

Montana's "Lit'ry Lady"

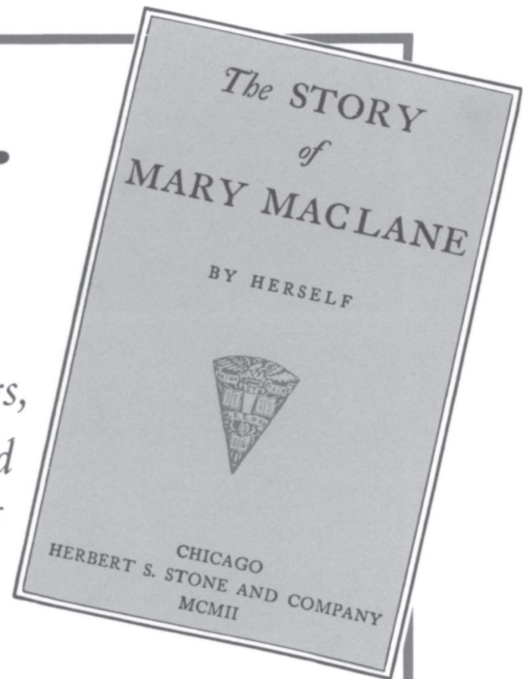


MARY MacLANE IN 1906

Shocking

by LESLIE WHEELER

I of womankind and of nineteen years, will now begin to set down as full and frank a portrayal as I am able of myself, Mary MacLane, for whom the world contains not a parallel.



WITH THESE WORDS, a recent high school graduate in Butte, Montana, began a kind of diary in which she revealed her innermost thoughts and tortured unhappiness. There was nothing particularly unusual about this: other girls in other towns kept diaries. What was unusual was that Mary MacLane dared to have her private words published. And because it was 1901, and because the diary was both provocatively written and filled with things considered shocking at the time, it created a sensation throughout the country. For the nineteen-year-old who had written it, the publication meant the beginning of a career as an eccentric “lit’ry lady,” and later as writer and star of the silent screen—a career that would take her to the large cities of the country in search of adventure and fulfillment, bring her home again to nurse her wounds and write another book, and finally end some thirty years later with her death in a Chicago rooming house, alone and largely forgotten by those who had alternately damned and praised her.

The Parents



JAMES MacLANE



MARGARET MacLANE

All family pictures courtesy Mrs. Kay Chester, Helena.

MARY MacLANE was born on May 2, 1881, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the third child of James and Margaret MacLane. Her siblings, including an older brother and sister and a younger brother, seem to have exerted little or no influence on her early life—nor, apparently, did her mother. Through her “Highland Scot” father, however, Mary claimed a heritage which was a source of pride and to which she later attributed her “peculiar” genius.

James MacLane held a government position in Winnipeg, and the family lived in comfortable circumstances in a large house with servants. MacLane had participated in the California gold stampede some thirty years before, and in spite of his success in Winnipeg, was apparently seized anew with wanderlust when Mary was four years old. He took his family to Fergus Falls, a small town in western Minnesota. Four years later, James MacLane died, and his wife and four children

moved to Montana, living first in Great Falls, and then in Butte. Here Margaret MacLane married again, this time to a man named Henry Klenze, who dabbled in mining with indifferent success. Apparently little remained of the affluent life the family had once known, and none of the occupants of the house, including Klenze, contributed in any way to Mary’s lifestyle. She went her own way, and, quite simply, ignored them.

In Butte, Mary attended the local high school, and for a time was one of the editors of the *High School Leader*. She filled her spare time with reading and going for long walks in the sparsely foliated countryside surrounding Butte with two chosen companions. Aside from these two friends, she was, by her own account, a loner. Her classmates considered her odd, and she was quite sensitive on the point. In her senior year, however, she found a sympathetic ear in the person of her English teacher, Miss Fanny Corbin. Mary developed a school-girl crush on this teacher, and was despondent when Miss

The Siblings



JOHN JAMES

DOROTHY MARGARET
MARY

JAMES WHITBY

Corbin left Butte to study and eventually become a professor at the University of Montana at Missoula.

After graduation, Mary and her older sister, Dorothy, had hoped to enroll at Stanford University in California, but their plans were frustrated by family financial reverses. Cast in a more conservative and practical mold, Dorothy took a job as a clerk at the local library. Mary applied for another library job, and went so far as to take the competitive examination, but instead of answering the prescribed list of twenty-five questions, she answered seven or eight and then branched off into an essay, which, although written in clever prose, was totally unrelated to the questions.¹

It is not surprising that a more conventional applicant got the job, and Mary remained at home, occupying herself as best she could. She continued to go for long rambles by herself in the "sand and barrenness" around Butte, and to read as voraciously as ever.

1. Interview with Mrs. Kay Chester of Helena, daughter of Mary's older sister, Dorothy.

Included in her reading were the confessions of the Russian artist, Marie Bashkirtseff. This was a journal describing in minute detail the life and loves of the author, beginning at age twelve, and ending with her untimely death at twenty-three. It was written with the public in mind, for through her journal, Marie Bashkirtseff hoped to achieve the fame which she feared her painting might not bring her.

As she wrote in the preface: "This is the thought that has always terrified me; to live, to be so filled with ambition, to suffer, to weep, to struggle, and, at the end oblivion!—as if I had never existed. If I should not live long enough to win renown, this journal will interest the psychologists; for it is curious, at least—the life of a woman, traced day by day, without affectation as if no one in the world should ever read it, and yet at the same time intended to be read; for I am convinced that I shall be found sympathetic—and I tell everything, everything, everything."²

2. Marie Bashkirtseff, preface to her *Journal* (Rand McNally & Co., N.Y., 1889) p. 14.

MOVED BY similar cravings, and determined to tell “everything, everything, everything,” Mary began a journal of her own. Her “portrayal,” as she called it, was written over a period of three months, beginning in January, 1901, and ending in April of the same year with a *L’Envoi* penned on October 28, 1901. In brilliant but sometimes repetitious and rambling prose, Mary laid bare the demons which beset her. She described how galling it was to feel herself a genius and a philosopher of her own “peripatetic school” (since most of her best thinking was done on the long walks she took), and to be cooped up in an “uncouth, warped Montana town,” where no one—including her immediate family—understood her.

She found it equally galling to possess a “good strong young woman’s-body,” and have no means of satisfying the desires stirring within her. She longed, like other romantic-minded young women, for a knight on a charger to come and carry her away with him—except that Mary didn’t call him a knight. Instead she conceived of him as the Devil, a “strong and fascinating man,” with “steely gray eyes” who would bring her as much pain as pleasure—if only he would come.

When the Devil failed to materialize, she let out a volley of unladylike curses—for Mary was no paragon of propriety, she was at pains to demonstrate. Underneath the conventional-looking exterior there lurked a renegade spirit. Proclaiming herself a liar and a thief, Mary announced that the last thing she wanted to be was a virtuous woman: “May I never, I say, become that abnormal, merciless animal, that deformed monstrosity—a virtuous woman.” Fortunately, she believed there was little chance of this ever happening, because her Devil had made her *sans* conscience and *sans* virtue. Indeed, she claimed that there was no vile deed that she would not do to obtain happiness.

Happiness and fame—the frustrated young Butte girl wanted the usual things, but she wanted them so desperately that her waking hours were consumed by an agony of expectation. The only relief came after she had just eaten “a fine, rare-broiled porterhouse steak from Omaha, and some fresh young green onions from California.” Then she was able to put her misery aside temporarily.

She could, of course, eat only so many porterhouse steaks and wait so long for her Devil to come, and by the spring of 1902, Mary MacLane had definitely tired of doing both. The time had come for her to take action: she made a package out of her handwritten diary

and sent it off to Herbert S. Stone and Company, a Chicago publishing house. She expected to have to wait several months before hearing anything, but to her surprise, the manuscript was accepted shortly after it was received. It was published a week later—thanks, apparently, to Lucy Monroe, a manuscript reader at Herbert Stone who had been assigned to read Mary’s diary and urged its publication.

In her journal Mary had written that she hoped “to be able to write such things as compel the admiring acclamations of the world at large; such things as are written but once in years, things subtly but distinctly different from books written every day . . . Let me but make a beginning, let me but strike the world in a vulnerable spot, and I can take it by storm.”



HER WORDS proved prophetic. No sooner had the slender volume containing *The Story of Mary MacLane by Herself* appeared (originally it was more aptly titled *I Await the Devil’s Coming*) than it was the talk of the nation, from Butte to New York. The newspapers printed excerpts from the book, reviewed it, and speculated about its author. Was she a literary prodigy, a mad-woman, or simply a clever con artist? There was no denying the book was written in a vividly picturesque style.

The august critic, H. L. Mencken, said that he knew of no other woman writer who could play upon words more magically, and the popular novelist, Hamlin Garland, was similarly enthusiastic. But the fact remained that many others found its contents deplorable. Thus while reviewers like Barrett Eastman in *The Chicago Journal* praised Mary’s courage in laying bare her soul, others like John Paul of *The New York Times* suggested that she be spanked.³

The storm of controversy aroused by *The Story of Mary MacLane* raged with special virulence in Mary’s home state. Butte, in particular, had its axe to grind because of the unflattering picture Mary had painted of the town. Not only had she written that “Butte and its immediate vicinity present as ugly an outlook as one could wish to see,” but she had also called the townspeople “dry and warped.” Her book was banned from the local library, and *The Butte Miner*, among other local

papers, rushed to denounce it as inimical to public morality.⁴

An interesting aspect of the uproar created by the book is the light it sheds on attitudes of the East towards the West—and *vice versa*—around the turn of the century. For example, *The New York Times* reviewer snidely observed that it was scarcely surprising that such trash had been seized upon by a Chicago publishing house, Chicago being considered on the edge of the wilderness in those days. But if the East looked down on the West as devoid of culture and refinement, the West was well aware of it, and very much on the defensive.

Thus one of the things that particularly irked *The Butte Miner* was the fact that “to the eastern mind, more or less warped concerning the trend of thought in the west, this book advertises itself as a reflection of the ideas and sentiments quite likely to take root in Butte, as mushrooms might flourish on a moldy dungheap.” *The Miner* also decried “the insane craving for sensationalism manifested by some of the eastern press in the case of this unfortunate Butte girl,” and soberly concluded that “if the culture of the east is not equal to an appreciation of such evident truths, Butte ought to offset the popular impression by proving that freak productions of a doubtful character do not constitute our highest ideals.”⁵

With the reputation of an entire state as well as that of a town at stake, other Montana papers hastened to condemn Mary’s book. A few dissenting voices, however, were heard. *The Red Lodge Picket* was critical of the Butte public library’s ban on the book, saying that “in the same way Shakespeare could be expurgated, many of the poets condemned, and even the Bible kept from good society.” *The Anaconda Standard* under the by-line of John Maguire also printed a defense of Mary and her book.⁶

3. Eastman’s review and another favorable one by Marion Heath in the *Chicago Journal* were reprinted in the *Anaconda Standard*, May 4, 1902. Paul’s review appeared in the *New York Times*, May 10, 1902, p. 314.

4. A close reading of the book suggests that Mary was really ambivalent in her feelings about Butte. On page 111 she wrote that “The town of Butte presents a wonderful field to a student of humanity and human nature. . . . For mixture, for miscellany—variedness, Bohemianism—where is Butte’s rival,” and on succeeding pages offered a lively description of the different types of people who were to be seen thronging the streets on Miners’ Union Day or on the Fourth of July.

5. *Butte Miner*, May 1, 1902, p. 4.

6. *Red Lodge Picket*, May 9, 1902, p. 4.

7. These stories were all reported in *The Butte Intermountain*, April 30, 1902, and May 20, 1902. The story of Mary’s rudeness to Butte society matrons also appears in novelist Gertrude Atherton’s autobiography, *Adventures of a Novelist* (New York, 1932).

8. *Anaconda Standard*, May 4, 1902.

9. The ad appeared in the *Butte Intermountain*, May 16, 1902, p. 4.

MEANWHILE, THE young lady responsible for all this impassioned debate was proving she had the ability to shock in person as well as in print. Already she had been identified in Butte as “The Centerville Ghost,” because, as the book revealed, she was in the habit of prowling around the cemetery late at night. And she continued to raise eyebrows with her eccentric behavior. At a literary reception held in her honor by some of the local society matrons, she was said to have turned to one and asked if she ate with her feet in a trough. When the astonished woman answered in the negative, Mary replied, “You look to me like a hog.”

Much was also made of Mary’s alleged insolence towards those who came to visit her, especially reporters. One young lawyer who met the author as he was passing through Butte told reporters that he was certain she was mentally unsound because of the manner in which she had criticized his loud socks.⁷

Others who met Mary MacLane at this time in her life, however, maintained that she conducted herself in “as modest, ladylike, and sensible a manner as any young lady in Butte.” *The Anaconda Standard* attempted to explain these apparent discrepancies in behavior by suggesting that “it may be that she has a stage manner which she assumes at certain times when the occasion arises.”⁸

In Butte and elsewhere various individuals were eagerly cashing in on the notoriety of Mary and her book. A whole rash of popular songs featured her now-famous Devil, and the vaudeville team of Weber and Fields did a burlesque of the book with an actor named Collier playing the Devil. In Butte the author was prevailed upon to sell the rights to the use of her name to a cigar manufacturer for \$500.00, while the local Newbro Drug Company advertised a Mary MacLane highball, “with or without ice cream, cooling, refreshing, invigorating, devilish, the up-to-date drink.”⁹

Eight young Butte women, obviously inspired by Mary’s incredible success, began to write novels of their own. But the only direct literary heir to her book to appear was a spoof entitled *The Story of Willie Complain*, written by a man named Robert T. Shores.

The Story of Mary MacLane may not have had the impact on the public imagination like Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which provoked a series of suicides. Yet its influence was felt, especially on young girls with similar longings and frustrations. For example, a Butte paper, *The Tribune Review*, reported that a young girl in Kalamazoo, Michigan, convinced that

she, like Mary, was misunderstood, had eaten a last feast of candy and cakes, and then taken arsenic: “Morbidly mad from the reading of Mary MacLane’s book in the nude, Frances Goodrich Stout put an end to the life she believed she was tired of.” She was found writhing in agony with the book clutched in her hand.¹⁰

In Chicago, Elsie Viola Larsen was another victim of “MacLaneism,” as this revolt of previously conventional young ladies had come to be called. Miss Larsen, the head of the local Mary MacLane Society, whose members were nine sixteen-year-old girls, was arrested for stealing a horse. She had committed the theft, she said, because she wanted to have the experience for a novel she was writing that was going to be even better than Mary’s.¹¹

Back in Butte, Mary MacLane herself was beginning to reap a substantial financial harvest from her book. Eighty thousand copies were sold in the first month alone, earning her \$17,000.00 in royalties. And whereas once her future had seemed so bleak, she was now swamped with offers: several theatrical managers were eager to take her on the lecture circuit; the manager of the popular New York revue, the *Floradora Sextet*, offered her \$300.00 a week to appear in the show and *The New York World* was interested in having her write feature stories for its columns.

MOST IMPORTANT of all, Mary could now afford what she had dreamed: to leave Butte. On July 5, 1902, she boarded an east-bound train, and three days later, arrived in Chicago, where she had been invited to stay with her discoverer, Lucy Monroe. The Montana press did not, however, let her go quietly. Typical of the jibes aimed at the state’s errant daughter, even after she departed, was this one, which appeared in *The Missoulian* of July 15, 1902: “Mary MacLane isn’t as literary as she pretends to be. She hasn’t visited Chicago’s great literary center—the packing house to see the products of the pen.”

A longer story about Mary’s exploits in Chicago was printed in *The Helena Independent* of July 14 under some rather amusing headlines: “Mary MacLane Mops Floors of Hostess/ Butte Girl Shows Montana Dexterity in Routing Chicago Dirt in Monroe Home/ Shocks Queen of Kitchen and Does a Good Job.” This floor-scrubbing incident showed that Mary was capable of

10. *Tribune Review*, May 17, 1902.

11. The incident was reported in the *Butte Intermountain*, Dec. 4, 1902, p. 10.

practicing at least one of the things she had preached in her book when she wrote: “Indeed, I have gained much of my strength and gracefulness of body from scrubbing the kitchen floor—to say nothing of some fine points of philosophy.”

Mary’s companion in the Monroe kitchen was their Irish cook, Bridget, whom Mary claimed was the most interesting person she had met since leaving Butte. In this and other things she said, Mary revealed that she was still very much the small town girl, overwhelmed by the big city, and even a little homesick. She declared that she preferred Butte’s sand and barrenness to any scenery she had seen on her travels, and showed no interest in sightseeing in Chicago, or even in viewing the paintings in the Monroe home. She further proclaimed her lack of concern with national politics and international affairs.

Nevertheless, Mary made quite an impression on Harriet Monroe, the sister of her hostess. Miss Monroe was a poet, and later editor of *Poetry Magazine*, which published the work of a number of important poets, including Wallace Stevens. She described Mary’s conversation as “intensely interesting,” and at times “whimsical and witty.” She said that she had never seen anyone with the analytical power that Mary possessed; the young Montanan talked about all the people she met and analyzed them minutely. Nor did Miss Monroe doubt Mary’s sincerity, as others did. She also believed that higher education would open up Mary’s eyes to the value of such things as paintings and statuary. There was talk of her enrolling at either Radcliffe or Vassar. At either school, Mary confidently announced, she would study chemistry rather than literature, because while she felt she had completely mastered the latter field, she was totally ignorant of the former.

Thus it was that ten days after her arrival in Chicago, Mary left for Buffalo, N.Y., where she visited briefly with Fanny Corbin’s sister. Then she went on to Boston, where she was reunited with Miss Corbin—her “anemone lady,” as Mary had called her in her book. Miss Corbin, who was attending summer school at Harvard, discussed with her former pupil the possibility of enrollment at Radcliffe. Yet surprisingly, Miss Corbin told reporters that she didn’t think Mary was well enough prepared for Radcliffe. At this point, Mary had not actually applied for admission, and whether she ever did or not is a moot point, for five days later, one of the Montana papers reported that Radcliffe had closed its doors in the young author’s face. Apparently taking this action as a slap on the face of the entire state,

The Missoula Fruit-Grower reacted defensively, declaring that Radcliffe's rejection of Mary "was no insult to Miss MacLane [but] rather an admission of the excessive stupidity which educated asses display upon the slightest provocation." The paper went on to say that "Miss MacLane needs no more education except that which can be secured by travel and observation."¹²

Mary herself seemed to agree with this judgment, because she never did attend Vassar, Radcliffe, or any other institution of higher learning. Furthermore, she told reporters, she didn't find the people she met in Cambridge as interesting as those in Butte: "You would understand what I mean if you had lived in Butte, where the people are so much more virile and full of imagination and where the large horizon broadens the imagination."¹³

DESPITE HER newly professed love for Butte, Mary was not ready to return. By mid-August she was in New York. While she was still in Cambridge, *The New York World* had sent one of its crack reporters, Zona Gale, to do an exclusive interview with her, and now the paper had made arrangements for Mary to do some feature writing for its Sunday magazine. Mary's first story, giving her impressions of Newport and its famous social scene, appeared on August 24, 1902. It was followed by three other features on succeeding Sundays: "Mary MacLane at Coney Island," "Mary MacLane in Wall Street," and "Mary MacLane in Little Old New York."

On the fifth Sunday *The World* invited its readers to write in what they thought about Mary: "Can she write? Is she a poet? Has she struck a new note in her impression of the 'mysterious East'?" The response was so great that four weeks after Mary's last article appeared, *The World* reported that the letters were still coming in in extraordinary numbers, and printed another batch of them.

Indeed, anything at all related to this girl from Butte, Montana, or even her family, was considered such good copy that in November of 1902 *The World* published a piece entitled "The Love Story of Mary MacLane's Sister." The story described how Mary's sister, Dorothy, had met a young newspaperman, Louis Thayer, who worked on one of the Butte papers, and two days later, had married him, although she was engaged to another man. It was followed the next

12. *Missoula Fruit-Grower*, July 25, 1902, p. 4.

13. *New York World*, July 23, 1902.

Friends and Mentors



HARRIET MONROE



BUTTE HIGH TEACHERS—1896
Fanny Corbin in center, back row

Sunday by an article by Mary, giving her views on marriage.

In her book, Mary had shocked many by proclaiming that if two people loved each other, marriage was unnecessary; now she wrote: "In the mysterious East if you are married to someone it is rather a vague sign that you are in love with someone else."

She also said that she approved of her sister's marriage, because it took place on the spur of the moment, but that she herself would never marry. Marriage was too irrevocable for her. There was divorce, of course, but then divorce was so vulgar. If only, she proposed, marriage could be tried experimentally.¹⁴

These avant-garde statements were, of course, in keeping with what the public had come to expect from Mary MacLane. Still, those who hoped for further titillations from another book by the young Montanan were to be sorely disappointed. Titled *My Friend Annabel Lee*, Mary's second effort appeared in July of 1903, exactly a year after she had left Butte. The title referred to a Japanese figurine which Mary had purchased in Boston, and named after the heroine of Edgar Allan Poe's poem. The book was dedicated to Lucy (Monroe) Gray, the manuscript reader in Chicago who had helped launch Mary's literary career: "This book and one pale lavender flower of Amaranth."

The book itself was a hodge-podge of miscellaneous reflections and utterly lacked the passionate tone of Mary's first book. She continued to analyze herself and her peculiar nature, described her impressions of Boston—where she especially liked to sit between two barrels in the corner of East Boston Wharf and watch the passing scene—and reminisced about her native Butte.

In *My Friend Annabel Lee*, Mary particularly recalled her days at Butte High School. She described some of her classmates, including one who had found solace in a flask of whiskey she brought to school, and remembered what she herself had been like in those days: "I was younger, and in those days I still looked upon life as something which would one day open wide and display wondrous and beautiful things for me."

She also called Butte High School "a very interesting place—much more interesting than I have since found the broad world. I was sixteen, and seventeen, and eighteen, and things were not brilliantly colored, and so I made much with a vivid fancy of all that came in my path."¹⁵

14. Mary MacLane, "One Marriage," *New York World*, Nov. 9, 1902, p. 5.

15. Mary MacLane, *My Friend Annabel Lee* (Herbert S. Stone, Chicago, 1903), p. 110.

While *Annabel Lee* was written in the same picturesque style as Mary's first book, there was no longer any mention of her "kind Devil," and very little profanity. *The New York World* deemed the book far less radical than *The Story of Mary MacLane*, and concluded that in the intervening two years Mary had become more "sane and conservative." *The World* also printed excerpts from the new book, as did other papers across the country, including two in Mary's hometown, *The Anaconda Standard* and *The Butte Intermountain*.

Again *The Butte Miner* refused to quote from a book by Mary MacLane, but instead leaped at the opportunity to level another blast at the east. The editor observed that "the eastern press with an appetite for the sensational that cannot be accounted for on anything approaching logical or reasonable grounds, have taken up the second production of Miss MacLane quite as enthusiastically as they did the first book that emanated from her versatile pen," and mocked "the squash-headed professors in some of our superannuated institutions of so-called learning," who had "raved" over Mary's first book.¹⁶

Regardless of what *The Miner* said, however, Mary's second publication did not do as well as the first, which went into several editions. Nor was it followed by the two additional books that Mary had told reporters when she had first arrived in Boston that she would write before she was twenty-five. Three years later, in September, 1906, *The Anaconda Standard* reported that Mary was in Boston completing a book which she said was almost too radical for publication, "being a true story of her own thoughts and feelings," but this book, if there was in fact one in manuscript, never appeared.

Although Mary occasionally made the news with some comment or other, most Montanans tended to lose track of their celebrated authoress. In a collection of satirical pieces entitled "Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray," William Davenport noted that "no one seems to know what our Mary is doing. Perhaps she is spending her mornings and eves in the Massachusetts haygardens picking milk." The collection also contained a letter from a fictitious lover urging Mary to come home.¹⁷

16. *Butte Miner*, Sept. 3, 1903, p. 4.

17. Warren G. Davenport, *Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray, Being a Collection of Editorials from the Files of the Butte X-Ray during the Years 1907-1908* (X-Ray Publishing Co., Butte, 1908).

18. Quotes are from Mary's third and final book, *I, Mary MacLane*, published by Frederick A. Stokes, New York, in 1917. Mary was always considered by her family to have been a frail child—"born with a headache," in Mrs. Chester's words.

IN 1910 MARY decided to do just that. She was twenty-seven now, and it was the first time she had been in Butte since she left eight years before. The intervening time had been spent in both Boston and New York, with parts of the summers at Cape Cod, and winters in Florida “at sun-flooded resort towns full of gaudiness and gambling and surprising winter-resort people.” During this time, too, she had made a quick ten-day trip to Europe, remembered mostly for the seasicknesses she had endured on the voyage over, and very brief glimpses of London and Paris.

Mary’s first book had opened up the doors of the literary, artistic, and theatrical world to her, and she had hobnobbed with the famous. Yet looking back on this period of her life, she wrote: “Those were mongrel, wasteful years, empty of every realness, every purpose, every vantage: They filled [me] with a bastard wisdom.” With too many companions to help her waste her time, the once-lonely woman had become, she believed, worldly in taste, weak in manner of thought, fragile in body from a mad irregularity of food and sleep, and in every attribute uncertain of [myself].”

It was in order to get her bearings and perhaps rekindle the old spark of her creativity that Mary returned to Butte. Unfortunately, her homecoming was marred by a severe attack of scarlet fever. Her constitution had never been particularly robust, and with her health further undermined by years of high-living, she was a long time recovering.¹⁸

When she had finally regained some of her strength, she wrote briefly for *The Butte Daily News*, and also travelled to Thermopolis, Wyoming, where, living up to her reputation for eccentric behavior, she refereed a prizefight.

But apart from this bit of excitement, Mary’s days in Butte assumed the uneventful cast of the years of her youth. According to her own account, she would rise around nine in the morning, breakfast alone, sit for a while on the veranda of her parent’s home looking out at the mountains surrounding Butte, and then either go for a long walk, or if the day was “too humidly hot,” return to her room to read and reflect.

After dinner with the family she would go for another long walk, returning late at night to write for a couple of hours. Then she would go downstairs to raid the refrigerator, reminding herself of “a lean foraging coyote.” Food was still a great source of comfort to her, only this time the object of her particular affection was a cold boiled potato. When she had finished

her solitary feast, it would be two or three or four in the morning, and she would read some of the Romantic poets (Keats was her favorite) before going to bed. The elaborate costumes of her years in the east were abandoned in favor of two black very plain “nun-like” dresses. Altogether, Mary claimed to lead a life of calculated loneliness and asceticism.

There were, however, stories about her to the contrary. Visiting Montana in 1913, novelist Gertrude Atherton met Mary in Butte, and years later described the meeting in her autobiography, *Adventures of a Novelist*: “When she called on me she remained for several hours, talking all the time, and with exceeding brilliance. She was very nervous, pacing the room for the most part, for she led a wild life down on ‘The Flat,’ that resort of all the wild spirits in Butte. She told me in a mixture of slang and prose of an almost classical purity of a fight she had had in a saloon with a ‘sporting woman’ and of the fine black eye she had given her. She admitted freely that she ‘drank,’ and liked rowdiness when she happened to be in the humor. And yet she read constantly, the best that was written, had been well drilled in the classics from childhood. Her criticisms of current authors were acute, unbiased, and everything she said was worth listening to.”¹⁹

Mrs. Atherton’s recollections are interesting because of the contrast they provide to Mary’s own description of her life at this time, which appears in her third book. It is possible that she did engage in a “wild life down on the Flat” in the first years after her return to Butte, but it is also quite possible that she invented some or even most of what she told Gertrude Atherton. According to another Montanan who met Mrs. Atherton about this time, she seemed on the look-out for racy stories, and sensing this, Mary might have simply obliged her by telling her what she wanted to hear.²⁰

In any event, shortly before the appearance of her third book, Mary told a reporter for *The Anaconda Standard* that “If quiet living and very hard work for a period of two years or more and of concentrated solitary thought and study during the several years previous, with every sacrifice of all other interests to it, and much self-denial make for excellence in literary art, then my book should have a degree of excellence. In fact, I know of no other way in which excellence can be achieved.”²¹

19. Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist*, p. 491.

20. Interview with Miss Frieda Fligelman of Helena.

21. *Anaconda Standard*, April 13, 1917.

MARY'S THIRD BOOK, *I, Mary MacLane* was published in April, 1917, this time by the New York House of Frederick A. Stokes.

The opening sets the tone: "It is the edge of a somber July night in this Butte-Montana. The sky is overcast. The nearer mountains are gray-melancholy. And at this point I meet Me face to face. I am Mary MacLane: of no importance to the wide bright world and dearly and damnably important to me. Face to face I look at Me with some hatred, with despair, and with great intentness."

This third volume was much like Mary's first in its agonized soul-searching. But there was a difference. Whereas in *The Story of Mary MacLane* the author had been a girl of nineteen, unhappy yet still hopeful of what life might bring her, she was now a mature woman of thirty-one, dejected because her excursion out into the world had left her bruised and generally disillusioned. She saw herself as a misfit, who belonged neither in Butte nor in Chicago or New York, and was keenly aware of her position as "the Unmarried Woman and profoundly loverless."

Mary had reached a point in life when the urge to have children was strong, and yet, she said, she felt only contempt for most men, and accused herself of "the subtle guilt of a Lesbian tendency" in her relationships with women. Occasionally, she left her tortured self-analysis to comment on external events, waxing patriotic over America's involvement in World War I, and at another point expressing concern for the children who worked in the country's factories and coal mines. But for the most part it was herself and her own misery which consumed her.

Mary complained of her lack of companionship in Butte. She was at best well-hated there, she said, but at the same time she expressed the love she had discovered she felt for her hometown, whose "mournful beauty" had "entered like thin punishing iron" into her soul.

She went on to enumerate the various things she particularly loved about Butte, and concluded with an assessment of the effect living there had had on her: "There is nothing benign, nothing enlightening—no gentleness, no pity in its barren beauty. But its hard chaste influence on the sensitive spirit is beyond any analytical power to gauge. . . . Its wonderful aridness starves human nerve-soil till the sad wide eyes of the soul grow bright—fever bright, light-bright, star-bright—from denial and unconscious prayer. . . . Because of that—and because of its long-familiar outsideness—

mournful, beautiful, mystic, lavish, madly-mixed, gray-purple—a fascination beyond plaisance or pain—I feel love for this Butte." 22

The reviews which greeted Mary's third book showed that she did have some friends in her home state. *The Anaconda Standard*, indeed, praised it, noting that "publishers have found many who tried to imitate the style of this Butte authoress and all have failed."

The Montana American, according to its masthead "an All-Butte Weekly Newspaper and Trade Journal of Leisurely Comment and Review," gave her this lengthy accolade: "Mary MacLane of Butte has written another wonderful book. I say another, for her former books were wonderful. A prophet is not without honor in his own country and doubtless Mary MacLane will get recognition in bigger cities and in far distant states, while this hamlet will give it to her grudgingly and skeptically. . . . It is exasperating to find in Butte so many who are as skeptical of Mary MacLane's ability to write interestingly and marvelously, as they are cocksure of their own ability to pass judgment on her work. Bartenders, barbers, bankers and bishops and a nondescript array of critics, mingle with their owlsh judgment, a discussion of her personality, and sundry speculation as to her age and the color of her eyes. Mary MacLane's work will live when Harold Bell Wright's unceasing litter of journalistic offspring will be forgotten and when people will be uncertain whether Gouveneur Morris was a writer or a chief executive of some western state. . . . I look and hope to see a kinder, saner appreciation of Mary MacLane's delightful writing in this community. Butte has something to be extremely proud of in the work of this daring woman who has done nothing more terrible with her pen than to tell the truth manfully and beautifully." 23

Unhappily, most Butte residents did not share this editorial enthusiasm, nor were they willing to forgive Mary for her repeated transgressions against their sense of propriety. Novelist Gertrude Atherton recalled that "whenever I mentioned her name to any of my acquaintances in Butte there was an oppressive silence. Words had long since failed them." 24

22. *I, Mary MacLane*, p. 287.

23. The hometown favorable reviews cited here are from *Anaconda Standard*, April 22, 1917, p. 8; *Montana American*, April 27, 1917.

24. Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist*, p. 492.

25. *I, Mary MacLane*, p. 251.

26. Mary MacLane, "The Movies and Me," in *Photoplay*, Jan. 1918.

“MEN WHO HAVE
MADE LOVE TO ME”



Mary MacLane, whose performance in her one and only movie evinced mixed reviews from critics, is seen here emoting in two stills from the film. These were published later in an article Mary wrote describing her experiences in writing for and starring in a motion picture. Like the reviews, her own reactions to this adventure were ambivalent.

AS FOR MARY herself, her imminent departure from Butte was suggested in her book, when she wrote of her love for New York, and elsewhere: “I want people again, those away from here who are my friends—some glowing-spirited ones who appreciate my mind and cater to me. . . . I want to be free from myself and away, loosed in the little broad big narrow world.”²⁵

When heard from again, Mary was in Chicago. She returned to the Windy City late in the summer of 1917 for the filming of a movie titled “Men Who Have Made Love to Me.” Not only had Mary written the script for this photo-drama, but she also played the heroine. The story involved six “affairs of the heart”—the first with a callow youth, then a literary man, then a baronet’s younger brother, then a bank clerk, and finally “the husband of another”—which were said to be drawn from Mary’s own experience.

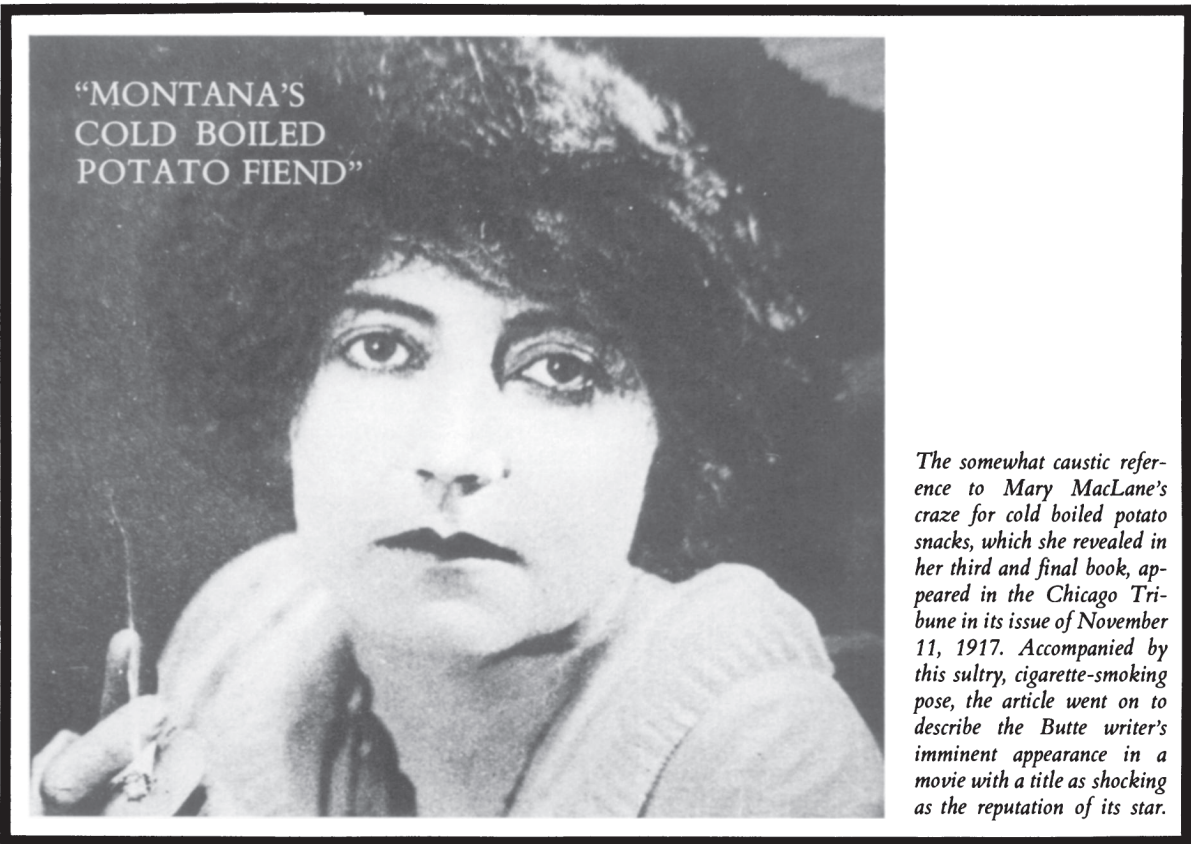
In an article entitled “The Movies and Me” which appeared in *Photoplay Magazine*, Mary explained that the movies had for several years provided a means of pleasurable escape for her: “I have paid 15¢ on several thousand afternoons in the far wilds of my native Butte

in order to translate me from the somber colors of myself to the passionate prisms of life as presented by various directors.”

She said that she believed there was more sheer beauty in movies than any other form of popular expression, but that she had never dreamed of being a movie star herself. Now that she was in the process of becoming one, however, she was finding that it wasn’t so difficult after all: “I had thought that it required a devilish lot of energy and pep and punch and stunningness to become one of those things [a film star]. But not so. It requires languor and clothes and ease and loads of astonishingly yellow make-up. And a kindofa sortofa vampish way with men.”

Nevertheless, she still considered herself to be a “lit’ry lady” rather than an actress. She was a fan of the movies, not a critic, she added, and confessed to “a secret hankering to be an extra-person, ad-libbing in a mob.”²⁶

These disclaimers notwithstanding, Mary’s director, Arthur Berthlet, was enthusiastic about her potential as an actress. He claimed that he had never seen “personality score such a triumph over unfamiliar scenes and undertakings,” and said that in appearance and mastery



of the situation Mary reminded him of Sarah Bernhardt thirty years earlier.²⁷

The critics, on the other hand, had mixed reactions to Mary's performance. In *Motion Picture World*, James McQuade observed: "Mary has no fine stage airs . . . and her stage walk shows perceptibly at times an inclination to what might be termed a waddle, yet we welcome these seeming defects because they are really part of herself." McQuade also had words of praise for the lavish sets and Mary's many exquisite gowns.²⁸

Others were less kind. Louella Parsons noted that Mary owed a great debt to the designer of her gowns for helping to give her an appearance she could never have

had off screen, and along with a number of other reviewers, felt that Mary's chief accomplishments in the movie consisted of smoking, swearing, and drinking.²⁹

In *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mae Tinee wrote that Mary was "most adept at the art of lighting matches and puffing desultorily." But otherwise, in Ms. Tinee's opinion, Mary was "expressionless, unmannerly, and uninteresting."³⁰

The most interesting aspect of the film appeared to be the subtitles, which were written by Mary, and described by one critic as "jaunty, cocktailish, and witty." The very first title, which particularly caught Louella Parsons' attention, went like this: "God has made many things less plausible than me. He has made the sharks in the ocean and people who hire children to work in their mills and mines, and poison ivy and zebras."

Regardless of the merits of Mary's performance, "Men Who Have Made Love to Me" generated controversy by its sensational nature, just as had her first book almost twenty years earlier. In Ohio the Board of Censors went so far as to ban the movie, because it was felt to be harmful to public morality. Yet while *The Story of Mary MacLane* had been followed by other writings, "Men Who Have Made Love to Me" proved to be Mary's first and last movie.³¹

27. *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1917.

28. *Motion Picture World*, Jan. 28, 1918.

29. Miss Parsons' review appeared in the *Chicago Herald*, Jan. 25, 1918.

30. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 25, 1918.

31. Although an actress named Mary MacLane is listed in the credits of three other pictures, "Which Shall It Be?" (1924), "The Night Ship," (1925), and "Sparrows" (1926), this had to be another Mary MacLane, for all of the parts were juvenile roles and Mary was by this time in her forties. As for this other Mary MacLane, it is possible that some stage mother may have named her daughter after Mary in the days of her notoriety.

32. This version appeared in the *Montana Standard*, Aug. 9, 1929.

33. Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist*, p.p. 491-2.

34. Ada Page, "Mary Goes Back to Sand and Barrenness," *Overland Monthly*, Nov., 1929, p. 368.

IT WAS NOT the last time, however, that the Butte authoress-turned-actress made headlines. In May, 1918, five months after the movie was released, Mary's disappearance from her Chicago hotel room caused some excitement. She had left behind only a satchel, two nightgowns, and a handful of letters from admirers, which the newspapers seized upon and printed in their entirety. Her friends had no idea of where she was and were concerned that she had met with an accident. They said she had seemed tired and depressed for several days before her disappearance, and there were rumors that she was in financial difficulty.

Was the incident merely a clever publicity stunt (Mary did leave her love letters behind to be found and read) or was she, in fact, in financial difficulties? The latter would seem to have been the case, for on August 1, 1919, Mary, having resurfaced in Chicago, was entertaining a friend at her home when two detectives appeared with a warrant for her arrest. She was charged with larceny by Madam Alla Ripley, the designer who had done her gowns for "Men Who Have Made Love to Me." Mary was to have either returned the gowns or paid for them, and since she had done neither, Madam Ripley had decided to take legal action.

Dressed in an embroidered Japanese kimono and a feathered hat, Mary was escorted to the Women's Detention Home, where she was forced to remain until her friends could raise bail—for although she was said to be living in "surroundings of comfort and luxury," she had only 85¢ in her purse.

This unfortunate episode was part of the downward spiral which characterized Mary MacLane's later years. Her financial plight was aggravated by her own taste for high living and fondness for gambling—whether in the elegance of a St. Augustine casino or the rougher atmosphere of a gambling house on New York's Forty Second Street. Moreover, her books were no longer selling well, and she seemed incapable of writing more.

Plagued by ill health and low in spirit, Mary died on August 1, 1929. She was forty-eight. In her last book she had written: "It's not Death I fear, nor life. I horribly fear something this side of Death but out-passing life a little: a nervousness in my Stomach—a very Muddy Street—a lonely Hotel Room." At the end it was the fear of the third thing—a lonely hotel room—that she faced. She had been dead for several days when her body was found in just such a setting: "a lonely hotel room on the fringe of Chicago's poorest quarter."

Her obituary, which appeared in *The New York Times* and other newspapers across the country, said she had been living a solitary life in a state of penury. And as if there wasn't already enough pathos in her condition when she died, it was also reported that clippings and photos from the days of her former successes had been laid out on the bed beside her for a final inspection.

This version of Mary's end was contradicted by her sister-in-law, who claimed that Mary hadn't died friendless and alone, or penniless. Instead she was said to have been steadily employed at a large Chicago advertising house, where she was in charge of copy, and had a responsible and well-paid position. However, ill health—a combination of a tubercular condition and an abdominal tumor—had caused her to take thirty days off from work, and she had written her mother that she was considering having an operation. Her last days were reportedly spent with girl friends from the advertising company, who had come to visit her.³²

For some, however, this less gloomy account of Mary MacLane's last years failed to remove the poignancy from her life story. Gertrude Atherton called her "a strange and rather tragic figure." For Mrs. Atherton the secret of Mary's "reckless deterioration" lay in the fact that she lacked a genuine creative ability: "She could only write of herself. She had the genius of personality, but none for the fiction she could have written so brilliantly had nature been kinder and given her more than that tiny spark. As it was she took refuge in 'life' as it appealed to a naturally decadent mind."³³

Writing in *The Overland Monthly* several months after Mary's death, Ada Page saw her tragedy in somewhat different terms: "To those familiar with her books, strange and possibly repellent, and yet full of a wistful and lonely seeking for something that life never yielded to her, her solitary and tragic end brings a renewed sense of question and futility."³⁴

She who had once haunted "the dry, warped cemetery where the dry, warped people of Butte bury their dead friends," was herself buried—not in the town which she had both loved and hated, and which had mostly hated her—but in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, next to her father to whose Highland Scottish heritage she had attributed her dark and tortured genius.

LESLIE A. WHEELER makes her second appearance in these columns, dealing again with a woman author with Montana connections. Her study of Gertrude Atherton, the Californian whose 1913 visit to Butte resulted in a novel called *PERCH OF THE DEVIL*, was published in our Winter issue, 1977.