years and whose recent proceedings for a divorce from her have set Broadway talking.

Dunaew has a history, the last paragraph of which has not been written, for he is not yet 35. And from a casual glance at him you would not guess his strength. Seeing the dime, bent almost double between his fingers, you would suspect a trick. You would look about for a vise and a hammer.

“Let me see you do it, Dunaew,” I said to him.

“No,” he replied. “I don’t want to try it without first drinking a glass of whiskey. I must have inspiration.”

We were in his room on West 64th Street. On the table by the window were manuscripts of short stories, poems, a novel he has just finished. On the chiffonier was a photograph of Nina Byron. The walls were decorated with photographs of Nina Byron; above the mantelpiece Nina Byron again, a charming young lady with serious eyes.

“Oh, come on,” I urged him, “try it anyway.”

So he took a dime from his pocket, rubbed the fingers of his right hand up and down his trousers leg and placed the dime across the first and second fingers at the first joint. The thumb he pressed against the dime.

“He goes,” he said, and he jerked his arm up and flung it down, contorting his body and grinning madly as he pressed upon the coin. It didn’t go, and with a furious leap into the air he ground his fingers together.

“Ah!” He was panting. “There.”

He held out his hand. In the palm lay the dime doubled over. I looked at Dunaew. His eyes were bloodshot. His dark hair had fallen over his forehead. I picked the dime up. Really bent, there was no trick. He walked about shaking his hand, the first fingers of which had now swollen to double size.

“Extraordinary!”

“You didn’t believe me, eh? Let me tell you what happened to Jack Dempsey. Oh, he is a nice fellow. Out

in Los Angeles—I had been working in the movies there for a long time—I met Dempsey. It was in the Alexandria hotel. We began to talk. I told him of the strength of the Russians. I told him of a famous Cossack who could kill a man with one blow.

“‘Can he fight?’ Dempsey asked.

“‘No, he can’t fight, but he could kill you,’ I said. This Cossack had often killed an ox with one stroke of his first. I told Dempsey so. He believed me. Some one who was with us told Dempsey that I was strong, and suggested that we grip hands. I agreed.

“‘But you are a slight man,’ Dempsey said.

“‘Never mind,’ I told him, ‘take my hand.’ He took my hand. We gripped. Dempsey leaned over to the side.” Dunaew mimicked a man twisting his torso to escape the pain of the grip.

“It was through my strength that I escaped from prison in Siberia,” Dunaew remarked. “After the revolution of 1905 I was sent to the mines for a term of six years, in spite of the fact that my father was a very wealthy and prominent man, at one time the mayor of Muscow. I put my hands between the bars, palms together, and worked at the iron by spreading. When I had pushed them apart a bit I put my arms into it, then my elbows, and broke the bars. They were waiting for me outside with horses.” He laughed. “It is that strength that I put into writing my plays and my novels.”

“And you’re acting?”

“For that, strength is necessary too. But sit down.” We sat down on a couch. “Abroad I have been famous, in Germany, Russia, England. It is I of whom Ibsen said, when he had seen me play Oswald, in ‘Ghosts,’ that mine was the finest Oswald he had seen; that I was Oswald and Oswald I. Bernard Shaw, too, saw me play Ibsen and came behind the scenes to my dressing room to

congratulate me. In Paris Max Uordau entered after the second act and told me that I was amazing.

“‘If I come back again after the third act’, he said to me, ‘it will mean that you are a great actor; if I don’t you will never see me again.’ That’s just how he said it. He was a peculiar man. Well, after the third act he came in and struck his forehead with his hand.

“‘Wonderful!’ he said, ‘wonderful!’ And the next night he and his wife and his daughter and his friends were in a box. We have been close friends ever since.

He paused and looked about idly at the photographs of Nina Byron.

He had met her, he said, seven years ago. Dunaew was then living with his first wife, Edith Donnaburg, a beautiful Danish girl studying at Columbia. Both Mr and Mrs Dunaew became interested in Nina. She had just arrived from New Zealand with a fresh outlook on life and proved a charming companion for Mrs Dunaew. Before the actors wife went as a nurse overseas she begged from her husband the promise that if anything happened to Madame Dunaew he would take care of Nina. Madame Dunaew, having gone abroad, died in the service, and Dunaew, true to his word, was wed to Nina Byron.

They went to live in a little bungalow at Hollywood, where Dunaew had begun acting for the movies. His young bride, however, wasn’t content to remain there long. Carried away with an ambition to dance, she returned to New York and joined the Follies. It is for this alleged desertion, Dunaew says, that he has instituted in the courts of California suit for divorce. Meanwhile, he says, Nina is in New York dancing under a new name.⁸

Their divorce was granted in January 1924.⁹ Judging from a poem Dunaew published later in life, the divorce didn’t cheer him up much.



Life's Autumn

Chill breath of fall is entering the windows,
 Unwelcomed thoughts are stripping love's disguise—
 Like happiness—turns garden bleak and somber,
 Like tender loveliness of erst beloved eyes.

In cruel nudity the trees are swaying wanly,
 Their moans are deep in penetrating gloom—
 In frantic haste, long ghostly webs are woven
 By hoary spiders in the long-deserted room.

Whose soul is sobbing hopelessly in darkness—
 Of bliss of spring long gone? And up, above
 In silken webs, a moth is struggling vainly
 Like anguished heart—in bonds of broken love.

What use are dreams, when heart has lost its treasure?
 What good is music to the soul that feels no more?
 What means the sorrow, joys, and pain, and pleasure,
 When spring is gone—and dead forevermore.

—Nicholas A. Dunaev.
 "Kolya"

DIVORCED BY PICTURE DIRECTOR

Dancer of Ziegfeld Follies Chorus



Mrs. Nicholas A. Dunay

ANOTHER member of the Ziegfeld Follies chorus was divorced yesterday in Judge H. Thompson's court when Nicholas A. Dunay, film director, testified that his wife, known as Nina Byron, ignored him after he had paved the way for her success as a dancer. He said that he married her in 1919, when she came to this country from New Zealand, but that when she made a name on the stage she promptly forgot him.

-
- 1 *Los Angeles Times* 21 June 1922.
 - 2 *Los Angeles Times* 14 December 1919.
 - 3 *Los Angeles Times* 25 January 1920.
 - 4 *Evening Star* (Washington DC) 27 December 1920.
 - 5 *Cincinnati Enquirer* 14 February 1921.
 - 6 *Buffalo Times* 12 August 1922.
 - 7 *Variety* October 1921.
 - 8 *Daily Arkansas Gazette* 29 October 1922.
 - 9 *Los Angeles Times* 18 January 1924.

Chapter 4: the Follies and Paris

It must have been after her stint with *Hitchy-Koo of 1921* that Nina began working on Broadway as a showgirl, dancing in the Ziegfeld Follies—perhaps late in 1921 through to late 1924 when she went to Paris.

Florenz Ziegfeld Jr and his wife Anna Held, enthused by the Paris Folies Bergère, had started the Ziegfeld Follies in New York in 1907. The programme of ornate revues was the child of the higher class vaudeville and variety shows and partly the parent of later extravagant Broadway shows.

Many of the best entertainers performed at the Follies: WC Field, Eddie Cantor, Josephine Baker, Fanny Brice, Ann Pennington, Bert Williams, Eva Tanguay, Bob Hope, Will Rogers, Ruth Etting, Ray Bolger, Helen Morgan, Louise Brooks, Marilyn Miller, Ed Wynn, Gilda Gray, Nora Bayes and Sophie Tucker appeared at one time or another.

The Ziegfeld Follies were also celebrated for their display of beautiful chorus girls, commonly known as the Ziegfeld girls, who usually wore elaborate costumes. Several of the Ziegfeld girls went on to become stage and screen stars.

There is an ambivalence about Ziegfeld and his Follies. One view has him as the Hugh Hefner of his time, exploiting young women's sexuality for the gratification of wealthy and predatory men, another as a man of feminist sympathies, providing opportunities for choice, liberating young women from the bonds of orthodoxy, chastity and poverty.

By June 1923 Nina Byron was in the Ziegfeld Follies *Summer Edition*.¹ Ziegfeld considered her “one of the most beautiful girls in the world”.² She had taken the place of Gilda Gray, the

queen of the new dance craze, the shimmy. After Gray's divorce from her first husband in 1923, she married Gil Boag and left New York for Hollywood.



"ZIEGFELD FOLLIES" 1923 "Summer Edition" Opening Program:
Eddie Cantor, Gilda Gray



Gilda Gray

In April 1923 *Variety* reported,

Madge Bellamy, Ince star... attended the “Follies” Friday night and nearly started a riot among the girls backstage when Sam Kingston brought her back to see Will Rogers and the rest of the stars. Madge spent the evening backstage. When she saw Nina Byron she rushed to a clinch. They were in the same show together three years ago.³

In June Gilda Gray was bitten by a dog and her acts at the Follies taken by other dancers. *Vaudeville* magazine reported,

Nina Byron, in the “South Sea Moon” number, almost stopped the show. She was a young riot. Nina is popular with the chorus, and the girls were all determined to “put her over” that night so they stuck a little extra wiggle into their Hawaiian dancing and worked as they have never worked before. Of course, to show her happiness, Nina cried in the wings after the number while all the chorus girls gathered round to congratulate her.⁴

And then in late 1924 Nina Byron was off to Paris.

Paris, of which the journalist CF Bertelli was writing graphic stories of the wild parties that lured Americans there, of priceless champagne rivers flowing as if it cost nothing, of waiters impersonating slaves and serving food and naked women on trays, of orgies and of cocaine and opium.⁵

Girls were warned not to go by one who had been, and seen,

After investigating the show places of the gay French capital, Miss Ella Frances Lynch, founder of the National League of Teacher-Mothers, declares that American tourists should be well warned and well chaperoned to avoid seeing things they ought not to see. She holds that it would be best that young American girls should not visit Paris at all.⁶

The Moulin Rouge had been rebuilt,

NEW MOULIN ROUGE

Biggest Revue House

Paris will have an unusual New Year gift this year in the shape of a brand-new Moulin Rouge.

The old Moulin Rouge, theatre and dance-hall, was burned down just after the war began. Pending reconstruction a big barn-like affair has been running as a dance hall under the name. But now the theatre is opening at last and the temporary structure will disappear.

The Moulin Rouge will be twice as large as the old theatre, and will be the biggest revue house in Paris. It will take its place along with the Folies Bergère and the Casino de Paris as the home of the spicy, undressy presentations which made the stage of Paris famous.

The building is of concrete and will seat 3,500 persons. In the rear of the auditorium proper is a well, and at the bottom of the well a huge dance hall, where a ball begins as soon as the theatre closes. The girls in the show take part later in a miniature revue at 1 a.m. in the dance hall.⁷

They would cast American performers for the opening revue in time for Christmas 1924; they would call it “New York–Montmartre”;

Establishing an astonishing precedent, Henri Letelier, Jean Fouret and other proprietors of Montmartre’s latest and biggest house decided to hire only American girls.⁸

The producer of the revue, Jacques Charles, “husband of the world famous nude beauty D’Herlys” had personally selected seven girls from the Ziegfeld Follies and so “displayed the charms of Broadway to Paris as never before”. They were Doris

Lloyd, Nina Byron, Yvonne Hughes, Ruth Fallows, Grace Girard, Sybil Wilson and Pat Coleman; the eighth was Helen MacDonald, another Broadway performer.

They arrived early in November and were immediately troubled by the racially egalitarian French,

CHORUS GIRLS

IN NEAR RIOT

Former Beauties in Ziegfeld Production

Object to Starring of Creoles

PARIS, Nov. 8.—The new Moulin Rouge theatre, which will be opened soon with a clothes-less revue, was nearly ripped wide open when eight glorious former Ziegfeld chorus girls staged a near riot on being informed after their arrival here that they will have to act in a scene in which five Creoles are starred.⁹

Otherwise things began well enough,

8 FOLLIES GIRLS HAVE BRUMMELS OF PARIS ON RUN

The American girl has great success in Paris.

That's a maxim on Broadway, and how could it be proved better than by the eight former Follies' beauties who dined alone in the smartest night resort in Paris recently and were mobbed by forty men?

The girls scorned the fervid forty, and swept out still alone, triumphant as Ali Baba over the forty thieves. That's the story that comes from Paris, anyway.... And they have all but made a fortune for a little Frenchman, the proprietor of an insignificant hotel in the heart of Montmartre, where they are stopping. Such a sensation are they that the humble little hotel has become almost as popular as the Ritz.¹⁰

Opening night was 21 December,

French beauty surrendered to America for the first time in the history of this country when the long-heralded opening of the Moulin Rouge theatre... took place last night....

In addition to the eight “there were eighteen Hoffman girls, whose acrobatics amazed and enchanted” the audience. The Gertrude Hoffman Girls was an American formation group that enacted the chorus girl with athletic and acrobatic kicks and leaps.

Henri Letelier, in a stage box, got so excited that he offered to take the whole chorus out for supper afterward, and registered disappointed amazement when the eighteen Hoffman girls unanimously refused to go out with a millionaire.

A chorus girl who will not go out to supper is a novelty in Paris. However, Letelier... France’s richest man... managed to acquire eight “Follies” girls in a party of which Paris talked this morning in hushed whispers.¹¹

The newspapers reported Bertelli’s coy account of the Trumpish party with sly innuendo,

DINES AMERICAN GIRLS
Richest Man in France is Santa Claus
For Broadway Beauties

Henri Letelier, France’s richest man, beauty judge extraordinary and modern Solomon, set the final seal on America’s claim to the production of the loveliest women when he abandoned the usual Christmas party given to the French beauties and instead gave a Christmas tree to seven Broadway girls, all of whom are appearing at the Moulin Rouge. The festivities were held

at a Montmartre cabaret just opened by Jed Kiley, Chicagoan.

The girls for whom the party was given were Helen MacDonald, from Dillingham's production, "One Kiss"; Ruth Fallows, artist's model; Doris Lloyd, the shapely coryphee once given the beauty crown by Flo Ziegfeld; Nina Byron, who replaced Gilda Gray as the Follies' shimmy queen; Yvonne Hughes, well known in the movies; Sybil Wilson of the Follies, and Grace Gerard, one of the season's American mysteries in Paris.

Grace is supposed to be the wife of a well-known Broadwayite and to have taken a job as a dancer in Paris in order to get a swift, secret divorce.

Other French millionaires, including Pierre Wertheimer, owner of Epinard; the brothers Lillias, owners of a big department store, and Jacques Carmona, French champagne king, were present as additional Santa Clauses.¹²

"Six women is about the right number for any man perfectly understanding the way of love," declared Letelier during the festivities....¹³

The *Springfield Leader and Express* wasn't impressed with Letelier,

It must be remembered that as a heartbreaker Letellier takes his toupee off to no other sheik in Europe. Of course, he is no Valentino for looks, having been in his prime about the time that Sitting Bull sat down. But he has wealth, power, position, and charm of manner.¹⁴

Downstairs from the theatre was a huge dance hall, where a ball began as soon as the theatre closed.

It is this feature of their contracts which is somewhat worrying the eight beautiful former follies girls from New York, who are the real stars of the show.

The eight say they thought they were coming over to dance in a regular theatre, and not in a "western dance hall." But their contracts hold them to the double job, and contain a clause to the effect that they must be prepared to remain at the theatre if necessary until 2 a.m.

"I hope they won't make us sit with men and get commissions on drinks," said the attractively eccentric Helen MacDonald, of whom it is said that a famous prince once introduced her to some friends in the wee sma' hours as "the future queen."

"I had some of that once," continued Helen, "and it's no joke. When I was a kid, under 20, I got crazy and signed on with a woman who wanted dancers for Christobal, in the Canal Zone. When we got there we found a regular tough dance hall, and discovered the only dancing we were supposed to do was with customers. The Y.W.C.A. rescued me on that occasion. Gee, I'd hate to have it happen again."

"But you're no longer a kid under 20, it was suggested. Helen's lazy, close-lidded eyes gleamed a moment.

"No," she agreed, "I guess us girls can take care of any of these French men if we have to."

Helen is one of a bunch of slim, lissome, easy-to-look-at cherubs which includes the well-known Doris Lloyd, the conscientious Nina Byron, the youthful and lovely Ruth Fallows, the graceful Sybil Wilson, the sweet-and-pretty Grace Girard, the Venusesque Marie Skelton, and the charming Yvonne Hughes.

It's the first time any such invasion of American beauties has hit Paris, and the town is quivering under the shock.¹⁵



The Americans in Paris—in furs in January:
posing before the Arch of the Carrousel, Nina Byron at left.

They objected to being used as hostess girls in the dance hall.
But worse was to come,

Just Bit too Far,
or Less for Dancers
**American Girls Refuse to Dance in Paris Café in
Risqué Costume; on Strike**

PARIS, Dec. 26—Eight American showgirls brought to Paris to speed up a revue for the reopening of the Moulin Rouge have gone on strike, refusing to wear scanty stage costumes outside the theatre.

The management of the Moulin Rouge arranged with Gerald Kiley, who runs a Montmartre dance hall, to send the octette of American beauties to his place at midnight

as dancers and he instructed that the girls wear the daring costumes in which they appear in a big scene in the revue.

The girls stated that it might be alright to wear risqué robes on the stage, but it was an entirely different matter to sit in a dance hall and fox-trot with the customers and friends in abbreviated costumes, so they refused.

Tonight the theatre management is seeking a compromise, but last night the girls refused to go on.¹⁶

Another account claimed their costumes were dirty: on Christmas night,

... the American beauties refused to don the dirty costumes provided for them. Now the poor dears are without jobs and planning to sail home a week hence. The directors of the theatre fired them for their refusal to wear the costumes....¹⁷

Henry Wales of the *Chicago Tribune*:

Seven Striking Follies' Beauties Tire of Paris and Decide to Return to Dear Old United States to Behold Lights of Beloved Broadway Again

Paris, Jan. 1—Paris is a great town, but it is no place for American girls upon the stage, is the united opinion of seven Follies beauties, who, after a short but eventful appearance in the famous Moulin Rouge, are returning to their beloved Broadway.

Flo Ziegfeld, acting the part of belated Santa Claus contributed to their happiness by offering seven contracts in parts where they will not be expected to waltz with customers in scanty costumes when they get home. Their trouble with the Moulin Rouge management, against whom they recently called a strike,

also came to a happy climax when the big pleasure palace agreed to pay their homeward passage.

“Everything is lovely, and we are glad to be going home,” Ruth Fallows, end girl, strike leader and spokesman, declared. “It is all thanks to Mr Ziegfeld, who is the nicest manager in America. We like France and Paris and would like to come back, but we are not used to doing the things they expect from show girls here.”¹⁸

It was not as easy as that of course: CF Bertelli reported,

PARISIAN THEATRE
FORCED TO TERMS
WITH SEVEN GIRLS
**Ziegfeld And American Ambassador
And Consul Bring Strong Pressure
ROW OVER DIRTY GOWNS**

Paris, Dec. 30.—Under pressure exerted by the Actors’ Equity society, the American Ambassador and consul, and other high officials in Paris, all aided by Flo Ziegfeld who came to the rescue in two inspiring cablegrams, the managers of the new Moulin Rouge theatre agree to pay the required fortnight’s salaries as well as return first class fare home to seven Broadway beauties, “fired” Christmas night because they refused to wear dirty costumes.¹⁹

Friends (all men, clearly) staged a farewell party for them,



The farewell party in Paris.



On the liner *France*, Le Havre to New York, arriving 10 January 1925:
left to right, Sybil Wilson, Ruth Fallows, Helen MacDonald, Nina Byron and
Doris Lloyd: *Cincinatti Enquirer* 29 March 1925

The Hoffman girls were also the subject of examination in Paris,

Paris, Jan. 7.—The prefecture of police today decided that eighteen American girls appearing in the Moulin Rouge revue were not offending public decency through appearing practically nude except for slippers and pearl necklaces. Following receipt of complaints, M. Dwyer, divisionary commissary of police, and M. Girardis, Montmartre commissary of police, last night attended the Moulin Rouge and watched the Hoffman girls through high powered glasses. After the show they decided that nobody should be shocked....²⁰

Back home the defensive francophobia blossomed: “Hounded and Slugged by Jealous Paris Beauties—Scandalous Series of Beatings, Slanders and Brutality Heaped on U.S. Dancers by ‘Green-Eyed’ Rivals Which Sent the Angry Yankee Girls Scurrying Home in Tears” shrieked the *Hamilton Evening Journal* in March.²¹

Others were not so credulous:



You are asked to believe that these girls—Sybil Wilson, Ruth Fallows, Helen MacDonald and Nina Byron—you are asked to believe that they up and quit their jobs as show girls in the Moulin Rouge in Paris. And all because of a little difference between them and the manager over costumes. Said costumes, it seems, were strong on quality but weak on quantity. And the young ladies would not stand for it.²²

Some of the women sold the story of their experiences to the newspapers. Ruth Fallows had kept a diary and her account was serialised in illustrated two page spreads over five weeks in many newspapers: “Temptations and Tribulations of Beautiful American Girls in Paris By Ruth Fallows, Famous Model. Just Back From Extraordinary Adventures in the ‘City of Light,’ Who Writes Her Illuminating Confessions and Revelations of Perils, Persecutions, Golden Lures and Soul-Traps Baited for Innocent Girls, Ranging From Fetes of the Rich and Quirks of the Bohemians to the Murky Realms of the Apache.”²³

TEMPTATIONS AND TRIBULATIONS
of Beautiful American
GIRLS IN PARIS

By Ruth Fallows

The famous model just back from extraordinary adventures in the "City of Light," writes her illuminating confessions and revelations of perils, persecutions, golden lures and soul-traps baited for innocent girls, ranging from fetes of the rich and quirks of the Bohemians to the murky realms of the Apache.

In the Magazine Section of
THE GAZETTE TIMES
Next Sunday

Read the opening installment and you will
 read every chapter each week.

Fallows had found Paris very alien; she complained of being mauled by men, of jealousy from older women, of curfews imposed on the parties, of smashed props, scratched legs, assaults and insults, proposals that they should appear entirely nude on stage and that they should act as come-ons in a restaurant. She wrote of the "false paradises" of cocaine and absinthe. "The spirit of the French music-hall," she wrote, "is that of a worn old woman, with furrows ploughed through her over-rouged cheeks by irrepressible tears."

Backstage the girls suffered sharp, suspicious looks, catty remarks, an occasional shove, a surreptitious scratch from a fingernail, a foot out to trip. When they refused to appear nude

on stage were given small black butterflies to stick on—but they came off in the heat.



Butterflies: *San Francisco Examiner* 17 May 1925.

English journalist in Paris, Basil Woon, had helped them considerably—Fallows referred to him as “our dear cavalier, Basil Woon, the writer, without whose aid I don’t believe we’d ever have been able to get out of the country.” Woon later wrote about the events in his book *The Paris that’s not in the guide books*.

The difference between American and French chorus-girls was demonstrated vividly enough recently when the new Moulin Rouge theatre opened. The title of the revue was “New York-Montmartre.” Jacques-Charles, formerly of Casino de Paris, was the creator.

Deciding on a dangerous experiment, Jacques-Charles went to America and hired eight chorus-girls. They were Helen MacDonald, Ruth Fallows, Doris Lloyd, Nina Byron, Grace Gerard, Sybil Wilson, Yvonne Hughes and Marie Shelton. All were beautiful and sophisticated members of the Broadway legion.

These girls were paid forty dollars a week, including rehearsals, and their return passage to America. When Paris heard about the deal there was much interest and a good deal of scepticism.

The girls arrived and went into rehearsals with an equal number of French girls. Almost immediately there were clashes. The bond of sympathy that their common profession might have created was not formed because the American and French girls could not understand each other. Jealousies were nurtured which smoldered into flaming enmity.

When the French girls heard that the American girls were getting forty dollars a week there was great outcry. They themselves were only being paid twenty-five francs a day—less than a fourth of what the American contracts called for. Even then the Moulin Rouge had been exceptionally generous, for thousands of chorus-girls in Paris get only fifteen francs a day—not enough to keep them in clothes and food, let alone shelter.

The result of the Moulin Rouge situation was a series of squabbles that finally ended in the distracted management's sending the Americans back to Broadway.

It will be many moons before a French theatre sends again to Manhattan for its chorus-girls. Conditions in Paris are not made for them.²⁴

In another press release Fallows described how the girls had tied their stockings around their breasts for modesty,

M. Charles was fearfully upset. He rushed over to Nina Byron and started to untie the stockings. But Nina is very strong and M. Charles soon gave it up.

The hats we wore were colossal.... Ours seemed to have been made by a blacksmith. Wires came through at every angle, and there was no lining. Nina Byron was hit by an iron beam that the workmen had carelessly left suspended in air, and only the hat saved her from being killed.²⁵

1 Victoria Wilson. *A Life of Barbara Stanwyck: Steel-True 1907–1940*.

2 *Exhibitors Daily Review* July–December 1928.

3 *Variety* April 1923.

4 *Variety* 21 June 1923.

5 Michele Vogel. *Olive Thomas: the Life and Death of a Silent Film Beauty*.

6 *Pittsburgh Press* 30 November 1924.

7 Basil Woon in the *San Francisco Examiner* 28 December 1924.

8 *Indianapolis Star* 22 December 1924.

9 *Dayton Daily News* 9 November 1924.

10 *Daily News* (NY) 8 December 1924.

11 *ibid.*

12 *South Bend Tribune* 26 December 1924.

13 *Buffalo Courier* 26 December 1924.

14 *Springfield Leader and Press* 8 Feb 1925.

15 Basil Woon in the *San Francisco Examiner* 28 December 1924.

16 *Salt Lake Tribune* 27 December 1924.

17 *Bee* 29 December 1924.

18 *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* 2 January 1905.

19 *Akron Beacon Journal* 30 December 1924.

20 *Chicago Tribune* 8 January 1925.

21 28 March 1925.

22 *Hanover Evening Sun* 14 January 1925.

23 *eg, Tampa Sunday Tribune Magazine Section*: weekly 17 May to 14 June 1925.

24 Basil Woon. *The Paris that's not in the guide books*.

25 *Pittsburgh Press* 17 May 1925.

Chapter 6: marriage and divorce again



In the midst of all this Nina Byron was married again. Her second marriage was to cinematographer Harold G. Rosson in 1924.

Harold Rosson

"Hal" Rosson 1895–1988 became known for his subtle and imaginative lighting. He began in 1908 as an actor at the Vitagraph Studios in Brooklyn, but gave up acting to become an assistant to director of photography and director of photography for Metro in New York in 1915. He also worked for the Kalem Company, Famous Players and Essanay before the War and the army.

After the War, he worked in Marion Davies' production company, Cosmopolitan Productions, set up for her in 1918 by her lover, William Randolph Hearst. In 1920, Rosson was signed by Mary Pickford to shoot movies starring her brother, Jack Pickford.

He eventually rejoined Metro, which in 1924 merged with Goldwyn Studios and then with Louis B. Mayer Productions to become MGM. Here he made his reputation and on 29 July 1925 he married Nina Byron. The marriage lasted till 1927.

Variety inaccurately reported Nina was granted a final divorce decree from “Richard Rosson” because of “incompatibility of temperament”.¹

No-fault divorce didn’t exist in California in 1927 so the plaintiff had to “earn” it. Furthermore the husband was expected to take the gallant part and allow his wife to file, rather than disgrace her by doing so himself. But the divorce records show Harold Rosson was the plaintiff and he sued Nina Clarice Betts Dunay – most uncommon at the time (David Stenn, *pers. comm.*).

Rosson claimed, “Defendant has at all times neglected the home of these parties, has refused to take proper care of the house and has shown complete indifference to the plaintiff’s comfort in that connection. On many occasions, so many that plaintiff is now unable to specify the particular dates, defendant has remained away from home for the greater part of the day and plaintiff has returned from his work to find no food in the house, no preparations made for his evening meal and has been compelled to go to the lunch counter of a nearby drug store or to his brother’s house for food.”

He went on to detail Nina’s frequent absences from home, often all night, once for a whole month, then, “Plaintiff is fond of children, but defendant has at all times since said marriage refused to have children.

“Defendant’s conduct, as hereinabove alleged, has caused plaintiff great and grievous mental suffering and anguish, has made him nervous and unhappy, and has interfered with the efficient performance of his work.”

The notice was served on Nina on 3 August 1927 and as she didn’t respond the plaintiff’s allegations were held to be true and the divorce granted.²



At MGM Rosson was the lighting cameraman on *Bombshell* (1933), on which his camera work showed off star Jean Harlow's platinum blonde look to maximum advantage. Rosson was married to Harlow for two years, from 1933 to 1935.

Hal Rosson and Jean Harlow.

He went on to work in colour and was hailed for his photography on *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), for which he received the first of five Academy Award nominations.³

Nina Byron's career is hard to follow after this. She was listed among "others well known in the pictures" at Arrowhead Springs hotel in December 1927.⁴

In July 1928,

Another Follies girl has felt the call of the celluloid. Thus we have Nina Byron ex-glorified member of Ziegfeld's bevy cast for a role supporting Clara Bow in "The Fleet's In."⁵

The film is considered lost and existing cast lists do not include Nina Byron. In October 1928,

Mrs Gibson, one time Vaudeville performer, has gone to New York with Nina Byron, Follies dancer, who divorced Richard Rosson last month.⁶

Nina was headed for Broadway and is said to have been associated with Eddie Cantor in the Florenz Ziegfeld show *Whoopee!*



She is not listed in the opening night cast of *Whoopee!* which ran at the New Amsterdam theatre from 4 December 1928 to 23 November 1929.^{7,8} There were, however, 100 “Glorified Ziegfeld girls” in the show, not all named in the cast list.

NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE
 W. 42d St.
"The House Beautiful" Mts. Wed. & Sat.
 Erlanger, Dillingham & Ziegfeld, Mgr. Dir.
 458 RESERVED SEATS AT \$1.00

ZIEGFELD SENSATION

EDDIE CANTOR
 in
WHOOPEE

with **ETHEL SHUTTA** and All Star Cast
100—GLORIFIED GIRLS—100
 After Performance Attend ZIEGFELD
 FROLIC Alop New Amsterdam Theatre



If she was in *Whoopie* it was not for long as she was among 100 passengers who arrived in Los Angeles on the liner *President Wilson* in March 1929—from New York, through the Panama Canal and on up the west coast.



SAILING SCHEDULE

DOLLAR STEAMSHIP LINE
 ROUND THE WORLD
 INTERCOASTAL
 TRANS-PACIFIC
 ORIENT-EUROPEAN
 TRANS-ATLANTIC

The Dollar Steamship Line is unique in that its entire fleet is of new construction.

"The Sunshine Belt to the Orient"

Schedule No. 5

◀ *Oshkosh Northwestern* 23 March 1929.

Los Angeles yesterday added another beauty to the vocation colony when Nina Byron, lately of Ziegfeld's "Whoopee" arrived on the dollar liner President Wilson for a visit.

"The canal trip certainly is an ideal way for theatrical people to get a complete rest in a short time," she said.

“European voyages offer harder work than staying home but the smooth passage through the tropics and up the West Coast does away with the strenuous features of a trans-Atlantic trip.”⁹

“She will,” *Variety* explained, “try to crash the flickers.”¹⁰

1 *Variety* October 1928.

2 Superior Court of the State of California, County of Los Angeles, interlocutory judgment of divorce No. D57508 Dept 10.

3 Jon C. Hopwood. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005849/bio>

4 *San Bernardino County Sun* 18 December 1927.

5 *Daily News* (New York) 4 July 1928.

6 *Baltimore Sun* 28 October 1928; not Richard, but Hal Rosson, and the divorce was in 1926, not 1928.

7 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whoopee!>

8 <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/whoopee-10796>

9 *Los Angeles Times* 19 March 1929.

10 *Variety* March 1929.

Chapter 7: the afternoon of a faun

In 1933 when her ex, Hal Rosson, was marrying Jean Harlow, and six months later when Rosson and Harlow announced their separation, many newspapers inaccurately rounded out their coverage with, “Rosson... in 1924 married Nina Byron, an Australian girl who was not in pictures. They were divorced two years later”.¹

In February 1938 a California gossip columnist wrote, “Van Smith’s heartbeat these days is Nina Byron”² and gossip queen Louella Parsons wrote, “Palm Springs was so warm over the weekend that summer dresses without coats were in order... Van Smith was there with the new girlfriend Nina Bryon (*sic*).³

In her “Snapshots of Hollywood” column a fortnight later,

The Nina Bryan-Van Smith romance continues at fever heat; they were at a night spot absolutely engrossed in each other.⁴

By 12 March, however, she could report “Van Smith and a new girl friend at Phil Selznick’s”.⁵

It is hard to discern just who Van Smith was, apart from Beverly Hills millionaire and gossip column fodder— “young, handsome and good looking—everything a girl wants in a beau,” Ms Parsons had written in 1934.⁶ Handsome *and* good looking.

The *LA Times*’s “Chatterbox” wrote that he “flits from girl to girl like the busy bee buzzes from flower to flower”.⁷



Frank Hotaling.

Nina married Frank Hotaling in 1939 and they remained married until his death in Woodland Hills, Los Angeles in 1977.

He was a movie art director and set designer, associated with over 100 films, mostly westerns—his best work done in the 1950s and 60s, including John Ford's *The Searchers*.

A search of family history databases shows Nina living at 1339 N La Brea Ave in 1934; Nina and Frank at 1308 Cole Place, Los Angeles in 1939 & 1946 and at 149-53 Sutton St, Sherman Oaks in 1952. They travelled often: to New York, Hawaii, Mexico, England, France.

Mrs Nina Clarice Hotaling, born in Christchurch, New Zealand on 27 July 1900 died (childless) in Lynchburg, Virginia on 21 January 1987.



149-53 Sutton St, Sherman Oaks (Google Maps).

-
- 1 eg, *Boston Globe* 19 September 1933.
 - 2 *San Francisco Examiner* 7 February 1938.
 - 3 *Fresno Bee The Republican* 8 February 1938.
 - 4 *San Francisco Examiner* 22 February 1938.
 - 5 *San Francisco Examiner* 12 March 1938.
 - 6 *San Francisco Examiner* 27 May 1934.
 - 7 *LA Times* 16 July 1936.