Chapter 4

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## FROM HERO TO CELEBRITY
### The human pseudo-event

*"He's the greatest!"*

ANONYMOUS (BECOMING UNANIMOUS)

IN THE LAST HALF century we have misled ourselves, not only about how much novelty the world contains, but about men themselves, and how much greatness can be found among them. One of the oldest of man's visions was the flash of divinity in the great man. He seemed to appear for reasons men could not understand, and the secret of his greatness was God's secret. His generation thanked God for him as for the rain, for the Grand Canyon or the Matterhorn, or for being saved from wreck at sea.

Since the Graphic Revolution, however, much of our thinking about human greatness has changed. Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God's purpose in him; today we look for his press agent. Shakespeare, in the familiar lines, divided great men into three classes: those born great, those who achieved greatness, and those who had greatness thrust upon them. It never occurred to him to mention those who hired public relations experts and press secretaries to make themselves look great. Now it is hard even to remember the time when the "Hall of Fame" was only a metaphor, whose inhabitants were selected by the inscrutable processes of history instead of by an *ad hoc* committee appointed to select the best-known names from the media.

The root of our problem, the social source of these exaggerated expectations, is in our novel power to make men famous. Of course, there never was a time when "fame" was precisely the same thing as "greatness." But, until very recently, famous men and great men were pretty nearly the same group. "Fame," wrote Milton, "is the spur the clear spirit doth raise. . . . Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil." A man's name was not apt to become a household word unless he exemplified greatness in some way or other. He might be a Napoleon, great in power, a J. P. Morgan, great in wealth, a St. Francis, great in virtue, or a Bluebeard, great in evil. To become known to a whole



people a man usually had to be something of a hero: as the dictionary tells us, a man "admired for his courage, nobility, or exploits." The war hero was the prototype, because the battle tested character and offered a stage for daring deeds.

Before the Graphic Revolution, the slow, the "natural," way of becoming well known was the usual way. Of course, there were a few men like the Pharaohs and Augustus and the Shah Jahan, who built monuments in their own day to advertise themselves to posterity. But a monument to command the admiration of a whole people was not quickly built. Thus great men, like famous men, came into a nation's consciousness only slowly. The processes by which their fame was made were as mysterious as those by which God ruled the generations. The past became the natural habitat of great men. The universal lament of aging men in all epochs, then, is that greatness has become obsolete.

So it has been commonly believed, in the words of Genesis, that "there were giants in the earth in those days"—in the days before the Flood. Each successive age has believed that heroes – great men – dwelt mostly before its own time. Thomas Carlyle, in his classic *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), lamented that Napoleon was "our last great man!" Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., at the age of 40, has noted with alarm in our day (1958) that while "great men seemed to dominate our lives and shape our destiny" when he was young, "Today no one bestrides our narrow world like a colossus; we have no giants. . . ." This traditional belief in the decline of greatness has expressed the simple social fact that greatness has been equated with fame, and fame could not be made overnight.

Within the last century, and especially since about 1900, we seem to have discovered the processes by which fame is manufactured. Now, at least in the United States, a man's name can become a household word overnight. The Graphic Revolution suddenly gave us, among other things, the means of fabricating well-knownness. Discovering that we (the television watchers, the movie goers, radio listeners, and newspaper and magazine readers) and our servants (the television, movie, and radio producers, newspaper and magazine editors, and ad writers) can so quickly and so effectively give a man "fame," we have willingly been misled into believing that fame – well-knownness – is still a hallmark of greatness. Our power to fill our minds with more and more "big names" has increased our demand for Big Names and our willingness to confuse the Big Name with the Big Man. Again mistaking our powers for our necessities, we have filled our world with artificial fame.

Of course we do not like to believe that our admiration is focused on a largely synthetic product. Having manufactured our celebrities, having willy-nilly made them our cynosures – the guiding stars of our interest – we are tempted to believe that they are not synthetic at all, that they are somehow still God-made heroes who now abound with a marvelous modern prodigality.

The folklore of Great Men survives. We still believe, with Sydney Smith, who wrote in the early nineteenth century, that "Great men hallow a whole people, and lift up all who live in their time." We still agree with Carlyle that "No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men. . . . Does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to that which is really above him?" We still are told from the pulpit, from Congress, from television screen and editorial page, that the lives of great men "all remind us, we can make our lives sublime." Even in our twentieth-century age of doubt, when morality itself has been in

ill repute, we have desperately held on to our belief in human greatness. For human models are more vivid and more persuasive than explicit moral commands. Cynics and intellectuals, too, are quicker to doubt moral theories than to question the greatness of their heroes. Agnostics and atheists may deny God, but they are slow to deny divinity to the great agnostics and atheists.

While the folklore of hero-worship, the zestful search for heroes, and the pleasure in reverence for heroes remain, the heroes themselves dissolve. The household names, the famous men, who populate our consciousness are with few exceptions not heroes at all, but an artificial new product – a product of the Graphic Revolution in response to our exaggerated expectations. The more readily we make them and the more numerous they become, the less are they worthy of our admiration. We can fabricate fame, we can at will (though usually at considerable expense) make a man or woman well known; but we cannot make him great. We can make a celebrity, but we can never make a hero. In a now-almost-forgotten sense, all heroes are self-made.

Celebrity-worship and hero-worship should not be confused. Yet we confuse them every day, and by doing so we come dangerously close to depriving ourselves of all real models. We lose sight of the men and women who do not simply seem great because they are famous but who are famous because they are great. We come closer and closer to degrading all fame into notoriety.

In the last half century the old heroic human mold has been broken. A new mold has been made. We have actually demanded that this mold be made, so that marketable human models – modern "heroes" – could be mass-produced, to satisfy the market, and without any hitches. The qualities which now commonly make a man or woman into a "nationally advertised" brand are in fact a new category of human emptiness. Our new mold is shaped not of the stuff of our familiar morality, nor even of the old familiar reality. How has this happened?

## I

THE TRADITIONAL heroic type included figures as diverse as Moses, Ulysses, Aeneas, Jesus, Caesar, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Shakespeare, Washington, Napoleon, and Lincoln. For our purposes it is sufficient to define a hero as a human figure – real or imaginary or both – who has shown greatness in some achievement. He is a man or woman of great deeds.

Of course, many such figures remain. But if we took a census of the names which populate the national consciousness – of all those who mysteriously dwell at the same time in the minds of all, or nearly all Americans – we would now find the truly heroic figures in the old-fashioned mold to be a smaller proportion than ever before. There are many reasons for this.

In the first place, of course, our democratic beliefs and our new scientific insights into human behaviour have nibbled away at the heroes we have inherited from the past. Belief in the power of the common people to govern themselves, which has brought with it a passion for human equality, has carried a distrust, or at least a suspicion of individual heroic greatness. A democratic people are understandably wary of finding too much virtue in their leaders, or of attributing too much of their success to their leaders. In the twentieth century the rise of Mussoliniism, Hitlerism, Stalinism, and of totalitarianism in general, has dramatized the perils of any people's credulity in the power of the Great Leader. We have even come erroneously to believe that because tyranny in our time has flourished in the name of the Duce, the Führer, the omniscient, all-virtuous Commissar, or the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, democracy must therefore survive without Great Leaders.



Yet, long before Hitler or Stalin, the cult of the individual hero carried with it contempt for democracy. Hero-worship, from Plato to Carlyle, was often a dogma of anti-democracy. Aristocracy, even in the mild and decadent form in which it survives in Great Britain today, is naturally more favorable to belief in heroes. If one is accustomed to a Royal Family, a Queen, and a House of Lords, one is less apt to feel himself debased by bending the knee before any embodiment of human greatness. Most forms of government depend on a belief in a divine spark possessed by a favored few; but American democracy is embarrassed in the charismatic presence. We fear the man on horseback, the demigod, or the dictator. And if we have had fewer Great Men than have other peoples, it is perhaps because we have wanted, or would allow ourselves to have, fewer. Our most admired national heroes – Franklin, Washington, and Lincoln – are generally supposed to possess the "common touch." We revere them, not because they possess charisma, divine favor, a grace or talent granted them by God, but because they embody popular virtues. We admire them, not because they reveal God, but because they reveal and elevate ourselves.

While these democratic ideas have been arising, and while popular government has flourished in the United States, the growth of the social sciences has given us additional reasons to be sophisticated about the hero and to doubt his essential greatness. We now look on the hero as a common phenomenon of all societies. We learn, as Lord Raglan, a recent president of the Royal Anthropological Institute, pointed out in *The Hero* (1936), that "tradition is never historical." Having examined a number of well-known heroes of tradition, he concludes that "there is no justification for believing that any of these heroes were real persons, or that any of the stories of their exploits had any historical foundation. . . . these heroes, if they were genuinely heroes of tradition, were originally not men but gods . . . the stories were accounts not of fact but of ritual – that is, myths." Or we learn from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) that all heroes – Oriental and Occidental, modern, ancient, and primitive – are the multiform expression of "truths disguised for us under the figures of religion and mythology." Following Freud, Campbell explains all heroes as embodiments of a great "monomyth." There are always the stages of (1) separation or departure, (2) trials and victories of initiation, and finally, (3) return and re-integration with society. Nowadays it matters little whether we see the hero exemplifying a universal falsehood or a universal truth. In either case we now stand outside ourselves. We see greatness as an illusion; or, if it does exist, we suspect we know its secret. We look with knowing disillusionment on our admiration for historical figures who used to embody greatness.

Just as the Bible is now widely viewed in enlightened churches and synagogues as a composite document of outmoded folk beliefs, which can nevertheless be appreciated for its "spiritual inspiration" and "literary value" – so with the folk hero. He is no longer naively seen as our champion. We have become self-conscious about our

admiration for all models of human greatness. We know that somehow they were not what they seem. They simply illustrate the laws of social illusion.

The rise of "scientific" critical history and its handmaid, critical biography, has had the same effect. In Japan, by contrast, the divine virtue of the Emperors has been preserved by declaring them off-limits for the critical biographer. Even the Meiji Emperor – the "Enlightened" Emperor, founder of modern Japan, who kept detailed journals and left materials to delight a Western biographer – remains unportrayed in an accurate critical account. In the United States until the twentieth century it was usual for biographies of public figures to be written by their admirers. These works were commonly literary memorials, tokens of friendship, of family devotion, or of political piety. This was true even of the better biographies. It was Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., who wrote the biography of Alexander Hamilton, Albert J. Beveridge who wrote the life of John Marshall, Douglas Southall Freeman who enshrined Robert E. Lee, and Carl Sandburg who wrote a monument to Lincoln. This has ceased to be the rule. Nor is this due only to the new schools of debunking biography (represented by Van Wyck Brooks' *Mark Twain* (1920) and *Henry James* (1925), W. E. Woodward's *George Washington* (1926) and *General Grant* (1928)) which grew in the jaundiced 'twenties. The appearance of American history as a recognized learned specialty in the early twentieth century has produced a new flood of biographical works which are only rarely inspired by personal admiration. Instead they are often merely professional exercises; scholars ply their tools and the chips fall where they may. We have thus learned a great deal more about our national heroes than earlier generations cared to know.

Meanwhile, the influence of Karl Marx, the rise of economic determinism, a growing knowledge of economic and social history, and an increased emphasis on social forces have made the individual leader seem less crucial. The Pilgrim Fathers, we now are told, were simply representatives of the restless, upheaving middle classes; their ideas expressed the rising "Protestant Ethic," which was the true prophet of modern capitalism. The Founding Fathers of the Constitution, Charles A. Beard and others have pointed out, were little more than spokesmen of certain property interests. Andrew Jackson became only one of many possible expressions of a rising West. The Frontier itself became the hero instead of the men. "Isms," "forces," and "classes" have spelled the death of the hero in our historical literature.

Under the hot glare of psychology and sociology the heroes' heroic qualities have been dissolved into a blur of environmental influences and internal maladjustments. For example, Charles Sumner (1811–1874), the aggressive abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts, who was beaten over the head with a cane by Representative Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina, had long been a hero of the abolitionists, a martyr for the Northern cause. From the excellent scholarly biography by David Donald in 1960, Sumner emerges with barely a shred of nobility. He becomes a refugee from an unhappy youth. His ambition now seems to have stemmed from his early insecurity as the son of an illegitimate father, a half-outcast from Cambridge society. His principles in his later years (and his refusal to sit in the Senate for many months after his beating) no longer express a true Crusader's passion. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once eulogized Sumner:

> So when a great man dies,
> For years beyond our ken,



> The light he leaves behind him lies
> Upon the paths of men.

But now, in David Donald's technical phrase, Sumner's conduct in his late years becomes a "post-traumatic syndrome."

In these middle decades of the twentieth century the hero has almost disappeared from our fiction as well. The central figure in any serious book is more likely to be a victim. In the plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, in the novels of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John O'Hara, the leading roles are played by men who suffer from circumstances. Even the novelist's imagination is now staggered by the effort to conjure up human greatness.

Today every American, child or adult, encounters a vastly larger number of names, faces, and voices than at any earlier period or in any other country. Newspapers, magazines, second-class mail, books, radio, television, telephone, phonograph records – these and other vehicles confront us with thousands of names, people, or fragments of people. In our always more overpopulated consciousness, the hero every year becomes less significant. Not only does the newspaper or magazine reader or television watcher see the face and hear the voice of his President and the President's wife and family; he also sees the faces and hears the voices of his cabinet members, undersecretaries, Senators, Congressmen, and of their wives and children as well. Improvements in public education, with the always increasing emphasis on recent events, dilute the consciousness. The titanic figure is now only one of thousands. This is ever more true as we secure a smaller proportion of our information from books. The hero, like the spontaneous event, gets lost in the congested traffic of pseudo-events.

## II

THE HEROES of the past, then, are dissolved before our eyes or buried from our view. Except perhaps in wartime, we find it hard to produce new heroes to replace the old.

We have made peculiar difficulties for ourselves by our fantastic rate of progress in science, technology, and the social sciences. The great deeds of our time are now accomplished on *unintelligible frontiers*. When heroism appeared as it once did mostly on the battlefield or in personal combat, everybody could understand the heroic act. The claim of the martyr or the Bluebeard to our admiration or horror was easy enough to grasp. When the dramatic accomplishment was an incandescent lamp, a steam engine, a telegraph, or an automobile, everybody could understand what the great man had accomplished. This is no longer true. The heroic thrusts now occur in the laboratory, among cyclotrons and betatrons, whose very names are popular symbols of scientific mystery. Even the most dramatic, best-publicized adventures into space are on the edges of our comprehension. There are still, of course, rare exceptions – a Dr. Albert Schweitzer or a Dr. Tom Dooley – whose heroism is intelligible. But these only illustrate that intelligible heroism now occurs almost exclusively on the field of sainthood or martyrdom. There no progress has been made for millennia. In the great areas of human progress, in science, technology, and the social sciences, our brave twentieth-century innovators work in the twilight just

beyond our understanding. This has obviously always been true to some extent; the work of profound thinkers has seldom been more than half-intelligible to the lay public. But never so much as today.

Despite the best efforts of ingenious and conscientious science reporters (now a profession all their own) our inventors and discoverers remain in the penumbra. With every decade popular education falls farther behind technology. Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was popularized "for ladies and gentlemen" who glimpsed the crude gist of his ideas. But how many "popular" lecturers – even so crudely – have explained Einstein's theory of relativity? Nowadays our interest lies primarily in the mystery of the new findings. Fantastic possibilities engage our imagination without taxing our understanding. We acclaim the flights of Yuri Gagarin and Alan Shepard without quite grasping what they mean.

Not only in science are the frontiers less intelligible. Perhaps most worshipers in Florence could grasp the beauty of a painting by Cimabue or Giotto. How many New Yorkers today can understand a Jackson Pollock or a Rothko?

Our idolized writers are esoteric. How many can find their way in Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake?* Our most honored literati are only half-intelligible to nearly all the educated community. How many understand a T. S. Eliot, a William Faulkner, a St. John Perse, a Quasimodo? Our great artists battle on a landscape we cannot chart, with weapons we do not comprehend, against adversaries we find unreal. How can we make them our heroes?

As collaborative work increases in science, literature, and social sciences, we find it ever harder to isolate the individual hero for our admiration. The first nuclear chain reaction (which made the atom bomb and atomic power possible) was the product of a huge organization dispersed over the country. Who was the hero of the enterprise? Einstein, without whose theoretical boldness it would not have been conceivable? Or General Grove? Or Enrico Fermi? The social scientists' research enterprises have also become projects. *An American Dilemma*, the monumental study of the Negro and American democracy that was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, was the combined product of dozens of individual and collaborative studies. Gunnar Myrdal, director of the project and principal author of the book, played much the same role that the chairman of the board of directors does in a large corporation. The written works which reach the largest number of people in the United States today – advertisements and political speeches – are generally assumed to be collaborative work. The candidate making an eloquent campaign speech is admired for his administrative ingenuity in collecting a good team of speech writers. We cannot read books by our public figures, even their autobiographies and most private memoirs, without being haunted by their ghost writers.

In the United States we have, in a word, witnessed the decline of the "folk" and the rise of the "mass." The usually illiterate folk, while unself-conscious, was creative in its own special ways. Its characteristic products were the spoken word, the gesture, the song: folklore, folk dance, folk song. The folk expressed itself. Its products are still gathered by scholars, antiquarians, and patriots; it was a voice. But the mass, in our world of mass media and mass circulation, is the target and not the arrow. It is the ear and not the voice. The mass is what others aim to reach – by print, photograph, image, and sound. While the folk created heroes, the mass can only look and listen for them. It is waiting to be shown and to be told. Our society, to which the Soviet notion of



"the masses" is so irrelevant, still is governed by our own idea of the mass. The folk had a universe of its own creation, its own world of giants and dwarfs, magicians and witches. The mass lives in the very different fantasy world of pseudo-events. The words and images which reach the mass disenchant big names in the very process of conjuring them up.

## III

Our age has produced a new kind of eminence. This is as characteristic of our culture and our century as was the divinity of Greek gods in the sixth century B.C. or the chivalry of knights and courtly lovers in the middle ages. It has not yet driven heroism, sainthood, or martyrdom completely out of our consciousness. But with every decade it overshadows them more. All older forms of greatness now survive only in the shadow of this new form. This new kind of eminence is "celebrity."

The word "celebrity" (from the Latin *celebritas* for "multitude" or "fame" and *celeber* meaning "frequented," "populous," or "famous") originally meant not a person but a condition – as the Oxford English Dictionary says, "the condition of being much talked about; famousness, notoriety." In this sense its use dates from at least the early seventeenth century. Even then it had a weaker meaning than "fame" or "renown." Matthew Arnold, for example, remarked in the nineteenth century that while the philosopher Spinoza's followers had "celebrity," Spinoza himself had "fame."

For us, however, "celebrity" means primarily a person – "a person of celebrity." This usage of the word significantly dates from the early years of the Graphic Revolution, the first example being about 1850. Emerson spoke of "the celebrities of wealth and fashion" (1848). Now American dictionaries define a celebrity as "a famous or well-publicized person."

The celebrity in the distinctive modern sense could not have existed in any earlier age, or in America before the Graphic Revolution. *The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.*

His qualities – or rather his lack of qualities – illustrate our peculiar problems. He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness. He is morally neutral. The product of no conspiracy, of no group promoting vice or emptiness, he is made by honest, industrious men of high professional ethics doing their job, "informing" and educating us. He is made by all of us who willingly read about him, who like to see him on television, who buy recordings of his voice, and talk about him to our friends. His relation to morality and even to reality is highly ambiguous. He is like the woman *in* an Elinor Glyn novel who describes another by saying, "She is like a figure in an Elinor Glyn novel."

The massive *Celebrity Register* (1959), compiled by Earl Blackwell and Cleveland Amory, now gives us a well-documented definition of the word, illustrated by over 2,200 biographies. "We think we have a better yardstick than the *Social Register*, or *Who's Who*, or any such book," they explain. "Our point is that it is impossible to be accurate in listing a man's social standing – even if anyone cared; and it's impossible to list accurately the success or value of men; but you *can* judge a man as a celebrity – all

you have to do is weigh his press clippings." The *Celebrity Register*'s alphabetical order shows Mortimer Adler followed by Polly Adler, the Dalai Lama listed beside TV comedienne Dagmar, Dwight Eisenhower preceding Anita Ekberg, ex-President Herbert Hoover following ex-torch singer Libby Holman, Pope John XXIII coming after Mr. John the hat designer, and Bertrand Russell followed by Jane Russell. They are all celebrities. The well-knownness which they have in common overshadows everything else.

The advertising world has proved the market appeal of celebrities. In trade jargon celebrities are "big names." Endorsement advertising not only uses celebrities; it helps make them. Anything that makes a well-known name still better known automatically raises its status as a celebrity. The old practice, well established before the nineteenth century, of declaring the prestige of a product by the phrase "By Appointment to His Majesty" was, of course, a kind of use of the testimonial endorsement. But the King was in fact a great person, one of illustrious lineage and with impressive actual and symbolic powers. The King was not a venal endorser, and he was likely to use only superior products. He was not a mere celebrity. For the test of celebrity is nothing more than well-knownness.

Studies of biographies in popular magazines suggest that editors, and supposedly also readers, of such magazines not long ago shifted their attention away from the old-fashioned hero. From the person known for some serious achievement, they have turned their biographical interests to the new-fashioned celebrity. Of the subjects of biographical articles appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* and the now-defunct *Collier's* in five sample years between 1901 and 1914, 74 per cent came from politics, business, and the professions. But after about 1922 well over half of them came from the world of entertainment. Even among the entertainers an ever decreasing proportion has come from the serious arts – literature, fine arts, music, dance, and theater. An ever increasing proportion (in recent years nearly all) comes from the fields of light entertainment, sports, and the night club circuit. In the earlier period, say before World War I, the larger group included figures like the President of the United States, a Senator, a State Governor, the Secretary of the Treasury, the banker J. P. Morgan, the railroad magnate James J. Hill, a pioneer in aviation, the inventor of the torpedo, a Negro educator, an immigrant scientist, an opera singer, a famous poet, and a popular fiction writer. By the 1940's the larger group included figures like the boxer Jack Johnson, Clark Gable, Bobby Jones, the movie actresses Brenda Joyce and Brenda Marshall, William Powell, the woman matador Conchita Cintron, the night club entertainer Adelaide Moffett, and the gorilla Toto. Some analysts say the shift is primarily the sign of a new focus of popular attention away from production and toward consumption. But this is oversubtle.

A simpler explanation is that the machinery of information has brought into being a new substitute for the hero, who is the celebrity, and whose main characteristic is his well-knownness. In the democracy of pseudo-events, anyone can become a celebrity, if only he can get into the news and stay there. Figures from the world of entertainment and sports are most apt to be well known. If they are successful enough, they actually overshadow the real figures they portray. George Arliss overshadowed Disraeli, Vivian Leigh overshadowed Scarlett O'Hara, Fess Parker overshadowed Davy Crockett. Since their stock in trade is their well-knownness, they are most apt to have energetic press agents keeping them in the public eye.



It is hardly surprising then that magazine and newspaper readers no longer find the lives of their heroes instructive. Popular biographies can offer very little in the way of solid information. For the subjects are themselves mere figments of the media. If their lives are empty of drama or achievement, it is only as we might have expected, for they are not known for drama or achievement. They are celebrities. Their chief claim to fame is their fame itself. They are notorious for their notoriety. If this is puzzling or fantastic, if it is mere tautology, it is no more puzzling or fantastic or tautologous than much of the rest of our experience. Our experience tends more and more to become tautology – needless repetition of the same in different words and images. Perhaps what ails us is not so much a vice as a "nothingness." The vacuum of our experience is actually made emptier by our anxious straining with mechanical devices to fill it artificially. What is remarkable is not only that we manage to fill experience with so much emptiness, but that we manage to give the emptiness such appealing variety.

We can hear ourselves straining. "He's the greatest!" Our descriptions of celebrities overflow with superlatives. In popular magazine biographies we learn that a Dr. Brinkley is the "best-advertised doctor in the United States"; an actor is the "luckiest man in the movies today"; a Ringling is "not only the greatest, but the first real showman in the Ringling family"; a general is "one of the best mathematicians this side of Einstein"; a columnist has "one of the strangest of courtships"; a statesman has "the world's most exciting job"; a sportsman is "the loudest and by all odds the most abusive"; a newsman is "one of the most consistently resentful men in the country"; a certain ex-King's mistress is "one of the unhappiest women that ever lived." But, despite the "supercolossal" on the label, the contents are very ordinary. The lives of celebrities which we like to read, as Leo Lowenthal remarks, are a mere catalogue of "hardships" and "breaks." These men and women are "the proved specimens of the average."

No longer external sources which fill us with purpose, these new-model "heroes" are receptacles into which we pour our own purposelessness. They are nothing but ourselves seen in a magnifying mirror. Therefore the lives of entertainer-celebrities cannot extend our horizon. Celebrities populate our horizon with men and women we already know. Or, as an advertisement for the *Celebrity Register* cogently puts it, celebrities are "the 'names' who, once made by news, now make news by themselves." Celebrity is made by simple familiarity, induced and re-enforced by public means. The celebrity therefore is the perfect embodiment of tautology: the most familiar is the most familiar.

## IV

THE HERO was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name.

Formerly, a public man needed a *private* secretary for a barrier between himself and the public. Nowadays he has a *press* secretary, to keep him properly in the public eye. Before the Graphic Revolution (and still in countries which have not undergone that revolution) it was a mark of solid distinction in a man or a family to keep out of the news. A lady of aristocratic pretensions was supposed to get her name in the

papers only three times: when she was born, when she married, and when she died. Now the families who are Society are by definition those always appearing in the papers. The man of truly heroic stature was once supposed to be marked by scorn for publicity. He quietly relied on the power of his character or his achievement.

In the South, where the media developed more slowly than elsewhere in the country, where cities appeared later, and where life was dominated by rural ways, the celebrity grew more slowly. The old-fashioned hero was romanticized. In this as in many other ways, the Confederate General Robert E. Lee was one of the last surviving American models of the older type. Among his many admirable qualities, Southern compatriots admired none more than his retirement from public view. He had the reputation for never having given a newspaper interview. He steadfastly refused to write his memoirs. "I should be trading on the blood of my men," he said. General George C. Marshall (1880–1959) is a more recent and more anachronistic example. He, too, shunned publicity and refused to write his memoirs, even while other generals were serializing theirs in the newspapers. But by his time, few people any longer considered this reticence a virtue. His old-fashioned unwillingness to enter the publicity arena finally left him a victim of the slanders of Senator Joseph McCarthy and others.

The hero was born of time: his gestation required at least a generation. As the saying went, he had "stood the test of time." A maker of tradition, he was himself made by tradition. He grew over the generations as people found new virtues in him and attributed to him new exploits. Receding into the misty past he became more, and not less, heroic. It was not necessary that his face or figure have a sharp, well-delineated outline, nor that his life be footnoted. Of course there could not have been any photographs of him, and often there was not even a likeness. Men of the last century were more heroic than those of today; men of antiquity were still more heroic; and those of pre-history became demigods. The hero was always somehow ranked among the ancients.

The celebrity, on the contrary, is always a contemporary. The hero is made by folklore, sacred texts, and history books, but the celebrity is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspapers, and the ephemeral images of movie and television screen. The passage of time, which creates and establishes the hero, destroys the celebrity. One is made, the other unmade, by repetition. The celebrity is born in the daily papers and never loses the mark of his fleeting origin.

The very agency which first makes the celebrity in the long run inevitably destroys him. He will be destroyed, as he was made, by publicity. The newspapers make him, and they unmake him – not by murder but by suffocation or starvation. No one is more forgotten than the last generation's celebrity. This fact explains the newspaper feature "Whatever Became Of . . .?" which amuses us by accounts of the present obscurity of former celebrities. One can always get a laugh by referring knowingly to the once-household names which have lost their celebrity in the last few decades: Mae Bush, William S. Hart, Clara Bow. A woman reveals her age by the celebrities she knows.

There is not even any tragedy in the celebrity's fall, for he is a man returned to his proper anonymous station. The tragic hero, in Aristotle's familiar definition, was a man fallen from great estate, a great man with a tragic flaw. He had somehow become the victim of his own greatness. Yesterday's celebrity, however, is a commonplace man who has been fitted back into his proper commonplaceness not by any fault of his own, but by time itself.



The dead hero becomes immortal. He becomes more vital with the passage of time. The celebrity even in his lifetime becomes passé: he passes out of the picture. The white glare of publicity, which first gave him his specious brilliance, soon melts him away. This was so even when the only vehicles of publicity were the magazine and the newspaper. Still more now with our vivid round-the-clock media, with radio and television. Now when it is possible, by bringing their voices and images daily into our living rooms, to make celebrities more quickly than ever before, they die more quickly than ever. This has been widely recognized by entertainment celebrities and politicians. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was careful to space out his fireside chats so the citizenry would not tire of him. Some comedians (for example, Jackie Gleason in the mid-1950's) have found that when they have weekly programs they reap quick and remunerative notoriety, but that they soon wear out their images. To extend their celebrity-lives, they offer their images more sparingly – once a month or once every two months instead of once a week.

There is a subtler difference between the personality of the hero and that of the celebrity. The figures in each of the two classes become assimilated to one another, but in two rather different ways. Heroes standing for greatness in the traditional mold tend to become colorless and cliché. The greatest heroes have the least distinctiveness of face or figure. We may show our reverence for them, as we do for God, by giving them beards. Yet we find it hard to imagine that Moses or Jesus could have had other special facial characteristics. The hero while being thus idealized and generalized loses his individuality. The fact that George Washington is not a vivid personality actually helps him serve as the heroic Father of Our Country. Perhaps Emerson meant just this when he said that finally every great hero becomes a great bore. To be a great hero is actually to become lifeless; to become a face on a coin or a postage stamp. It is to become a Gilbert Stuart's Washington. Contemporaries, however, and the celebrities made of them, suffer from idiosyncrasy. They are too vivid, too individual to be polished into a symmetrical Greek statue. The Graphic Revolution, with its klieg lights on face and figure, makes the images of different men more distinctive. This itself disqualifies them from becoming heroes or demigods.

While heroes are assimilated to one another by the great simple virtues of their character, celebrities are differentiated mainly by trivia of personality. To be known for your personality actually proves you a celebrity. Thus a synonym for "a celebrity" is "a personality." Entertainers, then, are best qualified to become celebrities because they are skilled in the marginal differentiation of their personalities. They succeed by skillfully distinguishing themselves from others essentially like them. They do this by minutiae of grimace, gesture, language, and voice. We identify Jimmy ("Schnozzola") Durante by his nose, Bob Hope by his fixed smile, Jack Benny by his stinginess, Jack Paar by his rudeness, Jackie Gleason by his waddle, Imogene Coca by her bangs.

With the mushroom-fertility of all pseudo-events, celebrities tend to breed more celebrities. They help make and celebrate and publicize one another. Being known primarily for their well-knownness, celebrities intensify their celebrity images simply by becoming widely known for relations among themselves. By a kind of symbiosis, celebrities live off one another. One becomes better known by being the habitual butt of another's jokes, by being another's paramour or ex-wife, by being the subject of another's gossip, or even by being ignored by another celebrity. Elizabeth Taylor's celebrity appeal has consisted less perhaps in her own talents as an actress than in her

connections with other celebrities – Nick Hilton, Mike Todd, and Eddie Fisher. Arthur Miller, the playwright, became a "real" celebrity by his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. When we talk or read or write about celebrities, our emphasis on their marital relations and sexual habits, on their tastes in smoking, drinking, dress, sports cars, and interior decoration is our desperate effort to distinguish among the indistinguishable. How can those commonplace people like us (who, by the grace of the media, happened to become celebrities) be made to seem more interesting or bolder than we are?

## V

As OTHER PSEUDO-EVENTS in our day tend to overshadow spontaneous events, so celebrities (who are human pseudo-events) tend to overshadow heroes. They are more up-to-date, more nationally advertised, and more apt to have press agents. And there are far more of them. Celebrities die quickly but they are still more quickly replaced. Every year we experience a larger number than the year before.

Just as real events tend to be cast in the mold of pseudo-events, so in our society heroes survive by acquiring the qualities of celebrities. The best-publicized seems the most authentic experience. If someone does a heroic deed in our time, all the machinery of public information – press, pulpit, radio, and television – soon transform him into a celebrity. If they cannot succeed in this, the would-be hero disappears from public view.

A dramatic, a tragic, example is the career of Charles A. Lindbergh. He performed singlehanded one of the heroic deeds of this century. His deed was heroic in the best epic mold. But he became degraded into a celebrity. He then ceased to symbolize the virtues to which his heroic deed gave him a proper claim. He became filled with emptiness; then he disappeared from view. How did this happen?

On May 21, 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh made the first nonstop solo flight from Roosevelt Field, New York, to Le Bourget Air Field, Paris, in a monoplane, "The Spirit of St. Louis." This was plainly a heroic deed in the classic sense; it was a deed of valor – alone against the elements. In a dreary, unheroic decade Lindbergh's flight was a lightning flash of individual courage. Except for the fact of his flight, Lindbergh was a commonplace person. Twenty-five years old at the time, he had been born in Detroit and raised in Minnesota. He was not a great inventor or a leader of men. He was not extraordinarily intelligent, eloquent, or ingenious. Like many another young man in those years, he had a fanatical love of flying. The air was his element. There he showed superlative skill and extraordinary courage – even to foolhardiness.

He was an authentic hero. Yet this was not enough. Or perhaps it was too much. For he was destined to be made into a mere celebrity; and he was to be the American celebrity par excellence. His rise and fall as a hero, his tribulations, his transformation, and his rise and decline as a celebrity are beautifully told in Kenneth S. Davis' biography.

Lindbergh himself had not failed to predict that his exploit would put him in the news. Before leaving New York he had sold to *The New York Times* the exclusive story of his flight. A supposedly naive and diffident boy, on his arrival in Paris he was confronted by a crowd of newspaper reporters at a press conference in Ambassador



Myron T. Herrick's residence. But he would not give out any statement until he had clearance from the *Times* representative. He had actually subscribed to a newspaper clipping service, the clippings to be sent to his mother, who was then teaching school in Minnesota. With uncanny foresight, however, he had limited his subscriptions to clippings to the value of $50. (This did not prevent the company, doubtless seeking publicity as well as money, from suing him for not paying them for clippings beyond the specified amount.) Otherwise he might have had to spend the rest of his life earning the money to pay for clippings about himself.

Lindbergh's newspaper success was unprecedented. The morning after his flight *The New York Times*, a model of journalistic sobriety, gave him the whole of its first five pages, except for a few ads on page five. Other papers gave as much or more. Radio commentators talked of him by the hour. But there was not much hard news available. The flight was a relatively simple operation, lasting only thirty-three and a half hours. Lindbergh had told reporters in Paris just about all there was to tell. During his twenty-five years he had led a relatively uneventful life. He had few quirks of face, of figure, or of personality; little was known about his character. Some young women called him "tall and handsome," but his physical averageness was striking. He was the boy next door. To tell about this young man on the day after his flight, the nation's newspapers used 25,000 tons of newsprint more than usual. In many places sales were two to five times normal, and might have been higher if the presses could have turned out more papers.

When Lindbergh returned to New York on June 13, 1927, *The New York Times* gave its first sixteen pages the next morning almost exclusively to news about him. At the testimonial dinner in Lindbergh's honor at the Hotel Commodore (reputed to be the largest for an individual "in modern history") Charles Evans Hughes, former Secretary of State, and about to become Chief Justice of the United States, delivered an extravagant eulogy. With unwitting precision he characterized the American hero-turned-celebrity: "We measure heroes as we do ships, by their displacement. Colonel Lindbergh has displaced everything."

Lindbergh was by now the biggest human pseudo-event of modern times. His achievement, actually because it had been accomplished so neatly and with such spectacular simplicity, offered little spontaneous news. The biggest news about Lindbergh was that he was such big news. Pseudo-events multiplied in more than the usual geometric progression, for Lindbergh's well-knownness was so sudden and so overwhelming. It was easy to make stories about what a big celebrity he was; how this youth, unknown a few days before, was now a household word; how he was received by Presidents and Kings and Bishops. There was little else one could say about him. Lindbergh's singularly impressive heroic deed was soon far overshadowed by his even more impressive publicity. If well-knownness made a celebrity, here was the greatest. Of course it was remarkable to fly the ocean by oneself, but far more remarkable thus to dominate the news. His stature as hero was nothing compared with his stature as celebrity. All the more because it had happened, literally, overnight.

A large proportion of the news soon consisted of stories of how Lindbergh reacted to the "news" and to the publicity about himself. People focused their admiration on how admirably Lindbergh responded to publicity, how gracefully he accepted his role of celebrity. "Quickie" biographies appeared. These were little more than digests of newspaper accounts of the publicity jags during Lindbergh's ceremonial

visits to the capitals of Europe and the United States. This was the celebrity after-life of the heroic Lindbergh. This was the tautology of celebrity.

During the next few years Lindbergh stayed in the public eye and remained a celebrity primarily because of two events. One was his marriage on May 27, 1929, to the cultivated and pretty Anne Morrow, daughter of Dwight Morrow, a Morgan partner, then Ambassador to Mexico. Now it was "The Lone Eagle and His Mate." As a newlywed he was more than ever attractive raw material for news. The maudlin pseudo-events of romance were added to all the rest. His newsworthiness was revived. There was no escape. Undaunted newsmen, thwarted in efforts to secure interviews and lacking solid facts, now made columns of copy from Lindbergh's efforts to keep out of the news! Some newspapermen, lacking other material for speculation, cynically suggested that Lindbergh's attempts to dodge reporters were motivated by a devious plan to increase his news-interest. When Lindbergh said he would co-operate with sober, respectable papers, but not with others, those left out pyramided his rebuffs into more news than his own statements would have made.

The second event which kept Lindbergh alive as a celebrity was the kidnaping of his infant son. This occurred at his new country house at Hopewell, New Jersey, on the night of March 1, 1932. For almost five years "Lindbergh" had been an empty receptacle into which news makers had poured their concoctions – saccharine, maudlin, legendary, slanderous, adulatory, or only fantastic. Now, when all other news-making possibilities seemed exhausted, his family was physically consumed. There was a good story in it. Here was "blood sacrifice," as Kenneth S. Davis calls it, to the gods of publicity. Since the case was never fully solved, despite the execution of the supposed kidnaper, no one can know whether the child would have been returned unharmed if the press and the public had behaved differently. But the press (with the collaboration of the bungling police) who had unwittingly destroyed real clues, then garnered and publicized innumerable false clues, and did nothing solid to help. They exploited Lindbergh's personal catastrophe with more than their usual energy.

In its way the kidnapping of Lindbergh's son was as spectacular as Lindbergh's transatlantic flight. In neither case was there much hard news, but this did not prevent the filling of newspaper columns. City editors now gave orders for no space limit on the kidnaping story. "I can't think of any story that would compare with it," observed the general news manager of the United Press, "unless America should enter a war." Hearst's INS photo service assigned its whole staff. They chartered two ambulances which, with sirens screaming, shuttled between Hopewell and New York City carrying photographic equipment out to the Lindbergh estate, and on the way back to the city served as mobile darkrooms in which pictures were developed and printed for delivery on arrival. For on-the-spot reporting at Hopewell, INS had an additional five men with three automobiles. United Press had six men and three cars; the Associated Press had four men, two women, and four cars. By midnight of March 1 the New York *Daily News* had nine reporters at Hopewell, and three more arrived the next day; the New York *American* had a dozen (including William Randolph Hearst, Jr., the paper's president); the New York *Herald Tribune*, four; the New York *World-Telegram, The New York Times*, and the Philadelphia *Ledger*, each about ten. This was only a beginning.

The next day the press agreed to Lindbergh's request to stay off the Hopewell grounds in order to encourage the kidnaper to return the child. The torrent of news did not stop. Within twenty-four hours INS sent over its wires 50,000 words (enough to fill a small volume) about the crime, 30,000 words the following day, and for some time thereafter 10,000 or more words a day. The Associated Press and United Press served their subscribers just as well. Many papers gave the story the whole of the front page, plus inside carry-overs, for a full week. There were virtually no new facts available. Still the news poured forth – pseudo-events by the score – clues, rumors, local color features, and what the trade calls "think" pieces.



Soon there was almost nothing more to be done journalistically with the crime itself. There was little more to be reported, invented, or conjectured. Interest then focused on a number of sub-dramas created largely by newsmen themselves. These were stories about how the original event was being reported, about the mix-up among the different police that had entered the case, and about who would or should be Lindbergh's spokesman to the press world and his go-between with the kidnaper. Much news interest still centered on what a big story all the news added up to, and on how Mr. and Mrs. Lindbergh reacted to the publicity.

At this point the prohibition era crime celebrities came into the picture. "Salvy" Spitale and Irving Bitz, New York speakeasy owners, briefly held the spotlight. They had been suggested by Morris Rosner, who, because he had underworld connections, soon became a kind of personal secretary to the Lindberghs. Spitale and Bitz earned headlines for their effort to make contact with the kidnapers, then suspected to be either the notorious Purple Gang of Detroit or Al Capone's mob in Chicago. The two go-betweens became big names, until Spitale bowed out, appropriately enough, at a press conference. There he explained: "If it was someone I knew, I'll be God-damned if I wouldn't name him. I been in touch all around, and I come to the conclusion that this one was pulled by an independent." Al Capone himself, more a celebrity than ever, since he was about to begin a Federal prison term for income-tax evasion, increased his own newsworthiness by trying to lend a hand. In an interview with the "serious" columnist Arthur Brisbane of the Hearst papers, Capone offered $10,000 for information leading to the recovery of the child unharmed and to the capture of the kidnapers. It was even hinted that to free Capone might help recover the child.

The case itself produced a spate of new celebrities, whose significance no one quite understood but whose newsworthiness itself made them important. These included Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of the New Jersey State Police; Harry Wolf, Chief of Police in Hopewell; Betty Gow, the baby's nurse; Colonel Breckenridge, Lindbergh's personal counsel; Dr. J. F. ("Jafsie") Condon, a retired Bronx schoolteacher who was a volunteer go-between (he offered to add to the ransom money his own $1,000 life savings "so a loving mother may again have her child and Colonel Lindbergh may know that the American people are grateful for the honor bestowed on them by his pluck and daring"); John Hughes Curtis, a half-demented Norfolk, Virginia, boat-builder who pretended to reach the kidnapers; Gaston B. Means (author of *The Strange Death of President Harding*), later convicted of swindling Mrs. Evalyn Walsh McLean out of $104,000 by posing as a negotiator with the kidnapers; Violet Sharpe, a waitress in the Morrow home, who married the Morrow butler and who had had a date with a young man not her husband on the night of the kidnaping (she committed suicide on threat of being questioned by the police); and countless others.

Only a few years later the spotlight was turned off Lindbergh as suddenly as it had been turned on him. *The New York Times Index* – a thick volume published yearly which lists all references to a given subject in the pages of the newspaper during the previous twelve months – records this fact with statistical precision. Each volume of the index for the years 1927 to 1940 contains several columns of fine print merely itemizing the different news stories which referred to Lindbergh. The 1941 volume shows over three columns of such listings. Then suddenly the news stream dries up, first to a mere trickle, then to nothing at all. The total listings for all seventeen years from 1942 through 1958 amount to less than two columns – only about half that found in the single year 1941. In 1951 and 1958 there was not even a single mention of Lindbergh. In 1957 when the movie *The Spirit of St. Louis*, starring James Stewart, was released, it did poorly at the box office. A poll of the preview audiences showed that few viewers under forty years of age knew about Lindbergh.

A *New Yorker* cartoon gave the gist of the matter. A father and his young son are leaving a movie house where they have just seen *The Spirit of St. Louis*. "If everyone thought what he did was so marvelous," the boy asks his father, "how come he never got famous?"

The hero thus died a celebrity's sudden death. In his fourteen years he had already long outlasted the celebrity's usual life span. An incidental explanation of this quick demise of Charles A. Lindbergh was his response to the pressure to be "all-around." Democratic faith was not satisfied that its hero be only a dauntless flier. He had to become a scientist, an outspoken citizen, and a leader of men. His celebrity status unfortunately had persuaded him to become a public spokesman. When Lindbergh gave in to these temptations, he offended. But his offenses (unlike those, for example, of Al Capone and his henchmen, who used to be applauded when they took their seats in a ball park) were not in themselves dramatic or newsworthy enough to create a new notoriety. His pronouncements were dull, petulant, and vicious. He acquired a reputation as a pro-Nazi and a crude racist; he accepted a decoration from Hitler. Very soon the celebrity was being uncelebrated. The "Lindbergh Beacon" atop a Chicago skyscraper was renamed the "Palmolive Beacon," and high in the Colorado Rockies "Lindbergh Peak" was rechristened the noncommital, "Lone Eagle Peak."

## VI

Since the Graphic Revolution, the celebrity overshadows the hero by the same relentless law which gives other kinds of pseudo-events an overshadowing power. When a man appears as hero and/or celebrity, his role as celebrity obscures and is apt to destroy his role as hero. The reasons, too, are those which tend to make all pseudo-events predominate. In the creation of a celebrity somebody always has an interest – newsmen needing stories, press agents paid to make celebrities, and the celebrity himself. But dead heroes have no such interest in their publicity, nor can they hire agents to keep them in the public eye. Celebrities, because they are made to order, can be made to please, comfort, fascinate, and flatter us. They can be produced and displaced in rapid succession.

The people once felt themselves made by their heroes. "The idol," said James Russell Lowell, "is the measure of the worshiper." Celebrities are made by the people.



The hero stood for outside standards. The celebrity is a tautology. We still try to make our celebrities stand in for the heroes we no longer have, or for those who have been pushed out of our view. We forget that celebrities are known primarily for their well-knownness. And we imitate them as if they were cast in the mold of greatness. Yet the celebrity is usually nothing greater than a more-publicized version of us. In imitating him, in trying to dress like him, talk like him, look like him, think like him, we are simply imitating ourselves. In the words of the Psalmist, "They that make them are like unto them; so is everyone that trusteth in them." By imitating a tautology, we ourselves become a tautology: standing for what we stand for, reaching to become more emphatically what we already are. When we praise our famous men we pretend to look out the window of history. We do not like to confess that we are looking into a mirror. We look for models, and we see our own image.

Inevitably, most of our few remaining heroes hold our attention by being recast in the celebrity mold. We try to become chummy, gossipy, and friendly with our heroes. In the process we make them affable and flattering to us. Jesus, we are told from the pulpit, was "no sissy, but a regular fellow." Andrew Jackson was a "great guy." Instead of inventing heroic exploits for our heroes, we invent commonplaces about them (for example, in the successful juvenile series "The Childhood of Famous Americans"). It is commonplaces, and not exploits, which make them celebrities.

Our very efforts to debunk celebrities, to prove (whether by critical journalistic biographies or by vulgar "confidential" magazines) that they are unworthy of our admiration, are like efforts to get "behind the scenes" in the making of other pseudo-events. They are self-defeating. They increase our interest in the fabrication. As much publicity yardage can be created one way as another. Of course most true celebrities have press agents. And these press agents sometimes themselves become celebrities. The hat, the rabbit, and the magician are all equally news. It is twice as newsworthy that a charlatan can become a success. His charlatanry makes him even more of a personality. A celebrity's private news-making apparatus, far from disillusioning us, simply proves him authentic and fully equipped. We are reassured then that we are not mistaking a nobody for a somebody.

It is not surprising that the word "hero" has itself become a slang term of cynical reproach. Critics of the American Legion call it "The Heroes' Union." What better way of deflating or irritating a self-important person than by calling him "Our Hero"? The very word belongs, we think, in the world of pre-literate societies, of comic strip supermen, or of William Steig's Small Fry.

In America today heroes, like fairy tales, are seldom for sophisticated adults. But we multiply our Oscars and Emmies, our awards for the Father of the Year, our crowns for Mrs. America and Miss Photoflash. We have our Hall of Fame for Great Americans, our Agricultural Hall of Fame, our Baseball Hall of Fame, our Rose Bowl Hall of Fame. We strain to reassure ourselves that we admire the admirable and honor the meritorious. But in the very act of straining we confuse and distract ourselves. At first reluctantly, then with fascination, we observe the politicking behind every prize and the shenanigans in front of every effort to enshrine a celebrity or to enthrone a Queen for a Day. Despite our best intentions, our contrivance to provide substitute heroes finally produces nothing but celebrities. To publicize is to expose.

With our unprecedented power to magnify the images and popularize the virtues of heroes, our machinery only multiplies and enlarges the shadows of ourselves.

Somehow we cannot make ourselves so uncritical that we reverence or respect (however much we may be interested in) the reflected images of our own emptiness. We continue surreptitiously to wonder whether greatness is not a naturally scarce commodity, whether it can ever really be synthesized. Perhaps, then, our ancestors were right in connecting the very idea of human greatness with belief in a God. Perhaps man cannot make himself. Perhaps heroes are born and not made.

Among the ironic frustrations of our age, none is more tantalizing than these efforts of ours to satisfy our extravagant expectations of human greatness. Vainly do we make scores of artificial celebrities grow where nature planted only a single hero. As soon as a hero begins to be sung about today, he evaporates into a celebrity. "No man can be a hero to his valet" – or, Carlyle might have added, "to his *Time* reporter." In our world of big names, curiously, our true heroes tend to be anonymous. In this life of illusion and quasi-illusion, the person with solid virtues who can be admired for something more substantial than his well-knownness often proves to be the unsung hero: the teacher, the nurse, the mother, the honest cop, the hard worker at lonely, under-paid, unglamorous, unpublicized jobs. Topsy-turvily, these can remain heroes precisely because they remain unsung. *Their* virtues are not the product of our effort to fill our void. Their very anonymity protects them from the flashy ephemeral celebrity life. They alone have the mysterious power to deny our mania for more greatness than there is in the world.

Chapter 5

## Richard de Cordova

# THE DISCOURSE ON ACTING

MOVING PICTURES EXISTED FOR over a decade before anything resembling a star system appeared. Although personalities from other fields (particularly politics) were presented in documentary "views" from a very early date, they were not in any strict sense of the term movie stars. The basis of their notoriety lay elsewhere. One can cite, as an example, the series of five films Edison copyrighted in 1899 documenting Admiral Dewey's role in the Spanish-American War (largely the parade upon his return). Although the cinema certainly capitalized upon Dewey's notoriety, it had neither a direct role in creating it nor the means to control it. The fame of personalities such as Dewey was caught up in a circulation of events exterior to the cinema as an institution.

The cinema's function in relation to these personalities was, in a sense, merely to represent them. Dewey, McKinley, Roosevelt, and Prince Henry were the raw material in what was principally a new form of photojournalism. This cannot be said of stars such as Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford, who emerged out of an explicitly fictional mode of film production. The spectator did not pay to see a record of Mary Pickford's movements, but paid, rather, to see her activity in the enunciation of a fiction.

There was thus no simple continuity between the intermittent representations of these famous figures and the star as such. Nor did these representations in any clear way mark out the conditions for the emergence of the star. In fact, one cannot locate the incipience of the star system in the industry's practices prior to 1907.

Of course the question this raises is why the cinema did not have a star system before this date. The theater, vaudeville, and professional sports all banked on the ability of name performers to attract an audience. The theater had, in fact, based its popularity on star performers through much, if not most, of the nineteenth century. According to Benjamin McArthur, a theatrical star system had begun to gain momentum in America with George Frederick Cook's 1810 tour. By the 1870s,

Chapter 38

# Neal Gabler

## WALTER WINCHELL
## Stardom

I

WALTER WINCHELL HAD CHANGED remarkably in the fifteen years since he arrived back in New York late in 1920 as a naive but aggressive young vaudevillian trying to make his name in the world. He was still handsome, still with fine features and penetrating blue eyes that locked so intently on a listener that they often unnerved those who met him. He still talked like a "magpie," in Ben Grauer's words, and he still sent off waves of electricity that could set a whole room buzzing. He was still fearful and insecure, still always worrying about money. He was still much more outwardly than inwardly directed, still campaigning for himself every chance he got, still at turns sycophantic and resentful.

But he had changed. Physically he was trim, but his five-foot-seven-inch body was no longer lithe. His hair was rapidly turning gray, his hairline receding. He looked older than his thirty-nine years, even if his aging had imparted a certain distinction – something no one could have imagined thinking back on the ambitious, glad-handing young Winchell. The larger change one detected, however, was in his temperament. Though quick-witted and often funny, he had become much more self-conscious about his growing status as a political commentator and much more concerned about preserving his image as an American institution. There was a sobriety one seldom found in the younger Winchell, a sense that he could no longer stand on the sidelines heckling, that to be taken seriously he had to grapple with weightier issues.

Yet at the same time that he was completing his transformation from imp to institution, he realized that he still couldn't rest. He had to move or someone would catch up to him, even surpass him. That, he knew as well as anyone, was how celebrity worked; there was always something new coming along, something hot. So one always had to reinvent oneself. It was out of this impulse that he had first ventured into radio when he felt he had reached a ceiling with the column. Now that he was preeminent in



both radio and print, he needed to master another medium to stay ahead c pack. And this time he looked to Hollywood. This time he was going to become a movie star.

As preposterous as this might have sounded for any other journalist, it was far more than a pipe dream for Winchell. His film shorts aside, he had been courted by Hollywood for starring roles since his first trip there, but he had always rebuffed the studios by asking for a prohibitively high salary. By 1935 Walter was listening more attentively, not only because he wanted something to rejuvenate him but because he thought he had found a way to reduce the risk of failing while he tried: Ben Bernie.

Over the years Walter and Bernie had had their real-life disputes – when Bernie wrote for permission to mention Walter's name in a trailer for a film he was doing at Paramount, Walter refused and warned, "[I]f you persist then I'm washed up with you forever"[1] – but their radio feud had continued unabated since those few weeks back in 1933 when the sponsors temporarily ordered them to desist, and Bernie spent part of 1935 in Hollywood prospecting for movie projects for the two of them. By the fall Walter, obviously over his anger about *Broadway Through a Keyhole*, was also pressing Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox to come up with a vehicle for Bernie and Winchell. "Reliance films have been writing me for weeks for an interview, claiming they have three scripts for me," Walter said. "Thalberg [of MGM] and Harry Cohn of Columbia are also interested but I think you are top man and our alleged prestige would be safer with you."[2]

Zanuck had promised Walter that he would find the "proper and correct vehicle for you and Bernie,"[3] but it wasn't until September 1936 that he found it. Zanuck was clearly excited. He dispatched Fox Vice-President Joe Moskowitz to New York with a temporary story treatment and instructions to contact Walter the minute Moskowitz arrived. Less than three weeks later, with Moskowitz trailing Walter on his rounds and by one account pleading with him to agree so that Moskowitz could return to California,[4] Walter signed for his first starring film role. The salary was to be $75,000. "I hope I haven't been swindled!"[5] Walter wrote Zanuck three days later. Walter also asked that he not be forced to come to Hollywood much before actual production began, since his syndicate had complained of too much Hollywood gossip and not enough New York. Zanuck cheerfully agreed. "I will not send for you until I actually need you and you will receive script far in advance so you will have plenty of time to build up your own dialogue and cut down Bernie's," Zanuck joked.[6] To Fox publicist Harry Brand, Walter made one more request: that he be given a bungalow on the lot to race to between takes so he could "get another couple of paragraphs done."[7]

Walter departed New York on December 14, 1936, from Penn Station and arrived in Los Angeles three days later.[8] Though Eddie Cantor, who was to costar, had begged off the picture – Walter later said because Cantor thought it would fail[9] – Walter arrived in high spirits. The story, adapted by Curtis Kenyon from Dorothea Brande's novel *Wake Up and Live*, was a farce about a timid page at a radio station who has a lovely singing voice but gets "mike fright." The beautiful hostess of an inspirational radio program (Alice Faye) encourages him to conquer his fear by practicing in front of the microphone. One day while he is singing to himself, his voice is accidentally broadcast on Ben Bernie's program. The public response is overwhelming, but the page is unaware that he is the object of its affection, and so is Bernie. Inundated by calls and telegrams demanding the singer's name, Bernie decides to call

him "The Phantom Troubadour." Suspicious, Winchell demands that Bernie produce the troubadour. When Bernie tries, hiring a stand-in, Winchell reveals the hoax and humiliates his rival. Meanwhile, an unscrupulous agent, who has discovered the truth, kidnaps the page. By the end the page has been freed and, with the help of the hostess, sings publicly at a nightclub while Bernie and Winchell declare a truce. All this was to be punctuated with songs by Mack Gordon and Harry Revel. But as Zanuck had told Walter, "The beautiful part about this story is that neither you nor Bernie have to carry the plot, the plot is carried for you and yet you are an integral part of it without being dragged in. . . ."[10]

"I have just seen the final script on 'Wake Up and Live,' " Walter wrote *Variety* editor Abel Green enthusiastically the first week of 1937, "and really think it is one of the swiftest paced I have ever read or seen . . . I am playing a semi-menace with the usual windup. 'Why Walter we didn't know you were using it for That reason!' "[11] Walter's confidence, however, rapidly ebbed the closer he got to production, and his mood was souring. "From the office-dressing room windows," he wrote, "it [Hollywood] looks like the front of the Palace used to look . . . The same agents, actors, hangers-on, lobbygows, phonies, front-putter-uppers . . . Strange, too, seeing so many falsefaces . . ."[12] He admitted he was overtaken by nerves and began suffering a severe case of lumbago. The night before his screen test he had slept only three and a half hours, which "certainly isn't enough to make a guy feel like doing anything but committing a murder."[13]

Zanuck tried to bolster his spirits. After seeing Walter's test, the studio head declared himself "very happy."[14] "Your personality is swell on screen and you have the best pair of eyes I've seen on an actor in a long while," he gushed to Walter. "This is no bull, I mean it. The way they have darkened down your hair looks good. If you know your dialogue and do not let Bernie step back on you, I'm afraid you are going to be a bit of all right." Walter had also objected to several of his lines, and Zanuck readily agreed to change all but one. He had even given Walter the star dressing room.

But for all Zanuck's attempts at accommodating him, Walter was not reassured. One rumor had him fainting on the set his first day.[15] Walter vehemently denied it, saying that he had been on the set for only two minutes that day – just long enough for Patsy Kelly, who was playing his secretary, to nudge him after a crack by Bernie, run a finger across her throat and say, "Hmmm, your pal!" Nevertheless, the film's director, Sidney Lanfield, who had known Walter from the NVA days, said he was always having to shoot around his star in the morning because Walter was too jittery to sleep and usually arrived late. And when he did arrive on the set, he was still so nervous and uncertain that Lanfield usually had him perform the first take to an empty camera until the actor calmed down.[16] Bernie told an interviewer that the technicians on the picture had been bothered for ten days by a strange noise that kept drowning out the dialogue. "We found out it was Winchell's knees rattling madly against each other!"[17]

He finished shooting in late February with high praise in the column for Lanfield, who "finally got what the authors intended, we think, after perspiring blood and dying a little every day . . . It seemed a dirty trick to play on a man – handing him two 'actors' such as Bernie and us."[18] Lanfield was so moved by this little tribute that he wired Walter his thanks rather than phone him, for fear he would lose his composure: TO THINK THAT IT TOOK THE TOUGHEST GUY FROM THE TOUGHEST CITY TO COME OUT HERE AND SOFTEN UP A LOT OF CALLOUSED FARMERS STOP WE ALL LOV[...] AND WE'LL MISS YOU LIKE HOLY HELL YOU LOUSE.[19]



Walter lingered for several weeks, adjusting his sleep schedule and hitting the clubs again. By the time he returned to Broadway, Zanuck's publicity machine was already cranking up for *Wake Up and Live*. "Prepare yourself for the kick of your life," Zanuck told a journalist even before the picture was cut.[20] "When you see 'Wake Up and Live' you are going to see a new screen actor the like of whom has never been on the screen. Forget that he is Winchell, look at him under the name of Joe Doakes, if you wish, but look at him and you will agree with me he is one of the greatest picture possibilities that has come to the screen in many a day."

At Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood on April 4, two weeks after Walter's return to New York, *Wake Up and Live* received its first press screening. "It is sheer entertainment, fast stepping, sparkling, without a foot of waste material or a dull moment," rhapsodized *Daily Variety*.[21] "Dust off all your SRO signs," joined the Hollywood *Reporter*. " 'Wake Up and Live' will make the box offices of the nation do exactly that. It is headed for record-breaking business." I HAVE TO ADMIT PREVIEW GREAT, Lanfield wired Walter that night. ALL NOTICES RAVES[.] DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS[,] ZANUCK [,] [ADOLPHE] MENJOU AND HUNDREDS OF OTHERS SAY BEST MUSICAL THEY HAVE EVER SEEN.[22]

Walter seemed to have won his gamble and should have been ecstatic. But the day after the preview he was rushing back to Hollywood to confront a new crisis. While he had been in New York, his family had fallen ill. To those to whom he mentioned the crisis, he didn't specify what was wrong, but by way of explaining his sudden trip west, he wrote Hearst, "My wife is pretty sick,"[23] and he informed columnist Leonard Lyons that June was going to be operated on the following Monday. "She's a pretty sick girl and so I belong here with them," Walter said, adding that he had already told his radio bosses that his family must come first and that they had graciously agreed.[24]

The nature of the operation or the degree of its seriousness Walter again did not divulge in his letters, but whatever June was undergoing was complicated by another development. The very day that she went into the hospital, Walter tersely ended his column: "The W.W.s anticipate a blessed event in the Winter."[25] June had now lost the baby and possibly the ability to have any others. "The Walter Winchells aren't that happy," he wrote in the column a week after the operation.[26] "Mrs. Winchell was suddenly rushed to a surgeon's stiletto but is on the mend." Privately, he wired his secretary: WE WOULD RATHER HAVE BABIES THAN MONEY.[27]

As June convalesced, Walter remained in California, missing, as it turned out, the New York premiere of *Wake Up and Live* at the Roxy later that month. The critics there had been as enthusiastic as the ones in Hollywood, but they reserved their loftiest encomiums for Walter. Regina Crewe in the New York *American* said that "the Winchellian personality dominates the screen when Walter is in camera range. The qualities that have won him fame in two media are apparent in the third. His acting has the fine virtue of appearing natural."[28] (She added that he was turning down offers of $15,000 now for personal appearances and that his fan mail equaled that of Fox's biggest star, Shirley Temple.) Frank Nugent in *The New York Times* called *Wake Up* a "blessed event at the Roxy."[29] "He runs through 'Wake Up and Live' with the assurance of an ex-vaudeville hoofer and the high tension we always have associated with Broadway's Pepys," Nugent wrote. Producer Billy Rose, then in Fort Worth, Texas,

for the state centennial fair, saw the picture the same night as its New York opening and sent Walter a glowing telegram offering to back a revival of *The Front Page* starring Walter. He even promised to donate the profits to any charity Walter designated.[30]

Louella Parsons, Hearst's Hollywood gossip, was so impressed that she devoted an entire column to an interview with Walter – a rare beneficence. No longer hedging about his future in pictures – after returning from California he had said that "wild horses couldn't drag another picture out of him"[31] – he openly discussed with her his jitters while the film was being made and said he thought his second movie would be less nerve-racking.[32]

Audiences swarmed to the picture. On opening day more than 6,000 patrons attended a midnight screening at the Roxy,[33] helping set a one-day attendance record of 38,825.[34] More than 1,500 people were in line at ten o'clock the next morning. It broke house records at the theater on Saturday and Sunday by more than $2,000 each day and broke another the following Tuesday despite a continuous rain.[35]

As years passed, however, the luster of *Wake Up and Live* would diminish until the film virtually vanished, as most of Walter's work would. Certainly no one any longer would be calling it one of Hollywood's greatest musicals. Once past the flush of initial excitement and Winchell's power of intimidation, the picture receded as forgettable froth with some tuneful songs, none of which became a standard, and some winning performances by veteran character actors Patsy Kelly, Ned Sparks, Walter Catlett and Jack Haley as the Phantom Troubadour – the same Haley of Haley & Craft who had provided Walter jokes back in vaudeville.

Despite its impermanence, *Wake Up and Live* may have had one effect: Some observers thought that Walter's performance had a lasting influence on screen acting. "Walter Winchell is so positive an acting personality that professional actors imitate him," drama critic George Jean Nathan wrote after seeing the film, citing twenty-seven plays and forty-three movies over the last few years in which actors patterned themselves after Winchell.[36] To the extent that he symbolized the city in the thirties, Walter did seem to define an urban style for actors. Something in his clipped, nasal voice, something in the fast, kinetic, herky-jerky way he moved, something in his snap-brim fedora and the double-breasted blue suits he wore, something in his wise-cracking and his slang, something in his bantam size and sharp features, provided a model of tough-guy urban America, and there would be a little of Walter Winchell in James Cagney, George Raft, John Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, even Humphrey Bogart, all of whom rose to prominence after he had become a national figure.

Whether he could actually have become a successful movie star is a moot point. Though he waffled, he really seemed to have no desire to do any more pictures. In any case a friend had warned him to take his time before making another film. "I think you're a chump to hurry back before the cameras," the friend wrote. "You're in a spot where audiences want more of you, but if you oblige too fast, I'm afraid you might weaken the grand value you have won. You're not a hungry actor who must work to be remembered."[37] "This is very difficult for me to tell you," Walter wrote Zanuck, taking the friend's advice to heart, "but I would be happier if you wouldn't take up my option."

"Whoever wrote you that letter that you quoted in your letter to me should have his head examined," Zanuck indignantly wrote back the same day.[38] "I think your attitude, as expressed in the letter – if you are sincere about it – is certainly a slap in the face at me and ungrateful to say the least." Zanuck promised not to "mince words" with Walter. "In the first place, you asked me to find a picture for you when you were out here last year. I did not ask you. I found a picture and paid the price that you wanted without quibbling. I designed the picture and spent over $850,000 to find out whether I was right or wrong. No one took a gamble except Twentieth Century-Fox and Darryl Zanuck." He said that the studio had extended Walter every consideration, and he ended, "I am surprised at you, Walter." Two months later Joe Moskowitz sent Walter an agreement, exercising the option and ordering Walter to California on September 23 to begin a movie to be called *Love and Hisses*, once again costarring Ben Bernie.[39] Now he was enslaved not only to the column but to Hollywood as well.



Actually he had been in New York only once – a week in mid-July – since June's surgery, and in all likelihood it was only the operation and her convalescence that saved him from the *Mirror*'s usual dunning that he return to New York and write a Broadway, not a Hollywood, column. In late June, he made an appearance on Cecil B. De Mille's "Lux Theater" playing reporter Hildy Johnson to James Gleason's editor Walter Burns in a radio adaptation of *The Front Page*.[40] As Johnson, a reporter whose soul belongs to journalism but who struggles futilely to extricate himself from it and live normally, Walter was clearly playing a role wrenched from his own life, and he was brilliant at it. When Hildy's fiancée scolds him for being on the job every time she calls for his presence, it could have been June talking to Walter, and when Burns, after being excoriated by the fiancée, admits, "I'm a bum," Hildy chimes in, "I'm a newspaperman!," again sounding one of Walter's own defenses. There are not many Hildy Johnsons left, not many journalistic "swashbucklers," Walter told De Mille in an on-air interview after the play, but Walter left little doubt that he considered himself one of that dying breed whose chief dedication was to the paper, and he promised that he would be back on Broadway as soon as he finished his film obligation, probably in October.

But as the starting date for *Love and Hisses* approached, Walter was clearly growing apprehensive again – this time less over his acting than over his workload. He couldn't help remembering how difficult it had been to balance the film, the broadcast and the column during *Wake Up and Live*, and in mid-September Walter advised Jergens that his health would prevent him from doing the broadcast for the next eight weeks. Always protecting himself, however, he asked Jergens not to replace him with another commentator but to do another kind of program entirely. Jergens granted the leave but not the request for a different program. OUR INTEREST REQUIRES US TO PROTECT THE GREAT INVESTMENT MADE IN DEVELOPING THIS PERIOD AS A NEWS SPOT, Robert V. Beucus of Jergens wired him.[41] He got the same consideration from the *Mirror*, with Louis Sobol taking over the column for syndication in his absence.[42]

Now Walter was forced to deny rumors that he was going to let his contract lapse and finally scale back, as he had been promising June for years. He insisted that he was simply going to recharge. "The odds are a good ten to one that if I had not received this leave I would have been a very sick fellow," he wrote a friend.[43] A press release from Fox reported that Walter was suffering from "nervous exhaustion" and that aside from the suspension of his broadcast and column, precautions were being taken on the set to ensure his well-being.[44] A physician was to be present at all times, and the start of shooting had been pushed back from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. to accommodate Walter's sleep. But none of these things seemed much to appease him. If he had been

nervous and sick with anticipation during his first film, he was ill-tempered and bored during the second, knowing he had already proved himself, and tired of the whole thing. "All I know is that I sit around fifty minutes out of every hour waiting to do a scene that is seldom over four or five lines," he wrote Abel Green. "My God, how they waste time out here! . . . I need more action than that, Abel, or I fall asleep."[45]

THE DAY after he wrote Green, Walter received a letter from a ghost of his youth. It had been years since he had had any contact with Rita Greene. He had expunged her like so much of his past, readily agreeing to an increase in her stipend fourteen months after their divorce and then, less readily, to another in 1931, but neither seeing her nor writing her in the six years since. (Evidently Walter had been so angry over her second request that he instructed his secretary not to put her calls through.)[46] Those years had not been kind to Rita. After the divorce she had continued in vaudeville, but she was exhausted and frequently ill with a thyroid condition, and she finally quit on her doctor's advice. Eventually she enrolled in business school, and on August 11, 1930, her eleventh wedding anniversary, she set out for an employment office and wound up landing a job in the New York branch of Pathé Pictures where, out of consideration for Walter, she dropped the name Winchell.[47]

It was never easy. With one sister married and gone and another unmarried and working only fitfully, Rita became the main provider for her family, living in an airy house on Staten Island. Her life revolved around her job, first at Pathé and later as a legal secretary, around her obligations to her family and around the local church. She and her family huddled in front of the radio each week to listen to Walter's broadcast, but he was never mentioned in the household in any context other than as a reporter and gossip.[48]

Then she got the news, the news of which she wrote Walter that October while he was filming *Love and Hisses*. "Sometime back I found out I had a tumor in my breast," went the letter. "I have been taking treatments for this tumor in the hope that it would dissolve, but I am now of the belief that it must come out." The operation, which doctors advised she have immediately, would cost roughly $500, and she was now asking Walter if he might see his way to giving her $300 toward it. The response, whether Walter authorized it or not, was unspeakably cold. His secretary in California wrote: "[W]e are doing our best to simplify his routine as much as possible for him. . . . I have been given strict orders not to bother him with any mail at the present time. . . . I'm sure you understand."[49]

Of course, all Rita understood was that she had cancer, that Walter had promised years ago he would help her if she needed it and that now she needed what amounted to a pittance, though Walter, always suspicious, probably believed the tumor was a ruse to pry more money from him. Rita angrily wired back that if Walter was too busy to answer his mail, could his secretary please see to it that his *wife* got the request? Within a few days Rita got her money and soon after had a radical mastectomy that saved her life.[50] But she could never forgive Walter his insensitivity, and she bridled at the injustice of her supporting a family on her wage of less than $20 a week and Walter's stipend of $75 while he boasted of making thousands of dollars a week. At any rate, she believed that by getting her to agree to forgo alimony, Walter had conned her into accepting less than what she was entitled to.



After the operation Rita attempted to contact Walter for redress. Again and again she found he was "too busy, or in other words can't be bothered."[51] "My hours are never regular," he wrote her after a year of her trying to arrange a meeting. "I sleep when I can and get up when I can. . . . I just can't make dates."[52] It was, Rita said, after another year of these rebuffs that she devised a new plan. She would write a book about her life with him. She would reveal the secrets he had worked so desperately to conceal. "I am not getting any younger," Rita wrote in her manuscript by way of explanation. "I am getting older, my health is nothing to write about, and I have come to the time when I must have some security. . . . [A]s everyone has written about Winchell, and it appears that he is such good copy, I have tried my hand at it, and perhaps it will give a few people a laugh when they read why Winchell's life is more interesting than the others."[53]

Rita wrote her manuscript, leaving little doubt that she intended it less as a literary effort than as a means to coerce Walter into increasing her stipend. But then she locked it away in a trunk with an old photo album, clippings, letters and other mementos of her life with Walter. For in the end, no matter how desperate her plight and no matter how cold-hearted Walter's treatment of her, she loved him. Rita Greene never stopped loving Walter Winchell.

WITH *Love and Hisses* completed, Walter returned to New York in November and resumed the broadcast on November 14, after his eight-week hiatus, vowing yet again that his days as a movie star were through.[54] In all, he had spent eight and a half months in Hollywood that year, the longest stretch of time he had been away from New York since his last vaudeville tour in 1920, and he had become increasingly disenchanted with it, increasingly restless over its pace and its social life. "There's nothing for me to do in California," he told *Time* magazine. "I can't go to people's homes and then write about them."[55] He was especially struck by Walda's reluctance to tell him anything about her friend Shirley Temple. "You would just put something in the paper about her," she said.

In California, *Love and Hisses* was being previewed. Based on an original story by Walter's friend Art Arthur, who had been the Broadway columnist for the Brooklyn *Eagle* before heading to Hollywood to write pictures, *Love and Hisses* was in the vein of *Wake Up and Live* but even slighter. The plot is triggered when Bernie asks Walter if he will promote a new find of Bernie's, a pretty French singer who, Bernie claims, has entertained the crowned heads of Europe. Discovering otherwise, Walter blasts her on the air instead. The next day a worried French aristocrat arrives at Walter's office, asking the columnist's assistance in finding his daughter, who has run away to Broadway. Walter promptly finds her at a casting call at Bernie's club and is wowed by her voice. What Walter doesn't know is that this has all been part of an elaborate deception by Bernie to make Walter eat crow, since the girl (Simone Simon), whom Walter now promises to publicize, is the same one he has criticized. But before Bernie can make a fool of him, Walter discovers the plot and springs a practical joke of his own on Bernie. He has some gangsters kidnap Bernie and threaten to kill him unless Walter hands over $50,000 in ransom money. At film's end, Bernie, blindfolded, is pleading for his life, not realizing he is onstage at his club before a full house. With Walter now having regained the upper hand, the French girl sings to an appreciative audience. "I'm the

guy who brought her over," says Bernie. "But I'm the guy who *put* her over," replies Winchell.

Sidney Lanfield, who directed *Love and Hisses*, wrote Walter that "the consensus out here is that it is much better than 'Wake Up and Live,' " and he added that he had received "fifty rave wires from people who said the audience screamed from beginning to end." When the picture opened early in January, however, the consensus was anything but the one Lanfield had described.[56] Frank Nugent in *The New York Times* was kindest, saying, "As sham battles go, this one is not quite up to the standard of their [Winchell and Bernie's] previous engagement, but it still must be reckoned a lively, well-scored, amusing show. . . ."[57] More typically, *Newsweek* called it "uninspired entertainment," which "misses by a considerable margin" the success of *Wake Up and Live*, but the magazine spared Winchell and Bernie responsibility.[58] Howard Barnes in the New York *Herald Tribune* found a cruelty in the banter between Walter and Bernie that the critics had surprisingly overlooked in the first picture. "Their continual heckling of each other has already lost its freshness."[59]

Lest the film be perceived a failure and a blow to Walter's seeming indestructibility, he was at some pains in the following weeks to tell listeners that *Love and Hisses* was actually outperforming *Wake Up and Live* at the box office.[60] At the same time he was now insisting that he would have continued making movies if the tax bite hadn't been so deep and left him so little return.[61] Yet whatever gloss he put on it, *Love and Hisses* had been a disappointment after *Wake Up and Live*, and the willingness of critics to say so could be laid partly to Walter's long sabbatical without his column and broadcast. Defenseless, he was fair game.

## II

"The Column." It was always "The Column," as if it were something holy and inviolable, as if the others were pretenders, which, in a sense, they were. Everyone read "The Column." "I have never been able to get far enough into the North woods not to find some trapper there who would quote Winchell's latest observation," Alexander Woollcott wrote as early as 1933, and he recalled a "painful" scene in Hatchard's bookshop in Piccadilly where a lord was in a dither because his orders to have Winchell's Monday column rushed to him as soon as it arrived had been disobeyed.[62]

But however popular it was elsewhere and however much civilians enjoyed it, it was in New York and especially among show people and café socialites that "The Column" was devoured with the avidity of a child racing to the tree on Christmas morning to see what gifts had been left. By eight o'clock each evening, press agents and other show business personalities were queuing up at the newsstand, waiting for the early or "green" edition of the *Mirror*. "Before anything you turned to page ten," a press agent recalled, referring to the page on which "The Column" was found. "A press agent would grab the *Mirror*, run through it like a dose of salts and run to the telephone and say, 'Pete, you're in Winchell today!' "[63]

And the interest went beyond ego gratification or professional advancement. "The Column" was so sacrosanct and café society's faith in publicity so devout that Winchell's items had an oracular authority. "If Winchell says so, it's gotta be true," Lucille Ball said about a report of Walter's that she was expecting a child.[64] (She was.)



Others learned of unhappy spouses and impending divorces or soured romances. David Brown was shocked to read in Winchell that his wife was divorcing him, then heard from her lawyer the next morning.[65]

Walter himself seemed to regard "The Column" with a kind of reverence, too, as if he were merely its custodian and not its creator. "Other columnists have jocular moments when they suggest to a very limited group of intimate friends, that perhaps there are more important matters on earth than their daily essay," wrote one press analyst. "When Winchell says something about 'The Column' it is as if he were discussing an immutable force which he had miraculously unleashed but scarcely understood."[66]

For Walter, everything had to be seen through the scrim of "The Column"; life was reduced to column fodder. As Emile Gauvreau put it in one of his novels, "The interests of others concerned him only in so far as he could make capital out of them."[67] Once Walter was strolling down the beach in Miami while composer Richard Rodgers was discoursing to some friends on an investment he had made. Seeing Walter, Rodgers offered a brief summary, but Walter stopped him after a moment. "Never mind, never mind," he said, holding up his palm. "It's no good for the column."[68]

In one sense his reverence for "The Column" enslaved him to it; in another sense it liberated him from responsibility for it. Walter's "wrongoes" on both the broadcast and in "The Column" were numerous, as might be expected from a column that could contain well over fifty items each day. He repeatedly reported that Judge Joseph Force Crater, a New York jurist who had suddenly disappeared, was still alive.[69] A week after reporting that Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., had given an engagement ring to Vera Zorina, he announced that Zorina had married George Balanchine two weeks earlier, without ever referring to his own blooper.[70] He spent months and even years tracking the romances of Katharine Hepburn, once publishing an "unconfirmed report" that she had married agent Leland Hayward after both had obtained Mexican divorces.[71] Boarding a train in Newark for New York upon her return from the Yucatán, Hepburn instructed her traveling companion to hand a reporter a Mexican peso. "You give that to Mr. Winchell," snapped Hepburn. "It's worth 30 cents. That's what I think of Mr. Winchell."[72]

Walter conveniently managed to ignore most of his mistakes or attributed them to erroneous "reports," as if he hadn't been the one circulating them; when he did correct errors, he did so circuitously by assailing sources. *He* never made errors, never retracted, not necessarily because he was infallible but because "The Column" had to be infallible. That might not have pacified anyone stung by Walter's "wrongoes," but readers and listeners never remembered the mistakes anyway, and his credibility never suffered. They seemed to realize that accuracy was beside the point. The point was creating a sense of omniscience. And for this, Winchell understood, seeming to predict events was just as good as actually predicting them.

With "The Column," the broadcast, the personal appearances and movies, Winchell in the mid-thirties had become his own cottage industry, and though he liked to give the impression that he managed all these activities with a minimum of help – as was somewhat true – he still, of necessity, had gathered around him a small coterie to feed the maws. Ruth Cambridge continued to run the office in her relaxed fashion.

Vivacious and carefree, Ruth had met dancer Buddy Ebsen the summer Walter was away in California with June after Gloria's death. Three weeks later they eloped. "Now I know why you've been sending my mail to Chicago (where Buddy was) instead of to California where I am!" Walter quipped in the column.[73]

Ruth enjoyed the tumult at the Winchell vortex. Even after she married, she stayed with Walter, running the office single-handedly except for an occasional temp, until May 1935, when she left for Hollywood, where her husband had landed a film contract. Her replacement couldn't have been more different from Ruth. She was a petite, dark, chain-smoking young woman, nervous and birdlike, named Rose Bigman, who was conscientious where Ruth was convivial and who had a manner and voice almost as sharp as her boss's.[74]

Rose's father had died when she was two, her mother when she was seven. She and her older sister spent their childhood unhappily bouncing from one aunt to another until the girls were old enough to work. Rose had worked as a secretary at a real estate firm for several years until "economic conditions made it necessary to dispense with my services," as she wrote in her letter of introduction, then as the secretary to the man in charge of the New York office of Westinghouse radio stations until these were sold to NBC, and then as secretary to an executive at the Columbia Phonograph Company until her division was closed down. A son of one of her bosses was dating Ruth Cambridge at the time and recommended Rose for a temporary position to help with an overflow of mail. She pounced on the opportunity – for years she had carried a clipping of a lovelorn poem from Winchell's column – and arrived for her interview in a large borrowed coat so she would look older than her years. Ruth hired her at $5 a week, and she began work on December 4, 1932, the day Walter debuted his Jergens program.[75]

Though the job was supposed to last only a few weeks, Rose wound up staying nearly a year before Walter decided that the office work no longer warranted two secretaries. Fortunately Bernard Sobel, the *Mirror*'s drama critic now that Walter had surrendered the job, decided to hire her. But Rose never lost her bond to Winchell – even though she hadn't seen him during her first six months on the job – and Sobel was careful not to disparage him in front of her.[76] When Ruth left for Hollywood, as Rose later told it, "Winchell yelled up to Bernie, 'Send Rose down to me!' " From that day, for the next thirty-five years, Rose Bigman was Winchell's gatekeeper, carving out her own small legend among the Broadway cognoscenti.[77]

By his own admission, he was a tyrannical boss. "Nobody's Girl Friday, I am sure[,] has taken so much from a boss who can blow his top faster than I – before orange juice," he wrote in his autobiography, describing a typical phone call. " 'Fercrisssakes! You let me run the leading item when two of the opposition rags had it the day before! I thawt you read all of them. I can't read every paper every day. I don't mind getting it second. I just don't like getting it third!' (Bang! Hanging up.)"[78] Rose called him the "bantam rooster" when he flared up this way.[79] "We'd have these big fights," she recalled. "But when he'd call again, we never mentioned it. Everything was like a new day."

Even so, she was terrified of leaving the office for fear he would phone. "I never went out to lunch. I would practically die before I would have to go to the ladies' room or anything . . . because I never knew from one day to the next what time he would call. It could be ten o'clock in the morning or six o'clock at night. But I'd have



to sit there all day to wait for him, you see."[80] If she did happen to miss his call, he would bark, "Where the hell were you?" She worked seven days a week, including holidays, recovering only when he took his four-week summer vacation.

"Don't let the Boss frighten you – talk back to him when he starts shouting," Ruth counseled from California.[81] But Rose was nowhere near as assertive as Ruth, and she fretted over every little mishap. "You have found out what a worrier I am," she wrote Walter shortly after assuming her duties. "I worry about the column every minute of the day and when I get up in the morning my first thought is 'Did WW leave me any notes? Did I do all right yesterday and other silly things like that?'

"What I'm trying to say is please have a little patience with me. . . ."[82]

At the bottom of the note, Walter typed: "Stop worrying. You're doing bigtime work and I appreciate it. I'm just a nervous guy, get used to me. Love and kisses, Walter." And he gave her a $50 raise.

The routine was killing. Rose arrived at the office at 10:30 each morning and seldom left before 7:30 or 8 o'clock. Each day brought hundreds of packets from press agents. Rose read them and began sorting them by column heading: "Man About Town," "Things I Never Knew till Now," "New York Heartbeat," "Notes from a Girl Friday." The best material she sent to Walter's apartment in what she called the "nightly envelope." Then he composed the column, either at home or in the office late at night after Rose had left, and sent back the rejected items circled in red with comments scrawled in the margins. He also enclosed drafts of letters he wanted typed.

A messenger brought the finished column down from Walter's apartment to the *Mirror* offices on 45th Street. "He'd make so many changes," Rose said. "He crossed out things. He x'd them out. Nobody could read it but me."[83] Frequently he phoned with last-minute emendations. So Rose would retype the column and send a copy to the composing room and another to the Hearst lawyer, who vetted it for libel and sent it on to the editor for another review. It was Walter's expectation that Rose would protect the column from these censors. At first it was "awful," in Rose's word. "I'd be so scared and I'd sit and wait for him [the editor] to call and I'd say, 'What am I going to take out? What am I going to take out?' " But after a while she learned to "fight like mad."[84]

Her most important assignment, however, was not shepherding the column to print or even protecting it against Hearst. Her most important assignment was controlling access to Walter. She learned early that he was never to be disturbed. Ruth was on one of her long lunch breaks one day as a meeting between Walter and some Paramount Picture executives was rapidly approaching. Rose felt a wave of panic. Should she disturb Walter at home to remind him of his appointment or should she let him miss it? She decided she really had no choice but to phone him. Walter was furious at being awakened. He gave her such a dressing-down that she decided thenceforth she "wouldn't call him even if the building was burning."[85] Not even Hearst himself got through. "I'm sorry. Mr. Winchell is sleeping," she told Hearst when he phoned once and demanded that Walter be alerted immediately. "This is William Randolph Hearst," he insisted. Still, Rose refused. Later Walter sent Hearst a note saying that he had been unavailable because he had fallen out of the window.[86]

"Everyone thought I was a battleax until they met me," Rose admitted.[87] When they did meet her, they discovered an unprepossessing young woman – everyone assumed from her phone manner that she was much older – who fully realized that

while she was to run interference for Walter, she had also to mediate between Walter and the press agents who serviced the column. When Walter was about to blacklist a press agent from the column for some offense, real or imagined, it was Rose who said, "C'mon, Boss. Wait a minute. Don't put him on the list. He really didn't mean it."[88] In this way, onetime press agent Ernest Lehman believed, she "kept Walter from going to extremes." On the other hand, it was also Rose who, after Walter had erroneously printed that the Lehmans were "writing their own unhappy ending" – he had confused Ernest with another Lehman – begged Lehman not to demand a retraction. "Please don't ask him to retract," she importuned. "Just forget it."[89]

Rose answered the phones, opened the mail, wrote the letters, retyped the column and broadcast, even changed the ribbon on Walter's typewriter. Yet there was still the enormous job of feeding the maws, and these duties fell to hundreds, if not thousands, of contributors, none of whom expected or received monetary compensation; the mention was compensation enough.

One of the most faithful of these contributors, a thin, painfully shy clerk for the Brooklyn Edison electric company named Philip Stack, began mailing poems to the column under the pseudonym "Don Wahn" in 1929. His verses were both melancholy and cynical, about lost romance and jaded lives, but Walter loved them – they may have reminded him of his own *Vaudeville News* doggerel – and they became a regular feature, running just under Walter's by-line and making "Don Wahn" possibly the best-known poet in New York. Still, Stack was never paid. "I think that contributors to columns like you ought to be paid for their work – by book publishers, I mean," Walter wrote in the introduction to a collection of Stack's poems.[90] "For you never heard of a columnist paying for his contribs – and you never will. Never give a sucker an even break, Barnum is supposed to have said.

"But as that Guinan Gal taught me: 'Never even give a sucker (a contributor) ANYTHING!' "

For Walter it had always been part of the Winchell myth as well as a point of honor that he composed the column virtually by himself and that he never paid for items. But both claims were fallacies. In the early thirties he asked his old roommate Curley Harris to collect items for him at $50 a week. Harris agreed. "Sometimes I'd pick up the column, a third of it would be mine. Sometimes more," Harris recalled.[91] So he asked Walter to revise the arrangement up to $100 a week. Money-conscious as he was, Walter acquiesced. But Harris was soon dissatisfied again. "Eventually I thought the hundred wasn't enough," Harris remembered. "He was making a lot of money. He went up pretty fast, you know. . . . So we finally made an arrangement that he would pay me I think it was $10 or $20 for things on the radio and $10 or something for things in the column. Five items would be $50. So we worked that way for a long time." Others worked on the same basis – author Jim Bishop, then a copyboy, made $5 for each "Oddity in the News" Walter used – but always secretly, lest anyone discover that Walter was not the one-man band he made himself out to be.[92]

Regardless of the number of contributors, it fell to Walter to distill and shape the contributions into columns, and no one ever denied that his sensibility governed. One friend recalled watching Walter intently sitting on the bed in his apartment, brandishing scissors, clipping away at press agents' sheets and then connecting strips with Scotch tape, papers strewn everywhere. "It looked like a kindergarten class," observed the friend. "But he knew what was important. *He knew* that."[93] "He could take any guy's twelve lines and reduce it to six lines and make it far more readable, far more pointed, and it hadn't lost a thing that the original writer put in it," remembered Arnold Forster, the Anti-Defamation League attorney who often contributed political material to the column.[94] Just how good an editor he was may have been most apparent when he was on vacation. "The press agents would send the same material that they sent to Winchell when Winchell was around," remembered one associate, "but none of the other columns ever improved. . . . None of them ever had his style. . . . When he came back, it became Winchell again."[95]



Early in 1937, when he was in Hollywood making *Wake Up and Live* and unable to devote as much time as usual to his column, Walter realized that his ad hoc system would no longer be sufficient. He needed someone who could compose portions of the column and the broadcast for him, someone who was young and hungry and discreet, someone who could be trusted. And he already had a candidate in mind: a tousle-haired, bespectacled twenty-year-old gag writer named Herman Klurfeld.[96]

Like Walter, the Bronx-born Klurfeld was the elder son of Russian Jewish immigrants – his father a house painter, his mother a housewife. He spent his youth in Jewish enclaves around the Bronx, speaking Yiddish until he was taught English in the first grade. During his senior year of high school, he was stricken by a lung abscess and was bedridden for two months, passing the time listening to radio comedians and then penning his own gags, which he never mailed. When he graduated, he planned to become an accountant, but with his father frequently out of work and the family in desperate need of money, he took a job pushing handcarts in the garment district. At night he still wrote gags, scribbling them on index cards. Finally a friend convinced him to send a few of his choicest jokes to Leonard Lyons, the new Broadway columnist at the New York *Post*. Klurfeld sent six. Lyons published one: "Girls used to dress like Mother Hubbard. Now they dress like a cupboard." Klurfeld was ecstatic. "To see my name in a Broadway column in the New York *Post* for a kid who lived in the Bronx tenement area – this was startling for me and all of my friends," he remembered.

He kept submitting, and Lyons kept publishing. "Herman Klurfeld at the Stork says . . ." Finally, after six months, Lyons wrote him asking if he would like to become a PR man. Klurfeld hadn't the slightest idea what a PR man was, but he went to Lyons's office, dressed in the same tattered sweater he wore to his job in the garment district. Lyons explained that a press agent named Dave Green had noticed Klurfeld's contributions and wanted to see him. Klurfeld was so dumbstruck by Green's sumptuous office in the RKO Building and by the celebrity photos decorating the walls that he immediately accepted an offer of $10 per week, even though it was $2 less than he was earning in the garment district. When he raced home and told his parents that he was going to work as a gag writer, they were stunned. "But I loved it. I couldn't wait."[97]

Klurfeld was raw and untutored – Green had to buy him a suit so he wouldn't embarrass the office – and he landed so few gags in the columns in those first months that Green kept cutting back his salary. But when Walter returned from his annual vacation at summer's end and received several months' worth of gags that Green's office had stockpiled for him, he made a point of phoning Green to tell him how much he liked the young man's work and told Green to send him over to the office. When he arrived, as Klurfeld remembered it, Walter was in his fedora pecking away, two-

fingered, at the typewriter.[98] The office "didn't look at all the way I had imagined. Dingy, narrow, cluttered, it was sparsely furnished with several hard chairs, a row of files, a long table and two desks."[99] He was struck immediately by Walter's handsomeness, especially his mesmerizing blue eyes. On either side of the columnist sat two burly men, who Klurfeld later learned were bodyguards: one from the FBI, the other from the mob. Glancing up, Walter pushed himself away from the typewriter. "You have a way with words, kid," he told Klurfeld. And Klurfeld "glowed, simply awed to be in his presence."[100]

For the next hour Walter expatiated about everything from the Stork Club to "The Column" to the movies Zanuck wanted him to make. But he also questioned Klurfeld about his family, his background, and his aspirations, and he seemed especially to approve that Klurfeld's family was so much like his own. Afterward, ducking into a cab, Walter promised they would be seeing more of each other. Two weeks later Walter asked Green to send Klurfeld to the Stork Club. They ate in a private room, only three or four tables, where Walter introduced him to Tallulah Bankhead ("Go fuck yourself" were her first words) and gangster Bugsy Siegel. Again, Klurfeld was dazzled. When, on another occasion, Klurfeld expressed his admiration for the playwright Clifford Odets and cited him as an inspiration, Walter arranged for Odets to join them at Lindy's for breakfast.[101]

If Walter was trying to seduce the young man into the orbit of W.W., he succeeded masterfully. After the Stork, Klurfeld started dropping by the office several times a week in the early evening, before heading off to night school, where he had enrolled in accounting courses. ("Accountant?" Walter had asked him incredulously when he heard. "Accountants don't have fun."[102]) A short time later Walter left for Hollywood. Shortly after that Klurfeld submitted to the column a paragraph he called "The Headliners," which was a series of quotes from famous individuals, followed by a wisecrack. Walter phoned him, which wasn't unusual by now, but this time "he seemed to be very excited," as Klurfeld remembered it. "He said, 'Kid, I loved those "Headliner" things. From now on I don't want you to contribute to any other columnists. I want you to go to work for me. How much are you making?' " $25 a week, Klurfeld told him. "I'll double it," said Walter. It was understood that no one but Dave Green and Rose were to know about the arrangement. Klurfeld was to work at home. Rose even cashed his checks lest anyone wonder why Winchell would be giving a weekly stipend to Herman Klurfeld.

As Herman quickly discovered, working for Walter Winchell was never merely a job; it was a way of life. "I would write the Sunday column, which we started calling 'The New York Scene' and then 'Notes from an Innocent Bystander,' " he recalled. "I would write ninety-nine percent of that column, which was what the critics said about the [Broadway] shows. We boiled it down, you know . . . I did very little [on Monday] except punch up the Monday 'Man About Town' column – the gossip stuff. I would just punch it up with little phrases to make it more readable. The Wednesday column – the 'New York Heartbeart' – that was for press agents. That was a payoff for press agents. That he mostly did on his own."[103] Of the seven columns that Walter submitted each week, then, Klurfeld said he wrote the better part of three, though Walter edited them all. "Some weeks I did four. Some weeks I did two."

On Thursdays, while he was drafting the Sunday column, Klurfeld also began wrestling with his main contribution to the broadcast in those early days – the lasty.[104]



Because of Walter's adamance that listeners remembered most what they heard last, his sign-off – "With lotions of love, this is your correspondent Walter Winchell who . . ." – was given assiduous attention. "How about a hundred [submissions]?" Klurfeld said of the number of lasties he wrote each week before Walter was satisfied. "And sometimes he didn't like anything I gave him of the hundred. And very often I'd give him one and he said, 'That's it.' " But even then Klurfeld couldn't trust that his mission was complete; he was on twenty-four-hour retainer. "I'd say, 'I'm going to have a Sunday off. Terrific!' Well, Sunday morning I get a call from Rose: He changed his mind. He needs a new lasty . . . And there went my whole Sunday. I sat at that goddamned typewriter and turned them out until he got one he liked. Some days he didn't like it and used the one he had on Friday anyhow. . . . I worked harder on that goddamned one line than I did in writing four columns."

For both Klurfeld and Rose, the demands were ceaseless, the work was grueling and slavish, the pay good but not great, and Walter seemingly ungrateful. So why did they subject themselves to it for as long as they did? They often asked themselves this question as the years passed. One answer was action. Working for Winchell, even surreptitiously as Klurfeld did, put one at the center of action and connected one, if only vicariously, to power. "Psychologically I got the joy of working for a man who was to me almost godlike, who could change the world, change people's lives," Klurfeld reflected years later. "He was the king of the world and I was one of the assistant kings."[105]

Rose too enjoyed being at the eye of the storm, swept up in the turbulence. It gave her life momentum and meaning. It also gave her deference and perks, like show tickets and free meals at fine restaurants. And when Walter was inundated with Christmas presents, all of which he felt ethically obliged to return, Rose convinced him to let *her* keep them.[106]

But there was another force that bound both Herman Klurfeld and Rose Bigman to Winchell: the force of family. Like Nellie Cliff, Rita Greene, June Magee and Ruth Cambridge before them – like Broadway in the twenties and America in the thirties – Klurfeld and Bigman were young and adrift and looking for a community that would have them. Walter provided it. "He was sort of a father image to me," Rose said. "I think that's why I took the yelling and everything. I didn't have a father, so I took it from him."[107]

Klurfeld also described his relationship to Walter as one of a father to a son.[108] Walter was the one he wanted to please. "If I've made any kind of headway, I'm grateful to you," Klurfeld wrote Winchell shortly after going to work for him.[109] "You've been a sort of guide and teacher for me. You made me do a lot of things I never dreamed I was capable of performing." A year later he wrote again: "I want to thank you for being so nice to me. I hope that someday I'll be able to afford to contribute material without getting anything for it, simply because I don't consider that work. And the pleasure I get[,] the things I learn from you are worth more to me than anything else. That may sound Pollyannish, but it's the way I really feel."[110]

Sometimes Herman even allowed himself to imagine that he was being groomed for the day when Walter would fulfill his longtime promise to June and retire.[111] To Rose, Walter was less paternal and more abusive, and she thought he regarded her only as a "necessity," but he also referred to her only half-jokingly as his "other wife," and in any case, what she mistook for lack of intimacy was simply the way

Walter dealt with people, warily, never letting down his guard. He trusted Herman and Rose about as much as he would ever trust anyone besides June. Everyone else wanted something. Herman and Rose wanted only to bask in the reflected glory of Walter Winchell.

## III

It wasn't only Winchell, Bigman and Klurfeld who were indentured to "The Column." So were the press agents. "We regarded that column as number one, and we broke our backs to get in there," remembered one.[112] At one agency the going rate for landing a joke in Winchell's column was $75; for landing an "orchid," Walter's method of bestowing praise, $150;[113] and a single mention would hold a client for weeks.[114] That was why the press agents got what they called "seven o'clock stomach" waiting for the first edition of the *Mirror* to hit the newsstands. One press agent recalled rushing his pregnant wife to the hospital to have their baby, then picking up the *Mirror* while he waited for the delivery. When his wife emerged, she beamed and said, "It's a little girl!" and asked if he was happy. The press agent said, "Happy? I got five items in Winchell."[115]

There were, in the late thirties, hundreds of these press agents – some of them joke and pun writers, others news gatherers, still others outright promoters and ballyhoo artists. "In those days being a press agent was like a girl being a model," said one veteran publicist. "When a guy was arrested and they asked him what he did, he'd say 'publicity.' Everybody was in publicity."[116] Press agents had first materialized around the turn of the century to exploit free publicity in the expanding press.[117] Though a bill was introduced in Congress in 1913 seeking to outlaw press agentry and though the New York legislature passed a law in 1920 restricting publicists' activities after one of them had faked the suicide of an actress to promote her new film, press agentry remained a growth industry not only among the august public relations counselors who ministered to corporate clients but among the low-rent hustlers who promoted bandleaders, stripteasers, banjo players and restaurants.[118] It was the rise of the mass media and the concurrent rise of the idea of celebrity that did it. Even the most minor performer realized that publicity, not necessarily talent, was the way to fame, fame the way to success, and a press agent was the first step along the way.

Virtually all these press agents sent material to Winchell – scores of items, pages of items, thick packets of items – every day. Rose Bigman said admiringly that she didn't know how they did it.[119] But the fact was that they had little choice. "You *had* to service Winchell every single day – 'Sounds of the Night,' or funny stories or observations," said Coleman Jacoby, later a comedy writer.[120] Jacoby submitted five pages of jokes to Winchell each day. Press agent Eddie Jaffe submitted as many as ten pages, others even more. "I realized that competing to get into Winchell's column was like a third university for me because you were competing against four hundred other minds every day," said press agent Gary Stevens.[121] Searching for an advantage, Jaffe printed up stationery: "Exclusive to Walter Winchell." Emmett Davis sent his items on pumpkin-colored paper until Winchell scribbled back, "I've had enough of yellow journalism. USE WHITE PAPER!"[122]



Even greater ingenuity was applied to the items themselves. A press agent named Milton Berger once financed a divorce so that the aggrieved husband could sue Berger's client, muscleman Charles Atlas, for alienation of affections.[123] Another time, representing a toupee firm, he planted the story of a man who fell asleep in his barber's chair during a shave and wound up getting his toupee cut. When Marlene Dietrich's press agent was having difficulty keeping her name in the papers, he called on Eddie Jaffe for help. Jaffe, who knew you could always get clippings in the sports department, concocted the "Marlene Dietrich Award" for the race-horse with the best legs, then found a racetrack willing to present it.[124] Another legendary press agent, Jack Tirman, was representing the Kit Kat Club, where "if you didn't get in the papers," the owner "beat you up. He didn't fire you."[125] To keep the Kit Kat in the columns, Tirman began inventing nonexistent acts. One of these, a dance team, wound up getting orchids in Winchell's column as well as a review in the *Post*. When Walter discovered the ruse, he was furious, but Tirman deflected the anger by telling Walter that *if* the dance team had actually existed, Tirman *would* have come to Walter first.

"We and the other press agents fought with each other to see who was in Winchell's favor," remembered Ernest Lehman.[126] Those who weren't in favor had to devise methods to land their client's plugs anyway. This often resulted in elaborate deceptions by which the outcasts routed items through the favored press agents.[127] This way the out-of-favor press agents got the mentions they wanted, and the favored ones were rewarded with mentions for *their* clients because Walter believed they had given him "free" items – that is, items about people and places they didn't represent. The rule of thumb was that Walter would give a press agent one plug for every five "free" items the agent delivered.

There was always more anxiety than honor, more pressure than respite, for the press agents. "We lived in a dangerous world," Lehman said.[128] Clients were seldom satisfied; they always wanted more. Press agents loved to tell the story about dance king Arthur Murray, a dour, laconic man whose press agents got him in the columns by making him the vehicle for their snappy one-liners. Then came a fallow period when Murray wasn't in the papers. So he called his press agent, Art Franklin, and complained, "What happened, Art? Did I lose my sense of humor?"[129]

Even when clients were reasonably satisfied – and the turnover was great in the best of times – press agents found themselves in a daily pincers between competing columnists. That was because columnists seldom returned items, and press agents were forced to guess how much time to let pass before submitting the same items to another columnist, the damage of having the same item run in two columns being incalculable. Of course, Walter received all material first, and press agents appreciated that he alone among columnists always returned unused items promptly, usually no later than a week after submission, frequently with the reason for rejection. Press agents in good standing also appreciated that Walter occasionally sent along a scurrilous item he had received about one of their clients, placing a question mark beside it to show that he wasn't using it.[130]

Still, he inspired terror. Once, at a time when Walter was especially enamored of the rhumba, he was watching a couple on the dance floor and remarked how much he was enjoying them to press agent Sid Garfield, who quickly chimed in, "Look, Walter, I'm enjoying them too."[131] Another time, when a few disgruntled press agents

began griping about Winchell, Jack Tirman looked skyward and blurted, "I'm not listening, Walter."[132] Another press agent remembered instinctively checking his car's rearview mirror when a passenger criticized Winchell, fully expecting to find Walter tailing him.[133]

The greatest fear was of winding up on what Walter called the "Drop Dead List." Any one of a number of petty offenses could land a contributor on the DDL, a Coventry that could last months or even years and that would undoubtedly cost the transgressor clients and money and possibly his job. One common offense was giving Walter an item that had run in another column, something that happened occasionally when a press agent or contributor mistakenly thought he had already rejected an item. Another was giving him an erroneous item – a "wrongo." "Sometimes people give you a wrong steer," Walter frankly told an interviewer in 1937. "When I find that a contributor has done that, I never use his stuff again. I don't know why. It's like finding that a girl has been unfaithful."[134] (This was also the main reason why he seldom confirmed items with the subjects, despite claims that he did; contributors knew they gave him false information at peril of being put on the Drop Dead List.)

Like veterans telling war yarns, every press agent had his favorite story about landing on the DDL or narrowing escaping it. Marty Ragaway earned a place on the DDL when, on meeting Walter, he casually mentioned that he had been sending gags to the column since he was in high school. "Well, how dare you do that to me?" Walter fumed. "How dare you send me copy and let me use a kid in high school's material?"[135] Ben Cohn, under pressure from Walter to supply "novelettes," invented one about a showgirl who was about to jump from her hotel room window because she could not pay the bill. Then she got a call to report to rehearsal, but as she walked through the lobby, the house detective stopped her and told her to forget the rehearsal. He had called the producer and said she couldn't do it.[136]

The story had immediate impact. Producer Billy Rose offered her a job. Radio columnist Nick Kenny wrote a poem to her. The Chez Paree took up a collection. Now Walter wanted to meet her. "My world shattered," Cohn said. So Cohn typed a letter, had the receptionist rewrite it in her hand, put it in an envelope, pricked the envelope with two pins and brought it to Walter. When Walter demanded to see the girl, Cohn said he had let her have his room, then returned to find his money gone, his bridgework missing and the note pinned to his pillow, saying that she had been through so much and was now taking a few things of his. "And so you were only stuck for a story," Girl Friday wrote in the column. "Ben Cohn was stuck for $32 and his bridgework." But he escaped the DDL.

Cohn was among the lucky ones. Gary Stevens was representing a singer named Patricia Gilmore, who was conducting a discreet romance with bandleader Enric Madriguera. The Associated Press had reported that the two had wed, but Gilmore, whose Irish Catholic parents disapproved of the relationship, phoned Stevens to dispute it, and Stevens in turn sent on a denial to Walter, who published it along with a dig at the AP. The AP retaliated by publishing a photostat of the marriage certificate. When Stevens confronted Gilmore, she confessed that they had gotten married but wanted to keep it secret.

Now came the storm. Rose phoned Stevens immediately to ask how he could have made such an error. The next day Walter himself phoned, spewing expletives and demanding that Stevens meet him at the Stork Club that afternoon. When Stevens



arrived at the club, it was empty except for the waiters and Walter, who was eating. Walter ordered him to sit and began lecturing him, almost paternally at first as Stevens remembered it, about the responsibility to check facts. Then he turned angry. "You're on my shit list for one year," Walter said, and quickly dismissed him.

Every day Stevens sent contributions to Winchell, and three days later they would come back, untouched and unclipped and always with the same note: "Don't send these to anyone else." (Stevens circumvented the ban by rewriting items and submitting them to Dorothy Kilgallen at the *Journal* and to Sullivan and then trading items with other press agents.) Months after the imposition of the ban, Walter was dancing at the Stork with a girl whom Stevens was dating at the time. "Tell your friend to call me," Walter said to the girl. Stevens did, and Walter, as if compensating, published seven or eight of Stevens's items in the first few weeks. Bringing up the incident years later, Walter laughed, punched Stevens playfully on the shoulder and said, "I was wrong and you were wrong."[137]

Usually contributors pleaded with Walter to reinstate them. "I am sorry that you think I deliberately tried to palm off someone else's gag on you as my own, and that as a result you feel toward me as you do," comedian Henny Youngman once wrote him abjectly. "Certainly I respect you too much to try to pull anything as raw as slipping you a gag from another column," and he promised that he would henceforth be "doubly careful in checking on any material submitted to me. . . . I cannot risk incurring your displeasure for a mere line."[138] Eventually all but a few were reinstated. The only capital crime for which there was no reprieve was boasting that one could get an item into the column.[139] Walter made it clear that no one had that ability; anyone who believed he did would be making Walter out to be a dupe.

He was most lenient with young press agents. A new publicist at Warner Bros. named Robert William was assigned to provide Winchell with material, and William's boss invited him to dine with Walter at the Stork. Beforehand, however, the two stopped at the Astor Hotel for drinks. William, a novice drinker, downed a scotch and soda "like a malted" and within five minutes was in "the most advanced state of euphoria you could imagine." By the time he arrived at the Stork, he was goggle-eyed, and while he managed to keep himself composed during dinner, after dinner he was "stricken with the greatest case of narcolepsy." William's boss was irritated, but Walter was understanding. "When I was your age I went to sleep right under the table," he said. William believed "he saved my job."[140]

Otherwise Walter was largely contemptuous of press agents. He hated their sycophancy, their mewling, their obvious insincerity, their desperation, which may have reminded him of his own. "The press agents were all over him," recalled David Brown.[141] He walked around "like a shark with little fish around him" was press agent Maurice Zolotow's description.[142] Above all, he hated his dependence upon them.

For the press agents the feeling was mutual. Most of them deeply resented the power Walter held over them, the peremptory banishments, the constant demands, the need to today and bootlick. Their resentment toward Winchell may have been exceeded only by one other hatred: their own profound self-loathing. On the face of it, press agents were a strange, colorful breed who prided themselves on being characters in the Damon Runyon mold. But just beneath the surface of the image, one found an unsavory and largely forlorn group of men. Some were lapsed journalists in mid-career who were frantically searching for a way to make money. Some were fresh

high school kids who liked to wisecrack and hoped they might become humorists or even columnists. Others were orphans and vagabonds who had drifted into publicity because they didn't know how to do anything else. "A lot of these guys couldn't write their own names," Ernest Lehman said.[143]

They spent their evenings, as Walter did, hanging out at clubs and restaurants, hunting for clients, picking up gossip, trading stories, cadging drinks, pressing items on columnists. They lived with a sense of their own corruptibility, often having to bribe their way into columns. At Walter's own *Mirror*, for example, $25 could buy a picture on the center "split page." For $2, radio columnist Nick Kenny would mention a birthday. Kenny's secretary, who happened to be his niece, would demand tickets to radio programs. His brother, who was married to a radio actress, would demand that press agents help her get jobs. A cartoonist for the column named Bill Steinke ("Jolly Bill" he was called) demanded $10, he said, to make a plate. And Kenny himself was a songwriter who plugged those clients who helped get his songs on the radio.[144]

The whole process was grubby and humiliating, and it was no different at many of the other papers. The submissiveness hurt, and the agony of knowing that you were chasing trivia, leaving nothing. Stanley Walker in a scathing dissection of the press agents in *Harper's* magazine wrote of hearing them "cry softly into the beer, ale, Scotch, and rye along Broadway for years and curse their own strange calling. . . . They do become ashamed of themselves at times, though the majority, if they keep at it long enough, manage to smother their consciences."[145]

They tried, some of them, to boost their status by calling themselves "public relations men" or "press representatives," but the terminology of their trade betrayed them. Press agents talked of "servicing" a column and of "scoring" when one had a successful plant in a column. The metaphors were sexual because the press agents saw themselves as procurers with a stable of clients they had to sell and columnists they had to sell them to. And what added insult to the insult was that clients frequently failed to pay; by Eddie Jaffe's estimate, 50 percent of his clients welched.[146]

Yet however shabby the system, however meager the influence of any one individual, save Winchell, they were all locked in an immense cycle of promotion and dissemination and creation which for better or worse helped define the country. "Publicity is the nervous system of the world," wrote Harry Reichenbach, who was one of its earliest and best practitioners.[147] "Through the network of press, radio, film and lights, a thought can be flashed around the world the instant it is conceived. And through this same highly sensitive, swift and efficient mechanism it is possible for fifty people in a metropolis like New York to dictate the customs, trends, thoughts, fads and opinions of an entire nation of a hundred and twenty million people."

Most of the press agents themselves were so absorbed in the details they were myopic to the rest; they never saw the system whole this way or gave a moment's thought to its effect. But a few did. A few knew. "I always believed that a great deal of our news was shaped by a rather small group of press agents," observed Ernest Lehman. "If I ever saw a feature story in a New York newspaper I knew that that was not the result of some editorial board saying, 'Let's do a feature on so-and-so,' or that the feature writer said, 'I've got a great idea. I'd like to do a feature on so-and-so.' I felt it always started with a press agent calling someone and saying, 'Look, I've got a story for you. Here it is.' "[148]



That is the way the system operated. That is the way the world w[illegible] in an age of gossip and celebrity. And the press agents, for all their abasement, were the ants that moved the mountain. For without them, there was no celebrity, no gossip, no mass culture really. And, as he knew only too well, no Walter Winchell either.

## IV

He never called them rivals. To Winchell his fellow columnists were always "imitators," riding on the coattails of his popularity. He loved to read their columns aloud in front of an appreciative audience and provide a running commentary.[149] When he saw items and jokes he had rejected appearing in other columns, he would crack, "I see my rejects are ending up in the garbage pails."[150] But this was more than public entertainment. David Brown, then an obscure young journalist writing a column for *Pic* magazine, was shocked to receive tear sheets of his pieces with comments and criticisms from Walter even though Brown had never met him.[151]

"[M]y impression of the Broadway columnists[,] judging from their output, was that they were, by and large, a rather venomous lot, forever clawing at each other," wrote one, recalling his feeling as he was about to join their ranks.[152] By the late thirties there were many more of them clawing, nearly all of them marginalized Americans – Jews, Catholics, women, homosexuals – venting national frustrations through their own. The *Daily News* had both Ed Sullivan and Sidney Skolsky. When Skolsky was fired for insubordination, he was replaced by a aristocratic-looking Georgian named Danton Walker, who had once served as assistant to Alexander Woollcott and then to Harold Ross of *The New Yorker* before joining the *News* as an assistant to the financial editor.[153] Genial Louis Sobol still covered Broadway for the *Journal*, but when O. O. McIntyre died suddenly, early in 1938, Sobol, who had never really had the stomach for the sort of bare-knuckles journalism that Walter loved, took over as the *Journal*'s resident nostalgist. He, in turn, was replaced on the Broadway beat by Dorothy Kilgallen, the twenty-five-year-old daughter of veteran Hearst reporter Jimmy Kilgallen, and a valued reporter in her own right. Lee Mortimer, who had once written the Sunday column in the *Mirror* while Walter sulked, now had his own column. Hal Conrad wrote Broadway gossip for the Brooklyn *Eagle*, and within a few years producer Billy Rose was to launch a syndicated Broadway column.

"Did you know L. Lyons is now a columnist?" Girl Friday asked in May 1934.[154] Leonard Lyons, who had landed on the *Post* that month, was one of the few with whom Walter didn't quarrel.[155] He had been born in 1906 Leonard Sucher, youngest of seven children of an impoverished garment worker from Romania who died in a sweatshop when Leonard was eight years old. To support the family, his mother set up a candy stand at Ridge and Rivington streets on New York's Lower East Side while Leonard, a bright student, sailed through P.S. 160, skipping four grades. He worked his way through high school, making keys at the Segal Lock Company and during summers running errands at the Palisades Park Commission, where one of his brothers was head bookkeeper. After high school he took accounting courses at City College, then went to St. John's Law School, where he graduated second in his class. He joined a law firm and left two years later to start his own practice.

Soon, however, he realized that the law exerted a weaker claim on him than journalism. One reason why, evidently, was his fiancée, Sylvia Schonberger, whom he had met at a party during his senior year of law school and whom he had instantly resolved to marry.[156] Sylvia, moved by the beautiful letters he had written her, was convinced Leonard could be a writer. In June 1930 he landed a column in an English-language insert in the Yiddish *Jewish Daily Forward* at $15 per week. It was the editor there who renamed him Leonard Lyons.[157]

Six months later the section folded. Lyons was now contributing items to the Broadway columns, including Walter's, but he hadn't lost hope of getting another column of his own. "It was the mad dream – the terrific longshot," he later said.[158] Early in 1934 New York *Post* publisher David Stern put out a call for a Broadway columnist. Lyons submitted his clippings and won the job from among five hundred applicants. (Walter claimed to have recommended him.[159]) He was sitting at a nightclub one night that May batting around possible names for the columm when Walter said, "Here's a natural for you. The Lyons' Den."[160] Lyons liked it and joked that Walter had won the name-the-column contest, the prize being a night on Broadway.

"Why would a lawyer become a columnist?" his son Warren reflected many years later of his seemingly modest and unambitious father.[161] "I asked him this many times. His answer was, 'I don't know.' That's what he said to me. 'I don't know.' " There was always a lingering suspicion both within the Lyons family and without that Lyons hadn't really wanted to be a columnist, that his wife, Sylvia, was the driving force behind his career and the one who stoked his ambition. Lyons would admit only that he liked the excitement of being a columnist, and there certainly were perks.[162] But he may have been unwilling or even unable to admit the deeper attraction that a Broadway column held for a poor boy from the Lower East Side who devoutly wanted to be accepted, and for his wife as well: a Broadway column allowed them to circulate among the famous.

Walter hated having to mix with celebrities; he thought of them as unavoidable nuisances. "I just don't like celebrities," he told an interviewer.[163] "I'm like the violinist in the story who played with the orchestra for forty years, and when the conductor asked him why he made such faces he replied, 'Because I hate music.' " Lyons, on the other hand, loved to mingle with them, and in his column he told tales *about* the famous rather than *on* them, lest he offend. "My father never printed gossip," said Warren Lyons.[164] "If you look through his columns, you'll never find a blind item. . . . You'll never find anything 'who was going out with whom.' . . . He prided himself on not printing gossip." Lyons printed anecdotes instead, which is the main reason Walter was so magnanimous toward him. "You are the first column to come along who [*sic*] doesn't copy me," Walter wrote Lyons his first week on the job.[165]

Lyons cultivated a different image, too, from the pugnacious one that Walter had perfected and that the others copied. He avoided the crossfire that was a staple of the columns, and one of the few times he did attack was to scold Louis Sobol for hosting vaudeville shows because he thought that using celebrities and then writing about them was unethical.[166] Lyons was "a real gentleman," said press agent Robert William.[167] "Pleasant," Eddie Jaffe called him.[168] "Made a real *effort* to be pleasant." *The New Yorker* closed its profile of him by saying, "Everyone is Lyons' friend."[169] And one of those friends, the playwright William Saroyan, observed, "There is not a great deal of desperation in him – if there is any at all."[170]



But anyone watching the tiny man with the prominent nose flitting restlessly from nightclub to nightclub and from table to table, scribbling notes – he was famous for mangling stories to the point of nonsense – knew there was quite a bit of desperation in him, whether his own or Sylvia's. "Driven, dedicated," were words used to describe him.[171] "The hardest-working newspaperman I ever met," said one Broadwayite.[172] "Lyons never drinks, not even coffee," wrote Westbrook Pegler admiringly, "and he tells how when he gets home at 6 A.M. and says 'Good night' the elevator man thinks he is drunk and how his baby is just waking up when he gets in and just being put down when he starts back to work at four in the afternoon – the gay life of a Broadway bon vivant."[173]

Of course, it wasn't gay. It was long and arduous, and by the late thirties even members of the fraternity were questioning whether a Broadway column was worth the effort. In the twenties and early thirties Broadway, pulsating with uninhibited energy, was undeniably the center of the celebrity universe, and the Broadway columnist at the center of the center. But the evolution of café society couldn't conceal that the center was gradually shifting westward to Hollywood, where the movie stars dwelt. More and more, that seemed to be the place for a gossipmonger.

Partly in recognition of the changing order, the *Daily News* had dispatched one of its Broadway columnists, Sidney Skolsky, to California for what was supposed to be a year's tour of duty. Four years later, Skolsky was still in Hollywood. But then Ed Sullivan, jealous of what Walter had accomplished in the movies, convinced *News* editor Frank Hause to recall Skolsky at long last and send Sullivan instead. "I pleaded with him by wire and phone to return," Hause later wrote Walter of the efforts to bring Skolsky back, "but no dice. I guess the competition on the Broadway beat was too much for the Little Mouse, and he liked the easier tempo and climate of Hollywood."[174] Skolsky saw it differently. He fired back a letter of resignation, saying that "Broadway columns are as passé as Broadway"[175] and closing with a slight variation on the tag line of his column: "They got me wrong. I love Hollywood." Skolsky then switched to the *Mirror*, Sullivan left for California and Danton Walker took Sullivan's place on Broadway.

Wisely Walker began by soliciting advice from Walter on how to conduct his column. "Well, how shall I start?" Walter wrote back.

> I think it's important for anyone on a newspaper, particularly one who is doing a column, to "build his fences." The politicians do this a great deal, and it is a wise thing. Of course I mean make as many friends as you can. You never know from where the next line or paragraph is coming. One of your best stories may come from a fellow whose face you never liked, but whom you were nice to – and he appreciated your being civil to him, which is why he gave you the break.[176]

And he issued a warning about press agents: "Try your best to avoid the shyster press agent. There are many of them on our beat, and they think nothing of using one's column to spoil it if it will help them gain something." As for finding the right voice, "Try to be yourself as often as you can. I mean in style." He closed with an ethical consideration: "Never permit anyone to give you a gratuity because if you do, Danton, you will be putting yourself where they want you – in a spot."

Meanwhile, out in Hollywood, Sullivan was exploiting the film industry even more aggressively than Walter had. In short order, he sold three story ideas and appeared in the film of one of them, *Big Town Czar*. (*The New York Times'* Frank Nugent wrote, "[T]he only word for Ed Sullivan's portrayal of Ed Sullivan is 'unconvincing.' "[177]) But as with Skolsky, Sullivan was eventually recalled to New York, and as Skolsky had, Sullivan refused the order. Frank Hause was visiting Sullivan at the time the wire arrived from *News* publisher Joseph Medill Patterson. "I pointed out to the great Port Chester athlete the advantages of the Broadway beat and the News growth and prestige," Hause remembered, "and then dictated a wire to JMP, in which Sullivan stated, 'I acted hastilly [*sic*]. Please ignore earlier telegram. Am returning New York.' He did return, and Patterson, flattered, made Sullivan the fair-haired boy."[178]

Skolsky, in the meantime, was finding Hollywood less hospitable than he had at first thought. Working on the *Mirror* had brought him into direct competition with Hearst's veteran Hollywood columnist, Louella Parsons. Skolsky had been on the paper only a short time when Parsons published a front-page story announcing that Greta Garbo and conductor Leopold Stokowski were to be married. In the very same paper, Skolsky's column reported that the rumours were false. Infuriated, Parsons labeled Skolsky a Communist, and Hearst refused to hear his defense: He would be fired as soon as his contract expired. Three months later he spotted Parsons at Chasen's restaurant with her niece – a movie publicist named Margaret Ettinger – and the journalist Alva Johnston. Johnston and Fttinger waved him over. As Skolsky told it, he spent the next fifteen minutes pleasantly conversing, never addressing a word to Parsons, until she finally chirped, "If I'd known you were so nice, I wouldn't have told Mr. Hearst you were a Communist." Skolsky was so angry he bit her. All told, he was out of work for eight months.[179]

Skolsky should have known better than to take on Louella Parsons. There were others purveying gossip in Hollywood in the mid-thirties, notably a onetime actor and movie publicist named Jimmy Fidler who had a fifteen-minute radio show, but Parsons was the undisputed queen, the Walter Winchell of the West. "I've always claimed a story wasn't a story unless I got it first," she wrote.[180] She had set her sights on being a reporter from the time she was a young girl in Dixon, Illinois. In 1896, at fifteen, she got a job moonlighting as church, social and sewing circle reporter for the Dixon *Star* while she taught school. At twenty-four she married John Parsons, a wealthy real estate agent eight years her senior, who moved her to Iowa, installed her in a boarding house, gave her a daughter and then abandoned her. At twenty-nine, she moved to Chicago, where she wrote articles for the Chicago *Tribune* by day and dreamed up screenplays at night. In the meantime, she married again, this time to an impoverished but attractive sea captain. Eventually she was hired by the Chicago *Record-Herald* to write film reviews and features, but when the *Herald* was folded into Hearst's *American*, Parsons left for New York and landed the job as motion-picture editor on the *Morning Telegraph*, whose current editor had left for the war. Five years later she assumed the same duties on Hearst's New York *American*.[181]

The dominatrix of the relatively small but rapidly growing field of movie news, Parsons worked tirelessly not only building her column but cultivating contacts. Chief among them was William Randolph Hearst's paramour, the actress Marion Davies. It was Davies who invited Parsons to join her on an excursion to Hollywood in May



1925. Parsons was captivated. Feted by the Hollywood community, which respected both the power of her column and her relationship to Davies, the plain, plump, unsophisticated woman from rural Illinois had found her spiritual home. She returned to New York at summer's end, but a bout of tuberculosis sent her back to California for convalescence that fall. When she recovered, Hearst insisted she remain in Hollywood as motion-picture editor of his Universal News Service. It was the syndication of her column in the Hearst papers that cemented her status as the most important of the Hollywood journalists.

In New York the premier gossips were the ones, like Walter, whose tongues were the sharpest and whose scruples the lowest. Power there was a function of one's insolence. In Hollywood, a one-industry town as far as gossip was concerned, things were entirely different.[182] Parsons was part of Hollywood's social order, not antagonistic to it. Her power derived from her relationship with the studio establishment, and her column was largely a compendium of trade news, interviews and other information which the studios wanted to have disseminated. As a result, stars and other employees feared her not because her column could harm them with the public (though it could) but because her coziness with the men who ran the studios could destroy them with their employers. Even so, she was ordinarily quite benign, despite her despotic reputation. "The only time she would get burned up with a star was if they [*sic*] had a big scoop and didn't give it to her," recalled her longtime assistant Dorothy Manners. "She'd ask if they'd lost their minds."[183]

"She was always in the swim," said Manners.[184] She began working the phones at nine each morning, tramping to her desk in her office, which adjoined her bedroom, sometimes still in her robe. The phones rang constantly, and each of her two secretaries had two. As the secretaries fed her information from the studios and from her legman, Neil Rau, Parsons composed the column, then read it to her staff for suggestions. (When a messenger glanced at the column one day and said he didn't understand something, Parsons began reading the column to him too.) By one o'clock in the afternoon the column was filed, and Parsons began her rounds of the studios. By late afternoon she had returned to the office for her hairdresser, and then it was off to Romanoff's or Chasen's or a party.

Once a month she hosted a large gathering of her own, putting up a tent in the yard of her Beverly Hills mansion and inviting as many as two hundred guests. (Later she bought a farm outside Los Angeles, built an oversized porch, outfitted it with bunk beds and entertained on weekends there.) She lived regally with a maid, a cook and a chauffeur, and she expected from the community the deference due a sovereign. Unsurprisingly, everyone paid tribute. Warner Bros. publicist Robert William remembered Parsons's coming to the studio lot at Christmastime to collect her bounty. He filled her station wagon with presents. "And she took it as a kind of princess [from her] devoted crowd," he said.[185]

The princess treated Walter like visiting royalty – at first, no doubt, because they were both members of the Hearst family and thus technically noncompetitive, and later because she had a fifteen-minute radio program that followed Walter's and she realized she inherited part of his massive audience.[186] If she ever said an ill word of Walter, no one could recall it, and she even offered to send him hot stories. "Sometimes things break out here that you could have on the air before they are printed in New York," she told him.[187]

Her spite, all of it, was reserved for Hedda Hopper, a former actress who, in 1937, had the temerity to begin a Hollywood gossip column of her own. Parsons "hated her guts," said Dorothy Manners.[188] Hopper, born Elda Furry, was one of nine children of a butcher in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, in Quaker country just outside Altoona. Her childhood dripped with bitterness and resentment; her seminal experience was nursing her wealthy grandfather back to health after his eyesight had failed and being rewarded for her months of effort with a silver dollar. Bored with school and angry at the favoritism shown her brothers, she ran off to New York to become an actress and met De Wolf Hopper, an aging, physically imposing thespian with the voice of a church organ.

De Wolf Hopper, already four times married, doted on pretty Elda. "To him I was a new audience. I was as fresh as an unhatched egg. He enjoyed the attention he got from his raw recruit, went all out to give a continuous performance."[189] When she landed roles in two shows and toured the country, he wrote her ardently at every stop, and when she returned to New York, he met her at the station and immediately drove her to New Jersey to marry him. De Wolf was so much older than Elda's own father and such a notorious philanderer to boot that a friend of hers wept uncontrollably at news of the marriage. Meanwhile, he had such a difficult time distinguishing his new wife's name from those of his previous wives that Elda consulted a numerologist who, after much deliberation, dubbed her Hedda. Hedda said she hated it, but "I never heard him call me Ella, Ida, Edna, or Nellie again."[190]

Thin and delicate where Parsons was round and thick, pretty where Parsons was snaggle-toothed and jowly, Hedda found work in movies and on the stage through the twenties and early thirties, but by the time she turned fifty in 1935, she was divorced and jobless with a child to support. Eleanor "Cissy" Patterson, an old friend and the publisher of the Washington *Herald*, suggested she write a weekly "letter from Hollywood," and Hedda eagerly seized the chance. She lost the column in an economy move, but in 1937, on the recommendation of a publicist at MGM who claimed that Hopper seemed to have the best intelligence network in the film community, the Esquire Feature Syndicate signed her for a new Hollywood column. When the Los Angeles *Times* picked it up early in 1938, Parsons for the first time had real competition.

There were those who believed that Hedda Hopper had been energetically, if secretly, promoted by the studios as a way of balancing Parsons's power and keeping her in check. If so, Hopper eventually proved less compliant than Parsons and drove her into being less manageable too. Together the two guarded their domains, terrorizing stars, demanding scoops, punishing those who wouldn't provide them and creating a terrible dilemma for the unfortunates who wanted to stay in the good graces of both. "[H]alf the movie colony has gone schizophrenic handling those two old bags," Errol Flynn allegedly complained once. "You've got to please one without alienating the other!"[191]

But however much they loathed each other, Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper were really very much alike. They were both conservative, prudish, narrow-minded small-town women in an essentially conservative and prudish community, and they used their gossip as a club to keep celebrities in line rather than as a needle to make celebrities scream. This was also one reason why Parsons and Hopper never had anywhere near the impact that Winchell had, even though their names became almost



as well known as his. Winchell took on the world. As members of the establishment, Parsons and Hopper, like two biddy schoolmistresses, always fought to conserve the old order until the world passed them by.

## Notes

1 Note on telegram Bernie to W, Dec. 22, 1934; W to Bernie, n.d., Bernie file, Winchell papers.
2 W to Zanuck, Oct. 15, 1935, Twentieth Century-Fox file, Winchell papers.
3 Telegram Zanuck to W, Sept. 19, 1936, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
4 NY *American*, Sept. 30, 1936.
5 W to Zanuck, Oct. 3, 1936, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
6 Telegram Zanuck to W, Oct. 5, 1936, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
7 W to Brand, Oct. 14, 1936, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
8 Leonard Gaynor, Twentieth, to Richard Hyman, King Features, Dec. 11, 1936, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
9 "Jergens Journal," Sept. 11, 1938, NBC Blue, roll 712, NBC records.
10 Zanuck to W, Sept. 19, 1936, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
11 W to Abel Green, Jan. 4, *Variety* file, Winchell papers.
12 NY *Mirror*, Jan. 8, 1937.
13 Ibid.
14 Zanuck to W, Jan. 8, 1937, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
15 NY *Mirror*, Jan. 19, 1937.
16 *NY Times*, Feb. 7, 1937.
17 Clipping, n.d., MWEZ + n.c. 11, 680, NYPL at Lincoln Ctr.
18 NY *Mirror*, Feb. 26, 1937.
19 Telegram, Lanfield to W, Feb. 26, 1937, L file, Winchell papers.
20 Whitney Bolton, "The Stage Today," NY *Morning Telegraph*, Jan. 27, 1937.
21 Clipping, n.d., Scrapbook 1936–37, NYPL at Lincoln Ctr.
22 Telegram Lanfield to W, April 7, 1937, L file, Winchell papers.
23 W to Hearst, April 9, 1937, Hearst file, Winchell papers.
24 W to Lyons April 8, 1937, Lyons file, Winchell papers.
25 NY *Mirror*, April 12, 1937.
26 Ibid., April 19, 1937.
27 Telegram W to Rose Bigman, April 18, 1937, Bigman coll.
28 NY *American*, April 24, 1937; April 25, 1937.
29 *NY Times*, April 24, 1937.
30 Telegram Billy Rose to W, April 25, 1937, NYPL at Lincoln Ctr.
31 *NY Times*, March 28, 1937.
32 NY *American*, April 26, 1937.
33 Press release, Twentieth Century-Fox, Scrapbook 1936–37, NYPL at Lincoln Ctr.
34 *Motion Picture Daily*, April 27, 1937.
35 Harry Brand to W, April 26, 1937; Brand to W, April 28, 1937, Zanuck file, Winchell papers.
36 Quoted in Irving Hoffman, clipping, MWEZ + n.c. 11, 680 in NYPL at Lincoln Ctr.
37 Quoted in W to Zanuck, May 5, 1937, Twentieth Century-Fox file, Winchell papers.

38 Zanuck to W, May 5, 1937, Twentieth Century-Fox file, Winchell papers.
39 Moskowitz to W, July 19, 1937, Twentieth Century-Fox file, Winchell papers.
40 *The Front Page*, "Lux Radio Theater," June 28, 1937, Cassette 13646, Sound Div., Library of Congress.
41 Beucus to W, Sept. 16, 1937, Layer coll.
42 *Editor & Publisher* (Sept. 18, 1937), 20.
43 W to Abel Green, Sept. 24, 1937, *Variety* file, Winchell papers.
44 Press release, "Love and Hisses," Sept. 22, 1937, Winchell file, Margaret Herrick Lib., AMPAS.
45 W to Green, Oct. 1, 1937, *Variety* file, Winchell papers.
46 Rita Greene, unpub. ms., 46A–47A, Pat Rose coll.
47 Ibid., 72–73. Pat Rose, niece of Rita, int. by author.
48 Rita Greene to W, Oct. 2, 1937, Pat Rose coll.
49 Margarie Hockley to Rita Greene, Oct. 4, 1937, Pat Rose coll.
50 Ibid., 52; PR.
51 Ibid., 52.
52 W to Rita Greene, Sept. 29, 1938, Pat Rose coll.
53 Greene, 52A.
54 "Jergens Journal," Nov. 14, 1937, NBC Blue, roll 694, NBC records.
55 *Time*, July 11, 1938, 36.
56 Lanfield to W, Dec. 21, 1937, L file, Winchell papers.
57 *NY Times*, Jan. 3, 1938.
58 *Newsweek*, Jan. 3, 1938, 34.
59 NY *Herald Tribune*, Jan. 3, 1938.
60 "Jergens Journal," March 20, 1938, NBC Blue, roll 701, NBC records.
61 *he would have continued making movies . . .* Ibid., March 6, 1938, roll 701
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63 Al Rylander, int. by author.
64 Lucille Ball int., Apr. 22, 1970, Thomas coll.
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