Chapter Eight

The Glory Days and Nights

In 1930, John Barrymore amassed more baroque art for Bella Vista. Below Mad Jack's crowned serpent coat-of-arms passed a treasury of religious artifacts — icons, triptychs, and silver candelabra from the Georgian Knights. There was a 13th-century Book of Hours, described as a "hand-executed, illuminated Catholic doctrine which chronicles the story of Jesus."

These joined the ancient Chinese wall sconces, Louis XV antique furniture, and a dinosaur egg, which, amidst such surroundings, seemed capable of miraculously hatching.

Meanwhile, on April 8, 1930, daughter Dolores Ethel Mae ("Dede") was born. Barrymore joked sourly to the press that his baby daughter looked "a little like Lon Chaney" — he had desperately wanted a boy.

The man appeared blessed in every way, yet he was restless, chain-smoking, and drinking heavily. After a sailing adventure to Alaska in 1931, Barrymore brought home a new acquisition, a towering totem pole, and he erected it to loom over Bella Vista, its painted, grotesque faces leering at anyone visiting the No. 6 Tower Road estate.

Lionel his brother was concerned. There were, John had learned, bodies of Alaskan natives entombed in the totem pole, and Lionel Barrymore feared the curse that it threatened to cast down upon the unbowed head of his brother. Years later, Lionel still blamed his brother's spectacular downfall on the Totem Pole. Lionel was too dependent, emotionally and financially, on the mercies of the film establishment — specifically his Barrymore and friend with the notorious totem pole at Bella Vista
studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, which had financed his drug addiction — to place the blame on Hollywood.

The Hollywood of the 1930s was similar to the New York theatre of the early 1920s — racy, violent and sensational.

Greta Garbo chose to play streetwalker Anna Christie as her first talkie. Paramount imported Marlene Dietrich from Weimar Berlin after her “Lola-Lola” paraded her legs and garters in the S&M classic The Blue Angel. Sound made it possible to hear John Barrymore scream maniacally as his leg was amputated in his second go-round as Captain Ahab, which Warners now titled Moby Dick.

Edward G. Robinson snarling as Little Caesar, Bela Lugosi drinking virgins’ blood in Dracula, James Cagney shoving a grapefruit in Mae Clarke’s face in The Public Enemy, Dietrich facing the firing squad in Dishonored adorned in whore makeup and finery — all fascinated the 75,000,000 people who attended the 1931 movies weekly despite or perhaps because of the Depression woes.

The future Bundy Drive Boys were in the right place at the right time.

May 1, 1931: Svengali, starring John Barrymore, premiered at New York’s Hollywood Theatre. Based on the George du Maurier novel Trilby, it’s a hip Dracula, Gothic, subversive and rich in black comedy. As Svengali, Barrymore, in his long flowing hair and hellishly curled beard, looks like Lucifer at Woodstock, adorned in dark slouch hat and cloak, driving a lovesick woman to suicide, hypnotizing Trilby (17-year-old Marian Marsh) into becoming both his star diva and bed partner — and magically making the audience love him for it. There are even two baroque bonuses: a nude scene of Trilby (from the rear, and played by Ms. Marsh’s double in a body stocking) and, for a topper, Svengali climactically succeeding in taking Trilby out of the arms of her ingénue lover (Bramwell Fletcher, Barrymore’s future son-in-law) and into the grave with him.

“Oh God,” Barrymore’s Svengali heartbreakingly prays as he dies. “Grant me in death what you denied me in life — the woman I love!”

God, amazingly on the side of the Devil, gives the villain his final wish. The ending was similar to du Maurier’s, but so unlike a conventional Hollywood happy ending as to be startlingly more than 75 years after its release.

Marian Marsh died at her Palm Desert house in 2006 at the age of 93, where she displayed two of the paintings of her created for Svengali. Years before, she had spoken to me about the joy of acting with John Barrymore:

Marian Marsh and John Barrymore in Svengali
Proud, glamorous parents with John Drew
When I first met John Barrymore, he was sick in bed, at his house, up on Tower Road ... Jack Warner and Darryl Zanuck led me upstairs to Barrymore; he was in this great big enormous bed in this great big enormous room. As I walked in, Barrymore was propped up in bed, lots of pillows around him; he sat up straighter.

"Has anyone ever remarked," asked Barrymore, "that you resemble my wife, Dolores?"

"Yes," I said.

"Who?" asked Barrymore.

And I said, "The butcher on Vine Street, who gives me liver for my cat!"

Well, Barrymore just laughed his head off!

Warners fretted that the notorious, 49-year-old Barrymore might despoil their virginal starlet. The front office awaited news that Marian's panties had hit the floor. However, as Marian Marsh validated, there was no seduction:

These were happy days for Jack Barrymore. He was on his best behavior; he was happily married to Dolores Costello, and he wasn't drinking. Dolores would visit the set with their little daughter, Dede, who was just learning to speak then. The little girl didn't like that beard! When Barrymore would want to kiss her, she didn't like that very much.

Barrymore, always enchanted by animals, paid at least as much attention to Leo, the black cat who was Svengali’s familiar in the melodrama, as to his leading lady. The company soon became used to the sight of Barrymore playing with Leo, and treating the cat to sardines.

_Svengali_ was probably Barrymore’s greatest cinema performance — he’s the spidery serpent from the Barrymore coat-of-arms. But Hollywood denied him an Academy Award nomination — the 1931 winner, ironically, was Lionel Barrymore, for his portrayal of an alcoholic lawyer who drops dead defending his errant daughter (Norma Shearer) in MGM's sex saga, _A Free Soul_. As Margot Peters wrote in _The House of Barrymore_:

Lionel’s performance was very good, yet it was typical of the Academy to award big and fundamentally sentimental pieces of acting. In Svengali, John Barrymore was always subtly ironic. Who was he mocking — himself, the role, the cast, Hollywood? Oscars didn’t go to mockers.
John Decker established himself in Hollywood — the 1930 census finds him living at 1058 Spaulding Avenue in West Hollywood with a new wife. Clark Gable, meanwhile, was on the rise, a sensation after roughing up Norma Shearer in *A Free Soul*, for which Lionel Barrymore had won his Academy Award. The new MGM star wanted John Decker to paint his portrait, in the armor of a cavalier.

He recoiled in horror when he saw the final result.

“You’ve made my ears look way too big!” protested the future King of Hollywood.

Columnist Jimmy Starr, retired in his late years to Arizona, told the *Phoenix Gazette* the whole story:

[Decker] did this picture of Gable, and Gable seeing the finished product, said he didn’t like it because it made his ears look too big. Decker was enraged and sued Gable for the money he was to have received for painting the picture.

I don’t think he was really that mad and probably it was just a ploy to get his name known in Hollywood, but anyway the judge ruled that Gable didn’t have to pay if he didn’t want to.

Sometime later [the summer of 1934] the painting went on sale at an auction ... It was purchased by a man whose daughter was a fan of Gable’s. But when he took it home he discovered it was too big to hang on the wall of his house.

Several nights later I was out shopping for some andirons and by chance I happened to visit the man’s shop. I saw the picture hanging there and, of course, recognized it immediately.

“Where did you get that?” I said, excitedly.

He told me about the auction and about it being too large to hang in his house. I asked him if he wanted to sell it.

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll sell it for what it cost me — $7.50.”

You better believe I had the money out and quick. I took the painting home and forgot all about the andirons.

A couple of days later *Variety* ran a story about Jimmy Starr being an art collector now that he had John Decker’s painting of Gable. Well, Gable saw the story and came over to my house and said he wanted to buy the picture from me. He offered $500.

I told him, “Okay, Clark. I’ll sell the picture to you if you’ll sign a paper saying you won’t ever destroy it.” He wouldn’t agree to that.
The Decker's astral facade
by his friend and
devil within.

John Bangsone
The painting still survives — part of the John Decker collection owned by Charles Heard.

For all the protests, John Decker was winning favor. Two of his most popular works of that time were his rendition of the Marx Brothers as “Burgomeisters” and a separate painting of Harpo as Gainsborough’s “Blue Boy.” Harpo proudly exhibited the painting ever after, and a visitor once asked him if he liked it.

“Like it?” Harpo exclaimed. “Hell, I built my new house around it!”

Decker, meanwhile, enjoyed himself observing the pomposity and the actual idiocy of the Hollywood art establishment and its bonehead *nouveau riche* collectors. As he later noted:

By far the worst offenders in the crime of kicking-the-artist-around are the flighty wives of prominent motion picture producers. They all want to be painted in the manner of Gainsborough, because he placed big hats and flattering dresses and flowery backgrounds in his work.

There was one producer’s wife who came to me. She wanted me to do an imitation of Watteau to be hung over her new square fireplace. I checked on the possibilities, and learned that Watteau painted most of his work oblong because clients went in for high frames in the rococo age. But, among Watteau’s efforts, I located one square masterpiece he did, which I said I could easily copy, and which would give the producer’s wife something beautiful to overlook her fireplace. I then named my price. She said she’d have to think it over. Three days later she phoned me.

“Mr. Decker,” she said, “I must tell you honestly that I feel your price is much too high. I’m leaving for England in a few weeks — so I’ve decided to buy an original Watteau and cut it down to fit!”

Then there was the sweet young blonde spouse of another producer. Sweet, but awfully dumb. She saw an exhibit of my work in Los Angeles, and was so impressed that she asked me to paint her. I agreed. But, an hour before the sitting, she phoned.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Decker,” she cried frantically, “but my husband has suddenly made a lot of money on a movie deal, and now he’s sending me to Europe. He says I should go there because then I can be painted by one of the real Old Masters!”

And people wonder why artists die young!
March 31, 1932: *Scarface* with screenplay and dialogue by Ben Hecht premiered in New Orleans. The sexiest, most violent and flamboyantly aberrant gangster saga of them all starred Paul Muni as an Al Capone-type gangster and was produced by Howard Hughes. Hecht, who'd been in Chicago during Capone's beer wars and knew the subject all too well, was one of several writers on the picture, but its true muscle — demanding that Hughes pay him $1,000 at 6 p.m. each day he labored on the script. Howard Hawks directed, and shot the film using real bullets; reportedly Harold Lloyd's brother, while visiting the set, lost an eye due to a wayward shot.

Paul Muni starred as Tony "Scarface" Camonte, greased up and naturally scarred, while George Raft as his chief lieutenant Johnny tossed a coin and cut out paper dolls. "Look out, Johnny, I'm gonna spit!" exults Muni as he rejoices in his new machine gun. The real fireworks of *Scarface*, however, explode in the warped relationship of Scarface and his sister Cesca (played by a wild-eyed Ann Dvorak). Hecht developed an incestuous relationship between brother and sister that crackled throughout the film's death scenes and machine gun battles.
Tony: I don’t want anybody puttin’ their hands on you … I’m your brother.

Cesca: You don’t act like it. You act more like … I don’t know … some kind of … sometimes I think…

*Scarface* features various sensations, including Karen Morley as Scarface’s platinum moll Poppy (who berates him in a restaurant for damaging her stockings with his feet), and Boris Karloff as Gaffney, a rival gangster shot down in a bowling alley as he rolls a strike. But the real show is the bristly passion of the kinky Camontes, as Tony and Cesca fight it out together against the cops and the world — Tony shot down in the street under the sign, “The World At Your Feet.”

There were censorship battles for *Scarface*, which endured a title alteration: *Scarface: Shame of a Nation* and, in New York, a revised ending (Scarface going to the gallows). The censors also attempted to axe the violence and the Tony and Cesca kinky chemistry, but for the wrong reason; they felt that Tony’s love for his sister “was too beautiful to be attributed to a gangster”!


Based on Vicki Baum’s novel, the luxuriantly melancholy *Grand Hotel* is perhaps the most celebrated movie of MGM’s halcyon days, boasting a gallery of unforgettable performances: Garbo as the heartbreaking ballerina Grusinskaya, who utters the words, “I want to be alone”; John Barrymore as the sardonic Baron, who robs Grusinskaya and makes love to her; Joan Crawford as the alluring stenographer Flaemmchen; Wallace Beery as the tycoon Preysing; Lionel Barrymore as the pitiful, dying clerk Kringelein; and Lewis Stone as the scarfaced Doctor, who mutters amidst the scandal and death, “*Grand Hotel. People coming, people going … nothing ever happens.*”

*Grand Hotel’s* most iconic episode is the Garbo and Barrymore love scene. From the moment John Barrymore greeted Garbo by kissing her hand and saying, “My wife and I think you are the loveliest woman in the world,” she was in awe of his charm and artistry. Garbo broke one of her long-standing commandments by posing for the press with Barrymore on the set (arranging to sit so his left profile was to the camera); she prepared some “Irak punch” for him when he arrived one morning with a hangover. And after their beautiful love scene, Garbo shocked the company by giving Barrymore a passionate kiss.

“You have no idea what it means to me to play opposite so perfect an artist!” she cried.

Garbo and her beloved co-star she said was touched with “divine madness”
The Best Picture Academy Award winner of 1931/1932, *Grand Hotel* was a sensation, and John Barrymore’s dashing Baron is one of his flagship film performances. Garbo called Barrymore “one of the very few who had that divine madness without which a great artist cannot work or live.”

May 13, 1932: RKO released *State’s Attorney*, starring John Barrymore and scripted by Gene Fowler and Rowland Brown. Fowler based the script on his book *The Great Mouthpiece*, concerning attorney William Joseph Fallon, the criminal lawyer who defended over 125 homicide cases and never lost a trial. The pre-Code melodrama — Barrymore defends a prostitute (Helen Twelvetrees) in night court, and ends up living with her — is a striking example both of Fowler’s maverick style and the loose moral code of early 1930s Hollywood.

It was only now that Gene Fowler first saw John Decker. Rowland Brown, Fowler’s collaborator on the two aforementioned films, was en route to RKO with a hungover Fowler to work on the script for *State’s Attorney* when, as Fowler put it:

We chanced to see in Gower Gulch a harried gentleman [Decker] in a condition similar to my own. He was hatless. A flock of blackbirds could be seen flying down again and again to gather hair from the gentleman’s head for the upholstering of their nests. He was batting at the industrious birds, and cursing them.

Hardly settled in Hollywood, Fowler was already all too eager to lampoon it. Come June 24, 1932, and RKO released *What Price Hollywood?* — Fowler’s satire on the film colony. As ham actor Max Carey, Lowell Sherman provided a superb send-up of himself and John Barrymore (who was then Sherman’s brother-in-law), and the film plays as an early version of *A Star is Born*.

The leading lady of *What Price Hollywood?* was Constance Bennett, and the blonde star was just the type of pampered cinema goddess Fowler instantly despised. She hated the script. He was not very fond of her. Demanding various rewrites, Ms. Bennett received new pages one day for a scene in which she, as a movie star, was announcing her retirement from the silver screen to embrace motherhood. Not bothering to read the new lines beforehand, she grabbed the script and began rehearsing fully in character, as Fowler knew she would.

“And I’m going to have a beautiful black baby…” announced Constance Bennett.

The stagehands burst into laughter. Constance, in a rage, threw her pages on the
floor, and demanded Fowler be fired. He wasn’t. *What Price Hollywood?*, directed by George Cukor, was a hit and Gene Fowler had won a place in the movie colony while simultaneously throwing down the gauntlet at it.

To return for a moment to Lowell Sherman — it was during 1932 that he and his wife Helen Costello, Dolores’ sister, divorced. Sherman had just arranged with John Decker to paint Helen’s portrait, and Decker had already begun work when he read in the newspaper of the marital breakup. According to Decker:

I raced to the phone and called the actor. “Hello, Lowell!” I exclaimed. “This is Decker. You know that portrait of your wife you ordered? Well, I heard you’re divorced. I’ve got the picture three-quarters done, and I want to know what woman you’re going out with now — I’d like to put the damn face in!”

Gene Fowler tried to keep his distance from Hollywood, spending summers in Fire Island, where he worked on his books. Nevertheless, cinema colony temptation came
his way and he began an extramarital romance with actress Ann Harding. His wife Agnes forgave him and it would not be her only absolution.

June 4, 1932: John Barrymore, casting aside his fears of family madness, had vowed he’d give up drinking if Dolores bore him a boy. Dolores Costello Barrymore then gave birth to a son, John Blythe Barrymore (later to be known as John Drew Barrymore). As Phil Rhodes later learned, the pregnancy had been a troubled one, as John Decker would visit Bella Vista and loudly reminisce, in earshot of Dolores, how people in post-war Germany ate babies.

The Monster greeted the news of his son's birth with joy and hysteria, sending to Bella Vista for a revolver and vowing to stay at the hospital to protect the baby from kidnappers. When business advisor Henry Hotchener arrived at the hospital, Barrymore asked him to keep vigil as he left “for a few minutes.” He returned hours later, drunk, and passed out. Dolores sent for him and wept when told of his condition.

“I swore that if God would give me a son I would never drink again,” said Barrymore a few days later. “What happens to a man who makes a sacred oath — then breaks it?”

September 30, 1932: RKO released A Bill of Divorcement, starring John Barrymore as Hilary Fairfield, a madman who escapes his asylum one Christmas, comes home, and prompts the daughter he never knew (Katharine Hepburn, in her screen debut) to forsake her fiancé due to her fear of inherited insanity.

Not since Hamlet had Barrymore tackled a role so potentially catastrophic — his own terrors of his insanity and his father’s must have given him nightmares during the shoot. That he began work on the film a month after the birth of his son, surely with the fear of inherited madness acute in his mind, seems disastrous, especially as his character is addressed by a doctor as “the man who ought never have had children.”

As always, Barrymore hid his fears on the set. Despite rumors that he had seduced her in his dressing room and she fled crying, Katharine Hepburn remembered Barrymore as kind, funny and irreverent during the shoot. Come the famous line, “Do you know what the dead do in Heaven? They sit on their golden chairs and sicken for home,” Barrymore altered the line on the first take:

Do you know what the dead do in Heaven? They sit on their golden chairs and play with themselves.
George Cukor directed sensitively; Barrymore masterfully gave the impression of being a lost child about to cry, with a few moments of almost frightening madness:

When I talk I see a black hand reaching up through the floor. You see that widening crack in the floor to catch me by the ankle and drag, drag…!

December 2, 1932: The Great Magoo, a ribald play by Ben Hecht and Gene Fowler, produced by Billy Rose and directed by George Abbott, opened at Broadway’s Selwyn Theatre. As MacAdams wrote in his Hecht biography:

The play ends with Nicky and Julie leaving her squalid room, Julie exclaiming, “Oh darling, it’s like a fairy tale,” since she has been rescued by Nicky from a sordid fate. Tante, an old woman from Nicky’s show, comes running after them holding up a douche bag, calling, “Hey Cinderella. You forgot your pumpkin!”

The opening night crowd — including Fannie Brice, Noel Coward, Sophie Tucker and Groucho Marx — roared with laughter but the critics were appalled. Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times wrote:

The authors of The Great Magoo are not frugal. In one way or another they manage to peek backstage all the way from Coney Island to rehearsal halls in New York and the flea circus. But the formula of these picaresque slumming parties is now thrice familiar and maggoty talk is no longer a fine theatrical virtue….

The Great Magoo folded after only 11 performances. Gene Fowler, taking it all in stride, wanted to lie in a coffin at Campbell’s Funeral Parlor and invite the critics to pose as his pallbearers. It was beneath the critics’ dignity, if not Fowler’s.

The only film to team all the famous Barrymores, John, Ethel and Lionel, MGM’s Rasputin and the Empress, opened on December 23, 1932.

The shoot had been tumultuous. Charles MacArthur wrote the script as the film proceeded (with uncredited help from Hecht), sometimes turning in his pages the
morning the scene was to be shot. Ethel hated her performance as the Czarina (“I look like Tallulah’s burlesque of me”), managed to have Charles Brabin fired as director (Richard Boleslavski replaced him), and lambasted Hollywood in general (“The whole place is a set, a glaring, gaudy, nightmarish set, built up in the desert”).

In the fraternal scenery gnashing, Lionel plays the Mad Monk, relishing every eye-rolling beard-stroking nuance. John, playing the dashing Prince, pops his eyes at Lionel and plays with a sword during Lionel’s lines; in one scene-stealing moment, he begins to smoke a cigarette, and mugs when he realizes he’s about to put the wrong end in his mouth.

The film’s assassination vignette has the two stars let rip over-the-top acting. Lionel’s Rasputin, having glutted on poison cakes, is a demonic monster who will not die; John, cackling and leering, virtually becomes Mr. Hyde as the assassin, spitting out a glob of vomit, smashing his victim’s skull with insane glee, making the sign of the cross as Lionel’s Rasputin, a bloody pulp, rises yet again from the floor to prophesy “the great day of wrath.”

“Get back in hell!” shrieks John.

The finale of the scene — John drowning Lionel in an icy river — originally went awry as John, screaming, lost his balance and fell into the icy water, leaving Lionel glowering on the turf.

“It achieves one feat which is not inconsiderable,” reported the New York Herald-Tribune. “It manages to libel even the despised Rasputin.” Maybe so, but it was Prince Felix Youssoupooff (on whom John’s character was based) and his wife Princess Irina who actually sued for libel, claiming the film inferred that Rasputin had raped Irina. The damages allegedly amounted to $750,000, but MGM’s loss was a slight one — Rasputin and the Empress was a major hit and audiences flocked to see the three Barrymores in flamboyant form.

Ben Hecht began the New Year of 1933 with uncredited scripting work (with Charles MacArthur) on RKO’s Topaze starring John Barrymore in goatee and pince-nez. In a letter dated February 8, 1933, Hecht wrote to Gene Fowler:

I received a request from some cheap cocksucker getting up a literary magazine asking me for contributions and warning me in the same breath, not to write anything pornographic ... I mailed him back a large hand-drawn picture of a cunt — as I remember it — with the suggestion that he use it for a cover.

For all his success in the movies, Hecht had not mellowed in his feelings for Hollywood. As he added in this missive:
You and your God damn Hollywood trollops with their quiff hair hanging like batches of seaweed from a stinking derelict!

Following their joint Broadway flop *The Great Magoo*, Hecht and Fowler decorated their office at MGM to resemble a whorehouse, hiring a voluptuous blonde named “Bunny” to perform her secretarial duties in only a pair of high heels. Some eyewitnesses to Bunny’s charms also recall her wearing at times a blazing red dress. Visitors to the Hecht and Fowler office were voluminous, with Clark Gable a regular, wide-eyed caller.

The two writers kept busy producing Bunny-inspired drafts for *Farika, the Guest Artist*, to star W.C. Fields and Marie Dressler. It was never produced.

May 26, 1933: Paramount released *International House* — a mad comedy featuring such sensations as W.C. Fields, real-life gold-digger Peggy Hopkins Joyce, Rudy Vallee, Burns and Allen, Bela Lugosi, and “Girls in Cellophane.”

W.C. Fields had arrived in Hollywood the previous year, with a car, cash, and a Paramount contract. He then starred in *Million Dollar Legs* (1932), followed by his guest spot in the all-star *If I Had a Million*. He settled in Toluca Lake, just down the street from Boris Karloff, hardly sharing the affection that Karloff had for the swans that sailed on the lake and eventually came to land to seek food.

“Shit green or get off my lawn!” roared W.C. Fields to his swan neighbors.

While Karloff made peace with the swans, Fields declared open war on them, including their “leader,” a hostile swan with a seven-foot wingspan whom Karloff had named “Edgar.” In his book, *W.C. Fields: A Biography*, James Curtis relates that Fields eventually attacked the swans with a golf club and a baseball bat — and the swans retaliated so savagely that W.C. fled Toluca Lake and moved to a ranch in Encino.

It’s in *International House* that W.C. makes a spectacular entrance, his auto-gyro-helicopter crashing through a hotel ballroom roof in the village of Woo-Hoo, China:

W.C.: Hey Charlie, where am I?
Franklin Pangborn (as a prissy hotel manager): Woo-Hoo!
W.C. (throwing away the flower in his lapel): Don’t let the posey fool ya.
International House is packed with ribald humor, weird songs and pre-Code daring. W.C. wanders through the show in top form (pausing to peek through a keyhole, he muses, “What will they think of next?”). As the climax neared, the audience watched W.C. (as Professor Quail) and Ms. Joyce (as herself) preparing to escape Lugosi (as Peggy’s ex-husband) in a car:

Joyce: I tell you, I’m sitting on something. Something’s under me. What is it?
W.C.: It’s a pussy!

The last line said as the oft-wed Peggy Hopkins Joyce moves her used-and-abused fanny and reveals she is indeed sitting on … a cat and her kittens. The censors weren’t buying it, and W.C.’s exultant pussy line lit the censorship firestorm of 1933. As for the “pussy” bit, Simon Louvish reports in Man on the Flying Trapeze: The Life and Times of W.C. Fields, that the script had said “cat,” but W.C. had changed it to “pussy,” and the word somehow escaped the Breen office censors. Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) secretary Carl E. Milliken was fit to be tied when he reported to his boss Breen on the pussy matter:

The elimination referred to above apparently escaped the notice of our office and of the public group reviewers. The dirty-minded lout who put it in the picture knew perfectly well, however, what he was doing…

The dirty-minded lout went on to a great 1933 at Paramount, following up with Tillie and Gus, his first film with the redoubtable Baby LeRoy. It was the fount of one of John Decker’s favorite stories:

W.C. Fields, who passionately hates kids and thinks they’re brats, had to do a picture with Baby LeRoy when that youngster was the rage of Hollywood. Day after day he had to play a scene with the kid on his arm. And every day, after the kid had his orange juice, he wet his diapers on Fields’ arm! Finally, Fields decided to take a vacation from this annoyance. One afternoon, while the orange juice was being prepared, Fields dropped a slug of gin in it. It was fed to the baby, who promptly passed out — and Fields had a three-day vacation!
Fields capped 1933 as Humpty Dumpty in Paramount’s Christmas release, the all-star Alice in Wonderland. There’s still the familiar W.C. glint in this Egg Man’s eyes; one keeps waiting for him to leer at Charlotte Henry’s Alice from atop the wall.

July 16, 1933: “Sadakichi Hartmann, ‘Ex-King of Bohemia,’ Still a One-Man Show,” headlined the Los Angeles Times. Sadakichi tossed a benefit for himself, inviting the world at large to a lawn party off the Cahuenga Pass, with admission 50 cents a head. “For years now he has ruled Hollywood’s arty coteries,” noted the Times’ Arthur Millier, “adored by the ‘lunatic fringe’ and some who are not so loony.” The story went on:

Sadakichi is a literary legend to which he is one of the most enthusiastic contributors. Perhaps Li Po, China’s greatest poet who drowned while leaning from a boat attempting to kiss the moonbeams on the water, looked like this aging Eurasian.

Like Li Po, he deserves an emperor to give him money and an edict should procure him free wine.

By this you gather that Sadakichi Hartmann is a one-man show, something to be seen; but what you see is the mask, what you hear issuing from his throat in strange gutturals are notes of wit and malice from a hidden soul. Under this graying crust is deep-rooted sweetness, and equally deep despair. It is not easy to be a “Man Behind the Mask” (which you cannot take off) and write exquisite English, too. “He makes Frankenstein look like a pansy,” said a high school girl — yet Sadakichi seems to think that all women love him!

Sadakichi told the Times he had recently lectured in New York, providing a bonus act — he danced.

“They ado-o-red it,” drawls Sadakichi, then breaks out in that amazing barked laughter, like laughter from the grave.

“One thing marred my life,” he said, pouring another. “I arrived in Munich three years too late. King Ludwig was already quite mad. Three years earlier he would have provided for me.”

120 Hollywood’s Hellfire Club
For a sage always boasting of being ahead of his time, Sadakichi was truly now a visionary, with plans to advance himself via a new technology:

Always dreaming, he has a new dream. Television is to make his fortune. He will appear for just three minutes at a time — “one must catch the swift tempo of today — a few sharp words, a few steps of my dancing, one of my laughs — it will be wonderful. The people will adore me!”

Alas, Sadakichi as the first TV evangelist never came to pass. The Gray Chrysanthemum told the Times of his plans to take his future television fortune and set himself up at No. 2 Fifth Avenue, “so that I can receive friends properly,” with his daughter Wistaria as hostess. Then, for a finale, he’d head for a hermit’s nest atop the Maritime Alps — “there to spend the last years of my life living beautifully.” The Times wrapped up its feature with one of Sadakichi’s poems:

Nothing has changed
Since the Dusk of the Gods
Drift of water
And ways of love!

And the story concluded, “... that deep organ music comes up from the soul of this strange ‘Man Behind the Mask.’” The feature came complete with a caricature of Sadakichi, drawn on the back of a dinner check from Henry’s Restaurant.

John Barrymore’s best-known performance of 1933 was in MGM’s all-star Dinner at Eight, which had its gala Broadway premiere on the stormy night of August 23, 1933. The star constellation was magnificent: Marie Dressler, John Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Jean Harlow, Lionel Barrymore, Billie Burke — all directed by George Cukor in a sterling David O. Selznick production.

The dramatic punch of Dinner at Eight is John Barrymore as Larry Renault, an alcoholic has-been star known for his profile. His meltdown as he drunkenly insults a producer (Jean Hersholt) in front of his agent (Lee Tracy) still can make a viewer squirm.

“You’re through, Renault,” sneers Tracy as the star’s fed-up agent. “You’re a corpse and you don’t know it. Go get yourself buried!”

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There follows Barrymore’s suicide scene, almost too painful to watch: drunk, crying, tearing up the picture of his lover (Madge Evans) and tossing the scraps out the window into the night, and seating himself—after turning on the gas—so that his famed profile will be on display when authorities find his body. It’s yet another of John Barrymore’s spiritual striptease performances, as if prophesying the nightmare he’s soon to become.

*Dinner at Eight* did good box-office, taking in over $2 million in rentals. Those who saw Barrymore in the film surely numbered many who believed his painfully convincing performance. Perhaps he even shocked MGM—at the time the studio considered dropping his services. But David Selznick interceded, and Jack started work on *Night Flight*, another Selznick-produced Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer all-star free-for-all with Helen Hayes, Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, Robert Montgomery and the Barrymore brothers. Based on the Saint-Exupery 1931 novel *Night Flight*, the story of pilots flying medicine over the Andes, Jack was cast as Riviere, the head of the airlines. He was so drunk on the set that director Clarence Brown tried to sack him and replace him with an unknown. Lionel, always subservient to L.B. Mayer (the widely-circulated story claims that Mayer financed Lionel’s drug addiction) reportedly pleaded Jack’s case, and he remained in the film. However, Jack kept drinking, and when time came for retakes, he fled with Dolores and the family once again to Alaska with his yacht *The Infanta*.

Thereafter MGM decided to dispense with his services.

After Barrymore came home from his Alaska journey, he ended 1933 impressively in Universal’s *Counsellor-at-Law*, a rapid-fire, non-stop, totally natural performance.

During the *Counsellor-at-Law* shoot, Barrymore had a day in which he forgot a particular line and William Wyler spent many retakes trying to get it right. Shaken and frightened, the star went home that night having never mastered the line, and was a portrait of despair. At home he learned his Tower Road neighbor John Gilbert was contemplating suicide. Barrymore sat up with Gilbert all night, went to the *Counsellor-at-Law* set the next morning and nailed the line on the first take.

Yet the worry was there. The memory lapse had its horrible effect. More than ever before, John Barrymore feared of losing his mind.

W.C. Fields carried on with his Paramount sojourn, starring in *Six of a Kind* (as Sheriff “Honest John” Huxley), *You’re Telling Me!* (as Sam Bisbee, inventor of a keyhole finder for drunks), *The Old-Fashioned Way* (as The Great McGonigle, providing Baby LeRoy an audience-pleasing kick in the tail), *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* (as Mr.
C. Ellsworth Stubbins) and best of all, *It’s a Gift*, released November 17, 1934. The last, with its story by Fields (under the pen name of “Charles Bogle”), has Fields playing store-owner Harold Bissonette (“pronounced Biss-o-nay”), dreaming of a new life amidst a California orange grove. Among its choice offerings is its blind man scene, as Mr. Muckle (Charles Sellon), the horrible old coot with his black, snake-like ear trumpet and rapacious walking stick, invades Fields’ grocery store — smashing the glass door, upsetting various boxes of glassware, and destroying a table full of light bulbs.

“Mr. Muckle!” roars W.C. time and again. Indeed, only Fields could engineer a film so the audience hated the guts of a blind man. He also copes with a nasty Mr. Fitchmueller (Morgan Wallace) bellowing, “Where are my kumquats?” and a molasses-spilling Baby LeRoy (whom W.C. refers to at one point as “Blood Poison”).

By this time, Fields had moved to a ranch in Encino (where *It’s a Gift’s* final orange grove exterior was shot) and had met Carlotta Monti, a 27-year-old actress then landing screen roles here and there (e.g., Madi, Priestess of Zar, in 1933’s *Tarzan the
Carlotta of the large bonnets and profile poses became W.C.’s mistress. She called her sugar daddy “Woody.” He called her “Chinaman.” She moved in with W.C. at Encino, and her book, *W.C. Fields and Me*, suggests a deep, heartfelt relationship:

Beginning with the first intimate night together when we consummated our love — I will not disclose the wonderful details except to comment briefly that it was ecstasy — I felt more intensely alive and responsive than any time before in my life, my mind quicker and honed to a fine sharpness, my energies keyed higher and stronger. Woody seemed starved for real love and affection, and I gave it to him in large quantities. During that year I blossomed into full womanhood...

Ron Fields doesn’t believe it. Later when W.C. was living at 655 Funchall in Bel Air, he referred to Carlotta in a letter to a friend as “The young lady who is furnishing the poon-tang at 655.”

“Women are like elephants to me,” said W.C. “I like looking at them, but I wouldn’t want to own one.”

On March 29, 1934, the *Los Angeles Times* reports that John Decker and stage director J. Belmar Hall would create a “Tony Pastor’s Theatre Club,” modeled after the old New York playhouse that had presented “Gay ‘90s” melodramas.” The club, located at 5746 Sunset Boulevard, opened in May, complete with a performance of the stage thriller *The Ticket of Leave Man* starring Sheldon Lewis and with a foyer featuring Decker’s satirical paintings. There was, according to the *L.A. Times*, “a riot of forgotten variety and song acts,” and the crowd sang along to songs like “The Man on the Flying Trapeze.” The club was a popular Hollywood novelty for a time, but managing a club wasn’t Decker’s forte, and “Tony Pastor’s Theatre Club” soon shut its doors.

1934 saw the publication of *Father Goose*, Gene Fowler’s book concerning the rise and fall of Keystone comedy producer Mack Sennett. “An uproarious biography of Mack Sennett, the man who made America conscious of pie-throwing, Keystone cops and bathing beauties…” promised the cover jacket. The author vastly preferred book writing to script writing and hoped to devote himself full-time to such activity as soon as possible.
April 12, 1934: *Film Daily* reviewed the Ben Hecht-scripted *Viva Villa!* starring Wallace Beery as Pancho. The film provided Hecht one of his favorite Hollywood memories: during the location shoot in Mexico, a drunken Lee Tracy (playing reporter Johnny Sykes) stood naked on a balcony and pissed on a squadron of Mexican troops. The south-of-the-border wrath and Hollywood fallout saw Jack Conway replace Howard Hawks as director and Stuart Erwin taking over for Lee Tracy (who was hustled out of Mexico in a plane and fired by Louis B. Mayer).

Hecht’s rowdy script included a vignette in which Beery’s Villa whipped Fay Wray’s Teresa and — perhaps most memorably — a baroque death scene in which Joseph Schildkraut’s villainous General Pascal was stripped, smeared with honey and tied to an anthill as a feast for the insects and vultures (all done off-screen, to the accompaniment of Schildkraut’s screams). *Viva Villa!* won Hecht another Academy nomination. He’d lose to Robert Riskin of *It Happened One Night*.

Meanwhile, Hecht and MacArthur, in a daring move, co-produced, co-directed
and co-wrote their own film — *Crime Without Passion*, the melodrama of a flamboyant lawyer (Claude Rains) who kills a voluptuary (Margo), then topples into insanity. The bravura film, shot in New York at Paramount’s old Astoria Studios, came complete with an opening montage of Furies (!) flying over a New York City night sky and cameos by Hecht, MacArthur, Helen Hayes and Fannie Brice.

Rains later claimed it was his favorite screen experience: “I’ve never done anything I like as well as this role … a role that comes once in an actor’s lifetime.”

This message from John Barrymore heralded *The New York Times* May 3, 1934 ad for *Twentieth Century*, one of the greatest screwball comedies. The role of Oscar Jaffe, the Greatest Ham in the World, fit Barrymore to a “T.”

As Mildred Plotka, whom Barrymore’s Jaffe transforms into Lily Garland, star supreme and worthy adversary, Carole Lombard came into her own. Originally intimidated by Barrymore, she was pulling punches until director Howard Hawks took her aside and asked how she’d react if some man spoke to her the way Oscar Jaffe was talking to Lily Garland.

“I’d kick him in the balls!” vowed Lombard.

At Hawks’ suggestion, she did exactly that on the next take. Barrymore screamed in surprise and presumably a bit of pain. Come the next take in the film, Lombard kicked his shins. The fire was lit — *Twentieth Century* is a firecracker.

In his book *Alternate Oscars*, Danny Peary argues that Barrymore should have been the Academy’s choice as Best Actor of 1934, the year Clark Gable took home the prize for *It Happened One Night*. As it was, Barrymore wasn’t even nominated. He never would be. It hurt him more than he ever revealed, and he said late in life: “I think they were afraid I’d show up at the banquet drunk, both embarrassing myself and them. But I wouldn’t have, you know.”

The Hollywood opportunities for the Bundy Drive Boys to strut their stuff were soon to become more limited. 1934 saw the rise of the revised Production Code, as well as the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency. Barrymore’s *Twentieth Century* battles with thigh-flashing Carole Lombard arrived just under the wire — the censorship office managed to nix a publicity still in which Lombard revealed her leggy charms to her all-eyes co-star.

As the movies cleaned up, John Barrymore fell apart. On his next film, RKO’s *A Hat,
Coat and Glove, Barrymore’s memory totally failed him and he was replaced by Ricardo Cortez. He tried to revive himself by taking a cruise with Dolores, the children and their nurse, once again, to the always-revitalizing Alaska. During the voyage he became so desperate for alcohol he drank Dolores’ perfume. Barrymore got to shore one night, went on a wild bender, returned in the morning drunk and responded to the nurse’s shocked “Oh, Mr. Barrymore!” by breaking her nose — and then attacking Dolores.

Mr. Hyde was loose.

The marriage broke up. Barrymore feared Dolores would place him in an asylum. His pious and fleecing business managers, Henry and Helios Hotchener, fed his fears. He fled with them to England, where a proposed film of Hamlet fizzled before it even began after John saw himself in his old costume and realized he could no longer remember the soliloquies.

He fled again, this time with Helios, a spiritualist, seeking to save sanity and soul by running all the way to India.