13

Buyer's Market

1945–1947

JANUARY 1945 TO JANUARY 1947 were the last two years that Hearst and Marion had any interest, legally or otherwise, in the Beach House. It's a period whose salient details can be quickly summed up. But first it should be emphasized that the couple's use of their Santa Monica property was minimal then. They no longer called Wyntoon home but rather San Simeon, despite the war's continuation until the summer of 1945. Also in 1945, they sent certain items to Wyntoon from the Beach House. More important, they sent a larger number of furnishings and decorative items from Santa Monica to New York to be sold at public auction. The dispersal took place at Parke-Bernet Galleries in December 1945. Then in 1946, the couple bought property in Beverly Hills and put the Beach House on the market. They soon got some serious offers, leading to a successful sale to Joseph Drown at the outset of 1947. In the meantime, at some point in 1946, a change of title took place in Santa Monica, with the Hearst interests—specifically the entity called Hearst Magazines—buying the Beach House from Marion in a shell game that recalled Hearst's leasehold status, the one that may well have applied through most of the thirties decade as well as through the forties up till 1946.

Everything else is a matter of filling in details wherever the records can. And of course a matter of correcting erroneous dates and the like whenever possible, such as the belief that 1945 marked Marion's final use of the Beach House as well as her sale of the place. Another instance looms at the very start of the 1945–1947 period,

namely, the greatly mistaken idea that Hearst and Marion didn't move back to San Simeon from Wyntoon until the war ended. It's of little importance to explain whence the idea comes. The Hearst Papers at The Bancroft Library are more than equal to the task of defining Hearst and Marion's whereabouts in the final months of World War II.

The latter collection contains an item from January 9, 1945, sent from San Simeon by Bill Hunter to Mac McClure in Long Beach, California, where Mac was waiting out the winter shutdown of the latest season at Wyntoon, that of 1944 (he'd also been Hearst's designer there in 1943, a year that likewise saw construction inch along despite the war). The Hunter-to-McClure item from early 1945 reads as follows:

> Chief instructs that you please get in touch with Colonel Willicombe, who is now at Beach House, Santa Monica, regarding the things to go to Wyntoon, and to see that we have shelves, cabinets, etc., to receive the things when they reach Wyntoon. Otherwise Chief will have them sent to San Simeon.

San Simeon proved to be the recipient in 1946 of numerous floor lamps and table lamps from the Beach House, possibly traceable to this episode in 1945.

Hunter's message to Mac McClure in January 1945 also said that Hearst "would discuss plans and specifications" with Mac when he returned to San Simeon. For the moment, those words pertained to Wyntoon, where the wartime work would resume at its usual limited pace once the winter weather eased; San Simeon's renewal of construction would come later, not until the war had fully ended.

Willicombe was in Santa Monica to receive a message that Hunter sent there from San Simeon on February 7, 1945:

> Chief instructs to have [Bill] Newton make inventory of all table silver at Beach House, knives, forks, spoons, oyster forks, etc., and state whether it is solid silver or plated, and whether all one design.

Two months later, Hunter was still acting as Hearst's principal secretary at San Simeon and Willicombe was still acting in his new capacity as liaison in Santa Monica when Larry Mitchell wired Hearst on April 2:

> Willicombe talked with [Charlie] Rounds and he [Rounds] is preparing list of antiques at Beach House from data in his possession. Willicombe will send list to you when he receives it.

How such a list would compare with the inventory of 1938 (Appendix III) is hard to say—indeed, impossible to say without having the inventory of seven years later in hand.

In the absence of such a document, a message like this one from April 6, 1945, is more the standard for the period we're now amidst; Estelle Forsythe (who backed up Bill Hunter as Willicombe's secretarial replacement) to Bill Newton at 415 Ocean Front:

> Will you please send up two dozen tamales and tortillas but only one jar of the sauce from Castillo's soon as they can make them up special for us? Thanks.

A similar message from Mrs. Forsythe at San Simeon went to Newt in Santa Monica on April 25:

> Will you please send up two dozen tamales and tortillas from Castillo's. Thanks.

Two days later, Mrs. Forsythe heard from the *Los Angeles Examiner:*

> Six dozen ears corn with [news]papers tonight.
>
> Checked Farmer's Market [in the Fairfax district], Von's Santa Monica, Prudence Penny's sources, all say no fresh lobsters available, season October 1st to March 15th.

There's little to be gained in citing more messages of this kind—except to point out that in 1945 Hearst still worked on his newspapers every day and that, so far as Mexican food went, Castillo's was a preferred source for him and Marion and others on the hilltop (or the Hacienda, as its dateline went in many teleprinter items of the period).

Seymour Berkson, who ran Hearst's International News Service in New York, was a guest at San Simeon in July 1945. He left a memorable account of his stay on the hilltop, a letter (unpublished till now) that we can treat ourselves to despite its having no direct bearing on Santa Monica. Yet it very much *does* have a bearing on the two principals in our story, Hearst and Marion; and thus it provides a welcome interlude at this otherwise quiet juncture along our timeline. Earlier, in 1938, a book by Seymour Berkson on European royalty entitled *Their Majesties!* had appeared. The man could write. He did so in this case in longhand to his wife, who'd remained behind in the east:

> I'm writing this en route from San Luis Obispo to San Francisco. We left San Simeon bathed in golden sunshine and drove early this morning [Tuesday, July 10] to San Luis Obispo where I boarded this train while the others [in Berkson's party] went back to Los Angeles.
>
> This train is making its way through the most beautiful mountain country in California. I will probably have a stiff neck by the time I reach Frisco—from turning left and right to catch as much of the scenic panorama as possible. . . .
>
> Mr. Hearst made a terrific impression on me. He really is the most astonishing personality I've ever met. We sat together for hours on each of three afternoons—Saturday, Sunday, Monday [July 7–9]. He went into the most minute details of [newspaper] syndicate and news service operations. His judgment is sharp, swift, incisive—but it's exercised in a mild, gentle manner. . . .
>
> I had an occasion to see and hear him mediating some of the warfare among his key newspaper executives—and I realize now how the empire hangs together despite those constant internal quarrels and bickering.

Mr. Hearst simply holds the empire together by the power of his intellect & his expert statesmanship.

We seemed to hit it off well—all of us [in the Berkson party]—with him. Gorty [J. D. Gortatowsky, head of Hearst Newspapers, Inc.] said he spent more time with us, ate more meals with us than he usually does when other executives are there. He was as comfortable as an old shoe as we sat together in the living room (they call it the assembly room). When a problem involved an intricate decision Mr. H. would pause and stare out into nowhere for an instant, his steel blue eyes clouded and half closed. Then he would open his eyes with a wide piercing look and snap out the decision—and you knew when you heard it that it was an uncanny & often totally unorthodox one.

As you know I had come armed with facts and figures on INS [International News Service] and with the aim of getting more revenue from the [individual] Hearst papers for our service.

He grasped the situation with a glance at the chart of rates I had brought & then he analyzed each paper's assessment. He wanted us to soak the papers even more than we had even dared to contemplate. We hope for $3000 a week more revenue. He authorized changes that will net us over $4200 a week—and then he turned to us with a glint in his eyes and blithely declared that he didn't think even that was enough of an increase.

"You ought to get more," he said—but there were other reasons for not wishing to overdo it so we stuck to the figures.

He initialed my chart of new figures as revised by him—and then he took a little stub of a red pencil out of his coat pocket and scrawled "O.K. WRH" on the chart.

He did the same on a form letter I drafted to break the "sad news" to the individual papers.

It seems much like robbing Peter to pay Paul. After all, both INS and the seventeen Hearst newspapers came under the same wing—ultimately. But between and among these entities there were budgets and, as Berkson put it, assessments to be juggled and jostled. In any event, so much for Hearst's indifference toward financial matters, as

alleged repeatedly by Marion in *The Times We Had*, not just by *Time* magazine and hostile biographers.

Berkson's letter to his wife continued:

> When we finished our business, he took a great delight in showing us around the castle—explaining the antiques and tapestries etc. Gorty says he never saw him show anyone around before—
>
> Hearst is very fond of the dachshunds and they have a luxurious red pillow under the dining table where they eat at meal times with the guests & Mr. H. slips them little extra tidbits from his own plate.
>
> It is wonderful to watch him with Marion. He worships her, laughs loudly at all her quips & jokes. They always walk in together for lunch and dinner & at their heels are their favorite dachshunds. One is Marion's & the other is Hearst's—a pair, male & female.
>
> When they leave the assembly room for their own quarters in an adjoining villa [Casa del Mar]—they leave together and the dogs follow. They generally stay in the castle from lunch time (2:30 pm) until 6:30 pm. And from dinner time (10 pm) until 1 am.
>
> He keeps no office for his own work but there is a complete office and phone switchboard in a little frame building adjoining the castle.
>
> He does all his own work on the fly in the castle assembly room. One of his secretaries [mainly H. O. Hunter] brings him papers & editorials for his OK. He usually sits on a sofa, reads them & scrawls OK or other comments with his little red pencil.
>
> There's a phone in every nook and corner so wherever he is he can pick one up & issue orders to his papers or other properties & executives—He seems to like to do business by phone & there are scores of them throughout the castle.
>
> The other afternoon after Hearst & Marion had left I had to go down to the office. It was a beautiful day & as I walked down the steps I ran smack into the two of them walking arm in arm through the gardens in what seemed to be an animated conversation.
>
> The gardens are in bloom & very beautiful—especially the roses which fill the air with perfume. There are magnolia trees with magnolias the size of cantelopes [*sic*].

> We toured the castle suites yesterday—there's a Della Robbia suite, a Doge's suite, etc. but the one I liked best of all & which I know you'd adore is the suite in the cupolas atop the castle overlooking the entire estate & the mountains & sea. It is called the Celestial Suite & it is! There are two bedrooms—not very large but octagonal shaped. The drapes & furnishings are all gold-colored & the paneling & ceilings brightly hued and gay—like the castles in the south of Spain—Little verandahs on each side of the bedrooms overlook the grounds & the tower bells are visible on each side.
>
> As we drove away today I thought I had been dreaming. It just doesn't seem possible to have seen so many beautiful things in 3 short days. On the way out some new animals we hadn't seen showed up along the road—giant American bison!

Hearst was eighty-two at the time of Berkson's visit. Marion was finally catching up, slowly but surely: she was forty-eight now.

THE RESUMPTION OF WORK at San Simeon later in 1945, both on the hilltop and elsewhere on the Hearst Ranch, has been well enough recounted in the book of 2003 called *Building for Hearst and Morgan: Voices from the George Loorz Papers* and in books by other writers. Little has changed since then in what we know about the efforts of Hearst, Mac McClure, George Loorz, and Stolte Inc., not only at San Simeon but also at Wyntoon for the years from 1945 to 1948.

And thus there's no need to repeat what was said in 2003, with the exception of what follows—inasmuch as it has a crucial bearing on what happened in Santa Monica right after the war. Loorz wrote to his eldest son, Don, on April 29, 1946, a Monday coinciding with Hearst's birthday, as Loorz rightly noted:

> I am flying to San Simeon in the morning. Mr. Hearst and Marion bought three fine estates in Beverly Hills, one $250,000, one $110,000 and one $63,000. They now want us to start remodeling same but I fear C.P.A. [the Civilian Production Administration] will not permit it and I

> hate to tell him so. He celebrated his 83rd birthday today. I do hope he enjoyed it and that he is in [a] fine mood tomorrow.

As mentioned in 2003, by allusion to W. A. Swanberg's and Fred Guiles's biographies, the well-known explanation has Marion acting independently of Hearst in buying two houses in Beverly Hills in 1946, though surely not *three* houses. Tradition also has it that with Hearst's health declining, he vetoed the first of the two places as an urban refuge from San Simeon's remoteness. The more prominent of the two—or the most prominent of the three that Loorz mentioned, if we adopt his insider's account—was the former Milton Getz residence on North Beverly Drive, high on a knoll near Coldwater Canyon. Never mind that the 1920s Spanish or, to use the broader term Mediterranean, was an architectural style largely forgotten or even scorned by 1946, the decadent stuff that Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* would soon be made of (and that San Simeon had always been made of). Whether Hearst and Marion paid $250,000 or less than half that amount (Guiles specified $120,000 to Loorz's $110,000 for the second-ranked acquisition), they made out like bandits in what was plainly a buyer's market. No wonder they were eager to start remodeling. There'd be money to spare at this rate—especially if a good price could be had for the Beach House.

The deal struck by Hearst Magazines with Joseph Drown later in 1946 was allegedly for $600,000—about 6.6 million (minus appreciation) in the dollars of 2010. The same conditions of a buyer's market prevailed at that point in 1946, not quite a year after the two- or three-property windfall for Hearst and Marion in Beverly Hills. If Loorz and Guiles were close to the mark with the prices they cited, why would the Santa Monica sale have commanded so much? The amount was more than twice the larger (or largest) amount spent in Beverly Hills. Before getting too carried away, and before recalling that $600,000 was a figure gleaned by Swanberg in 1960 from a Rhode

Island newspaper (the *Providence Journal,* part of Appendix V), we should remind ourselves in all seriousness that beachfront property commands the utmost value, even in a downbeat or distressed market. Without location, location, location to recommend it, the Beach House could easily have gone for half or less of what it's said to have sold for.

Let's go back to the documents post haste to see how plausible the $600,000 sounds and to see what else we might gain from those who were directly involved in the sale of the Beach House compound, starting on December 11, 1946. On that day, Hal Roach's secretary wrote to Dick Burrud of Hearst Magazines on Wilshire Boulevard, headquartered near the affluent Windsor Square district of Los Angeles:

> Regarding your request for an appointment with Mr. Hal Roach, he advises me that he has no interest in the purchase of the Santa Monica beach property at this particular time.

Right after Christmas—on December 27, 1946—Martin Huberth wrote at length to Hearst at San Simeon. He did so from the main offices of the Hearst Corporation in New York:

> Further in relation to your telegram regarding the Santa Monica beach property sale.
>
> You will no doubt remember when I visited with you at Beverly Hills we discussed the sale of the Santa Monica properties and I told you that I thought it would be best not to sell the various houses separately unless we first succeeded in selling the big house because I thought that was the key to the situation, and if we succeeded in selling the big house then we could proceed to dispose of the smaller houses. You agreed with this policy.
>
> At that time Miss [Ella] Williams mentioned that Hal Roach was interested in purchasing the big house and had intimated a cash offer of $500,000. This I discussed with you and it was agreeable that such an offer would be acceptable. I told Miss Williams to get a firm bid and I

> would do the rest. During my visit Miss Williams was unable to get in touch with Mr. Roach.
>
> When the Drown offer came through and we were considering it I telephoned to Dick Burrud and told him that before we would come to any definite conclusion I wanted him to follow up [with] Roach and also the Douglas Aircraft people, and that I would not give him a definite answer on Drown until we had heard from Mr. Roach as to whether or not he was interested.
>
> It was only after I received from Burrud the letter addressed to him by Mr. Roach's secretary [transcribed in full above] and after I received word from Donald Douglas of the Douglas [Aircraft] Company that the Santa Monica big house was too rich for their blood as they were now in a period of retrenchment and pulling back after their heavy war contracts, and after having explored all possibilities of selling the big house separately that I brough the matter of the Drown offer before our Finance Committee. I, personally, was not in favor of all the terms of the Drown contract. However, the Finance Committee stated [that] if certain changes were made in the terms Drown had exacted, they would be in favor of entering into a contract. These changes were agreed to by Mr. Drown.
>
> It was then I telephoned and cleared with you and after that notified Burrud and told him to have Heinie MacKay's office draw the contract and attend to the legal end. This was done the beginning of last week.

Several days passed before Hearst tendered a response. By then it was January 9 of the new year, 1947. He wired Huberth with a brief statement, one indicating that the sale date should indeed be assigned to 1947, not to 1946 (and surely not to 1945):

> Your letter Dec. 27th re sale of Santa Monica Beach property, I am sufficiently satisfied with the terms.

On that simple, straightforward note, the main life of the Beach House can be said to have ended. It was a life that, above all, Hearst and Marion had known, a life that Julia Morgan and William Flannery and George Loorz and Frank Hellenthal had known, a life that Alice

Head had known, and that Louella Parsons had also known. The same could be said of all the others who'd seen the place or who'd stayed there between the twenties and forties, all the famous and celebrated and envied people, of whatever names or identities. That was the grand mansion that was—and in many ways that wasn't. Regardless, everything afterward, after 1947, was a memory, a recollection, and not infrequently the stuff of myth or of outright fabrication. True, the physical body of the place lived on for now. Yet its internal spirit was gone and had been absent for a long time, since before the war, really.

It makes you wonder if Hearst and Marion ever went back, if they ever drove on PCH past the Beach House during the four years of his convalescence in Beverly Hills that ended with his death in 1951. A passage in Marion's memoir indicates that indeed they did. ("I didn't even recognize it," she said in reference to changes made during Joseph Drown's ownership, "I dreaded to go by.") All the same, would she and Hearst have been nostalgic? Would they have spoken of times past, of the magic days of ten or twenty years before? Or would they have been quietly sad, saying little as they beheld a relic of a bygone era, one that even Hearst with all his wealth and power had had to leave behind, as he soon would do of this earthly life itself. "It had been so beautiful inside," Marion recalled in 1951/1975 of the main building, "and when I last saw it, it needed paint."

AS A FOOTNOTE to the sale of the Beach House in 1947, the memoirs of William R. Valentiner can be cited. He was the renowned scholar and museum director who we initially heard from in 1931 and who came to Los Angeles in 1946 to take charge of what has since become LACMA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Wilshire Boulevard. His memoirs, written in German, were translated by Margaret Sterne in the 1970s for *The Passionate Eye*, her biography of

Valentiner that appeared in 1980 and that's now a decidedly scarce, very much out-of-print book.

Passages that concern us from Valentiner's writings start with a description of what in 1946 was simply called the Los Angeles Museum:

> The unfinished façade of the museum, an enormous block-like building opposite the house I lived in, was not very inviting, although the park surrounding it [Exposition Park] and the large rose gardens next to it were enchanting.

Valentiner was less than enchanted, however, by the interiors he encountered:

> The art collections were deplorable. . . .
>
> There were, besides, two galleries containing loan exhibitions, one of the Barnsdall collection of French Impressionists, the other the Marion Davies collection of French eighteenth-century masters, which were shown under glass and so badly hung that one could understand why some students believed them to be forgeries. . . .
>
> I proposed to start a permanent collection which would survey all ages from prehistoric times to modern art, in such a manner that if the visitor began his walk through the museum at the entrance on one side he would end on the other side, having been visually instructed in the entire development of art. . . .
>
> Aid toward building a museum collection came soon after I had taken over my position, from William Randolph Hearst, whom I knew from a visit I had paid some years ago in San Simeon [in 1931]. When I called on him at Marion Davies' house in Beverly Hills, he was exceedingly kind, and although he hardly ever left the house he was still amazingly active [mentally] and shared a rare interest in what was going on in the art world.

Valentiner wrote these lines in the early 1950s. He conflated some dates. The preceding passage, for example, strongly suggests 1947 at the earliest, following Hearst and Marion's final departure from San

Simeon. It remains a challenge for any reader of this translated material to distinguish 1946 from 1947 and, along with that, to get the four years from 1947 until Hearst's death in 1951 in sufficient balance. Valentiner's account continues:

> I saw him regularly during the last five years of his life, at intervals of course, the communications often taking place through his secretary, if he was not well enough to see anyone. He could never go to the museum, since his health was slowly failing, but I frequently showed him photographs of the installation of objects he had given and sent him reports on the progress of the museum. In his last years, when he was no longer able to spend large sums of money, he was still interested in the public auctions in London and New York, and acquired many smaller objects for us after his secretary had inquired whether the objects he was bidding for would fit into our collections. His nurse told me once that his constant interest in these sales and in the development of our museum actually kept him alive.

There were other motivating forces in Hearst's life in the late 1940s that fueled his longevity. The remodeling of the Beverly House through Mac McClure (too much of it blithely assigned by posterity to Julia Morgan) was surely as great a factor, if not a surpassing one. We can take Valentiner at face value nonetheless, pending more research through the Hearst Papers at The Bancroft Library and the records held at LACMA and elsewhere. Valentiner's memoir continues:

> During my first visit [to Beverly Hills], he asked me whether I had anything in mind that I would like to acquire for the museum. I was astounded, as no wealthy collector had ever asked me such a question before. Thinking fast, I told him that we had on loan a marvelous *Annuciation* by Andrea della Robbia. . . . While saying goodbye at the door Mr. Hearst said he would try to find the money for it.
>
> I did not hear anything from him for a week. Then unexpectedly the president of the Hearst Corporation arrived and wanted to see the museum. . . .

> A week later, Hearst's son David came to see me and handed me a check for $50,000 for the acquisition of the *Annuciation* relief, which is still perhaps the finest single object we have in the museum. Soon Mr. Hearst added $100,000 for museum acquisitions.
>
> From then on [1946 or 1947] we received regularly, every year, a selection from his vast collection, the value of which amounted during the last six years [1946 through 1951 inclusive] to more than $2 million. The selection was made with an understanding between Mr. Hearst, his art representative, C. Rounds [C. C. Rounds or Charlie Rounds], and myself in such a way that the objects fitted into the scheme of the museum. No cash for purchases was provided after the first years since Mr. Hearst explained that his income prevented him from doing so.

Valentiner's biographer, Margaret Sterne, moved on to excerpts from a diary kept by Valentiner in the late forties; some of its passages contradict what he said a few years later in a more retrospective, memoiristic format, parts of which have just been quoted. At any rate, Dr. Sterne presents the following from 1947, a year that seems conflated with 1946 either in Valentiner's memory or in her presentation of the man's output:

> The next entry in Valentiner's diary is for May 26, 1947, when Valentiner described an exciting day at the museum. Hundreds of antagonists of modern art inside and outside the building were protesting Valentiner's first major exhibition of California art. Disgruntled painters had placed their rejected paintings on the museum steps, distributed pamphlets in the galleries accusing the museum staff of communism and subversive activities, and made speeches everywhere denouncing the exhibition. The only fear aroused in the staff, however, was that William Randolph Hearst would hear that the museum was supporting modern art and would stop contributing funds for the acquisition of old masters.
>
> But on the morning of May 26 [1947] Valentiner received a telephone call from Mr. Hearst's lawyer in San Simeon telling him that he would soon receive a letter informing him that the museum would be presented with Marion Davies' collection of nineteen works of French

> and English eighteenth-century painters, valued at $800,000, the sum which Hearst had paid for the collection. Now, the lawyer wrote, he would give Valentiner $850,000 to buy this collection for the museum. Valentiner was overjoyed; he had asked Hearst for $50,000 about three weeks earlier, when he heard rumors that the Davies collection might be sold. The extra money was to be used for the installation of the paintings and the furnishing of a new room for the collection.

Contradictions and the prospects of still more shell games aside, the paintings in question had once hung in the Beach House—the "really wonderful collection of pictures" that Alice Head described in her memoir of 1939 but that few paid attention to, as Ilka Chase claimed in 1942.

Not all nineteen paintings are at LACMA today. One that's still there is Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of Arthur Atherley, acquired by Hearst and Marion from the London branch of Duveen Brothers in 1928 and mentioned in *The Times We Had*. It's a work that points up better than anything at LACMA or among the myriad things at San Simeon and Wyntoon the inseparability of Hearst and Marion as collectors, to say nothing of their inseparability as a devoted couple, bound together in what was tantamount to a common-law marriage through most of the years covered in this book about them that's now ending.

The message quoted below is from earlier in the forties, from 1941, a year that found Hearst mostly disposing of paintings and art objects rather than acquiring them—and rather than giving them to museums. He couldn't afford to be as generous on the Depression side of World War II. And because he couldn't, neither could Marion, to all intents and purposes. "Cannot sell the Lawrence [the Arthur Atherley portrait]," she had wired a friend in April 1941 who'd inquired hopefully, knowing that Hearst and Marion were selling certain items on a highly selective basis. "It is too precious to W. R. & me," she had

further said. “Have other paintings of equal value. Let me know if party is interested.”

Marion didn’t sign off with her trademark “Millions of thanks.” But she did say “Love” to her friend who’d asked about the painting.

We’re the ones who should be offering millions of thanks. For historically Hearst and Marion have long been imparting love to all of us who look back over the decades. They’ve been enriching us not through a building in Santa Monica that’s been gone for more than half a century now but through the written word, above all—through telegrams and other records that have stood the test of time, rare documents that warrant our preserving and savoring them for years to come.