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Denmark’s Forgotten Film Star: Karl Dane

by Laura Petersen Balogh

“Slim of ‘Big Parade’ Dead Amid Poverty,” “Riches to Rags,” and “Actor Who Once Made $1500 a Week Saved From Pauper’s Grave.” These were some of the headlines that appeared in American newspapers in April 1934 after the suicide of Copenhagen-born silent film star Karl Dane.

Today, the name Karl Dane is almost unknown in his native Denmark. In America, where he achieved fame and fortune, he is sadly known mostly to classic film fans and readers of Hollywood scandal books.

Karl Dane’s rise and fall is unparalleled in the history of film stars. In 1925, an unknown, he shot to stardom after appearing in King Vidor’s classic *The Big Parade* as the buddy of star John Gilbert. Just nine years later, after plummeting to the depths of poverty because of the perceived unsuitability of his voice for sound films, he shot himself in his Los Angeles apartment. To compound the tragedy, he had been reduced to operating a hot dog stand just outside the gates of the studio where only several years earlier he had achieved so much adulation. Until MGM stepped forward to arrange his funeral, it looked as if he would have to be buried in a pauper’s grave.

In reviewing the circumstances of Karl Dane’s life and death, one wonders how someone who received so much fame and made so much money, could be reduced to such despair and poverty so quickly? In researching his life, it becomes obvious that there was so much more to Karl Dane than his tragic death.

Karl was born Rasmus Karl Therkelsen Gottlieb on October 12, 1886 in a small second floor apartment at Tūresengade 23, in the parish of St Johannes, in central Copenhagen. He was the second of three sons to a glove maker, Rasmus Carl Marius Gottlieb, born in Horsens in 1860. The name Gottlieb is German, meaning “God’s love” and in fact his great-great grandfather, Johann Gottlieb Just, settled in Horsens from Stendal, then Saxony-Anhalt, in 1780, and became a butcher. Karl’s mother, Anna Cathrine Simonsen, was from Aarhus. Karl’s brother Reinald Marius was a year older than
Karl, and they were very close companions until adulthood. Karl’s father’s great passion was toy theater, (Dukketeater, or doll theater) all the rage in Victorian Denmark, and custom built his own model. This probably was created about the year 1892 in his glove makers’ workshop right outside the family’s ground floor residence at Nørrevoldgade 38 Stue in Copenhagen. According to family lore, this theater was so elaborate and professional, that people bought tickets to it. The two boys loved to take part in these shows, and this fired young Karl’s lifelong love of performing.

Despite this happy pastime, life in the Gottlieb household must have been stormy, since Karl’s mother Anna filed for a legal separation from her husband in 1903, and they were finally divorced in 1908. As the Danish law then required, the couple was counseled by a Lutheran priest, and each made a statement that still survives today in the Archives. Rasmus poignantly admitted to problems with alcohol and “money mismanagement,” and this latter issue would prove to be a major problem for Karl as well late in his own life.

Karl and his brother both attended the Nansensgade School from age six to age fourteen, when they were both apprenticed as machinists to the firm Smith, Mygind, and Hüttemeir, the makers of railroad equipment. Karl was always very proud of his ability to work with his hands, even during his heyday in Hollywood. In an April 1927 interview for Motion Picture Classic magazine, he said, “I’ll fix anything for you—from a locomotive to a typewriter. I always owned my own shop—and you gotta be a good man to do that in the old country.” When his four years of apprenticeship with the firm was completed in June 1907, Karl began his mandatory military service with the First Artillery Battalion (later known as the Coastal Artillery Regiment) responsible for the defense of Copenhagen’s land fortifications at the island fort of Trekroner (literally, “three crowns”) Battery. He earned high marks as a soldier, receiving regular promotions each year, and was discharged in October 1909. He joined up again when war broke out in August 1914, to defend neutral Denmark’s shores, and served until December 1915 as a full Corporal.
Karl was very tall, at 6'3 ½", (70.5 Danish inches) and while lanky, he was also powerful and athletic. He loved all sports, was an excellent swimmer, rode a horse, and could do just about any trick on a bicycle. It was also reported that he was one of the first pilots in Denmark, and a noted race car driver, who won a medal in a cross country auto race in Sweden. As a person, Karl was a bit of a paradox. While sometimes described as a quiet and private man, he was also friendly, down to earth, kindhearted, and a big flirt with the ladies. He also loved to play practical jokes, and was a fearless daredevil from childhood.

At the age of 23, Karl met and fell in love with an attractive young dressmaker, Carla Dagmar Hagen. They were married in September 1910 at Saint Paul Church in Copenhagen. Carla and Karl welcomed their son Ejlert Carl, into the world in 1911. A daughter, Ingeborg Helene, followed the next year. The new family lived in a small flat at Marstalsgade 51, Copenhagen, and they settled comfortably into domestic life. Karl worked as a machinist, repairing Singer sewing machines, until the outbreak of the war, when Karl re-enlisted.

Following Karl’s military discharge, prospects for finding employment were poor, so he decided to immigrate to America and send for his family later. He sailed in January 1916, on the ship Oscar II, with only $25 and no English skills at all. He settled in New York in February with his friend Charles Lindgren who had emigrated earlier, and got a job in a foundry. Karl’s draft registration card in June 1917 showed that by this time, he was working for the Robert Gair Company on Washington Street in Brooklyn, and living in a
boarding house on Clermont Avenue. Karl, like his father, was a restless soul, and wandered for awhile out west, working for a time in Lincoln, Nebraska, as a car mechanic, before returning to the East Coast again.

Karl never forgot about his happy years performing in his father’s theater, and by 1917, Karl decided to seek work as an extra and stunt man in Brooklyn and Fort Lee, New Jersey. His height, unconventional good looks, and strength got him noticed. He was also a fine and natural actor, who could play any sort of part. His first film was a Vitagraph short, but his small part ended up on the cutting room floor. Fate intervened, though, when the Warner Brothers were looking for someone to play the giant German Chancellor in their first feature, the first American propaganda film, My Four Years in Germany, and Karl fit the bill. He was so good that he reprised the role in two more films. He also made a terrific nasty but understated second villain in the serial, The Wolves of Kultur, starring motorcycle daredevil star Charles Hutchison.

As Karl was making his mark in films, he was also losing touch with his family in Copenhagen. Carla no longer wanted to join him in the United States, due to ill health, and they legally separated. A lonely Karl then fell in love with young Swede named Helen Benson. Tired of taking risks as a stunt man and suffering from his own periodic illnesses, they decided to move out west. The couple purchased land in southern California, and became poultry and fruit farmers on Kester Avenue in Van Nuys. He also proudly became an American citizen, and changed his name to Karl Dane.

The couple remained happily on the farm for the next three years. Helen became pregnant, but tragically, in August, 1923, both she and the baby girl died in childbirth. Grief-stricken and alone, Karl rushed into another marriage within months, this time to telephone operator Emma Sawyer, seven years his senior, but this was short-lived.

One day, Karl ran into Charles Hutchison, who was by then an independent producer. He convinced Karl to be a part of his current production, another serial. Meanwhile, MGM director King Vidor was trying to find the right actor to play the part of the gangly tobacco-chewing riveter Slim in The Big Parade. Robert McIntyre, the
Casting Director who had given Karl his first extra role, saw him on the screen again, and brought him to Vidor’s attention. Karl was a sensation in Vidor’s film, and became a star overnight. *The New York Times* echoed the sentiments of many critics, citing his “gorgeous characterization”, and reporting that Karl “just about runs away with the picture.” He signed an MGM contract in June 1926. At the time, though, the Gottlieb family in Denmark was totally unaware of his newfound fame—and new name. When *The Big Parade* premiered in Copenhagen at the World Cinema in January 1926, Karl’s then 13-year old daughter Ingeborg, was astonished to see the father she barely remembered, reportedly exclaiming “Why, that’s Dad!” out loud in the crowded theater. In Aarhus, his brother Reinald, now a successful electrician and taxicab company owner, also saw Karl in the film, and wrote to him in Hollywood, to which Karl responded: “Dear Big Brother! I have received your letter, and confess that I am Karl Dane!”

*Karl Dane, left, in The Big Parade*

*Courtesy Bruce Calvert*
The legendary Lillian Gish saw an early screening of the film, and personally handpicked Karl for her next projects, *La Boheme* and *The Scarlet Letter*. More assignments quickly followed, with prominent stars such as Rudolph Valentino, Marion Davies, William Haines, and Buster Keaton. He was then teamed with pint-sized actor George K Arthur in a series of successful comedies. Their first film together, the Army-themed *Rookies*, was enormously popular, and was quickly followed by many other successful features and shorts. Karl, despite his fame and fortune, never enjoyed the Hollywood social scene, as Arthur did. He was happiest in simpler pursuits, like building his own beach house in Malibu, working in his carpentry shop in his Beverly Hills backyard, or simply sharing a beer in the kitchen with a friend.

The bubble finally burst for Karl after the arrival of the sound. The primitive new sound equipment made his speech difficult for some to understand, and MGM dropped him in 1930. Although he made some funny sound shorts with Arthur at Paramount and RKO, which led to a nationwide vaudeville tour, Karl’s strong Scandinavian accent suddenly branded him as unfunny in the eyes of voice-obsessed Hollywood. His career was over by 1932.

Karl’s finances were in a shambles by this time. Like his father, he had never been wise with money, and now he was unemployed. This badly affected his confidence and he became deeply depressed. Every one of his new ventures failed miserably. Karl invested thousands into two separate mining deals in Nevada and Oregon, during a small boom set off when FDR increased the price of gold in 1933, but both investments soon went bust. Desperate, and now deep in debt, he sank all of his remaining funds into a hot dog stand situated outside the MGM gates, but this too failed when the business was shunned by his former co-workers. Karl then went to his former bosses, and begged for any job, any job, even as a humble extra or carpenter. They callously refused.

On Saturday evening, April 14, 1934, Karl was to meet a friend, Frances Leake, for a movie. When he failed to show up, Frances hurried to his apartment, and pounded on the door. She finally enlisted the aid of Mrs. White, his landlady, and together, they found Karl’s body slumped in his chair, with a revolver at his feet.
Frances fainted at the terrible sight. When she was revived, Frances saw Karl’s final note on a nearby table, next to the scrapbook he always kept, filled with his old studio contracts and rave reviews. The simple note read, “To Frances and all my friends—goodbye.”

Karl Dane’s tragic end can be seen in many lights. It is a stark reminder that fame is fleeting and times change. It also serves as a sad reminder of the terrible way people from different cultures were treated in Hollywood. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that Karl, despite the mistakes he made, and the tragedies he faced, managed to achieve so much living in his short forty-seven years. He lived his dream, but despite his fame, always remained in spirit the same simple machinist from Copenhagen. For this reason, he still intrigues 120 years after his birth—and deserves a deeper look.

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