

Out of This World — in Reno

Fantastic Story of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Alimony in the Dizzy Divorce Capital Where Law and License Never Clash



By INEZ ROBB
CHAPTER V

RENO, Nev.

IT IS the considered opinion of Reno's experts that the trouble with matrimony is married people. Theirs is a left-handed endorsement of Disraeli's profound conclusion that "all women should be married and no man."

The year 1931, in which the United States hit the depth of the depression, was a boom year for Reno. On May 1 of that year, the Nevada residence requirement for divorce was shaved from three months to six weeks.

It was as if the dam had burst. Divorcees and their money rolled in at a record rate. Hotels, dude ranches and boarding houses were all jammed. The overflow moved into a tent colony on the edge of town. In that year, Reno chalked up 4,745 decrees granted. This was double the number issued during the previous year.

The experts figured that the six weeks residential requirement had a lot to do with establishing the record. But they decided that poverty had a

lot more to do with it. When a major economic catastrophe overwhelmed the nation, love took it on the lam.

This was a very fine theory, neatly tied up with mauve ribbons, and lasted for eleven years—which is longer than most theories last in these times.

But the theory fell on its face in 1943. The most prosperous year in the history of America was likewise a record-breaker in Reno's divorce field. Almost 6,000 divorce decrees were granted during that year in the "World's Biggest Little City," as the tides of prosperity washed a record-breaking number of divorcees and divorcers toward its welcoming shores.

Reno was ready with the life-line. And also ready to reverse her 1931 decision that poverty puts the frost-bite on love. Experts have retreated to a prepared position where love is acknowledged to be a "sometime thing" at best, with little, if any, reference to whether brother can spare a dime or a dollar.

Because they are the only ones we hear about, the nation has come to believe that Reno's divorce colony is exclusively populated by rich women from the restless social centers of the Eastern states or by beautiful Hollywood and Broadway damsels in marital distress.

Certainly they are the ones who hit the headlines. But the truth is that they are greatly out-

numbered by the plain Jane Does and Dottie Roes from every nook and cranny of the United States, including the hills of Arkansas.

The Social Register is always well represented in Reno. The Screen Actors' Guild

and Actors' Equity usually have a representative or two in residence. They fill one of the really fashionable hotels and the dude ranches. But the bulk of the divorce business is bivouacked in the boarding houses and in cheap hotels. Here are the nobodies, the men and women from Keokuk, Tulsa, North Platte, Birmingham and Grass Roots, U. S. A.

Here are the men and women who have, in part, neatly solved the man-power shortage problem for Reno. These are the people who are working their way through a divorce.

With only the Mesdames Astor, Vanderbilt, Whitney et al in mind, it is difficult to realize that there are not dozens but hundreds annually who are working their way through divorces.

RECENTLY I lunched with a jubilant lawyer whose joie de vivre suggested at least a \$10,000,000 client on the incoming train.

"Not at all, not at all," he chortled. "I've just solved the domestic help problem for the family. A woman came in to price a divorce this morning. She didn't have much money, but she turned out to be a general cook and a former nurse maid.

"Boy! What a bonanza! What a find! Before she could shop around any further, I got her in the car and whisked her home. She's out there now, putting the house to rights. She's tickled pink to work her way through her divorce and we, thank Heaven, have a maid for the next six weeks!"

CHEAPEST DIVORCE

RENO

EXPERT ADVICE



Upper-Crust Attorneys Meet Their Chip-Heavy Clients at the Station With Everything But a Brass Band, for Which the Clients Eventually Pay. The Average Matrimonial Casualty Seeking the "Cure," However, Does Some Comparative Shopping and May Secure Counsel for as Little as \$25.

The first night I had dinner at the Riverside Hotel, the waiter salaamed deeply as he handed me the menu.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Madam," he intoned. "The last time I waited on you, it was at the El Morocco, back in New York."

I took another look and recognized Emil. He had come out six months before for The Cure, he explained, had taken a temporary job, had fallen in love with a roulette wheel, and been unable to tear himself away from Reno.

At the moment, the only two mechanics at the garage up the street are working their way through divorces. On the day the decrees are granted, and his mechanics depart for their former homes, the garage owner plans to slit his own throat. Unless—of course—this is a difficult year, domestic-

ly, for mechanics, and others arrive to take the place of the present duo.

Reno's hotels, restaurants, filling stations, beauty shops, her retail stores, her taxis, her business houses and her gambling joints are powered in part by men and women who are earning the money to pay for a Nevada decree.

People are reluctant to hire men and women for only a six to eight week period, to train them, break them in and then have them depart the moment the court dissolves their assorted marriages. But some help is better than no help, Tate Williams, secretary and manager of the Nevada Retail Merchants' Association, ruefully admits.

When you go into a restaurant or a shop, the affable girl who waits on you is likely to measure you with a practiced eye and ask bluntly:

"Are you here for The Cure, too, dearie?" And it is useless to deny it. Two things can never be explained away: the presence of a lone woman in Reno and a black eye. The world is convinced that neither condition has been arrived at through innocence or accident.

If you say "no," to the girl, she doesn't believe you, and if you say "yes," you are apt to loosen the flood springs to her long and sorry tale of domestic infelicity.

So accustomed is Reno to women working their way through The Cure that I bet a local friend I could ring doorbells in any residential block in town, announce I was working my way through a divorce by selling magazine subscriptions, and no one would either laugh or shut the door in my face.

On a dare, I selected a middle class block out

in the university section and rang eleven doorbells. I came away with assorted advice, considerable sympathy and two subscriptions!

A Reno divorce can cost anything. The only fixed fee is the court costs. This amounts to approximately \$46, and includes the \$20 filing fee, a \$10 fee if the defendant files an appearance, \$5 for the witness fee, \$1.25 for a certified copy of the divorce decree, \$2.25 for an exemplified copy of same, and \$7.50 to the court reporter for recording and transcribing the case.

The present tangled divorce affairs of Doris Duke are described here as "a lawyers' paradise." What the swank firm of Thatcher and Woodburn, which also obtained a Reno divorce for Barbara Hutton, received is anyone's guess.

But there is no secret in Reno that the highest fee ever paid in a divorce case was \$400,000 by Clifford Vail Brokaw, of the New York City Brokaws. Brokaw filed his case in Carson City, 25 miles from Reno, in the late Twenties. Mrs. Brokaw, the former Nannie C. Inman, bitterly contested the suit.



Senator Pat McCarran, Who Shared in the Record Divorce Fee—\$400,000.

She was represented by the potent duo of dapper "Billy" Woodburn and George Thatcher, Brokaw by Pat McCarran, now U. S. Senator. Mrs. Brokaw, clinging to the Old Guard conception that divorce would mean social ostracism for her, eventually was persuaded to file a cross-complaint and obtained the decree. The financial settlement made by Brokaw on his wife just prior to the granting of the divorce involved \$5,000,000 in liquid securities.

There is a legend in Reno that one of the firms involved in the Brokaw case daringly decided to ask \$100,000 as its fee, hoping that the final figure would be no less than \$50,000. When the moment to present the bill came, one of the partners—a poker-faced gambler—gave his associate heart failure by suddenly, on a hunch, coolly asking for \$200,000.

That sum was okayed without question. It was then the turn of the poker-faced partner to have heart failure. But by that time, he could afford it.

Five million ain't, as the philosopher says, hay. But the Brokaw settlement paled into insignificance beside that obtained by the first Mrs. Marshall Field III, now the wife of Architect Diego Suarez. The Chicago mercantile heir agreed to pay her a life income of \$1,000,000 annually.

In gratitude—and why not?—Mrs. Suarez, when she returned to New York, sent her Reno attorneys a check doubling their expected fee. And it really was cheap at the price.

It is said that Barbara Hutton paid \$50,000 for the legal aid that resulted in her Reno divorce from Prince Alexis Mdivani and her subsequent marriage to Count Court Haugwitz-Reventlow.



The Former Muriel Vanderbilt Concealed Her Identity Until the Deal With Counsel Was Closed, and Got a Bargain Divorce.

But for every divorce in the above box-car category, there are thousands that cost only in the hundreds. The local bar association long ago tried to fix a standard price of \$250 for the average or—shall we say?—non-sucker divorce case. But the average lawyer's fee today is much nearer \$150. And, if a divorcee shops around, she can pick up a bargain for \$25 to \$50 from the barristers who specialize in what might be called wholesale business.

These are the boys who somehow manage to get the gasoline to drive a car packed with divorcees over to Carson City or up to Virginia City where the court fees are less than in Reno. Or when business is good, to take a whole bus load of the girls to either metropolis, each 25 miles from Reno.

Quantity, not quality, is the motto of this group in Reno's busy little legal world.

THE well-to-do divorcee, in 99 cases out of a hundred, comes here with her Reno counsel already arranged for by her own attorney in her own home town. One of the most familiar sights in Reno is the smattering of upper-crust attorneys always on hand at the railroad station to meet incoming trains bearing clients.

The divorcee without much money is apt to come and do comparison shopping for prices before she settles on legal counsel. But the rich are not above doing it, either. Mrs. Vanderbilt Phelps, the former Muriel Vanderbilt, shopped around out here several years ago without revealing her identity until the bargain was sealed. She obtained a divorce for a shockingly paltry sum considering her Vanderbilt background. It was in the hundreds, not the thousands of dollars.

In the meantime, her sister, Mrs. William J. (Jack) Warburton, the former Consuelo Vanderbilt, paid a fine, Vanderbiltian sum for a divorce from her first husband, Earl E. T. Smith. When she compared notes with sister Muriel, Consuelo was furious at being taken to the cleaners.

But when she came back a few years later to divorce her second husband, Henry Gassaway Davis, she was on to the ropes.

Without tipping her hand, she settled on a price that was but a fraction of what her first divorce had cost. And when her lawyer eventually discovered that that quiet little woman under the nondescript name of Davis was a Vanderbilt, he all but expired of apoplexy.

Reno, since divorce is a business and hence a financial transaction benefiting the community, sided with the lawyer. It snubbed the Vanderbilt heiress during her incumbency.

Next week, Miss Robb will tell how easy it is to get a Reno divorce, and the many forms of complaints that are acceptable to the courts.