

COHN AND MAYER

“There’s talk around town,” Cohn remarked.

“I told Spellman that I didn’t know yet,” Mayer said. Harry Cohn and Louis Mayer sat in lawn chairs, by the poolside. Mayer squinted; his head hurt. Maybe something was coming on. A cold? Why all these questions? Who did Cohn think that he was? Was it not a secret vow between the cardinal from Boston and the little man from Hollywood?

“There’s talk around town,” Cohn reiterated.

Louis nodded. He did not like prying inquiries but tried to put on a good face. When he glanced downward, his eyeglasses caught the California sun, glinted, and the light flashed with such an intensity in Harry Cohn’s eyes that it made Cohn shield his vision for some seconds; his fingers held to the space between right lid and brow, and he kept his stare on Mayer.

“Screw them,” said the one mogul to the second one. “I’ve got friends everywhere.” One hated bigots; they thrived in this hamlet.

“You can’t ignore your co-religionists.”

“Them, I spurn the most. Always!”

What did Cohn want him to do, did he wish to pin him down? To what? Mayer was sweating, distressed at the gossipy town; what was it? Within thirty seconds, Mayer was shouting. Misses MacGillicuddy and Koverman, his employees, hurried over toward the two gentlemen. The green garden chairs did not fit their staid long dresses, the pencils and notepaper that they held in their hands; they were working, not vacationing.

“You don’t have to get angry, Lou. I can hear you. You’re insulting the head of Columbia pictures. I won’t take it.”

“No kidding?” Mayer tugged at the string of the swimming trunks that went up around his protruding abdomen; he might be small, but his muscles were all there, his chest and arms were thick and strong. It was the other fellow who was mad, the one who put the questions to Mayer that Mayer shoved aside. Louis saw that his interlocutor had grown excited, but why? Was he not being a reasonable man, that is what he wanted to know? Harry Cohn’s hands were trembling. “I’m taking back Jeannette MacDonald. You can’t have her.”

“You’re a no-good turncoat, Louis!”

“No MacDonald, Harry!”

“I don’t need Jeannette MacDonald, I can get a hundred dolls like her, where she came from! Someone should have his head examined, and it’s not me. As for MGM, forget it. You’re finished.”

“Admit we’re tops, Harry.”

“I’m thinking of buying you out.”

“Who’s selling?”

“I’m being unselfish by saying that we’ll save your skin. And now I wish you’d think of your people.”

“This is America,” Mayer said uneasily. “We’re in the United States. Our people? So what!”

“God should only save you from yourself, a sinful man!”

“No one knows me, or you; you don’t either.”

Cohn closed his eyes, crossing forearms over his breast. A gesture of self-commiseration. He sighed.

Mayer exclaimed to an unknown interlocutor: “Harry Cohn makes me angry only to make life more expensive for me. I know him, God.”

“You’re going too far, taking the name of the Lord in vain. Sinful. You’re corrupt – corrupted by Catholic priests!”

“You’re married to one.”

“Listen, I’m not a fag, am I?” Harry asked.

Mayer massaged his toes by rolling the beach ball under the balls of his feet. If he was Spellman’s friend, so was Cohn, and if Cohn kept nagging, he was going to lose his temper. When Mayer blew his top, he could hit a man. What was happening to a friendly and nice conversation?

Louis had flirted for years with the idea of converting. Catholicism attracted him. He had long talks with the cardinal’s Irish crony, a Franciscan brother in Los Angeles, about the meaning of catechism; the cross was an enigma that he avoided and a symbol, like the holy trinity, that was still puzzling to the little man. No one’s business but his own. He was an individual. The reason that he came to the church was that the top man at MGM was having trouble with strikes that were threatening his studio. Everyone appeared unhappy, upset about something. The world was going to pieces, God was an answer, he added that Americans needed a faith to live by, did they not? He was a Republican, so were the other studio bosses.

“I think I heard something about a strike coming on,” Mayer muttered.

“That’s un-American. Have you ever seen such a bunch of traitors?” offered Harry. He was speaking about the writers at Columbia, who were a cantankerous mob. “The next thing you know we’ll have conditions like in Russia.”

Harry had a Russian mother, a German father.

Louis was born in Dymer, Ukraine, and taken at three to Canada. Even if his father Jacob had peddled junk at a seashore town, he became a proud Crown subject; but otherwise a big failure, his son Louis knew it well; if he

had one ambition, it was not to become a *luftmensch* like his father had been; in the end, the old fellow had his religion to drape his shame with. Just as Cohn's father was a disaster in a practical sense, yet a pious man, but was that enough? Louis had gone onward to Boston, then one day in his early twenties he discovered that he was going to end up a junk dealer like Jacob, his father, so he gave that up and became a theater owner in Haverhill, Massachusetts, then a movie producer, making longer films based on good middle-class stories, something one could enjoy, appealing to Louis himself, who became a United States citizen at twenty-five; he went West at the age of thirty-three, and that was where his climb really began.

If he was chums with Cardinal Spellman, it was because the film boss needed friends in influential places. The Legion of Decency, Spellman's organization, which dictated Catholic moral tastes on a national level, at least to some extent, was a good ally; Mayer only had to pick up the phone to fix something. Movies had to be passed by boards, they needed Will Hays' approval too, at the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association, the man whom the studios employed. Loose morals meant bad business. Mayer, Cohn, the others had to watch carefully what they produced and what the land was prepared to accept from them. Studio bosses were worse prudes than Spellman just out of fear of censorship; they did the blue-penciling beforehand in self-defense. And if Jesus was what that measly molehill Hollywood needed, then Louis, or Cohn for that matter, was willing to crawl to the cross. Who could be allergic to the Savior?

“Don't give me your guff, Harry. You're pals with the cardinal too.”

“Friends, that's one thing. Conversion's another.”

“I talk to him, so what? You made a point of coming to work on Yom Kippur, so don’t tell me you’re not a pagan. This Jesus was one of us. You eat shellfish!”

“You’re taking catechism lessons from a monk.”

How did he know it? Louis could not ask, for it was tantamount to an admission of its truth. Mayer became very polite. He would smooth things over. A show of respect! Harry was susceptible.

“Mister Cohn, I’ve always admired your charm, your candor, but about matters that you don’t know, who would’ve thought that you’d brush them underneath the carpet?” Louis himself was not certain of what he was saying. “Really, be a sport.”

“Sure,” Harry smirked.

“Up-front, that’s Mister Cohn!” Mayer was fuming again. “I’ve always admired – your, your – wisecracks.” He must get Cohn away; he should leave the poolside for a drink. Just go. Whom did Louis Mayer have to give an answer to? His Maker only. Shame was also good for something in this game. The Church, the most respectable organization in the world, he thought, after the American presidency. Louis got so angry that he cried. He took off his round eyeglasses, wiping wetness away. “The cardinal’s a real person, Harry, a person like you and I. A holy man, maybe not that, but a real man.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” said Cohn.

Louis felt an odd sensation, heat went to his cheeks and forehead; he sweated. Was something coming on in the middle of summer? He wiped his brow, sniffled into a handkerchief, tried to get hold of himself. Sure, he felt humiliated, but was it not a beautiful state? He was showing His hand again! Louis was watched over by Him. Mayer saw what was approaching: a parrot. No, it was Cohn’s wife Joan, a pretty young blonde who appeared at poolside

hovering on a cloud of fluff; the woman was in a nun's habit, but her legs were bare. Misses MacGillicuddy and Koverman, too, had wings on their backs and took off to hover in the air at the other side of the pool, and on the palm trees were cherubs with tiny flaming swords.

He shook his head, things returned to their accustomed places.

"Harry, my girls went to Temple Ohabai Sholem, so don't tell me about being the right kind of person."

"Hey, did I convert like you?" Cohn fired back.

"I fulfilled my obligations. I can't father the whole human race, can I?"

"Been to mass yet?"

"You win. Your own wife's a Catholic, you get the prize. I haven't even been to mass, I haven't taken the Holy Orders either." Mayer looked at his wristwatch. "It's not quite four yet. I haven't done much today, have I?"

"Apostate!"

"Where'd you learn that word?"

"I asked one of our studio writers." Cohn's dislike of his own religion was legendary in the town. Cohn was the apostate.

That was what Louis Mayer thought. "I stick to being who I am," he said. He remembered a conversation that he had had with Edith when he said that he had considered converting. She mocked him to his face.

Those were one's daughters, boy oh boy.

"I stick to myself," Cohn said. "An Upper East Side guy. My father might've been a tailor, so what?"

He hated his father, Mayer ruminated. That Harry's father had been a do-nothing like his own, that was clear to Louis; they wanted nothing else but to escape from that failure. Jacob Mayer was the opposite of being an earner. Come on, he thought.

There was a black metal telephone on a white table near poolside. Mayer was expecting a call from his wife Margaret. It rang.

Miss Koverman ran to answer. "For you, sir."

"Our girl," said Margaret Mayer, "is very ill. I think she has a flu. Should I call Doctor Feingold?"

"You're calling to ask me whether my daughter should go to a doctor, Maggie?"

"Edie claims that's because of you that she's so sick. You want to kill her."

Mayer gasped, "Me?"

"You won't allow Edith to visit the studio."

"She can't. I won't allow Edie to become a dancer."

"She only wants to take lessons, Louis. Let the girl."

"I'll disinherit her. She's going to get involved in a nest of sin."

"Edie's got talent."

"Whores, drunkards, dope addicts, what will Edie get as companions? Singers and dancers are scum! She's got talent? So what!"

"Let her do it, Louis."

"At MGM, by the way," Louis said, realizing that Harry was overhearing his conversation, "at my studio the dancers and singers are clean."

"That's a contradiction then. Let her do it."

"She's to get in bed. And call the doctor!"

"Louis, the girl wants some independence."

Louis spluttered something about responsibility. Everyone was watching him. He was being tested. Again, it was Destiny. Did he love Edith? Let her do as she wished, that was what he heard from an inner voice.

“Maggie, tell Edie that I’ll pay for lessons. She wants it that bad? If she desires, then I, her father, will finance it. Let her get well first.”

“I thought you’d agree, honey. But you were just complaining a minute ago about these people being the dregs of society – ”

“Not in my studio. I’ll get her the right people.”

Most men kept feelings bottled up inside, but not Louis Mayer. His wife thanked him for being unselfish. “The kids’re different from our day,” she admitted. “Let them do it their way.”

They hung up.

“Woe is me,” Louis said. “I’m not being unfair to my girl, am I? She doesn’t want to fly to the North Pole, does she?” He turned to Cohn. “She wants to sing and dance. Is it a crime for a father to want something better for his child? She’s throwing everything back in my face.” Mayer’s eyes moistened. “My Edie’s an angel!”

“The kids’ll kill you,” said Harry. “So, how’s business?”

Mayer looked up. “Business?”

“Forget your daughter. How’s the studio, Lou?”

“My daughter.” Mayer wanted to brush it off. “She only wants to do what all the kids want nowadays.”

“They want to start the human race all over again!”

Louis nodded. “Show business, the movies, you can have it. Why does she need it? What is it?”

“Edie, show biz? Oh, I see. Tell her,” said Cohn, misinterpreting Mayer’s lament as an attempt to get Harry to hire his child, “tell her to show up at the studio gate at nine sharp. I’ll see what I can do for Edith – ”

“I don’t want her to.”

“She’ll be in the best hands.”

“My foot. My daughter, she never made it the hard way.”

“Like we did,” Harry agreed, “the children nowadays are born with silver spoons in their mouths.”

Louis peered at his small, bare feet. He hated how he looked. He was undersized, but a fierce fighter, ugly, but a charmer by sheer might of his personality. But he could not look in the mirror at himself. He was hideous; and he could not do much about his feet. “I think I’m coming down with something,” he murmured.

“It’s ninety degrees in the shade. You can’t be catching anything. So how’s business otherwise?”

Louis thought about his daughter, but he said to Cohn that he wanted to borrow Capra, Harry’s director and screenwriter, for a future film.

“Right, that Dago bastard! I’ll send him to Sing-Sing. You want him to work for MGM? Take him!”

Louis knew that Frank Capra could decide himself whether he wished to do a film for MGM, for Louis Mayer, so that it was not completely up to Harry Cohn for a decision. He would have to talk to the director himself, Harry said. Harry went on cursing Capra.

“He’s a bloodsucker, that man’ll give you nothing but heartaches and headaches!” Cohn spit. “An immigrant wop! They don’t make them worse! From Palermo! Imagine that! He wants the world, takes and takes from me like a vampire!”

“You’re going to fire him?” Mayer asked.

“Sure! Never!”

“So fire him.”

“Do you want to hire the fellow?” queried Cohn.

“No.”

If a man was in Harry's bad books, he was in Mayer's, that was the rule in town. No one hired someone who was on another studio mogul's blacklist. But Frank Capra was on nobody's list. Cohn loved him. Mayer realized that the Dickens novel that he planned to film would never get Capra as its director. Mickey Rooney as David Copperfield, but modernized, so that the main figure would become a stock broker who gives it up to go to Congress as the people's choice. Could it not be possible that he could get Capra on loan from Harry, he wondered? The film would be a world success, a grand thing.

"So Edith doesn't cotton much to your advice about staying out of the business?"

Louis stopped daydreaming.

"I don't think she ever took my advice."

"You're backing her into a corner, but if you wouldn't oppose her, she'd give it up." Cohn lit a cigar, puffed out a blue cloud. Mayer liked the aroma of Havanas. He breathed in deeply. "You're jealous, you can't fight it forever."

Louis was suddenly very weak. Why did his daughter have to go out and face life? Life was always there, she had time. No cocoon lasted forever. His stomach bothered him now. Louis had trouble with his digestion; Mayer by choice ate high-fiber cereals, fresh fruit, boiled chicken and overcooked vegetables. That was the right thing to digest, but this morning's breakfast at the estate where he was staying had done him in. Too much grease. One should not take another person's life in one's hands, he thought, one should not misuse one's commission as a father, one was never unselfish enough. He closed his eyes, and a story that his father Jacob repeatedly told him about the Old Country occurred to him. One could not only be good in life, one was too blinded by something or other. Jacob Mayer, when he was a boy,

went hunting in the woods near the village he lived in, found a wolf cub that had been wounded badly by a hunter's trap. Jacob took the cub home, hid it in a shed. Once it got healthy, it ate all the chickens in his father's coop, then ran off. The boy cried because he lost his wild pet. That winter they were particularly poor because of the loss of chickens: no eggs, hardly any meat. "You'll never get the wolf out of the wolf," said Jacob to Louis when he was a boy. "Don't fool yourself, and don't cry about what nature is." Protect yourself, but be a person. That was what Louis learned. One did the right thing according to one's lights, but not the impossible, for one cannot change the world.

"You can have Capra for one picture," Harry assured him.

Louis loved movies and worshiped talent; Frank Capra was a prime commodity. No doubt in his mind, he said instantly that he would sign him for one movie, and that was all. Have him for one picture? He loved Harry. He wanted to show him how much; it was up to Cohn to decide, too. His eyes got wet again.

"Miss Koverman!" Louis twisted his head to glimpse the secretary.

"Mister Mayer wants you," shouted a fellow who had just sat down across the way from him in a lawn chair, who wore yellow trousers with deep creases in them. "Come on, on the double!" the young man called in a Bronx twang. This smart aleck, Louis knew, was an East Coast mob man who had come out to the West Coast with an Italian countess. His mate socialized with the host on whose estate they were staying this weekend.

They were at the mansion of a very wealthy fellow. One never knew who might come along here; the host invited everyone who was anybody in California. His private ground was the stomping field of Hollywood, Republican politics, the bigwigs in newspapers, publishing. Illustrious crowd.

The host appeared himself at poolside at that moment, accompanied by his mistress, Miss Marion Davies. Louis had once tried to get Miss Davies in pictures, but it had not been a successful venture. But her lover, Hearst, was satisfied that Mayer had done his best. America did not know what it wanted, claimed the newspaper tycoon.

“Spellman’s a faggot, a Mick who feels up the choir boys at early mass, Lou.” Harry did not know himself why he said such an untruth; just to provoke Mayer? Maybe. Cohn could not live without antagonizing; that was the way that he dealt with other people; it was the nature of his relationship with the human race.

Mayer shook his head, doubting Cohn’s sanity for making such a statement.

Hearst unfortunately overheard Harry’s remark and shook his head, a furrow wrinkling up his forehead as he turned in Cohn’s direction, not exactly greeting him but frowning at him. Although Hearst was no Catholic, this was too much.

Luckily, Miss Koverman, a button-nosed middle-aged woman who was built like a barrel, intervened. She was a rather important lady for Mayer. Once she was Herbert Hoover’s secretary; she still had multifarious connections to other important Republicans.

Hearst sighed, “Well, you’ve come along just in time!” She grinned at him. “Miss Koverman, I’m glad to see our best light in Washington! What this country needs is a new direction.” He meant away from the New Deal.

“You’re so right, Mister Hearst.”

The tycoon, his eyebrows twitching, gleefully remarked in words that he wished that he could print: “That cripple in the White House is another Upton Sinclair! What’s the use? Some people are a sucker for the fellow. New

Deal, it insults my intelligence! Give the common man a fair deal, that's what my philosophy is, a decent wage and three square meals – not social security, by God!"

If Koverman did not come away from him laughing or crying, Hearst believed that he had lost his old self.

She giggled, "You're so right."

"I can't win much by preaching to the converted," Hearst commented. He turned to smile at Mayer and Cohn, winking, and they grinned back like old schoolboys. "Convincing people is the name of our business, isn't it, gentlemen?"

"Sorry," Cohn said. "I got carried away."

"She's a nice girl," Hearst patted the fifty-year-old Koverman on her head.

"I want to be," Miss Koverman retorted, looking at Louis Mayer.

Hearst went to greet other guests.

"Edie is a nice girl too," said Harry. "Let the kid be, will you?"

"I want to be good, with dignity. What did I do wrong?" Louis hit his fists together. He felt dizzy, and slipping out of the lawn chair, he swooned. Ida Koverman was just about to reach where he kneeled. Since Louis was usually overwrought and a man who wore his emotions on his sleeve, his histrionics surprised nobody, least of all Koverman, but when he acted as though he was talking to invisible people, she wondered.

Two hoboes who came as angels were greeted by Mayer in his secret hamlet on the California coast. Louis was standing at the gate of the town. "Stay with my family overnight." He pointed at the setting sun. "Soon it'll be dark, and the desert is cold." "We'll sleep in the alley," they said. "No, you'll stay with me as my guests," Mayer replied. The angels entered his home; but

the townspeople, who were an ill-meaning folk, gathered outside Louis Mayer's house. "We want the strangers!" they shouted. "No, you can't have them, they're my guests." "Then give us your daughters." Mayer stepped forward as if to obey, and the tramps, his guests, pulled him back by his sleeve from the front portal. The mob smashed glass against his door, they screamed to let the men out. "Is your whole family in this town?" the strangers queried. "Yes." "Then go away in the morning. The hamlet'll be destroyed by God." "Why?" "Its sins, its iniquities, its violation, and its godlessness!" "My son-in-law Selznick and my wife and daughters are here," Mayer expostulated. "It's been decided. Prepare to leave." Mayer went out the back door to the house of Selznick, whom he found washing his car. "Flee, David! Take your wife, my daughter with you." "Are you joking?" asked David. "I live here, this is my home." As dawn came and the crowd had still not dispersed, the two hoboes said, "Take your wife and both daughters. Go now. Otherwise you'll be annihilated along with the town." "But why?" "The sins of the city have called this punishment down on itself." Louis hesitated, and the tramps grabbed the host's hand, and took the hands of his daughters, seized his wife's too and took them away. "God wants to spare you," they said. They pointed at the Sierra Nevada mountains. "Go away to that place." Louis got on his knees, "How have I found favor in God's eyes? I'm too weak and old to climb mountains, please let us go to the town over the border in Nevada." He kissed the filthy hem of the garment that one of the tramps wore. It smelled to him as sweet as flowers. "We'll allow it. You'll be safe there, Mayer." One hobo looked at the other. "I want to go to Nevada and be rid of this town forever," Louis continued. "Where my family'll be safe – it's only one small favor, so we'll stay alive." "We'll meet you halfway. Do it, go to Nevada. God'll spare that city as long as you're there."

The sun had risen.

God let fire and brimstone pour down from the sky on Louis' old city, so that the fiery storm destroyed every house there, every inhabitant, and all that grew on the ground. That meant the films too, and Louis felt aggrieved, but that was nothing that he could prevent. As this was happening, Mrs. Mayer turned to watch and grew instantly as barren as the desert sand. She then asked in a fading voice, "Forget me, I'm through!" And she dried up to nothing, as if a piece of salt was wiped away from the table. They stayed in the city only a day, then left, for Mayer was frightened. He went with his daughters to live in the Sierra Nevada mountains. They slept in a cave. "Has everything ended?" they asked one another. It appeared so.

Irene, Mayer's eldest daughter, said to Edith one night as their father slept, "We'll have to repopulate the world, we'll have to sleep with father. No one's left to give him any offspring. Otherwise the world'll die out."

They could not see that they made up only a small part of the world's residents, for fear made their blindness everything.

They gave Louis sweet red wine the first night, and he slept after drinking many glasses; his daughter Irene lay next to him; he did not realize who it was, he thought it a dream. The next night Edith repeated the act of her older sister. Then both girls grew pregnant. The oldest one bore a son christened, "Nobody," after her beloved whom she never named; the younger called hers, "Somebody else," after the same man.

Louis shook with fever and thought that he saw Cardinal Spellman coming at him in his red garments to give him something secret. He threw up his arms. Miss Koverman caught him as he reeled over.

"Bless me!" he whimpered.

"A bite to eat," said the cardinal, tossing a wafer at him.

Louis shut his lips, did not put it in.

The churchman gave Mayer a pat on the head.

“I’m a Catholic now?” He woke up in Miss Koverman’s arms, with Harry hovering over him, worried. They had settled him again in the lawn chair by the poolside.

“For Christ’s sake, you’ve gotten sick,” said Cohn. “We have to get you to the hospital.”

He did not understand him, thinking that it was fever talking. “You’ve always been one to joke, Harry.” In delirium, with spittle forming around his mouth, Mayer sputtered: “You need salvation worse than I do. So now who’s saved the human race? We’re God’s flu.” He made a sweeping gesture. “Only my daughters!” It was a terrible secret that he let out, and fainted away as the men in white hospital garments ran across the grass. They lifted him and carried him on the stretcher to the ambulance.

A siren wailed. What had he done, he thought, when there was no denying it: the human race had been saved. He was brought to where he who spent the seed, the father, had to go.