10
Warner Brothers

Over the hills to Burbank. Gary Cooper raises his voice. Rehearsals at San Simeon. Purgatory in furs: the Warner Brothers lot. A fast one on Jack and Harry [Warner]. Marion retires. Some reflections on success.

MD: [W. R. wanted me to win an Academy Award.] You bet your life he did. [He started the whole darn Academy thing.] When there was a party at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, he suggested it to Louis B. Mayer. But I missed out—by a mile—or twenty miles. I never won one. I thought I would cancel my membership. I used to say it was a plot.

TC: W.R. wrote about the founding of AMPAS in 1927 in one of his "In the News" columns in 1940, though almost cryptically so. See *Hearst and Marion: The Santa Monica Connection*, pp. 317-318.

MD: If W.R. thought an Academy Award was for my benefit, it certainly was a lost cause. There were so many better actresses, and I never did anything outstanding.

I guess he had hopes that I might. He thought I should have won an Oscar for *Peg o' My Heart* [1933], but I thought it was a corny story to begin with, and a very inferior performance by the star.

I thought the Academy Awards were designed to create an incentive, but they were bound to create jealousy. You would go to the show and think you were going to win and somebody else did. I've forgotten who did that year [in 1934, saluting films of 1933]. I didn't. But I got a nickname, Daisy. Connie Talmadge was one of my best friends, and she thought it up.

PP/KSM: *Daisy Dell was the name of the character Marion played in the* The Floradora Girl *[1930]. Speaking of flowers,* Morning Glory *was the film that won Katherine Hepburn an Oscar that year (1933).*

TC: With the awards for 1933 having been given early in 1934, it was not quite a year later—January 12, 1935—that Marion wired Miss Hepburn from San Simeon, care of the RKO Studio in Culver City: "I have never had the pleasure of meeting you but I am putting all formality aside. I have just seen *The Little Minister* and I think you are gorgeous in it. My congratulations to a great artist. Could you come up here to the ranch sometime? We would love to see you. Best wishes." (G&RH)

MD: I stayed a member [of the Academy] through the years, but I never went to any more of the shows [the awards ceremonies after 1934], after *Peg o' My Heart.*

TC: In honor of *Gone with the Wind,* W.R. and Marion made a brief trip from San Simeon to Los Angeles in the winter of 1940 to attend the 1939 Academy Awards, held at the Ambassador Hotel. *Hearst and Marion: The Santa Monica Connection,* p. 315.

MD: W.R. thought that was my best film [*Peg o' My Heart*], and it did make a lot of money, if that means success. *Little Old New York* [1923] and *Operator 13* [1934] made money, too, but they [MGM] used the [block] booking system, and you could have all the detectives in the world and you'd never know where the money was going. There was no way to check up.

PP/KSM: *Studio reports on twenty of Marion's films made between 1925 and 1934 [at MGM] showed costs of $14,401,000 and a net loss of $823,000. See the table compiled on page 179 [the facing page in the 1975 edition].*

TC: In the summer of 1935, while W.R. and Marion were staying at Wyntoon, he and Jack Warner, Ed Hatrick, and others exchanged detailed messages about the prospect of remaking *Little Old New York* as a talking picture, with Marion playing the same lead as before. The idea was soon abandoned.

MD: Ilka Chase was in *The Floradora Girl* [MGM 1930]. She did a scathing book about Mr. Hearst, about the swimming pool and her mother.

TC: The book was *Past Imperfect* (New York 1942), whose pp. 109-110, pertaining to the Beach House, are quoted in *Hearst and Marion,* pp. 98-99.

The part about W.R. and the swimming pool at San Simeon appears on p. 119 in *Past Imperfect*: "It may have been his reputation working on my imagination, but he scared me to death, especially in the swimming pool, where he looked like an octopus. One day he dived in and came up quite near me, and the sight of his long head with the white hair plastered down over his brow by the water, and his strange light eyes gleaming on a level with my own, sent me thrashing to the far end of the pool."

MD: The most amazing thing was that I got the part for her [for Ilka Chase in *The Floradora Girl*]. I looked at twenty-two tests for that part. It was the second lead [the part of Fanny, to Marion's Daisy Dell].

She came up to me outside the projection room one day [in 1929 at MGM] and said she was Ilka Chase and that she was dying to get into pictures. She asked me if I'd seen her test. She said, "I'd give anything in the world, and I can do it . . ." I went back in and said I wanted Ilka Chase. How gullible I was.

TC: IMDb credits Miss Chase with ten film roles before *The Floradora Girl,* all of them dating from 1929 and 1930.

MD: We went to San Simeon to rehearse, and she asked if she could bring along her mother. I said, "Certainly." There were forty or fifty guests: actors, circus performers, stunt people, and political and society people from Newport [Rhode Island], New York and Washington.

At a party I didn't seat her mother on the right of W.R., because her mother was merely an editor at *Vanity Fair,* and it would have been very poor form on my part. There were more important people at the party.

TC: Ilka Chase was the editor of another Conde Nast magazine, *Vogue,* not *Vanity Fair.* As for Hearst's equivalent of *Vogue*, "The *Vogue* folk laughingly refer to their rival as "*Harpies Bazaar.*" *Past Imperfect,* p. 112.

MD: She then wrote a book about why I didn't put her mother next to Mr. Hearst. She didn't really say anything about me. She wrote about the swimming pool. She said Mr. Hearst goosed her in the

swimming pool. [Miss Chase said no such thing.] But he was not that type. Besides, when there were loads of people swimming, W.R. hardly ever went in.

Well, I'd rather pretend I never knew her. I hate to be snobbish, but if I ever saw her, I'd look over her head.

TC: Miss Chase was sporadically active in motion pictures through the rest of the 1930s and also in the 1940s. By the 1950s she was concentrating on TV work, with her last appearance dating from 1972. (IMDb)

[Sidebar, p. 179 in *The Times We Had*: "Results of Marion Davies's MGM Pictures Based on Studio Operating Reports"]

MD: Bing Crosby was a very fine man to work with. He was always in a very happy mood and he never paid any attention to anybody—he just paid attention to his work.

What amazed me was that when he started to sing before the orchestra, he could sing perfectly fine with a pipe or a cigarette in his mouth. With those enormous notes coming out. It didn't bother his throat a bit.

I said to him one day, "How can you do that when you're smoking?"

"It gives me that sort of husky quality."

He was very cute and very sweet, and he was crazy about his wife Dixie [married from 1930 to 1952]. And she was a darling.

Every time he'd be doing a scene, his eyes would sort of . . . He had big blue eyes, and you knew his mind was way off. I knew where it was. He was wondering where Dixie was and what she was doing. He'd be very serious on the sets. He'd stay by himself and read a newspaper, and then he'd go to the phone and call up Dixie.

She used to tease him, and he'd tell me, "I love Dixie. She teases me so I can't think of anything in the love scenes."

So I said, "Well, in our love scenes, let's make it real. You pretend I'm Dixie."

"Oh, no. You're not nearly as pretty."

"I understand that—but just close your eyes."

We were making *Going Hollywood* [at MGM in 1933] and Bing had been making pictures at Paramount, and we had borrowed him. His first day, I stayed off the set, which is the polite thing to do, because when you're at a new studio, I know how nervous you can be, and he didn't know me.

But there was a certain star [Joan Crawford] who used to play Bing's records all the time on her set, and when she heard that he was working, she came over and sat under the camera.

Poor Bing couldn't do his scene, and they finally had to ask her to leave the set. Now how could you do a scene with somebody staring at you with big owl eyes?

TC: In contrast to the past several paragraphs, Samantha Barbas said the following about *Going Hollywood* in her biography of Louella Parsons: "Though it was Crosby who made the film successful, Hearst disliked Crosby, who was known around Hollywood to be a drinker and womanizer." *The First Lady of Hollywood,* p. 171, based in part on John Kobal, *People Will Talk* (New York 1985), p. 639.

MD: I'll tell you why I liked Gary Cooper. I would say that in American history he could be a [Jim] Bowie or a [Thomas] Jefferson. He was a wonderful man and very understanding, but in a way that you didn't know half the time.

You'd think that here's a very tall person who looks like Uncle Sam and you'd wonder: Is he? You'd find out he was.

When you were working with him, he was very considerate. He would always back you up. Gary would give the star the benefit of the scene. Only a real man does that, and Bing did that, too. Other actors don't.

When we used to do scenes, the director would say, "I cannot hear your voice—kindly talk louder." So either my voice would have to get low, or Gary's would have to get a little bit higher. And Gary refused to change, and he was right. How could he change his voice?

One day—I got mad—I said to the director, "Look, that's your job, to get us on a level. I can't talk to my toes, and certainly if Mr. Cooper talks higher, they'll say he's a pansy."

Gary looked so shocked at me. "What did you-all say?" he said.

I said, "Now don't disturb us while we're working." And they [got his voice all right, and] every time Boley would say to Gary, "Would you mind doing that over again in a different way?" he'd do it just the same way.

PP/KSM: *Richard Boleslavky [Boleslawski] was directing* Operator 13, *a Civil War story [MGM 1934].*

MD: He [Gary Cooper] was smart, because an actor knows more than the director. If the director knew more, he'd be an actor and get more money. And Gary had been engaged for his style, anyway, so why should he change it?

There are so many directors who want to change your whole system of doing work, your personality. They want you to change to something which is not yourself but might be somebody else. So Gary always stayed his same character. He'd say, "Yup," and he'd still go the same way.

I'd do anything. If they said my voice was too high, I'd go lower. I had no character. I should have said, "Look—this is me. If you don't like it, you know what you can do." And one time they did. We were on the back lot, making scenes, and they let two lions loose out there. That's what they thought of me.

I used to take my cook out there. We'd all be working, maybe a hundred of us, and we'd have luncheon in a big tent. Beans and potato salad and hot tamales and beer. I'd be watching Gary, and he would eat more than anybody in the whole cast. He'd have the beans, and God knows he loved hot peppers, and then after luncheon he'd just throw himself down on the grass and rest until he was called. Then he'd get right up and go, and he'd look skinnier than anybody else.

Now I would pack in the food, every bit of it, and I'd feel my costume getting tight. When they called me on the set, I'd say "Just a minute till I let me costume out."

MD: Clark Gable was very fine to work with, and he didn't upstage. You get some leading men who want to steal the whole scene, but those four—Bing, Gary, Clark and Bob Montgomery—were fine to work with. I hope the rest of the hundred thousand leading men I had won't be jealous [upon hearing this].

TC: Clark Gable played opposite Marion in *Cain and Mabel* (Warner Bros., 1936). Bob Montgomery played opposite her in *Ever Since Eve* (Warner Bros., 1937).

MD: Everyone knew I was scared of horses, and in this one scene they had a lot of horses on the set. I was in the bungalow [at MGM], and there was a long street, and I could see the stage about a block and a half off.

I was upstairs refreshing my makeup when I heard a noise, a clattering, and I looked out. I saw Raoul Walsh [the director of *Going Hollywood*] and Bing Crosby on two white horses. So I screamed down, "Lock the door!" It saved my life. They were feeling pretty high, and they were going to bring the horses right into my living room.

It would have been very funny, but I defeated them. I anticipated the punch line.

MD: *Marie Antoinette* [not made until 1938] was the straw that broke the camel's back at MGM [in 1934]. W.R. wanted me to do it, and I was going to try my best. I wasn't sure I could make the grade, but I read all the histories about Marie Antoinette and went through the whole routine, and I could visualize myself as Marie Antoinette with a big white wig and an upturned nose. We were both disappointed.

He had wanted me to play [Shakespeare's] Juliet, and I'd practiced that. Of course W.R. thought everything I did was wonderful. He said, "You're perfect for Juliet, because Juliet was a blonde, you know. She was not a brunette." But the studio said no. They said, "No. No. No. No Juliet for Marion—she's a comedienne."

PP/KSM: *Irving Thalberg produced, and his wife Norma Shearer, a brunette, played Juliet [in* Romeo and Juliet, *MGM 1936].*

MD: The same [had] happened with *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* [MGM 1934, starring Norma Shearer]. I couldn't be a sick, consumptive Elizabeth Browning, because they said, "Marion's too lively. She's got to do comedy."

I was frustrated at each end. W.R. was much more mad than I was. He said, "I don't want you to ever have anything more to do with the MGM studio." We went down the road—but fast.

PP/KSM: *More literally, it was over the hills to Burbank [effective January 1, 1935]. Marion's bungalow was also moved, in pieces, to the Warner Brothers studio [late in 1934].*

MD: I don't think Louis B. Mayer minded losing me so much. He did mind losing Mr. Hearst, if you know what I mean. Later he said to me, "We have lost our queen." What he meant was he had lost the power of the chess game—the visitors—and the press.

TC: The Hearst interests and Loew's-MGM remained connected, however, through *Hearst Metrotone News*, the newsreel they would jointly produce and distribute for many more years to come (renamed *News of the Day* in 1936).

MD: I went up to San Simeon and Jack Warner kept calling. He was really very kind. I don't think I ever worked for anybody nicer, except Mr. Mayer. But I felt shy. I wouldn't go to the studio [Warner Bros. in Burbank]. When he called, I'd say no. "I'm sorry. I'll go when you present the script and we okay it." I said, "Let's do our rehearsing up here."

PP/KSM: *[Jack Warner] wanted to start production on* Page Miss Glory*, in 1935.*

MD: Jack said, "Oh, no. Now look, have a heart."

I said, "I'm terribly shy. Let's do it all here, and when it's ready, I'll come in the back door."

"You're homesick for MGM."

I said, "It isn't that. It's just that I've got stage fright." And I really did.

We had the costumes all arranged up at San Simeon. Then I finally came down for my first test. I tried to crawl in the back way, but I couldn't. He had locked the back entrance, and I had to come in the front way.

Nobody molested me. I was perfectly all right. That was the trouble; they gave me the air. I had gone too far. I got the freeze-out. Nobody would talk to me. And I thought they'd like me for staying away, but they didn't like that at all. They thought I was a snob. When we started production [on *Page Miss Glory*], it seemed awfully cold. I wasn't used to that. I was used to warmth.

I was only frightened because I thought I was really a lousy actress and that they were all good. I don't think they knew what stage fright was. I would sit in my dressing room by myself.

TC: These transitional episodes of the late part of 1934 and first part of 1935 are well documented in *Building for Hearst and Morgan*, p. 148 *ff.*, and in *Hearst and Marion,* pp. 165-166.

MD: When you go to a new studio, you feel at a disadvantage. They're not wise to your little tricks, the little pranks you play. They think you're so nice, at least for a while. Then they find out that you're really an imp, that you try everything under the sun to wreck everything as far as it possibly can be wrecked.

I was only at Warner's studio for two years [January 1935 through May 1937]. I was supposed to stay longer, but I felt that I had worked long enough, and I wanted some time off for myself. Although I was

only making two pictures a year, I couldn't enjoy myself. Even though I could travel for about three months a year, when I knew I had to get back to the studio by a certain date and that I couldn't eat too much or get sunburned or freckled, I couldn't really have a good time.

There was always a sign: NO FOOD ALLOWED ON THE SET—AND NO DRINKS. But I used to give the boys on the set beer and sandwiches. And Clark [Gable] used to buy them ice cream cones all the time [during the filming of *Cain and Mabel* in 1936]. They worked hard, and we didn't stop at five o'clock, exactly. "But," somebody would say, "we've got to go." And I'd say, "Well, anybody who wants to stay on gets beer and sandwiches." A little coaxing; that was all.

Over at Warner Brothers, in the summertime, it was 148 degrees up in the flies [the fly gallery], where the electricians were, and it was 122 on the stage. Ice cream was quite efficacious, and Clark used to bring it every day.

TC: Marion never worked at Warner Bros. during the summer months. In 1935 she and W.R. spent most of those weeks at Wyntoon. In 1936 they spent the summer in New York and Europe. By the summer of 1937, she'd quit making films altogether. Nonetheless, there would have been plenty of warm spring days in 1935, 1936, and 1937 for her to base her memories on.

MD: The girls would faint on the set, even though they had those big airplane propellers with ice in front of them. They would faint like dead flies.

I had on a fur costume and had to do dances. They were taking bets on me. A lot of them lost, even the time I was up on the top with this Madame Pompadour number [*Hearts Divided*, 1936]. They had to put ice on my wrists and chain me to the rail. I was just on a shelf, and I'd look down and think, Uh-oh. But I was used to the heat, because I had been in the *[Ziegfeld] Follies [of 1916]* in the summertime with fur costumes. So it didn't bother me much, but I didn't dare look down. I kept looking up, and all I saw was the top of the stage. I was up there about an hour and a half; really, it was Purgatory.

TC: The *Follies* edition that Marion referred to ran for 112 performances, from June 12 to September 16, 1916—mostly during the summer.

MD: Then the music started, and I felt the lights going on me, and I hiccupped. I was roasting. I kept wondering, How long is this going to last?

Finally, it took ladders to get me down. The costume alone weighed about fifty-six pounds. And the assistant director had told them to keep their shirts on because I was on the set, but I said, "Take everything off—including your pants." And they did. I was wild because I knew how hot it was up there.

TC: Frank Borzage directed *Hearts Divided*. Both Lew Borzage (a brother of Frank's) and John Gates were assistant directors on the film. (IMDb)

MD: What made me finally decide to quit [in 1937] was something that happens to everybody. If you're a dramatic actress, you want to do comedy; and if you do comedy, you want to be a dramatic actress. I had big ideas for myself. I even wanted to do Shakespeare, even when I innately knew I couldn't do it. I thought I could do dramatics, but the other people didn't. And they were right.

Not that I was a comedienne, either. I just did stories with comedy in them. It was the story that counted, not the one doing the story. You're only as good as the story is written, and no better.

I also thought that if I ever wanted to go back to work again, I could always do so. But I never did want to go back.

I wanted to take life easy, and once you get used to the lazy way of living, you find out that you rather enjoy it. So I quit.

I did miss the studio for a while. When I had nothing else to do, I'd go back. It was postman's holiday; I'd go see how the other animals performed. We'd have a luncheon someplace, too. I got over that after a while.

TC: From 1937 and for the next fourteen years (until 1951), W.R. and Marion's whereabouts are closely known. For the first ten of those years—through the middle of 1947—they divided their time mainly between Wyntoon and San Simeon; they were seldom at the Beach House or elsewhere in Los Angeles. And thus the opportunities Marion would have had for revisiting Warner Bros. at any time after 1937 were few and far between.

MD: Of course, W.R. had wanted me to quit a long time before I did, so there would be plenty of time for travel. He didn't know what to do with himself. And there's nothing more interesting in the way of pleasure or occupation than having something to do.

When you're working, you keep thinking of taking a long vacation and forgetting the whole thing. When you make the change, you have to make up your mind not to go back to the rut. I liked to have a good time, so I never went back.

I'd go to San Simeon, then to Wyntoon, then back to Los Angeles [Santa Monica mainly], and keep going back and forth. We didn't go to Europe again [after 1937]. But we had the beach house, and we went to Chicago once or twice [on business], and I think we went to Florida one year. But I didn't care for it there. It had once been nice, but it wasn't anymore.

TC: The bracketed "after 1937" was erroneously added by Bobbs-Merrill. The last trip to Europe was actually in 1936. W.R. and Marion never went to Florida during the remaining years of his life. However, they did go to Mexico twice, in 1941 and in 1942.

MD: For a while I was trying to kid myself along that I didn't miss working. I could always go visit the studio [in Burbank] and say, "I feel sorry for you . . ." They had to get up early, go through scenes hundreds of times, and get so tired they couldn't eat, just flop into bed. My happiest days had been on the stage. I had had more fun on the stage than in the movies. Not fun, exactly, but the exhilaration and excitement and the music and the glamour. Of all the things I did, that's what I liked the most.

That was when I was most insignificant. And that was why I liked it the best. I had no responsibility. I just held up the backdrops.

But the publicity pushed me along. I won't say that I was successful, because I don't know whether I was successful or not. I don't think anybody actually knows. That's up to the box office. But according to Mr. [Louis B.] Mayer and Mr. [Jack] Warner, there were no complaints on that score.

The old saying is, "It pays to advertise." I suppose that's all right, but I used to feel I had too much. If the producers gain by it, then you can't say you are overpublicized. If I was overpublicized, it hurt only me. It didn't hurt the picture.

When I did decide to get out—I made up my mind just like that—they said, "But you have a contract here."

I said, "I'm sorry. The contract's under the name of Cosmopolitan [Productions], and you signed the papers for Cosmopolitan to be released, and I go with it." Oh, was Jack Warner mad. And so was Harry Warner. They said I'd pulled a fast one.

TC: Marion's retirement from films was a wholly separate, discrete act. Warner Bros. and Cosmopolitan Productions were still aligned through the remainder of 1937 and through all of 1938, although there were tensions at times between the two camps. The contract was not renewed for 1939, and W.R. quickly came to terms on a one-year contract with Twentieth Century-Fox instead—not for Marion's sake but for that of the non-Davies Cosmopolitan films that had always been produced separately from her films (such as *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* at Fox in 1939).

MD: But I just didn't want to work in pictures anymore. I'd been working awfully hard for quite a long time [for twenty years, since 1917]. At that time [1937] Mr. Hearst was about seventy-eight or so [he was seventy-four], and I felt he needed companionship. He was having some financial troubles at the time, too, and he was more upset than people realized.

I thought the least I could do for a man who had been so wonderful and great, one of the greatest men ever, was to be a companion to him.