

# HIS KIND OF WOMAN

Directed by John Farrow  
Produced by Robert Sparks  
Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures  
Released in 1951

Many movies are fantastic, but unbelievable. Especially with hyper-sexual/violent films it's common for characters to react in ways that defy probability. Individual scenes may have an impact, but the total package is flaccid, sometimes silly, as narrative logic is sacrificed to accommodate isolated thrills, each burst of excitement progressively less interesting than the previous as suspension of disbelief melts away. The audience doesn't much care, primarily because it's not given anything *new*.

It's a rare movie that is a true fantasy, that sweeps the viewer through improbable happenings, cloaking tall-tale chutzpah with a patina of dream-logic, telling a story that is so entertaining, so disarming in its zeal to bedazzle, that it compels the audience to believe. Attention to detail, dynamic editing, and the charisma of the actors are critical in attempting this kind of high-wire-act production.

*His Kind of Woman* is that rare cinematic gem. It is two parts film noir, one part romance; and then it morphs into a combination character-study and Kipling-esque adventure before returning to the picture's sedate beginnings, all but substituting one protagonist for another along the way. Just as in a dream, where wild juxtapositions of locale and tone make perfect sense to the sleeper, so, too, does this remarkable film sweep up the viewer with its cockeyed internal logic. And unlike so many great film noirs—*The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Big Clock* (1948)—*His Kind of Woman* is fun. This is no brooding meditation on the irredeemability of man, but a charming invitation to enjoy some laughs and thrills. The reshoots Howard Hughes superintended are obvious once one knows where to look, the millionaire playboy cross-cutting between scenes of farce and sadism, as Mark Cardigan and Dan Milner gradually reunite to trounce the dastardly Nick Ferraro.

His scheme, to reclaim his criminal empire in America by assuming the identity of a rough-and-tumble iconoclast, anticipates *Seconds* by 15 years and *Face/Off* by 46! The idea of some mad scientist performing a face transplant on a yacht borders on the ludicrous. (And isn't that what it is—"Be careful of his face," the doctor enjoins—and not mere plastic surgery on Ferraro?; otherwise there wouldn't be so much talk about the unsuitability of Milner's face if it becomes contorted in death.) But the film pulls it off by withholding details of the process and attributing its viability, by association, to the godless cruelties of Nazi science, something pretty believable after the medical experiments conducted on Holocaust victims. While the plastic-surgery scheme is never actualized (unlike the superficially similar, but vastly inferior, Bogart-Bacall vehicle *Dark Passage*), it provides an excuse for the hair-raising climax featuring a sweat-soaked Robert Mitchum fighting to keep a toxin-spiked needle out of his skin, his bulging veins involuntarily welcoming oblivion.

Now, why Milner agreed to travel to Mexico, no questions asked, is also bizarre, except that he's very brave (a character trait established in the gripping scene when he casually

challenges the goons who've broken into his house), and he's a professional gambler who, perhaps, wants revenge for being set up (the \$50,000 is the carrot, the false rumor that he's the gambler who skipped town when he lost at the track is the stick). Only by going all-in can he have a chance to destroy the organization. (This idea became a mainstay of the James Bond series.)

His compatriot is the statuesque beauty (and freewheeling singer!) Lenore Brent, played by the inimitable Jane Russell. The director, finding any excuse to array her in the most conspicuously revealing and glamorous attire imaginable, shapes her character in classic noir style. She is capricious—sometimes kind, sometimes indifferent, her true loyalties unknown. In fact, she may be responsible for keeping Dan in one place until kingpin Ferraro arrives! She's about to run out of money (her assertions of trust-fund riches are a smokescreen), and she hates herself for giving up her body to Mark, a man she doesn't really love (and who is, amusingly, more interested in stalking game than bedding Lenore). Dan's arrival makes her situation more heartrending—she's quite fond of him, in spite of herself.

As this (very friendly) love triangle develops, Tim Holt of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* drops in, providing a nice distraction as a federal cop posing as an alcoholic pilot. He carries a lot of the exposition, catching the audience up, but leaving it, still, just a step behind. Ferraro's ultimate designs on Milner are still obscured. This is one film where exposition is more than a necessary evil to justify the action. Here the exposition is a tease!

Morros Lodge is a world unto itself, a bastion of civilization on the edge of untamed wilds, a distillation of film noir in general (and the western, for that matter). Dan is pinned between Nowhere and the gutless evil of Raymond Burr's vacillating Ferrara, who lies in wait just off the coast, eager to destroy a man's life if it benefits him in the slightest, justifying his cruelties by (inaccurately) characterizing Dan as a "welcher." But this brush with animalistic brutality benefits movie-ham Mark, who, tired of fakery on film and trapped between wife and mistress, embraces the opportunity to test his mettle and learn if there's anything more to life. His corner of the film expands from comedy-of-manners to adventure-romp.

*His Kind of Woman* is a slam-bang wonder, with some of the sharpest dialogue this side of Preston Sturges. The reshoots benefit the production, pushing the material in a way sorely lacking in the Robert Mitchum-Jane Russell follow-up, *Macao* (1952). The genre-bending verisimilitude and demented brilliance dazzle and delight. The film is enormously entertaining precisely because it is winsome and unapologetically unpredictable.