CHARLES CASTLE'S AUTHORISED BIOGRAPH

The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

Joan Crawford

THE RAGING STAR

Joan Crawford THE RAGING STAR · CHARLES CASTLE

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY

'Joan Crawford was one of the people that made Hollywood the place that touched the imagination of the world,' says George Cukor, yet when she died on 10 May 1977 she was living the life of a recluse. Shut away in her New York apartment, she refused to answer the telephone personally and even her closest friends had to leave telephone messages on her answering service. A life that had begun in poverty and illegitimacy ended in obsessive privacy. Yet Miss Crawford's screen persona had been characterised by energy, vitality, tenacity and a ruthless determination to reach the top and to establish a real identity.

THE RAGING STAR is the official biography of Joan Crawford. Authorised by Miss Crawford in 1974 to write the book and to produce and direct a documentary on her for BBC television, Charles Castle spent three years researching into her background and life, interviewing those closest to her in Hollywood, New York and London, including Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Henry Fonda, James Stewart, the late Rosalind Russell, Van Johnson and Michael Wilding. The result is an extraordinarily revealing portrait of a woman who embodied something of her true identity in every part she played, but who was equally concerned to erase the truth about her own past. In fifty years, during which she made eighty-three Hollywood movies, Lucille LeSueur from Texas had almost entirely remodelled herself into the image she wished to project. Her face and figure had been subtly transformed by cosmetic surgery. Her name was chosen by fans in a magazine and, adopting it, Joan Crawford felt that they had adopted her.

In her life she was the personification of glamour and individual style, with the drive and unerring ambition to fight her way to the top to escape her background

(Continued on back flap)

of poverty. But she was also four-times married and the mother of four adopted children; a house-proud fanatic, obsessed with hygiene and cleanliness; and a tough business woman who in later life dedicated her energies to the Pepsi Cola empire of her late husband, Alfred Steele.

Charles Castle has taken great pains to present a truthful picture of Miss Crawford, and to balance the demands of biographical accuracy with the respect and admiration with which he views his subject. He has therefore analysed the many paradoxes surrounding her, pinpointing her strengths and limitations as an actress, and ultimately has paid tribute to her as one of the few truly great stars of the classic Hollywood era. Illustrated with hundreds of rare photographs at every stage of her career, THE RAGING STAR is the definitive book on Joan Crawford.

Charles Castle arrived in England as South African Dancing Champion, then plunged into careers as a designer and playwright. He achieved the best-seller lists for nine months with his Noël Coward biography, *Noël,* published in Britain and the United States. His biography of opera singer Richard Tauber was modelled on his award-winning BBC television documentary of the tenor's life. His television film on Noël Coward won another Monte Carlo film award, and his documentary film on the Duke and Duchess of Bedford won a Hollywood Television Festival Award. Author of six plays for BBC television and as many BBC radio plays, he has also written a book on models called *Models Girls.*

£6.95
IN UK ONLY

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY
TIMES MIRROR

Jacket design: Stephen Knowlden Colour Recreation: Bill Taylo


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

CHARLES CASTLE'S
AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY

Joan Crawford

THE RAGING STAR

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY
TIMES MIRROR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although Joan Crawford was undoubtedly a movie star of remarkable beauty and achievement and a personality of extraordinary magnitude, over the three years that it has taken me to research and write *The Raging Star* there have been innumerable contributors whose insight and knowledge have made this rather complex subject most understandable to me, and at all times endlessly fascinating; I owe to them a great debt of gratitude. Although the bibliography, filmography and index at the back of this book list the sources of research and points of reference, I want to thank personally those who have helped both in the conception and the development of *The Raging Star*. Most notable of these are Miss Radie Harris columnist for *The Hollywood Reporter* who first suggested the idea of writing this biography on Miss Crawford and approached her on my behalf, and Mr Earl Blackwell, founder of Celebrity Service, the international link between celebrities and the media, who, as an old and trusted friend of Miss Crawford, persuaded her to consider me as her authorised biographer.

I am greatly indebted to the many friends and associates of Miss Crawford who gave of their valuable time in passing on to me their knowledge and recollections of Miss Crawford; in London to Henry Fonda, James Stewart, Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Michael Wilding, the late Rosalind Russel, Bessie Love, Robert Hardy, Simon Lack, Jesse Lasky Jr, Don Parker, Alexander Walker, Robert Enders, Allan Davis, and Stanley Hall whose opinion I have always respected and valued; in New York to Van Johnson, Irene Sharaff, Earl Blackwell, Radie Harris, Dorthy Strelsin, former Pepsi-Cola executive Mitchell Cox, George Oppenheimer, Donald F. Smith, and Miss Crawford's former butler, Grant; in Hollywood, George Cukor, Natalie Schafer, Bill Frye, Jack Lawrence and Dore Freeman. I am particularly grateful to Arthur Marshall for his sound judgment and valued advice.

With many thanks to the many film companies and distributors whose movies are quoted; MGM, Warner Brothers, Columbia RKO, Republic, Universal, 20th Century-Fox and United Artists. My gratitude too, to the authors and publishers of the many books from which Miss Crawford is quoted as outlined in the bibliography, my particular thanks to Paul Rotha for allowing me to quote from his *The Film Till Now*, and to Gavin Lambert for the quotes from *The Slide Area*, and to the many newspapers and magazines throughout the world, for references and criticisms relating to Miss Crawford's films. My gratitude, too, to the film companies and individuals, namely Horst Davent, Larry Carr, John Kobal, Donald F. Smith and many others who supplied photograhs.

Finally, I should like to express my thanks to my publishers, The New English Library and my editor Martin Noble, so ably supported by Jean Maund, for their invaluable patience and encouragement, and to Cecil Smith and Stephen Knowlden whose talents have given the book the look I sought and admire so much.

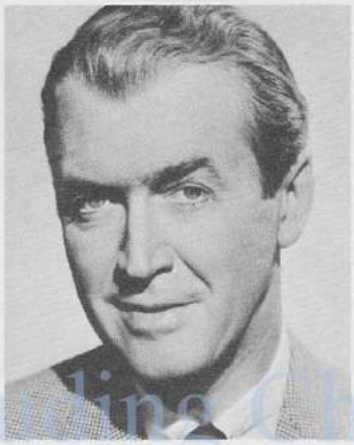
Charles Castle

"...EVERYONE IMITATED MY
FULLER MOUTH,
DARKER EYEBROWS. BUT I
WOULDN'T COPY
ANYBODY.
IF I CAN'T BE ME,
I DON'T WANT TO BE
ANYBODY.
I WAS BORN THAT WAY"

JOAN CRAWFORD

'She is a ten-year-old girl who has put on her mother's dress — and has done it convincingly.'
DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS JR

'She had a style of her own and a personal magnetism that was individual.'
SYDNEY GUILAROFF

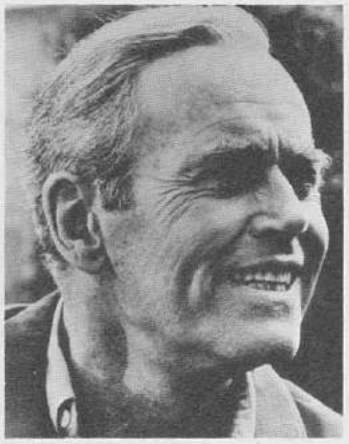


'My first impression of Joan Crawford was of glamour.'
JAMES STEWART

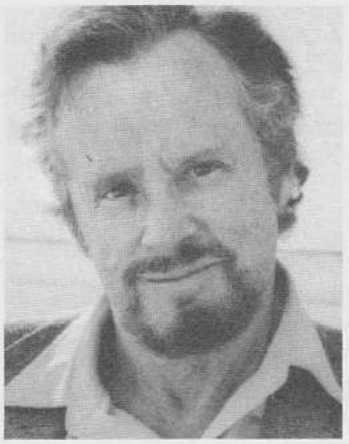
'She was so attentive to me throughout my serious illness that she would have killed me with kindness had I not recovered so miraculously.'
PATRICIA NEAL

'Joan Crawford was one of the people that made Hollywood the place that touched the imagination of the world.'
GEORGE CUKOR

'She had tremendous guts. More than anyone *I* knew.'
BESSIE LOVE



'Acting with her you never saw the wheels turning. She was very true. She was the part, the character, not an actress merely playing the person.'
HENRY FONDA



'In her late teens, you couldn't take your eyes from her, she was so arresting. She was absolutely smashing!'
JESSE LASKY JR

'Joan was more than one person. The real Joan Crawford was the one she had made herself. She *lived* the life of a star. When you walked into her house, it looked as though a star lived there.'

ROSALIND RUSSELL

'Joan was the only movie actress I knew that had no area of her life when she wasn't a film star.'

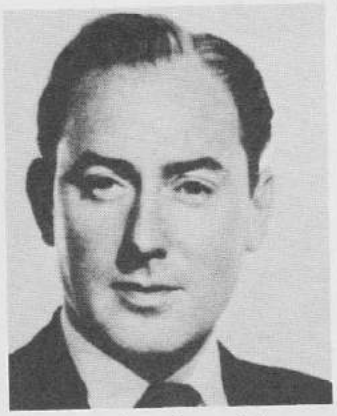
RADIE HARRIS
(Hollywood Reporter)

'Joan Crawford was one of the most thoughtful and ambitious ladies. She worked at her career. She was the most organised woman I think I've ever known.'

VAN JOHNSON

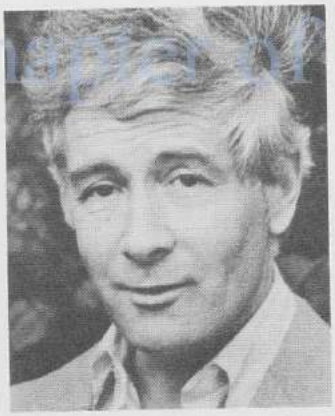
'She was unbelievably generous to her friends. I have sets of gold cuff-links, by the dozen, that I would get for Christmas or my birthday.'

EARL BLACKWELL



'She was hard-working and rightly too. I found her perfectly charming.'

MICHAEL WILDING



'My first impression of her was of the working mother who has sacrificed all for the family and the children and who still retains around her the air of having scrambled up the ladder.'

ALEXANDER WALKER
(Film critic, London Evening Standard)

'She made a point of finding out and remembering the names of every technician with whom she worked at the studio.'

GLYNIS JOHNS


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

When she died on 10 May 1977 Joan Crawford was living the life of a recluse. Shut away in her New York apartment, she refused to answer the telephone personally. Even her closest friends had to leave telephone messages on her answering service.

In fifty years, during which she made eighty-one Hollywood movies, Lucille LeSueur from Texas had almost entirely remodelled herself into the image she wished to project. Her face and figure had been subtly transformed by cosmetic surgery. Her name was chosen by fans in a magazine poll and, adopting it, Joan Crawford felt that they had adopted her.

This book sets out to discover who and what was the real Joan Crawford and reveals the real cause of her untimely death.

She was born in poverty. She was illegitimate and the identity of her father was for many years a mystery to her. As a teenager she paid for her own schooling by waiting at table and washing her school-friends' dirty dishes.

She arrived in Hollywood as a chorus dancer and soon become singled out for her exceptional vitality — in dance-halls and night-clubs, off-screen as well as on. She was a stunning beauty, a redhead with freckled face and chest, huge blue eyes, a wide expressive mouth. But she underwent a mysterious and fascinating metamorphosis from the soft, feminine, glamorous singing and dancing starlet of the twenties to the classic Crawford look: high cheekbones, a nose as finely chiselled as an Epstein — and her appeal became androgynous.

It was not just that she drank and gambled: in many ways she also thought like a man. Her statuesque frame, dominated by broad shoulders, a generous bust and slender hips, was the perfect peg for the square-shouldered, tailored fashions she made famous throughout the world, and which were created for her specially by MGM's ace designer, Adrian. Despite being only five feet four and a half inches tall, she gave an illusion of height on the screen: her diminutive hands and feet, and elegant, shapely legs moved across the screen with the maximum of economy.

Charles Castle

Crawford was the quintessence of energy and vitality. She applied her self-taught film craft with tenacity and ruthless determination in order to reach the top, first as a dancer, then as an actress. Triumphing in dramatic roles on the screen without ever performing a straight acting part on the stage, she helped to create the Hollywood of the late twenties and early thirties. But she also seemed to be able to adapt her image to the changing times, without losing the essential Crawford persona.

In the 1920s she epitomised the Jazz Age flapper, winning over a hundred cups for Charleston competitions. In the 1930s she changed radically, becoming the austere, ambitious, female — leaving an indelible mark on American culture as the archetypal career woman. In the 1940s she had a new lease of life, winning the Oscar for her brilliant performance as *Mildred Pierce*, a career woman whose rise from poverty to success mirrored her own story with remarkable and

uncanny accuracy. And in the 1950s she took her screen image to its logical conclusion in a succession of parts in which she suffered, often disastrously, the consequences of her own driving ambition.

In life she was the personification of glamour and individual style, with drive, resilience and unerring ambition: a woman prepared to claw her way to the top, to escape her own background of poverty and abuse. But she was also the four-times-married mother of four adopted children; a houseproud fanatic, obsessed with hygiene and cleanliness; a neurotic hostess who protected her furniture with plastic covers and insisted that her guests remove their shoes before crossing her whiter-than-white carpet. She was the tough business-woman who later in life dedicated much of her energies to the Pepsi-Cola empire of her late husband, Alfred Steele. But in which of her many fictional roles did she come closest to portraying her real character? Was she perhaps an amalgam of all of them — the archetypal self-driven and suffering bitch?

The Raging Star examines the facts behind the gossip and rumours that circulated Hollywood throughout the half-century of Crawford's career in movies: rumours, for instance, that she had once been a hooker who appeared in stag movies. It analyses the intricate reasons for her paradoxical and somewhat detached attitude to her lovers, friends and working colleagues, and reveals the truth about the former Queen of Hollywood who once basked in studio publicity, but who in her last years became so intensely private that she was too frightened to answer her own telephone. It pinpoints her strengths and limitations as an actress and, ultimately, pays tribute to her as one of the very few true stars of the classic Hollywood era.

Charles Castle

The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

The television documentary biography *This is Noël Coward*, which Charles Castle wrote and produced, has been seen in many countries including Britain and the USA. On publication in the United States of *Noël*, the book of the film, his mutual friends Radie Harris and Earl Blackwell both suggested that he should complete a similar film and book on the life of their long-standing friend, Joan Crawford. They spoke to Miss Crawford who telephoned him at the St Regis Hotel in New York to discuss the idea. She asked him to write to her, setting out his plans, and on receipt of his letter, replied:

JOAN CRAWFORD

November 18, 1974

Dear Charles Castle,

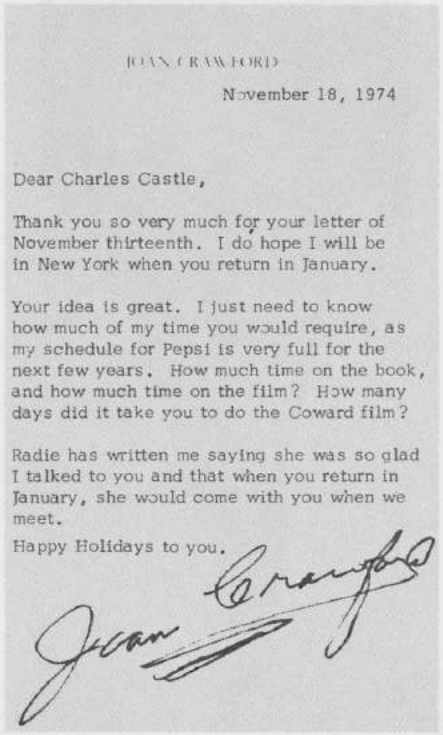
Thank you so very much for your letter of November thirteenth. I do hope I will be in New York when you return in January.

Your idea is great. I just need to know how much of my time you would require, as my schedule for Pepsi is very full for the next few years. How much time on the book, and how much time on the film? How many days did it take you to do the Coward film?

Radie has written me saying she was so glad I talked to you and that when you return in January, she would come with you when we meet.

Happy Holidays to you.

JOAN CRAWFORD


JOAN CRAWFORD

November 18, 1974

Dear Charles Castle,

Thank you so very much for your letter of November thirteenth. I do hope I will be in New York when you return in January.

Your idea is great. I just need to know how much of my time you would require, as my schedule for Pepsi is very full for the next few years. How much time on the book, and how much time on the film? How many days did it take you to do the Coward film?

Radie has written me saying she was so glad I talked to you and that when you return in January, she would come with you when we meet.

Happy Holidays to you.

Joan Crawford

1 A TALENT FOR LIVING.

Clutching the only bag she possessed, which contained all her worldly belongings including an extra pair of dancing shoes, an anxious Lucille LeSueur arrived at Los Angeles station, unsure of her reception. No doubt Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's representatives, Harry Rapf and Bob Rubin, would be there together with a string of studio personnel, press reporters and photographers to launch their new 'discovery', to whom they had offered a contract. As she looked across the crowded station, she searched for the limousine that would convey her to her luxury hotel.

But if she was already feeling insecure, she felt reduced to complete insignificance on being met by the studio publicity department's office boy, Larry Barbier, who had been detailed to welcome her. And his hopes were equally dashed, for he expected to greet a *femme fatale* draped in leopard skin, accompanied by a pair of panthers straining at the leash, à la Pola Negri. Instead, he met a frightened-looking seventeen-year-old waif dressed in an old linen-coat and cloche hat.

In his two-seater banger he drove her to the lowly Washington Hotel in Culver City where she deposited her bag, and then took her along to the nearby studio to sign her contract. She had six months in which to prove herself if she wished to stay on.

'What really hit me,' she later complained, *'was that six-month option. I had six months to prove something. If I failed to make it, they could drop me!'*

As she signed on the dotted line she vowed that nothing would prevent her from succeeding.

'If I failed to make it, they would drop me.'

Only too aware of her ignorance both of the history of Hollywood and the stars that peopled it, Lucille kept secret the fact that in her seventeen years she had seen no more than half-a-dozen movies, none of them memorable or of any interest for her since they featured neither dancers nor dancing, her only passion in life. She was unaware that any of the current box-office stars even existed, though they were reaping millions of dollars for their bosses: Ramon Novarro, Valentino, Lon Chaney, Gloria Swanson, Mae Murray, Lillian Gish, Marion Davies, Norma Shearer; 'Hollywood's Royals' Douglas Fairbanks and his wife, 'America's Sweetheart' Mary Pickford, were as unknown to her as the producers and studios who had cultivated and groomed them for stardom.

She was equally ignorant of the fact that she was as essential to the future of movies as Hollywood was to her. As the renowned film-maker, Paul Rotha, observed:

> The continued forcing of the star-system inevitably called for new faces and fresh talent. Producers were raking the world for suitable aspirants to film fame. This, in due course, led to the distressing habit of 'discovering' likely persons in countries thousands of miles from California, transporting them buoyed up by false promises, to Hollywood where, after a few months of exaggerated publicity,

they were forsaken without so much as making one film appearance, being left to find their way home as best they might.

As time went on, the haloes of existing stars in Hollywood began visibly to pale. Producers were continually forced to find new stars. Fresh names began to replace the old favourites, and stars of the calibre of Dolores del Rio, Sue Carol, Lupe Velez and Joan Crawford appeared from remote corners.

Talkies had not yet arrived, and would not be in evidence for another two years. In the meantime, Lucille had no intention of being idle. Together with Dorothy Sebastian she was introduced to movies via the stills camera of Don Gilum, and her first duties for MGM were posing for studio stills. As a dancer, she was more agile and athletic than the 'straight actresses' and was therefore photographed in 'sporty' roles — playing with a beach-ball on the sands of Santa Monica with the blue Pacific as a background, or on the sports fields of the University of Southern California, donning shorts in order to kick a football, jump over hurdles, perform physical-training exercises and show off her well-endowed bosom. She was photographed jumping out of a cracker for the Fourth of July and sliding down the chimney as Santa Claus for Christmas. She became more photographed than any other MGM artist at the time, largely because of her vitality and complete naturalness. *'I was strictly the "acting-queen of cheesecake",'* she confessed, *'as Greta Garbo had been. Peter Smith, head of the Publicity Department, had just bought an action Graflex for photographer Don Gilum and Don's action shots were favourites with newspaper editors.'*

But all the while she was looking and learning: standing in the back-

ground on the stages, watching the star players at work, studying new hairstyles and experimenting with different cosmetics in the make-up department. She visited the wardrobe department, and tried out new creations, seeking ways to accentuate her good and conceal her bad points. She was a little too fat, with a rounded face, and was gauche and self-conscious; she knew that she had to develop style, poise and a chic sense of dress in order to be noticed. Her behaviour was still brash, but during the next five years she studied etiquette and poise, learning how to cultivate a personal style — and how to be a good listener.

It would be an understatement to say that feelings of insecurity and inadequacy during her first months at MGM made Lucille lonely and miserable. She had left her family in Kansas, and had neither friends nor connections in Hollywood. But fortunately, shortly afterwards, she was taken under the wing of Paul Bern, the intellectual adviser to MGM's Irving Thalberg. Bern, later to commit suicide the morning after his marriage to Jean Harlow, became Lucille's mentor. Under his guidance and tutelage she learned about Hollywood's society and studio politics.

She also formed a platonic friendship with William Haines, the then-popular MGM star, through whom she was introduced to many influential names in the industry. Among these was Harry Rapf of MGM, at whose instigation Carey Wilson cast her as Miss MGM of 1925 in a short promotional film shown at the annual trade convention for exhibitors, containing clips from forthcoming MGM attractions. The studio's confidence in Lucille LeSueur seemed to be growing along with her own.

Her first movie appearance, played with her back to the camera, was as Norma Shearer's 'double' in reverse shots for Shearer's close-ups in *Lady of the Night*. This was one of Shearer's starring vehicles, and it was then that Lucille first felt the envy that was to haunt her until she reached star status herself, and had become the studio's top asset and one of America's highest paid women. She was also jealous of the fact that Shearer was the girl-friend of the studio's powerful leader, Irvin Thalberg. He was the first studio head to fire a powerful director — Erich Von Stroheim on *Merry-Go-Round* — as a result of

which he was both admired and feared. He had been Vice-President in charge of production of the Louis B. Mayer Company in 1923, and a year later become second Vice-President and Supervisor of production of the new Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corporation, formed in 1924 only ten months before Lucille's arrival in California.

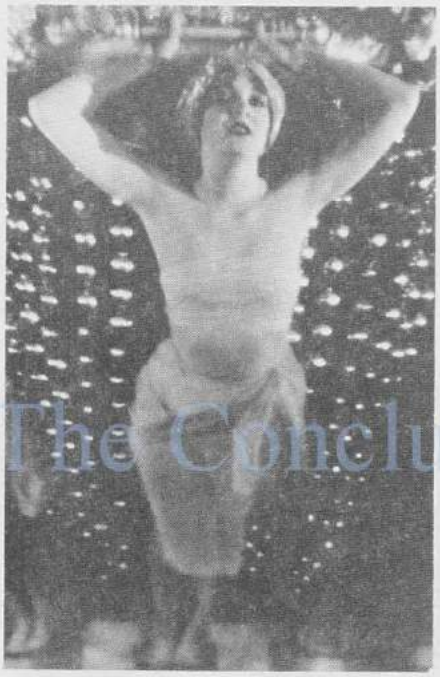
Thalberg became the boy wonder of Hollywood, and produced some of its greatest pictures. His talent for selecting people and properties has become one of Hollywood's enduring legends. Most Thalberg productions, lavish and ambitious, were hits with both critics and box-office. Of their time, and of their kind, they were unbeatable. Thalberg was an inveterate believer in the star system, and there was no star he believed in so deeply as the woman who was to become his wife. His handling of Norma Shearer's career was a triumph. She had a rare kind of beauty that caught the public's imagination. She also had poise and authority, but perhaps it was because of her quality of stillness, and her simplicity, femininity and timelessness that fans claimed that she was a great actress. A small woman possessed of immense determination, with few illusions about herself, she was a star because she had decided that that was what she wanted to be. However, she had many obstacles to overcome; her voice was not particularly pleasing and she was by no means a superlative actress, but her judgement was impeccable. She could leaf through a hundred photographs of herself in a couple of minutes and know exactly which should be passed for publication. Her knowledge of lighting was as great as the cameraman's, and she could tell from a dozen lights bearing down on her which one was likely to cast the wrong shadow.

It is clear that Lucille learned a good deal from Shearer. She quickly grasped the machinations so essential to stardom, and later — when she had become Joan Crawford — she became Shearer's arch enemy, vying with her for the crown as Queen of Hollywood and bitterly rivalling her for the few star vehicles available to actresses of their magnitude.

Years later, after Shearer had married Thalberg, she managed as a result to secure the best scripts on offer to MGM. For example, Hollywood columnist, novelist and MGM screenplay writer Adela Rogers St Johns wrote *A Free Soul* with Joan Crawford in mind, and pleaded with Thalberg to allow Crawford to play it. But Shearer liked the part — and got it.

'How can I compete with Norma,' wailed Joan Crawford in despair, *'when she sleeps with the boss?'*

Similarly, although Lucille admired Marion Davies' looks, charm and wit, she envied her private role as William Randolph Hearst's protégée, mistress and life-long companion. Hearst's intention was to make Marion Davies the greatest star in the nation, and it was estimated that he lost over seven million dollars in the attempt. He loved her with great devotion, and would certainly have married her had his wife consented to a divorce. It was his penchant for romance — as well as glory — which prompted him to try to impose Davies on the public. Only a handful of her films made money, yet she was an actress of considerable charm and a talented comedienne. W. A. Swanberg writes in his biography of Hearst: 'Her friends, then and now, are unanimous in judging her an incredibly warm and winning personality — fun-loving, joyous, a born comedienne, wildly sentimental and generous.' But although Lucille felt raging jealousy for both Shearer and Davies because of the powerful men behind them, she became as close a friend and confidante of Davies as she had become an enemy and rival of Shearer. Lucille herself yearned for a powerful mentor of the calibre of Hearst, who sponsored the films in which Marion Davies appeared for MGM. As helpful as Bern later proved to her career, he had neither the power nor the influence of



Above: Joan in the twenties

As background glamour, *Pretty Ladies*, 1925

Right: With Zazu Pitts, *Pretty Ladies*, 1925

Thalberg or Hearst. Although she did not manage to win the affections of anyone as powerful as either, she was much sought after by eligible bachelors like Jimmy Hall, Danny Dowling — and Mike Cudahy, scion of the Chicago meat-packing family.

Cudahy was the tall, dark and handsome heir to a fortune, but he had a weak character. He drank excessively and drove his flashy Packard drunkenly and dangerously high up in the Hollywood Hills, where his mother lived in grandeur in a thirty-five-roomed mansion.

Mrs Cudahy had not left the house since her husband's death twenty years before, and shuttered windows and locked doors made it seem like an eerie, impregnable mausoleum. She disapproved of the match between Michael and Lucille, especially when she read in the press about her son's dancing in night-clubs with an ingenue whose behaviour was nothing if not outlandish. She met Lucille on several occasions, but although she liked her, found her too brash and high-spirited to contemplate accepting her as a daughter-in-law.

Lucille blamed Michael's irresponsible drinking and behaviour for their break-up, but accepted some of the blame herself. *'It wasn't all Michael's fault,'* she admitted. *'I was looking for a dream prince, and I was sensitive and impulsive, two qualities that bring a wide variety of love and pain. Michael fell in love with a brash hoyden. He never understood that behind the façade was an uncertain child whose need was love.'*

Although she had suffered a severe blow to her pride, Mrs Cudahy's rejection made Lucille more resilient, adding a crusty layer to her vulnerability. She had acquired a taste for people with a background of culture and social standing, a taste which she liked and decided to cultivate.

Her first appearance in what was to be a string of silent films was in *Pretty Ladies*, a backstage story by Adela Rogers St Johns, directed by Monta Bell in 1925. Cast as 'background glamour', she and Myrna Loy, another new discovery, played chorus girls in the comic movie starring Zasu Pitts, fresh from her triumph in *Greed* and now playing a pathetic Broadway star whose husband leaves her for one of the show's beauties. It was designed as MGM's comic parody of Famous Player's Ziegfeld Follies films. This insignificant début led to another trifle called *The Only Thing* (November 1925), a fairy tale scripted by

Elinor Glyn, the famous novelist of Edwardian romances who visited Hollywood and earned $2,000 a week for lectures on romantic love. Lucille played the young Lady Catherine, a minor member of the court.

Old Clothes was released at the same time. Starring child-actor Jackie Coogan, produced by his father Jack Coogan Snr and directed by Edward Cline, it provided her with her first real acting part. Lucille was selected from 150 girls who were tested for the role. 'You're athletic, good-looking and your face is built,' the cameraman who supervised her screen test complimented her. She played Mary Riley, the destitute waif whom young Coogan and his partner Max Davidson take in as a boarder, and ended up in correct storybook style with a rich fiancé, Allan Forrest.

'The girl is a discovery of Jack Coogan, Sr,' Louella Parsons reported in her review of the film. 'She is very attractive and shows promise.'

Although it was not long before she fulfilled that promise, for the moment her mind was not entirely on her work. She was young, beautiful and full of vitality. She also danced superbly. *'I simply hadn't enough work and my vitality was at the explosion point,'* she later explained. She was dated nightly by different men from the studio, but refused to go out with anyone who could not dance as well as she could. Taken either to the Montmartre overlooking Hollywood Boulevard or to the Coconut Grove, where dancing would continue until the early hours, her exhibition dancing earned her over a hundred trophies for the Black Bottom and Charleston. *'Every time I got up on the floor and forced myself to dance,'* she recalled, *'it was like scoring a personal victory.'* She was conscious of the effect that she was having on the onlookers, many of them influential movie moguls.

It was at this time that F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was under contract to write screenplays for MGM, commented that she was, 'doubtless the best example of the flapper, the girl you see at smart night clubs, gowned to the apex of sophistication, toying iced coffee with a remote, faintly bitter expression, dancing deliciously, laughing a great deal, with wide, hurt eyes. Young things with a talent for living.'

Later, journalist and scenarist Adela Rogers St Johns also described

Above: With some of her dancing trophies

Below left: With Jackie Coogan and Allan Forrest in *Old Clothes*, 1925


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

her exuberance, after spotting her one evening dancing with Mike Cudahy at the Montmartre. 'From her too-high heels to her too-frizzy hair, she was all wrong, yet she stood out as though the light was too bright for anyone but her. Terribly young, showing off rather crudely, laughing too loudly, she had a fierce and wonderful vitality and grace. Lucille LeSueur has done a few bits at MGM. I hear she may be on her way.'

However, a growing reputation for fast living and easy virtue was to pursue her for many years to come. Dark stories still circulate in Hollywood of her appearance in privately made films of uncertain origin and questionable content. It is said that the originals were hastily bought up and destroyed by MGM when she became one of their box-office assets.

The gossip about her grew increasingly exaggerated. Some said that her eyes had been slit to make them bigger, that she had ruined her health by drastic dieting — and there were other, more damaging, tales which were harder to disprove. Rumour had it that she floated easily from one romance to the next. As one writer reported, 'She wears her escort of the evening like a corsage and passes from one love to another with equal ease.'

The press christened her 'the hotcha kid', while the studio's publicity department dubbed her 'the hey-hey girl', adding to reports of her nightly dance rituals by concocting inflated publicity stories which were to prove damaging to her current romance.

By late 1925 she had moved into a small flat on Ogden Drive, crammed with over a hundred dancing trophies. Here, on the rare occasions when she was at home alone, she played her victrola and danced about the tiny room by herself till the early hours.

'That girl is under contract to us, isn't she?' director Edmund Goulding asked his companion one night at the Coconut Grove. 'Just look at the way she does the Charleston! She's exactly what I'm looking for in *Irene*.'

He was referring to his new production *Sally, Irene and Mary*, the Broadway musical hit for which the role of Sally had already been given to Constance Bennett and Sally O'Neil had been cast for the part of Mary. Construction of the scenery had already begun and the lavish set for the full-stage Charleston number featuring Irene had been completed.

Lucille was cast as Irene. However, the publicity department was not happy with the name Lucille LeSueur, and Harry Rapf agreed to change it. The studio sponsored a contest, offering $500 for a name to match the personality of the 'energetic, ambitious and typically American girl'.

Movie Weekly ran the contest, and thousands of suggestions were proposed by its loyal readers. 'Joan Arden' was chosen, but a week later the studio discovered an extra on the lot whose *real* name was Joan Arden and so the second choice was taken — *'Crawford'*. At first the new Joan Crawford felt uneasy about her name — *'It sounds like* crawfish,' she complained — but as time went on she came to identify with it. In a sense, the change of name was to precipitate a remarkable change in her personality, on and off-screen.

There were others who were equally unhappy about her new name. A petite American leading lady of the twenties called Bessie Love who was to rise to stardom in the first musical-talkie *Broadway Melody* was also under contract to MGM until she left Hollywood in the mid-thirties to live in England:

> I remember saying to Carmel Myers at the studio at the time, [referring to Ramon Novarro's leading lady in the original *Ben Hur*] 'I'll never forgive Joan for changing herself the way she's done. You know, she used to be so pretty, so pretty and kind of *round*, and her

Cast as Irene with Henry Kolker in *Sally, Irene and Mary*, 1925

Above: Some said that her eyes had been slit to make them bigger.

Below: The Hotcha Kid

name, Lucille LeSueur sounds so lovely.' And Carmel replied, 'I would never forgive her if she *hadn't* changed herself!' But the real reason she altered her name was that the studio felt that LeSueur sounded too much like *the sewer*, the way it was pronounced, and so they changed it!

Encouraged by camerman Johnny Arnold, who told her that she had a unique look and a face with a strong bone structure, she had now gained enough confidence to face the camera in a major role. The make-up department went to work on her face, plucked her eyebrows, gave her the small cupid's-bow lips which were all the rage as popularised by Clara Bow, the *'It'* girl — and parted her hair in the centre. She went on a crash diet and, throughout the filming, stuck religiously to a régime that enabled her to reduce considerably. As Bessie Love recalled:

With plucked eyebrows and small cupid's bow lips, 1925

I remember before she changed herself, she had no waistline at all. She was *this* big in the waist [she gestured widely] and had these lovely broad shoulders so that it made her look svelte. Before she changed, she was just a good-time Charlie. She was just having a lot of fun, as we all were. Nobody was doing it for any particular reason, we just went out dancing and that was kinda fun.

Sally, Irene and Mary turned out to be a box-office hit. And for the three young actresses it created instant fame. Scripted and directed by Edmund Goulding, it was about three chorus girls in a Broadway show: Constance Bennett was Sally, the gold-digger kept by a millionaire (Henry Kolker) who also fancies Mary (played by Sally O'Neil), the girl from the slums. She rejects the primrose path to return to her poor sweetheart (William Haines). But there is no happy ending for Joan Crawford as Irene, the romantic dreamer, whose wedding to a college boy (Ray Howard) is followed by death in a car crash. Soon after this film Miss Bennett, the epitome of chic and elegance, left Hollywood for a few years to become the wife of a real millionaire. Miss O'Neil enjoyed a fair spell of stardom — and Joan Crawford went on for five decades.

The press were not exactly ecstatic about the film. 'Without any call for histrionics, Constance Bennett, Joan Crawford and Sally O'Neil in the title roles played with a polish to their performances that usually takes more years of experience to acquire than any of the three possesses,' the *New York World* reported, while the *New York Evening Graphic* added that the film was 'pretty cheap, tawdry, sentimental stuff, poorly directed. The subtle touches are put on with a shovel. But anyone who wants to see backstage life as it is sometimes lived may find some amusement in watching this tale unfold. Constance Bennett makes an alluring Sally and does the best work in the picture. Joan Crawford is a lovely Irene and Sally O'Neil is a pert youngster who is busy overacting every minute.'

Joan's performance pleased the studio however, and as her six-month contract had now come up for review she was offered an extension at $100 a week, a rise of $25 a week. As Samuel Marx, story editor at MGM, said:

After the success of *Sally, Irene and Mary* audience reaction to Joan Crawford was immediate. The post office delivered bag-loads of fan mail to her. Thalberg alertly recalled two complete films, *Old Clothes* and *The Only Thing*, because they carried the name of Lucille LeSueur among the players, and substituted 'Joan Crawford' on the cast list. 'We've got another star,' Thalberg informed Louis B. Mayer. His system of star-making was to be obedient to the wishes of the customers. 'The public makes the stars,' he told an interviewer. 'I show actors to their best advantage and watch for the

response.' He put Joan Crawford in every available role, big and small, as he was doing with Norma Shearer. They were the first two unknowns to achieve stardom at MGM through persistent exposure to movie-goers.

But her next film, *The Boob*, did nothing to advance her restless ambition. Although a comparatively youthful effort by director William Wellman who, by the time he made another MGM movie years later, was one of the best in the business, it was an innocuous piece about a farmhand rescuing a girl from abduction by bootleggers. George K. Arthur played the boob, with Crawford, Gertrude Olmstead and Charles Murray assisting the film's journey into oblivion. A critic from the *Baltimore Sun* had dismissed it as 'a piece of junk. The company had simply covered itself with water,' he continued, 'and became soaking wet, for the tale of a half-dumb boy who turned prohibition agent to convince his girlfriend he had nerve is as wishy-washy as any pail of dishwater.'

Although the gossip-writers had enjoyed her nightly revels more than the critics had praised her acting abilities, the publicists now elevated her into a much-talked-about 'discovery' when, together with a handful of other 'newcomers', they nominated her among the girls most likely to achieve stardom at the 'Baby Wampas Stars for 1926'. Along with Mary Astor, Dolores Costello, Dolores del Rio, Janet Gaynor and Fay Wray, she was groomed and gowned by the studio in order to be presented to the Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers. Thereafter she was taken up by the press, photographed dancing the Charleston in beaded dresses, posing in bathing suits on the back lot, and pictured at home with her growing collection of trophies.

But this publicity attracted more attention than she had bargained for. Her brother Hal, who had read the reports back home in Kansas City, decided to try his hand at acting as well, in the firm belief that if his sister 'can make it with her funny, freckled face', so could he. He arrived on her doorstep unexpectedly. *'I greeted Hal with mixed emotions,'* she said. *'It was wonderful to feel part of a family. On the other hand . . . I had to see that he had dinner and transportation and laundry and a job. I, who wasn't yet responsible for myself, was now responsible for him.'* Nevertheless she openly accepted her maternal responsibility as family breadwinner.

With Charles Chaplin

Family breadwinner at home

She agreed to speak to the casting department about his signing on as an extra, and reluctantly consented to let him stay in her tiny, cramped flat despite her reservations about being responsible for his meals, laundry, and getting him to and from the studio every day at a time when public transport was practically non-existent. As he barely had the fare to travel to Los Angeles from Kansas City, he could hardly provide himself with a car.

When he had settled down, he explained that their mother was being overworked at the laundry agency which she was running, and even though she appreciated the money Joan sent her weekly, their stepfather was not pulling his weight and was making their mother's life a misery.

Seizing the opportunity to reunite the family, Joan promised that immediately she won her next contract renewal, and a rise, she would look for a small house which she could furnish on an instalment plan, and their mother could move in with them. She suggested that while they were at work during the day, their mother could keep house and cook just like in the old days. The idea was not as successful as they had hoped. Joan found and furnished a suitable house on Genesee, and their mother joined them, but Joan's family began to create problems: they were distracting her from her work and generally making life intolerable.

She had dutifully obtained for Hal a job as an extra, but he started borrowing her car on the nights he went out on dates. He would invariably fail to turn up in the morning, either crashing the car or breaking down on the other side of town. As it was essential for her to be at the studio on time early each morning, she sometimes had to travel across town by bus and streetcars, arriving late and causing production costs to soar.

'He couldn't help it, my child,' her mother would plead, defending her favourite, and the breadwinner would be forced to relent. She grew to dread waking up in the morning, never knowing whether or not her car would be outside, and eventually decided to tell him he could no longer use it.

Although her mother contributed by carrying out household duties, and regularly made home-made jams and jellies, there was continued tension between mother and daughter. Joan preferred her to use the back door to the house, whilst reserving the front entrance for herself

Reserved the front entrance for herself

and her friends. Unlike so many other film stars, such as Norma Shearer and Sue Carol and, later on, Lana Turner, Elizabeth Taylor and Ann Miller, who were happy to allow their mothers to accompany them wherever they went and bask in their daughters' reflected limelight, Joan never allowed her mother to watch her filming at the studio or to mix with her socially. The only enjoyment she derived from being Joan Crawford's mother was in belonging to the movie-mothers social club, *The Mothers Club*. There, at monthly luncheons, she could compare notes with the mothers of the mighty about the fast-growing fame of her daughter. An intimate of Joan's recalls of her mother:

> Anna was a sweet, lovely lady, very simple and unsophisticated. She was a good cook, and made wonderful jams and special things that she knew Joan liked. She was made to feel very reticent and wasn't allowed to interfere in Joan's life at all. On one occasion when she *did* step over the line by giving an interview about her actress daughter on the radio, Joan scolded her unmercifully. 'Now, listen, mother,' she told her in no uncertain terms, 'this is *my* show, not yours, and please don't do that again.'

On another occasion her irresponsible behaviour led to a situation not so easily resolved. Joan received a writ from solicitors acting on behalf of their clients, the Broadway Department Store, but could not recall the purchases of $500 which the store was claiming from her. Shortly afterwards more writs arrived, first from Bullocks' store and then from the May Company: her mother had been buying clothes, hats, shoes and handbags, charging them to her accounts at the various stores, carefully concealing the fact from Joan by waylaying the postman before he could deliver the monthly statements.

Her mother, on being reproached by Joan, explained that she had not worn any new clothes for ages and had been feeling shabby in those she had brought with her from Kansas City. Joan was nevertheless faced with bills running to over a thousand dollars, but understanding her mother's logic — she wanted to look decent for Joan, and not embarrass her friends — she wrote to each store promising to pay the bills as soon as she could raise the money. She was forced to take in a friend, Shirley Dorman, as a lodger; Shirley shared her bedroom, and the weekly contribution enabled her to pay off her mother's debts in weekly instalments.

Not unnaturally, her mother cultivated friends of her own whom she invited home. But although it was important for Joan to get to bed early in order to wake early for her studio call, her mother's visitors invariably stayed late and sleep was impossible. Her irritation was increased by her brother continuing to use her car, causing her to be late for the studio every day.

'Finally, one day I'd had it,' Joan recalled. *'My nature is to accept a situation, gloss over it, endure it, take it for just so long. Then suddenly,* Finis! *I was through — I couldn't live that way.'*

She had seen a house on Roxbury Drive which she was intending to buy, leaving her mother and Hal at Genesee. But the new house, which stood in its own garden, cost $18,000 and she did not have enough for the deposit.

Then she had the idea of approaching the studio's head, Louis B. Mayer, a shrewd businessman who understood the situation and had read press reports of her brother's accidents. She asked whether he considered her future sufficiently secure to lend her enough for the deposit, and Mayer agreed to do so.

Although her confidence had been boosted by the studio's lending her money (*'After all, they wouldn't have done so if they didn't have*

faith in me,' she told herself), she felt depressed at being loaned to First National for her next picture. At that time studios did not lend *valuable* properties, but MGM were clearly set upon her earning her keep in order to repay the loan.

She was to appear in *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926) with Harry Langdon, who had been offered his first feature-length comedy after playing two-reelers and supporting roles, but reverted to his former pattern after the film failed to impress the critics. He played a hapless son whose father's business faces ruin. In order to help him, and to win the heart of a shoe-magnate's daughter who is sponsoring a walking marathon contest, he enters the cross-country hiking competition with a prize of $25,000 for the winner. The daughter Betty — played by Joan Crawford — is involved in the disasters that pursue him during the journey: in the end, he wins both the race and her hand.

'Harry Langdon does some remarkable work,' *Variety* reported. 'Aside from the expert handling of all the gags assigned him, he does several long scenes in which facial expression is the only acting. Joan Crawford is borrowed from Metro to be a nice leading lady with nothing to do.'

Liking her work in *Sally, Irene and Mary*, Edmund Goulding chose her as the female lead in his next film, *Paris*, (1926) at her parent studio. She played opposite Charles Ray in one of the many movies of that time portraying Paris as a city of sin, populated by prostitutes, dagger-wielding apaché lovers and the rich American visitors they preyed upon. 'The girl, exquisitely played by Joan Crawford,' *Photoplay* reported, 'should have married the young man-about-Paris whom Charles Ray makes amusing and believable.' But *Variety* disagreed: 'Advance information on Miss Crawford among the "picture mob" had her strangely heralded as a "comer". Undoubtedly a "looker" (when profiled she can double for Norma Shearer in a closeup), Miss Crawford will nevertheless have to show more talent than in this instance to make that billing unanimous.'

However, it was difficult for her to produce anything more than an acceptable performance under the circumstances, since she was ill during the shooting of the picture. As Bessie Love explained:

Paris, 1926, with Charles Ray

Right: *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, 1926, with Harry Langdon

She always had tremendous guts concerning her work. I remember, because we dressed next to each other. Garbo dressed on one side of me, and Joan was on the other side. I remember Joan was not at all well when she was filming *Paris* with Charles Ray. She was very ill. She had a sore throat; of course, it was a silent picture, so the voice didn't matter, and I said, 'Look, dear, when you're ill like that, you go to bed. Go home and get a doctor and stay there until you're well again.' But she was just beginning her career, and she didn't like doing that. She was afraid that somebody else would be brought in to do the part instead. But ill as she was, she went on, went on dancing and doing her adagio. She had tremendous guts. More than anyone *I* knew!

She was encouraged by Goulding. 'Draw the strength of the earth right into you,' he commanded in one scene, when he made her take off her shoes. 'The strength is there, use it.' She absorbed all the advice she was given, adding the strength and discipline she was being taught to her growing acting technique and film craft.

Setting a pattern for her screen future, Joan Crawford suffered for love in *The Taxi Dancer* (1927). Although made in a hurry by little-known director Harry Millarde from an obscure play, the film proved quite successful. She played a ten-cents-a-dance girl in love with a gigolo, whom she tries to save from a murder rap by offering herself to a millionaire. This was followed by *Winners of the Wilderness* (1927) with Tim McCoy, her first — and she hoped her last — Western, shot economically on the same location trip as *War Paint* in which Pauline Starke appeared with McCoy. In her next film, *The Understanding Heart*, Joan was enamoured of Francis X Bushman Jr.

For the first time she was becoming aware of the difference between standing in front of a camera and *acting* in front of it. Under the tutelage of Lon Chaney, whose concentration was intense and whose emotive acting was agonising for her to contemplate, she found herself absorbed in his craft. In *The Unknown* (1927), an improbable tale, Chaney played a fake armless wonder in a sideshow, infatuated with Joan Crawford who could not bear the touch of a man's hand. When he goes to the extent of genuinely having his arms amputated, Crawford falls in love with an acrobat. Her aversion mysteriously vanishes overnight!

Winners of the Wilderness, 1927
Left: *Unknown*, 1927, with Lon Chaney

Twelve Miles Out, 1927, with John Gilbert

By the end of 1927, Crawford had sufficiently proved herself to be earmarked for stardom by Metro. 'She looks like a leader during the coming year,' *Variety* predicted, 'and is being pushed towards stardom.' As part of her career guide she was cast opposite yet another powerful leading man, John Gilbert, in her next movie *Twelve Miles Out*. In William Anthony McGuire's stage melodrama about bootleggers versus Prohibition agents, filmed by Jack Conway, the subject and the star made a profitable crowd-magnet. But Gilbert's much publicised love affair with Garbo was dwindling and his preoccupation caused him to lack concentration on both his role and the picture in general, resulting in an indifferent exposure. However, it did Crawford no harm to be coupled with the screen idol: elegantly and sveltely dressed, she began to emerge as a stunningly attractive young woman, shedding her fleshy adolescent brashness. Eileen Percy and Dorothy Sebastian had featured roles, but it was Crawford who won praise from the *New York Review* who commented that she 'is lovely as Jane, and though her part affords her less variety, she makes a lot out of it and scores a pronounced success.'

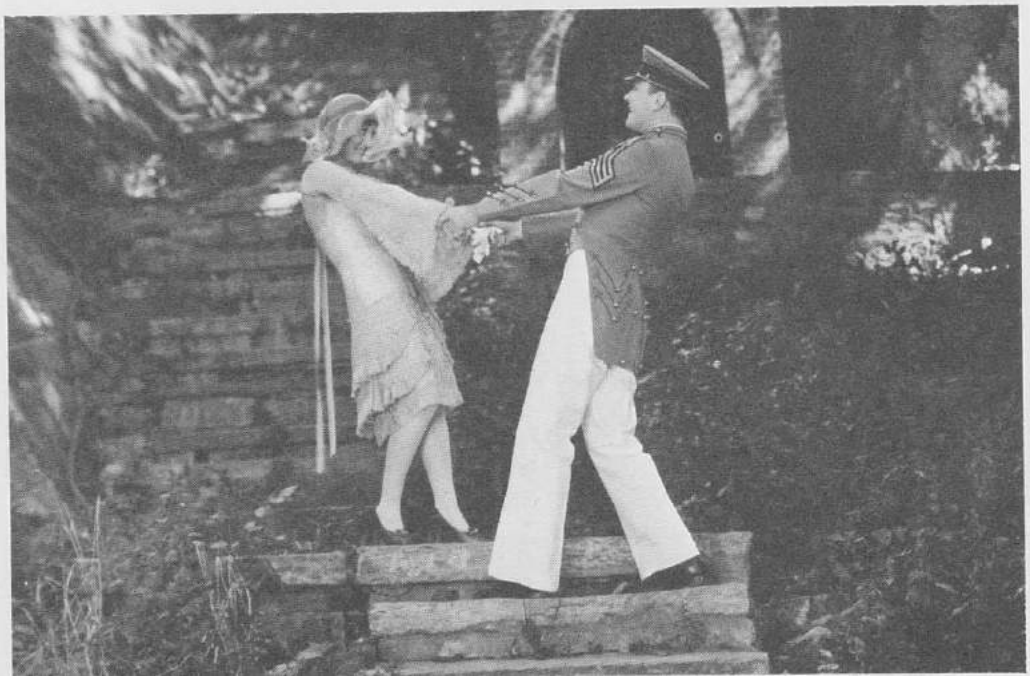
'From Lon Chaney I learned concentration,' Joan Crawford said, *'and from John Gilbert, I learned to keep my vitality undiluted on the screen, never to let down for a moment.'*

She played William Haines' girl-friend in her next two movies, and struck up a close platonic friendship with him that was to last throughout their lives. Haines, who had risen fast since *Sally, Irene and Mary*, played in *Spring Fever* (1927) a shipping clerk who bluffs his way into an exclusive country club and romances an heiress (Crawford); but this film, as well as the following, *West Point* (1928), was a low-budget potboiler of the sort that Metro was then churning out week after week. In *West Point*, an Edward Sedgwick production set in the US Military Academy, Haines portrayed yet another arrogant know-it-all who underneath is really a good guy; he is taught team spirit by Crawford and Sergeant Ralph Emerson in time to score the winning touchdown against the Navy.

'Looks like a leader', 1927

William Haines' movie career was, however, short-lived: when Louis B. Mayer found out that the actor was homosexual he was fired. Haines turned to interior decorating and became one of the most sought-after designers, working on the homes of stars such as Claudette Colbert and Joan Crawford herself.

Encouraged by the success of the songless *The Merry Widow* and *The Student Prince*, MGM bought the hit musical *Rose Marie* (1928) and filmed it as a silent. Crawford was assigned to the title role to



West Point, 1928, with William Haines

further her grooming for stardom, but without the music it was just another Northwest Mountie melodrama. Joan had to alternate between sugary coyness and feline sensuality in a role that was ill-suited to her straight, modern style.

Despite the pressures of appearing in half a dozen movies in 1927, her private night-life still raced along at a remarkable rate. *'Maybe I did play harder than anyone else,'* she admitted, *'but I worked harder too. Perhaps I had such an inferiority complex because I was trying to compensate for all I lacked in education, poise and background.'* She still used slang, speaking in an almost unintelligible mid-Western drawl. Fortunately this did not hinder her professionally since her roles up to this time were all in silent films.

She dressed in outlandishly bad taste, and had as yet no sense of style or sophistication, but she was spurred on by an insatiable desire to better herself, realising that by changing her appearance and lifestyle she could render herself acceptable to a society from which she felt alien and unwelcome, and that great success achieved by determination and ruthless ambition could be, and was becoming, her talisman. *'I wanted something out of life, and this was the only way I knew to acquire it,'* she candidly confessed to her intimates. *'From the very first, it was important to me to become famous as a movie star, to show the people back home in Kansas City what I really was.'*

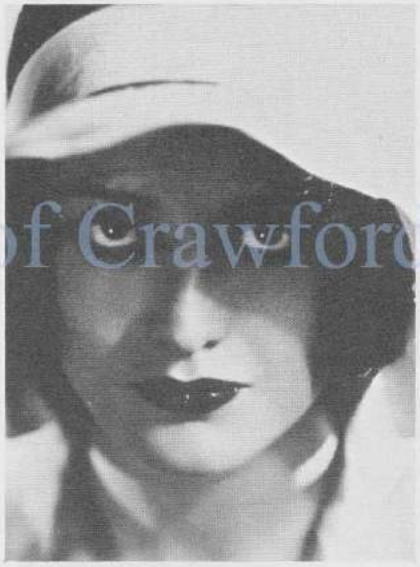
Her relationship with Cudahy had ended without rancour and her attentions now turned to an attractive young actor. They fell in love and married within eighteen months of meeting, and though his parents' social standing caused them to disapprove of the match, thereby offering the first obstacle to a happily married life, her new beau was to provide her with the background and social position of which she had always dreamed. He was intelligent, witty and good-looking. Through his world-famous father, doors opened that Joan had not imagined to exist.

Their romance was to become one of the most talked-about and envied relationships of the late twenties and early thirties, on a par with the Garbo-Gilbert affair, and she was aware of the radical change he was bringing to her life and career.

Nevertheless, as her new boy-friend, Douglas Fairbanks Jr — the crown prince of Hollywood — entered her life, she reflected on the reasons for her lack of education, poise and background; memories of her first seventeen years came surging back, as they were to haunt her throughout the rest of her life.

Below: Memories came surging back

Below left: *Rosemarie*, 1925, with James Murray and Iron Eyes Cody playing the Indian



2

THE MAN IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Joan Crawford's most vivid childhood recollection was of herself and her twelve-year-old brother Hal being sent away from home when she was only seven. The train on which they had been despatched by their father sped through New Mexico across the Arizona border, for the two lonely travellers were on their way to stay with their grandmother on her farm near Phoenix. The girl was unprepared for the journey from Lawton, Oklahoma, but there was trouble at home, and as the police were involved, her parents decided to shield them from involvement in a case resulting from their father conspiring to defraud.

Little Billie Cassin, as she was then known, was aware that something was wrong, since she'd heard her parents quarrelling behind closed doors, but she was too young to understand the gravity of the situation, or why she was being sent away from home.

As she sat gloomily staring out at the countryside rushing past, thoughts of the father she idolised came crowding in on her — of the fun they'd had and the games he'd played with her. She looked across the compartment at her brother. She didn't mind him being so special to their mother, since she was father's favourite, but as the train sped further and further away from him she felt that the bottom was falling out of her world.

As she had leaned out of the train window waving goodbye to him at the station, she watched the solitary figure of the stocky man on the platform diminish. Soon she could barely see him through the crowd and her tear-filled eyes.

Joan with her brother, Hal

'Cry-baby,' her brother chided as they settled down in their seats after the train had gathered speed. She looked over at him and decided to ignore his childish remarks.

Soon it was time for lunch, and they spread out sandwiches their mother had prepared for the journey, but Hal became restless as the train bore monotonously on and, to while away the time, he began to tease her. She ignored him at first, but he persisted and, annoyed at the constant niggling, Billie finally snapped, 'You wait till we get home, Hal Cassin. I'm gonna tell my Daddy on you.'

He grinned at her. A spoiled brat who had always had the last word, he now showed a cruel streak as well when, unexpectedly, he retorted that he wasn't even her father. At first she thought it was part of his teasing, but when he repeated the statement, she knew neither what to say nor think. The shock froze her tongue, numbed her thoughts. As if mesmerised, she stared at him. Intent on providing evidence in support of his claim, he dragged his suitcase from under his seat and she looked on in stunned silence as he produced a photograph which he handed her.

He pointed out the three people in the photograph taken some time before: there was his mother; and there was Hal himself as a child of four — she, Billie, wasn't yet born — and the third person, the tall man with large dark eyes and high cheek-bones that was their father. Her *real* father.

Billie glared at the photograph. She didn't recognise the man in it. Her father? Then who was Henry Cassin — the man she had been

brought up to believe *was* her father, the short man with black hair and small brown eyes who kept a store of scenery and costumes for his travelling Vaudeville show in the barn at home?

Hal shrugged, casually dropping the photograph back into the case, and suggested that Billie ask their grandmother when they reached Phoenix; then he concentrated on the comic books he had brought along.

Billie was upset and confused. Thoughts and memories flashed through her mind — happy memories of her 'father's' Vaudeville show that played the local towns. She recalled the day when, backstage, she had got her first glimpse of the theatre and her first smell of grease-paint. Slipping into the visiting ballerina's dressing room, she had sat at the mirror, dabbing stage make-up onto her face. It was there that she had become stage-struck; entranced, she used to watch the dancers from the wings, copying their steps and movements from behind the curtains and dreaming of her own future as a dancer. She saw herself dancing about the empty stage when there was no-one else around, whirling and twirling, her arms in the air, her feet barely touching the ground as she danced the day away.

Was all this to be taken from her? Which was her real father, she wondered — the man in the photograph, or the man at home with her mother? If Hal was right, who was the man she had been brought up to believe was her father? Was her mother actually *married* to Henry Cassin? Or were they only living together as husband and wife? Her large eyes filled with hurt and confusion.

Billie stared out of the window, oblivious of the passing view. Hal had spoiled everything for her. She knew that as the first-born, he was his mother's pet. She had been blamed every time he stepped out of line, and as a consequence had acquired a rebellious nature. She had even learned to suffer in silence the caning of her legs which her mother administered whenever Hal falsely accused her. On one occasion, when Hal had rushed through the nasturtiums to retrieve a ball, crushing them, her mother had immediately assumed that she was the culprit and despite her protests, she was punished.

She was a tomboy; her mother disapproved of her unladylike jumping, skipping and leaping about the house, but she just couldn't stand still. Her mother was particularly irritated at her dancing about the back yard and front garden, but she couldn't stop herself. She seemed to have quicksilver in her bones, never walking but running, jumping about, scaling trees and sliding down again. She was happy and carefree, but had only enjoyed true compassion from her mother when, at the age of six, she stepped onto a broken bottle whilst dancing about the front garden, gashing open her foot.

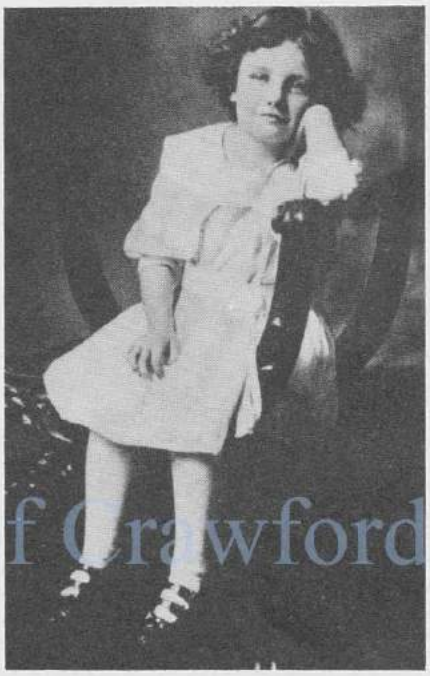
The cut was badly treated, and every time she danced after the accident the wound burst open again. She was forced to remain immobile for the next eighteen months, unable to tread on the damaged foot. Since she couldn't walk her mother, although small herself, carried her about during the day, and this was the closest she felt she would ever be to her.

But her joy came at night, when her adored *father* carried her about. She loved nestling in his lap as he sat reading his evening newspaper: she felt warm and secure; she didn't mind not dancing, so long as she was close to him.

One day that security was threatened forever. Shortly after recovering from her accident and overwhelmed at being able to move about freely again, she had slipped down into the cellar. She knew that it was out of bounds — it was dark, and dangerous because she might fall down the steps, being too tiny to reach the light switch. The cellar was her private hideout where nobody could find her, and here she could dance to her heart's content without being discovered.

Her mother had warned her to keep out, for the cellar contained

Joan as a child



Joan aged nine with her mother, Anna

shelves of her preserved pickles and fruits; apricots and peaches. 'I don't want you dancing about those shelves. You mind my preserves.'

Down she went, silently shutting the door behind her. She reached the foot of the stairs, and behind one of the empty shelves spotted a narrow tunnel leading beneath the house. She hadn't noticed it before; perhaps she had always been too busy dancing. Cautiously she crawled along the darkened hole and, a little further on, found some dirty canvas sacks. She tried to lift one of them up but it was too heavy, so she began to haul it out into the light coming from the high-up back-yard window. Dragging it behind her as she crawled out, she suddenly lost her grip and sprawled headlong. The sack spilled open, spewing its contents across the floor.

Hundreds of bright, shiny objects rolled into the corners of the cellar, and her eyes filled with delight. 'Gold coins!' she gasped. She scooped up as many as she could and rushed excitedly upstairs to look for her mother. 'Look what I've found!' she exclaimed, opening her fists. For once, instead of scolding her for going down to the forbidden cellar, her mother raced ahead to see the hidden treasure.

Billie watched her mother drag the remaining bags of coins out of the tunnel. She turned to the child, but said nothing. Her mother thought — and knew — the worst: the money had been stolen.

That evening, after Billie's father had returned from work, the family meal was eaten in silence. The children were sent to bed early, but Billie was unable to sleep on the porch, where she spent the hot summer nights, because of the sound of raised voices coming out through the open window.

Her father had explained that his partner in a new insurance company venture had stolen the gold, and that he had hidden it in their cellar for fear of the fortune being discovered at their office. But his wife, now practically hysterical, demanded that he go straight to the police the next morning and hand over the stolen property. Did he realise that he could be charged with theft? Or accused of receiving stolen property, if they found it in the house? Had he given any thought to her? Or to the two children?

The police were called in the following day, and the children were hastily sent off to their grandmother's farm near Phoenix in order to protect them from the proceedings.

Billie was restless at grandmother Johnson's, confused and upset. Her chance discovery of the hidden treasure had led to brother Hal's bitter revelation on the train, and his outburst had planted doubts about her parentage into her mind. She now turned to her grandmother for comfort.

Kindly, grandmother Johnson advised her not to be angry with Hal, who had only told her because of his own disappointment when he heard of Daddy Cassin's involvement with the stolen money. He had wanted her to know that such a man wasn't really her father, who was a better man than that. She told her that the man in the photograph was her real father, named Thomas LeSueur, and that he came from San Antonio in Texas where she had been born on 23 March. It is unrecorded, however, whether the year was 1904 or 1908. Joan was later, not unnaturally, to choose 1908. She had been christened Lucille Fay LeSueur; her father was of French descent, and her Irish-bred mother had left him shortly before she was born. There is no record of a marriage between the two ever having taken place. Earlier, her mother had lost a child called Daisy, and that was when she began spoiling Hal, who was all she had.

Billie learned that after her parents' separation her mother had moved with her and Hal to the small town of Lawton in Oklahoma, where she had set up home with Henry Cassin. It was there that Lucille was renamed Billie, and although her mother and Cassin never married either, the children were given Cassin's surname for the sake of respectability.

Joan with a friend on the beach

Years later, Joan Crawford met her real father. Stories had appeared in newspapers and magazines about their never having met, and these encouraged a sizeable mailbag of letters and photographs from men claiming to be her lost parent, among which was a photograph similar to the one her brother had shown her on the train. Her mother verified his identity, and she began corresponding with and supporting her father.

During the filming of *Chained*, in which she starred in 1934 with Clark Gable, her father appeared on the set one day at her invitation. She walked across to him, suddenly unsure of herself. How should she greet him? Shake his hand — or embrace him like a daughter?

As she reached him, he took her hand and gallantly kissed it in European style. He looked up at her and smiled, 'You're everything I thought and hoped you'd be.' But in spite of the sincerity of her father's gesture, she felt him to be a stranger. She was now twenty-six, they had never met before and their brief meeting was stilted and unemotional. He felt awkward on a film set, as uncomfortable as she was at the strange meeting. Perhaps if their first encounter had occurred in a more private place it would have been different, but here in a film studio he was out of his depth, and he fled. She never saw him again, but they continued to correspond.

Having learned the truth, Billie was confused about Daddy Cassin. But when she returned home to Lawton, no more was said about the stolen money and no reference was made to her parentage. Her mother had decided to move again, and the family packed to leave Lawton for good. The publicity and local gossip over the stolen money was too much for her: it was a small town, she was proud, and even though Daddy Cassin was cleared of any complicity in the incident, her mother knew she could never face the neighbours and tradesmen again.

Billie glanced over her shoulder for one last look at their house, so similar to all the others in the street with its couch swing on the porch where she had slept on hot summer nights. It had been the only home she had known and she knew she would miss it, but she could not know just how much.

The Cassins decided that running a small hotel might prove a lucrative venture and that year, 1915, they found a shabby little hotel in the neighbouring state of Kansas, which they rented and managed to run at a loss. Quarrel after quarrel kept Billie awake at night, only too aware of her parents' dismal financial position. She realised that Daddy Cassin was suffering for the shame he had brought on the family: humiliated and unable to make a success of their new life in Kansas City, he felt he could no longer support a woman and another man's two children in circumstances which could never improve. The nightly bickering only hastened his decision: he suddenly disappeared from their lives, never to be seen again, leaving the family destitute.

Still in her thirties, with two broken 'marriages' behind her and two young children to feed and clothe, Billie's mother had no alternative but to fend for the three of them. Without training of any kind, she set out to find work.

Their new home was a small laundry shop opposite the dingy hotel. The accommodation at the back of the laundry consisted of a room which served as the family's combined bathroom, kitchen, sleeping and living quarters, and it was here that Billie helped to wash and iron the laundry they had taken in during her school holidays while her mother waited on customers. The laundry tub doubled for the bath, in which she was kept spotlessly clean, and she learned to iron her mother's and brother Hal's laundry as well as shirts, for which they were paid twenty-nine cents apiece.

But poverty continued to pursue them, and her mother could not afford to carry on sending her to St Agnes' Academy, the Catholic School which Henry Cassin had chosen (though the family themselves were not Catholics). The Sisters were sympathetic, however, and agreed to keep Billie on provided she 'sang for her supper'. She was relegated to waiting at table for her school friends, washing their dishes and making their beds in return for her lessons.

She returned home in tears, complaining bitterly that girls who used to be her friends now treated her like dirt because she brought their food and washed their dishes. She felt demeaned and humiliated. She hated it there, and would never go back.

For once her mother was sympathetic and found another boarding school which promised better conditions and curriculum, but money

was still short and once again Billie had to work in return for her tuition and board.

However, her duties at Rockingham were no different from those at St Agnes', except that here she had even more to do — coping with fourteen rooms, cooking, making beds and washing dishes for thirty other pupils. She was, moreover, dominated and ill-treated by the headmaster's overpowering wife who took an instant dislike to her and made her four-year stay at Rockingham unbearable.

When she went home on school holiday after her first term, she again cried, this time complaining that she was being beaten by the headmaster's wife. She showed her mother marks on her body — bruises on her thighs which were evidence of the cruelty that had been administered — but this time she received little sympathy. Her mother said there was nothing she could do, that they could not afford to pick and choose and she would have to put up with it for a little longer.

Billie ran away from school regularly, but each time she returned tired and starving to suffer further beatings from the headmaster's wife. She realised that her education was patchy since the volume of domestic work she had to carry out each day left her with little time to attend classes. She seldom saw the inside of her classroom, but since the headmaster's wife could hardly admit that Billie had not been given adequate tuition, she forged her high-school certificate after obtaining safe passes for her in reading, writing and arithmetic.

However, while at Rockingham she did grab the opportunity to pursue her one great passion, dancing. Her first boy-friend, Ray Sterling, was equally lightfooted on the dance floor, and took her to her first big dance at the old Kansas City College after she had won a cup at a fraternity dance at the Jack O'Lantern café.

If schooling was no help to her, home life was no comfort either. Her mother had taken up with another man for a third time — a Mr Hough. Neither Billie nor her brother seemed able to communicate with him, and felt that he alienated their mother's affections. As a result of being away at boarding school for such lengthy periods Billie had lost contact with her mother and Hal, and as Hal was now dating local girls he had little time for his young sister.

Billie's new 'stepfather', however, wanted to communicate a good deal to her — and words were not needed to express his intentions. She was an appealing, attractive girl, well-developed for her age, and a decided temptation to a man like Hough. She finally escaped from his attempts to seduce her by packing her bags and running off to continue her schooling in Columbia, Missouri. Her mother agreed that Stephens College would keep her out of harm's way, and provide her with a chance to develop through her teens, but her stay there was short-lived. She was ill-equipped for college life since her High School education was practically non-existent, and it was arranged that she should continue to work as 'waitress' at Stephens in return for her education.

As she served meals to her fellow students, she felt more conscious than ever of her background and the fact that she did not fit in with the girls from cultured families. A little older now, more sensitive, and not tough enough to cope with their condescending attitude, she was continually hurt at being snubbed, and her insufficient education made her feel more inadequate than ever.

'They don't like me,' she told Ray Sterling one night after they had slipped away from the campus to drive along the river in his beat-up jalopy. They regularly stayed out dancing till after curfew, and he would help her creep back into college through an open window in the early hours. But on this occasion she was too upset for entertainment or dancing, and sat in his car looking across the old Missouri.

Embittered by her treatment at college, she appealed to Ray for his sympathy. While she accepted the fact that, compared with the others, she was brash, she knew she could hardly be otherwise. Her

breeding, schooling and even her clothing were inadequate, and she was desperately out of her depth.

Ray tried to reassure her that she had as much right to be there as the others and that she would overcome her feelings of insecurity as she grew older. He explained that she was justifiably over-sensitive about her background, the beatings, the snubbings and her 'stepfather's' advances, but implored her to develop a more positive approach to life. She had so much in her favour: looks, vitality, a natural, likeable personality, and moreover, a God-given gift for dancing.

'You have the tenacity to do anything you want in life.'

She smiled at him, realising that Stephens College at least provided her with the opportunity to see him — and to go dancing, which was becoming her only form of escape from a harsh world.

Through Ray's continued belief in her, she began to overcome the chip on her shoulder, but realising that her educational shortcomings would be discovered once it was time for exams, she ran away from Stephens College — this time for good — before she could be found out. With her she took a sound piece of advice from the college president, whom she called 'Daddy' Wood. He was a father-figure to her as, in later years, were Louis B. Mayer, Paul Bern and Carey Wilson who guided her career. 'When you find you can do one thing,' Wood counselled her, 'stop doing it and do another.' This perhaps explains her continual success later on, projecting one public image of herself after another.

Her formal schooling ended when she was sixteen, but shortly afterwards one of the essentials for making a go of life presented itself to her: luck.

A new revue was being planned with Katherine Emerine in the lead. Sixteen girls were needed for the chorus, and realising that she had nothing to lose by applying, Billie went along on the offchance for an audition at the Baltimore Hotel — and landed a part.

The revue went on the road, but folded in Springfield a week later; and to appease the girls, Katherine Emerine's parting words were: 'Any time you're passing my way in Chicago, look me up; I know a producer called Ernie Young who's always looking for girls. He'll get you a job.'

Billie had experienced her first taste of show-business and welcomed the escape it offered. But before setting out on the road to success she returned to her mother in Kansas City, and in order to pay her way at home took a job in Kline's Department Store, serving behind the counter of the ladies' dress department for twelve dollars a week.

After tasting freedom in Missouri, she found living at home very restricting. Gone was the independence which she and Ray had grabbed at Stephens College, dancing till all hours. One night she stayed out until two in the morning, and on her return faced an irate mother who reproachfully reminded her that she was supposed to be home by midnight. Billie resented the intrusion into her activities and petulantly said so. Besides, she said, there was no harm in dancing and enjoying herself. But, suspecting her daughter's motives, her mother insinuated that she could not have been dancing until two in the morning as every respectable place in Kansas City was closed by eleven. She seemed more concerned about their neighbours' reaction to her daughter staying out late, than her own. Billie, however, didn't care what the neighbours thought.

'Well, I do, Billie. We lead good, clean lives here and I don't want talk going around.'

Billie now refused to be questioned any longer, snapping that it was none of her mother's business. Taken aback at her rudeness, her mother slapped her. The warm sting on her face seemed to burn through her. Stunned at this sudden violence, she vowed under her breath that her mother would never lift a hand to her again, and went to her room slamming the door behind her. The following morning

she packed her bag, and left without saying goodbye. On the way to the station she called in to see Ray, who looked up the trains to Chicago and drove her to the station.

He begged her to wait until he finished college so that they could leave together — he loved her and wanted her to marry him. But her mind was made up, and she refused his offer, feeling that he mistook sympathy and pity for love. He had convinced her that she had a future and now she wanted to try her luck. She explained about Miss Emerine's offer, and her burning desire for a stage career. She was going to be a star. To prove to her mother, the neighbours and everyone else, albeit it out of defiance, that she could make *something* of her life; that she could be *somebody* one day; someone people would admire and respect; someone they couldn't kick around any more.

The train pulled in and he smiled at her. 'You've got the guts to make anything of your life you want,' he said as it continued on its journey to Chicago.

On the train she struck up a conversation with an elderly passenger who asked her name. She was seized with panic. Her name? She suddenly realised that she was only sixteen — that she was under age, and had run away from home. What if her mother traced her and got the police to send her back to Kansas City?

'It's — it's Lucille,' she said hastily, 'Lucille LeSueur!' She wasn't telling a lie, she assured herself: her real name *was* Lucille LeSueur. That was the name with which she was born, and she liked the sound of it as well. She could see it written in theatre programmes; on billboards; in *headlines! 'Starring* LUCILLE LESUEUR.'

Her daydreaming was abruptly brought to a halt as the train pulled into Chicago, where she agreed to share a taxi with the elderly gentleman, who carried her bag. The vehicle drove off and she anxiously kept an eye on the meter; as they pulled up outside Miss Emerine's it read 'Five dollars'. Five dollars! Her half share would cost her more than half the money she had in the world — she would be left with one-and-a-half dollars — practically nothing. Jumping out of the taxi, she grabbed her bag, and as she slammed the door hastily told the driver to drive on, without paying her share. As she rushed up the stairs she hoped that the kind old man would forgive her for cheating him.

She rang the bell and waited anxiously. When the housekeeper came to the door, Lucille asked her whether Miss Emerine still lived there. The housekeeper said that she did, but that she was not expected home for some weeks since she had gone on tour with a new show. Lucille's heart sank. She hadn't reckoned on Miss Emerine being away, but managed to thank the housekeeper, pick up her bag and start up the street.

What was she to do? Then she remembered that the producer's name was Ernest Young. She dashed across to the nearest telephone, looked up his address in the directory, and rushed over to his office. But when she arrived she found the outer office crowded with beautiful tall girls dressed to kill, all waiting for auditions. In her serviceable blue dress, too tight at the seams, and with a hole in her glove, she felt like Orphan Annie. Exhausted by her frustrating journey from Kansas City, she realised that she didn't have a chance against such stiff competition. Then she had a brainwave.

The inner door to Young's office opened. Suddenly Lucille dashed ahead of the others, slammed the door behind her and immediately burst into tears. Young's wife was in the office with him, and she threw herself on their mercy, theatrically overdoing her hard-luck story and repeatedly stressing the mere four dollars she had to her name. She asked whether they would try her out, despite her not being as tall or as pretty as the girls outside.

Fortunately, Katherine Emerine was a close friend of theirs, and as she had encouraged the young girl, they decided to take her under

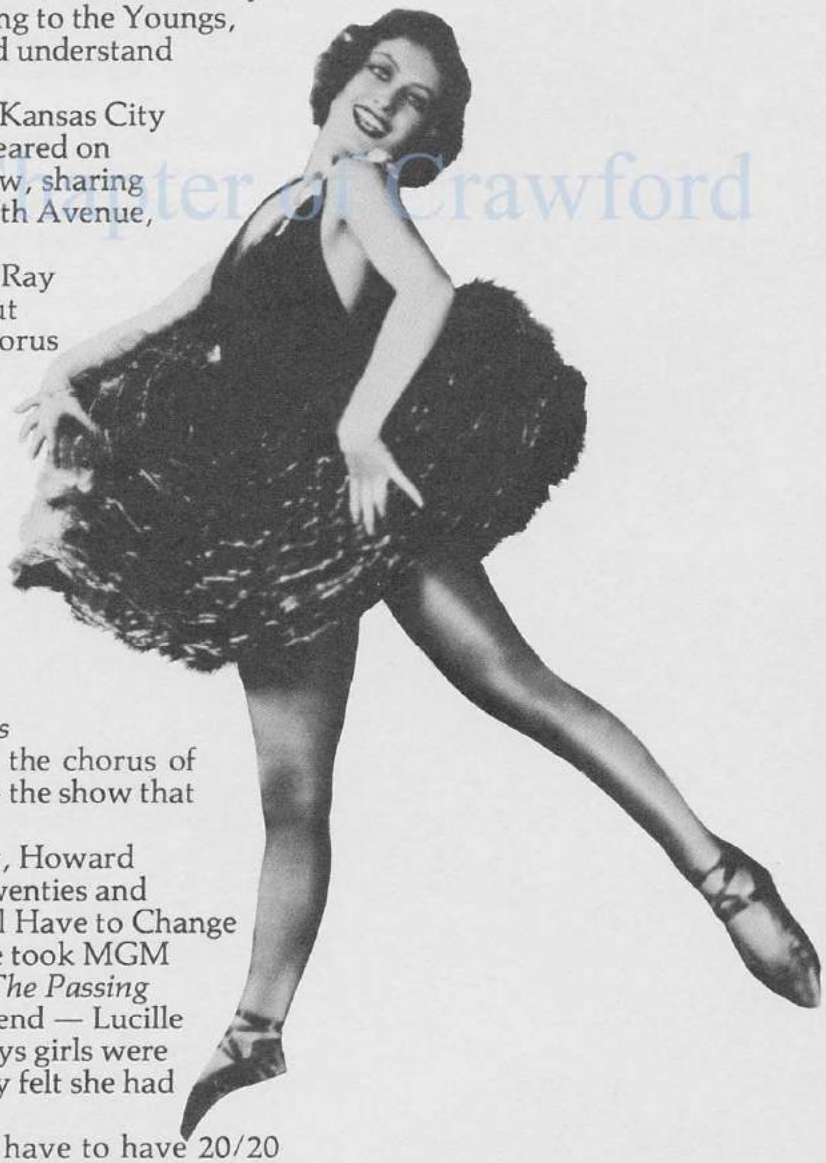
their wing. The Youngs provided her with a job singing and dancing at the Friar's Inn, for which she was paid $25 a week, enough to keep her going for the moment at any rate. They offered her one further week's engagement in Oklahoma City, followed by a season at Detroit's Oriele Terrace where she performed eight routines a night along with thirty-one other girls.

If luck was in a good mood when it offered her the chance to meet the Youngs, it was positively cheerful the night it presented the great impresario and theatre-owner J. J. Schubert to her. During a gypsy routine her multi-coloured twirling skirt accidentally sent his wine-glass reeling into the air. It landed in his lap, drenching him. In true theatrical tradition, Shubert went backstage afterwards in search of the 'little fat girl with blue eyes', and offered her a part in the chorus of his new musical, *Innocent Eyes*, which was playing in Detroit on its pre-Broadway try-out.

Excited at the prospect of both appearing in a Shubert musical and going to New York, she rushed along to see the matinee of *Innocent Eyes* the following day, and was captivated by the show and its star, Mistinguett. The opportunity to appear in it was too great to miss, but she was under contract to appear at the Oriele Terrace for several more weeks, and since the *Innocent Eyes* company was leaving Detroit the following day to open on Broadway ten days later, this put her in a dilemma.

But since she could hardly give up the chance to work on Broadway she decided to quit the show. Unfair as she was being to the Youngs, who had been so kind to her, she hoped they would understand the needs of a driving ambition.

Three months after running away from home in Kansas City with four dollars to her name, Lucille LeSueur appeared on Broadway. At sixteen she was the 'baby' of the show, sharing a room in an old brownstone on 50th Street, off Fifth Avenue, with four other chorus girls.



When Christmas approached, she wanted to see Ray Sterling again, and make amends to her mother, but needed the extra cash for her fare home. As her chorus salary was only just enough to see her through the week, she decided to 'double' by doing another show — it had to be at a night-club since her own show's curtain never fell before ten. She could dance well enough, but the clubs needed singers as well, so she hunted Tin Pan Alley for songs.

She borrowed fourteen dollars from her room-mates to buy a dress for her new act, and every night after performing in *Innocent Eyes* she went along to Harry Richman's where she sang and danced till the early hours. After *Innocent Eyes* had closed, she got a job just before Christmas in the chorus of *The Passing Show of 1924* at the Winter Garden — the show that was to be her passport to Hollywood.

The celebrated wit of Hollywood and Broadway, Howard Dietz, composed some of the greatest hits of the twenties and thirties including 'Dancing in the Dark', 'I Guess I'll Have to Change my Plan', and 'That's Entertainment'. One night he took MGM executives Harry Rapf and Robert J. Rubin to see *The Passing Show*, and they agreed that the third girl from the end — Lucille LeSueur — was a 'natural' for pictures. In those days girls were chosen for their beauty and personality — and they felt she had vigour and vitality as well.

'She was an exceptional looker and you didn't have to have 20/20 vision to notice it,' Dietz recalled. 'Her personality knocked you over.'

'The first I knew of it was when the note arrived backstage offering

me a screen test,' the chorus girl who was to take Hollywood by storm explained to theatrical impresario and connoisseur of beautiful showgirls, Nils Granlund. *'But there's no point in taking the test,'* she added, *'I haven't got a chance.'*

'You're going if I have to drag you there,' he replied to her surprise.

But she still lacked self-confidence, and felt sure they would prefer the tall, glamorous types she had seen in Young's outer-office. Only five feet four and a half tall, with broad shoulders, she weighed a hundred and forty five pounds, was much too fat, and felt that her round, freckled face with a mouth too big and eyes too large would hardly appeal to them. Granlund persuaded her to go along, however, and along with eighteen other girls she waited her turn to stand in front of the movie camera.

'Look sad, then mad, then questioning; wistful and coy,' commanded a disembodied voice from behind the glaring lights. She carried out the instructions and went home.

To her amazement, she was told she had passed the first test and was invited back for the second one. This time she was introduced to Harry Rapf and the handsome, persuasive former solicitor J. Robert Rubin, MGM's Eastern Representative who looked after the studio's interests in New York.

'You want to be an actress?' Rapf asked after the second test.

She replied that acting didn't interest her and that she wanted to be a dancer. Rubin told her that they would contact her when they had the results of the second test from Hollywood, and she gave them her mother's address since she would be in Kansas City until after Christmas.

Christmas at home was like old times. She spent her holiday ironing customers' shirts at her mother's laundry shop, but this was brought to an abrupt halt with the arrival of New Year's Eve — and the postman bearing a cable for her from MGM.

Excited fingers ripped open the envelope. It took her only seconds to scan the contents: 'LUCILLE LESUEUR,' it read, 'YOU HAVE BEEN PLACED UNDER CONTRACT MGM STUDIO STOP SIX MONTH OPTION STOP SEVENTY FIVE DOLLARS A WEEK STOP LEAVE IMMEDIATELY FOR CALIFORNIA STOP.'

She danced about excitedly, hugging her mother. News of a contract at $75 a week — six times more than she had been paid to work behind the counter at Klines, more than double her combined pay packets in New York at the Winter Garden and the club — was almost too good to be true.

'Don't get carried away, dear,' her mother said, dampening her spirits. 'It says "six months". What then? You go back to Klines? Or back to Harry Richman's speakeasy?'

But Lucille was confident of success, vowing never to go back to waiting on tables, serving behind counters or ironing shirts for twenty-nine cents. Here was the chance to prove herself: nothing would stand in her way.

Her mother looked at her, smiled, and moved towards the back of the shop. 'Just don't you go forgetting your mother, back here in Kansas City, that's all,' she said over her shoulder.

'Oh, mother,' she said following her. 'You *know* I'll send you whatever I can afford each week.'

And so, determined to prove herself, she packed her bag in readiness for the journey next day. She had youth's fearlessness and love of adventure, the physical attributes required by those gentlemen admirers who would undoubtedly make the road to success a little less bumpy — and now she had the chance to put her talents into practice as well. Now seventeen, the little girl from nowhere left for Hollywood the following morning, determined never to look poverty in the face again.


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

3
JOAN AND DOUG

Douglas Fairbanks Sr was one of the founding giants of the Hollywood film industry. Born in Denver, Colorado, on 23 May 1883, he had married Beth Sully, the pretty, vivacious daughter of multi-millionaire Daniel J. Sully, one of the great business tycoons of the early 1900s. A year or two before their marriage, however, Beth's father, who had owned practically every bale of cotton in the world, was out-manoeuvred by a business rival and lost everything.

Douglas junior was born in New York on 9 December 1909, a year later than Joan Crawford (or five years later if she is believed to have been born in 1904). Although he was also the product of a broken home, for which he would eventually be the breadwinner, any similarity between their upbringing ended there. He became a studious young man who enjoyed reading and languages, politics and history, whereas her education was negligible. He cultivated friends from music and the arts — she preferred hotcha dancing and night-clubs. He developed a talent for writing, poetry and sketching — she liked the victrola. He was quiet, gentlemanly and reserved — she was a supreme extrovert. He was the antithesis of her in every way, yet some strange force, an attraction of extreme opposites, was to bring them together.

Beth idolised her husband and son, and her social contacts and position stood the Fairbanks' in good stead in New York society. By 1915 Douglas Sr had become a well-known light comedian on the Broadway stage, winning over audiences with his quick charm and flashing smile, and was invited to appear in movies in Los Angeles by the Triangle Corporation, which consisted of the big three producers, D.W. Griffith (whose silent epic *Birth of a Nation* was a milestone in

Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Joan

cinema history), Mack Sennett and Thomas Ince. He could hardly resist the offer of $2,000 a week — an enormous sum for those days (and these!) — and left New York with his family to join Billie Burke and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree who were under contract to the same company. At that time the Triangle Corporation and the Cecil B. De Mille-Sam Goldwyn-Jesse Lasky combination of Famous Players-Lasky Corporation were the only major film producers. Studio space was provided by the barns of a citrus farm outside Los Angeles; the farm became a village, the village a town, and the town Hollywood.

Twenty-nine films in three years made Douglas Fairbanks the idol of America, earning him $100,000 a year; but he realised that more money could be earned from actual film production and formed his own family company — together with his older brother Robert and much older half-brother John. At this time he fell in love with Mary Pickford, whose own fame rivalled his; but she too was already married, to actor Owen Moore. Romance between the two heart-throbs was inevitable, it seemed; they separated from their respective partners, divorced and married one another.

Beth and Douglas junior returned to New York where Beth married a Pittsburgh stockbroker, James Evans, on the rebound. Although he had been a beau of hers when she was seventeen, the hasty, ill-advised marriage lasted only five years and she also lost her $500,000 divorce settlement through bad investment and speculation. They returned to Los Angeles, where young Douglas was sent to school. Jesse Lasky Jr (son of the famous film pioneer whose first venture, *The Squaw Man* in 1913, marked the birth of Hollywood as the American film capital) became a screen writer of over fifty films including eight De Mille epics such as *Samson and Delilah* and *The Ten Commandments*. Of these years he recalled:

> Douglas Fairbanks Jr was our near neighbour in Hollywood at that time, and his father and my father and Beth Evans and my mother were all very dear friends. So Doug, who was my age, was a very close neighbour and a very close friend. We went to school together in Hollywood. There were only two private schools, the Hollywood School for Girls on La Brea, and Miss Jane's school on Hollywood Boulevard, in this period, which was around 1916. At first I was at Miss Jane's school with Wallace Beery's nephew, Noah, but we were expelled for fighting. So we went to the Hollywood School for Girls. We were terribly ashamed of it. There were over forty girls there, and only five of us boys. The others were Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Noah Berry Jr, Joel McCrea and Bill Buckland whose father was one of the first great art directors of Hollywood.
>
> We were only between six and ten years old. Ten years later it would have been rather fun being at a girls' school, but right then it was much too soon! We hated the girls, dreaded them — and avoided them.

At first Jesse Lasky Jr did not care much for Doug either:

> That was because even though we were contemporaries, and in a sense on the same Hollywood level — his father was a big star; my father was Vice-President of Famous Players-Lasky — he was a bit grand. As early as I remember when we were little, when most of us kids were too shy to even enter a room, why, Doug would be proclaiming *Richard III*! I found him a bit over-flamboyant as a child particularly because he owned the first roller-coaster that had a motor in it, and drove up the hill ahead of us while we pulled our roller coasters up behind us.

Recalling this, Douglas Fairbanks Jr laughed:

> I remember my *Richard III* period very well. I was twelve and was

going to school in Pasadena. I had just seen John Barrymore in *Richard III* and got so carried away that I decided to learn not only his part, but the entire play. I remember the year very well (1922) because it was the year my father was making *Robin Hood*, and it was the year that I joined the boy scouts.

It was at this time that Doug went to live in Paris with his mother:

> We lived in Paris for a total of three years. I went to school and studied there. Fortunately, as I was bilingual — I had been taught French from the age of three — it enabled me to attend painting and sculpturing classes in Paris without any language difficulties. I was there between eleven and twelve years old, and returned to the States, and went back to Paris for another year between twelve and thirteen.

His father's name resounded round the world and the rival studio, Famous Players-Lasky, decided to capitalise on this by offering his thirteen-year-old son a starring role in a Hollywood film. Fairbanks Sr, who was on holiday in Paris at the same time as Beth and Doug were there, strongly opposed the idea and refused to have his son exploited for commercial gain. He was determined that Doug should have a university education, and threatened to cut him off should he have anything to do with films. Beth, however, had no qualms about exploiting her son, since they were badly in need of an income, and accepted the Famous Players offer. Not unnaturally, this created a serious rift between father and son, for although Fairbanks had earned a fortune with his three most recent famous films *The Three Musketeers, Robin Hood* and *The Mark of Zorro*, Famous Players was the strongest rival of the new company he had recently formed with Mary Pickford, Charles Chaplin and D.W. Griffith — the United Artists Corporation. Douglas Fairbanks Jr added:

> Mother was still married to Jimmy Evans at the time, and she *did* have qualms, but she didn't have any choice, because she had pawned the last of the family jewels to keep us going; all the pearls and diamonds went one by one, the entire Sully fortune. The rest of her family were very extravagant and couldn't face up to it, and by now Evans had lost a great deal, so it was just a question of everyone having to knuckle down and that was *it*.

Douglas Fairbanks Jr returned to Hollywood in a fanfare of publicity, and was launched in his first movie *Stephen Steps Out*, in which he played the title role, his name displayed prominently above the title. 'My father put him in his first film,' Jesse Lasky Jr said. 'And oddly enough, at the same time I was working for his father, but whereas Doug was *starring*, I was only playing an *extra*, on *The Thief of Baghdad*! So the story broke out, "Jesse Lasky Jr works for *Fairbanks*, Douglas Fairbanks Jr works for *Lasky*".'

Young Douglas had been neither groomed nor trained for so large an undertaking, however, and the film was an unqualified flop. 'I was fired after just six weeks,' Douglas said, 'and we went back to Paris for another year! Things were pretty hopeless, and my mother sold yet another necklace. We went on running up debts until friends persuaded Lasky to give me a contract at practically nothing a week. So I went into his stock company playing small parts, being assistant cameraman, prop boy — *anything*!'

Given the contract by Lasky in 1924 on the strength of his famous name, he and his mother moved to a small house in Hollywood and he became the breadwinner. (In 1927 Famous Players was re-established as Paramount Pictures Corporation, although Famous Players-Lasky continued in Britain, where the change of name to Paramount did not

take place until 1930 after the Lasky fortunes were wiped out in the American Depression.)

After playing small parts and doing many incidental jobs behind the scenes, Doug's first important role occurred in 1925 when, although only fifteen years old — though looking nineteen — he was given a part in *Stella Dallas* by Samuel Goldwyn, appearing with Ronald Colman, Lois Moran, Jean Hersholt and Belle Bennett.

Although relations with his father improved, they remained formal. 'I was still tutoring at that time,' Doug said, 'as well as taking regular academic studies, not to mention drama courses, voice production and fencing lessons.' He would be invited to dine or swim at Pickfair, realising that to be asked to their famous mansion was tantamount to being summoned to the White House. He recalled that 'An invitation to Pickfair was an event, issued some days ahead of time, worked up to, involving special combing of the hair and very careful selection of what to wear, like a child going off to a party.' Mary Pickford did all she could to restore relations between father and son, but with little effect, since his father felt he was being exploited by a rival faction and could not condone his son being party to it.

Douglas continued to play small roles in unimportant films, but became restless at his uneven progress. Disappointed with his lack of success in films, at the age of seventeen he turned to the stage.

On 17 October 1927 he appeared in the John van Druten play *Young Woodley* at the Majestic Theatre in Los Angeles — and took the town by storm. A first-night audience of the Hollywood élite, including Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson, rose to their feet.

'Actually,' Douglas Fairbanks Jr recalled, 'the most important person on the first night was Charlie Chaplin who gave me the biggest booster that night. He sat up with me until two in the morning encouraging me after everybody else had gone home.'

The critics were unanimous in their praise: 'The debut of young Fairbanks is, both from the standpoint of the play and the personal considerations, a distinct success,' wrote one critic. 'Ideally cast as the student, he also conveyed the deeper emotions inherent in the story with an air of sincerity that was more marked because he has not yet acquired the stock tricks of the established actor.'

His father was well-pleased, and Junior now seemed to have earned a place in his affections.

'Have you seen my boy's play?' Fairbanks boasted to his friends. 'I guess I was wrong. I felt he shouldn't be doing it at seventeen. That he should be in college, but pay no attention to me; he's an independent cuss, and by God, he's got away with it!'

Present in the audience on that same first night was the object of his immediate destiny, Joan Crawford. Paul Bern had taken her to see the play, and took her backstage afterwards to meet him.

Paul Bern, who was regarded at MGM as talented, hard-working and creatively unique, was, as has been said, Joan's guiding light. He was one of her closest friends, but theirs was a platonic friendship. Realising that she was alone in Hollywood and periodically in need of advice and comfort, he was always at her disposal. As Thalberg's invaluable right hand, he was at the same time protecting one of the properties the studio was carefully cultivating. He had a genius for finding scripts and talent, and added to his duties by acting as go-between on many occasions when trouble loomed.

Two weeks after Joan had broken off her engagement to Mike Cudahy, Bern, always chivalrous and thoughtful, invited her to see *Young Woodley* and have dinner in order to console her. *'Douglas and I had met casually at the studio commissary and he had seemed rather stuffy,'* Joan recalled. *'But what a deeply touching, tender performance he gave that night! I went home and dreamed of Young Woodley, and in the middle of the night I picked up the telephone and sent Douglas a congratulatory telegram.'*

'I sent Joan a note the next day to thank her,' Doug said. 'I wanted to telephone her but I didn't have her number. It was too hard to get. Nobody would give it to me, but Paul Bern eventually let me have her address, and so our romance began through the exchange of notes.'

Seemingly meant for one another, they became inseparable. They dined at the Biltmore that night, and every night throughout the remainder of the play's run she sat in the box swooning over her new love. The cards seemed stacked in their favour. They played golf and tennis together at weekends, danced through the night, and lunched at the studio at every available opportunity. As they grew more deeply attached to one another, they were totally unaware — and uncaring — of the family dissent they were creating.

Douglas' mother, Beth, clearly opposed the relationship. 'I found Joan a strange, moody girl, over-flamboyant in her dress and alternating between gushing enthusiasm and gauche aloofness,' she declared. 'The first time I met her they took me over to see a picture,

and she sat in the car, read a book the whole way and never spoke to me. She was scared.'

'Doug used to bring Joan Crawford down to our beach-house,' said Jesse Lasky, whose father had an enormous house on the Santa Monica beach front from 1925 to about 1935, built no doubt from the proceeds of his turbulent professional association with the Great Lover, Rudolph Valentino, who had appeared in many of the Famous Player-Lasky successes including *The Sheik, Blood and Sand* and *Monsieur Beaucaire*.

'The funny thing about Valentino,' Douglas Fairbanks Jr observed, 'was that as famous as he became afterwards, only three or four of his films were successful. He became such a success after he died, but at the time, it was his personal appearances, not the films that attracted such mobs of people. He made fourteen major films and only three of rour of them were really big successes.'

Jesse Lasky Jr continued:

> Doug senior used to come over quite often and Doug junior and I were great pals. His father and mine were rivals, but there was no serious rift between them. They were not rivals in the sense of being in the same battle or being after the same thing.
>
> Ours was a very pleasant place, as you can imagine; it was enormous, like a hotel. We always had parties going on and lots of house-guests; beautiful pools in front, and a great atmosphere of good living and high living. Very often Doug used to send me a telegram, I don't know why, except it was part of his grand style, and one of the telegrams I remember went, 'What ho for a game of football?' He was a marvellous athlete. He'd come down and we'd organise games of touch-football on the beach, and one of the times he came, he brought this fantastic girl who had an incredible figure. Like Doug, I was a victim of beautiful women! I couldn't take my eyes off Joan.
>
> It was the jazz-age, and as pioneer families we generally had our feet in two camps. We were socially acceptable. We belonged to the Santa Monica Beach Club where very few film people were ever received, and all the girls in those days looked like what we called flappers. This was the Clara Bow period, the Alice White Period.
>
> Alice White was an imitation of Bow. [*Doug interjected*] She wasn't in the same league as Clara Bow.
>
> But Joan impressed me because the first thing I was aware of was her absolutely incredible eyes. [*Jesse Lasky Jr continued*] Her blue

'Her absolutely incredible eyes.'

eyes were enormous, and when you looked at her, she was magnetic. You couldn't take your eyes from her, she was so arresting. She was absolutely smashing!

By now, however, Joan's efforts to cultivate her appearance were beginning to pay off and Jesse Lasky Jr found nothing common about her:

> Many of the girls one saw had a certain vulgarity about them, a certain cheapness, brashness, brassiness. But not Joan. Even though she had been a chorus girl a short while before, and I suppose at this period she wasn't yet an accomplished actress, she had a certain poise. She had bobbed hair, very much the uniform of the time.
>
> Her face, when you took it apart feature by feature was not by any means perfect, but the tremendous impact of the eyes and the wonderfully sensual mouth was wonderful to look at. And, of course, I felt that over the years the thing that happened to Joan was that she became more and more elegant, more and more beautiful. She was one of the people whose education never stopped. She kept improving.
>
> Although she spoke with a Texas accent, she wasn't slangy at all. It was a very definite Texas accent, but it was very pleasant. She sounded like the heroine in a Western movie, but she didn't sound like a dance-hall girl, she sounded like the rancher's daughter! It was medium pitch, but it got lower as the years went on; her voice improved enormously as she became one of the great actresses of the screen.

Douglas Fairbanks disagreed:

> I don't remember that she had any accent at all. It might have been Middle-West, if anything. You see, she was busy cultivating her voice, taking voice lessons and studying speech all the time and possibly being a little self-conscious, if anything, but I don't remember a Texas accent. After all, she left Texas when she was very young, and she would have had a St Louis, Missouri, Middle-West accent.
>
> She was always so arduous and working so hard at everything; at dancing, on her looks, on her speech and on her carriage. She was dedicated to self-improvement.
>
> The cute thing about Joan and Doug was that the two of them invented a language [*Lasky Jr continued*]. They had a code. They could speak to each other in a crowded room, and nobody knew what the hell they were saying to one another. And that was a delightful quality about them. I remember the first time they came down it annoyed me, because they were constantly going into their own language, which, of course, I didn't follow, and here they were doing this, 'cutesy, wutesy, witsy, watsy,' or whatever it was, pig-Latin talk. It was all so mixed up you couldn't pick it up at all.
>
> Actually, it was double-Dutch [*Doug explained simply*]. That was all. But there were so many kinds of double-Dutch and nobody seemed to understand our particular double-Dutch. But we didn't *invent* it, we *learnt* it.
>
> And of course, they hung on to one another very closely [*Lasky Jr continued*]. She was utterly unpretentious and perfectly at ease, and adoring Doug. I couldn't take my eyes off her, she couldn't take her eyes off *him*. She was totally devoted to him, and she was a very comfortable girl even though she was here in the equivalent of a palace of the period, because my father was certainly a prince of the industry at that time, yet she wasn't in any way shy.
>
> She fitted easily into the environment which many of the girls did

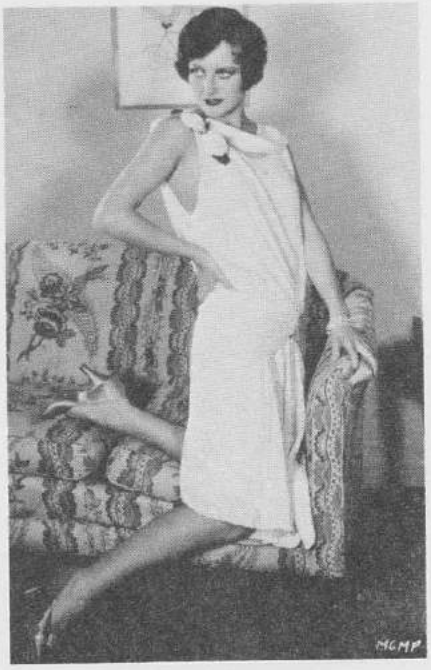
With her first husband, Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

not, who came down. Many of the girls I would bring down, if they happened to be extra-girls or from the lower echelons of the film world, were giggly and silly, because it was a giggly, silly time. The flappers who giggled and cackled, were silly.

Doug's sophistication was such that he was always taking off somebody. He was always being somebody he had just been with at a party, and he'd suddenly be totally immersed in this characterisation. At this period, he was Ronald Colman, and he sounded exactly like Ronnie Colman. Another period when he came down with Joan, he had admired Maurice Chevalier, and so he was doing impersonations of Maurice, and suddenly he *was* Maurice, and he had it down to perfection.

They were very much in love, and of course, his father disapproved. I suppose Douglas senior wouldn't have been satisfied even if an English princess had been available. Doug came to our house as a haven of refuge, because here he was with me, his friend, and my father would protect him and not tell his father that he had brought this particular girl over. My father was always busy enough having romances of his own and therefore respected other people's privacy!

The larger of our two swimming pools built to supplement the oceans saw the flowering of a memorable Hollywood romance [*recalled Jesse Lasky Sr*]. Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Joan Crawford used it to escape the disapproving eye of Doug Sr whose house was a block or so down the beach.



They became secretly engaged on 31 December 1927, but Joan misguidedly wore a wedding ring, and a gold chain round her ankle inscribed *To My Darling Wife*. The Press not unnaturally reported this, incurring the wrath of Fairbanks Sr. Fairbanks implored Beth to step into the breach, but her efforts came to nothing. Joan and Doug were in love and had the headstrong determination of youth.

If Fairbanks had warmed to his son through renewed faith in his acting abilities, relations between them now deteriorated sharply and all invitations to Pickfair ceased. Close friends reported that Fairbanks's and Pickford's worst fear about the impending marriage was the possibility of their becoming grandparents: since Mary Pickford was still playing, and would continue for a few more years to play, juvenile roles she was more than anxious about her youthful public image.

The stories that have been reported about my father's disapproval of Joan, I believe have been distorted [*said Douglas Fairbanks Jr*]. And going over it with Mary (Pickford) recently [*who, in her eighties and still residing at Pickfair, sees no-one and lives in seclusion under the protection of her third husband, actor Charles 'Buddy' Rogers, ten years her junior, to whom she has remained happily married since her retirement in 1933*], she agreed that this disapproval was based on the fact that we were both too young and, looking back, it was probably true. I was only nineteen when we got married, and it was for the same reason that my father hadn't wanted me to go to work when I was so young. 'Well, as long as I'm working on the stage and earning my own living and keeping my family,' I protested to him, 'I am capable of looking after Joan.'

'All right, all right,' my father replied. 'You've done what you say, but for God's sake don't get married at nineteen, to your first great romance.' Of course, he did not know that I had got over another great romance only a few months before, which I thought was the end of the world. So I don't think it was a disapproval of Joan as a person, as subsequent stories have made out, so much as his disapproval of me getting married at that age. Mary says that there was nothing personal against Joan. I think that Joan *thought* there was at one time, but that was not so.

Above and right: Joan and Doug

However the reason for Mary Pickford's disapproval of Joan Crawford was that she believed her to have been born in 1904, not 1908, and could not condone Doug marrying at nineteen a woman five years his senior.

In Metro's careful grooming pattern, they now cast Joan opposite another of their heartthrob leading men — the Latin-lover supreme Ramon Novarro. In the film version of Ben Ames Williams' novel, *All the Brothers Were Valliant* (1928), set against a nautical background of the nineteenth century and retitled *Across to Singapore*, she appeared in the opium-sodden love triangle with Ernest Torrence and Novarro vying for her favours. But although the chemistry worked on that one, it failed on her next, *The Law of the Range* (1928) with Tim McCoy. A melodramatic hotch-potch with bandit rangers and a stage-coach hold-up to add flair to an otherwise tiresome mish-mash, MGM were saved embarrassing exposure of their sub-standard product because audiences failed to turn up at the cinema.

Realising their mistake, and now fast running out of leading men, Metro cast her again with John Gilbert in *Four Walls* (1928), an underworld drama adapted by Alice Duer Miller from a recent Broadway success by George Abbott and Dana Burnett. Gilbert played a gangster from New York's ghetto, jailed for manslaughter, released, and then involved in a feud for the affections of the tough amoral moll (Joan Crawford) with Louis Natheaux, the gang's leader who succeeds in getting murdered by Gilbert. Directed by William Nigh, Joan played with riveting intensity, giving Frieda the coarse, provocative toughness the role demanded, sacrificing long wavy hair for a short, curly bob. Her hair lightened, her make-up simplified, she now began to adopt an individual style that seemed to personify the look of the fast-moving twenties.

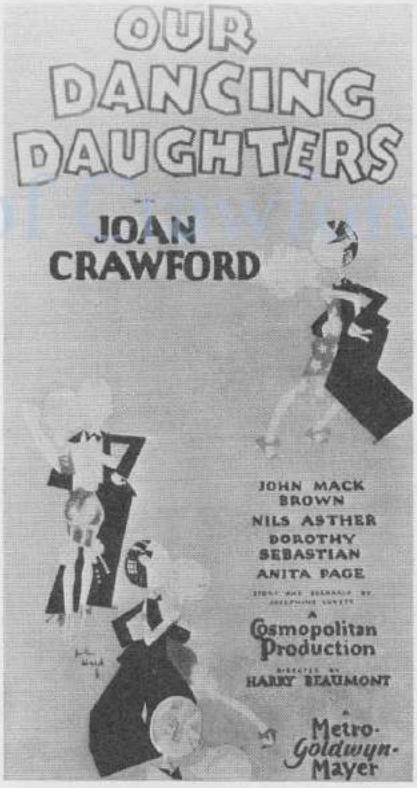
The demand for her talents increased with each new picture she completed, and the film that was to give her star status was on the horizon. The publicity created by her romance with Doug brought both their talents to the attention of studio heads, and Doug was signed by MGM to play with Garbo and John Gilbert in *A Woman of Affairs*. His own rise to stardom was now assured.

But now Joan was offered the part that was to launch her career and gain her the star status she craved. She won the coveted role of Diana, the flapper in *Our Dancing Daughters*, the ideal screen expression of the Jazz Age, which was just then reaching its climax. It was a part she had lived in real life and knew how to play better than anyone else, that of a wild young socialite famed for her uninhibited vivacity and love of parties, drunk on her own youth and vitality. She dances herself into a frenzy accompanied by shrieking saxes and wailing trombones, luring John Mack Brown from his hard-drinking wife Anita Page in the process.

Girls were cutting their hair shorter, mixing their drinks stronger, changing their bedmates faster — and millions rushing to see how they did it in this movie assured Joan a place among the new stars of the future. She set the craze with her wind-blown bob and audiences were to follow the styles she created for many years to come.

Wrote the London *Evening Standard's* award-winning film critic and author Alexander Walker:

> It was the last, definitive film of her jazz baby period and shows no stern-jawed Joan. From the opening shot of her legs doing an impatient dance while she puts on her undies to the time she loses her man to another girl, the impression is one of spoilt exuberance and of a little tease who takes a sip out of each of the Martinis held by her dance partners. Finding herself encumbered by her skirt in the Charleston she whips it off and finishes the dance in her slip. 'You want to take all of life, don't you?' her boy-friend says, and the reply comes, 'Yes — all. I want to hold out my hands and catch it all.'



It had only one sound scene in it, where the rather painful dialogue was spoken, but it was nevertheless the turning point in her career. *'None of us were starred in the picture,'* she said, *'but theatre-owners, seeing the audience response, "starred" me.'* Her name went up in lights above the title for the first time and she, more than anyone else, was delighted.

'I'd drive around with a small box camera taking pictures of JOAN CRAWFORD in lights,' she laughed. *'I phoned Douglas, wildly excited, from the studio when Mr Mayer called me in, doubled my salary, announcing, "Beginning Saturday, Joan, you will have $500 a week!"'*

She was 'on her way' to undreamed-of heights, and nothing could stop her. The *New York Mirror* reported:

Joan Crawford, as the girl who was free and wild but maintained her ideals, does the greatest work of her career. She has a typical Clara Bow role and she gives Clara a lively run around for first honours as a modern flap. Joan has beauty, charm and more refinement than the trim-legged Bow. She makes you believe she's straight even through the torrid, questionable scenes she is required to play. She also shows a snappy Bow figure and she can dance a mean varsity drag.

Added the *New York World*:

Of Miss Crawford it can be predicted that in case her managers continue to find just such breezy little comedies for her she will realize what apparently has been her ambition for at least two years, and get going as a star in her own right. She has good looks, sprightliness, intelligence and a good sense of humour. She dances with great grace and versatility and she knows when — and how — to call a halt.

'I had found that incredible thing, a public,' she recalled. *'People wrote to me as if they knew me. I answered every letter personally. From this moment on I had a sense of audiences as warm loving people who would care for me in direct proportion to the energy and talent I could give to a public to whom I owed a loyalty and from whom I've always received loyalty.'*

Earning $500 a week, 1928

After winning an audience, however, there came a quest for reinforcement in the shape of prestige. *'I craved valid pictures, significant parts,'* but despite being heralded as a star, with reviews and fan mail boosting her morale and the studio doubling her salary, she was to be given two inadequate roles which could have put paid to her achievement in *Our Dancing Daughters*.

Dream of Love was supposed to be a big one for Joan. A lushly romantic tale based on the old French play *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, it was a vehicle for Nils Asther playing the heir to a Middle European kingdom. Joan, a gypsy girl who becomes a great actress, falls in love with him, but the fans wanted her as the whoopee girl of *Our Dancing Daughters*, and the film flopped. Her next, *The Duke Steps Out*, a part-talkie directed by James Cruze, was with William Haines who had become the first MGM star to face a microphone. Haines, playing a millionaire's son who drops out of college to be a prize-fighter, falls for a varsity girl (Joan) and returns to win her and the inter-collegiate boxing match. But although a box-office money-spinner, the movie provided an insubstantial role for her talents.

Realising that they had miscast her in these two pictures, the studio now pulled *Our Modern Maidens* out of the hat, as a sequel to the highly successful *Our Dancing Daughters*. Dressed for the first time by Adrian, she stole the picture with her spectacular solo dancing scene. To please fans and critics alike, the studio capitalised on their publicised romance and cast Douglas as her lover. Once more as leader of post-deb society, her affair with Fairbanks ends with her marrying him to the delight of all concerned. Anita Page, one of Crawford's deadliest enemies, doubtless because of their strong rivalry for the same roles, was the only other principal retained from *Our Dancing Daughters;* she played Joan's Southern pal — flirting with Rod La Roque, involving herself with the others in a series of misunderstandings, illicit pregnancies and annulments, applauded wildly by enthusiastic followers.

'Joan Crawford and Douglas Fairbanks Jr in a sequel to *Our Dancing Daughters,' Photoplay* announced. 'Must you be told that it's a sure-fire hit?' And from *Variety*: 'Story is juvenile and silly but the sort of silliness the fans gobble by the carload . . . Miss

Crawford's fans won't be disappointed, even a little bit. She wears her clothes as she always does and gives them the limit in a half-clad dance at one of her own house parties. Her pantomime is far-fetched but vivid.'

The film lived up to its promise; the couple were on the crest of a wave for Douglas had just won a new contract with Warner Brothers to appear in a string of romantic films with the studio's latest asset, a very young and ravishingly beautiful Loretta Young.

Joan and Doug set their marriage date for 3 June 1929, and to avoid family arguments, decided to be married in far-off New York. The ceremony took place in a chapel at St Malachy's Catholic Church.

Shortly after, his mother married musical comedy star Jack Whiting; he was many years her junior, but they were blissfully happy and remained so until his death separated them many years later. She remembered her son's wedding vividly: 'Doug obtained the marriage licence in the same place where his birth was registered, City Hall,' she recalled. 'He was nineteen, but supposed to be twenty-one, so he asked me to confirm the later age. They only needed to go up a floor to find out the truth, but fortunately, they didn't ask him!'

The young Fairbanks's returned to Hollywood to pursue their respective film careers. Joan had bought a house, 214 North Bristol Drive at Brentwood, and Doug moved in with his new bride. Realising the marriage was now a fact, Doug's father reopened the doors of Pickfair to him, even if he only held them ajar.

Above left: In *Our Dancing Daughters*, 1928
Above right: In *Dream of Love*, 1928
Above: Marriage to Douglas Fairbanks Jr.


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

4
RIVAL FACTIONS

In his account of the influence of movies in the late twenties, film-maker Paul Rotha believed that much of the American mind was occupied with a primitive instinct for fight and possession that was the basis for many movies (viz. the early Westerns, with their gunmen and hard-riding cowboys, and later the vogue for underworld crook stories with gangsters and their molls). 'Out of this primitive mind comes also the strong physical feeling, particularly in the dynamic American girl,' Rotha added. 'Nearly every movie is saturated in sex stimulant; a quality that is increasing with the dialogue film, and is uppermost in almost every director's and producer's mind, not only in Hollywood, but in Britain, France and Germany. The most popular stars in Paris are Joan Crawford and Victor McLaglen (1929).'

Youth was an essential of the American film which the studios were constantly seeking, for with it went the vitality and dynamism that were inseparable from the true function of the movie. Youth and movement were the keynotes of *Our Dancing Daughters* and countless others of the same brand. Clara Bow, Fay Wray, Charles Rogers, Richard Arlen, Nancy Carroll, Anita Page, Sue Carol and Joan Crawford were all symbols of the American drama of youth.

'Pace, together with the combined motives of sex, youth, and spaciousness, is the chief reason for the success of the American movie,' Rotha observed. 'It was the vitality of movement in such films as *The Broadway Melody* and *Hollywood Revue* which made them popular, as the underlying factors of publicity and the star-system.'

Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo were the only female stars at Metro who had not yet risked their careers with a talking début, and now it was up to Joan to prove her adaptability and determination to stay on the top by taking the essential step. MGM's first sound musical *Broadway Melody*, starring Anita Page, Bessie Love and Charles King, was chosen as the best picture of 1928-9, the first talkie to win the honour. Now came Joan's turn when the studio produced another musical, *Hollywood Revue of 1929*, and audiences heard her speak for the first time in a full-length talkie with an all-star cast including Norma Shearer, John Gilbert, Marion Davies, Buster Keaton, Marie Dressler — and Bessie Love.

'If this film doesn't catch on like wildfire,' Mark Hellinger in the *New York Daily News* reported, 'I am Calvin Coolidges's old electric horse. As an example of what the talking film has done to the legitimate theatre, this *Hollywood Revue* is pretty nearly the last word.' And Eleanor Barnes in the *Los Angeles News* sang Joan's praises: 'Joan Crawford's popularity with the collegiate crowd is understandable. Joan is the spirit of youth. And her manner of singing "I've Got a Feeling for You" — coupled with her dancing to music furnished by the Biltmore quartet — was a radium drop for the bill.'

'Everybody but Garbo and the gatemen seemed to be in it,' commented an onlooker about the most popular in a cycle of musicals filmed with no real story. Directed by Charles Reisner, it was a sensational success, but since most of the stars were working in other movies during the day the majority of the scenes were shot in the

Left: Joan, 1929

seven-at-night to seven-in-the-morning 'graveyard shift'.

'At the time they were having a strike at the studio,' Bessie Love said. 'Nobody except the big stars were established there yet and the ones who worked didn't all have a contract. They needed a union very badly, and until they decided to get one started, they wouldn't work.'

They conceived the idea of a Screen Actors' Guild to protect all Hollywood's film performers, but the founders (C. Aubrey Smith, Boris Karloff, leading man Leon Ames and comedian James Gleason) had to fight for five years until, with the added support of such towering giants as Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Fredric March and Groucho Marx, the producers were forced to recognize the Guild in 1935.

Continued Bessie Love:

> And so all the supporters of the Guild who were under the new rulings weren't allowed to work until after the strike. This included everyone not already under contract, from leading performers to extras and chorus singers and dancers. However, MGM got their artists who were already under contract to them together. Harry Rapf called me in and said, 'We're doing a revue and we're going to have everyone in the studio in it. What we're trying to do is to get everyone to do something different from what they've ever done before. For instance, Conrad Nagel is going to sing "You Were Meant For Me" with Anita Page; Buster Keaton is doing "The Dance of the Seven Veils" and Norma Shearer and John Gilbert are going to do the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.
>
> 'Have you ever done an acrobatic dance?' Harry asked me.
>
> 'No!' I said in absolute horror.
>
> 'That's fine. Go and see the dancing producers.'
>
> And that's how it happened! I had to do an acrobatic dance, of all things.

The transition from silent pictures to talkies ended many artists' careers; one of those to lose out was John Gilbert, whose weak shrill voice belied his looks and romantic charm. However, Joan stepped into the new world without any difficulty, and was also expected to sing in her first talkie. She was called upon to render 'Gotta Feeling for You', leaning on a piano and parodying Helen Morgan, and to join Marion Davies, Buster Keaton and the chorus in a lavish production routine of 'Singin' in the Rain'.

> I remember Joan on the set so vividly [*Bessie Love recalled*]. She was always making *sandwiches* for everybody! You'd have thought there was a war on and they were all starving! I came onto the set one day and there she was with a huge sort of French loaf that she was cutting up . . . I'm not sure if they really wanted them; but *that* didn't stop her!
>
> Joan was never idle. She was always sewing or doing something with her hands. I remember one of the boys from the design department saying to me, 'I wish you could see what Joan gave me for Christmas. Beautiful bath-towels with my monogram on them that she embroidered herself . . .'
>
> Someone else said, 'Do you know, when I first met Joan she was making her own underwear. Her own hand-made lingerie!'
>
> Also, she was always more at home with men than with women. I don't mean that she was being *familiar* with them, but she preferred their company. I think she thought women would criticise her. She seemed to have an inferiority complex.

This inferiority complex was not reserved for her friends but applied equally to her new in-laws. She was convinced that Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford strongly disapproved of her as a daughter-in-law, and couldn't forgive the fact that the marriage

turned them into prospective grandparents. Occasionally she and Doug were invited to spend the day at Pickfair, arriving at ten in the morning and leaving after dinner. After luncheon father and son, who had made up their differences to some extent, would spend the afternoon over at the United Artists steam bath, while Mary Pickford went upstairs to rest. Too frightened to move in case she was missed and thought rude for leaving without permission, should Mary Pickford come down unexpectedly, Joan would sit all day on her own in the sitting room working at her needle-point or knitting, until the men returned at six and Mary Pickford came down beautifully gowned and coiffured for the evening.

'And there I sat in that same damned chair, in the same damned dress I'd put on that morning, feeling anything but chic, anything but poised, in fact, positively gruesome!

The evening dinners were formal and elaborate affairs, complete with menus, footmen, titled guests and the occasional visiting royalty. Unaccustomed to such splendour, Joan would carefully watch which knife or fork Miss Pickford chose from the varied selection, afraid of choosing the wrong ones and inviting criticism.

Joan complained that Miss Pickford never spoke to her except when they were in a group of people, and she found the air of hostility and disapproval crushing. She never referred to her mother-in-law by name, in case she put a foot wrong, but formally, as *Ma'am*, much as one would address royalty.

To relieve the tension on these occasions Douglas Fairbanks Sr, notorious for practical jokes designed to humiliate pompous guests, would set to, putting down cushions which made rude noises when the ageing and po-faced sat on them, handing out exploding cigars, and so on.

Of Mary Pickford's attitude towards Joan Crawford, Douglas commented:

> Mary denies that she ever reacted that way to Joan, but I was not in the position to know, because I was not aware of it. However, knowing that Joan was very sensitive, I would discount her own impression of something Mary said as being in her own imagination. I hesitate to admit that Mary did not speak to her because Mary denies it.

The things that have been characterised about Joan are true, [*Doug added*]. She was dedicated to her job; her appearance, her voice, her behaviour. She had a real driving force. She felt insecure out of that cocoon that was the film world. Although she later lived in New York, it was only in the theatrical world of New York, and even then, only the *film* part of that theatrical world. Everything else was strange and undesirable and unattractive to her. The unreal world of theatre was more real to her than the so-called real world of other people, and she may well have been right.

She had a fierce loyalty to her family which I don't think they deserved much. She had a scoundrel of a brother. She was always bailing him out of jail. He died. Of syphilis, I think [*he added with a wry grin*]. Joan's mother was a hell-cat and she didn't get on with her at all, but she put up with her. She died about seventeen years ago.

Joan doted on having friends from different worlds. She was very careful about money. She always gave generous presents to people, but was careful about spending money on her own needs. She was always giving friends money. She liked being in the position to help, giving people breaks and things like that. I think that was as much part of her enjoyment of success, being able to be a kind of lady bountiful. She put up with a lot of teasing from

Joan at her needlepoint

friends, but from the ones she trusted, like Billie Haines, her great confidante.

A year after he died of cancer his own boy-friend, Jimmy Shields, died of heartbreak. An amusing, handsome playboy a little younger than Haines, he had had an operation to his nose for the removal of a cancerous tumour.

Joan had a couple of school chums who were in constant correspondence with her. They would write long letters of advice, and she would write long letters back, and they remained pen-pals throughout the years. One fellow was called Scotty; he was a very special old school friend.

And then there was this fellow called Jerry Asher who used to be in the wardrobe at Metro. He had an awful, high, squeaky falsetto voice, and as an example of the sort of help Joan would give her friends, she decided that it was psychological, and had him go to a head-shrinker. He finally came out with a rich baritone voice, changed his job and became a very successful member of the press department.

With her good friend, Jerry Asher, who became a writer and publicist

Right: 'She brought great glamour to Doug's life.'

Asher went on to protect the star who had helped him, and arranged her interviews.

I think it's important that Doug Jr is given credit for the coming of age of Joan Crawford [*his life-long friend, Jesse Lasky Jr, commented*]: but I think that her association with Doug who was one of the genuine young sophisticates of Hollywood gave her a crash course in coaching. She was exposed to a world of knowledge of Shakespeare, of poetry and painting. Doug was a very cultured young man. He was ahead of all of us in his appreciation of the arts . . .

She might have gone up in the Alice White mould or the Clara Bow mould. She might have met a cowboy star instead! But with Doug, it was the international society, and of course, it was tremendously valuable in bringing an actress into a comfortable ease and wider world of knowledge and sophistication, which was very valuable to her.

But jumping to her defence Earl Blackwell, popular head of Celebrity Service (the international link between celebrities and the media) whom the press occasionally confuses with California's fashion and radio show-man Richard Blackwell, provides Joan with evidence of her own influence over *Doug's* career:

> Joan Crawford brought great glamour to Doug's life, at an early age, that Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks could not bring. You know, much as I love Doug, the son of a great star meant very little those days. If you think of Ethel Barrymore, think of John Barrymore, think of any great star. Their children were usually ignored by people. Although Doug was the son of one of the most famous men in the world, it was a handicap, which is understandable. I think it was Doug's marriage to Joan that gave him a lot of glamour and excitement at an early time, because Joan was a major star instantly, and he was not. I think the marriage helped Doug in Hollywood. The fan magazines were full of them. They were the beautiful young couple of Hollywood.

Earl Blackwell first met Joan and Doug in California in the early thirties, when one Sunday, on the way home from church, a mutual friend, Scott Welch, invited him for a drive round Beverly Hills to see the homes of famous Hollywood stars. Earl continued:


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

'That's Pickfair, and that's where Norma Shearer lives', he pointed out. Then we drove along at one point and he said, 'Excuse me, I want to see a friend.' He went into this lovely home in Brentwood, and I sat outside waiting in the car. About fifteen minutes later, the front door opened, and out came Joan Crawford. My heart skipped a beat, because I had admired and loved her since school days, watching her on the screen. 'Come on in,' she called out to me. Well, I went in and met Joan. . . . She couldn't have been warmer and sweeter to me. Then she introduced me to Douglas to whom she was married at the time, and said, 'Will you stay for lunch?' Later that afternoon, Noël Coward came to tea — he was in California for the filming of *Private Lives* with Norma Shearer and Robert Montgomery. I couldn't believe I was meeting Joan Crawford, Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Noël Coward all in one day! I was interested to note that Joan had crushes on stars too, though. She had a tremendous crush on Helen Hayes, and also on Garbo. Even though she was a major star herself, I remember her asking Noël how Norma Shearer and Robert Montgomery were progressing in the film, and whether he had seen Garbo.

It was a typically Californian Spanish-type house, which she had remodelled in a very Georgian and very formal way. She had a beautiful drawing room with an extremely high ceiling. There were two lovely statues of her and Douglas moulded in bronze, on either side of the fireplace. They were about two and a half feet high. When they divorced, Scott inherited them. There was a lovely dining room with photographs of the Duke of Windsor and various other members of the royal family and the aristocracy, but these would have been Douglas's, not Joan's.

I found Joan and Doug delightfully happy, but round that time I wasn't used to observing sophisticated people. However, Joan then said to me, 'Now I'm going to cook supper, and you must stay.' She was dear to me and here was I, the guy who at school used to sit day-dreaming, drawing her face, trying to capture those enormous eyes and mouth, the hair falling down on her shoulders, now having lunch, tea, and dinner with my idol. I couldn't believe it!

She always had lots of flowers. Joan used to have gardenias everywhere. She was associated with gardenias. She always carreid them too, but I think that was just a phase. It was also during the Hollywood white phase, when everything was white — her home and her drawing room was all white.

Joan was just a lovely person with great simplicity, without any make-up on all day, and of course, after that, I used to see her on the lot at MGM and she looked like the film star, and always did. I had been to drama school, and by fluke, had a meeting with Louis B. Mayer. I wanted to be a writer, but he pressed a couple of buttons and got me a screen test. They put me on a stock contract, playing small parts, which thrilled me no end. When I used to see Joan on the lot, although I was playing bit parts and she was a major star, she would say, 'Come on Earl, we're going up to Adrian's.' And so we'd go up to Adrian's office and sit on the floor while he showed her the designs for the gowns he had prepared for her next film.

Joan used to drive a little white Ford roadster, instead of a big limousine like Norma Shearer and Jean Harlow would arrive in. Joan drove her own little car. She did have a chauffeur at the time, and he would sometimes sit beside her while she did the driving. His name was Bennett, and he drove her for a number of years. When she started seeing Franchot Tone, Bennett would drive and Joan would hide in the back seat so that she would not be seen driving down to Santa Monica where Franchot was staying.

Tommy Phipps, who is Lady Astor's nephew, was brought up at

In *Montana Moon*, 1930, with Johnny Mack Brown

Cliveden in England and went to Hollywood at that time. He was a friend of Douglas. He remembers dining with Joan and Doug one night, and after dinner Joan saying to him, 'Don't you want to go for a drive?' He naturally agreed to do so, and he remembers her driving him round Hollywood, seeming strangely and unaccountably nervous. He realised why, the next day. She announced their divorce. This was six months after I first met her.

After two years, the pressures of marriage had become insurmountable. The world's most discussed bride and bridegroom, they were constantly entertaining, which Doug loved and she had now come to abhor. Afraid and insecure, she clung to him, but when the guests had left, communication between them broke down. They had little in common outside work, bed and mutual friends, and they began to choose their own friends from different backgrounds and with different interests.

By 1929 the jazz-mad revels of the twenties were coming to an end, but Joan was still whooping it up in *Untamed* with Robert Montgomery. It was her first all-talking non-musical movie in which she played an heiress from the tropics which gave her good ground for singing the theme song 'Chant of the Jungle'. Critics noted a great improvement in outdoor sound recording in the ranch scenes of her next film, *Montana Moon*, in which she played the wild Manhattan gal who is tamed by cowboy John Mack Brown. But MGM noted the unexciting receipts of the Sylvia Thalberg-Frank Butler western drama, and realised that the Crawford jazz-baby persona was ready for revision.

Now a married woman, and conscious that her 'flapper' image belonged to her past, she entered the thirties with a more sophisticated, fashionable look, She dieted considerably and after remodelling her face with a good deal of dental work, she emerged with high cheek-bones, huge and heavily emphasised eyes, a large expressive mouth and a chiselled jawline, all setting an individual style of her own — an image which she had created and was to keep sublime for many years.

Her two next films, released in 1930, marked her changing screen role from that of the irresponsible girl-about-town to that of the more serious young woman. In *Our Blushing Brides*, a second re-hash of *Our Modern Maidens*, this time with Robert Montgomery and — again — Anita Page, she wore a blonde wig to the delight of her fans, and the film became one of the biggest box-office hits of the year.

In *Paid*, 1930, with Robert Armstrong

While establishing her star potential, she fought to express it in ways that were emotionally sustaining. She achieved this with *Paid*, again with Montgomery, which was her favourite picture. She played the role of a department-store girl falsely jailed and coming out bent on revenge. *'The moment of getting that part was crucial career-wise,'* she said. *'I knew if I scored a triumph I'd surprise my fans and attract a new audience. I knew, too, that if I failed I'd lose the audience I had built up and gain nothing. My dancing daughter days were over. . .'* The role was so dramatic and Joan's performance so intense as to set a pattern for future parts of this type. The film had begun its life on the Broadway stage nearly twenty years before as *Within the Law*, with Jane Cowl in the lead, and Joan's part of Mary Turner had been played before by Alice Joyce and Norma Talmadge. Norma Shearer had secured the leading role for herself in the MGM remake, but now she was married to Thalberg and expecting his child, the role went to Joan.

The 'sneak preview' of *Paid* tood place in San Bernardino, sixty miles east of Los Angeles. In the audience sat Irving Thalberg, eager to witness audience reaction to the studio's new star. 'Applause grew louder when the main title announced Joan Crawford,' recalled MGM's story editor, Samuel Marx. 'They were pleased. For the usual price of admission they were handed a star in an exciting new melodrama, to be followed by the regular bill. The first reel of *Paid* went smoothly. Then a scream of derision rocked the theatre.' They learnt later it was because of a reference to the payment of $20,000 a year to coolie labour — this was during the Depression! 'The studio executives, segregated in their own section, looked at one another, puzzled. Thalberg slid down in his chair, embarrassed. But the plot of *Paid* raced along, the laughter subsided and when the film ended there was loud applause.' After minor repairs to the music, and corrections to the processing of scenes that were too light or too dark, the film was released to an eager public — minus the offending reference.

Joan's next movie, however, never saw the light of day. *Great Day*

went into production as a major musical in 1930 with Harry Pollard directing and also starring John Mack Brown and Cliff Edwards. It was dropped after ten days' shooting when Mayer heard her attempt to speak like a baby-voiced ingenue.

> Joan felt Mayer had neglected *Great Day* [*Samuel Marx continued*] and, determined to maintain her position against the competing actresses at the studio, went to Mayer, put her arms around his neck and said, *'Help me, L.B.'* It was an irresistible way to his heart. *'He always responded to that,'* she said, *'But he never touched my boobs or pinched my butt. I esteemed all the gifted people with whom he worked and him most of all. In the many years he guided my career, I valued his judgment, his patience and the fact that he never played games.'*

However, Mayer screened the incomplete *Great Day* with Thalberg, who claimed that he gave it his best efforts but that deficiencies in the production could only be corrected by starting over from the beginning. Mayer ordered the picture closed down and filming never resumed.' Three of its Vincent Youmans songs, nevertheless, have been played and sung since: 'Great Day', 'More Than You Know', and 'Without a Song'.

From flaming flapper, to shop girl, to bitch goddess, no other cinema actress succeeded in establishing and maintaining herself so well as a glamorous star. Yet although she was to achieve her ambition to reign as a supreme star, she was never to achieve the acting accolades won by many of her movie contemporaries, namely Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, Irene Dunne, and later, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Vivien Leigh, Barbara Stanwyck (an incomparably better actress than Crawford who, together with Davis and Crawford formed the Hollywood triumvirate of 'strong' women), Greer Garson and Lana Turner. When Garson and Turner proved their emotional worth to their audiences and their financial worth to MGM, they were to win roles that Crawford had coveted in precisely the way that Garbo and Shearer had first choice of the plum parts in their day at Metro. Commented Paul Rotha:

> By the third year of the depression, the economic independence of women, so newly won, so precariously held, had collapsed almost completely and they were thrown back on the immemorial feminine position. In the harsh world of supply and demand, they had nothing to sell but sex.
>
> In the high tradition of popular art, the screen became the confessional which gave them absolution. The shop-girl heroine herself was an incredible being both in concept and as embodied in glamour by Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, and Barbara Stanwyck, but she was linked to the lives of her audiences by the idiomatic dialogue, the realistic minor characters, the setting of contemporary life, which sound had established as the background of the confession film. And the closer her screen adventures moved toward the experiences of her actual prototypes, the more difficult it became for her to adhere to the old ideals. She had not forsaken them in spirit; she still wanted wealth, virility, *and* respectability. But life under the depression had taught her that one might have to be sacrificed if any was to be obtained. The increasing frankness of the films centring round her was an echo of her cynical despair. At first it was only an overtone. But, by the end of 1932, it clamoured from every episode of the confession film.

As fashion had once changed in Crawford's favour, it was inevitable that *others* would come along to compete with her, projecting the change from the razzmataz of the twenties to the glamour of the

Above: In *This Modern Age,* 1931

Above right: In *Laughing Sinners,* 1931, with Italian actor, Henry Armetta

thirties; from the restrictions imposed by wartime which brought to the screen the Greer Garsons and Barbara Stanwycks, to the fifties and the June Allyson and Doris Day 'girl-next-door' image, to the sixties and the seventies look as projected by the Barbra Streisands and Liza Minnellis.

However, it could be said that Crawford had certain limitations as an actress. Because her range was more suited to romantic and dramatic parts than to high comedy, for instance, the studio tended to exploit her by type-casting her in the roles they thought were financially viable. Even as a one-time dancer, she did not achieve the successes of Ginger Rogers or Cyd Charisse. She remained a big name throughout her life despite her relative shortcomings and the poor films in which she appeared. But her difficult and temperamental nature, to which colleagues later testified, could easily be attributed to her feelings of inadequacy as an actress or a dancer — after all, she had neither formal training nor stage experience on which to fall back — and the prima donna attitude she consequently developed was doubtless to lose her parts in the future. The self-protective iron cage she was beginning to build around herself to defend her vulnerability, coupled with her progressive eccentricity, were to leave her open to comment in years to come. But for the moment, her career was moving steadily from strength to strength.

She knew that her fans came to see her 'larger-than-life' portrayals as a form of escapism. She had always appealed more strongly to the women in the audience than to the men and was convinced that they came to see *her,* rather than the movie; and what is more, she was right.

She was acutely conscious of the male star's influence and was fortunate to be teamed with most of the 'greats'. However, audiences have always been divided in their appreciation of her acting abilities. Some preferred her star-image and saw no wrong in anything she did; others found her synthetic and heartless. Many were impressed by the calculating care with which she handled her emotions, as though one were ruled more by the head than the heart, but her more critical audience found her lacking in a sense of humour and apparently invulnerable. It was a case of a chemistry which worked for some and not for others. It worked most powerfully when she played with Clark

Gable for instance, when in the next year their partnership helped her earnings to soar to a phenomenal $145,000. She was fast becoming a highly paid star, one of the studio's top box-office assets.

'Everything we did made money,' she commented at the time that the star system that had taken control of movie-making was at its peak. *'Occasionally we even made a good picture.'* 'You're going to be a great star,' Charles Bickford told her. *'But I want to be a great actress,'* she cried, realising the importance of strong stories with powerful roles for her.

Because she was so strong, she needed someone stronger as a partner; he came along in the form of Clark Gable, one-time lumberjack and oil rigger, possessed of a sturdy masculinity which enabled him both to wear clothes well and be wildly attractive to women. He had toured the west in stock companies for five years learning how to act, and Thalberg now put him under contract to MGM. *Dance, Fools, Dance* was a strong movie in which Joan starred as a girl who becomes a crime reporter when her family is ruined by the stock market. Gable was cast in a small part as an 'oily hood'. It was a box-office success despite censorship trouble with a scene of girls and boys stripping to their underwear for a midnight swim — a scene that would be played nude nowadays.

Clarke Gable's masculinity clicked. He and Joan had a certain magnetism in their scenes together, and the studio decided to cash in on their combined charisma. Sensing the Gable-Crawford impact, Mayer had Crawford's next picture, *Complete Surrender* with John Mack Brown, remade because he wanted to star Gable opposite her. It was retitled *Laughing Sinners*, and Crawford played a blonde prostitute.

Her next movie, a minor Crawford attraction, was *This Modern Age*, without Gable. Although critics predicted a financial disaster it was a smash hit. 'A shop-girl's delight,' they sniped, but Crawford — always loyal to her fans — replied, *'There must have been a lot of shop-girls, bless 'em.'*

Teamed up together again for *Possessed*, Crawford and Gable were successfully established in this heady brew of politics and sex. Its frank treatment of the latter (for 1931) ran it into censor trouble, but it was nevertheless one of the year's top grossers. In the role of a lower-

Top: In *This Modern Age*, 1931, with Neil Hamilton

Above: *'But I want to be a great actress'*

class woman determined to achieve something better from life Joan could draw on her personal background. These dramatic roles established a role for her that suited her emotionally. If marriage had heightened her sensual awareness and her ability to project suffering, separation from Doug now converted a happy-go-lucky fly-by-night into a serious young woman.

The strain of reconciling a brilliant film career with her marriage began to show. Her work demanded complete concentration, and the drive and ambition which sapped all her emotional resources left little for the marriage bed. *'At the end of the day I leave the part locked inside me. Only the make-up and the wardrobe are left at the studio,'* she confessed. Doug, whose own interests lay increasingly in art, literature and politics, drifted further and further from her, reading books and poetry while she read film scripts. *'Pictures have given me all the education I ever had,'* she admitted. *'I used to read scripts and have to look up the words to find out what they meant and how to pronounce them.'* Their choice of friends clashed; he wanted to go out, she preferred to stay in, learning her lines. Their marriage was in trouble, and they knew it.

Bessie Love remembers being present at a Hollywood party given by Ronald Colman one night:

> Ronnie said to Doug, who was there, 'Where's Joan? Why didn't she come? I knew she wouldn't come.' 'Of course she'll come,' Doug said. 'Why not?' 'Oh, I don't know. She never goes out,' Ronnie replied.
> 'She always uses some excuse like she's got sunburn and her dress was cutting in.'
> 'She'll be here, she'll be here,' Doug promised. But she wasn't.

Her love scenes with Clark Gable were convincing — and real

During the filming of *Possessed* with Clark Gable, the third of the eight films they were to make together, rumours were rife about her love for MGM's heart-throb. They had developed a close friendship and she found comfort in his sympathetic attitude towards her failing marriage.

Both still married, their meetings were necessarily fleeting and furtive. Since they were unable to be alone together for long, they arrived at the studio early each day in order to steal a few precious moments before the crew arrived. Played before the camera and film crews, their love scenes were convincing — and real. They discussed marriage on quiet walks and after long rides along the sea shore, but although theirs became a tender and caring love it was also desperately hopeless.

After a brief marriage to ex-actress Josephine Dillon who had diligently taught him the rudiments of acting, Clark Gable married thrice-wed Texas socialite Rhea Lucas Langham who was several years his senior. It was supposedly through her influence that Gable had starred in the West Coast production of *The Last Mile* (Spencer Tracy's Broadway success) at a reputedly enormous salary. Lionel Barrymore saw Gable's performance, recommended a screen test for him at MGM, and the rest is movie history.

If Gable had been free, Joan would have married him once she herself was divorced, but she respected the sanctity of his marriage to Rhea, who was a friend of hers, and refused to allow her feelings for him to destroy another woman's happiness. She and Gable, however, were currently caught up in double triangles for he was enjoying a romance with Loretta Young, whilst her attentions had turned to the man she was to marry after divorcing Doug — Franchot Tone.

In an effort to restore their crumbling marriage, she and Doug decided to take a two-month trip to London and Paris in the middle of 1932. 'It was also a delayed honeymoon,' Doug said, 'because we hadn't had a honeymoon until then.'

Noël Coward, an old friend of Doug's father, met them at the dockside at Southampton and arranged for them to see his brilliant stage success, *Cavalcade*, at Drury Lane. England received the couple like royalty. Cheered wherever they went, fans clamoured to see them, to secure their autographs or merely to catch a glimpse of their screen idols. Press and photographers fought their way through crowds of thousands in order to record the occasions. Coward introduced them to London's social scene; they met the Duke of Kent (then Prince George) and dined regularly with him. But feeling out of her depth, Joan refused to attend a garden party at Buckingham Palace, to Doug's chagrin.

The trip to England failed to re-unite them. They travelled together and stayed under the same roof in order to save face, but accepted that the marriage was over and continued in name alone. They had married when young, immature and wildly and physically attracted to one another, but now realised that they no longer suited one another. Neither side was wholly at fault; they felt equally to blame.

Hollywood gossip columnists who had already hinted at a split, were given additional ammunition when Doug became involved in an alienation-of-affections action in May 1933, the same month in which he and Joan officially separated. Unfortunately, this occurred just after Joan had given an interview to an important magazine, claiming that they were happier than ever and had no intention of parting, although the article had not yet been released.

Approached by a reporter for a statement about the $50,000 alienation-of-affections suit, Joan stated, *'There's nothing for me to say except that I have known all about this from the start. We've discussed these flagrant charges together. It is an outrageous injustice and there is no truth in them whatever.'*

Joan at the Lido, Ambassador Hotel, 1934

The perpetrators of the scandal subsequently confessed to its having been a blackmail attempt; the case was thrown out of court, and the culprits were deported, but not before Joan telephoned their business manager, Mike Levee, telling him to get Doug's clothes out of her North Bristol Avenue house. Levee protested, reminding her that he could not interrupt Doug's work over at Warner's; but Joan insisted, and Levee arranged for Doug's clothes and belongings to be collected before plucking up courage to drive over to Warner's and wait for shooting to finish.

> I was working that night in storm scenes on Somerset Maugham's sea story called *The Narrow Corner* [*Doug recalled*]. I was shivering with cold, and kept going with brandy. I'd got word just ahead of time about the break from Louella Parsons who called me on the phone wanting a statement. But then Mike came in and said, 'You're not going home tonight. You're going to the Beverly Wilshire hotel.'
>
> I had no idea that Joan had moved my belongings out [*he concluded, a little hurt*], and *that* was the end of my marriage.

Jesse Lasky Jr observed:

> I think the marriage ended because Doug got married too soon. If he'd met Joan maybe ten years or fifteen years later they would have been marvellous. But I think in a way it was the thing that ended so many marriages between people in the film world.
>
> Doug wasn't ready for marriage. He was ready for a hundred romances before he would be ready for the kind of marriage that he would settle into. He was a highly romantic figure, and Joan was increasingly attractive and I just think they couldn't have been enough for each other. What would have been enough for each other at that moment, at that beginning of marriage at nineteen, would not have been enough two years later, and they would have had to go on, because careers in films are always restless careers.

And Doug revealed some of his own feelings about Joan when he published a profile on her for a magazine:

> Joan Crawford . . . has temperament without being temperamental. She demands the things to which she knows she has the right, and will ask for no more until she knows with all sincerity she is worthy of it. When she meets with disappointment she has a tendency towards bitterness rather than remorse, which, no doubt, is a throwback from an acute memory of less happy days. She is extremely sensitive to surroundings and instantly conscious of any discord . . . She is intolerant of people's weaknesses. Jealousy is not in her make-up, but she resents those who have become successful without serving the same trying apprenticeship that she herself experienced.

'It is impossible for two people to live up to an ideal created by Hollywood publicity,' Joan defended the marriage in her final analysis of her marital failure. They were set free from one another on 13 May 1933.

But the ending left scars on Doug. In 1976 whilst on a visit to London playing the lead in *The Pleasure of His Company* on the West End stage, journalist Roderick Mann reported in the *Daily Express* that Doug had found life in Hollywood:

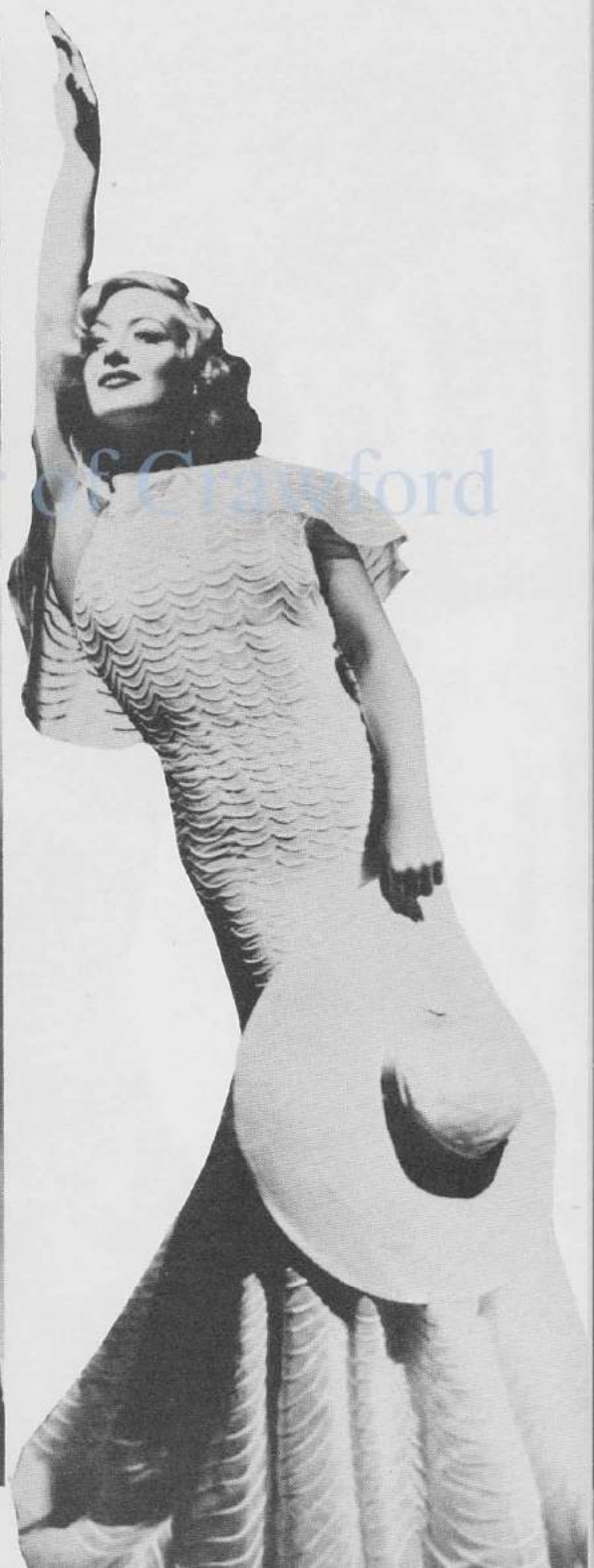
> Dreary, frustrating, dull, boring and only occasionally fun — as it can be fun on some special day even in a Siberian prison. It was not

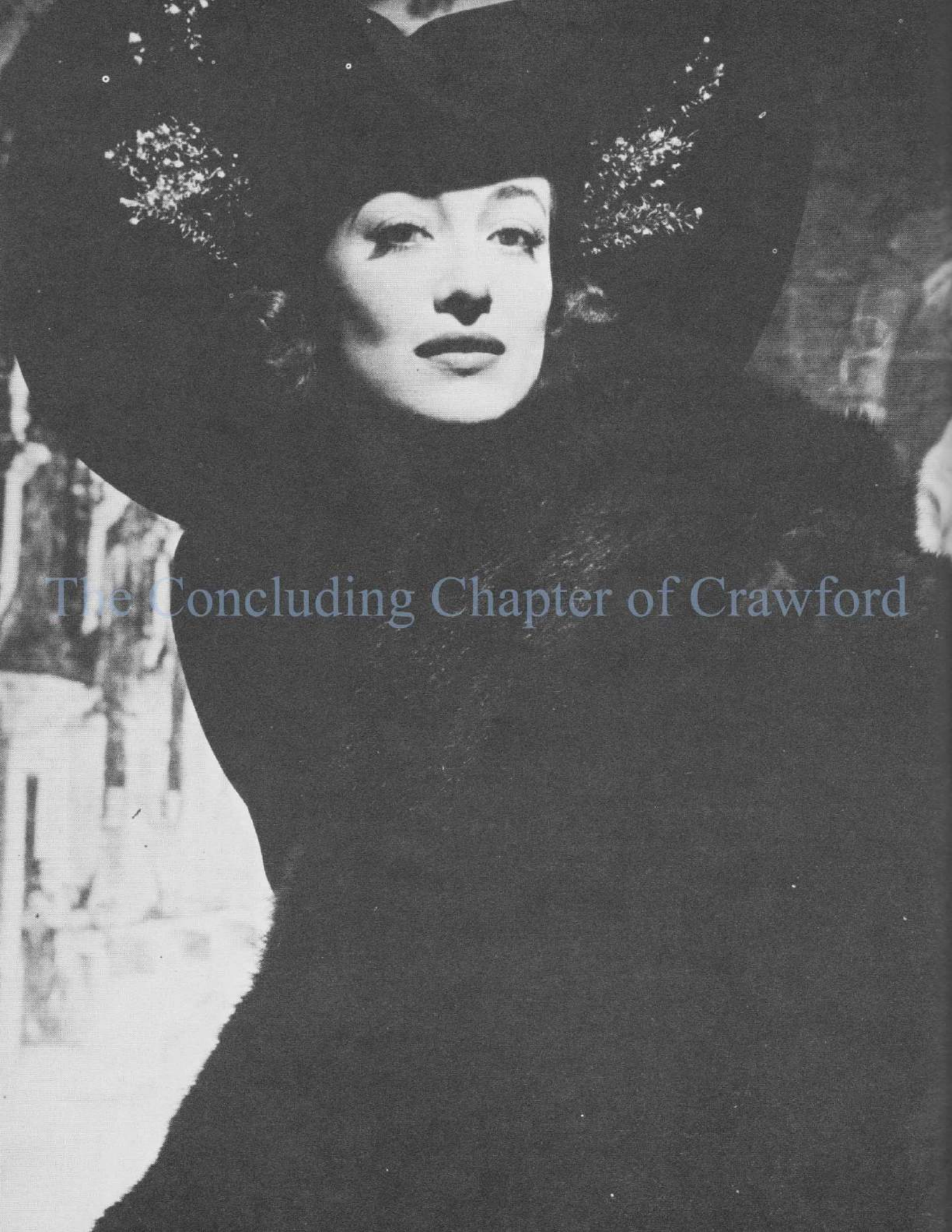
a fairyland or Baghdad or Xanadu. They talk now of Hollywood as having been a Babylon [*Doug continued bitterly*]. None of that was true. Wild parties? Well, they have them in Dubuque, Iowa, too.

For the most part, the producers were abusive tyrants who turned out things for the masses. Ninety per cent of what they made in those days was trash.

I made the decision to leave [*Hollywood*] because I was growing more and more tired and more and more frightened. Remember, however important you were in the public mind, behind the scenes you were always full of anxiety that your option wouldn't be taken up.

This anxiety drove Joan Crawford from success to success: the fear of insecurity and the consequent threat of returning to her early days of want and unhappiness.




The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

5
TIME WILL TELL

Although he was born in London, when he was one year old Sydney Guilaroff's parents took him to Montreal where he was educated; when he was fourteen, the Guilaroffs moved to New York where they made their home. At an early age Sydney came to Hollywood for a screen test, but the introvert, withdrawn young man felt inadequate and — believing that he could never become tough enough for Hollywood — returned to New York. He found a job as an apprentice in a hairdressing salon, picking up hairpins and sweeping the floor — and not many years later became MGM's top hair-stylist, reigning supreme for over forty years and creating hair fashions for the great names of film history including Garbo, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and practically every other star contracted to that studio.

The appearance of his name on screen credits seemed a guarantee of good taste, like those of the Westmore brothers and William Tuttle for make-up.

Sydney Guilaroff told me at his Beverly Hills home:

> Joan Crawford was the most influential person in my career. She was instrumental in my coming back to California, and had it not been for her, I would not have had a career at all.
>
> I first met her when she went to New York City at the time when she had just married Douglas Fairbanks Jr. They were both very young, and she was probably the most exciting new young star. She represented the youth of the day. They didn't talk as much about sex those days as they do today. These days everything is sensual, sexual, sex-appeal. Those days it was never mentioned.
>
> I was working at a salon in the city, and I had a very good clientele. One of them recommended me to her, but it was not until a year later that this beautiful creature came back.
>
> Motion pictures were coming into their own at that time. They seemed to influence people the way they wore their hair, their clothes. They set the styles; the fashions. She came at a time when you had to set a style for an individual person. She was going to do a film called *Letty Lynton* (with Robert Montgomery and Lewis Stone), and she asked me to create a hair-style for her. This I did, and she liked it so much that she went all the way back to California, carefully keeping it in place — in those days you travelled by train (over 3000 miles) — and she was so successful that she had the hair-style copied in California. She never forgot me for that. Every time she came to New York she would write to me, and she finally persuaded Goldwyn Mayer that I ought to come to MGM. And so I did, and that's how I began in movies.
>
> She was a glittering person; remarkably beautiful. I think Joan Crawford was one of the most beautiful women in the world. Very talented, and with a great sense of drama. I must say, I thought she was extraordinarily natural and sweet. She never behaved in that star manner. Today they call them super-stars. What the hell is super supposed to mean? Where does that put Clark Gable and

Left: A portrait by Horst


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

In the title role of *Letty Lynton,* 1932

Errol Flynn? Irene Dunne, Myrna Loy — and Greta Garbo? They were called *stars*. Nowadays you have a super shoeshine boy. A super football-player-star. Like instant coffee, if you can make it, you can make it.

I found Joan one of the easiest people to work with. In those days stars were a lot easier. She was very straight, very natural, and she had a wonderful sense of humour. She was very polite. Very intelligent. She was one of the first people to offer me friendship when I came to Hollywood. She would invite me to her home and give me a present at Christmas.

Guilaroff was the only stylist to look after Joan Crawford's and Garbo's hair, helping them to create an image and an individual style. He commented:

But I wasn't only interested in hair-dos. I liked the general production of movies. I would be interested in talking to producers.

Joan Crawford had the most beautiful eyes and teeth. A wonderful period jawline, and her nose was perfect. It was chiselled. Right at the bottom of everyone's nose there's a little area of imperfection, but with Joan's it was finely chiselled right at the very tip end of the nose, and the nostrils had a slight flare. She had a style of her own and a personal magnetism that was individual. It's no wonder she had such a tremendous following. Most of the time I found that just revealing her face was the best thing you could do for her . . . She looked best with her hair swept off her face, always behind her ears. . . .

In fact, I became famous, I suppose, because I worked with so many beautiful women, and they thought that I made a great contribution to them. But I would say that *she* made a great contribution to me! She helped me look like I had a great deal more talent than I had.

Joan Crawford was a perfectionist and if you're inclined that way yourself, you just give your best. She was always encouraging, and was always positive because we always tested every hair-do before a shot. Sometimes we would do so in conjunction with the hair-style specially designed for an evening gown, or a day-time dress. We would do a close-up of the hair-do, and then she'd have the dress on — and we'd do a medium shot, and then a full-length shot to see the effect of the whole thing. I used to go along to the dress-designer's room to see the clothes and the fittings so that she would look as though she had been done by one person, not by three or four different departments!

She was very clever with her make-up. Most of the established stars those days did their own make-up.

Joan's face required so little adornment, and I would be very careful not to make the hair the outstanding feature of her appearance so that it did not detract from her natural beauty, or from what she was saying on the screen. The hair-do should simply be part of the person, belonging to them, not an overriding feature of their appearance.

One of the things I liked was absolute simplicity. The simpler the hair, the better. Consequently, simplicity and naturalness don't date, never go out of style. Some of the things I have seen that I did in the past, look as though they were done today.

You evolved a style for certain individuals and they retained it for quite a while [*Guilaroff continued*]. Styles didn't change then as rapidly as they do now. Style is something that should be part of an individual, and Joan had both style and individuality.

Right: In *Letty Lynton*, 1932, with Robert Montgomery

Above: Again as Letty Lynton

Letty Lynton was the story of a wealthy New York socialite with two lovers. She returns from vacation in South America and poisons a blackmailer (Nils Asther) whom she meets on her return, but is proved innocent by lover number two, Robert Montgomery. Like *Possessed*, it was directed by Clarence Brown, who directed her in many films in the thirties and whose sensitive understanding helped to mould her in dramatic roles. With their soft-focus pictorial quality, Brown's films often verged on the sentimental, but they had a good sense of personal relationships and even his glossy, large-budget productions retained a human dimension.

The gowns which Miss Crawford wears will be the talk of your town for weeks, and *how* she wears them!' one reviewer commented on her clothes which were specially designed by Adrian, who set an individual style for her that was copied by movie-goers throughout the world.

Adrian (Gilbert Adrian), MGM's top dress designer, had created fashions for most of the mighty, and had impeccable taste, style and flair. He remained married to Janet Gaynor, one of the biggest stars in the firmament, until his untimely death in 1959. He had married her when she retired from movies in the late thirties, but she said later that she might not have stayed away from film making if her marriage to Adrian had not been so happy.

'Joan Crawford as Letty is at her best!' another reviewer raved, while yet another called it 'A shopgirl's delight'. But the film's run was short-lived, since it had to be withdrawn shortly after release as the result of a copyright infringement suit. (It had been adapted by John Meehan and Wanda Tuchock from Mrs Belloc-Lowndes' novel based on the Madeleine Smith case.) Even today it remains unavailable for general screening.

In 1932 *Variety* reported Crawford as saying:

> *I want to do some really fine things to be remembered by, and then I shall say goodbye, thanks a lot, it was lovely. But how to know when the time comes? That's why I'm always groping, seeking to learn, trying to improve myself. I want so much to fight off conceit. I must never allow myself to become self-satisfied. But I don't think I ever will. My ambition is too driving — too relentless to permit me to grow complacent. I would never, for instance, talk over the radio, 'When I did this, when I did that' — those silly, stupid*


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

In *Grand Hotel*, 1932. On the left is Wallace Beery

interviews all about oneself. Who cares? If you're important enough, people will talk about you. You don't have to do it yourself.

Her restless determination to find roles which suited her talents remained undiminished. Envious of the parts played by Shearer and Garbo, she was set on being rated in the same league. That Mayer did not consider her a straight actress because she lacked stage experience did not deter her. *'Mr Mayer accused me of camping outside his front door. The truth is, I kept an eye on the back door as well,'* she said warily. But in lighter vein, she recalls an incident when she called on him. *'Don't you stand up when a lady enters a room?'* she reproached Mayer when she stormed into his office.

'I *am* standing,' replied the short, stocky studio head, half hidden behind his large desk.

However, she could not complain about her next role, as the compassionate stenographer Flaemmchen in the movie of Vicki Baum's successful play *Grand Hotel*. In a part not dissimilar to those she had played in *Paid* and *Possessed*, she scored as the ambitious young woman of easy virtue who embarks on a series of romantic liaisons with rich men in order to achieve her own ends.

For the first time in her career she was supporting an illustrious cast of stars headed by Garbo, John and Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery and Lewis Stone. Although only the scenes with Garbo really hold up, the film has become a classic; made for a costly \$700,000 — a large budget for those days — it was a tremendous box-office success, recouping the studio's investment and a good deal besides.

Nevertheless, studio politics originally gave Crawford false hope. Desperate for a major dramatic starring role, she coveted Garbo's part as the fading ballerina. Garbo was playing hard-to-get at the time since she was negotiating the renewal of her MGM contract, and when the studio hinted that the role would be offered to Crawford she relented at the eleventh hour. Crawford, however, was accused of holding up filming because she was fed up with being *just one of the stars*.

Although she and Garbo — her favourite actress — had no scenes together, their adjacent dressing-rooms enabled her to catch periodical glimpses of Garbo rushing to and fro. She fell under the spell of the woman who had enthralled movie audiences throughout the world, but was sadly misrepresented by the press. *'I admire*

Garbo,' she told a reporter. *'I think she's a great talent.'* Yet the press accused Crawford of imitating her.

'You don't know what I suffered when I first learned what they were saying,' Crawford confessed. *'I cried, I raged, for I had worked so hard. I wish I could harden myself against criticism, rise above it; but I can't. I take my work seriously — too seriously. At least with my temperament, I can never become a static.'*

The London *Evening Standard's* film critic Alexander Walker found her acting in *Grand Hotel:*

> A performance that ran Garbo very close indeed, particularly since Garbo was much mis-cast as a ballet dancer. Whereas Joan Crawford as the secretary on the make, got the number right away. Very precise, and knowing exactly which way to turn; how much of that creamy yoke of bosom she should show.
>
> A performance that invites sympathy quite as much as Garbo, curiously enough, holds sympathy at bay. Garbo's is the classic, Joan Crawford is the pop in that film. And I think Metro held over Garbo's head the strength of Crawford's performance in order to get her to sign up again for MGM. . . .
>
> I think that Garbo realised in that picture, by virtue of its construction, she'd exposed herself to a certain kind of vulnerability that she would never do again on an MGM picture. If she appeared in another movie, it would only be in the star role, not surrounded by other stars, except the leading man.

In the late sixties, Alexander Walker prepared a tribute to Garbo for BBC television's *Omnibus* programme. It was directed by Fred Burnley. Walker continued:

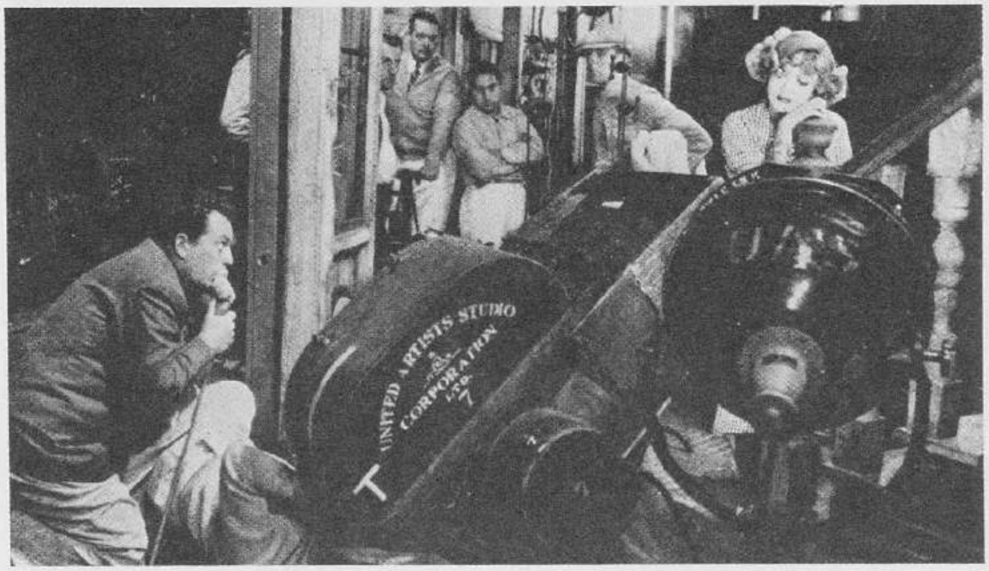
> Fred Burnley did the direction of the photography for the linking narration, and it was interesting that Joan Crawford agreed to do the linking narration for it. We had been apprehensive about asking her, but the then Head of Arts Features for BBC television, Norman Swallow, said, 'Well, let's try. All we can do is ask her', and back came the reply by cable, within an hour, from Crawford: 'I'd be delighted to do it.'
>
> Whilst recording the programme, Fred Burnley said to Crawford, 'Now Alex won't mind at all if you make some changes to the script, it it suits your delivery, by all means do so. We're very fortunate to have you, and we want you to feel comfortable with the lines.' And she replied, *'No, it's perfect for me. There's only one thing I'd like, Mr Burnley. I hope Alex won't mind, but I'd like to mention that when we were making* Grand Hotel *Miss Garbo — who was very remote indeed — and I met on the staircase, and she said to me, "This is the only film we have been in together. What a pity, eh? Our first picture together and not one scene!"'*

Crawford would not, however, have agreed to appear in a tribute programme for a lesser star. 'No, she wouldn't', Alexander Walker agreed, 'because she was the tops. Moreover, Garbo wasn't in competition with her and hadn't been in competition with any of those super-stars since 1941. If Garbo had been on the screen today, obviously Crawford wouldn't have done it, because it would have been like somebody coming out of retirement to talk about someone who was still in the limelight.'

A few years after making *Grand Hotel*, Joan Crawford boasted that nobody could imitate *her*. *'I've always drawn on myself only,'* she claimed. *'That is one of the reasons why nobody has been able to imitate me, and nobody can duplicate anything I've done. You always see impersonations of Katherine Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe, but no-one can imitate me.*

'I remember every one of my important roles the way I remember a part of my life,' she announced, *'because at the time I did them, I was the role and it was my life for fourteen hours a day.'*

Right: On the set of *Rain*, 1932
Below: Promoting *Rain*



Notorious for his unpredictable temperament, John Barrymore had astounded Garbo when, on being introduced, he took her hand, kissed it in European fashion and said, 'My wife and I think you are the loveliest woman in the world.' She was able to reciprocate when, after a particularly difficult scene with him, she turned to the crew and announced, 'You have no idea what it means to me to play opposite so perfect an artist.'

Crawford, however, did not enjoy such chivalric exchanges, and aware of his intention to upstage her, she simply and craftily wore a low-cut dress!

Grand Hotel, in which Garbo murmured to Barrymore the immortal words 'I want to be alone,' won theAcademy Award for the best picture of 1931-2, and although Crawford was voted the third top money-maker by the end of 1932, her box-office appeal took a dive with her next picture, *Rain*.

Desperate for a starring role of the same calibre as those secured by her rivals Shearer and Garbo, Crawford discovered that Warner Brothers had acquired the rights in Somerset Maugham's classic short story. She hounded MGM to loan her out so that she could play the coveted part — created by Jeanne Eagles on Broadway and for which Gloria Swanson had received an Academy Award nomination in the silent screen version — of Sadie Thompson, the Samoan prostitute who sells her favours to visiting seamen. Although directed by the highly regarded Lewis Milestone, Crawford was unable to summon up emotional reserves which did not exist and was forced to realise her own limitations.

Letty Lynton had been a vulgar woman, but was rich and had taste; however, Somerset Maugham's equally vulgar heroine required the craft of an actress of no mean dramatic ability, such as Tallulah Bankhead who scored a triumph in a Broadway revival two years later.

Ever conscious of criticisms from her loyal fans, she worried over the letters that poured in saying how much they hated her mouth make-up:

It was broad, it was bold and blatant [Crawford admitted]. *That's the kind of woman I thought Sadie was, but I hadn't the vaguest idea what she was like inside. I didn't even know then that you could work from the interior to the exterior. I was still working from the exterior. My fans wouldn't accept her. They would accept me as Letty Lynton who was just as vulgar, but she had style. Cheapness AND vulgarity they would not accept. Oh, who am I kidding, I just gave a lousy performance!*

Her critics, who gave her caustic notices, agreed. 'Because the producers have made such a strong attempt to establish the stern impressiveness of the story, it is rather slow,' commented the *Motion Picture Herald*. 'In its drive to become powerful, it appears to have lost the spark of spontaneity.' And from Abel Green in *Variety*:

> It turns out to be a mistake to have assigned the Sadie Thompson role to Miss Crawford. It shows her off unfavourably. The dramatic significance of it all is beyond her range. As for Milestone's shortcomings as an entrepreneur, apart from this being a trade surprise, the outcome is equally to be laid at his doorstep. Milestone tried to achieve action with the camera, but wears the witnesses down with words. Joan Crawford's getup as the light lady is extremely bizarre. Pavement pounders don't trick themselves up as fantastically as all that. In commercial favour of *Rain* is the general repute of the theme and Miss Crawford's personal following, but the finished product will not help either.

Alexander Walker, however, feels that 'Viewed today, though, her ability to create and sustain the part, her drive and strength of emotion, even her ruthlessly unflattering appearance, were ahead of her time. Unfortunately, it was a performance from the gut in an age that preferred glamour.'

A marked difference was shown in her make-up and clothes, elegantly muted, for her next picture *Today We Live*, but in spite of an assembly of important supporting talent, her performance was equally bad. Gary Cooper was borrowed from Paramount where he had been a star for six years; Franchot Tone was imported from New York's Group Theatre; plus Howard Hawks, who had just directed the stunning *Scarface*, and William Faulkner, the great novelist writing his first screen original. But all to no avail. She played an English girl in a slow triangular drama set in an unconvincing wartime England, with Robert Young thrown in for good measure, but *'The whole picture missed,'* Crawford confessed, *'and I missed most of all.'*

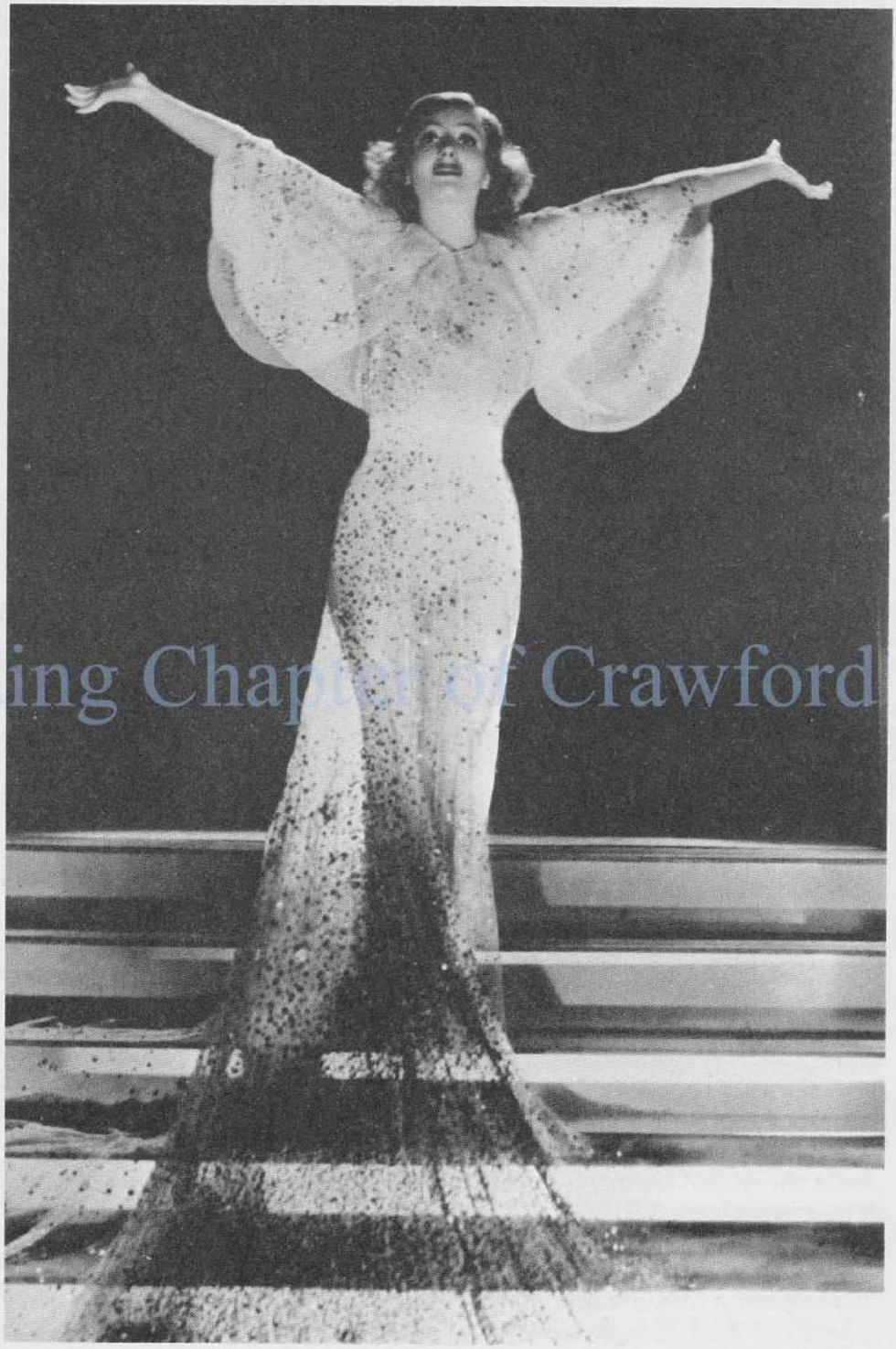
However, resurrection for Crawford was around the corner. After refusing new conditions at RKO, David O. Selznick — who was to produce such classics as *Gone with the Wind*, *Rebecca* and *The Third Man* after forming his own independent film company operating under the MGM banner — became a vice-president of MGM in charge of his own unit:

> I had the pleasure of introducing Fred Astaire to the screen by borrowing him from my former studio, which was uncertain as to what it had bought [*Selznick boasted*], and introducing him in *Dancing Lady* at MGM, a picture which also introduced Nelson Eddy, and which rescued Joan Crawford from the threatened oblivion caused by a series of flops including *Rain*.
>
> By common agreement, Crawford was on the verge of ruin, thanks to the Maugham movie and *Today We Live*. *Dancing Lady* had been shunted around for many weary months and costs were high because we waited weeks and weeks for Gable. It was important to Crawford's future that we have a fine picture, and have Gable with her.

As the secretary on the make in *Grand Hotel*, 1932, with John Barrymore

Dancing Lady became one of her biggest hits, and the studio produced a record breaker in the strong backstage story with musical trimmings on a lavish scale. Scripted by Allen Rivkin, Zelda Sears and P.J. Wolfson from James Warner Bellah's novel, it took her from a raided burlesque show with Winnie Lightner to Broadway stardom with Fred Astaire.

Above: In *Dancing Lady*, 1933, with Clark Gable
Right: In *Dancing Lady*



Now divorced from Rhea Langham, Clark Gable fell in love and married Carole Lombard, one of filmdom's most beautiful and beloved actresses who is considered to have been the most important woman in Gable's personal life. Although Lombard and Crawford both adored him, he was at the same time involved in a romance with Jean Harlow which was being played down by the studio, particularly since Harlow's new husband Paul Bern had committed suicide on their wedding night.

Consciously preserving the images of two of their biggest money-earners, MGM teamed Gable with Crawford in *Dancing Lady*, cashing in on the highly successful Ruby Keeler movie *Forty-Second Street* made by the rival Warners studio.

As tap-happy Janie, the role was second nature to Crawford, and reaffirmed her in the sort of part her fans adored, in a spot that is basically Ruby Keeler. Beautifully dressed in flowing costumes by Adrian, lavishly produced by David O. Selznick with music by Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart and Dorothy Fields (who later won an Oscar for 'The Way You Look Tonight'), it bore the hallmark of success from the start. However, it emerged as a money-spinning 'B' movie, with tough, slangy backstage repartee of the sort made by Warners, rather than a picture of the high quality carrying the usual MGM hallmark of sophistication.

Set on the Broadway musical stage with production routines including such perennials as 'Everything I Have Is Yours', the story concerns a burlesque chorus girl who aims for the big time, represented by the suave Franchot Tone, a rich Park Avenue playboy who falls in love with Janie. He offers her marriage, but as a ploy to get rid of him she agrees to wed him on condition that the show in which she is to star (and which he finances) becomes a flop, thereby proving his love for her and their ability to live on love rather than money. Trying to sabotage the production in order to win her hand, Tone comes up against the hard-boiled dance director, Clark Gable, who is determined to make it a succcess. Not surprisingly, Janie falls in love with Patch (Gable) and the show is a hit. The film was an undoubted box-office triumph in spite of Crawford breaking an ankle during filming and Gable being rushed off in mid-production for an appendicitis operation.

'*Dancing Lady* was the most successful picture Joan Crawford and Clark Gable made,' Selznick commented, 'and for years was rated by MGM as the hundred-per-cent commercial picture by which all other pictures were measured.' But Fred Astaire was dissatisfied, and left the studio announcing, 'When I die, just bury me in a Crawford-Gable picture!'

The *New York Times* commented:

> Undaunted by the scathing remarks made against it, the back-stage story rears its head more impudently than ever in the picture *Dancing Lady* which has found a home at the Capitol. It is for the most part quite a lively affair, but nevertheless one constructed along the familiar lines. The closing interludes are given over to a lavishly staged spectacle which by some stroke of magic the leading male character is supposed to put on in an ordinary-sized theatre. It looks as though it might be better suited to the Yale Bowl or Chicago's Soldiers' Field. The dancing of Fred Astaire and Miss Crawford is most graceful and charming.

Although Crawford had many escorts including Harry Rapf and Caesar 'Butch' Romero, her big love was Clark Gable. Her romance with him had ended because of his liaison with Jean Harlow and marriage to Carole Lombard, and her own growing affection for actor Franchot Tone, whose background seemed so similar to that of Douglas Fairbanks Jr. Son of an industrial magnate, his impeccable breeding had provided him with a graduate degree at Cornell University, whereupon he turned to the theatre and became a follower of the prestigious Group Theatre.

She admired his reserve and found him an intelligent, serious young man who preferred quiet evenings dining alone with her at the Beverly Hills Hotel to dancing till the early hours at the Coconut Grove. Kind and patient, calm and understanding, he was completely different

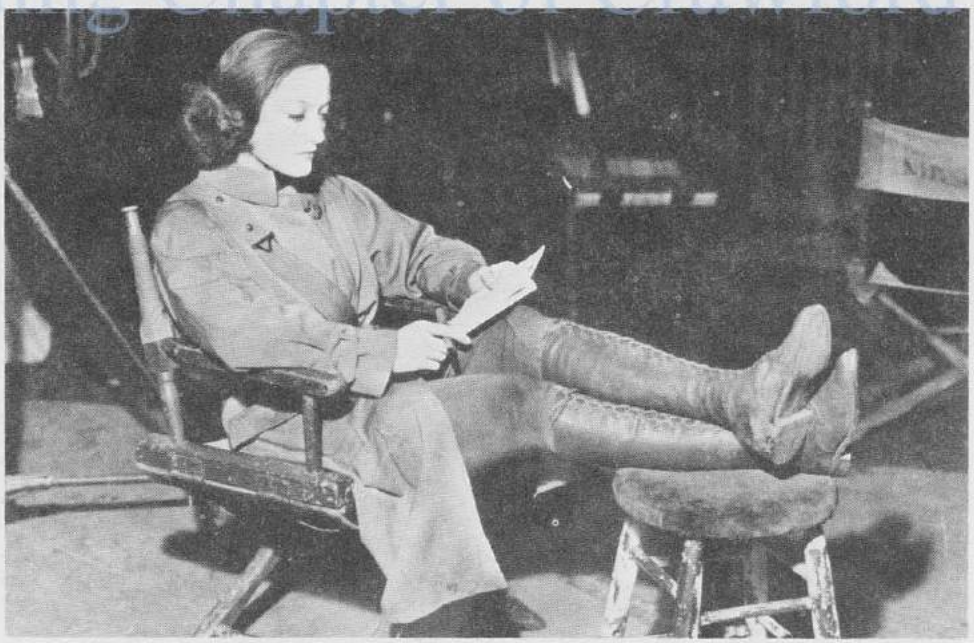
from her acquaintances who peopled the Hollywood that was so familiar to her. He was rich, the possessor of the society family background and education which she lacked, and which she admired as much in him as she had in Douglas. A gentleman in the true sense of the word, he treated her with the considerations and courtesies she commanded and enjoyed. He was introvert; she, extrovert.

Tone had met William Haines over dinner at Tallulah Bankhead's one evening; not realising that he was a close friend of Crawford's, he made a disparaging remark about her. Haines jumped to her defence. 'She's my dearest friend,' he said. 'No-one can criticise her but me. Now you never say another word about Miss Crawford until you meet her. And when you do, do you know what? You'll not only like her, you'll fall in love with her!'

And that is precisely what he did when he saw her on the set of *Today We Live*, in which he played a supporting role. He bided his time until an opportunity to get to know her better arose during *Dancing Lady*, and their friendship grew throughout filming. She became interested in his theatrical career, learning from him the methods employed by the Group Theatre — in particular the techniques of Stanislavsky of whom she had never heard!

She valued his theatrical knowledge, and was impressed to learn that he had played with Katharine Cornell in *The Age of Innocence* and had starred in the Theatre Guild's production of *Green Grow the Lilacs*. A solid theatre career had provided him with the stagecraft and acting experience she lacked. He opened her mind to literature by introducing her to Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw, reading to her from the classics and introducing her to the arts and to opera.

Rumours grew about their romance, and as they were both free they had no need to hide their feelings for one another — only from gossip writers.



After she had completed filming *Dancing Lady*, Franchot Tone persuaded her to join him on a visit to New York for the opening of the Group Theatre's *Men in White*. Conscious of the need to avoid publicity, Tone assured her that New York was unlike Hollywood and that they would be inconspicuous there; yet as they pulled into Grand Central Station, a battery of photographers rushed forward and reporters questioned her about plans to marry Tone as she stepped off the train.

She was saved from an embarrassing situation by the man who was to become her most ardent follower, and the self-appointed president of her world-wide fan club. Dore Freeman, Senior MGM publicist,

Right: On the set of *Today We Live*, 1933

With her close friend Cesar 'Butch' Romero

possesses the largest collection of Crawford memorabilia in the world, which he guards jealously but will proudly show to visitors who pay homage at the shrine of his beloved goddess at his home in Hollywood:

> I came from humble beginnings in Louisville, Kentucky [*he said*], and travelled to New York where I became a Western Union messenger.
>
> My first encounter with Joan Crawford was when I delivered telegrams to her at the railway station when she arrived in New York from California. I was the first to see her before she left the train, and the last to see her when the train departed for the West Coast. Messengers were always allowed on the platform before anyone else on arrival of the train, and also after everyone else had been cleared away before the train departed, to deliver last-minute cables.
>
> I became a fan of hers the first time I saw her, and went to every movie she made . . .

Freeman would wait outside the famous *21* Restaurant in New York, where she dined before going to the theatre, in order to open her car door when she went in and again when she came out, then would race to the theatre to do the same there:

> Then I used to wait for the curtain fall, and in the meantime I'd tell the traffic officers to put her car in front of the line so that she could be first out . . . the police co-operated, and I would be there to wave her off.
>
> She must have appreciated my efforts because later, under her influence, I came to California. She had put in a good word for me at MGM, so I got a job in the publicity department. Mind, I was young then, and had to begin at the bottom of the ladder, so my first duties were to carry large pails of water to the men who pasted the movie posters up on the bill-boards.
>
> I worked my way up until I got into the stills department. It was my job to sort out the movie stills for promotion, and I soon learnt to respect the stars' wishes about what they wanted released, and what they wanted 'killed'. Naturally, Joan Crawford had stills approval in her contract, and we used to sit together selecting the best, and putting aside the doubtful ones. In time she learnt to trust my judgement, and left the selecting to me.

Over the years Freeman has assembled in his private collection not only thousands of Joan Crawford's movie stills, immaculately kept in large albums in chronological order, but posters and sheet music from the background music of her movies as well.

He indicated half a dozen music sheets propped up on an upright piano in the corner of his sitting room — 'I bought each one of them for a dollar apiece.' He paid $800 for a piano on which to display them, but cannot play a note of music!

Pinned to the walls and doors of his hall, sitting room, bedroom and den, are hundreds of stills of Crawford and artists' impressions of her.

The blonde wig she wore in *Torch Song* is propped up on a wig block in his bedroom, while the diamanté-studded mesh-hose she wore in the same movie dangles lifelessly from a picture frame containing a photograph of her wearing them. A large velvet bow taken from the dress she wore in *The Gorgeous Hussy* is pinned to another film portrait of her wearing the dress. 'I couldn't afford to buy the entire dress when it came up for sale at the MGM auction,' he explained, 'but they allowed me to purchase that bow.'

With Dore Freeman in California, president of her fan club

The black leotard designed by Adrian which she wore in *Mannequin* is displayed on another wall, but pride of place on a ledge above his bed is reserved for a white plaster mask of her face, sculpted by MGM's make-up genius William Tuttle who used to try out and create Crawford's make-up before applying it to her features.

Freeman's most prized possession is in a glass case on the sitting-room mantelpiece: a watch, inscribed on the back *Time Will Tell.*

'That was given to me by Miss Crawford,' he says with reverence.

'What is the significance of those words?' I asked.

When she came to New York [*he explained*] there was a lot of speculation about her intentions of marrying Franchot Tone.

As a Western Union messenger, I went to Grand Central to deliver telegrams to her. The press pushed forward as she got off the train and kept asking about Franchot Tone, and when they were going to marry . . . the more she tried to evade the issue, the more they pressed her. She didn't want to mislead the press, nor to betray their trust in her, and I finally pushed forward and said 'Time will tell. Joan . . . tell them 'Time will tell'.

Fortunately, the crowd roared with laughter at this, and stopped asking about Franchot Tone. But what they didn't know was that he was on the train *with her,* and could have emerged at any moment!

She was so grateful for my saving the day that she contacted Western Union later to find out who the messenger boy was. As you can imagine, it was practically impossible for them to know which of their hundreds of messengers had delivered her telegrams that day, but she persisted, and finally discovered it was me.

We finally met, and to show her gratitude, she got me the job at MGM in Hollywood and gave me this watch as a memento.

A sizeable reward for a passing remark.

6

AN ARCHAIC GREEK MASK

On her return to Hollywood, Joan Crawford began filming *Sadie McKee*, playing a housemaid in a negligible magazine piece. She secured for Franchot Tone a supporting role as her wealthy employer's son, which guaranteed his presence beside her both on the set and off. Her role, in the true Crawford formula, made no particular demands on her acting skills, so she decided instead to *look* different by allowing her hitherto-plucked eyebrows to grow naturally, and enlisted the help of Adrian to simplify her costume designs. Not for the first time, or the last, she played a poor girl forced to choose between a rich man, played brilliantly by Edward Arnold as a happy alcoholic, and true love — Franchot Tone — but tempted by Gene Raymond who croons to her the theme song, 'All I Do is Dream of You'. Needless to say, Tone wins the day.

The *New York Times* reported:

> Clarence Brown's direction of *Sadie McKee* is studied and in its way effective but it scarcely improves the flow of the story. There are many static interludes, a great deal of talk, which is by no means as interesting as the producers evidently thought it to be. Miss Crawford assuredly does well by her part, but even so the incidents in which she appears often are hardly edifying. It is in fact an exasperating type of motion picture.

'Miss Crawford seems a bit miscast in the role of girlish innocence,' added the *New York Herald Tribune*, 'but she does a competent job with Sadie, and in certain of her scenes is genuinely moving.'

MGM's morals clause was strict, and each contract artist signed up agreed 'Never to become drunk, commit indecencies or misbehave in any way in public.' Crawford could hardly co-habit openly with Tone, and so he moved house from Santa Monica to be near her in Brentwood. She set to work to decorate and make comfortable their

In *Sadie McKee*, 1934

In *Sadie McKee*, 1934, with Franchot Tone, her second husband

home, and contracted her close friend William Haines (who had given up acting to become a top interior decorator) to help them.

Franchot Tone became a settling influence on the once-erratic star, who leaned on him for advice and trusted his judgement implicitly. His calm manner and sound counsel helped her to feel more secure than she had ever been. For a time, at least, she ceased to feel inadequate.

There now followed two more films with Clark Gable; *Chained* and *Forsaking All Others*, consolidating a match on screen that pleased fans and box-office alike.

Clarence Brown gave the Clark Gable-Joan Crawford crowd-attraction sex-magnetism full reign in *Chained*, guaranteeing a box-office success for Edwin Selwyn's uninspired story, scripted by John Lee Mahin. Otto Kruger played her married paramour whom she ditches for South American Gable. As the two rivals dramatically endeavour to resolve her future, she stands aside in typecast impassive emotion, as in many of her other movies such as *Sadie McKee*, and later on in *Daisy Kenyon*.

Joan with her pet dachshunds

Richard Watts, Jr, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, wasn't in the least impressed with the results, and said so in no uncertain terms:

> May I say that although I expect the film to make a million dollars for its producers, it seemed to me just an earnest camera treatment of a snappy serial in one of the dressier sex magazines. Since the picture doesn't even attempt to go in for credibility, no one should blame Miss Crawford or Mr Gable for failing to give real portrayals in their romantic roles. The two stars who certainly know their business, wisely decide to pass their time tossing charm and personality all over the place, which is obviously what the film requires for audience appeal.

Her next triangle love-story, *Forsaking All Others*, with Gable and Robert Montgomery making it a three-star love affair, provided a role for Crawford that had been created on Broadway by Tallulah Bankhead in the E. B. Roberts — F. M. Cavett comedy. She is jilted at the altar by Montgomery in the first scene, consoled by Gable in the second, and after being spirited away from him for an abortive

Mr and Mrs Franchot Tone at Home

weekend by the repentant groom, returns to Gable whom she decides she really loves. 'It is one of Miss Crawford's best performances,' reported *Variety*. 'She is believable thro-out. That tongue-in-cheek moralising which often marks many of her sagas is largely missing. This is just a semi-rowdy, semi-drawing room eternal triangle.'

Rosalind Russell, who appeared with Crawford, Gable, Robert Montgomery and Billie Burke in *Forsaking All Others*, said:

> Joan Crawford *behaved* like a star. Some do. Some don't. Some people just come along, like Kate Hepburn, who came in blue jeans to work. Of course, it made plenty of news. That was before my time, when she first went out there.
>
> But Joan was an actress both off and on the screen. She behaved as many don't. Those days they did more, you know? . . . When we did *Forsaking All Others*, I was always rather a slob. I used to play poker with the stage hands in between scenes.
>
> You know, when Joan came on the set, *somebody* came on the set. I would just slop on any old way, as it were, and say, 'Where's the game?' 'There. Behind the scenery,' one of the boys would say, and I would join them. And Joan would always pass by and stop, I remember, and watch me, shaking her head. Not disapprovingly, just 'What is that? What are you doing?' She couldn't believe her eyes.

Although many were frightened of Crawford, Rosalind Russell was not.

> No. Not at all. I remember her asking one day if I wore a girdle. I was very thin those days! 'Where did you buy it?' she asked. So I replied, 'I don't wear a girdle.' So she always tried to be friendly, but not to the extent of saying, 'When can we have lunch?'
>
> She obviously had very strong likes and dislikes, but thank goodness, she liked me, although she didn't know me very well at all.
>
> She was very much the star. I think that's a very important thing to remember about her, that she was in command of what she did. Now, if she was not that confident herself, she certainly gave a

In *Chained*, 1934, with Clark Gable

Below: Relaxing

damned good performance of somebody that was!

Of course, I think she had some difficulty, like many in our profession, of combining her career and her personal life. Her marriages, for instance. As I said, that's why I think she was a star off-screen as well. She was a meticulous housekeeper too. She saw to it. She *lived* the life of a star. When you walked into her house, it looked as though a star lived there.

Crawford's next picture, *No More Ladies*, a sophisticated romantic comedy produced by Irving Thalberg which co-starred Robert Montgomery and her new love Franchot Tone, suited her perfectly since she was co-directed by the stalwart George Cukor, who had a genius for directing women and understanding the feminine mind. The film was originally directed by Edward H. Griffiths, but Cukor did retakes for it; he later directed her in three more pictures, *The Women*, *Susan and God* and *A Woman's Face*.

Cukor, who later directed Garbo in *Camille*, has over fifty major films to his credit, apart from the three in which he directed Crawford and the two Garbo movies (the other was her last, *Two Faced Woman*); perhaps the most memorable are *A Bill of Divorcement* starring Katharine Hepburn, *Dinner at Eight* (Marie Dressler and Jean Harlow), *Little Women* (Katharine Hepburn and Joan Bennett), *Romeo and Juliet* (Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard), *Gaslight* (Ingrid Bergman), *A Star is Born* (Judy Garland), *Bhowani Junction* (Ava Gardner) and *My Fair Lady* (Audrey Hepburn).

'Joan Crawford was in the great tradition of a movie queen', George Cukor reflected from the drawing room of his immaculate Hollywood home which, with its thirties decor, reflects the period of some of his great successes. He had recently made his first venture into directing a film for television, and before us in place of honour on the low coffee table stood the majestic gold Emmy Award he had won for *Love Among the Ruins*, which he had made for the American Broadcasting Company; he seemed to be as proud of this television award as he was of the Oscars he had won in fifty years as Hollywood's director supreme.

When Crawford appears on the screen [*he continued*], something happens. That is what they have to have to appeal to the great public. Aside from that, she was a gifted actress. She had this extraordinary face. George Hoyningen Huene (the great Russian-born photographer who had worked for *Vogue* in Paris and *Harper's Bazaar* in New York before going to Hollywood where he taught photography and was colour consultant to Cukor on a series of films) said that she had a face like an archaic Greek mask; the bones and everything.

I remember when I worked with her, it didn't matter what angle they photographed her from. She looked good from all angles. Any way she was filmed was fine for her. That is the essence. She was one of the people that made Hollywood the place that touched the imagination of the world. Joan was one of those great, great creatures, a great movie queen along with Gloria Swanson, Garbo and the rest of them.

I found her very hard working and very conscientious. A very accomplished performer. She was nurtured in the wisdom of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, which was very wise. All the stars at that studio were nurtured by MGM, by Irving Thalberg, and they gave varied opportunities to try this thing and that. She really is in the tradition of the golden days of Hollywood.

To a question about her taking direction, he replied:

Anyone depends on the director. They're clever, practical women,

and if they don't deliver the goods, that's that. But I found her very sympathetic and willing to try anything. I think only a stupid woman, working with a director, would be a bore to him. These days they say 'I must express myself.' Well, I wonder what the hell they were doing those days? They *were* expressing themselves. That doesn't mean you're dictating, or you're coaching them. But there are all these clichés about stealing pictures and how they take direction. Obviously when you're working with an actor, you're not a teacher and you're not a dictator. You work together.

Joan was nurtured on the camera, and she was very knowledgable about it. She wasn't aware of it, she didn't act *to* the camera, but she acted *for* it. She knew a great deal about it. She got into movies very young, and she had this wonderful equipment for the screen. She had this marvellous face for the screen that moved beautifully, and that welcomed lights. She was this extraordinary photogenic creature, and if had she started on the stage, she might equally have become a top stage actress.

In *I Live My Life*, 1935

But she lacked a sense of humour about herself, and Cukor helped her find it. *'To me, Cukor can do no wrong,'* she enthused. *'He makes you have a sense of humour about yourself. Till I met him, I didn't have one.'*

No More Ladies, another triangle love story with Robert Montgomery and Franchot Tone vying for her favours this time, became the envy of competing studios. Crawford, dressed by Adrian and lit by Oliver, personified the MGM look and became the stuff the masses' dreams were made on. The film exactly captured its highly polished glamour and psuedo-sophisticated romance, while the Donald Ogden Stewart-Horace Jackson script from A. E. Thomas' play supplied a dash of genuine wit. The *New York Herald Tribune* reported that:

> Miss Crawford's portrayal of Marcia, the worldly innocent who marries a rake and almost goes away with another man when she finds her husband has been unfaithful to her, is incisive but unconvincing. The sophistication of her attitude towards matrimony and life is less a mood of her own creation than a pattern of gestures and spoken lines. She is handsome and engagingly defiant in the scene that brings together her husband's former conquests and marks her attempt to pay him back in kind for his infidelity, but on the whole hers is not a distinguished performance.

She was, however, to pay tribute to Adrian, who created the 'MGM look' that became the envy of rival studios. *'Adrian toned me down in colour and line and gave me the tailored look women have treasured ever since,'* she complimented. *'Trying to cope with my broad shoulders, he decided to emphasise them: result, the broad-shouldered look that became an overnight sensation and dominated women's styles throughout the thirties.'*

After making *No More Ladies*, she left for New York with Franchot Tone; dining with the Lunts one night, and seeing how happy they were together even though they were both actors, she felt that she and Tone could make a go of marriage after all, and they became engaged. In 1935, she was dropped in favour of Jean Harlow for a second time when the musical *Reckless*, which had been designed for her, was given to Harlow. Directed by Victor Fleming, William Powell was the leading man, with Franchot Tone and May Robson playing supporting roles.

Instead, she was given another Crawford formula film *I Live My Life*, in which she played a bored society girl who takes a holiday abroad and meets a young archaeologist (Brian Aherne) in Greece. He falls in love with her, and follows her back to New York, but she

merely strings him along, losing her opportunity of lasting happiness.

She was constantly being asked to appear on radio shows, then the vogue for stars of her calibre, so the future Mrs Franchot Tone now agreed to do a major broadcast on the *Gateway to Hollywood Show*, before a live audience as the result of her fiancé's persuasion. The show was the brain-child of Jesse Lasky, Hollywood movie pioneer, whose son Jesse Lasky Jr, now living in London, remembers:

> I recall that it was a show with two unknown drama students, people who wanted to be stars, working with two of the greatest stars my father could find, and I believe that his first choice was Joan Crawford to be on the *Gateway to Hollywood*, because he said that she was certainly one of the greatest actresses that had come out of Hollywood. There were other actresses who had come out of the New York stage; there was Ginger Rogers, Claudette Colbert, Ruth Chatterton, Miriam Hopkins, but they were all originally theatre people. But Joan was a genuine product of

In *I Live My Life*, 1935, with Frank Morgan

> Hollywood — she was pretty well matured in Hollywood. She hadn't had any theatre background, so he felt she was the ideal representative of Hollywood, because she hadn't been drenched in scandal; she hadn't become alcoholic and she hadn't deteriorated as some did. She had gone from improvement to improvement . . . becoming lovelier and lovelier in the best sense, and this is why he wanted her to represent Hollywood in his *Gateway to Hollywood* programme. She appeared in the very first of these plays which were specially written.

Jesse Lasky Sr recalled:

> The ambitious young performance would be screen-tested on the network. A boy-girl team starred each week in specially written radio playlets with people like Joan Crawford, Claudette Colbert, Edward G. Robinson, Cary Grant, and so on.

Crawford dutifully appeared, but was petrified and as a result resolved never to come before a live audience again. *'To this day,'* she admitted, *'I've never accepted a stage part, much as I'm tempted, because I haven't the guts. When I was a chorus girl, there was a whole line of us to bolster each other!'*

However, in her search for artistic maturity under Franchot Tone's influence, she played *Elizabeth the Queen* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*

with him on sound radio.

Franchot Tone had been loaned to Paramount for *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, in which he and Gary Cooper played the two British brother officers, and when Robert Montgomery refused to appear in MGM's *Mutiny on the Bounty*, starring Clark Gable, Tone was given his role of Byam, the British gentleman who goes to sea. This was the one part which could have made him a star, but although he earned an Oscar nomination, he returned to the part of the gracefully handsome gentleman-in-residence at MGM. He seemed destined to play the part of himself, the sophisticated, wealthy, intelligent aristocrat.

Always conscious that the press were keeping watch on their every move, Crawford and Tone surreptitiously slipped away to New York and managed to arrange a secret wedding in New Jersey on 11 October 1935.

But Joan's wedding night was marred by a distressing communication. Two previous attempts at blackmail had failed, but now an anonymous telephone caller threatened to publicise a reel of film which purported to show her dancing in the nude — one of the 'stag' films which gossip-mongers had accused her of making in her early Hollywood days. However, taking the opportunity to vindicate herself, she asked the caller to send the film along to J. Robert Rubin, MGM's representative and legal adviser in New York who declared that the woman in the film bore no resemblance whatever to her. Blackmail threats ceased thereafter, together with any suggestions of her ever having been a hooker in her early days — but it is not known how much MGM paid for the reel of film, which was never seen again.

The rumours, however, still persist in Hollywood to this very day. When I was in California researching the book, her contemporaries and owners of memorabilia shops whose stock in trade was selling nostalgia made mention of rumours that in the mid-1920s Lucille LeSueur, like so many of the other young Hollywood hopefuls, who were free and unattached, were not only, even by today's standards, sexually promiscuous, but were also prepared to use sexual promiscuity as a means to further their movie careers. It is also said that later on in the 1930s she reversed the coin by expecting her leading men to offer their favours in return for their co-starring parts with her in movies. Many of the leading men, however, including Robert Taylor, Clark Gable, Gary Cooper and Franchot Tone (whom she subsequently married), are no longer alive to refute this and it must remain as unsubstantiated gossip.

As we have seen, marriage to Tone gave her some interest in the theatre. Although still refusing to appear on the stage, he did encourage her to attend discussions at the Group Theatre. Through her new-found love she cultivated a different circle of friends, and so seriously did she consider the teachings of the Group Theatre that she took singing lessons as well. Having met the great soprano Rosa Ponselle, who was visiting California, she went so far as to sing opera duets with her — both in the privacy of her drawing room and on disc. Although Crawford had sung in musicals, hers was hardly an operatic voice and the recordings were never released . . .

Under the influence of the Group Theatre's serious approach to acting, her own attitude to the film roles she wished to play now changed. She wanted to replace the 'Crawford formula' film parts with more serious roles.

'I only know that I wanted good parts, valid and varied parts,' she complained about typecasting, *'and that I battled constantly to try to get them. To no avail. From* Dancing Lady *on, every picture I made was formula.'*

'You're an American girl,' Louis B. Mayer tried to reason with her. 'The public thinks of you as Cinderella.'

But Joan commented:

And sure enough, she learnt to ice-skate without any trouble.

We have both been referred to as perfectionists, but I don't know what that word means. If it means trying to keep things going by learning your craft so that you can get it done to the best of your ability and not have the acting show, then I suppose that's what it is. If it means standing up against this tremendous technical thing which you have to cope with in the movies all the time; doing things with credibility and being believable when you're surrounded by machines and cameras and technical men with lights and everything else to surmount, then I suppose I am a bit of a perfectionist. This is part of a craft that takes learning, and if you get so that it doesn't bug you, then you can understand why Joan Crawford was so good at her job.

It wasn't a question of take after take with Joan Crawford either, [*he said, when asked whether her performance varied*]. It was a question of one or two takes, and that was it. Oh, a very few stars became famous for the take after take routine, and half a dozen

In *The Gorgeous Hussy*, 1936

takes and everything, and for some reason this has become a sort of thing that lots of people feel is the way movies are made . . . There are lots of directors, some of the finest directors, who would simply refuse to do more takes. John Ford, for instance. Three takes would be his maximum. Number one, he would be furious, and number two he would probably print. With a lot of them, the spontaneity was a tremendously important thing. The fact that you can't have it show, is, I think, where Joan scored. It was a good quality that she enjoyed. By learning her craft Joan was a very graceful person, not in the sense of being a ballet dancer, but in her grace of moving, and in her natural movement. This is the thing that added to her glamour.

Acting with her there was little rehearsal. It was more or less spontaneous.

Asked whether she gave her usual 'Crawford formula' performance even though *The Gorgeous Hussy* was her first costume picture, Stewart replied:

When you saw Joan Crawford there, right in front of your eyes, she was Joan Crawford up there, whether she wore a bathing suit or a long regal gown. She was Joan Crawford, but the skill and perfection was the fact that she could be Joan Crawford, but with deference to the character, and make the character believable on the screen. I always quote Spencer Tracy in this respect. Somebody

came up to him and said, 'Don't you get tired just playing Spencer Tracy?' And he replied 'Well, what do you want me to play? Humphrey Bogart?'

In pictures it isn't really a question of getting up and by some magic transforming yourself into someone else.

Joan Crawford had tremendous drive and ambition. Did James Stewart believe that the ambition was there anyway or had it been created as a result of her work at the studio? Had the competition created the ambition?

Sure. It's a tremendously competitive thing [*he replied*], I mean, it was in those days, immensely competitive, because it was good. Not only competitive between the studios but in the studios themselves . . . People say there was no freedom for anybody, but this isn't true. There was lots of freedom, but it was an anchor type that you could bargain. You could say, 'Well, if I do this and that you have me up for, could I do the other?' The competitive side of things those days was very good.

Joan Crawford was an exceptionally strong person. Could Stewart detect no weakness in her character?

Strength is a good way to describe Joan. But I didn't notice any weakness in her. When she came into a room, whatever kind of room it was, everybody knew it. Everybody turned around and looked. Well, that's strength, but she didn't come on strong. It wasn't a force thing. She didn't need that to exude that strength.

I think of the correct definition of glamour as this; when suddenly everything got quiet and you turned around, as if for no reason, there she was. She came down and everybody sort of stopped and looked. I suppose that's what glamour means. But pretty hard to describe technically. She certainly had glamour.

Yet if *The Gorgeous Hussy* provided James Stewart with a suitable role to display his talents, not so Franchot Tone who was given no more than a twenty-six line part as War Secretary John Eaton who marries Peggy in the end. After winning an Oscar nomination for *Mutiny on the Bounty*, he had suffered a setback in having to play so small a role, yet it was Crawford — humiliated and horrified on his behalf — who protested to Louis B. Mayer.

Below right: In *The Last of Mrs Chaney*, 1937, with Robert Montgomery and William Powell

'We can't have a great cast like this, Joan,' Mayer explained, 'and then have you walk away into the sunset with some unknown actor. We *have* to have an important actor of Franchot Tone's calibre.'

The studio won its case, but it was to cost Crawford her marriage. From then on, Tone realised more than ever that he would always be overshadowed by her cinema reputation. Whatever love they had between them now seemed to have cost him his rightful place in pictures. He was too withdrawn, too much of a 'gentleman' to complain or fight, and so he suffered in silence. Deeply hurt, he yet realised there was little he could do; he was under contract to the studio, and could be suspended for refusing their wishes. He was, moreover, married to the star of the picture, who was also one of the studio's top money earners. Trapped in this invidious position, he was earning for himself the tag 'Mr Joan Crawford,' and there seemed little he could do to change the situation.

If marriage to Franchot Tone began to provide less and less happiness, at least the Group Theatre connection to which he had introduced her seemed to have paid off, for although *The Gorgeous Hussy* itself was not an overwhelming success, her dramatic part provided her with the prestige she sought. Directed by Clarence Brown, who directed Garbo in her formidable successes, *Hussy* was produced by Joseph Mankiewicz, a man for whom she developed the highest regard and who produced her next few films.

There now followed *Love on the Run*, also produced by Mankiewicz, which co-starred Clark Gable as a newspaper reporter who falls in love with an heiress (Crawford) who is betrothed to a Prince involved in espionage in Europe. Franchot Tone was given his regulation role, stringing along as a rival reporter, but needless to say Gable won her hand in the end.

'A slightly daffy cinematic item of absolutely no importance,' criticised the *New York Times*, 'with Joan Crawford, Clark Gable and Franchot Tone in roles that by now are a bit stale. In all good conscience, the film ought to bow, in turn, to several distinguished antecedents, for it has borrowed liberally here and there of tried and true screen devices and situations.'

Heeding her critics' advice, the studio now regretfully attempted to move away from the Crawford formula movies. The first of two flops which marked her film output for 1936 was Frederick Lonsdale's *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*, a courageous stab at allowing Crawford to portray a British society jewel-thief who is caught red-handed — a role previously played by Ina Claire on Broadway in the mid-twenties and by Norma Shearer in an earlier talkie version in 1929. She failed dismally in her effort to play an English aristocrat (she had failed to play an Englishwoman convincingly once before in *Today We Live*), even though ably supported by William Powell and Robert Montgomery.

The second misguided venture was *The Bride Wore Red*, adapted by Bradbury Foote and Tess Slesinger from an unpublished play by Ferenc Molnar, *The Girl From Trieste*. It was made by Dorothy Arzner, Hollywood's only woman director for many years, and produced by Joseph Mankiewicz. The film co-starred Robert Young, and Franchot Tone was dragged along as usual in a supporting role. The plot concerned a waterfront café singer posing as a society belle, but only succeeded in earmarking itself as the last picture in which Tone appeared with his wife. 'With a new hair-do and more wide-eyed than ever,' the *New York Herald Tribune* said of Crawford, 'she plays at being a slattern, a fine lady and a peasant with all the well-known Crawford sorcery. It is not entirely her fault that she always remains herself. The film has no dramatic conviction and little of the comic flavor that might have made it amusing though slight. Your enjoyment of it will depend on how much of Miss Crawford you can take at one stretch . . .'

Below: In *The Bride Wore Red*, 1937

Above: In *The Bride Wore Red*, 1937
Right: With *Hollywood Reporter* columnist, Radie Harris

She would have done well to have heeded David Selznick's advice when, before embarking on *The Gorgeous Hussy*, he'd explained to her that she was too modern to do costume pictures.

His failing marriage began to take its toll on Franchot Tone's career. He lost faith in himself and in the industry which had wooed him from the theatre that he loved so much; Crawford suffered two miscarriages, and their marriage failed to produce the children they had hoped would bring them together. It was time for the parting of the ways.

Their last film together threatened her own career as well. The twenties flapper, who had developed into the sophisticated young woman of the thirties, appeared to have lost direction as far as the public and her critics were concerned.

Scott Fitzgerald, too, wrote an unkind letter about the difficulties of finding a part to suit her style:

> She can't change her emotions in the middle of a scene without going through a sort of Jekyll and Hyde contortion of the face, so that when one wants to indicate that she is going from joy to sorrow, one must cut away and back. Also, you can never give her such a stage direction as 'telling a lie' because if you did she would practically give a representation of Benedict Arnold selling West Point to the British.

If the professional cards were stacked against her, she came under still greater attack from her friends.

Well-known *Hollywood Reporter* columnist Radie Harris has written for as long as the late Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons pursued their respective journalistic careers. Like them, she had her own celebrity radio show, and includes among her friends established

stars as well as newcomers to both films and the theatre. She had been a friend of Joan Crawford's for almost forty years, and in her autobiography, *Radie's World*, wrote a penetrating insight into her motivation. She spoke to me frankly about the failure of the marriage between Crawford and Franchot Tone:

> When Joan is all by herself in a bathtub, with just a sponge in her hand, she never takes her hair down and becomes a woman. There's no separation between Joan the woman, and Joan the movie star. Joan gets up in the morning, and *is* the movie star. She is the epitome of what every movie fan thinks a movie star should be like.
>
> She is always the film star first, because she is so aware of her fans. She would let them have a detailed bulletin of her day's activities . . . and so wherever she appears, her fans are *there*.
>
> I went out with her one night when she was married to Franchot Tone. We went to the theatre first, and the fans were waiting outside for her. They were still waiting outside in the interval. She wanted to go out and get an ice cream soda at Hicks, and sure enough, there they were, waiting for her at Hicks, and they followed her back.
>
> After the theatre, we went to dinner, and when we arrived, the fans were waiting outside the Pierre Hotel.
>
> At El Morocco on a cold night she would invite them inside to have coffee. So Franchot Tone was never out with his wife, he was out with a film star, and he hated it. Most men *do* hate it. After all, he was an outstanding stage star himself, and didn't enjoy playing the role of Mr Joan Crawford when he was out with her.
>
> Joan is the only movie actress I know that has no area of her life when she isn't a film star, when she is really just a woman. I mean, if she hears that Ethel Merman's daughter-in-law has been murdered, she is the first to send flowers and a cable (the girl was shot down in cold blood for no apparent reason, one night, in California.)
>
> In her relationships with men, she is not pursued. *She* is the aggressor. No man could ever live with her as 'My wife, Joan Crawford.' It is 'I am Joan Crawford's husband.' The reason that she lost Doug Fairbanks, that she lost Franchot Tone, that she lost Greg Bautzer (distinguished Hollywood lawyer who she knew before she married Alfred Steele) is that she is terribly predatory about her men. They'd have a date, spend a pleasant evening together, then he'd go home. Two seconds later she would ring him and say, 'I've been trying to get you. Where were you?'
>
> And he'd say, 'But darling, I've just left you. Give me time to get home.' She just wanted to be sure that he *did* get *home*.
>
> Entertaining seemed to be such an act for her. You'd go to her home, and there would be six people. Very informal. But there would be place-cards. For six people.
>
> Always a telephone on the table, because if anyone called, she had to be there. She'd carry on a telephone conversation during dinner.
>
> When she had a small luncheon party for Noël Coward at *21*, she invited a few close friends including Lynn Fontanne, Alfred Lunt and me. The smoked salmon and caviar was in one room and the luncheon itself was laid out in the Hunt Room. Even when she was at home, she always entertained on a grand scale, but having done so, she reverted to her housewife role and washed the dishes and scrubbed the kitchen floor herself before going to bed. She was one of the ten great stars of the silver screen, and could have done it so easily. Vivien Leigh was also a superlative hostess, but she was always relaxed and easy and you were never aware of the preparation that went into her entertaining.

Close friends complain that Crawford's relationships were superficial. 'You would get flowers on your birthday from her,' confided one intimate, 'She would send opening-night wires, you would get telephone calls and the most terrific personal solicitude, but there is no daily contact. With her, it comes from the head, not from the heart. It's all too organised.'

> I'm such a fan of Joan Crawford [*said one of the admirers who used to wait patiently for her to appear*]. When I was a chorus boy in shows in New York, in *Too Many Girls* and *Pal Joey* with Gene Kelly, and I used to take singing lessons next door to *21*, which is on 52nd Street. I would purposely go early in the hopes of watching all the movie stars walking into *21*, because that, to me, was the most exciting glamorous place in the world.
>
> I looked at this wonderful face [*he continued*], and noticed how beautifully dressed she was. I can tell you exactly what she wore thirty-five years ago. It was a beige suit with a beige hat, and a big, big rose on the front of it. She was talking casually, and she must have looked out at me glaring at her through the bars of the grill, and she smiled. I was so overcome with the reaction; of the embarrassment, that I made a grimace at her, and ran up the stairs and took my singing lesson. I thought, 'Now, why did I do that?' So when some kids do that to me today, I understand.

Van Johnson, the fan who became a movie star himself, said:

> Little did I know that one day I would be at the same studio with her. We never made a picture together, but I used to go on the set and watch her work. Then one day I was invited to her home, at North Bristol, which is Brentwood. Donald O'Connor later bought that house.
>
> She entertained beautifully. On that occasion I met Roland Young and Billie Burke for the first time. Jill Esmond, who was then Mrs Laurence Olivier, and her son Tarquin were there too. They lived next door, in the house that Robert Preston built. Fred MacMurray and Lily were there too, that night.
>
> It was my first really big sit-down dinner with black-tie, and I felt acutely out of place. I never realised that we were expected to change conversation as the plates were changed; as the courses changed. You were supposed to turn to the person next to you, which I kept doing, but the person on the other side of me was always talking to the person on the other side of *them*. I felt terribly uncomfortable.

Franchot Tone suffered more than mere discomfort. After making his last film with his wife, he left Hollywood in 1939 following their divorce, but did not have a happy life thereafter. He returned to the New York stage, and although he took to drinking heavily it did not show in his work. Two years later he married starlet Jean Wallace who bore him two sons, Pascal and Thomas. But the boys were to become subjects of a bitter court battle, both parents fighting for their custody during divorce proceedings. Tone claimed that his wife was unsuitable to be a mother in view of her association with gangster and gigolo Johnny Stompanato.

Stompanato later gained notoriety as Lana Turner's boy-friend. One night, in a jealous rage, he threatened Miss Turner with a knife, and Miss Turner's fifteen-year-old daughter Cheryl stabbed him to death in her mother's defence.

Franchot Tone gained custody of the boys, but they returned to their mother when, as the wife of Cornel Wilde, she appealed to the courts. His film career in the forties was patchy, playing second fiddle to leading ladies. He appeared in three movies with Deanna Durbin,

followed by a series of parts as second leads.

More trouble followed when he was beaten senseless by ex-boxer Tom Neal, as a result of which he underwent extensive plastic surgery. Both he and Neal had claimed to be engaged to starlet Barbara Payton, but although Tone won her in the end they were divorced after only a year.

Throughout the fifties he was involved in the theatre, and television parts helped to keep him in circulation in the sixties. Perhaps his only notable film role in the sixties was in *Advise and Consent*, in which he played a sickly United States president who dies in office.

He himself died of lung cancer, in September 1968, at the age of sixty-three. His first wife, Joan Crawford, visited him regularly throughout his illness in New York and his convalescence at his summer house in Point Comfort, Canada.

'Because of our marriage,' Crawford admitted with deep regret, *'he was often one of the leading men assigned to a "Crawford picture," whether the part was satisfactory to him or not.*

'Franchot's and my love cost him his rightful career in pictures.'

Joan Crawford's fans regarded her as a glamorous star of the first order and went to see a 'Crawford film' regardless of the story or the leading men billed as her co-stars. She was considered a superlative actress by her ardent followers who found she had no particular period, and that moving with the times, she never seemed 'dated'. In the roles she played, they found her thoroughly feminine, but operating with masculine reasoning, being possessed of the mind of a man. 'If a man had a wife and *six* mistresses,' observed one of them, 'and Joan Crawford walked into the room, he would leave them all for her. *That* was the sort of power she had over men, and naturally, every woman in the audience would have given anything to be in her shoes. She conveyed an independent woman who allowed her admirers to fight over her, and standing aside she would happily settle for whichever of the two won the battle.'

Although her fans have always rated her highly, in 1938 her future was being threatened, at any rate so far as *The Hollywood Reporter* (the film industry's Bible) was concerned. In a full page advertisement placed by exhibitors who claimed they were 'tired of losing money on the glamorous stars detested by the public,' it published a blacklist of expensive stars whom they considered 'box-office poison', naming her as one of them. Her name appeared in a formidable list of actresses which included Marlene Dietrich, Mae West and Katharine Hepburn!

Our heroine certainly faced a bleak future as far as informed opinion was concerned, but her critics had not reckoned on the drive and tenacity which had pushed her to the top of so competitive an industry in the first place, and she now mustered up all the strength she had to fight the changing times and fashions.

7

THE FIVE YEAR FIGHT

As though in retaliation against the critics' bitter attack on their stars — and ignoring the press's blacklisting of one of their top-assets — MGM renewed their faith in Joan Crawford's future by offering her a new contract, guaranteeing her a million and a half dollars a year for the next five years, for three pictures a year. Although the attack by the press, referred to at the end of the previous chapter, came as a blow to Crawford's pride, her confidence was boosted when she received her 900,000th fan letter. She had counted every one of them!

'Is Joan Crawford Slipping?' 'Can Joan Crawford hold on?' 'Are Joan's screen days numbered?' demanded the fan magazines, prophesying doom. But they failed to understand their readers, who were the people who paid to watch the movies. Despite thousands of columns of newspaper and magazine publicity, the moviegoers still went to see her on the screen. The slightest change in what they had come to expect could mean the disappointment of the fans, resulting in a box-office disaster; and Joan Crawford realised that she would have to play substantially the same character again and again.

'Her fans are holding her back,' complained Clarence Brown, who had directed her in various films including *The Gorgeous Hussy*. 'She's the shopgirl's idea of a lady and that's how they want to see her. But Joan's grown up. She's a woman now and can't go on playing poor little girls who make good. Yet they won't let her stop.'

Like all other stars, she had her own pet ways of indicating certain simple emotions, and felt she could not be blamed for digging into her bag of tricks if they proved most effective. However, one could criticise her for projecting her own personality too strongly, and for involving herself too deeply in the characters she portrayed, no matter how effective this was on the screen, and in the box office.

'Movie stars? I don't like the name,' Humphrey Bogart told a reporter years later, putting the term into perspective:

> The words 'movie stars' are so misused they have no meaning. Any little pinhead who does one picture calls himself a star.
>
> But *Gable* is a star, *Cooper* is a star, *Joan Crawford*, as much as I dislike the lady, is a star. I don't think the so-called others are. To be a star you have to drag your weight into the box-office and be recognised wherever you go.

'The star system is a cult of personality,' George Cukor told author and scenarist Gavin Lambert, who had asked him to enlarge on what he meant by saying that it was the bad side of the star system which encouraged stars to trade on their personalities rather than work at the real business of acting. 'It may be a personality rather than a talent that catches the eye and the attention in the first place,' Cukor continued. 'Then, if it doesn't develop, it grows threadbare. And these people were not always encouraged to develop, to change. Thalberg was one of the few who really tried to make his stars do surprising things, try different kinds of parts.'

The first of the three pictures under Crawford's new contract of

1930 was *Mannequin*, in which she played substantially the same sort of 'poor-girl marries rich-man' role she had done so many times before, the Crawford formula No 1. But fortunately this was her penultimate 'shop-girl' role. Spencer Tracy was cast opposite her, and playing with a star of his calibre gave added strength to her performance as Jessica Cassidy, a lower-class garment factory worker who marries her long-time beau in order to escape the squalor of her surroundings. She moves from the factory floor to the salons of haute couture to become a mannequin — providing Adrian with scope to create some beautiful fashions. Then she divorces, and remarries an adoring shipping magnate, Spencer Tracy, who has also come up the hard way.

Although the film was a cut above the rest because of Tracy's participation — and satisfied her faithful fans — it failed to please critic Frank Nugent of the *New York Times* who wrote 'A glib, implausible and smartly gowned little drama, as typically Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as Leo himself, *Mannequin*, at the Capitol, restores Miss Joan Crawford on her throne as queen of the working girls.' Howard Barnes, in the *New York Herald Tribune* said 'Joan Crawford is not particularly happy in the role of the slum princess. Try as she may, she is too tony for Hester Street and too much Miss Crawford for the poor girl who made good.'

But although Crawford's next and final 'shop-girl' role was not dissimilar to her previous parts, she realised the importance of powerful co-stars, and in *The Shining Hour* played alongside the temperamental stage-actress Margaret Sullavan, Robert Young, Melvyn Douglas and Fay Bainter, going so far as to agree to top billing with Miss Sullavan. Only too aware that Miss Sullavan and Miss Bainter could act her off the screen, Mayer told her, 'These three women's roles are equal. Those two talented actresses could steal your picture!' To which she replied, *'I'd rather be a supporting player in a good picture than the star of a bad one.'*

However, the trio failed to win audiences with a confusing story of a New York night-club dancer, Olivia (Crawford), who marries a gentleman-farmer (Melvyn Douglas) and leaves to live with him and his brother and sister on their country estate. Although his brother David (Robert Young) objects to the marriage, his wife Judy (Margaret Sullavan) gives them her blessing. However, her husband's domineering, jealous sister (Fay Bainter) resents Olivia's intrusion and — in good form as the villainess of the piece — sets alight their country home, providing Crawford with a scene as the perfect

Left: In *Mannequin*, 1938, with Spencer Tracy

Opposite page: In *Mannequin*, 1938, dressed by Adrian

Above right: In *The Shining Hour*, 1938, with Melvyn Douglas

heroine, stumbling out of the blazing wreckage, carrying the long-suffering Margaret Sullavan who has fainted in the smouldering remains.

Variety reported:

> *The Shining Hour* is studded with a quintet of marquee names, headed by Joan Crawford, but that draw value is all that exhibitors can depend on, as the picture is a confused jungle of cross-purpose motivations and situations that fail entirely to arouse interest. Basic trouble with the production lies in confusing script.

The diminutive ice-star Sonja Henie provided the inspiration for MGM's next Crawford vehicle. Through her scintillating skating the astute Norwegian 'Queen of the Ice' had made people aware of the glories of the ice-rink — becoming a millionairess in the process, and reputedly not a very generous one at that. Crawford was now cast in *The Ice Follies of 1939* in MGM's smart attempt to jump on Henie's successful film bandwagon. Henie's three films, *One in a Million* with Adolphe Menjou, *Thin Ice* with Tyrone Power and *Happy Landing* with Don Ameche had made her one of 20th Century's top ten money-makers.

Crawford was called upon to skate alongside James Stewart and Lew Ayres, but although her performance on and off the ice remained in the film, the three songs she sang ended up on the cutting-room floor.

'This was trash,' was how Crawford described the film, which had borrowed half its plot from *Excess Baggage*, an old stage play that had been gathering dust on MGM's shelves. 'Miss Crawford should avoid this type of film in the future', echoed the critics, 'when she has to buck poor material.'

James Stewart remembered:

> *Ice Follies* took three and a half months to shoot, and the film's running time was a little under an hour and a half, which was more or less the average running time of movies those days. The pictures that are made today are far too long, and they become a bore. Ideally, these long, long scenes could be tightened, cut and formed so that they make sense more easily.

But what today's movies lack is back-lot management', as James Stewart calls it, which makes for longer preparation and production

Above left and right: In *Ice Follies,* 1939, with James Stewart

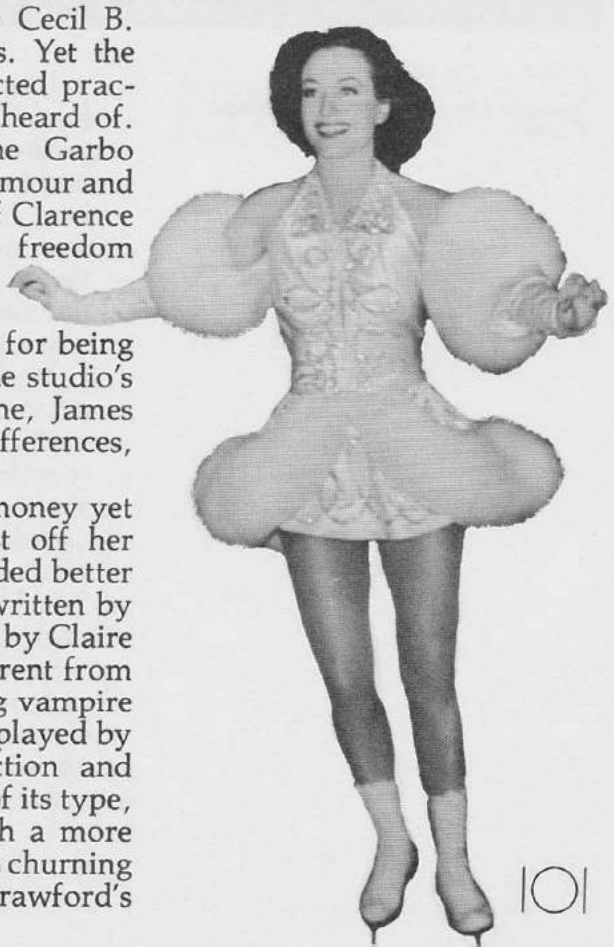
time in the pictures of the post-Hollywood era, with notable exceptions such as *Midnight Cowboy* and *Easy Rider* made almost entirely on location on low budgets.

Just as the Hollywood of the thirties and forties created stars, and the films in which they appeared became vehicles for their talents, so nowadays the industry creates directors, such as John Schlesinger and Peter Bogdanovitch, and the films they make become vehicles for *their* talents.

Crawford, however, disagreed with Hollywood's reputation for manufacturing stars. *'You manufacture toys, not stars,'* she claimed.

James Stewart agreed:

> It is certainly true that the films these days are vehicles for directors' talents, but by the same token, we had the Cecil B. DeMilles, the D. W. Griffiths', and the Clarence Browns. Yet the interesting thing is that although Clarence Brown directed practically all Garbo's pictures, his name was hardly ever heard of. Clarence Brown was tremendously important to the Garbo pictures. Although the star was important as far as the glamour and movie magazine aspects were concerned, the directors of Clarence Brown and George Cukor's calibre had complete freedom regarding the creating of what you saw on the screen.



Although Joan Crawford was fast acquiring a reputation for being impossible as a result of her powerful position as one of the studio's most lucrative money-makers, plus her cast-iron discipline, James Stewart suffered from none of this: 'We never had any differences, only a very pleasant relationship, which I valued.'

With three consecutive films behind her that had made money yet failed to please critics, and determined this time to cast off her 'Crawford formula' image once and for all, she now demanded better roles. The first of these was in *The Women,* a screenplay written by Anita Loos and Jane Murfin, based on the Broadway success by Claire Boothe Luce. Although cast in a part not substantially different from many of her earlier roles, as Crystal Allen — a man-hunting vampire who sets her cap at the husband of a noble society woman, played by her arch-enemy, Norma Shearer — the story, construction and subtleties contained in the piece provided her with a classic of its type, rather in the way that *Grand Hotel* had supplied her with a more worthy vehicle than the run-of-the-mill stuff Hollywood was churning out. Shearer was naturally given top billing, and this — Crawford's

only picture with the star whom she had envied and with whom she vied as MGM's Queen of the Back-lot — provided her with a role in which she only had to play second-fiddle in the four scenes in which they appeared together. The rest of the all-female cast included Rosalind Russell, Paulette Goddard and Joan Fontaine; everyone was prepared for sparks to fly when shooting began, but fortunately one of Hollywood's most seasoned directors George Cukor, who had recently been removed from the *Gone with the Wind* production, was there to keep the peace.

Said Rosalind Russell, who played the gossiping trouble maker Sylvia:

> I enjoyed playing scenes with Joan. She's very good to play scenes with. She gives. She's very professional. She stays very much in character.

Above: In *The Women*, 1939

Right: In *The Women* with Rosalind Russell

> Joan was more than one person [*she continued*]. I think the real Joan Crawford was the one she made herself.
>
> She was a woman who was very much in control of herself. She had been through so much in her life, which has been a reasonably long life. It's like a person without any education, finding herself with a PhD and several Doctorates. And she did all this herself, and therefore she became that person. I am sure through great trial and tribulation without ever complaining about it, or without ever discussing it with her friends.
>
> In *The Women* — on the lot, there were thirty-four speaking parts and all of them women! People would stop me on the street and say, 'Ten dollars if I could have a front seat when you girls get together.' But there was never a fight at all, because everyone was so over-polite, doing everything in their power to *avoid* fighting.
>
> Adrian made all the clothes for the principals, but we weren't allowed to see each other's clothes beforehand for obvious reasons! We'd come on the set and look up and down one another's clothes and say, 'Is she wearing that plaid? Will that clash with my green?'

Crawford, however, who did everything in her power to avoid open confrontation with Shearer, complained bitterly: *'Norma Shearer made me change my costume sixteen times because every one was prettier than hers. I love to play bitches and she helped me in this part.'*

Rosalind Russell continued:

Norma, who I have always liked a lot and got along with, was at notorious logger-heads with Joan. I think that Norma was protected. You see, she was treated as the Queen of the Lot because of her marriage to the boss, Irving Thalberg. Joan had made a lot of money for the company, and I imagine that's what annoyed both of them; it was a competition of who was really the Queen of the Lot. . . . Norma would come on the stage, and there would be excited whispers, 'Miss Shearer's here', 'Miss Shearer's just arrived'. But Joan stood for none of that nonsense. Remember, basically, Joan is a tough woman. Her fibre is strong because it *had* to be. From her background, all the way up, she's worked her way, and she wouldn't stand nonsense for a minute from anybody.

Of course, Norma got all the Queens to play and all the classical parts which Thalberg had thrust her into, and that might have been a contributing factor. But they weren't cut from the same cloth.

At the premier of *The Women* with Louis B Mayer, Paulette Goddard and George Cukor

Norma was rather remote, and surrounded by a coterie of protection; but everything changed after Thalberg died [*three years earlier, at the age of thirty-seven*] — it was not the same for her, and she knew it. She was rather fey . . . And Joan was a very gutsy down-to-earth person.

But in spite of being down-to-earth, Joan was a very feminine woman, and, of course, very glorious looking. They always talked about her eyes, but I think her best feature is her nose. She has a beautiful nose. A very, very elegant nose. You study her face; I used to look at it and think 'Oh, what a nose! That bone structure of it!'

Joan was very professional. Always on time. She knew her work.

She watched everything; what people were doing. I didn't have as many scenes with her as I did with Norma, because I was always trying to bust up the marriage. In the story!

I guess Norma made up her mind that Joan wasn't going to get the better of her. When Joan read lines back, she knitted all the time. She didn't look at Norma. The needles were going clickety-click, and her fingers were pulling away at the wool, and she simply didn't look up at her at all. When you're doing close-ups, you have to get the eyelines right. It's one of the things that we consider very professional, that you work just as hard when you're behind the camera. Anyway, Norma didn't let it get her down. I think it didn't but she wasn't going to show that it did. Fortunately, they had very little to do together in the picture.

The Women was an unqualified success at the time, re-establishing Crawford's position in Hollywood, at the box-office and in movie magazines. Whether it has survived the passing of time is another matter. English film critic Alexander Walker doesn't think it has:

> I think that it's a picture that doesn't wear too well. It's very much a period piece that is totally a characteristic of Hollywood production because a great deal of the characterisation is expressed through the way they dress, the settings that they're in, and the make-up that they wear. As well as the lines of dialogue — but the lines of dialogue are switchable. You could switch the characters around in *The Women* far better than you could in, say, *Baby Jane*. The latter has two clearly defined characters and Crawford is one of them. Crawford is one of the characters in *The Women* who works, because she is the real bitch.

Above: In *Strange Cargo* with Ian Hunter
Below: In *Strange Cargo*, 1940, with Clark Gable

Fresh from his triumph in *Gone With the Wind*, Clark Gable was now re-united with Crawford for *Strange Cargo*, their eighth movie together. In it they succumbed to that old urge again, but most of the picture dealt with the perilous escape of a boatload of cut-throats from Devil's Island. Crawford played Julie, a café entertainer in a town near a French penal colony who gets the sack for immorality; a character not unlike Sadie Thompson. A jailbreak ensues and together with Gable, Peter Lorre, Paul Lukas and Ian Hunter, she undertakes the perilous journey to the mainland, with the prison guards hot on their heels. Ian Hunter's role as a Christlike regenerating influence added a mystical overtone which didn't quite come off in this Joseph Mankiewicz production, with a screenplay by Lawrence Hazard from Richard Sale's novel *Not Too Narrow, Not Too Deep*.

Variety reported:

> Miss Crawford is provided with a particularly meaty role as the hardened dance-hall gal who falls hard for the tough convict. It is a departure from those handed her during past several years by her studio, and reminiscent of her earlier work that carried her to popularity originally. Although the picture has its many de-

ficiencies, the Crawford characterization will give studio execs idea of proper casting of her talents for the future.

This was the last film in which Crawford and Gable appeared together. Crawford did not forget the star whom she had admired when, after his death in 1960, she wrote in tribute to him, *'Clark Gable was the King of an empire called Hollywood. The empire is not what it once was, but the King has not been dethroned, even after death.'*

Now keen to find star roles in other movies of the calibre of *The Women*, and desperate to find parts which could guarantee sizeable box-office returns and justify their million and a half dollars investment in Crawford, MGM's plan to star her with Nelson Eddy in *The Chocolate Soldier*, and in other operettas, fell through.

With Nigel Bruce, Frederic March and Rita Hayworth in *Susan and God*, 1940

In line with many others, she had also been short-listed for the most coveted role in the history of the movies, that of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (won by Vivien Leigh). She was under closer consideration according to David O. Selznick, who wrote, 'MGM had urged me to make *Gone with the Wind* with Joan Crawford as Scarlett, Maureen O'Sullivan as Melanie, and Melvyn Douglas as Ashley. I said they were all very good people, but they would all be miscast. Fortunately, I had the authority to cast it as I saw fit, as I did with all my other pictures.'

But a good part did come along. Crawford saw Gertrude Lawrence in New York in the Broadway hit *Susan and God*, and set her heart on the part of Susan Trexel, the zany society woman who adopts religion as her latest fad. But the screen rights had already been bought by MGM as a vehicle for her rival Norma Shearer. Adapted for the screen by Anita Loos from the original play by Rachel Crothers (shown in England in 1940 as *The Gay Mrs Trexel)*, Fredric March was contracted to play the part of the alcoholic husband for $100,000 so that put paid to the idea. But suddenly her telephone rang. It was a call from Louis B. Mayer from the coast.

'Would you be willing to play a *mother*, Joan?' Mayer asked her.

'I'd play Wally Beery's grandmother if it's a good part!' she replied.

'Norma had refused to play a mother, the part of Susan,' Crawford recalled, and as George Cukor was to direct the film he had asked for her instead. *'It was most flattering,'* Crawford cried, *'Mr George Cukor asking for me!'*

Cukor, who has directed Crawford in both comedy and drama, said:

I don't think she was a *comedienne*.

She played comedy and she was very funny. But she was an

actress. I wouldn't say she was a funny woman, but in *Susan and God*, which was a character part, she was funny, as the *character* was funny, but she was not a comedienne as such.

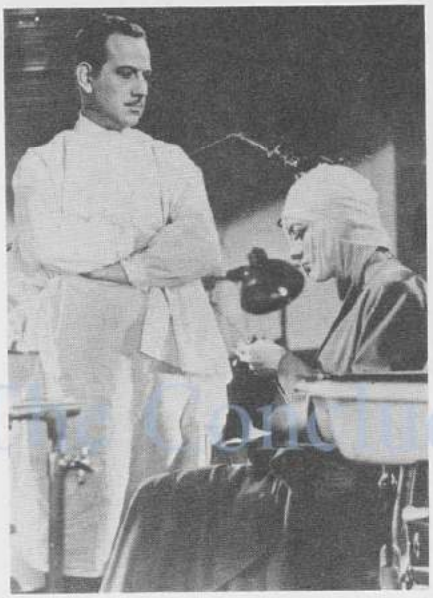
I would say that her role in *Susan and God* was character comedy. Susan is a monster. She's very well written, but she's a monster, and she should be a little larger than life. She's overwhelming and silly and a nuisance, and she *has* to be larger than life.

I found her great. We became great friends. She was a very determined, gallant woman, and a good and tender friend. She was a very competent, managing creature.

Naturally, she was not an *angel*, but who is? She could be funny about herself too. The late Willie Haines who used to be a great friend of hers used to tease her unmercifully, and she would laugh too.

Joan Crawford went through her school of training, and passed with honours. She was trained in a certain way, and she presented herself in a certain way because that is what she was trained to do. Nowadays they come on — their idea of technique is to look like a slob.

She was in a period when there was glamour in the world and when there were movie queens. In life there were these great figures, and they had them on the screen in a slightly distorted representation of life. She had been acting a long, long time, and that's a tribute to her gifts, and to her character. Also, she was with a very good company who directed her career very intelligently. Now the poor things that are thrown into the world to make a success then they're up for grabs, and they think they know how to conduct their careers. These careers were conducted by expert showmen, wonderful companies who were wonderfully organised. That's why they lasted a long time.



In *A Woman's Face*, 1941, with Melvyn Douglas

But did the directors enjoy the same sort of grooming afforded to the stars? Cukor answered:

> Oh,no,no, no! It was different for us. And people used to say, 'How can you work under that hateful, terrible system where you can't trust yourself?'
>
> Well, all the pictures with people like Joan Crawford were done like that. I think that people who write about Hollywood those days don't know what they're talking about. They don't know a darn thing about it. It operated — they made these pictures that captivated the imagination of the world, so it couldn't be so restrictive.

Cukor's enthusiasm for Crawford's talents automatically led to her next success when he directed her in *A Woman's Face*, regarded as one of her finest screen performances. *'It scored my high point at MGM,'* Crawford said: but it was the last good part they offered her, and after three pictures in which she reverted to her old 'formula' roles, she decided to leave MGM for good.

The role of Anna Holm in *A Woman's Face* found her playing a criminal whose scarred face has left her with a grudge against society, which master criminal Conrad Veidt uses to further his own ends. She meets a cosmetic surgeon (Melvyn Douglas) who performs a successful operation to remove her scars. In so doing, her hatred for the world vanishes.

The transition from the hunted, bitter animal to the beautiful woman was depicted with remarkable skill under the expert and painstaking direction of George Cukor. *'I say a prayer for Mr Cukor every time I think of what* A Woman's Face *did for my career,'* said Crawford, who received rave reviews for 'the best picture to emerge

With her secretary Betty Barker answering fanmail on the set of *A Woman's Face*, 1941

from Hollywood in a long time.'

'In *A Woman's Face*,' Cukor told Gavin Lambert, 'I had an image for Joan Crawford's character for the first part of the picture, when her face is scarred. It was *mentalité du bossu*. If I felt she was forgetting this during a scene, I'd do a *mentalité du bossu* number at her from near the camera.' As Cukor said this he twisted his head to one side and made a face like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Referring to the amount of location work nowadays, Cukor commented recently;

> For a time, they depended a lot on back-projection. But I made pictures in New York, and every place. Originally, in silent pictures, everything was done on location — they'd go to Ireland, they'd go here, they'd go there, and then the expertise, the technical part took over a little bit. But the technical part was dazzling. For example, in *A Woman's Face* there were scenes with great waterfalls, and they made those brilliantly, technically. *Now* they think that if you go to a location it makes it more real. I don't think so, particularly. It had to be done with discretion at all times.

Yet despite her great triumph in *A Woman's Face*, times and fashions were changing and a more natural, realistic type of acting was beginning to evolve. The writing was on Crawford's wall as far as star vehicle roles were concerned — presenting itself in the form of MGM's great new white hope, Greer Garson, who had recently completed *Goodbye, Mr Chips* and scored tremendous successes in *Mrs Miniver*, *Random Harvest* and *Madame Curie*. Crawford bitterly regretted that the *Random Harvest* and *Madame Curie* roles should have gone to Greer Garson instead of to her, but MGM was now concentrating their efforts in promoting Garson and Lana Turner as their new stars in the way that they had backed Greta Garbo and Norma Shearer, both of whom had retired by 1942. Crawford realised that in the way that she had only ever had third choice of the plum parts after Garbo and Shearer, that history was repeating itself, and Garson and Turner were getting first and second choice, leaving her precisely in third place — exactly where she found herself ten years before.

No amount of pressure could persuade MGM to provide her with the powerful roles she desired, and she found herself on endless suspension for refusing to accept the many inconsequential parts that were offered to her. With the advent of war, taste in films was fast changing and demand for the type of films made before 1939 was on the wane.

Crawford's close friend Carole Lombard, one of filmdom's most beautiful and beloved actresses, was married to Clark Gable, but their marriage ended tragically after less than two years when on 16

January 1942 the plane in which she and her mother were returning home from selling War Bonds crashed in Nevada, killing them both. The grief-stricken Gable joined the Army Corps, keeping him off the screen for the following three years.

To show her loyalty to the man she had loved, and to the woman she had admired so much, Crawford asked if she could be loaned to Columbia to take Lombard's place in *They All Kissed the Bride*, and donated her salary from the film (said to be in excess of $100,000) to the Red Cross, who had discovered Lombard's body near the wreckage.

Wrote author Stephen Harvey:

> Crawford's first romantic comedy in five years, *They All Kissed the Bride*, was an unremarkable example of the sort of confection Rosalind Russell specialized in during the early forties. The heroine is a ruthlessly efficient business executive who is softened into conventional femininity by the omnipresent Melvyn Douglas. Although Crawford was to play many such career women under more sombre conditions, the giddy treatment of this theme really clamoured for the effervescent manner of Russell or Lombard. The movie was a pleasant trifle on the whole, but had little impact on Crawford's career.

Above: In *When Ladies Meet*, 1941, with Robert Taylor

Top: In *Reunion in France*, 1942

On her return to Metro, Crawford was presented with the script of *Reunion in France*. She was to play the part of a spoiled, ambitious Frenchwoman in German-occupied Paris. Her leading man, John Wayne, appeared as an American flier whose plane has been shot down by the Nazis and who is being hunted by the Gestapo. Directed by Jules Dassin, the reviews commented far more favourably on Crawford's clothes, designed by Irene, than on the plot or the performance.

It was during the shooting of *Reunion in France* that she almost came to blows with one of the supporting actresses, Natalie Schafer, a Broadway actress who was unaccustomed to the wiles of movie stars.

Said Natalie Schafer:

> I was out on the coast with a play, having just finished two plays on Broadway with Gertrude Lawrence (*Susan and God* and *Lady in the Dark*) and walked onto the set of *Reunion in France*. Now, having just worked with Gertie who was my idea of a real *divine* star who had all the glamour and everything else in the world, as well as the cosiness. We would sit around with our hair in curlers and talk the night away, but you could never do that with Joan. I came right from Gertie Lawrence to Joan Crawford but I didn't think that Hollywood stars were any different from theatre stars on Broadway.
>
> However, we did our first take, and I, not knowing anything about picture technique, was approached on the set by Jules Dassin, the director, who came to me and said, 'Joan is making shadows on your face.' Well, I didn't know what the hell that meant, so I said, 'I don't know what to do about that. Why don't *you* do something?' So he said, 'No, no, that's your key light,' pointing to a light that was very bright and shining on both of us, and he said, 'When she leans forward like that, she shadows your face, so when you see her lean forward, you put all your weight on your right foot and that will get the shadow off your face. So whenever she is leaning on her *left* foot, you put your weight on your *right* foot.'
>
> By the time we finished the scene, I danced! I was doing an absolute dance, trying to get the shadows she was throwing, off my face!

But I suppose what really annoyed me was that I had a dressing room, a trailer dressing room on the set, next to hers. Now I didn't have a long mirror in my dressing room, but she did. So, when Joan was in a scene, I walked from my trailer to hers to have a look at how the long dress I was wearing looked. Her door was open and I went in, looked in the long mirror, then went back to my dressing room.

The next day when I came on the set there were two policemen standing right between our dressing rooms. So I said to the hairdresser, 'Has there been a robbery? Has somebody been murdered? What are the policemen doing?' But the hairdresser said nothing. The make-up man wouldn't talk either. Nobody said a thing. They all just closed up. So I said, 'Well, something terrible has happened, find out why the policemen are there!'

In *Reunion in France*, 1942

Left: In *A Woman's Face*, 1941

Far Left: In *They All Kissed the Bride*, 1942, with Allan Jenkins

So in the afternoon my stand-in came in and said to me, 'I've found out why the policemen are there. Miss Crawford ordered them because you went into her dressing room yesterday.'

My first impression of her was that I was working with a very typical Hollywood star who was almost unreal. She was *charming* to me in spite of doing these things, she would be absolutely delightful, delightful to everybody; delightful to the little people. Nothing was real. It was as if she was playing a Hollywood star, and I thought she played this Hollywood star so beautifully. Then I kept looking at her and thinking, 'What's she like when she gets home and takes her clothes off?'

This really was a woman out of another world, because I hadn't

really been with any Hollywood people at that time. I've been with a lot since and I've never met one quite like her.

I admired her because she was what I call a real old-fashioned star, the way nobody is today, and the marvellous thing about her was that she kept it going.

I don't think she could have gone to the grocery store without her eyelashes on and her make-up on. And I understand about the clothes; now they were not my kind of clothes, but she dressed up every time she went out. She dressed to walk across the street; she always had gloves on; and I think it's quite marvellous to keep this picture of a star when you see all the little beatnik stars running around with their dirty hair and sneakers.

She had this, 'Everybody must know that I am Joan Crawford when they see me,' thing about her.

Crawford justified this by saying, *'If you're going to be a star, you have to look like a star, and I never go out unless I look like Joan Crawford the movie star.'*

In *Reunion in France,* 1942, with Odette Myrtil and Ann Ayars

With equal candour she said, *'If you want to see the girl next door, go next door.'*

'Miss Crawford, as usual, makes an elegant mannequin for a series of ensembles that probably will excite more female comment than the role itself,' wrote the *New York Times;* and the *New York Herald Tribune:* 'Suffice to say that Miss Crawford appears in enough new dresses to please producers and the feminine audience. With all the evidence in, Miss Crawford, as Michele de la Becque, isn't making all the sacrifices implied in the script.'

Writer and critic George Oppenheimer remembers moving into a new house in Brentwood, not far from Joan Crawford's house, and said:

One Saturday afternoon I had a phone call from Joan. 'Come over to dinner tonight,' she said, 'Ginger's coming too.'

Well, we had a quiet dinner in her kitchen, and I was just fascinated that on a Saturday night Ginger Rogers and Joan Crawford wanted an old Jew to come over.

Joan said, 'You'd be amazed the number of Saturday nights that we're alone. Men think we're either having an affair or being married.'

Joan was a kinda layabout at home. She laughed a lot at

everything. She loved jokes, and she was bawdy as hell sometimes. I found her a warm, great dame.

I had gone to Hollywood in 1933 [*Oppenheimer continued*] having just done a play called *Here Today*, which did not have a long run, but has since become a great stock item, and suddenly Robert Sherwood phoned me and asked me to go up to George Kaufman's with him. They had done a picture with Eddie Cantor, and they had a clause in their contract which said they could quit at any time they wanted, and so they named me as their successor — and quit! So I went to work for Goldwyn. I adored Hollywood and decided to quit the publishing business, so my partner Harold Guinsberg, who was the most generous man in the world, bought me out and I stayed in Hollywood.

I wrote *Day at the Races* for the Marx Brothers, my only picture alone, nominated for an Academy Award, and *The War Against Mrs Hadley* with Fay Bainter.

And then I was asked to do some writing on *Two Faced Woman* for Garbo. It was an old, old picture that Constance Bennett had done with Zanuck before he became 20th Century Fox, and Metro

In *Above Suspicion*, 1943, with Fred MacMurray and Steve Durrae

bought it and remade it. Sam Behrman and I were on it, and Sam and I screamed bloody murder. George Cukor who directed it wouldn't accept one line of mine, he said it had to be by Behrman.

It is said that between us and Cukor we got Garbo off the screen, but that was not true. She was ready to quit anyway, and this was a good excuse. The straw that broke the camel's back. I ran into Garbo once in the street and I said to her that *Two Faced Woman* was having a revival in London and doing amazingly well.

She said, 'It was a dreadful picture,' and walked away.

I did a screenplay for Joan Crawford in which she was supposed to sing, and then I found she didn't sing. And I did another in which she was supposed to dance with Clifton Webb, but they both said, 'Oh, God, no!' And so both screenplays were thrown out.

Joan had a lovely house, and she had very good taste. She gave good parties, pool parties where you dined out, and people kinda made fun of her, which I didn't think was quite justified. She was essentially a nice dame. When she put her feet up on the table with her knitting and started taking verbal swipes at her contemporaries, she was such goddam fun, but the moment anybody important came in, she suddenly took her legs off and became Lady Vere de Vere, full of graces and airs.

Pretension was her greatest fault. She pretended, I think, as a


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

form of defence. She knew she'd been Lucille LeSueur, and although she'd achieved so much, she still had these feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.

Feeling insecure about the reception of her most recent film, *Reunion in France*, her next, *Above Suspicion*, was also badly received by critics. The second Helen MacInnes best-seller to reach the screen within a few months, it starred Crawford and Fred MacMurray as ostensible honeymooners, really spies for Britain, in 1939 Germany. The brilliant Conrad Veidt suffered a fatal heart attack after completing his role.

'There are so many spies in *Above Suspicion*,' wrote the *New York Herald*, 'that it is hard to keep track of them. There are so many floral, musical, and cryptographical passwords in the film's plot that the whole show becomes a sort of super treasure hunt. Unfortunately, neither Joan Crawford nor Fred MacMurray look quite bright enough to unravel the tangled skeins of this screen melodrama.'

This run-of-the-mill spy thriller was her last picture under contract to MGM. After seventeen years with the studio which had given her everything she had learned and achieved, and which had created Joan Crawford, the time had come for the parting of the ways. Her career had reached a dead end, and the questions the fan-magazines had asked about her future five years before: 'Is Joan Crawford Slipping?' 'Can Joan Crawford hold on?' 'Are Joan's screen days numbered?' seemed more valid than ever.

Her five-year contract expired, and by mutual consent there was no renewal. The serious threats to her career at MGM were Greer Garson — fast acquiring the plum dramatic roles Joan had once fought for and lost to Garbo and Shearer; and Lana Turner — her natural successor in the glamour roles. Her female contemporaries, Shearer, Garbo, Myrna Loy and Jeanette McDonald had either retired from MGM or moved elsewhere, and now it was her turn to go; and she was not yet thirty-five.

She left the studio by the back gate, carrying the last of her possessions from her dressing room. When accused by Louis B. Mayer of camping on his front doorstep — though obviously not closely enough — she always quipped that she kept her eyes on the *back door;* she was now using it as a means of exit.

Her absolute certainty in the choice of roles is what characterises her breakaway from the studio in her search for new parts. The loyalty and faith of her fans was a boost to her ego, an instant identification of her own professional acceptance and personal achievement, and in spite of changing times and fashions she was prepared neither to gamble with nor disappoint a public that had helped and idolised her. *'Coming on a set each day is a homecoming to me,'* she admitted, and she was determined that nothing would prevent her from making that daily trip to the studio . . .

8 THE WARNER DAYS

Two days after leaving MGM, Joan Crawford signed a new contract with Warner Brothers for two pictures a year at a third of the salary she had received from her former studio. She was given script approval, but waited three years for a suitable starring role to come along.

Warner's resident stars Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck were given first consideration on any new property, placing Joan Crawford in very much the same position as she had occupied at Metro when Garbo and Shearer — and later Greer Garson and Lana Turner — had been given the first bites of the cherry.

She divorced Franchot Tone in 1939 and married little-known character actor Philip Terry on 20 July 1942, six weeks after meeting him. His most important role, perhaps, was playing Ray Milland's brother in *The Lost Weekend*, for which Milland won an Oscar and the film itself a total of five Academy Awards, an unprecedented accomplishment.

In the early forties Crawford adopted two children, Christina and Christopher; unrelated to one another, and both Scandinavian, they came to her when ten days old through adoption homes. She spent the three years in which she was away from the studio caring for the children, with Philip Terry — a shy, unassuming man with a gentle and comforting manner — at her side. All was domestic bliss.

Van Johnson recalled:

> Joan Crawford had just adopted her wonderful little children, and I remember being invited to her home at North Bristol, Brentwood.
>
> The first time I went over, she showed me her swimming pool, her projection room and theatre, and the badminton court. [*The house boasted twenty-seven rooms*]. I used to go out there for Christmas and Thanksgiving dinner and we would have a lovely time with Christina and Christopher.

Below right: With her third husband, Phil Terry, at the Mocambo, 1944

Below: With her adopted children, Christopher and Christina


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

Joan was quite a disciplinarian with the children. It was fascinating to watch. She was an excellent housekeeper too. But the thing that impressed me most was her attitude to her friends and her concern about them. I know, because I've been in and out of hospitals all my life. The first big bash-up I got in Hollywood was in the middle of *A Guy Named Joe*. I had just started it with Spencer Tracy and Irene Dunne, and I got smashed up in an automobile accident outside the studio.

With his close friends Keenan Wynn and his wife Eve (whom Johnson himself married four years later), Van Johnson was driving to a special screening of Spencer Tracy's *Keeper of the Flame* when his convertible was hit side-on by a car that had shot through a traffic light. Johnson's head smashed against the windshield, and as a result of the injury a metal plate had to be inserted into his forehead.

After the operation [*Van Johnson continued*] I was allowed to get up to walk a little bit and I remember going down the hall in the middle of the night in the Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital. It was a big, triumphant thing; the night nurse was down the hall, and I thought I must try this thing alone for the first time, because the whole top of my head was off, and there was a plate there.

I remember my hand going along a plaque on a door, and I looked up to read what it said. The inscription was *This Room Donated by the Kindness of Joan Crawford.* To this day she subsidised two rooms at the Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital for people in the acting profession who couldn't afford to be hospitalised.

One such person was Earl Blackwell's father who, on a visit from Atlanta, Georgia, to see his son, was in need of care which he could not afford. Earl recalled that Joan somehow heard about it, booked a room at the Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital and insisted on paying all the medical expenses. To him, this was typical of her readiness to help and her great generosity to her friends:

At the opening of the Pen and Pencil Club, New York, with Earl Blackwell, singer Russell Nype and Ethel Merman

Joan was unbelievably generous to her friends. I have sets of gold cuff-links, by the dozen, that I would get for Christmas or my birthday. She never forgot a birthday. I always got a cable from her.

Van Johnson also recalled Joan's kindness to new people coming into the picture colony, and remembered:

There was an actress on her way to stardom when I first started out, and she was just marvellous. Her name was Gertrude Michael. She made those Sophie Lang pictures where she was the well-dressed jewel-thief, a sort of early Marlene Dietrich. She was very tall and statuesque. She would walk in with those big hats with Paul Cavannaugh and steal the bank of Tiffany's blind — but the charm! I always say to my children, 'It's not what you do, it's how you do it.' She stole with finesse!

And poor Gertrude Michael got on her uppers. She did a few things that retarded her career and she wound up in the headlines with 'Where are all my friends?' The next day Miss Crawford was there to bail her out. She had her over at the house, and we were all invited in to meet Gertrude Michael. I was thrilled.

Joan Crawford was one of the most thoughtful and ambitious ladies. She *worked* at her career. She worked at life, and she worked at just being at her desk every day. She was the most organised woman I've ever known. Just to go on the set and watch her work was one of my great thrills.

After writing fan letters to her all my early years, when I was at High School in Newport [*Van Johnson continued*] to be out there on the set watching this great, fabulous lady and enjoying her hospitality at home was just wonderful.

George Oppenheimer remembers walking down a street in Beverly Hills one Christmas Eve. 'Suddenly I heard a scream,' he said. 'Joan in an enormous car with the two children called me over. She stopped all the traffic while I had to kiss the children. This was typical of Joan, she didn't care who she held up while she wanted to see a friend.'

Left: In *Mildred Pierce*, 1945, with Jack Carson.

As a contribution to the war effort she enlisted in the American Women's Voluntary Service, wearing uniform, and rehabilitating children abandoned by mothers whose husbands had gone off to fight, cooking and caring for them at a home specially founded for them.

Her first Warner's appearance was as a guest star in 1944 in *Hollywood Canteen;* the studio assembled the cream of its stars for a

wartime film set in the Pacific. 'It was an elaborate show,' reported the *New York Daily News*, 'but it is presented by author-director Delmer Daves in such a patronising manner as to make one blush for its complete lack of reserve in singing the praises of Hollywood . . . The players in the picture seem constantly awed by their own gracious and hospitable entertainment of the servicemen.'

But eventually, the role that she had looked and waited for so long

materialised — and for this she won her only Oscar in fifty years on the silver screen. *Mildred Pierce* had been turned down by Bette Davis and then offered to Barbara Stanwyck who, riding on the crest of a wave following her triumph in *Double Indemnity*, was unavailable. Producer Jerry Wald then suggested Crawford for the role. The life-saving Academy Award revitalised her flagging fame in the story that was, ironically, almost a mirror of her own life and background, tracing in its drama her own early traumas, aspirations and ruthless fight for improvement and self-respect.

Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, Eve Arden and Ann Blyth were in the supporting roles. Adapted for the screen by Ranald MacDougall and Catherine Turney from the novel by James M. Cain, *Mildred Pierce* tells of the restless, ambitious middle-class mother of two teenage daughters who is disillusioned with her unsatisfactory marriage. Obsessed with finding a better life for her children, she sets out to make money to improve her social standing, abandoning her husband to become a waitress and then a restaurant-chain proprietress. Marriage to Zachary promises a better life.

Her only Oscar-winning performance: the title role in *Mildred Pierce*, 1945, with Zachary Scott

However, her rapid rise to riches brings nothing but ingratitude from her snobbish, vicious and heartless daughter (Ann Blyth) who, slapping her across the face, spits, 'Get out before I kill you.' The daughter shoots her stepfather in a jealous rage, and Mildred Pierce returns to her first husband — to the life which has cost blood and tears in her endeavours to escape from it.

The weirdest aspect of the details of Joan Crawford's own upbringing is the uncanny resemblance they bear to the plot-line of more than one Crawford movie, notably *Mildred Pierce*. The struggle of Crawford and her family to make ends meet by a variety of humdrum jobs has distinct parallels with Mildred's indomitable, chequered history, while the agonies of Mildred's personal relationships with men and with her young daughter are similarly echoed in the childhood and adolescent experiences of Billie/Lucille/Joan.

Had the film of *Mildred Pierce* not begun its life in James M. Cain's novel, it might easily have been an original screenplay using the facts of her own background and personae as the basis for its story and motivation.

Film critic Alexander Walker observed:

> It was the necessity for the self-made woman that spurred Joan Crawford on. She was years in advance of Women's-Lib. Women's-Lib was instinctual to Joan Crawford. It wasn't part of idealogy. It was forced on her by circumstances of the times . . .

It's the masochism of the part in *Mildred Pierce* that you feel is probably the second greatest element to Joan Crawford; this maternal feeling and caring for everything. She builds suffering into the role. The suffering she builds into *Mildred Pierce* is of a mother who has found her ingrate children to be unworthy of her.

A temperamental man himself, Hungarian-born director Michael Curtiz exemplified the craftsmanlike studio director who brought technical proficiency and polish to the varied material he was given. He could extract good performances from actors, and he directed two of Warner's contract players to their only Oscars: James Cagney in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) and Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Perhaps his most memorable single film is *Casablanca* (1943), a wartime romance representative of Hollywood at its best. He had anticipated difficulties from Crawford, whom he had heard could be impossible, and approached filming with all defences up. When she arrived on the set of *Mildred Pierce* for wardrobe tests, Curtiz walked over to her, shouting, 'You and your damned Adrian shoulder pads. This stinks!' And he ripped the dress from neck to hem. *'Mr Curtiz,'* Crawford sobbed, *'I bought this dress this morning for two dollars and ninety-eight cents, there are no shoulder pads,'* and she rushed into her dressing-room in tears.

They overcame their differences, however, and at the end of filming *Mildred Pierce* she presented him with a pair of Adrian's shoulder pads.

Whilst at MGM, costume designer Irene Sharaff met Adrian who told her how he had arrived at using shoulder pads for Crawford. Award-winning Irene Sharaff is famed for her costume designs for stage and films including *The King and I, An American in Paris, West Side Story, Funny Girl, Hello, Dolly!, Cleopatra* and *The Taming of the Shrew.* She recalled that Joan insisted on feeling absolutely free in her dresses and suits, and continued:

> At fittings Joan Crawford would rotate her shoulders vigorously, with arms outstretched, to test the stretch of the garment across her shoulder blades. As this feeling of unhampered freedom in clothes is possible only in loose jersey or a sweater, all other fabrics Adrian used for her clothes had to be let out across the back to such an extent that padding was necessary on the shoulders. With each outfit Adrian designed for her, the shoulders became increasingly exaggerated. As Miss Crawford was one of the leading stars and of glamorous repute, her silhouette became a pattern, soon copied, and for ten years shoulder pads were the outstanding item manufactured in the fashion industry.
>
> The Crawford silhouette exaggerating the shoulders was a step that was perhaps sooner or later inevitable in women's fashions. For the fluctuations of fashion tend to emphasise one or other part of the body and to alter its proportions. Adrian's focusing on the shoulders was gradually replaced by a new concentration on the bosom.

With *Mildred Pierce* grossing over $5 million at the box-office all was forgiven, and Joan Crawford was well and truly back on top.

Rosalind Russell remembered:

> Joan was wonderful in that picture. She had this marvellous range. She can go from A to Z with emotion. And with that streak of toughness that is in her, it comes through when she wants it to, and it's very effective. She didn't like people who put on a lot of airs. You could see her give them a look with those big blues of hers, to take it easy.

Wearing Adrian's famous shoulder pads

I don't think the front office ever got away with anything with Joan, because she was too wise for them, and had this very quality they were afraid of. That she was tough. You see, they would con actresses into saying, and there are several actresses I could mention who would be afraid of the front office: 'Well, if you think I should do that . . . if you think it would be better for my career to do it, yes, all right, I'll do it. I guess I'll do as you say.'

But not Joan. Not in a million years. She'd just look at them with those blues as if to say, 'Don't try to con me. I'm too wise for all that.'

Right: Reading *Picturegoer*

Below: Clutching her Oscar for *Mildred Pierce*. Note the photographers' flash bulbs on the bed

Sydney Guilaroff recalled that:

When Joan was nominated for an Academy Award for *Mildred Pierce*, she had a very bad cold and had to stay home. I called her and said, 'I'm glad you won it. I think it's wonderful. But it's long overdue.'

I think she was a far greater actress than she was given credit for. She was given credit for her great beauty and her personality, and the way she led fashion, her magnetism — we call everything charisma today. But I think she was one of the most gifted actresses of our time — plus the fact that she had one of the great faces of the century.

She was an extraordinarily generous person. She never forgot her friends. If somebody was down and out, she helped out. And she never prized people because of their position. She had her friends from all walks of life. It never made any difference to her who the person was. If she liked them, that was that. She was very, very rare.

Marriage to Philip Terry did not last. Once her domestic duties as housewife and mother had been replaced by a working routine at the studio, she realised that she neither knew nor loved the man she had married out of loneliness.

A close mutual friend commented:

I don't know why she married him in the first place: they were poles apart in every possible way. I guess she was just kinda lonely, and he was a nice quiet guy to have around.

When they married for those three short years, you always saw him around with her. He was at the studio, waiting on the set every single day. It must have been pretty soul-destroying for him hanging around all day, and not getting a job for himself.

'Never marry out of loneliness,' Crawford advised. *'I owed him an apology from the first.'*

The next role to come her way after *Mildred Pierce* was in *Humoresque*. John Garfield had been cast to co-star as the temperamental young violinist, and the actress playing the leading part of Helen Wright had walked out on the picture. Seizing the opportunity to play a lusty lady who is also an alcoholic, Crawford appealed to producer Jerry Wald for the part, and after consultation with John

Left: At a Warner Brothers press reception for her at the Hotel Sherry-Netherland, with Phil Terry and Willard Pluthner

Above: With Phil Terry

Below: In *Possessed*, 1947, with Van Hefflin

Garfield (who had flown back to New York) the role of a wealthy socialite with an ageing husband and a string of gigolos went to her.

Dressed for the occasion by Adrian, on loan from MGM, Crawford appeared svelte, sophisticated and worldly, winning praises from the critics with her performance. *'Humoresque* is undoubtedly Crawford's finest performance,' wrote one. 'As Helen, the dissolute and wealthy patroness of a fast-rising violinist played by John Garfield, she was forceful, suitably complex, aglow with feeling. Her timing was flawless, her appearance lovely, her emotions had depth.' She could ask for no more; and in a gesture expressing both gratitude and faith in the future, Warner's consequently offered her a seven-year contract at $200,000 a picture.

Possessed, in which she plays a schizophrenic who is being driven mad by unrequited love, marries Raymond Massey and eventually shoots Van Heflin whom she loves, gained another Academy Award nomination and high praise from the *New York Herald Tribune:* 'Miss Crawford is at her best in the mad scenes' — and *Time:* 'Miss Crawford is generally excellent, performing with the passion and intelligence of an actress who is not content with just one Oscar.'

She was not so well received, however, in her next film *Daisy Kenyon*, made while on loan to Twentieth Century Fox. Directed by Otto Preminger, she plays a magazine illustrator who has Henry Fonda and Dana Andrews vying for her favours. In an early scene she ruthlessly keeps her suitors waiting as she consults her appointment book with a planned, methodical knows-her-own-mind, lives-her-own-life look. At the start of the film, she appears as the fussy, spinsterish, apartment-proud fashion artist who, resentful of Dana Andrews' breaking a date, clears the ashtrays, straightens out the room, and punches dents out of the cushions, clinging to her apartment as a symbol of security.

'I have to fight to stay happy — fight for everything,' she asserts herself, sounding composed and certain. Square-shouldered, strong

In *Possessed,* 1947, with Geraldine Brooks and Raymond Massey. Miss Brooks remained a close friend of Joan's and died three weeks after her in 1977

nose and cavities in her cheeks enhancing her determination, she never allows herself to get into a mood she can't control. But she shows concern too, when she says determinedly, 'I can't wander all my life — I've got to be going somewhere.'

Daisy Kenyon's dialogue fitted her perfectly, conveying the emotions, inner thoughts and philosophy of the character, but as an actress Crawford had reservations about film dialogue. *'The written words weren't too important,'* she found. *'I know that if certain words or phrases stick in my throat, I could call a little conference right on the set and have them changed to suit me better. I knew the writer would be grateful to me. His words were dead words. They were brought to life by me,'* she added with colossal arrogance.

Henry Fonda recalled:

> It seems to me that *Daisy Kenyon* was just like any other film. You had the words. It was an obvious scene and you rehearsed it. Otto Preminger who directed might have had suggestions here and there and you liked them and incorporated them, but there weren't any big deals . . . It was a soap opera film to begin with . . . I didn't want to do it. It was not one of the films I would be proud of having played in.
>
> I was a contract player, and had to do it. It wasn't bad, so I couldn't fight too much about it. And the audience reacted to it as I expected them to. If they went to see a Joan Crawford movie, that's fine, and there was no reason not to have liked her because she was good. It was just one of fifty or sixty movies I did that were just churned out. It was different, because it was Joan Crawford. Acting with her was such a consummate thing. With my world of theatre behind me and hers of the movies, we came together and played *Daisy Kenyon.*
>
> With her you never saw the wheels turning. She was very true. She *was* the part, the character, not an actress merely playing the person. She had charisma or personality. She would be somebody when she walked onto the stage before she even opened her mouth, whether she was known to be Joan Crawford or not. She would be somebody that you would think of and notice.
>
> She didn't do theatre because she was afraid. I can understand that. Because a great many people who have made a reputation like she did in films, are jeopardising it. You're sticking your neck out. You're leaving yourself open to criticism that you don't need.
>
> When I did this one film with her, and I don't want to say it in a put-down way, she was obviously the star, and she had demands.

But they were not outrageous demands. She wanted the stage a certain temperature and I didn't object to that. It was colder than most people would have — it was important to her that the stage be cool. Our stages were air-conditioned, so they could do that.

I was told that she always gave her leading men and all the principals on the picture presents on opening day. Not at the end of the picture, but on the first day of shooting. My present from her was a crystal vase from Denmark. It was a beautiful thing. I wasn't used to being given a present by the leading lady or by anybody else when I started a film, so I was unprepared to give her anything.

But I discovered that she chewed double-mint gum, and I bought her a carton-full and gave her that.

Above: In *Flamingo Road*, 1949, with Zachary Scott

Below: In *Daisy Kenyon*, 1947, with Henry Fonda and Dana Andrews

Henry Fonda has worked with both Bette Davis and Joan Crawford:

I knew Bette a long time, and I have worked with her twice or three times, and I was very aware of Bette's mannerisms, but I was never conscious of Joan having any. I found working with Joan very relaxed. Very warm. Jim Stewart and I were bachelors in a house a block and a half from Joan's house and I think perhaps twice in two years we went to her home in the afternoon when there were other people there, and swam in the pool and had drinks round the pool. William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies gave annual costume parties at their big beach house, and everybody in the business was there. And at that kind of party you would meet Joan Crawford.

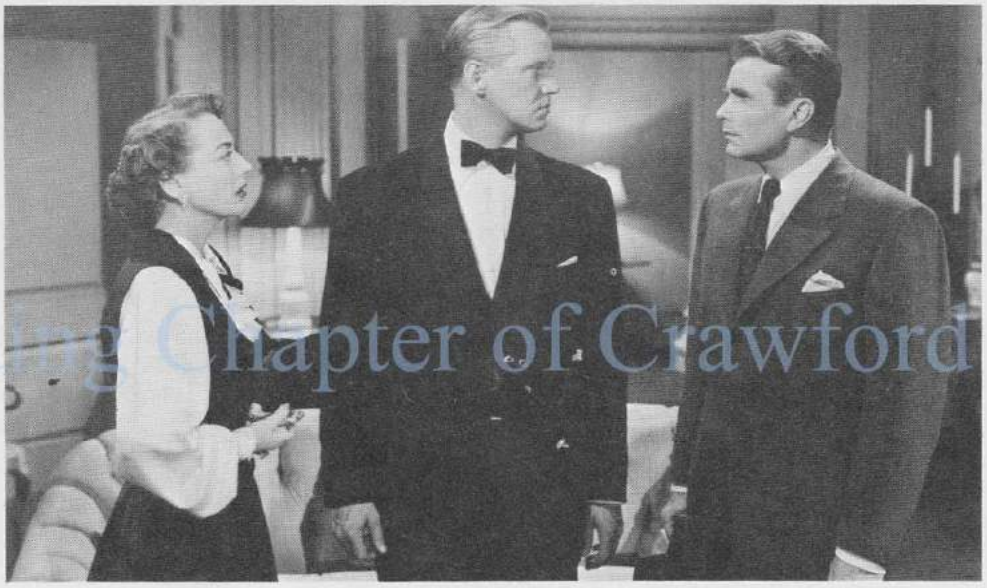
Joan Crawford was a movie star. There was no question about that. In everything it meant. If you're going to be in the movies and you're going to be a star, to conduct yourself as a star, *think* as a star. But I've never been able to, I guess that is because of my early self-consciousness and shyness. But there's no question about it. Joan was a star in every sense of the word. She didn't remind you of it in any particular way. You just knew it. And you didn't think any less of her for it. Jim Stewart is one of my closest and dearest friends. He's a star. Knows he is. Acts like it. And accepts it. I would shy from it, but that doesn't mean I'm right. It's just because of my nature. I'm self-conscious being chauffeured in a Rolls Royce. I accept it because it's an easy thing to do.

There now followed a string of films for Crawford at Warner's, typing her as the 'all-American woman' much as her roles as MGM had typed her in the poor-girl-marries-rich-man, or rich-girl-marries-poor-man parts. The formula films began with *Flamingo Road*, co-starring Zachary Scott, in which she portrayed a fairground girl who moves into crooked political circles; this was followed by a brief guest appearance as herself in a Doris Day film *It's a Great Feeling*.

Next came *The Damned Don't Cry* in 1950, in which she drew on her Oscar-winning role in *Mildred Pierce* for inspiration. As Ethel Whitehead, fed up with poverty, her drab background and labourer husband, she blames herself for the death of her only son who is killed in a bicycle accident. In a detailed, realistic scene, the hard-driving career-woman image begins to reveal itself when she applies to an employment bureau for work: 'I can't wait that long,' she snaps at the sensible woman clerk who advises her to learn a skill.

The *New York Times* attacked her:

> Miss Crawford runs through the whole routine of cheap motion-picture dramatics in her latter-day hard-boiled, dead-pan style. As a labourer's wife, she plays it without makeup and with her face heavily greased. As a cigar-store clerk and clothes model, she plays it tough. And as the ultimately cultivated 'lady' she gives it all the lofty dignity that goes with champagne buckets and Palm Springs swimming pools. A more artificial lot of acting could hardly be achieved.



Above: In *Harriet Craig*, 1950

Right: In *The Damned Don't Cry*, 1950, with David Brian and Kent Smith

She was saved, thankfully, when loaned to Columbia to play *Harriet Craig*, based on *Craig's Wife* by George Kelly, in the role created by Rosalind Russell. Under Vincent Sherman's direction, she won critics' approval for her portrayal of the selfish, domineering shrew whose only real love is her meticulously kept and richly appointed house. Obsessed with her environment, the neurotic perfectionist who is a stickler for absolute cleanliness refuses to leave with her husband (Wendell Corey) when he is offered promotion elsewhere. Realising that her only true love is her house, he finally walks out on her, leaving her to live alone in the home he provided and which she had made untenable for him.

'In every mannerism of speech or gesture,' the *New York Herald Tribune* raved, 'Miss Crawford suggests that she is a queen in the country of the cinema, playing a dominant woman whose unkindly rule of her home has psychotic origins.'

These psychotic origins were later to obsess the star in her own homes where, like Harriet Craig, she became paranoiac about cleanliness and hygiene.

She then returned to Warner's and, once more under Vincent Sherman's direction, played the role Madeleine Carroll had created in Fay Kanin's Broadway success *Goodbye, My Fancy*. With Robert Young, Frank Lovejoy and Eve Arden as co-stars, she plays a congresswoman who returns to her alma mater (from which she had been expelled twenty years before) to receive an honorary degree.

Caught in a triangle with the man she had loved (Robert Young) and the man who now loves and follows her (Frank Lovejoy), the romantic comedy ends where it started with her going back home again to her present love.

The *New York Times* did not, however, care much for her performance, commenting, 'Miss Crawford's errant congresswoman is as aloof and imposing as the capital dome,' in contrast to *Variety's* 'Miss Crawford, recently involved in only heavily dramatic roles, sustains the romantic, middle-aged congresswoman with a light touch that is excellent.'

But the *New York Times* attacked Crawford again, putting paid to her Warner days with its review for her last picture under their banner, *This Woman is Dangerous*. She played the master-mind of a hold-up gang in a shoddily made product, unworthy of a studio of Warner's standing. 'When trouble comes to Joan Crawford in her motion picture roles,' the review began, 'it comes in great big agonising hunks.' It continued:

> The incredibly durable star, whose theatrical personality has now reached the ossified stage, appears as a woman criminal . . . There is only one possible explanation for such fictitious junk as this, which is wilfully delivered in the name of dramatic fare. That is, as pure contrivance for the display of Miss Crawford's stony charm. Those who admire the actress may be most tenderly moved by the evidence of the suffering she stolidly undergoes. And to these the arrant posturing of Miss Crawford may seem the quintessence of acting art. But for people of mild discrimination and even moderate reasonableness, the suffering of Miss Crawford will be generously matched by their own in the face of *This Woman is Dangerous*.

Left: In *This Woman is Dangerous*, 1952

Realising that the string of flops threatened her future, and having no wish to sink into oblivion, she made moves to restore her career yet again. As she had left MGM when the formula parts ceased to offer sufficient variety for her acting skills, she now secured her release from her Warner's contract in 1952, joining the ranks of major stars who, with the advent of television and its devastating effect on the movie industry in the early fifties, turned freelance.

By now she had adopted two more children, at birth, but although she has always referred to them as twins the girls came from different families and had been born a month apart. Cathy and Cynthia were the antithesis of one another: Cathy became large and rather fat,

Cindy slender and very pretty. By all accounts they did not enjoy the average childhood, as witnessed by Hollywood columnist Radie Harris:

> I remember going to Joan's house in California with the four children. You would never have known a child lived there. I went into these sterile nurseries. There were no dolls around. No toys to be seen.
>
> We went from there to Maureen O'Sullivan's house, and you wouldn't believe the difference. The sewing machine was in one room, and the dolls and toys surrounded Mia (Farrow) who was jumping up and down on the bed. The kids were all over the place. It was a home that children lived in.
>
> Joan was so obsessive about her children being prepared so that, although they had every luxury in life, if anything happened to her they would be able to take care of themselves.
>
> If other little children came over to play with little Christopher, Joan would say, 'Have you shined your shoes yet?'
>
> And he'd say, 'Not yet.'
>
> She would interrupt their games and say, 'Go upstairs and shine your shoes.' The discipline for those children at that age was overboard and demanding. Christopher became rebellious and by the time he was twelve or thirteen had run away from home several times.

> On one horrific occasion [*Don Parker continued*], I think it was the first or second day of my employment there, I went to a cupboard for a car-rug, but opened the wrong door and found myself in a bedroom instead. Suddenly Miss Crawford appeared behind me, as if from nowhere. 'What are you doing in this room?' she demanded. 'I — I'm sorry, Miss Crawford,' I began, 'I opened the wrong door. I was looking for the cupboard with the car-rug.' And at that moment I saw, tied to the foot of the bed, young Christopher. He had no clothes on, and he was crying his eyes out.
>
> I was so shocked to see this, and found myself numb; speechless. I turned to her questioningly, and she explained, 'He's being punished. I've tied his hands to the foot of the bed. You see, I caught him masturbating last night.'
>
> And with that, she ushered me out of the room and locked the door behind us, leaving the child crying unmercifully.

With two of her adopted children, Cathy and Cindy

The boy, not unnaturally, ran away from home when he was finally released, and an intimate who was staying with Crawford at the time recalls when the police brought him home. 'No. That's not my son,' she told the police who stood on her doorstep with the child. 'There must be some mistake.' And with that, she shut the door on them. The police, knowing it *was* Christopher, left him on the doorstep, but she refused to open the door to him, leaving him to spend the night outside curled up on the couch by the side of the pool. '*That's* his punishment for running away,' she told her house-guest bitterly as she marched back into the drawing-room.

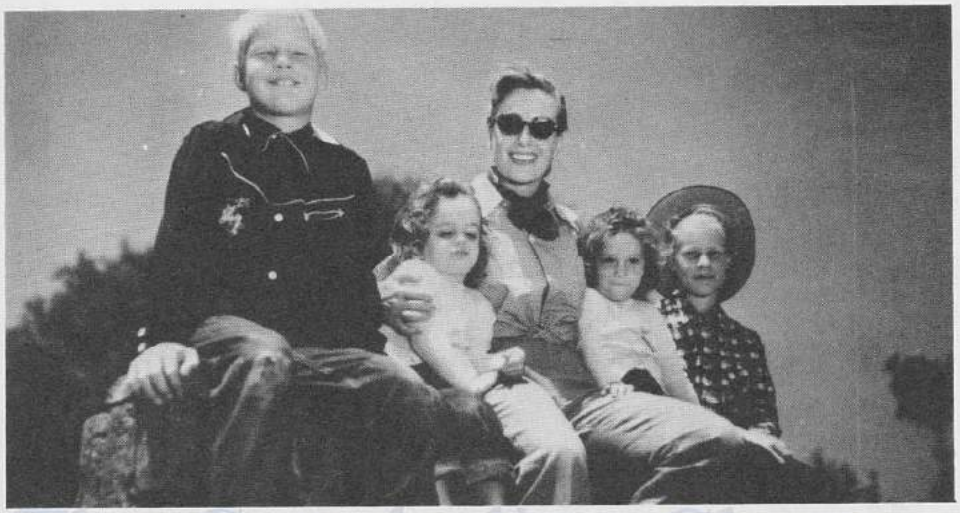
Another confidante recalls that Crawford asked Christopher to recite the Star Spangled Banner to her guests. He couldn't remember the words, and so on this occasion she punished him by locking him in a closet with the American flag wrapped around him until he was able to emerge word-perfect.

'My three girls were taught to wash and iron,' Crawford echoed. *'All the children learned to take their soiled clothes to the laundry room after baths as soon as they could walk. When they were old enough, they dusted and vacuumed their own rooms. A room not properly taken*

care of — no television. Sloppiness has never been tolerated in our home, nor has rudeness.'

Joan Crawford justified the discipline she imposed on the children on the grounds that it provided them with the security they needed. She tried to give them what she had lacked as a child: constructive discipline, a sense of security and a sense of sharing, self-support and self-sufficiency.

Regrettably, as the children grew up they grew away from their adopted mother. Christopher, whose persistent running away caused considerable distress, was sent by a New York judge to a home for psychiatric care. He married a teenaged girl when he came of age, and had four children. Crawford refused to associate with him and his



With her four adopted children, left to right, Christopher, Cathy, Cindy and Christina

family. She had been estranged from Christopher for more than twenty years; despite his efforts at a reconciliation when he brought his young wife to meet her, she wouldn't allow them inside the apartment. She never wished to meet her grandchildren.

Christina, a beautiful blonde who became an actress, virtually came to blows with Crawford, who accused her of trading on her name for acting parts and publicity. She married New York stage director Harvey Medlinsky, but the match — which was not approved by Crawford, was short-lived and they were soon divorced. Christina, now Mrs David Koontz, received a negative reply from Crawford to her wedding invitation.

Cathy and Cindy, too, have married and have children of their own, but neither were in contact with their mother who has never seen their children either.

'I absolutely will not allow anybody to call me grandmother,' Crawford confessed. *'They can call me Aunt Joan, Dee-Dee, Cho-Cho, or anything they want, but I hate the word grandmother. It pushes a woman almost into the grave.'*

Despite the security and family unity in which the children were reared, with every opportunity and luxury showered on them by a doting and domineering mother, everything turned strangely sour. Perhaps this was the result of their being suffocated during their early life in California, and then virtually ignored later when they lived in New York after their mother had married Alfred Steele, the then Chairman of Pepsi Cola, and was no longer living in Hollywood. It is as though they had outlived their usefulness to her once she no longer needed to project a movie star image of a happy family life and herself as doting mother. Never once did the children sleep under their mother's roof in New York; they were relegated to a nearby residential hotel under the strict care of a nanny, who escorted them to and from school and brought them to visit their mother at her apartment every day on their way home — at a given time, for a given period, as though it were a business meeting.

Under the circumstances it was hardly surprising that Christopher ran away so often, or that the four of them sought independence so early by marrying and making their own families.

Another visitor to Crawford's home was the British stage director Allan Davis, whose great success *No Sex, Please, We're British* has run on the London stage for several years. He recalled, when in 1952 he was under contract to MGM as a learner film director:

> I met Joan Crawford and she invited me around to dinner. It was still sunlight when I arrived. She lived on the way to Santa Monica in a big ranch-type house. I remember from the first minute, going through the gates, the beautifully swept, manicured lawns and neatly-kept gravel drive with nothing out of place. I arrived, and the door was opened by a butler.

In an uncanny parallel to Allan Davis' experience Gavin Lambert describes his own visit to a similar house in his novel, *The Slide Area*. In one of the stories in this book, entitled 'The Closed Set', the movie star he writes about accurately resembles Joan Crawford, and here Gavin Lambert describes arriving at *his* movie-star's house. He has named his fictional character Julie Forbes:

> There are some fine homes in the hills which separate Hollywood from the San Fernando Valley, and they give an illusion of country living . . . Tall trees were silhouetted against the sky, and a blue jay flew above the driveway marked PRIVATE which led off the canyon road. This driveway passed a swimming pool with an adobe guest house overlooking it, and wound through a eucalyptus grove to a mansion built around three sides of a courtyard, like a Spanish mission. In the centre a fountain played, and at the far end marble steps led up to a front door inlaid with blue and white tiles.
>
> A butler in tails opened the door and said in a near-English accent, 'Miss Forbes would like you to wait in the living room.'
>
> The L-shaped living-room bore no traces of living. Everything about it was an abstraction of comfort and elegance. The walls were white except for a strip of filigreed black and gold wallpaper above the pseudo-antique fireplace, at right angles to which stood two long low black couches. Pressed flowers lay under the glass tops of white marble coffee tables. A plaster-cast pink and blue angel floated above the grand piano, suspended on a gold wire from the ceiling. There were cigarettes in little glass bowls and book matches in gold leaf covers, each one with a facsimile signature, *Julie Forbes*. The only painting was a Julie Forbes, a pastel blur about five feet tall in a frame overlaid with black velvet.
>
> The first thing I noticed was her dress, deep, flaring crimson. Like everything else about her, it had a bright perfect glitter. The diamond choker round her neck. The silver sandals with jewelled toes. From the smooth legendary face, beautiful luminous cat's eyes stared out. Cut short, her blonde hair gleamed. Her skin was golden, her figure trim and pliant as a young girl's. She had been created a moment ago. There was no childhood, no past, nothing. I thought of a joke about the mortuaries in California; they supply human ashes to cannibals in the South Seas, who make them flesh by adding water. Instant people, like instant coffee. Julie Forbes, I decided, was an instant person. That must be her secret. Every few years she was reduced to ashes, then reconstituted in a new form. Different. Shining. Instant.

Continuing Allan Davis's account of *his* visit:

It was at the time when the two little girls, they were probably between ten and twelve, were just coming to say goodnight, and *they* were manicured and absurdly neat-looking in very starched, clean-looking dresses. Their hair was very brushed and they looked terribly scrubbed. I shall never forget those little girls. When they were introduced to me, they curtsied politely. It was my early days of the States, and I wasn't used to children curtsying.

Joan Crawford herself was very neatly dressed. Her eyes, of course, enormously big, huge orbs, dominated her appearance, but what struck me was her slimness; there wasn't an ounce of fat on her. I was impressed by the flatness of her tummy! She had on a sort of yellow, neat-fitting dress with two small bows. This was the impression: everything was neat. Trim. Everything was in place, and this was the feeling of the entire evening; how terribly neat and groomed everything was.

We had a cocktail, and a little light Californian wine with dinner, and after dinner Joan Crawford wanted to know whether I had seen a play in London called *Portrait in Black* which starred Diana Wynyard, which I had. It was a thriller set in San Francisco, put on at the Piccadilly Theatre. She was thinking of making a picture of it, and was looking for a leading man. She wanted to know about the young actors I knew, and I talked about Paul Scofield and Paul Rogers who she hadn't heard of. As the result of this conversation, quite a lot of cables went off to England from my office at Metro the next morning on her behalf to the leading men I had suggested, but, alas, nothing ever came of that.

Portrait in Black was subsequently made with Lana Turner in the role Crawford discussed. This was one of the many properties she was to lose to her new rival who was being championed by the studio.

Allan Davis continued:

After dinner, we went down to the playroom; an enormous bungalow on the side of a huge pool, across the garden. I remember it vividly because it was the Hollywood perfection that I had never seen in all the other places I had been to. The armchairs that we sat in faced a big Utrillo on the wall. The biggest armchairs you ever saw, and she pressed a button, and the Utrillo swept up into the ceiling, revealing a cinema screen behind it. In this playroom, there was every possible means of relaxation and comfort. But before the film began, we had drinks.

Three of the children, Christopher, Cathy and Cindy, visit her at the set of *Queen Bee*, 1955

This is again echoed in Gavin Lambert's account of his heroine Julie:

> As we went into the hall, she smiled, 'I want to show you something I designed myself.' Standing by the wall, she pressed a button. Part of the wall slid away, revealing a closet behind it. A light went on automatically.
>
> The closet was like a small room. It contained an armchair and a low table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. In the chair sat a dressmaker's dummy, without limbs or head. Hung on it was a starched evening dress shirt and a bow-tie. A white silk top hat and a pair of dancing shoes stood in a glass case on the table. Against the black wall was pinned a pair of fish-net tights.
>
> 'Memories,' she said quietly. 'Don't touch them, please. They're my costume from the chorus line in 1927.'
>
> She pressed the button again, the panel slid back. When she pressed another, a second panel opened in the centre of the wall. This time the closet had a black ceiling with silver paper stars. A gold statuette glittered on the top of a broken marble column.
>
> 'My Oscar.' She looked gravely at us and closed the panel.

Further describing his own visit, Allan Davis went on:

> She's got noticeable hands and she had a huge brandy glass. She poured a large brandy into it, and she very seductively warmed it with both hands and handed it across to me, murmuring, 'Mr Davis, *do* have a brandy.' I always remember that brandy arriving in this huge glass, *at* me, and I must say, I have used that bit of business, and it always gets a laugh in *No Sex, Please, We're British!*
>
> The film began, and her comments throughout it were exactly like the rest of the evening. Thoroughly professional. The film was some rubbishy story set on a college campus and there was a new young man in it who she wanted to see. He was a new young actor just coming up in Hollywood called Cliff Robertson. [*The film was his début in* Picnic. *He subsequently appeared with Crawford in* Autumn Leaves, *his next picture.*] She knew how the picture should be made and when it wasn't being done she'd say, 'That's a bad cut. I don't believe that.' And then the thing I learned that night as a director: the director of this picture constantly cut people half-way between the knee and the thigh, and every time this shot came up, she cried, 'Christ, why doesn't he move in; why doesn't he get into the waist, or get right back and get the full figure!' And time and time again she called this out. I don't think that I've ever made that mistake again with any of the pictures I did after hearing her remarks.
>
> I felt Joan Crawford was a magnificent presentation of the person she wanted to be. I would describe her as icy, but warm. Glacial, but human. The voice was carefully modulated; conducted. Not a thing was out of place; from the manicured lawn and neat driveway; her hair, the dinner — the children's behaviour. It was all meticulous!

After her divorce from Philip Terry and before she married Alfred Steele she had many escorts and admirers, and Hollywood solicitor Gregory Bautzer became a constant companion.

A close mutual friend, recalling an incident illustrating her quick temper, said:

> They were madly in love with one another. Greg had given her a beautiful limousine as a present, and she reciprocated by presenting

him with a pair of diamond cuff-links valued at $10,000.

One evening they had an almighty quarrel. They both believed the other was being untrue, and as Greg left he ripped off the cuff-links and gave them back to Joan. In her fury, she stormed into the bathroom and flung them into the lavatory pan, and flushed them down.

She suddenly realised how much money she had paid for them, and immediately called the plumber to open up the pipes. Fortunately, they had got stuck in the bend of the pipe. The plumber's bill was $500, but she consoled herself with the fact that she had saved nine and a half thousand grand!

But now it was Greg's turn. He got into the limousine he had given her, and smashed it into a wall! I can tell you he paid more than $500 in repairs!

Of course, this was merely a lovers' tiff, and they soon made it up to one another, but it was certainly the most expensive quarrel I had ever heard of!

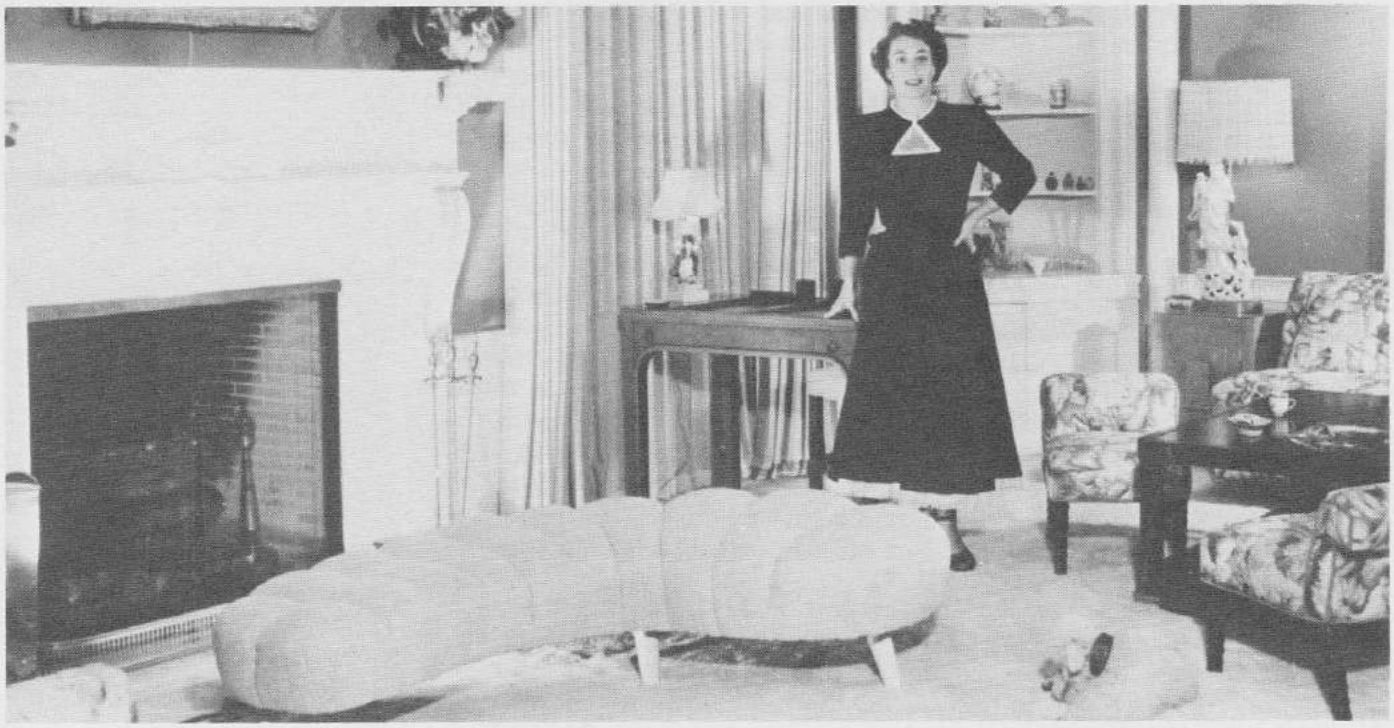
She seemed to acquire a growing reputation for securing the extra-curricular attentions of her leading men, and those who failed to win the coveted roles opposite her on the screen complained bitterly that it was because they had either rejected her amorous advances at the vital casting stage — or that she had found them unsuited to her sensual requirements. Acting ability, however, was her most demanding requirement. She objected to Frank Shields as her co-star in a film, saying that the tennis champion could be her leading man 'when I play on the number one court at Wimbledon'. On hearing that, Shields left the studio.

Another Hollywood colleague relates a story he heard from Betty Marvin (Lee Marvin's first wife):

At home with the four children

She was telling us, that before she married Lee, she left the North West and went to the University of Southern California, and as she was putting herself through University, she ran out of money, and so had to get a job of some kind.

She looked around and got a job working for Joan Crawford. It was the time when Miss Crawford's career was at a low ebb and she was still living in a big estate. There were absolutely no servants at the time when Betty moved in, so Miss Crawford, in order to keep



Above: At home during *The Damned Don't Cry*, 1950

the grounds looking well, called the head of her local fan club and invited the fans over on Saturdays to take care of the lawn. She would make an appearance for the benefit of the fans who were clipping and mowing and hoeing and plucking, and then retire indoors to do the housework.

But before Betty arrived, Joan Crawford had been in New York where she saw a performance of *The King and I*. She sat in the theatre, took one look at Yul Brynner, and said to herself, 'I want him.'

Below: Escorted by attorney Greg Bautzer

She returned to California, and wrote him an anonymous letter, and the return address was a Post Office box in Beverly Hills. She didn't identify herself as she'd planned the whole thing as a gag to begin with. She wrote that she thought he was the most glorious looking man she had ever seen in her life and could understand any woman wanting to get her hands on him and falling desperately in love.

Mr Brynner responded to this letter, and wrote back, naturally curious to know who Madame X was. She eventually identified herself, and it was arranged that he would come out and spend the weekend with her during the run of the show.

In the meantime, Miss Crawford told Betty, 'Get the household ready, and the food prepared round the pool because that's where my guest and I are going to be. And keep those kids out of the way — and keep them quiet. I don't want any bother from the kiddies' wing.' She didn't have much time! He had to get back for his Monday evening performance on Broadway. And this was the pre-jet period. Those flights used to take eleven and a half hours.

So he arrived and was driven to the estate. It was a glorious moonlit night. It was late, the children were all tucked up in bed. Miss Crawford was dressed to kill, in flowing panels, and attended to his immediate needs: some libation and foods.

They were on the chaise, and he fell into a deep sleep and could not wake up! He was dog-tired. The only time he could open his eyes was long enough to say, 'Where's my bed?'

He went to bed. Slept. And wakened just in time to get the flight back to New York for his next performance.

Nothing ever happened. However, when he was still asleep, all hell broke loose, and she took it out on the kids!

9
INDEFINITE FUTURE

Having left MGM for Warner Brothers, in protest against the stereotyped roles they had offered her, Joan Crawford again found herself cast in similar parts by her new studio. Always anxious about her career and her public image, she had no wish to continue being branded with the 'all-American woman' label which her pictures at Warner's had stuck on her, and she abandoned that studio as well. The earlier Warner roles had won her a consistently good press and provided the studio with satisfying box-office receipts, from the ambitious mother in her Oscar-winning performance in *Mildred Pierce* to her portrayal of the nymphomaniac in *Humoresque*, followed by the schizophrenic in *Possessed*. However, the next three roles at Warner's which caused her to make the final break were parts in which she portrayed women rising from woebegone rags to sorrier riches, first as the fairground girl who gets involved in crooked political circles in *Flamingo Road*; then the lower-class housewife turned phoney society criminal in *The Damned Don't Cry*; and finally the classy gun moll in *This Woman is Dangerous*. Her only role to break the pattern of criminal toughies was as the congresswoman torn between two loves in *Goodbye, My Fancy*.

Reading the Edna Sherry novel *Sudden Fear*, one night in 1952, she decided that the character of Myra Hudson — the successful playwright who sacks her leading man shortly before the opening of her new Broadway play — would be an exciting film vehicle for her. Robbed of his chance of fame, the leading man sets out to kill her in revenge, by which time she has fallen in love with him. So eager was she that she signed to star in the picture — to be independently produced by Joseph Kaufman who had bought the film rights — without a salary but on a box-office percentage.

Left and right: In *Sudden Fear*, 1952

Despite the off-screen differences between herself and co-star Jack Palance, who considered her overt friendliness with the crew insincere, and told her and many others so in no uncertain terms, *Sudden Fear* was a triumph. Crawford won rave reviews for her portrayal of the petrified, hunted victim who succeeds in setting a trap for and finally disposing of her would-be assassin. She was back on top — but without the security of a studio contract.

She was now invited back to MGM to star in her first Technicolor film, *Torch Song*, with Michael Wilding and Gig Young. The former stage dancer Charles Walters, who had directed musical routines in films including *Easter Parade* with Judy Garland and *Lili* with Leslie Caron, was contracted to choreograph and direct the picture.

Above: In *Sudden Fear* with Jack Palance

Right: In *Torch Song*, 1953, with Michael Wilding

Crawford was anxious about both her future and her reception at the studio that had created her — and that she had left ten years before. Could this one film convince MGM that they had made a mistake by letting her go, and impel them to offer her a new seven-year contract? Despite her anxiety, she was excited at playing the part of a tough and selfish musical comedy star who is a neurotic perfectionist in her work and becomes a trial to her co-workers. She had songs to sing and dance numbers to perform. In the film she falls in love with her blind pianist, played by Michael Wilding, who had recently co-starred with Marlene Dietrich in *Stage Fright*, and with Ingrid Bergman in *Under Capricorn* and *The Law and the Lady*. He was then married to Elizabeth Taylor.

A shy and diffident man with great personal charm, Michael Wilding recalls the new deal at Metro when they made *Torch Song:*

> They had to make cheap films and *Torch Song* was made in eighteen days. They had Joan dancing with Chuck Walters a few days beforehand. She was hard-working and rightly too. I found her perfectly charming.
>
> She did, however, amuse me when, in the early days of making the film, she said, 'Why don't you ever come to rushes?'
>
> 'Do you go?' I asked.
>
> 'I watch them three times,' she replied. 'I watch them twice to see what is going on. And then I watch to see what I've got to beat.'
>
> To *beat!* [*laughed Michael Wilding*] Not to *play* with.

Explaining the difficulties of playing a blind man on film, Wilding commented that in filming you have to cheat your eyelines anyway, meaning that for optical reasons one doesn't necessarily look *directly* at the object or person, but often a little to one side or the other. He went on:

You have to look in a certain way to get the camera angle, and playing a blind man on top of this, convincing the audience as well as the person you're playing with is very difficult. So I was cheating for the camera, and being a blind pianist at the same time. What's more, I couldn't play a note of music, and so miming it, knowing which notes to play without looking at the key-board, was a nightmare for me.

I didn't enjoy making the film because I wasn't happy in the role. Perhaps people would say I wasn't good in it [*he added disarmingly*], and I wasn't!

Below: In *Torch Song*, 1953

Bottom: In *Torch Song* with Michael Wilding

Crawford's uncertainty about her own performance and her feelings of insecurity revealed themselves in a different way. She hadn't danced for eleven years and was tensed up about the exhausting musical routines which she had to learn in so short a time. On top of this she returned home each night to cope with the demands of four young children, whereas her usual routine had been to stay in her caravan on the stage every night to rest and prepare herself for the next day's shooting.

She was playing a scene with one of the artists when she looked off the set to the director and beckoned him over. Putting her hand over her mouth, she murmured instructions to Walters which she did not wish her co-player to hear.

'Joan would like you to move on that line,' the director said to her partner. It was the worst line for the artist to move on but he naturally agreed to do so. The scene was played, and afterwards she again called 'Chuck!'

The director went over, and again she whispered something to him. 'Joan says would you please try the scene again,' he said, and gave the artist something different to do.

'What a funny way of going about it,' said the crestfallen artist. 'Why she couldn't have said something to me about it herself, without going through this whole rigmarole, I'll never know. I hadn't come across it before in movies, and I had certainly worked with stars of her magnitude before.'

The theme music for *Torch Song* had been composed by the late virtuoso pianist, Walter Gross, three years previously. Gross, who had formed a double act on radio and television with Cy Walters, knew that he had a hit melody on his hands. Of all the lyrics that were written for this — even one submitted by Johnny Mercer — not one was thought right by the composer.

Jack Lawrence, who had written lyrics for 'Sleepy Lagoon', 'All or Nothing at All', 'Linda' and many other hit songs, recalls that:

I sat down and wrote the lyrics for Walter Gross's piece off the cuff, and named it 'Tenderly'. At first Walter wasn't too sure that he wanted a lyric at all; he was strangely possessive over it, and thought that words would spoil his music. However, we went ahead and had it published and Sarah Vaughan was the first singer to record it. Unfortunately Walter, who had never had anything published before, had become an alcoholic and remained a 'one-song' man.

'Tenderly' was chosen for *Torch Song*. Joan Crawford wanted to sing it herself, and spent much time vocalising, but India Adams finally recorded it and Miss Crawford mimed to her voice. Walter recorded the piano pieces for Michael Wilding to play, and by the time the movie was completed 'Tenderly' was used fifteen times. I need hardly tell you that as Walter, the publishers and I had a three-way deal, we all did very well indeed!

Visited on the set of *Torch Song* by her former co-stars Robert Taylor and Ann Blyth

However, despite its haunting melody the film failed to impress critics or audiences, and hopes of a possible future with MGM were dashed without them offering Joan the coveted contract.

If she felt she had suffered unreasonable hostility from Jack Palance on *Sudden Fear* and her co-players on *Torch Song* because of her unexpected attitude towards them, this was nothing compared with the open combat between herself and the seasoned actress Mercedes McCambridge on her next picture, *Johnny Guitar*, the Western she made for Republic in garish Trucolor.

Playing a staunch moralist who loathed everything Crawford stood for in the movie, Mercedes McCambridge was applauded by the crew at the end of a scene — a rare occurrence in film-making. 'This naturally made Joan mad,' claimed Miss McCambridge. 'After all, she *was* the star of the picture. I guess if I were Joan Crawford I'd be mad if some Mamie Glutz horned in on my territory that way.'

Crawford accused McCambridge of openly reporting the details of their feud to the press, and although it distressed the star to feel that this was the third consecutive picture in which she had been at odds with her co-players, the publicity department revelled in the free promotion — hinting that Crawford was injecting into her private life on the set some of the toughness of the characters she portrayed on the screen.

Alexander Walker observed:

> I identify Joan Crawford with two films specifically, first *Mildred Pierce*, then the Western *Johnny Guitar*. The latter, because it's a very kinky film, to see this strong ambiguously, feminine-masculine woman, got up in a cowboy outfit, lauding it over the men in the saloon. If I can describe it, it's almost like a butch Marlene Dietrich. Where Dietrich shades into ambiguity, however, Crawford draws a hard line around it, and I think she's got that sadistic streak in *Johnny Guitar* that she doesn't have in the other roles.
>
> It's impossible to think of Crawford in *Johnny Guitar* actually suffering. She's built to give pain and deal out suffering, like dealing out a hand of cards at poker, whereas in the other movies, she doesn't. She does suffer in the other movies; I think she enjoys suffering, but then that's a characteristic of stars, male and female. It seems to validate them when they suffer: 'I suffer, therefore I am.'

There was more enmity in her next picture, *Female on the Beach* for Universal, in which she appeared with Jeff Chandler, Jan Sterling and her fourth opponent, Natalie Schafer.

Crawford played a rich and lonely widow whose late husband, a Las Vegas gambler, has left her a palatial beach house she has never visited. Jeff Chandler, as the well-tanned gigolo next door, is kept in the peak of condition by his uncle and aunt in order to prey on rich widows. Like the plumbing, he seems to go with the house. Against a background of greed, avarice, murder, lust and intrigue, Crawford falls in love with the gigolo and marries him, giving in entirely to the strong physical attraction she feels for him.

'Darling, how marvellous! We're together again. It's wonderful!' began Crawford as she welcomed to the picture Natalie Schafer, who in chapter 7 describes working with her in *Reunion in France* twelve years before. 'I adore you. I've seen all your pictures,' she enthused. Natalie had appeared in some two dozen films by then, playing — among other parts — both Lana Turner's best friend and her mother. 'You're so great. It's such a privilege to work with you again,' Crawford continued. But the compliments and sentiments were short-lived.

Top: In *Torch Song*

Above: In *Johnny Guitar*

Above left: In *Johnny Guitar*, 1954, with Scott Brady and Sterling Hayden

Natalie Schafer remembers:

We were standing together being lit for a scene, when I told Joan that I had read an article by Arthur Miller the night before in *Theatre Magazine* in which he described the amazing technique of actresses who were capable of acting with their backs to camera. He had written that Judith Anderson could do a whole performance with her back to the audience.

So here I was being lit with Joan. We had a table between us on the set. The camera was at the back of me, and the light was on Joan as they were shooting, favouring her, from behind me. We were talking quite casually, and I said to her, 'You know, I read a *marvellous* story by Arthur Miller last night, an excellent article about how actors can act with their backs. I was absolutely fascinated by it, and now I have the chance to try it, and I'm practising it now.'

So Joan said rather grandly, '*Nobody* who ever plays a scene with me has to worry about acting with their backs.' I turned around to look at the camera and said, 'Oh! But isn't that heaven?'

We were supposed to be in the beach-house dressed in sun-suits and cottons. But she would never wear anything but very full skirts. She came down the stairs of the beach-house in *full* evening wear to everyone's astonishment.

Apparently she had fired three wardrobe people because they wouldn't dress her that way for the beach scene.

We had bungalow dressing-rooms at Universal those days, which was rather grand. I had Douglas Fairbanks Jr's bungalow, because he wasn't on the lot at the time, which was next to Joan's.

One evening, after we'd finished working, I was getting ready to go home when a secretary came over and said, 'Miss Crawford would like you to come over and have drinks with her.'

'Tell her it's adorable of her,' I said, 'but I have a dinner-date and I'm rushing like mad, but please thank her.'

The next morning when I came on the set, she wouldn't talk to me. She looked through me as if I wasn't there. I said to the others, 'What's the matter with her today? She's not talking. Yesterday she was darling, she even asked me to come to cocktails,' and they replied, 'That's just it. You didn't go.'

On the set Joan had in front of her what I thought was a glass of water. We were having a long scene under very hot lights and I said, 'Oh! I'm so thirsty, may I have a sip?' I took a sip, and it nearly knocked me down with the strength of it!

In *Queen Bee* as Eva Phillips

Earl Blackwell was dining that New Year's Eve with Lilian and Alfred Steele in Las Vegas. He told me:

> Alfred Steele had met Joan casually once at a party in New York given by her then agent, Sonny Werblin, but he didn't exactly know her. I'd been calling Joan every New Year's Eve for many, many years, so as I was dressing for dinner, I put in a call and didn't get through because she was tied up at the studio. Finally, when I was downstairs having drinks with Lilian and Alfred, the call came through. I said, 'Happy New Year, dear,' and Joan wished me Happy New Year too. 'Believe it or not,' she continued, 'I'm still working, so I'm staying at the studio and I'm just going to spend New Year's Eve here alone. What are you doing?' 'I'm in Las Vegas with friends of mine, Lilian and Alfred Steele,' I replied. 'Wait a minute. Alfred, this is Joan Crawford. Joan, this is Alfred Steele,' I said, re-introducing them, and Al took the phone to wish her Happy New Year.
>
> Five months later, they were husband and wife.
>
> He and Lilian were getting a divorce. They had just told me that it was their last New Year's Eve together. Lilian was on her way to Mexico the next day to get the divorce, so it was their farewell.

Steele had been married before he met Lilian. It is thought that his first marriage had broken up because of his late first wife's excessive drinking. Before becoming President (and then Chairman) of Pepsi-Cola, Steele was head of an advertising company in New York, and a close personal friend of Alfred Strelsin, a noted New York businessman.

'Al Steele was best-man at our wedding,' said Strelsin's wife Dorothy, who had appeared in American musical comedy as Dorothy Dennis. 'He was married to my girl-friend Lilian who, I believe, realised she had made a mistake by divorcing him.' Lilian had found that his work demanded too much of his time and energy and felt unable to compete with it. 'In fact, two weeks after his divorce from Lilian became final, he married Joan on the rebound. I don't think it was a love affair with Joan. He was a daring kind of man. It happened so quickly, everyone was taken by surprise. We couldn't believe it. It was the one day that every telephone line was busy, everybody calling up one another saying, 'Did you hear? Did you hear?'

Lilian Steele works for a doctor in Beverly Hills these days. The mother of a grown son by Steele, Sonny, she never remarried.

Dorothy Strelsin continued:

> Al really loved Lilian. He was mad for her. When she left him, he used to sit at El Morocco every night for the next four months until he married Joan, alone with tears in his eyes. He would ask them to play his and Lilian's favourite tunes. He was a wonderful, lovable guy, a very generous, kind soul who never lost his temper.

But before she could marry Steele later that year, Crawford had to complete *Queen Bee* for Columbia. Based on the novel by Edna Lee with screenplay and direction by Ranald MacDougall, it is a story that gave her the chance to play another bitch and a beloved wife at the same time. She portrays the evil and depraved Eva Phillips who taunts and ridicules her husband (Barry Sullivan) who has taken refuge in drink out of hatred for her. She has a compulsion to dominate everyone around her, and like the queen bee of the hive stings her rivals to death.

A cousin (Lucy Marlow) comes to visit the Phillips family, and at first is beguiled by Eva's charm and affability, but gradually learns the monstrous truth about her. 'You really must learn to join in

conversation,' she is advised by Crawford, 'otherwise you give such a mousey impression. Smile a bit,' she adds, projecting an accurate description of herself, 'make contact with people.'

'Now you can go back to your drinking — it'll make you feel at home,' she tells her husband, having put off his threat of divorce by insinuating that he is having an affair with the cousin. 'Whatever I am, and I know what I am, you can't get rid of me,' she says when he has taken away the satisfaction she gets out of being a bitch.

She is a woman who despises a relationship when it is over and done with, but nevertheless tries to lure into renewed love-making the estate manager (John Ireland); he has been her lover, but although now engaged to be married he is still regarded by her as her private property. Thoroughly repelled by her causing his fiancée's suicide, he deliberately crashes the car in which he is driving Crawford, killing them both, thereby avenging his sweetheart and freeing Crawford's husband to marry the cousin at the same time.

'As the wife of a Southern mill owner whom she has driven to bitterness and drink by her ruthless, self-seeking machinations and frank infidelity,' the *New York Times* commented, 'Miss Crawford is the height of mellifluous meanness and frank insincerity. When she is killed at the end, as she should be, it is a genuine pleasure and relief.'

In May 1955, Crawford and Alfred Steele flew to Las Vegas in his private plane, where they were married. She had never been in an aeroplane before — she was terrified of flying.

'Joan hated to fly, and so do I,' said Rosalind Russell, 'and one night I met her out someplace and I said, "I hear you flew and got married."

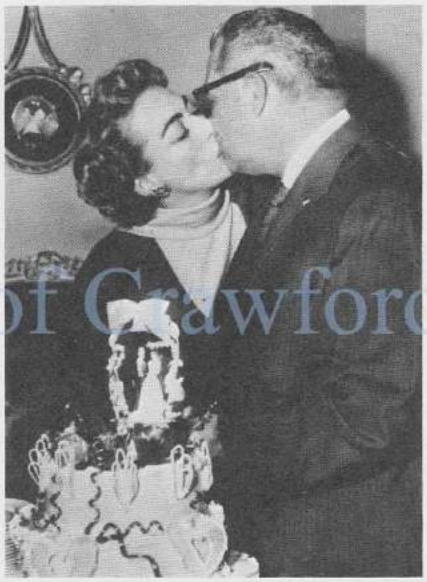
'"I'm over it now," Joan said, "Alfred just put his arms around me and said, 'I'll protect you. You're mine and you're going to be mine from now on. Just sit right here quietly with me and everything will be all right.'"

'You're just cock-a-mania in love,' Rosalind Russell told Crawford. 'That's all that's wrong with you.'

Crawford and Steele spent their honeymoon on the Isle of Capri, but stopped over in Paris en route.

Earl Blackwell recalls:

> I was in Paris at the time, and gave a large dinner party for them at Maxims. I took over the entire upstairs and had about eighty for dinner. Louis B. Mayer was there as well, with his second wife.
>
> And then Joan and Alfred went on to Capri to spend their honeymoon, and that summer I happened to be in Capri too,



Top: In *Female on the Beach,* 1955

Above left: In *Queen Bee,* 1955, with John Ireland

Above: On her wedding day with her fourth husband, Pepsi executive Alfred N. Steele, 1955

staying in a hotel, so Joan, who was staying with friends as a house-guest, said, 'Why don't you come over to have a drink with us?' I was dressed, as one does in Capri, in casual trousers with an open-neck shirt, but Joan was in a beautiful evening dress, and Alfred was in black tie. Alfred said, 'Joan, look at Earl. The way he's dressed.' I said, 'Yes. This is the way one dresses in Capri.' So Alfred said, 'I'm going to change,' and Joan stopped him. 'No, Alfred. We're the guests of honour. You're going to stay just as you are.' And he did — but I guess he was a little uncomfortable!

It was clear to Joan that she would be travelling a good deal in the future, for as Chairman of Pepsi-Cola her husband travelled the world, visiting their bottling plants in Europe, Africa, Asia and the United States. She was the perfect ambassadress, loving every moment of it — and although she hated 'live' performances of any kind, she seemed at ease appearing in front of the commercial public, the majority of whom were fans who had come to see her endorse her husband's product in the flesh. She still had the gowns, the turbans and the jewels, and she more than anyone knew how to make an entrance.

Pepsi's profits began to rise, and for the first time Coca-Cola began to regard them as their strongest rivals.

Visiting Paul Gallico in St Moritz, Christmas 1955, with his stepdaughter Ludmila, whose mother, Virginia, is behind the camera

The only film of any real distinction which could have lifted Crawford above the cheaply made pictures churned out in the fifties was Columbia's *From Here to Eternity*. But mystery surrounds the reason for her walking off the project, and she was replaced by Deborah Kerr, who played the promiscuous army wife, turning the turgid surfside love scene with Burt Lancaster into a classic. The role won an Oscar nomination for Miss Kerr, although the Award finally went to Audrey Hepburn for *Roman Holiday*.

Crawford later lost another role, but this time, it is believed because of problems with the script. She had moved on to the Paramount Studios lot to make *Lisbon*. Award-winning costume designer Edith Head reported:

> We sipped champagne and nibbled fresh caviar every evening in her dressing room and went over sketches. It was the sort of assignment to dream of. Joan was playing a very, very wealthy woman, a woman with superb taste. Our materials were ordered, the patterns were in work, the designs for the jewellery sent to the jeweller, the shoes ordered, and I had caught the rare excitement you get working with a great mannequin.
>
> Then *Lisbon* was called off and Miss Crawford moved off the lot.

With the advent of television in the fifties movie box-office receipts slumped, and many stars found themselves out of work and invested their money in business and real-estate. Crawford, however, was wise enough to adapt her professional talents to the media of the future when she agreed to appear in her first television film, produced by William Frye, Universal's producer of many notable productions such as the highly successful film, *Airport*. For many years he produced General Electric Theatre's filmed television specials with Ronald Reagan, and introduced many of Hollywood's most sought-after stars to the world of television. Bill Frye said:

> Joan Crawford spelt glamour for me in the real old tradition of Hollywood, and on the first day she arrived for work, she didn't let me down. She appeared in a limousine with her three poodles, wearing dark glasses and the right clothes.
>
> She was very particular as to what she wanted, and she *knew* what she wanted. In the case of her cameraman, she wanted Charles Lang, who had photographed her many times in films, but the studio told me that we couldn't afford him. 'Well, if you can't get Charles Lang,' she said, 'you can't get Joan Crawford.' So I got Charles Lang, and it was probably one of the most beautifully photographed television shows of its time. It was specially written for television by Gavin Lambert, and it was one of his first ventures into the medium. Tom Tryon (who has since become a best-selling novelist) was in it together with John McIntyre.
>
> The interesting thing about Joan Crawford to me was, that although it was only a three-day schedule, two days' rehearsal and a day to shoot it, she moved bag and baggage to that studio — with her maid, and with her chauffeur and car standing by at all times. She brought her own sheets and her own towels. Many people sent flowers because she was making this big jump into television. She had her meals at the studio brought in — and then she became completely absorbed in her work.
>
> She was always on time. She was a perfectionist. She wanted to know about each actor in case she didn't know them, their credits and their background.

Here, once again, she bore a remarkable resemblance to Gavin Lambert's movie-star heroine. According to Frye:

. . . she was a source of power, energy, habitual purpose. When she entered the brightly-lit set, it was as if somebody stepped up the current. From every side the light blared white-hot.

I had never watched her work before. Most of it was galvanic concentration, for she had very little natural talent. The imaginative stroke, the sudden passionate instinct, were never hers. Acting was hard labour, like coal-mining or road-mending.

Those days Joan Crawford was a very happy woman because she was married to Steele [*Bill Frye continued*]. On the second television film she did, she had Al Steele move to the studio too. We had double bungalows. On that occasion when she left after she'd finished shooting, I again witnessed this marvellous thing of glamour. It was before the jet, so that it was a long overnight flight back to New York. When she left the studio she went as accustomed, with the hat, the dark glasses, the suit, the dogs, the chauffeur — and the basket of iced vodka in the limousine.

And then she had another complete change of clothes to get off the plane in New York. Who does that today?

After Alfred Steele's death Crawford asked Bill Frye, who was on a short visit to New York, to escort her to a charity benefit at the Waldorf Towers. Frye recalled:

So naturally I hired the black limousine to pick her up and went to her apartment. She was all dressed in grey chiffon and grey pearls and diamonds, and she wore a chinchilla coat.

'Do you have a car?' she asked.

'Yes. I have one of those old black Cadillac limousines.'

'Darling,' she replied. 'Dismiss your car. I have a grey car for tonight, to go with my costume.'

I don't remember any of the titles of the particular shows in which Joan appeared for us on television *(Because I Love Him* and *The Road to Edinburgh)* [*Frye added*]. Titles weren't so important those days. It was General Electric: 'Tonight we present Miss Joan Crawford in . . . ' whatever the title was. The star billing was always the star. In those days I was getting a tremendous amount of people, such as Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, Greer Garson, Jimmy Stewart and Fred Astaire, to do their first televisions.

The story was the main attraction for them. You weren't going to get them in front of a camera without a good story.

It was always an exciting occasion when Joan came on the lot because people *knew* she was there, and then see her walk on the sound stage to a projection room.

To illustrate her concern for the minutest detail, I remember a scene she played with Tom Tryon. She was in love with Tom in the story. He was a younger man, she was very rich, and they were in love. They plotted the murder of her husband, and a friend came to see them unexpectedly (Sydney Blackburn), but it was perfectly all right because he was blind, and the body was in the far corner of the room. But what they don't know is that he has come to see Joan Crawford and her husband to say that the operation to his eyesight has been successful. And there is a scene where Tom Tryon is going to leave her, and breaks away. He's afraid of what's going to happen. She could be very dramatic, Miss Crawford, and those tears could flow fantastically. She could switch them off, and turn them back on.

And she had to leave that day, after shooting, to catch her plane back to New York. I told her I would call her in New York the next day to tell her about her rushes, and when I did so she said to me,

'You know when I turn around, and I finally face Tom and there are tears in my eyes? Did that tear stay on my left cheek for long?'

'It did.'

'How long?'

'I don't know how long, but we can intercut that to make it as long as you like. We can cut to you with the tear there, cut back to Tom, cut back to you with the tear still there, back to Tom, and we'll cut back to you a third time, just as it drops off.

'Joan, it looks like a diamond on your cheek-bone.'

'Bless you, Bill, darling', she said. Satisfied with the important detail of the tear.

She got to know everyone on the sound stage by name. She knew the electricians up there on the rafters, and if she didn't know their first name, she made them feel that she did. When you work with between sixty or seventy of a crew on a set on each production, it is impossible to know all their names, but she certainly made it her business to know who they were, and never forgot.

With Cliff Robertson

Autumn Leaves now followed, for Columbia; Crawford played a lonely spinster bashing away at a typewriter whose life is transformed by a handsome young man (Cliff Robertson), with whom she falls in love. But he turns out to be a pathological liar, a kleptomaniac — and emotionally immature. They marry, but she suspects that his cycles of depression — followed by violent physical attacks — indicate latent insanity, and has him committed. Having done so, she works overtime to pay his hospital bills, and the picture ends with his being cured and his return to her. Alexander Walker laughed as he said:

> *Autumn Leaves* is one that I always remember, because it is such an absurd story. It's the story of the female menopause, and it's a transitional film in Crawford's life because here's this woman who obviously goes for the sexy stud and then finds that she has hooked herself on to a psychopath whose psychopathy is graduated from the absurd to the sublimely manic.
>
> He starts off by lying to her, then he starts off other little deceits. Then he hits her, and finally he throws the typewriter at her; which always appealed to me, as a journalist and film critic, because it is the deadliest weapon of all! And finally he tries to do her in, and she has him committed to an asylum. At that point you think she would put her sables on and go home saying ,'Thank God. I'm well rid of him,' but what's Joan doing? She's asking herself, 'Will the cure kill his love for me?'

'That is where the film goes desperately wrong for me,' I observed, but Walker contradicted:

> For me, that's where the film goes desperately *right*. If it were a more clinically rational movie, it wouldn't be half the fun it is. And Crawford can convince you, because obviously, not being a terribly perceptive woman in the sense of being able to judge the rationale behind things that have nothing to do with the emotion, and I mean the construction of this character, Is it reasonable? Is it plausible throughout?
>
> She goes emotionally to the heart of things in one mighty leap and it's that feeling of absurdity that makes *Autumn Leaves* such enjoyment, such fun. It never crossed Crawford's mind that there was anything absurd about a woman whose husband had attempted to kill her, saying, 'Will the cure kill his love for me?'!
>
> Clearly a parallel with her own character, in that nothing that happens is going to change anything.

After the completion of *Autumn Leaves*, Crawford uprooted herself from California to live in New York. Her husband's business was conducted from there, and it was necessary for him to be on hand for international business conferences, with his wife by his side.

They moved to a duplex on 2 East 70th Street and Fifth Avenue:

> It was a sixteen-room duplex apartment [*reported a close mutual friend Dorothy Strelsin*], and out of the sixteen rooms, they made eight. So instead of five bedrooms, there were only two. It cost them half a million dollars and there wasn't even a bedroom for the kids to sleep in. Yet there was an enormous health room complete with massage table and gymnasium. She turned all the spare space upstairs into her dressing closets. She sent her children to a hotel at this very young age. They never stayed with her in New York after she married Al, but he tried to make it up to them by taking them along on business trips abroad.
>
> Joan would come over to our house, but she always had that God-damned needlepoint with her. She would always be doing needlepoint or crocheting so that she wouldn't have to talk to you. She used this preoccupation as a reason not to communicate with people.
>
> But she was too strong for me. She could possess you. Once you were around Joan, you were possessed. Everyone just disappeared out of your life because she took over. She was very powerful. She was not one to disagree with either. You had to feed her ego all the time; she lived on that. You couldn't differ with her. You made a suggestion, 'Joan, I don't like that colour,' and she'd reply, 'Well, then you don't know that this colour goes with that colour.'
>
> You could ruffle her very easily. Once she lost her temper with me. I did something that didn't please her and she yelled at me. And I learnt not to ruffle her, to become subservient. It seems everyone became subservient to her. When girls are together they let their hair down, like school girls. But not with Joan. You couldn't with her. Even her eyes were so fiery, they frightened me.
>
> Joan was regimented. She would wake up, and have her desk work, and secretarial work, and she'd talk into the recorder and leave messages for the secretary, and then she'd have her massage, and then her hairdresser would come. Then the manicurist arrived. Then someone was coming to talk to her about some charity thing. She was always punching a clock. She didn't relax to the extent of saying, 'Well, I'm doing nothing today.' She was always doing something. She didn't sit idle. Even if it was television, she would

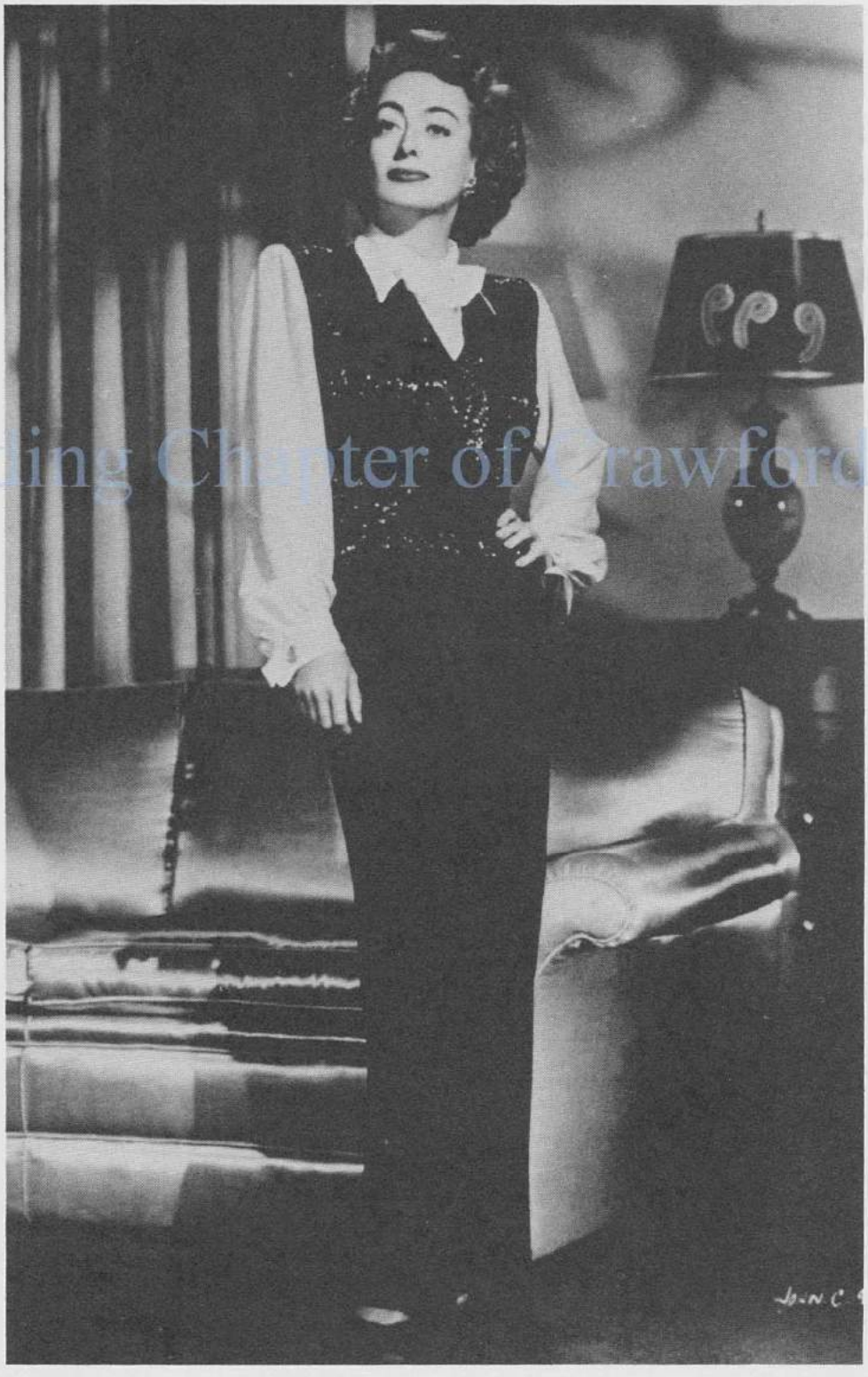

The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

be watching herself in an old movie.

In her own way she was very unique. You could be dining with her and if she felt comfortable with you, she didn't have to make conversation. If you sent her something, you would get the thank-you note the next day.

We'd go to the theatre, and she'd walk around with that little bag with 100° vodka, and pass the little cups on to her friends in their seats while we were watching the play.

Then she was great on laundering, and washing and scrubbing and cleaning. She'd take you upstairs to the special closets she had built. If there were a hundred hats there must have been five hundred hats, and they were all lined up. I don't think she ever gave anything away. Nobody ever had that many clothes.



And the dining table was never used for food. It was always covered with dress patterns and materials, her models she wanted, from Vogue, from Harpers — then she'd have sketches made. She always had her clothes made. She would buy the materials, and her forms were there, made by the dressmakers.

When she dressed, I would say, 'Joan, you look so beautiful'. And she loved to hear that. And she *was* beautiful. And when we walked into *21* and everybody saw her, you could hear the heads bobbing, people saying, 'Joan Crawford. Joan Crawford', and she was rather aware of that. She always dined upstairs where the staid, quiet group dined. Never downstairs with the jet-set.

She would never be seen walking in the streets, or shopping at Bloomingdales. People would say, 'I saw Garbo shopping today,' but nobody ever saw Joan Crawford shopping.

That's because the minute she left the house she got into her car, then we would go down to her wholesale place to buy some materials, or look at some raincoats or something. Always wholesale. So it would be house — car — place.

She ordered her provisions on the telephone and had everything sent. She had everything delivered.

She loved cooking. She was an excellent cook. She liked steaks and chicken, but she put condiments on it, loads of seasoning. Very spicy and highly seasoned. She loved to wear leotards. She'd cook in black leotards. And she wore a shirt over the leotard, hanging loose, and no shoes. But you knew that she was showing that beautiful body of hers.

The only time Joan was relaxed was when she was in the kitchen cooking. She loved to prepare spinach salad with bacon. The steaks would be on, and she'd just talk about that. Then she would be just plain little Joan. Very, very happy. Nothing studied. But that was in the kitchen. Then she went into the dining room, and it was the film star again.

But she would never eat. She would cut up her food and take four bites, but she would never finish her own meal. She was very conscious of her weight. Her whole life was surrounded with masseurs, hairdressers — and they always came to her, she didn't go to them. Of course, it took a great deal of money to keep her going that way, but no doubt since he was the Chairman of the Pepsi Board, he could charge all that off, but when she wasn't doing a movie she was spending all that money all the same.

I remember a funny incident [*Dorothy Strelsin continued*]. Joan was upstairs getting dressed and I was sitting talking to her one night. She was waiting for someone, and the doorbell rang. Mamasita, her maid, let him in, so after about ten minutes Joan said, 'Why don't you go downstairs and keep him company?'

By that time I had had *one* of her 100° proof vodka drinks — and I'm not a drinker — and those steps were not the steps that had a back to them. They were always highly waxed, and my! I think I went down two steps, and the funniest thing — I slid all the way down on my fanny. When I got to the bottom, there I was sitting at the foot of the stairs. And I said to the visitor, 'Boy, what an entrance. Look at me!'

He came over and helped me up, and Joan called down, 'Are you all right?'

I said, 'Yes. But I'm so embarrassed. Look. I've gone all the way down on my fanny.'

And Joan replied drily, 'Well, you're lucky you didn't go down on your *head*!'

Life on Fifth Avenue had certainly begun.

10 OPPOSING STARS

Joan Crawford's next picture, made in 1957, was based on Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Story of Esther Costello*, in which the British actress Heather Sears played the title role of a blind, deaf and dumb child rescued from an Irish slum by a philanthropic American visitor. The girl is given a chance in life through the efforts of her mentor (played by Crawford); shown before audiences in Amy Semple MacPherson type appearances and appeals for charity, her example provided hope for others. Rossano Brazzi, who exploits and rapes the girl, played Crawford's estranged husband in a rather uninvolved and wooden performance.

This was the first film Crawford had made outside America and not unnaturally, her British fans gave her an unprecedented film star's welcome when she arrived in England for filming.

It also marked the end of the romantic roles she had played for the previous thirty years. Now in her fifties, she graciously bowed out of the romantic parts which she had tended to play, settling for character roles — but still with star billing.

Alexander Walker observed:

> *The Story of Esther Costello* was interesting. Crawford was very much miscast there and she felt that very badly. You see, it was the story of the exploitation of the child.
>
> In films in which she is surrounded by other leading stars, there is the competitive element that is very much increased and makes her characteristic almost incandescent.
>
> But you notice that as she gets older, the parts necessarily either get smaller or else the movies in which she is the star are chosen so that the leading men are subordinated by the story to the character

With Bessie Love and Rossano Brazzi in *The Story of Esther Costello*, 1957.

that Joan Crawford plays, so that in effect the story does the work for her that perhaps waning powers and looks would no longer enable her to do.

'Which brings me to the later films in her career,' I interrupted. 'The roles she played later were of extraordinarily neurotic women. When one considers *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane, Berserk, Trog, I Saw What You Did, Female on the Beach* and *Strait Jacket* for instance, they all had similar neurotic themes. Whereas we are aware that men and women go through one change of life, you commented in your book *Stardom* that Crawford has gone through four changes. No doubt the last was the fourth change, to neurotic parts.'

Travelling with Alfred Steele and the four children

Walker answered, 'You have to necessarily come to terms with your age, and if you're no longer able to project a sexually desirable image, what you've got to project is a sexually neurotic image. In each case, you're keeping the focus on attention.'

'Why from desirability to neurosis? Surely one can be desirable even though one might be neurotic?'

He explained:

> But you're desirable in a different way. You're desirable for the way that you correspond, perhaps, to the kinks of the person you're co-starred with in the role in the movie. Murderers and deceivers, like Rossano Brazzi in *The Story of Esther Costello*, that kind of role concentrates a *neurotic* interest on you, whereas being young and much more in possession of your looks and appearance, what you want is to have concentrated a *sympathetic* interest on you.
>
> I think it was a function of the type of roles she was able to seek because they became fewer. But she had to feel that she was acting them one hundred and one per cent and if there was a retreat into the neurotic aspect of late middle-age — because, after all, that's what she was by now, and getting more neurotic — then her roles matched that. And she also had to feel the dramatic centre of attention, and consequently you maximise the dramatic potential of the neuroses that a film is built around. Obviously, the very title *Autumn Leaves* tells you that it's about the female menopause. Bette Davis had a similar problem after *All About Eve*. She solved it — and Crawford to a certain extent solved it — by going into the horror movies, and the awful thing was when they were perfectly matched, one sadistic and the other masochistic, in the film *(Baby Jane)* by Aldrich.

In the roles Crawford played, she succeeded more as the flapper, first of all, then the modern-miss, the sophisticated young woman, then bitches which she enjoyed playing, and scarlet, tainted women.

'Yes, fighting against the taint,' Alexander Walker agreed. 'It's the taint of the scarlet woman, as you say, who can exact obedience from her men. Remember in *Torch Song*, when she comes down the grand staircase singing a song, and finds six men stretched out, all with cigarette lighters, ready to light her cigarette? A perfect example of her power over men.'

In *The Story of Esther Costello*, 1957, with Heather Sears

But what of her power over audiences? She was the first to agree that some of her latter films were not her best, yet her public continued to support her. How did she feel about those situations in which her virtuosity had to triumph over tenth-rate films. *'I don't think anyone starts out thinking they're going to make a bad picture,'* Crawford said. *'They're hoping that the producer they choose, the director, the writer and everyone that works on the set with them will offer a bit of advice that will help to overcome the weaknesses — and there are weaknesses in every script. In every story. It's like your child. Every child has weaknesses.'*

And what is the quality she considers she has for the public that makes it want to go on seeing her pictures, whether they are good or bad vehicles for her talents?

'First of all I'm stage struck — but I think everyone knows that. Secondly, I try to get films that have audience identification.'

But after making *The Story of Esther Costello*, her seventy-fourth film, would she ever retire from film acting? *'No. Never,'* she said firmly. *'But I do find that when I'm not working and I don't have to get up at that ungodly hour of a quarter to five, I get very lazy and restless.'*

The Story of Esther Costello was Crawford's only film in three years. She travelled the world in her new job as Pepsi-Chairman's wife, opening new plants, entertaining foreign customers, and making guest appearances; this made it almost impossible to accept film work, since she operated on such an exacting and time-consuming schedule.

'Every time Pepsi had an opening of one of their bottling plants, Joan appeared and everybody came from all over to see her,' reports an onlooker. 'That was the only chance they had to see her in real life. And she did a good job for them. But then she started to exercise her prerogative and became a little too dictatorial, and I don't think her husband, Al Steele, liked that.'

A powerful, organising woman by nature, she entered a new world of commerce that was Al Steele's empire. An affable, friendly and much admired man, he had no aggression and was unprepared for the strong organisational ability she brought to her new role as his wife. As he hadn't known her intimately for very long, it is true to say that he did not quite know what he was in for; gentle and unassuming, he was swept overboard by her strident tenacity in dealing with her own Pepsi-Cola involvement. It is believed that their marriage would not have lasted had he not died.

Earl Blackwell said:

> I think Alfred Steele was what you would describe as typically American. He was a man who had worked his way up to be a top executive, but he had no sophistication. He was simply a typical American who started at the bottom of the ladder and worked his way up. But he was a strong man, and it took a strong man to dominate Joan. I think that he *did* dominate her, whatever one believes to the contrary. She changed her life completely, after all; she had never been on an aeroplane, yet she flew to Las Vegas to be married to him. After that she flew everywhere.

Two people equally successful in their own fields, they had solid

achievements behind them. Worldly, professional and businesslike, they worked in harmony together, but for only four short years until Steele's untimely death in 1959. He died of a heart attack during the night, and Crawford found his body slumped on the floor the following morning.

Speaking in her New York apartment, Radie Harris said:

> When Al died, I heard it on the radio. I had been with them two days before, and I called Joan, never dreaming that she would answer the phone. And there she was answering the phone, perfectly calm and as organised as she has always been. She said that the service would be arranged and that she would call to let me know the details.
>
> 'Please, Joan, don't bother. I'll read it in the newspaper,' I said. 'No. I'll call you,' she replied. And she *did* call me. 'Now you're going to be in Car Six,' she said, 'and in the car with you will be Earl Blackwell.' Then she gave the names of the other occupants. Like house-seats. It was all organised, and she did all the organising by herself. My feelings would be — and God forbid — if I were married, and got up in the middle of the night and heard a thump on the floor, and went into the next room and found my husband dead on the floor, it would leave me in such a state of shock that I wouldn't be able to cope with *anything*. But this was Joan. This is when she worked the best, when she had a role to play. It was a crisis to be met and the only way to meet it was in her usual organised way.

In her first television comedy, *The Bob Hope Show*, 1958

Dorothy Strelsin was also present at the funeral:

> I remember, we went back to Joan's apartment after the funeral, and she carried on just as if Al was there. She wasn't moaning and groaning. She wasn't the type to sit and cry. She's very, very strong. It was unique to show that much power.

To keep alive the memory of Steele immediately after his death, she kept an empty chair drawn up for him whenever she and the 'twins' Cindy and Cathy played gin rummy — Steele's favourite card-game. In every game, Crawford played one gin rummy hand for her late husband.

Two days after her husband's death she was invited on to the Board of Pepsi-Cola, after being elected by the stockholders. 'You're part of the Pepsi organisation,' said Herbert Barnett, who had become President of Pepsi when Steele became Chairman of the Board a few years earlier. She was the first woman on the Board. 'This is a calculated business deal,' Barnett told her. 'You've done a great job and we want you to continue bringing bottlers and executives closer together. We want you to expand.'

She continued her hard-driving promotional work in her capacity as the company's official hostess, giving parties for customers, flying to the grand openings of new bottling plants and attending board meetings.

At a party in her apartment for visiting West Nigerians who had contracted to bottle Pepsi-Cola in their country, she amused her guests one night by making good use of an accident. Having spilled lemon juice all over her gown, she disappeared only to dramatically reappear a moment later in a transparent skirt with tight trousers underneath: a one-woman conversation piece that pepped up the party.

After the party, with her skirt off and the guests gone, she insisted that the kitchen floor be scrubbed by the servants before finishing for the night. The next morning she scrubbed the floor again — herself.

Hedda Hopper, the Hollywood columnist, reported: 'I've known Joan ever since she made her first picture out here and there is a demon inside her. She cannot stop going. She cannot stop doing. She will never stop trying to improve herself.'

Earl Blackwell recalled:

I used to spend lots of time with Joan as her house guest when the children were growing up. One day when I arrived, I found Joan on her hands and knees, scrubbing the foyer floor!

Actually, as a house guest you would be worrying all the time whether you kept your room tidy, because if you didn't she would go around you picking up things for you. She was meticulous about everything. Her house was always immaculate. She was a fantastic cook. She liked to cook spicy foods.

Joan did everything one thousand per cent. If there was no maid and she did not like the looks of the floor in a hotel bathroom she would get down on her hands and knees and scrub it. After a party she emptied ashtrays, opened windows to air the place, rearranged flowers. Everything had to be fresh and lovely.

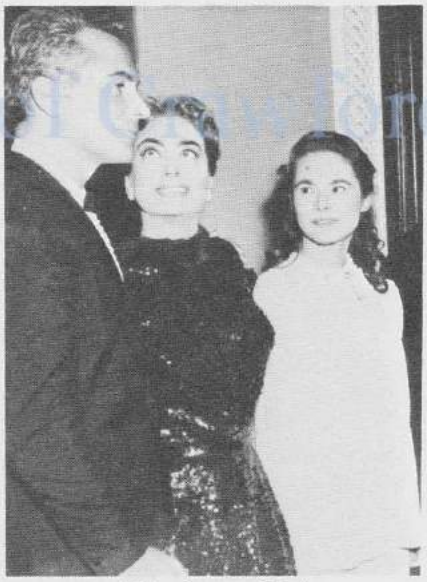
When she travelled for Pepsi, staying at spotlessly clean hotels throughout the United States, she took along her own linen: sheets, pillow-cases and towels. Her pathological sense of hygiene and cleanliness impelled her to scrub the bath and disinfect the hand-basin and lavatory pan before making use of them.

Film producer Robert Enders remembers being asked to her apartment to discuss the possibility of her appearing in a new movie of his: 'I came in through the kitchen, and she said, "Bob, will you take off your shoes?" And I said, "No, I won't. It's ridiculous." And she said, "But you must take them off. I've just had my carpet done." And I found out subsequently that she had her carpets done every day.'

Henry Fonda laughed:

Oh, she asked me to do that too. But that was because the carpet was white.

Her apartment was only three or four blocks away from my house in New York, and we saw her at a little party. 'You must come to see my new home,' she said. This we did, and she gave us a tour. But she asked us to take off our shoes. I just thought it was an idiosyncrasy. She's not the only one. We've got a good friend, James Garner's wife. She's getting over it now, but she made you take your shoes off when you came in the door. It doesn't bother me, it amuses me!



On the set of *The Story of Esther Costello*, 1957, with Rossano Brazzi and Heather Sears

Crawford's furniture was covered with plastic, and the plastic covers remained on the sofas and chairs when visitors called, to protect her spotlessly clean possessions from dirt, dust and stains. This preoccupation is often diagnosed by psychiatrists as 'An upper-class version of the working-class woman's obsession with house cleaning which we recognise as an attempt to wash away guilt or atone for forbidden desires.'

As Radie Harris said:

Joan was as meticulous in her household duties as she was with caring for her friends. I was going to Bermuda for the first time, and happened to mention it to Joan very casually . . . I did not realise that Pepsi-Cola had a canning factory in Bermuda, and she immediately got on the telephone to them and organised this whole trip for me.

I was met at the airport, and the Pepsi people got me everywhere I wanted. I had a marvellous time, thanks to Joan. She did that kind of thing, but she was not the kind of person that went with it. I can sit down and talk to Grace Kelly, but I always felt with Joan, as well as I knew her — and she loved my column [*from the*

Hollywood Reporter] and sent me fan letters every time she read something she liked — that one couldn't just sit down and have an ordinary conversation with her.

A week after Steele's death an old friend, movie producer Jerry Wald for whom she had worked before, offered Crawford a role in *The Best of Everything*. 'I thought that coming out to Hollywood and working would take her mind off her troubles and be good therapy for her,' said the late Wald.

But the film was already in production with a string of beautiful young actresses — Hope Lange, Suzy Parker, Diane Baker — and Martha Hyer and her old friend Brian Aherne with whom she had appeared years before in *I Live My Life*; it provided Joan with only a small role. Playing Amanda Farrow, editor of a magazine publishing house who takes her failing relationship with a married man out on the girls who work under her, she finally leaves to marry — but returns to claim back her job, which has since been given to Hope Lange who is forced to stand down. Crawford conveniently falls in love with Stephen Boyd — to whom Miss Lange had turned for consolation — after being jilted by Louis Jourdan, a Broadway stage director.

In *The Best of Everything*, 1959

This film failed to include two vitally necessary scenes of Crawford with her married lover and with the man she leaves to marry. Not surprisingly, the weak novelettish plot failed to draw audiences.

Her career was again in the balance. For three years she waited for a suitable starring part to come along, and after a handful of television appearances she was offered the role in a film that marked the start of a series of horror movies: *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Said Bill Frye, Universal producer:

> I found that book originally and tried to get Universal to do it with Bette Davis, and they turned me down. They were not at all interested in Bette Davis. She had appeared a lot on television and the studio just didn't think that she was box-office.
>
> Well, I lost the property and it went to Robert Aldrich. He took an option on it and was able to put these two magnetic stars together. I believe when he took it to Joan first he was going to have her play Bette's part. But Bette had already read the book through me, and she said that if she did it, she would only play the role which she finally played in the film (that of Jane Hudson, former child star who persecutes her crippled sister Blanche who had once been a top film star).

In *The Best of Everything*

I think Joan got more money, but Bette got the role she wanted.

The stars were notoriously at odds with one another, sniping and swiping at every opportunity. Each was clearly too much for the other; for the first time each had encountered, if not her equal, at least a reflection of herself — a determined star of unquestioned power. It would be fair to say that Crawford was the star supreme, and Davis the actress sublime.

Said Bette Davis:

> The character I played, Baby Jane, was the tops in dreadful appearance. That was the climax of all the make-ups. I did that make-up myself. It took me exactly four minutes every morning to stick on this white stuff, gluk on my eyes, put it on very badly, put on a lousy cupid's bow, because in actual fact no make-up man would have wanted his name on the screen. I always felt she never washed her face. She just added to it every day and it got worse and worse!

When the Henry Farrell novel was offered to Bill Frye the option for the film rights stood at $10,000, but rose to $61,000 by the time Robert Aldrich had shown interest.

A Seven Arts-Warner Brothers co-release, the film was shot on location and at Warner Brothers. It was the first time in fourteen years that Bette Davis had set foot on her parent-lot, and it was ten years since Crawford had made *This Woman is Dangerous* for them.

Tremendous publicity surrounded the signing of the contract, and the press revelled in the feud between the two stars. The *Hollywood Citizen News* reported their arrival: 'Both actresses arrived on time and smiling for the press reception. Joan wore a colorful print and had her auburn hair up in a sort of Oriental or Spanish bun. Bette was in black to set off her blonde locks, worn long.'

They were set for battle, and disappointed neither press nor critics. Daily reports appeared concerning a feud that had not yet begun. 'We wouldn't have one,' Bette Davis said. 'A man and a woman, yes, and I can give you a list, but never two women. They'd be too clever for that.'

It was almost as if they had worked out their differences on the screen, through Lukas Heller's crisp, biting dialogue.

Asked whether he thought the Crawford-Davis roles were interchangeable, Alexander Walker replied:

Left: With director Robert Aldrich and Bette Davis at a press reception for *Whatever happened to Baby Jane?, 1952*

Left: In *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* with Bette Davis

Well, the Bette Davis role is the more dominant role, but if you try to swop those personalities around, the film does not work because you can never conceive of Bette Davis being the submissive masochistic sister. Never. You see, Joan Crawford enjoys suffering and you always knew that she would triumph in the end.

But in *Baby Jane* you didn't know that she would triumph in the end. However, she makes a meal of her suffering — her suffering is like the rat underneath the silver dish. It's pretty horrifying to look at it, but it keeps your horrified attention riveted. If you tried to put Joan Crawford in a Bette Davis role, that would work, because after all she is a pretty dominant personality and can hand it out as well as take it. Bette Davis never could, and that picture could have been thrown completely off keel if she was the one in the wheelchair. Never.

Although both actresses gave superlative performances, Bette Davis was nominated for the Academy Award that year and Crawford, not unnaturally, was disappointed to say the least. But she was clever as well, and arranged that if Anne Bancroft won for her performance in *The Miracle Worker*, she would accept the Award in Bancroft's absence.

Bill Frye was present at the Awards dinner and commented:

> Anne Bancroft won, and not Bette Davis. So Joan Crawford got on that stage, and came out in shimmering crystal beads, beautifully turned out in diamonds and pearls, and accepted that Oscar. In the papers the next day, there were pictures of Joan Crawford and Gregory Peck who won it for *To Kill a Mockingbird* — and as far as the public was concerned Joan Crawford had won the Academy Award for Best Actress in *Baby Jane*!

This undoubtedly made Bette Davis extremely angry. As she told journalist Joyce Haber in an interview in *The Los Angeles Times*:

> I was positive I would get it. So was everybody in town. I almost dropped dead when I didn't win.
>
> And, of course, the fact that Miss Crawford got permission to accept for any of the other nominees was hysterical. Miss Crawford was being interviewed and photographed by the press, clutching Miss Bancroft's award. I was nominated, but she was receiving the acclaim. It would have meant a million more dollars to our film if I had won. Joan was thrilled I hadn't.

However, there was another opportunity for the actresses to come to grips with one another, and if Crawford triumphed on the occasion of *Baby Jane* Davis emerged victor on *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte.*

The two actresses were again cast together for this follow-up creepy, but after a short time on the set Crawford left the cast on doctor's orders, and was said to have pneumonia. Many believed that this excuse was made purely for insurance reasons. The truth may have been that she left because of a dispute over the ending to the picture. A new scene required Davis to go mad, but she protested that she had known that *Crawford* was supposed to go insane, and felt that a new ending which made it necessary for her to give a different interpretation to her role would be absurd.

Davis took the matter to the district court, staying an injunction previously won by Paramount, and subsequently overcame the opposition. The court upheld her point of view: she would not be forced to do the new ending. She felt that she had won a battle for artistic integrity.

The actor Don Parker, who co-presented and appeared in the Broadway and West End stage play *Kennedy's Children*, was then employed by Joan Crawford as chauffeur and general dogsbody:

> I went to school in Paris [*said Parker*], and met this guy whose father worked for Pepsi-Cola. He offered to write to Joan Crawford in Hollywood to see if she could do anything to help me get into movies.
>
> I arrived in Hollywood, and Miss Crawford, who at that time was doing a television film, invited me on to the set to meet her.
>
> 'You're friendly with the Michelles' who're in Pepsi-Cola, aren't you?' Miss Crawford asked. 'Yes,' I said. 'Well, you make yourself at home. You watch.' I sat on the set and watched her film, and that was the extent of our conversation.
>
> A year later, her secretary Betty Barker telephoned to tell me that Miss Crawford was returning to Hollywood to do *Sweet Charlotte*

and as she required someone to drive her to the studio, to be with her all the time, sort of aide, companion, and so forth, would I be interested. I naturally was, and was hired for the job.

She returned, and rented an apartment from Loretta Young in Palm Springs. A duplex. She had a maid, Mamasita, who lived in. There were two bedrooms on the ground floor, a living room, and a bit of a garden. She had white carpeting and white furniture with plastic covers. You weren't allowed to walk on the carpets with your shoes on — and I remember how difficult it was for the children, who were away at boarding school, when they returned over Christmas.

When she started filming *Sweet Charlotte* with Bette Davis, I wasn't allowed on the set with Miss Davis, or even to talk to her. I was forbidden to say good morning. It really was the Montagues and the Capulets. They each had their own staff. We were on opposite sides of the sets, and even if we wanted to communicate with her, we couldn't.

I remember meeting Miss Davis in the hall one day, and thought I was going to be electrocuted, but she was very accommodating and charming. She was friendly towards Joan, but Joan was not towards her.

One day, they did a scene where a door slammed. Bette Davis had to slam the door, and Joan's hand got caught in it.

That was the day Joan left the film. She got pneumonia the next day, and I drove her down to Cedars of Lebanon Hospital where she had to stay for three months. And that was her terribly lonely time. It wasn't a hospital in the sense of a hospital. There was a bar in her room and flowers galore. It was like a hotel. But she had to have pneumonia in order to get out of the picture.

I sat and played cards with her every day. That's all we did. Sat and played cards all the time. One night she was kind of maudlin. It was quite late, and I remember her mumbling, 'Why doesn't anyone love me any more?' And she cried, because she was a lonely woman.

She couldn't understand that she had frightened them all off.

However the producer of the film, Robert Aldrich, wrote in *The Celluloid Muse*: 'There's no doubt in the world that Crawford was sick. Seriously sick. If she'd been faking, either the insurance company would never have paid the claim or she would never have been insurable again. Insurance companies here are terribly tough; there's no such thing as a made-up ailment that they pay off on.'

It was clear that Crawford had to be replaced, and the insurance company agreed to compensate the film company for the loss of production time. Olivia De Havilland agreed to take over the role, but this only exacerbated Crawford's anger.

'Joan Crawford is sizzling at Robert Aldrich for not giving her the courtesy of calling her before announcing that Olivia De Havilland had replaced her in *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte*,' wrote Radie Harris in the *Hollywood Reporter*. *'Aldrich knew where to long-distance me all over the world, when he needed me,'* Crawford is quoted as saying. *'But he made no effort to reach me here to alert me that he had signed Olivia. He let me hear it for the first time in the radio release — and, frankly, I think it stinks.'*

Although *Baby Jane* made millions at the box-office, *Sweet Charlotte's* lukewarm reception encouraged Miss Davis to vow that she would never again appear in a macabre film. 'My macabre era is over,' she swore. But she had a final word to say about her celebrated feud with Crawford: 'The only thing I will say about Miss Crawford is that, when Olivia replaced her in the film she said, "I'm glad for Olivia — she needed the part." Joan issued these daily releases from her oxygen tent!'

But Crawford had the last word when she announced, *'I'm the quiet one and Bette's explosive. I have discipline. She doesn't. I don't know who suffers the most. Holding it in is an awful thing. Believe me, I know.'*

It is unlikely that Miss Davis would agree with the reference to her lack of discipline.

Don Parker, who worked for Joan on and off for two years in Hollywood, admits:

> I unfortunately saw the worst side of Joan Crawford. I knew the Joan Crawford when the public was gone and there was just me and the real Joan Crawford. She changed her mood from a warm motherly person to a fiend. It was the most instant change of mood of anyone I've ever known, from absolute joy to absolute anger. If it could have been shown on the screen she would have won every Award that was known to man.
>
> She would lose her temper over nothing very important. Small things — about a glass not being clean, for instance. She never lost her temper about anything important, because she was always in control. In private she could cope with the big things, but she was intolerant of the small.

Above: With Cindy, Cathy and the poodles

Opposite: With Cathy and Cindy

> She was absolutely devoted to her white poodles. The father was 'Masterpiece', the mother was 'Chiffon', and the daughter was 'Ma Petite'. Although we mere mortals weren't allowed to walk across the white carpets with our shoes on — even the delivery boy staggering in with the groceries, had to remove his shoes before entering — the dogs were allowed to romp all over them.
>
> She made no contact with her adopted son, Christopher, whatever, and the 'twins' — who were seventeen at the time I was with her — were at boarding school.
>
> One of the 'twins' was fat, and she would scream at this girl on the phone, long-distance, while she was at boarding school. She would holler, 'You're eating chocolates and you're eating desserts, and you're *ugly* and you're *fat*!' And the girl was only seventeen. But the other one was quite pretty and dainty and got off easier.
>
> One day I was taking the three poodles to the clipper to be groomed, and I was already on the garden path with the dogs, and I could hear her screaming at her daughter on the telephone. 'This is the time to get the dogs out of the way', I thought, and I rushed them towards the car.
>
> Just as we got into the car, Joan with her mou-mou streaming behind her rushed out calling, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' and then, picking up each dog one by one and kissing them in turn, said, 'I love you. I love you. I love you.' And I thought, 'She should be speaking to her children like that instead.'

Don Parker continued that:

> When she wasn't working, she went to bed around midnight and got up by eight in the mornings. She liked to watch her old films on television. But she was a very lonely woman. I spent a lot of time playing gin-rummy with her. She was an incredible gin-rummy player and won every game that I ever played with her. She knew it all.
>
> She drank like a man, she swore like a man, and she played cards like a man — and I learnt to do all those things, thanks to her!

Her maid, Mamasita, served her faithfully for many years. A German, her real name was Anna Brinka and she spoke little or no English. She worked hard and after many years asked for leave in order to spend a holiday with her family in Germany.

Crawford never saw her again.

According to Parker:

> There were no impromptus in Joan Crawford's life. Everything was perfectly organised. Usually every letter she received got an answer. She spent four hours a day replying to letters. She answered every single letter that came in whether she knew the person or not. It was a fixation. She had to respond to everything. Some of it was Pepsi business with which she was still involved at the time, otherwise it was fan correspondence or loyal friends. She was very loyal to fans who had been with her all the time, and some of them became friends.
>
> Her method of letter-writing was like feeding information into a computer. It was dictated on the phone to her secretary in

With Charlton Heston, July 1962

> California, Betty Barker, who didn't come to New York where Joan lived. It was an incredible system. And then Betty typed them out, kept a carbon copy and sent them to Joan 3,000 miles away to be signed, with a second copy, and then mailed.
>
> She also had a part-time Pepsi-Cola secretary in New York, Florence Walsh who had been with her for many years, but she left.
>
> She was in the tradition of sending an annual Christmas letter to everyone instead of a card. It was typed, but signed by her. It became more and more religious every year, which was odd because she's not a religious woman. 'God be with You and with your Spirit', it would end; it became weirder and weirder as the years went by. They went out by the thousand-load at a time. She sent 7000 Christmas letters every year.

One of her thousands of cards received by a casual acquaintance ended, 'Your friendship is so precious to me . . .'

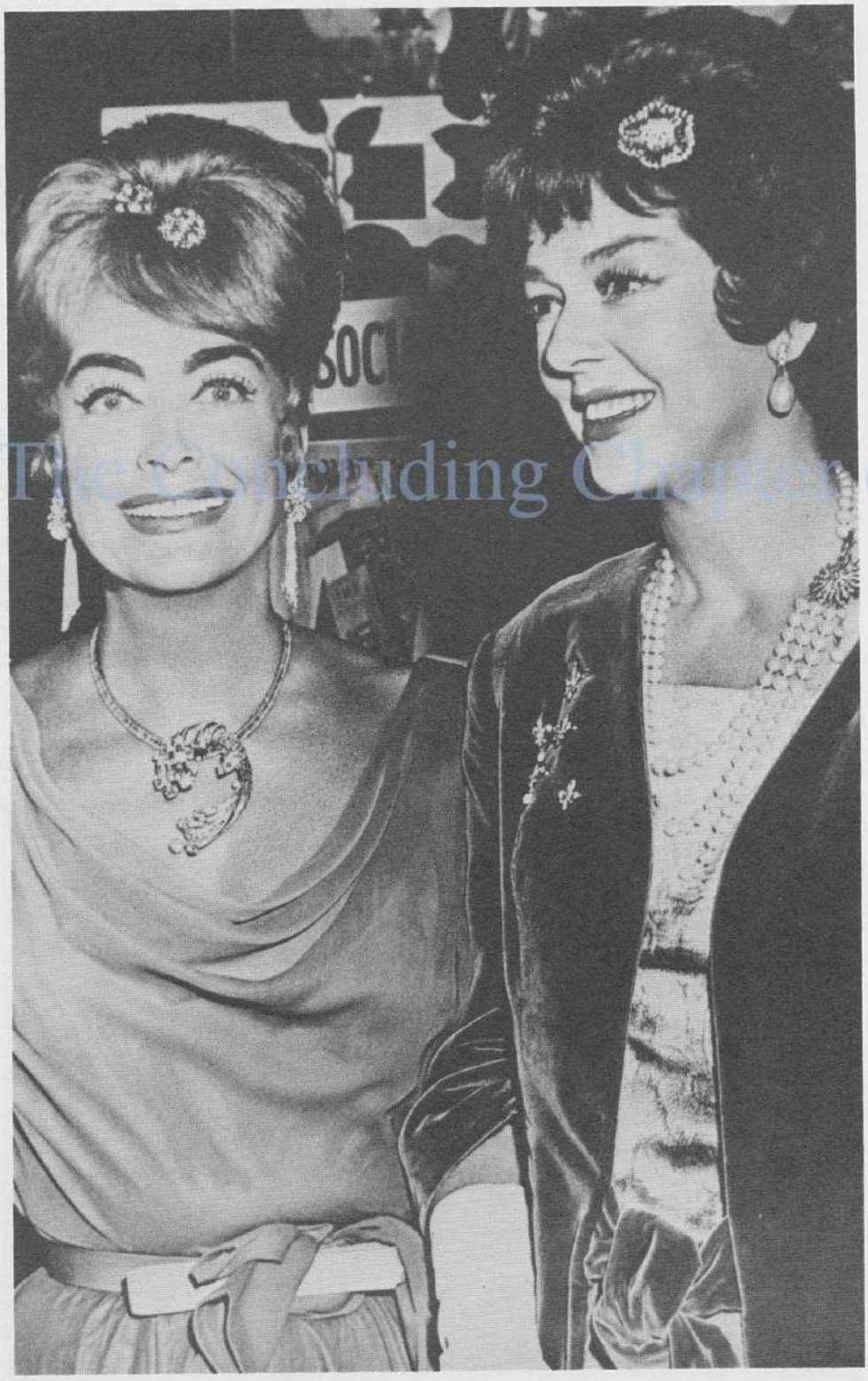
The last Christmas letter to be received by her adoring friends and fans was in 1975. It began, 'The Christmas Season is a most special time to wish you peace, love and joy,' and continued:

> These are my wishes for you. May all good things be yours at Christmas and throughout the New Year. With the economy and the world situation as they are now, next Christmas and thereafter, the time and money I spend on greeting each of you will be devoted instead to the charities which are so important to the less fortunate people, especially children of the world. This, I believe, is in keeping with the true meaning of Christmas. My heart is filled with thoughts of friendship and love for you now and always.

Parker added:

She was very afraid of public appearances. She would never do a stage play. She was afraid of live audiences. When she had offers of doing plays I kept saying, 'You should do them. It would be wonderful for people to come and see you,' and she would say, 'I can't. I'm afraid.' So she never would.

Joan was very funny, about friends. I think most of her friends were very, very old friends. Some of them were dying off, and she didn't like making new friends, because they tended to see her at bad moments. In the two years I worked for her, I only saw her go out five or six times to a friendly social gathering with friends, or perhaps a function to do with Pepsi.



With Maurice Chevalier

Left: With Rosalind Russell at the Beverley Hilton Hotel for the International Press Honours Awards — won by Miss Russell for *A Majority of One*.

11 DECLINE

Insanity was the theme of her next two films, made in 1962 and 1963, *Baby Jane* having set the pattern for a series of cheaply-made horror 'B' pictures. In *The Caretakers* she plays Lucretia Terry, head nurse of a mental hospital, who gets into cahoots with Dr Harrington (Herbert Marshall) to oppose Dr MacLeod's (Robert Stack) advanced ideas of group therapy and champions padded cells and strait-jackets instead. Faced with the problems of two inmates, Polly Bergen — a disturbed young wife who is mentally unbalanced after the death of her child in a car which she was driving — and Janis Paige — a confused tart — Crawford's and Marshall's techniques fail and in the end they turn to therapy in order to deal with their disturbed patients.

Variety reported: 'Miss Crawford doesn't so much play her handful of scenes as she dresses for them, looking as if she were en route to a Pepsi board meeting.' *The New York Times* commented: 'Altogether, this woman's melodrama is shallow, showy and cheap — a badly commercial exploitation of very sensitive material.'

She came in for worse criticism when, this time through good old-fashioned nepotism, she exposed Pepsi-Cola to the viperish attacks of the press. In her next picture *Strait Jacket*, she played a hatchet-swinging parolee from an asylum, who, twenty years earlier, had hacked to death her young husband and his mistress in true Lizzie Borden fashion. Her three-year-old child, Lucy, had witnessed the gory incident, and now aged twenty-three, repeats her mother's actions by hacking to death all and sundry. Mum naturally falls under suspicion.

Time took its own swing of the axe by printing: 'It must also be the first horror film able to boast that one of its diehard victims is a real-life Vice-President of Pepsi-Cola Company. As for Pepsi-Cola Board

Below: In *Strait-Jacket*, 1954. Opposite: In *I Saw What You Did*, 1965, with John Ireland

Member Crawford, she plainly plays her mad scenes for Those Who Think Jung.' *Variety*, however, was more polite. 'Miss Crawford does well by her role, delivering an animated performance,' it announced, as though this were her first screen appearance.

However, her next horror film became one of the year's top grossers, encouraging producers to offer her similar roles. Dealing with evil in a child's mind, *I Saw What You Did* told the story of two children who, left alone for a short while in an isolated house, amuse themselves by telephoning a number at random and chanting to the subscriber, 'I saw what you did, and I know who you are.' Unfortunately they pick on a neighbour (John Ireland) who has just murdered his wife, and he is naturally keen to dispose of the 'witnesses'. His mistress Amy (Crawford), who lives next door, learns of the murder and decides to protect the children, but quite literally gets his knife in her back for her trouble. He then sets off to do the pranksters in.

Her performance certainly won back the admiration of *Variety*, which reported: 'Top billing for Miss Crawford is justified only by making allowances for the drawing power of her name. But her role as Ireland's shrewish, predatory lover is well handled and vital to the story. The slightest gesture or expression of this veteran thesp conveys vivid emotion.'

This was her last film to be made in America. Three years later, in 1968, she returned to England after John and Jimmy Woolf had asked her to appear in *Berserk* (also released as *Circus of Blood*), a Romulus Films 'B' movie.

Playing the part of an ambitious circus-owner dressed in black tails and tights who cracks a fiery whip in the ring, she is accused of murders perpetrated by her daughter (Judy Geeson) who, after years of family neglect, has turned into a murderous psychopath. This is a theme similar to *Strait Jacket*, but with sawdust and tinsel to attract family audiences.

Playing the part of a police inspector investigating the goings-on under the Big Top was Robert Hardy, the British actor who scored so highly in television's *Elizabeth R* series with award-winning Glenda Jackson. Said 'Tim' Hardy:

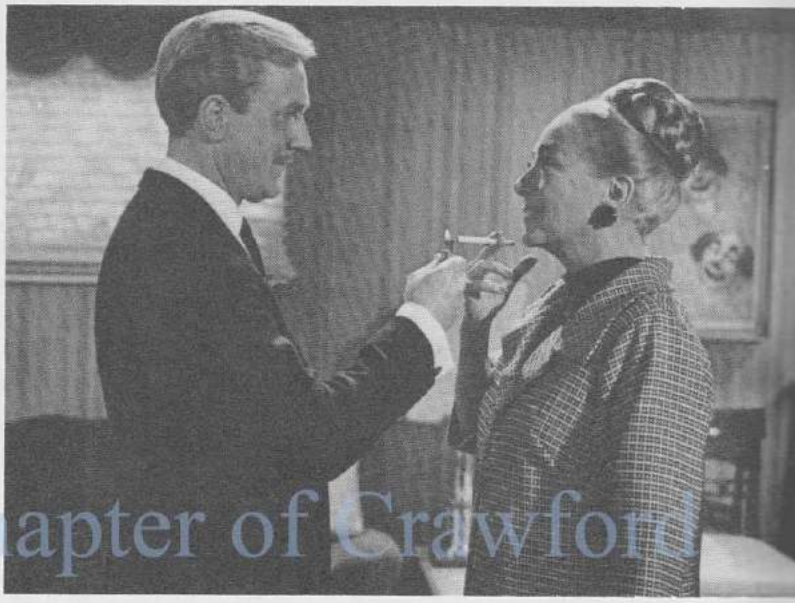
> We were on location on Blackheath where Billy Smart's Circus had taken over the site and everybody was hanging around wondering

why the star wasn't there. Joan Crawford was an hour and three-quarters late.

Just then, an elderly Rolls Royce with a very young and totally lost-looking driver rolled in among us. We were literally standing about among the caravans, and out stepped this rather small, greyish ginger-haired lady, in tears because she was late.

I guess it was only the third time in her entire life that she'd been late for a movie call, and above all on the first day of the movie. We were all very sorry, and it was entirely the driver's fault. He thought that Blackheath was the other side of London.

Anyhow, Miss Crawford was shepherded into her caravan, which was the longest of the Billy Smart living-in-type caravans,



Above: At Christina's Wedding to her first husband, stage director, Harvey Medlinsky, 20 May 1966

Right: In *Berserk (Circus of Blood)*, 1968, with Robert Hardy

complete with drawing room, library, a study and a bathroom. A vast affair.

When she reappeared an hour later, I was absolutely staggered and enraptured by the change from the sad little lady who turned up from the Dorchester, transformed into Hollywood's Joan Crawford. Reassuming the image, the mask, the stance, she seemed to come out of the caravan taller, younger, tougher, and it was the Joan Crawford one recognised.

There was not a chance in hell that I would have recognised her the way she had arrived. If she'd been sitting in a restaurant, which she never would have done, looking as she did when she turned up, and if somebody had said, 'That's Joan Crawford,' I would have disbelieved it . . .

A few days afterwards, somebody complained that the caravan which she was using, and to which people would go and talk to her, was dirty. I remember that she spent the whole of one evening after shooting washing the floors, such floors as there were, cleaning the carpet by hand, polishing absolutely everything. Mind you, she told us the next morning that she had done it, but it was a fair gesture all the same.

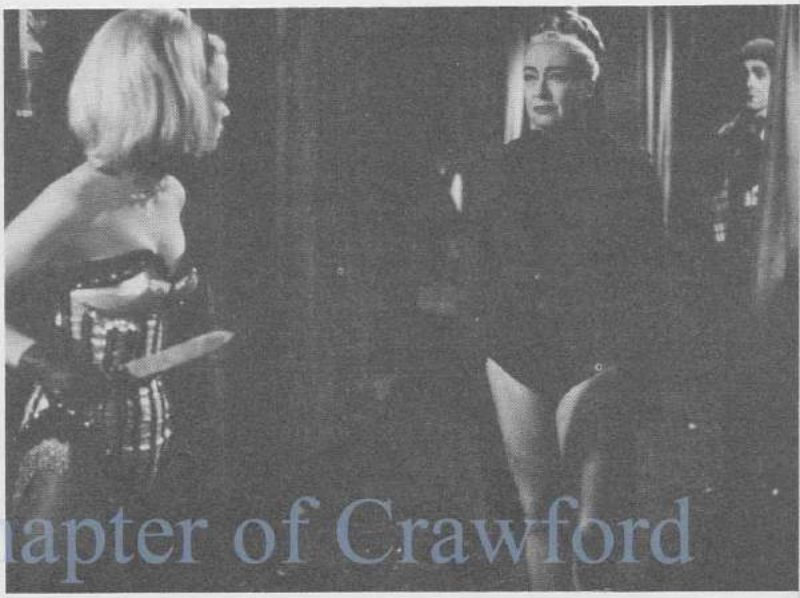
She was miraculous in the way that she brought out, and gave something really strong and hefty to the most banal lines in what was not a very hard script to begin with.

Whatever part she exercises and whatever decision she makes, and however many throats she cuts, she does it through the proper channels. She passes the explosive to the explosive merchant and then it goes under your chair — and you're blown to pieces. It's a bit improper isn't it?

But the thing I remember so vividly about the shooting, was one

night when we were working right through the night on the back lot at Shepperton Studios. It was a thunderstorm sequence and we had to have the camera high up on a huge crane for only one night — so it had to be done that night. And it was the only night in the year when it froze.

And they had three major fire hoses, and I don't know how many fillers to give the fine spray and all the rest of it. We had a scene with Judy Geeson, who was just starting, and being frightfully good, dressed in a tiny circus tutu, cold as ice, almost naked. She had to run through the rain, fall into a puddle and be electrocuted, because there was a trailing wire. It was a murder, in fact.



Above: In a scene from *Berserk*, 1968, with Judy Geeson

Left: With Sir Billy Butlin and Lord Mountbatten

And we had to go back over the scene, time and again, and it was so cold that our clothes froze to our bodies. And there was Joan Crawford with a bottle of vodka. She stayed the whole time, for hours on end, like Nurse Cavell, always at the ready.

And poor Judy, who had to be carried off, absolutely stiff, like a board . . . with Joan Crawford following them off the lot saying, 'Bring her into my caravan,' which was hot and comfortable.

And we just shared the bottle of vodka and got quietly pie-eyed together, which was the only way to keep the cold out.

In her caravan, in her dressing room, on the sound stage when we were in the studio, wherever we were, she had Pepsi stacked up all over the place. For all I know, each Pepsi bottle was 100° vodka! But she certainly banged the drum for her product, by keeping it on display wherever she went.

Crawford told Philip Oakes of the *Sunday Times*:

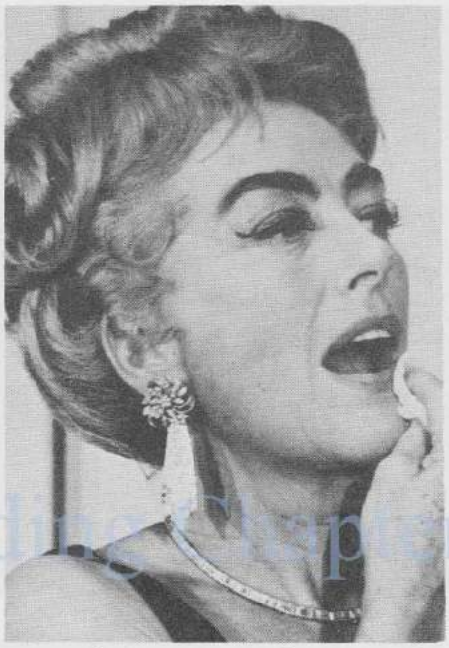
The film was made for only £400,000. It wasn't easy at all.

In the first place, the script was too damned English. At one point I'm supposed to say, 'I have to see my solicitor', and I told them I can't manage all those esses. We'll change it to 'I'll call my lawyer.' Another time a character says, 'He fancies himself,' which they told me was a very English expression. Maybe it is, I said, but we're not making this picture for England, but the whole world. It's true that I like to get my own way on a picture. I approved the cameraman, Desmond Dickinson, after seeing two reels of a thing he shot called A Study in Terror. *He's great on long shots. But, my God, he photographed girls of 19 and you could see every hair of their moustaches.*

Another thing that had bothered her [*reported Oakes*] was the lack of rehearsal. The weekend before shooting began she had asked for a reading of the script, only to find that the leading man had gone to Paris for a couple of days. When he returned she bawled him out in front of the entire cast. *'What I can't stand,'* she said, *'is unprofessionalism.'*

She admitted to driving herself hard, but she knew no other way to live. Oakes had asked her what she got out of making films. *'Joy. Expression. Outlet. Creativity,'* she replied. What did she get out of business, on the Board of Pepsi? *'Joy. Expression. Outlet. Creativity.'*

But if she had arrived almost two hours late for *Berserk*, she always



seemed to arrive at least two hours early for the filming of her next movie *Trog*, another sub-standard film made on the cheap in England. It is unlikely that she had ever been late for work before, so meticulous and professional has she been throughout her career in the movie industry.

British actor Simon Lack, who played a Colonel in *Trog*, recalled their working together, albeit briefly:

Joan Crawford was always on the set long before anybody else. I remember that by the time the rest of us arrived at 7.30 in the mornings, she was already in her caravan, preparing for the camera.

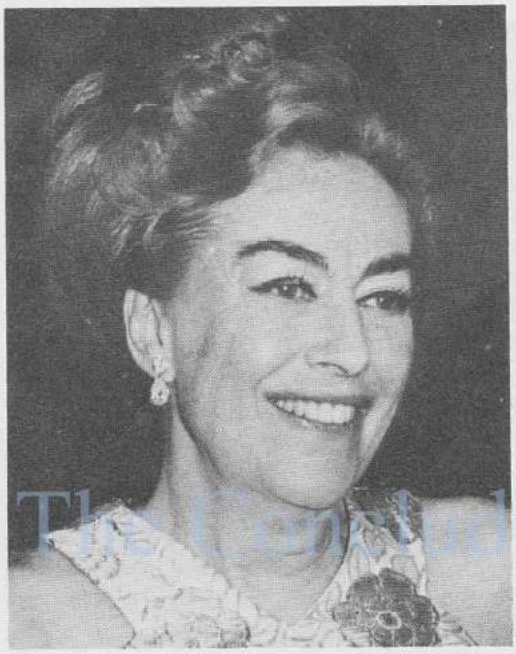
She had wonderful manners. I was waiting on the set for rehearsals to begin, and suddenly there she was. 'How do you do,' she introduced herself. 'I'm Joan Crawford.'

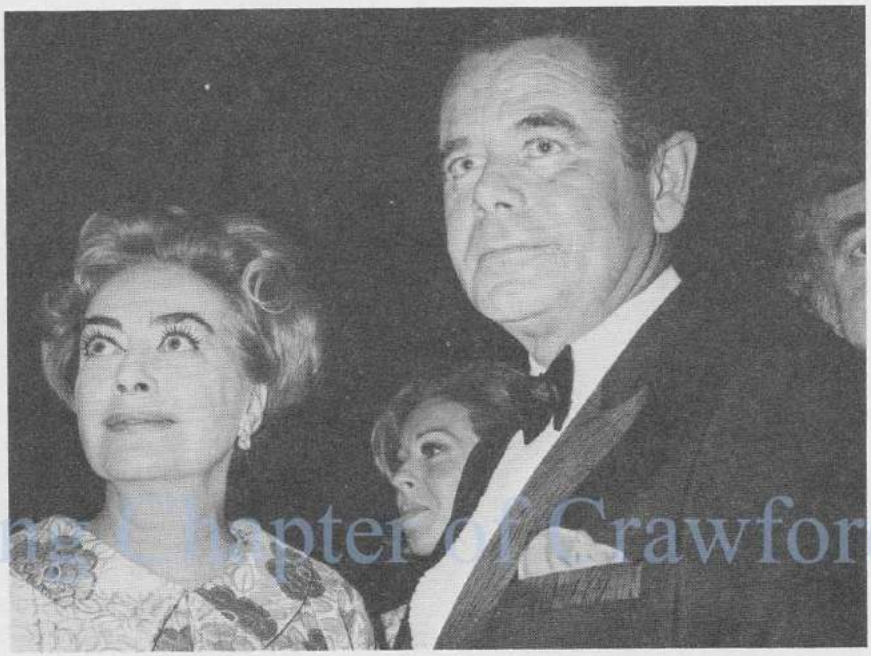
So few people have that aura that she possessed. It is not aloofness in any sense, but it's a question of knowing her job, and of there being a big shining light around her.

It is sad that the last movie in the fifty years' screen career of so brilliant a star should have been a picture like *Trog*. She had subjected herself to the most insignificant enterprise of her entire professional life. Surely she can't have done it for the money — or for esteem? Perhaps she liked working, and the only roles which came her way were those like that of the eccentric anthropologist who gives the name Trog to the prehistoric half-man, half-ape troglodite who terrorises the townsfolk who have refused to leave her alone to experiment with him.

Speaking the inane dialogue in this far-fetched drivel in low, over-articulated tones, she gives her lines the weight of a Shakespearian tragedy queen as if to convince an hysterical audience that she actually believes them. *Trog*, who escapes from her care, assumes a mini King-Kong role as he sweeps up a child and rushes for refuge to the cave from whence he came, where he keeps her under his tender protection. Brandishing sten-guns, the army arrives and ends the movie in a shoot-out, killing Trog, but not before Crawford warns, 'You kill it and you may destroy the most valuable scientific experiment we have today.'

At the time Alexander Walker, who was writing a book on the movie-star syndrome entitled *Stardom*, had in mind a chapter on Joan





Above: With Glenn Ford

Crawford, and wrote asking whether she would see him. 'Certainly, come around,' she replied. He comments:

> She was here making one of those very cheap pictures that rubbed off on her. It didn't turn out very well. It was called *Trog* [*he recalls with polite understatement*].
>
> I duly presented myself at six o clock, and she opened the door wearing a white terry-towelling coat and a turban. There was an ironing board in the middle of the living room, and she was busy ironing her party frock.
>
> My first impression of her was of the working mother who has sacrificed all for the family and the daughters and who still retains around her the air of having scrambled up the ladder. She looked slightly weather-beaten, which isn't what I expected her to be; her face was greasy, because she had taken all her make-up off. She explained that she was waiting for friends to come in for a drink at seven o'clock. And, of course, I made particular note of the eyebrows and the vast mouth. Those are the Crawford trade-marks. I wasn't surprised to find her small, though. All film stars, I find, are much smaller than they are photographed . . .
>
> The other thing was her great concentration, which was very much on what she was doing, and at the same time including me in it, so that she subordinated you to her work-environment, almost. She behaved at the ironing-board the way I expect she behaves on the set at a film studio. Everything else is secondary to what she is doing at the moment. She got me a drink — the usual vodka, which is what she drinks, then gesturing to the domestic scene, she said, *'Mr Walker, don't look at this. I've given my maid the night off.*

That girl deserves a night off occasionally.' This was clearly the star's consideration for 'little people'. That immediately tied up with what I knew about her. It is very characteristic of the super-stars who came up in the thirties, particularly the women. They relied so much upon the technicians, the lighting people, the make-up people, the wardrobe-girl, to preserve that image that was so vital to preserve in the 1930s. Because you weren't able to put sex on the screen, so you diffused sex through the rest of the personality, particularly through the wardrobe, the make-up, the hairstyle, the accessories. Therefore the people who are of minimal importance today . . . were of major importance and you had to keep on good terms with them. So you treated them with great consideration and made sure that they all got presents, and that you said good morning and goodbye to them; unless you were a Garbo, that is. And this followed Crawford around. She was tremendously professional about things.

And then she pushed across the ironing-board a couple of sheets of paper and said, *'Just look at that.'* And I looked at it, expecting it to be something to do with the movie, instead of which it was a list of Pepsi-Cola factories; bottling plants, that were either about to open or that she was returning to the States to open. The list of appointments ran from October up to about the 21st of December, for Miss Crawford — or Mrs Steele, as she was. And I said, having been taken aback at the evidence of the hard-working nature of the film star's life, 'Well, it's just as well you kept Christmas for the children,' and she said, pausing with the iron about a quarter of an inch above the dress — it was so near it was almost calculated, but it wasn't quite. She looked up, she rolled her eyes and said, *'Oh, Mr Walker, the children have all gone away. I use Christmas to clean the house.'*

I'm afraid it's a line out of a Joan Crawford movie, as indeed, every other line then became.

Was there any single spontaneous line in her dialogue? According to Walker:

I think she absorbed so much of her screen persona that it became like make-up she couldn't take off. I think it was spontaneous, yes, but it was spontaneity that life accrues.

Now I said how protective she was of the small people, but she was more protective of the Joan Crawford fans. An example occurs to me . . . She tried to engage a new press agent for every movie, because she liked to remain boss. But she also said to them, *'Look, I am Joan Crawford super-star. I am giving you a big chance to represent me. Do yourself some good.'* And on one occasion she was in New York City staying in a hotel while they finished off some scenes, or did some post-syncing. The press agent had seen some fans gathering downstairs and he ordered them away. Unfortunately he happened to mention this to her when he was up in her suite, and she said, *'You did what?'* And he replied, mixing her a drink, 'Well, Joan, you don't want to be bothered by *those* people after a hard day's work.'

And he suddenly felt such a smack on his face that he dropped the glass. Her eyes were blazing, and she said, *'How dare you treat my people like that! Go right down to the street and apologise and invite them up.'* Which he did, and after she had received them, very keenly and considerately, and had signed the autographs, she said, *'I'd like you now, Bill, to show those people out.'* So he showed them out and came back, and then she said, switching on the gorgon eyes, *'And now show yourself out. For good.'*

Now that was very characteristic of Joan Crawford. You

wouldn't have found that characteristic of people like Bette Davis. But Crawford lived through her admirers.

Like, 'don't tamper with the merchandise.'

Exactly. Because the merchandise was the most important aspect of the whole thing. And she talked on about one thing and another, until her friends, who happened to be the Lebanese manager of Pepsi-Cola, arrived with his wife and friends, all in their black ties and party gowns, and she was still in her terry-towelling housecoat and turban at the ironing board. Obviously, the ironing ceased to be the first concern, it was just something she did while she talked.

When I asked Alexander Walker whether it was done deliberately in order to give a human touch to what on the surface appeared to be a rather inhuman person, he replied:

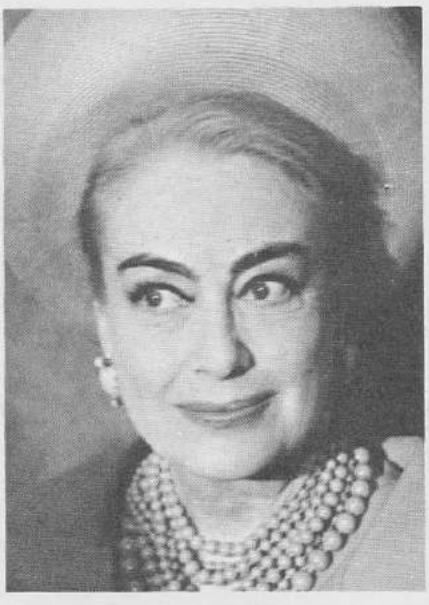
It may have started like that a long time ago, but I firmly believe it had become second nature to her. I think she realised in this vast protectiveness that flowed through the roles which she had, whether it's for that ingrate child in *Mildred Pierce*, or the absurdly young stud whom she marries in *Autumn Leaves*. That young man she married — Phil Terry — I always thought there was — not the murderous seed, but the seed of the relationship in *Autumn Leaves*. Because that was not love either for Terry, or for the young stud, it was emotion on the rebound. Or, indeed, for the prehistoric baby animal in *Trog;* Joan Crawford was the universal mother, and she was a mother with millions of kids, who are the fans.

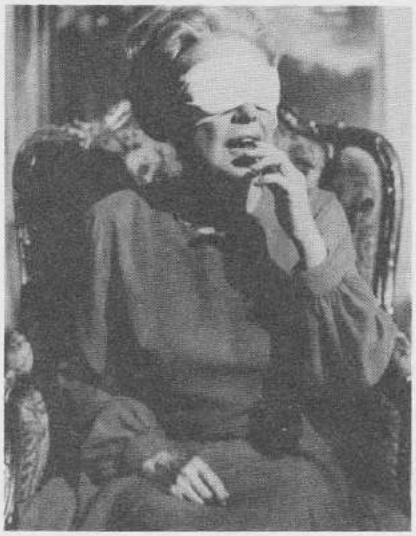
And I think it was the necessity for love in her life. I know that it sounds like a cliché of every star, but I think that it was true of Joan Crawford.

Yet when she had love to give her adopted children, it was discipline that she gave. She mistook discipline for love?

Yes. I think she could be a very stern disciplinarian, there's no doubt about that. To some extent I think she was the perfect example of the flapper-girl on the rebound.

I don't think she was conscious of society. I think she was conscious of the age she'd reached which made it inadvisable for her to face a movie camera. The fact was that her fans had grown old with her, which was a measure of their devotion, but also provided a mirror for her whenever she looked at the wrinkled





In three of her television roles. Top: After an eye operation in the Premier *Night Gallery* series. Middle: with Glenn Corbett in an episode from *Route 66*. Above: with Herbert Lom in an episode from *The Man from Uncle*

faces, the grey hair, the plump, fat, maternal figures, and thought, 'My God, these were once young kids, in flapper-girl skirts like me.'

Robert Enders, who co-produced Glenda Jackson in *The Maids* and *Hedda Gabler*, admits that:

> It is very difficult to find a starring vehicle for a woman of Joan Crawford's talent today, the one who is never a character actress, but always a leading lady. I think essentially a woman of her talent will find no film career any longer. I don't know the role that she could play, but unless somebody came up with something specifically designed for her, I don't think she would do it. The same is true of her male counterparts like Cary Grant or James Cagney, right now.

But from the late fifties to the end of the nineteen-sixties there were still roles for her, albeit some of them on television. She came out to appear as guest star in several television series including *The Zane Grey Theatre*, *The Virginians*, Rod Sterling's Night Gallery in *The Sixth Sense*, and threw herself with typical gusto into *The Man from UNCLE* maelstrom for an appearance in 'The Karate Killers' episode with Robert Vaughn, David McCallum and Herbert Lom. She starred in a full-length television feature called *Della*, playing Diane Baker's mother in a well-made story of business and intrigue. Written by Richard Allen Simmons and directed by Robert Gist, the Director of Photography on *Della* was feature-film man Wilfrid M. Cline who filmed Crawford's close-ups through heavy gauze, giving her the same hazy soft-focus effect (obliterating any tell-tale lines) as he had provided for Doris Day in Warner Brothers *It's a Great Feeling* — in which Crawford made a guest appearance.

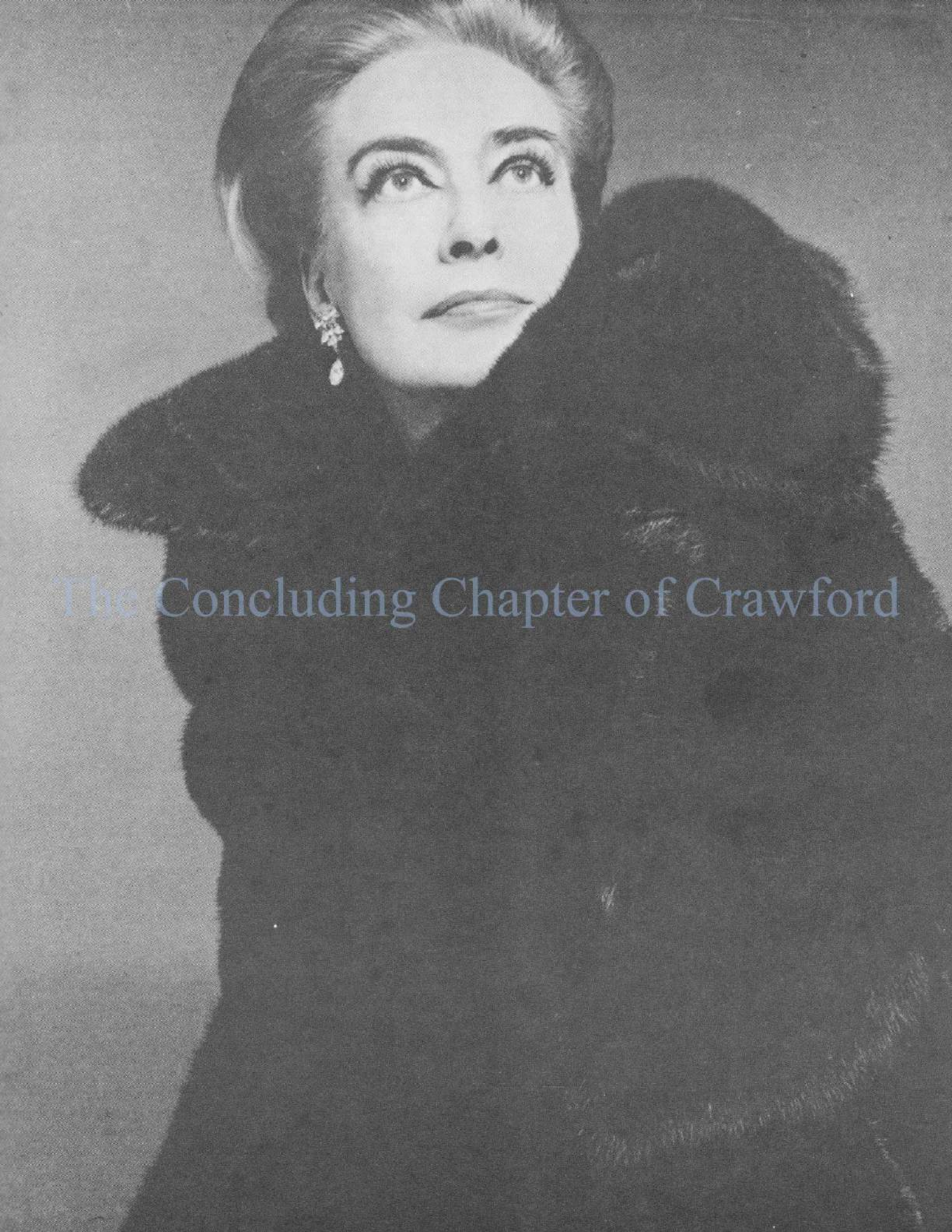
Produced by Stanley M. Kallis in the true Hollywood tradition, with all the characters discussing the star before we see her and so building her up for her first entrance, Crawford plays the rich and powerful Della Chappel who imprisons her daughter, Jenny, in their sumptuous mansion, set in acres of immaculate garden, where visitors are only received at night. 'My family *made* this city,' Crawford tells lawyer Barney Stafford (Paul Burke) who comes to persuade her to sell some of her city land to avaricious investors. 'This city made your family,' he replies defiantly to the impeccably turned-out Miss Crawford, whose distinguished grey hair swept from her face and dark eyebrows dominate her solemn face, and heavily-lashed eyes and prominent mouth are set firm against his intrusion on her privacy. But Stafford falls in love with her daughter, only to be prevented from seeing the nocturnal creature whose protective mother safeguards the secret for their having lived in lonely seclusion for fifteen years.

'My daughter has a certain skin condition,' Crawford explains to Burke in the last reel, underlining film critic Alexander Walker's observation about Crawford's maternal and protective instincts.

Unaware that Jenny has been listening to their conversation, he leaves the house. In the ensuing car chase with Jenny driving after him in her sports car, hotly pursued by Crawford who is only too conscious of the danger of the blazing sun, Jenny's car crashes over a hill and she is killed instantaneously.

'I'd like to build something in the city for children, as a memorial to her,' Crawford tells Burke, and releases the land for which he had originally come to negotiate.

Now on her own, she weeps openly, looking around at her sumptuous possessions, and for the first time in fifteen years sweeps open the drapes to let in the daylight on a scene which reveals a bereft and lonely woman.


The Concluding Chapter of Crawford

12
EXILE

Joan Crawford made her first Hollywood film appearance in *Lady of the Night* in 1925, doubling for Norma Shearer who, like Bette Davis, became one of her greatest rivals; eighty-one films and forty-five years later, her last movie role was in the inconsequential *Trog* in England.

She chose self-exile in her small, compact apartment at Imperial House, on East 69th Street in New York, where she lived until her death — a far cry from the opulence to which she had become so accustomed. Avoiding contact with friends of the past, none of whom she had seen for several years, she had no wish to make new acquaintances either.

Earl Blackwell told me:

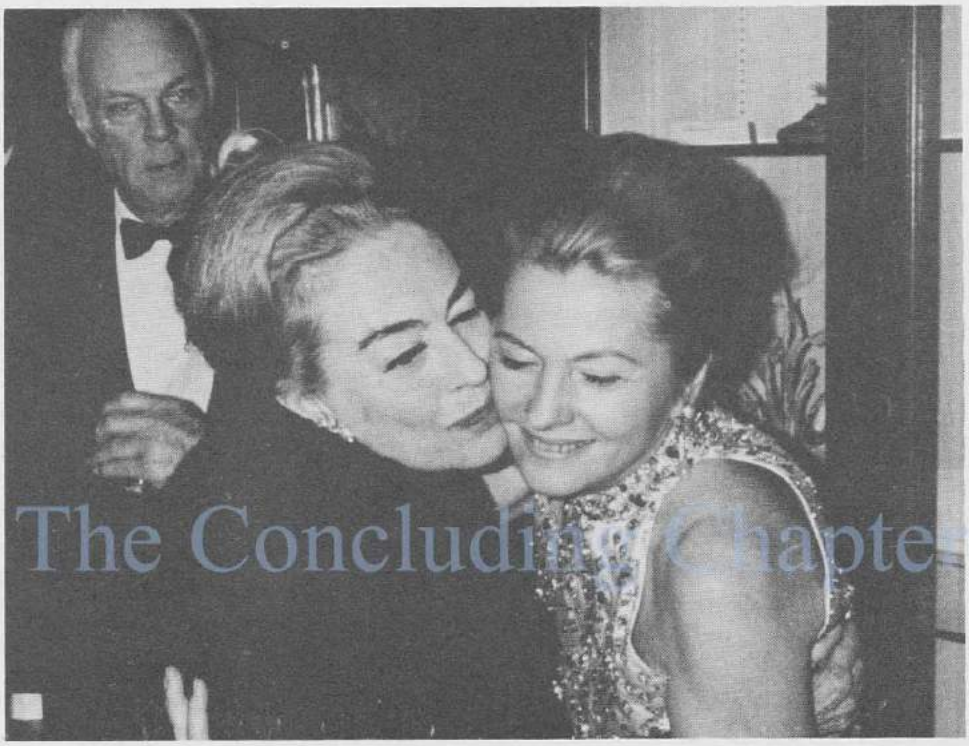
> Joan moved to that building about five years ago. She took an enormous apartment, but a year ago she took a smaller one in the same building. She had just one master bedroom and bathroom, and a bedroom for her housekeeper. But the reason for this modest living, I feel sure, is because she had been so unbelievably extravagant all her life. She was always extremely generous. When she was making a tremendous salary, she was spending it and giving it away. She spent a lot on her wardrobe and entertaining and gave fantastic presents to her friends, people at the studio and her various staffs.

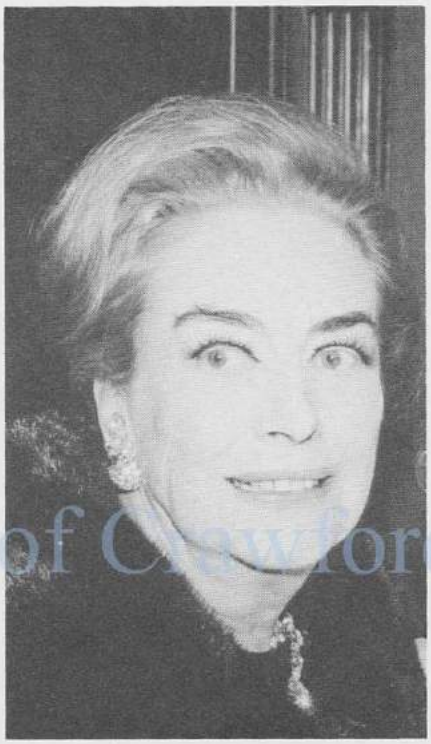
Alexander Walker had this to say:

> I think she had ceased to find out where she was. She had been so subsumed into the roles that she played that I don't think an Egyptian archaeologist will discover where the original Joan Crawford was hidden. I think she restructured life as it happened to her to look like a movie role. People who have made as many movies as she had, have obviously great emotional attachment to the roles she played, because that is what enabled her to continue to be loved. I think that they do this intuitively, without thinking.
>
> Garbo stopped principally, I think, as the result of disinterest coupled with the fear that if she returned to the screen she would be in competition and there was one thing which she couldn't match, which was her earlier self. She stayed away that fatal shade too long. Crawford had never stopped, and the whole tough aspect of the roles was probably a subconscious desire to match the drama of the earlier roles that came so naturally because of all the big studio production values. When she appeared in a recent movie, she had to hold that movie together because there was not a studio there to do it. She was paid very little, actually, in comparison with what she could earn and she'd probably got some *schmuck* producer around and a cast she despised because she watched them three times a week on the soap-opera on television in New York and she was the sales point of the movie.

But if it was explained to her, she would suppress the knowledge of whom the movie was being sold to. It's not being sold to the young audiences today, it's being sold to the big chains of distributors. It's probably being sold to an independent distributor who will fix up a screening as a double-billing once it goes out of the West End. It was a method of maintaining something essential in her that would have broken up and dissolved I think, if she had stopped. Maybe she'd already stopped. Maybe that's why she was breaking up and dissolving.

It had been ten years since she made a film. As there did not appear to be an audience for her any longer, perhaps she needed another *Baby Jane* to resurrect her?





Left: With Joan Fontaine at a party to launch a new book on Tallulah Bankhead in November 1972

Above: at the same party

'Or to bury her,' Alexander Walker ended philosophically.

Where Bette Davis, Crawford's rival and arch-enemy, had contrived to make her substantial ego likeable, as one critic puts it, because of her sense of humour and her power to mock herself, coupled with her unaffected social gregariousness and genuinely keen brain, Crawford by contrast remained enigmatic and glacial, as in so many of her cinematic roles: solemn, arguably self-pitying, certainly self-regarding (as her clashes with both Davis and Mercedes McCambridge on *Baby Jane* and *Johnny Guitar* respectively, undoubtedly prove) and in the last analysis not an especially agreeable human being.

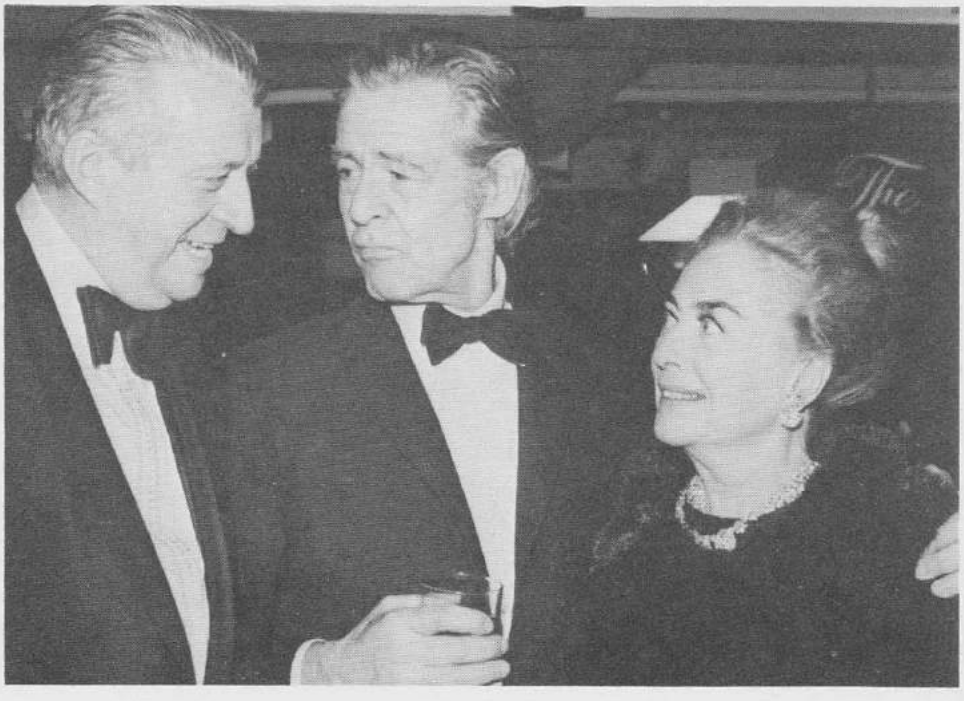
Star quality she undeniably always possessed, but her talent enabled her to sustain a very lengthy career at the top, through judicious modifications of her celluloid image and persona. When a well-written role happened to come her way, she appeared effective. But she had never had the true star actress's capacity to transcend mediocre material through sheer magic of face or voice or skill, as Davis, Garbo, Garland, Streisand or the two Hepburns have been able to do.

The intricate reasons for her parodoxical, somewhat detached attitude to her lovers, friends and working colleagues have long been a source of interest and comment because of her complex nature. Because of scars left by her early childhood, she developed into a woman who had always been motivated by a need for love; where she failed to find it in the home or with her family, it was showered on her

by adoring and faithful fans. She administered her life with cast-iron efficiency and professionalism, foregoing the true affections of those around her as a consequence. They came to fear her, rejecting her strength by cocooning themselves against her. Her dominating will to over-protect the ones she cared for succeeded only in smothering their love for her in the process.

Some of her older friends, however, remained constant, like Van Johnson who admits that he:

> . . . can't keep up with my friends and acquaintances all over the world. We all work hard during the days, and they overlap into the weeks and the years, and you say, 'I'll see you next year,' but next year never comes.
>
> But Joan Crawford would sit down with a tape-recorder and dictate a couple of dozen thank-you notes or letters to her friends. Her secretary would type them off the next day, and they would be sent around the world. I think of my friends all around the world, but I'll never be as good-mannered as Joan Crawford who worked at her friendship. It's like a garden. It must be tended.
>
> And she was just as true to Hollywood as to her friends. A couple of years ago Rock Hudson made a statement to some newspaper saying, 'I'm just in this television series *McMillan and Wife* for the money.' And Joan said, *'Can you imagine that? Why would he say such a terrible thing?'* I said, 'Well, he's right. Why else would you do a television series?' And she jumped on me for that. She was still to the manner born. The old-school-tie about her work and her studio. But I agree with Rock. If I do a TV series, I do it for the money. But it sounded rather bold in the newspaper the way Rock said it.
>
> That is the only time that I had any kind of argument with Joan.
>
> I'm sorry to say that it has been five years since I last saw her [*Van Johnson said with regret*]. We dined with Jacqueline Susann and her husband Irving Mansfield at *21*. And you know, when you say goodbye to a friend or chum and thank them for an evening, you never know that it might be goodbye forever. And I said good night to Jackie Susann, and that was it. I never saw her again.
>
> And I do miss Joan. God knows, I carry her in my heart, and always think of her on March 23rd — how can I ever forget her birthday?



'I used to get a Christmas card from her every year,' said Michael Wilding. 'She never forgot.'

'So did we,' put in Patricia Neal and her husband Roald Dahl. 'She never forgot.'

And the late Rosalind Russell added:

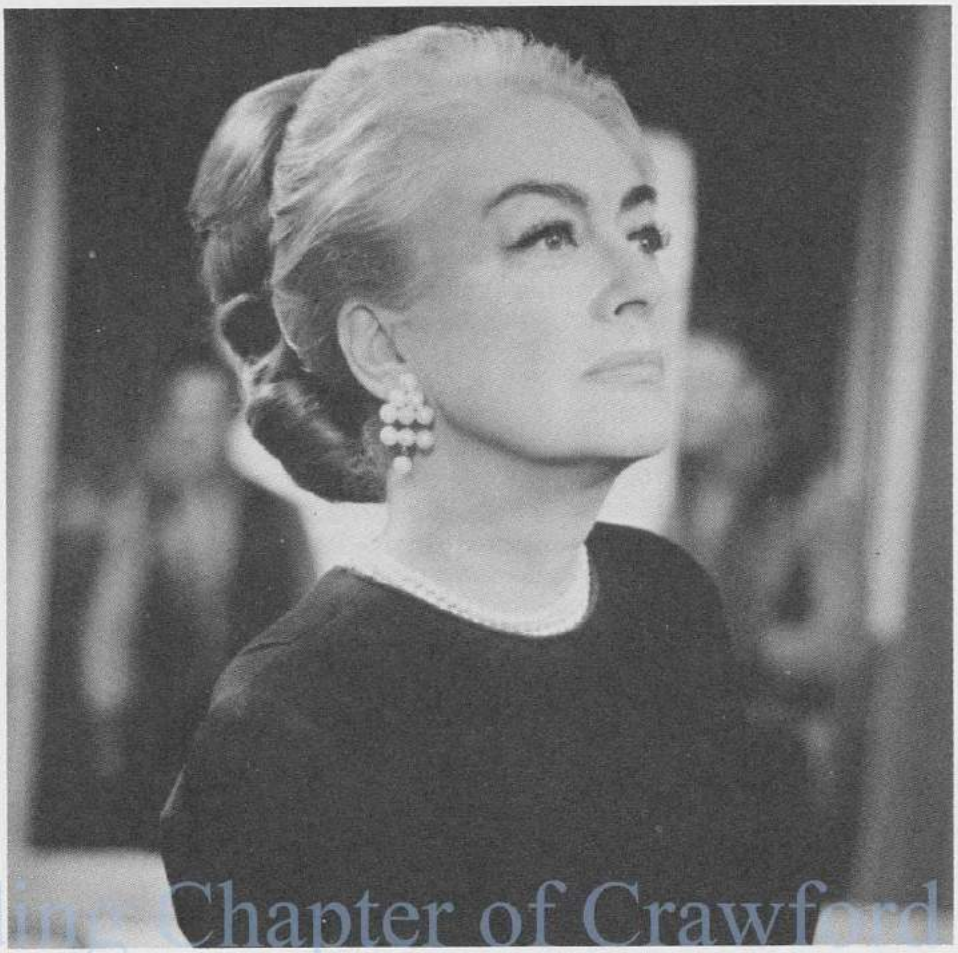
> We always heard from her over Christmas. She was very well known for her Christmas messages. She always wrote a personal note to you. She was never a close friend of mine, but of course I worked with her when I first started in Hollywood.
>
> I was given this Award by the Academy of Dramatic Arts. It was the first time they'd done it. And Joan agreed to be the co-hostess. And there she was at the Rainbow Room with thousands of people — and how she could take the battering, and the screaming and autographing, I don't know. You see, that's the other side of her. Well, we both did, but I *had* to be there to receive the Award, but she didn't have to. But afterwards she wrote me a note about it. She said she was sorry she didn't stay longer, but I didn't blame her at all because it was a madhouse and it was rather uncontrolled. One sat at a table and people climbed over each other to say hello. A lot of people want you to know that they came there, and you understand that they made the effort, but it was a madhouse all the same.

Crawford herself was honoured when John Springer presented her in his Legendary Ladies of the Movies series in New York City's Town Hall; in spring 1973 she proved as popular as ever with her adoring fans, answering their questions about her Hollywood career with unfaltering frankness despite her fears of appearing before a live audience. However, she was so nervous when she repeated her appearance in London at the National Film Theatre in a John Player Lecture, that she was physically ill before going on.

Said New York publicist Donald Smith:

> I remember when Doubleday published her autobiography, *A Portrait of Joan*. I sat on a couch with her for what seemed like an eternity, all alone, talking quietly, and it seemed that everyone was petrified of coming over to talk to her. Then a representative from the publishing house came over to her and said, 'We've got a couple of books here. If you're not too tired, would you mind signing

Opposite: at the Tallulah party, 1972, with William Humphrey, president of Abercrombie and Fitch, and Robert Ryan. Below left: with Joan Fontaine and Tamara Geva, original star of Rogers and Hart's *On Your Toes* and left: being interviewed



them?' And Joan said to him, 'What is your name?' He told her, and she said, *'Well, the day that* Sudden Fear *opened in California I signed something like nine hundred photographs for people going into the theatre and an equal amount when they were coming out. Now if they didn't tire me out, your lovely little group of people here won't.'*

And slowly, people took copies of her book over, and she signed them all.

On another occasion [*Smith smiled proudly, illustrating her thoughtfulness*], I was complaining to her about not being able to get anyone to clean my apartment. She had this marvellous man who worked for her, and she sent him along to me, and now he's cleaning *my* apartment.

It's surprising she didn't go along herself, given her passion for getting down on her knees!

Another friend adds:

What amazed me about Joan was her lack of involvement in life and with the people around her. She had her lunch on a tray and watched all the soap-operas on television, and all the quiz shows. She never went to a ballet or to the opera. She never went to the theatre. If she went anywhere, she left early. Recently she had been the guest of honour at some function [*the launching of* They Had Faces Then] and I had to go somewhere first. When I arrived, just at ten o'clock, I said, 'Is Joan here?' And they said, 'No. She's already gone home.'

She had, in the past years become a terrific recluse. You called her on the telephone and left a message. She called you back in five minutes. But she would not accept incoming calls.

Her friends were forbidden to reveal her private telephone number. Many of her intimates believed that her self-imposed exile may have been the result of the 100° proof vodka ravishing her face in some way, while others claim that she had had a face-lift which had not been entirely successful. Another personal friend reported that she was upset by an anonymous telephone caller who threatened her life, and she became frightened and insecure as a result.

'I tried to invite her out occasionally and she always made up a little excuse,' confided an intimate of hers. 'She said, "Maybe I can come. Maybe." And so I never pressed it.'

'We called her latterly,' complained long-standing friends Radie Harris and Dorothy Strelsin. 'Other people called her, but she didn't say, "Yes, let's get together." She said, "I'm going out of town. I'll call you when I get back.' 'But she never called back and you realised that she hadn't been out of town at all, but simply evading her friends. You didn't get a chance to see her at all in the last two years.'

'Come New Year's Eve, come Christmas, a birthday, all the things that one thinks of sharing or celebrating with somebody, and she was alone,' chimed in another old friend. 'She didn't visit her children over Christmas, never had a family Christmas with her children, never shared her birthday. New Year's Eve she stayed home alone. I know for a fact that she had no man in her life any more.'

But one colleague who *did* see her was Australian-born actor Murray Matheson whose professional career took him to the London stage and then on to Hollywood, where he is regarded as something of a celebrity these days because of his many appearances in such long-running television series as *Banacek* and *Marcus Welby*. He and Crawford were guests of honour at a charity function in Nassau. Their hostess Lady Sassoon, widow of the late Sir Victor, a close friend of the Royal family, had invited them to dinner as an attraction at a fund-raising benefit. As Matheson recently recalled:

It was a most charming evening, and we were seated at a table with extremely pleasant guests who were not in the slightest connected with the theatre or the film world. The conversation turned to documentary films, and Joan at once told of a most fascinating film she had seen concerning childbirth. Whether it was out of sheer nerves at being at the centre of so social a crowd with whom she had little in common, or a mere impish desire to shock the conservative gathering, I don't know, but a concentrated silence prevailed as her captured audience hung on to her every word as she related the details of the film that had impressed her.

'It was one of the most moving films I have ever seen,' she enthused. 'First of all, in great close-up you see the water-bag. Then the child's head emerged — and he had a prick as big as a bull's!'

The shocked silence was so great at this revelation [*said Matheson*] that you could have heard a pin drop. The locals quite naturally switched the conversation to tennis and the homely delights of their paradise island as though they hadn't heard a word she had said, and we turned to one another stifling our desire to burst into fits of laughter.

Murray Matheson remembers that in September 1975 Crawford was offered the part of an ageing star in the long-running television series *Colombo*, but wrote back saying that although she liked the script enormously and was flattered to be asked, she was prevented from doing so because of her Pepsi commitments. The role was subsequently played by Joan Fontaine.

And so it seemed that her exile was almost complete. Following the death of Pepsi's President, Barnett, and various moves in the Board's hierarchy, policy changes had occurred, demanding less and less of Crawford's time and efforts.

Her future with the company was uncertain following the retirement of another close Pepsi ally, Connecicut-based Mitchell Cox who, until his recent retirement, served the company for forty years as Vice-President in charge of public relations. His duties included writing Crawford's speeches for Pepsi and travelling with her to the various bottling plants throughout the world to promote the Pepsi image.

'My boss (Alfred Steele) was best man at my wedding,' Cox told me proudly. 'And I look back on my years working alongside Joan with great affection. She was professional and extremely kind to me. Once in 1963 she even had me appear in one of her movies, *Strait Jacket*. But I am afraid it wasn't the success we'd hoped for.'

He continued:

Joan was a tremendous asset to Pepsi. Her name was magic to the folk and they flocked to see her everywhere she went. I remember the occasion in 1971 when the Pepsi bottler in Birmingham, Alabama, invited the public to celebrate the fifth anniversary of his plant. The plant was several miles from town, way out on the beaten track, and as there was no public transport they had to find their way there as best they could. Although it was a rainy Saturday, over 70,000 people came to see Joan. All they got was a free Pepsi and the chance of catching a glimpse of their favourite star, and some of them managed to get a photograph of her specially autographed. The police told us afterwards that it was the largest crowd ever seen in Alabama, far larger than any of the international football games for which that State is famous.

Another time, in New Orleans, the largest gathering since Lyndon Johnson's visit there attended our Press Conference, and we had another turn-out of over 70,000 in Tulsa, Jacksonville.

But the largest of all attendances was in Miami, Florida, where

At her last public appearance in 1975 hosting a party in honour of Rosalind Russell at the Rainbow Room for the launching of the book *They Had Faces Then* with publicist, Donald F. Smith

the bottler spread the Conference over two days, and over 104,000 people came along for a free Pepsi, a bag of potato chips, and the chance of seeing their movie idol. Joan signed autographs over those two days until her arm practically fell off. But she never complained, nor showed irritation at the excitement and jostling of the crowd.

Of course, I have seen Joan harassed and irritated on occasions, just like any other human being, but she never demonstrated this side of her temperament in the presence of the public; I have never seen her display the tantrums normally credited to movie people.

She had one fear, of course, and that was of flying. She was absolutely terrified of flying. We would sit on the plane together, and she would take my hand for comfort, but she soon got over her anxiety when she felt protected. In time, however, when her confidence built up, she wasn't quite as nervous, and this was helped greatly by the fact that Al Steele had his own private plane. When they travelled together, she learned to overcome her fear of flying.

'I worked for madame for fifteen years, and when it came time for me to leave, we cried on one another's shoulders like children,' said Grant, a loyal senior citizen who spoke in a slow, mellifluous voice, weighing every word and every sentiment. He spoke of Crawford with a certain reverence, not as Joan Crawford the movie star but as the woman who had employed him for so long, and throughout that time had showered him with kindness and the kind of respect he now shows for her.

Grant had first encountered Crawford many years before when working as a doorman at New York's *Saks Fifth Avenue* department store. He said warmly:

Of course, I recognised her the moment she stepped out of her car. I will always remember the impeccable shoes she used to wear, and her neat, tiny ankles. Even if one did not recognise her at once, one would have immediately known she was a star. There was just something special about the way she dressed, about the way she walked, and the way she conducted herself. She was always friendly to me, and was never aloof in the way that a great many of the other movie stars could be when they came to the store.

She had commanded his respect and admiration from the beginning, and when he finally left *Saks* he was employed by her.

I worked for madame for over fifteen years [*he continued*]. I did the majority of the household buying, and madame liked me to purchase provisions in great quantity. She never did the shopping herself. She always bought the other household necessities wholesale from the warehouses. She used many provisions in the kitchen, and liked a variety of foods so that she could experiment with different meals from what there was in the freezer or the cupboards.

Her favourite restaurants were *21* and *Casa Brazil*. I guess she liked going to *Casa Brazil* because they served the spicy kind of food she liked.

She was extremely punctual about everything she did, but I suppose that came from her Hollywood training. Dinner was usually served at seven o'clock when she dined out, and she never stayed out after ten at night. She was a stickler for that rule. She was afraid of being out late, and I don't believe that the muggings that went on in New York gave her added confidence about being out after dark.

When she sat down to dinner, it had to be served at a certain time, and it had to finish at a certain time. The car would be waiting outside at a given time, and if the guests were not finished their final course or their coffee, that was just too bad. She would get up to leave all the same, and the others would file in meekly behind her and follow her out. Her life was as regimented as that. Everything worked according to the clock. That came of her movie discipline, rising at a given hour, being on the set at a particular time. And I don't believe that she could have accomplished all she did in a day had she not worked that way. There was no-one more punctual, and she expected the same from everyone else.

Grant's position in the Crawford household was reinforced by events when a fire broke out at her previous apartment on Fifth Avenue; this occupied the two top floors of an apartment block with a view of Central Park, and was the one into which she had moved on her marriage to Alfred Steele. Recently she had lived in a much smaller modern apartment, as described earlier in this chapter by Earl Blackwell, in a block on East 69th Street.

Recalled Grant:

I was on my own at the time, and handled all her clothes, moved them from the cupboards and repacked everything she owned before it was ruined by water damage from the hoses. After all the insurances were paid, she moved to the Imperial House. As the result of that incident, she didn't like to leave the apartment alone, and many times I was left there on my own to look after it. She had complete trust in me.

As you probably know, although she and Mr Steele had that enormous apartment on Fifth Avenue — the children did not live there with them. They were sent to a nearby hotel where they were looked after by a nanny. When they came home from school, madame would give them some of her time, and then they would be taken to the hotel. Apart from the fact that she had converted some of the available accommodation into a gymnasium for Mr Steele, for instance, she felt that it would not be practical for them to live in the apartment with them. She was always at her desk, visitors came in and out, and at times she treated her home as her office, and that was no place for children. She felt their presence interrupted her plans and cut across her daily routine. And

naturally, in the evenings, there was always entertaining to do, and the children would not fit into that atmosphere. [*Even though, by this time, the children were fairly grown-up, in their late teens.*]

Of course, she loved her three pet poodles, but they are dead now. 'Champion' was the father of 'Chiffon' and 'Ma Petite'. She simply idolised them. Later she had a Shih Tzu named 'Princess Lotus Blossom' — I named her that because she looked so oriental, somehow. She travelled all over the United States with madame.

And what of the mysterious disappearance of Mamasita, Crawford's German maid of many years standing?

According to Grant:

She left madame to visit her family in Germany. Her brothers and sisters always wanted her to spend a holiday with them, but when it was time to return to New York, there was trouble with her visa, and she was gone longer than expected. In the meantime madame had to find someone else to replace her. Mamasita finally came back to America, and these days lives in Texas with her own daughter who is happily married a second time. Both her daughter and son-in-law love her and have given her a home where she is very happy.

Madame's Pepsi-Cola contract was over [*Grant continued*] and my feeling is that this was because at 72 [*the age Grant gave her in 1976*] they felt that she was no longer young enough to fit the youthful image they wanted for their product.

Madame became an ardent Christian Scientist [*Grant continued gravely*], and when there was illness, she would say, 'If you wait long enough, it will cure itself.' But the doctor was always there in a hurry! [*he added with a twinkle*]. She wasn't exactly a hypochondriac, but she never took chances. She had large quantities of pills, medicinal aids, and cures for this and cures for that. She always smoked a good deal and drank only 100° vodka on the rocks.

Grant, the loyal retainer, a product of an old school in which habits die hard, identifies his own inability to accept the changing world of the seventies with that of his employer, but was reluctant to elucidate:

> I left when I felt that certain things were not good for me, morally or personally. It is not always wise or advantageous to live alone as madame did. It was sad to see how times had changed over the fifteen years. I realised how much she missed Hollywood, and the life that went with it. It was like the story of Dorian Gray.
>
> I remember how we wept together when I went. I explained to madame that we were both growing old. I tried to tell her in my own way that we all grow older and things change. It was as simple as the front of your face and the back of your head.
>
> But I am glad that I was there when she needed someone most. She was extremely generous to me. More generous than necessary, and I will always be grateful for the time I spent working for madame.

He concluded a little sadly, clearly upset that his time with Joan Crawford had ended.

And so, alone, yet with old friends who remained constant who would have been at her side at her very command, Joan Crawford sat at home contemplating her fifty years in the movies.

'I don't know anyone who isn't alone,' she said. *'You just learn to live with it. You don't dwell on it. That's the only way to handle it. I never look at the past.*

'I live today to prepare for tomorrow.'

Below and right: with her pet poodle, Princess Lotus Blossom, whom she gave to friends four days before her death

The tomorrow for which she was preparing came just after nine-thirty in the morning on 10 May 1977. Unknown to outsiders, she had been bedridden for the last ten days of her life, suffering physical discomfort and incontinency. A full-time nurse had moved into the apartment to care for her. Miss Bernice O'Shatz, an ardent fan of Miss Crawford's, became a reliable and much needed friend at this time and moved in as well to take care of the household duties and daily shopping needs. At nine-thirty that morning Miss Crawford gestured to the nurse to send Miss O'Shatz on an errand as she wished to give the nurse some confidential notes. The nurse sent Miss O'Shatz to buy a bed-pan, and then went into the kitchen to make some tea for Miss Crawford; when she returned to the bedroom a few moments later, Miss Crawford was dead. It was rumoured that, like Marilyn Monroe, she might easily have taken one or two of the many pills she kept by her side, and accidentally overdosed herself, but this was not so. She had been awake since eight o'clock that morning, under observation of the nurse and Miss O'Shatz, and to take her own life would have been impossible in the circumstances; besides, it simply was not in her nature. Her essential self-love, and the instinct for preserving the physical and mental monument she had built of herself over the years could never have suffered her own self-destruction.

Athough cardiac arrest — or heart-attack — was diagnosed, it was what Miss Crawford had suffered during the previous two years that led to her death. She had been suffering agonising pains in her back in her final months. Unknown to any of her close friends or family, Miss Crawford was for the last two years of her life steadily dying of cancer. When she wrote to me in November 1974, she said she was looking forward to our meeting the following January. But on my return to New York to discuss this book and the film of her life which we were planning she was unaccountably indisposed. I was unaware at the time that she had been taken to a clinic for a few days for the extraction of several teeth at the back of her mouth. Her general health was being affected by cancer of the stomach, causing an anaemic disorder, and her lowered resistance led to infection in the gums. She was not eating properly as she could not absorb food; frightened of her worsening condition, she at once gave up drinking. Her health was declining and she started losing weight. 'I'm down to 108 pounds,' she let slip to Radie Harris on the telephone, unwittingly confirming one of the symptoms of cancer. She chose self-exile by locking herself away, refusing to answer her own telephone for fear of her friends witnessing her deterioration, prying into the reason for her privacy and learning her painful secret.

She did, however, see one close friend of many years' standing throughout those two years of pain and discomfort. She called upon Michael O'Shea on many occasions; once to go out and buy her half a dozen cans of plum juice, for instance, as she had been told by her Californian secretary, Betty Barker, that it would relieve the constipation she was suffering at that time. On another occasion she asked him to shop for a backgammon board for their amusement in the confinement of her apartment. He also visited her at other times to help prepare meals.

Miss Crawford had become an ardent Christian Scientist and refused treatment for the primary tumours. As she had told Grant, 'If you wait long enough it will cure itself,' but of course, it did not. It produced a referred pain because of the secondary growth, or metastisis, from the original tumour; irritating the nerve ends, and coming through the neck, it resulted in penetrating pain in her upper arms and neck. As the secondary cancer progressed to her back she suffered excruciating pain for which she courageously refused pain-killers.

Shortly before she died, her staunchest rival for over twenty years, Bette Davis, became the first actress to be honoured in Hollywood for her contribution to the movie industry. At a momentous reception she received the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award for her part in advancing the art of film. The only four others to have been honoured in this way before were Orson Welles, John Ford, James Cagney and William Wyler. Desperately regretting having been overlooked, it could be said that Bette Davis' recognition over Miss Crawford's own great contribution to the film industry rankled with Miss Crawford, coming as a final bitter blow to her pride. Miss Crawford, aged seventy-three, had lost her youth and vitality, her extraordinary beauty, many of her close friends, her health — and now the esteem of the Hollywood that had created her. With all her achievements behind her there was little or no hope of the future providing equivalent prospects.

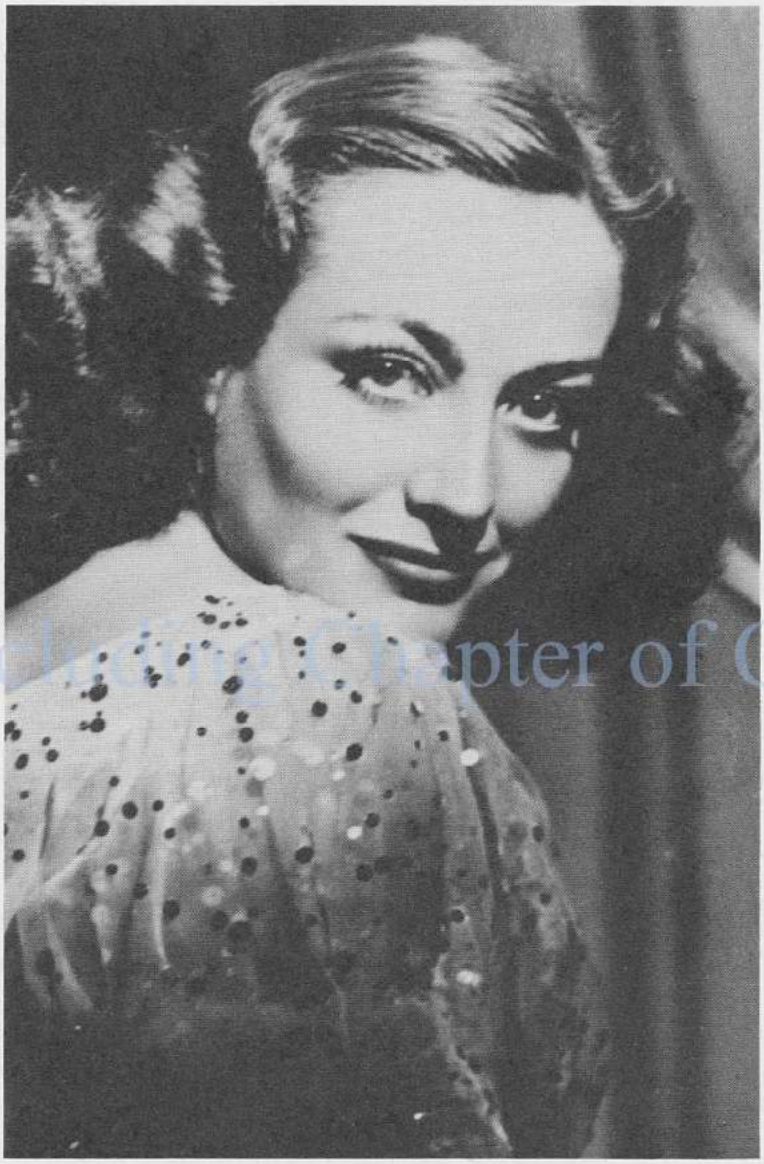
As she had been given a pension by Pepsi-Cola three years before, the level of income which she had been so accustomed to receiving was now greatly reduced, and in order to pay for the smaller apartment into which she had moved, she sold a few pieces of jewellery.

Four days before she died, she arranged for her devoted dog Princess, whom she had treated like an adored child, and with whom she now felt too unwell to cope, to be sent to the loving care of friends in the country; she accepted that her life was slipping away, and with the usual meticulous care she had administered to her activities throughout her lifetime she left everything in an ordered fashion.

She had had a new will prepared a few months before, naming nine legatees and six charities. Of the legatees, she left $5,000 to her devoted friend Michael O'Shea, $5,000 to her former make-up artist Monty Westmore; $10,000 to her former New York secretary Florence Walsh, and $35,000 to her Californian secretary Betty Barker who had remained loyal for so many years. The disappointment that Miss Crawford felt for her adopted son Christopher and daughter Christina in life, however, now materialised upon her death when in her will she left $77,500 to each of the other children, Cathy and Cindy — but nothing to her first two, except a statement indicating that they would know why they were not remembered; Christopher, whose rebellion against her had caused her such grief, and Christina over whom she had persecuted herself for so many years in the imagined belief that her daughter had designs on her late husband Alfred Steele when Miss Crawford was married to him. As in *Mildred Pierce* — the only Oscar Award winning role of her eighty-one films, she punished her ingrate children whom she considered to be unworthy of her.

In the few moments the nurse spent in the kitchen preparing tea on the morning of her death, an embolism had formed in Miss Crawford's circulation and blocked one of the arteries to her heart, resulting in the final attack.

Only Miss Crawford's friends and family were invited to the memorial service at Campbell's Funeral Parlor where a congregation of some thirty people, including Myrna Loy who began her own career at MGM as a budding starlet in the mid-twenties with Miss Crawford, saw the casket containing the cremated ashes. A very simple service was conducted, devoid of any eulogies, but consisting of Bible selections read by Miss Crawford's Christian Scientist practitioner, Mrs Campbell. At the second memorial service organised by Pepsi-Cola a week later at All Soul's Unitarian Church for 1,500 friends, among the show business personalities to pay respect were Brian Aherne, Cliff Robertson, Anita Loos, Ruth Warrick — and Geraldine Brooks who had appeared with Miss Crawford in *Possessed* in 1947. Pearl Bailey flew in from Kansas City to sing, 'He'll Understand.'



Joan Crawford was remarkable and magnificent. Her unerring drive and ambition and complete dedication made not only her own dream come true but she became the stuff that moviegoers' dreams were made of.

She reached for the stars.

'She was one of the people that made Hollywood the place that touched the imagination of the world.'