

PART ONE • THE MERGER



## CHAPTER I • The Boy Wonder

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, William and Henrietta Thalberg were living at 19 Woodbine Street in Brooklyn, New York, a narrow brownstone wedged into a middle-class German-Jewish neighborhood. The young couple could not afford to rent the entire home, so they contented themselves with a multiroom attic. William was an importer of lace, a small, passive man. Henrietta was petite, too, but powerful. Years later, family friend Irene Mayer Selznick described Henrietta's eyes as "dark and menacing." Like her family, the owners of the Heyman & Heyman department store, Henrietta was ambitious. She expected her husband's business to improve her station in life. When it did not, she turned to motherhood, hoping to mold a son into the man of vision that William would never be. According to Irene Selznick, "Henrietta got revenge against an ineffectual husband—against life—through this boy."

Irving Grant Thalberg was born at home on May 30, 1899. Henrietta's hopes for her child were nearly dashed when he was diagnosed with a congenital heart defect. Born a "blue baby" because of a faulty supply of oxygen to his blood, Irving had a sickly color and arms like matchsticks. He was given a poor prognosis by the family doctor and by the specialists who were brought in later. The child might live to twenty, or if he was lucky, to thirty.

A daughter, Sylvia, was born a year later, but Henrietta spent her energies on Irving. To prove the doctors wrong, she conducted a seven-year regimen: sponge baths, rubdowns, hot water bottles, enemas, and forced rest periods. If Irving had

lived his life in quarantine, he would have escaped the usual childhood illnesses. When he started school, he was hit first by bronchial infections and then by diphtheria. When he could attend classes, he was an eager, inquisitive student. He excelled in English and social studies at Brooklyn Boys' High School, but lagged in mathematics. Henrietta drilled him until he improved, and one day he brought home a silver award. His mother looked at it. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"Second," answered Irving quietly.

Henrietta socked him in the arm. "Next time, you bring home the gold award." The harshness of this blow was softened by the nurturing that followed, but its message was imprinted in Irving's mind more indelibly than the drills. He was expected not merely to achieve, but to surpass.

Irving did achieve the gold medal and he did surpass his fellow students, but he was distracted by chest pains, dizziness, and fatigue. In the fall of 1916, rheumatic fever dealt the coup de grace to his academic career, putting him in bed for a year. He could not graduate from high school. Henrietta tried to keep him from losing ground. She brought homework, books, and teachers to his sickroom. She tried to make him ignore the tantalizing sounds of children playing outside his window. She had to motivate him without giving unrealistic expectations. To accomplish this, she had to impose her will. The Thalbergs became a matriarchy with one goal: keeping its crown prince alive.

Irving enjoyed reading, which was fortunate; there was little else to entertain him. Prevented from learning about life on the streets of New York, he learned about it in books. He began to devour popular novels, classics, plays, and biographies. He took a lively interest in philosophy, studying and comparing the works of Schopenhauer, Kant, and Hegel. He was taken with William James's philosophy of pragmatism, which held that a philosopher "turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and . . . turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power." In time, Irving distilled these philosophies into five rules:

Never hold an "unassailable" opinion.

The clearness with which I see my goal determines my speed in reaching it.

Expect help from no one.

Pride goeth before a fall, and the height of the pride determines the severity of the bump.

Never take any one man's opinion as final.

For all his mental agility, Irving was losing contact with the world. The literary characters who inhabited his bedroom were more real to him than his former playmates. There was no action in his existence, let alone power. Henrietta feared that this isolation would lead to emotional illness. “You’ve been sick long enough,” she said to him one day in 1916. “I want you to make something of yourself.” With this imperative ringing in his ears, the thin, precocious boy ventured into Manhattan.

He had by this time been informed of his expected life span. Children who endure grave illness often acquire maturity before their peers. If this was true of the seventeen-year-old, he would need all the wisdom he had gained to face his limited prospects. Due to years of seclusion, he had missed his adolescence. He had few social skills. His ability to relate with people on a simple human level was impaired. He was quiet, but he was considered reserved rather than shy. When included in conversation, however, he was honest and incisive. He barely had a high school education, but this was a moot point. He lacked the stamina he would need for the rigors of college, for all-night sessions writing term papers and cramming for exams. He was spindly, so a blue-collar job was out of the question. Of necessity Irving chose a moderate course. He worked part-time as a clerk with his maternal grandfather while taking evening classes at New York University and various business schools. He became expert at typing, shorthand, and Spanish. After a few office jobs, a chance encounter brought the first work that truly stimulated him.

In June 1918 he was staying at his grandmother’s vacation cottage at Edgemere, Long Island. Sensing a job prospect, Henrietta urged Irving to introduce himself to one of her mother’s neighbors, a genial businessman named Carl Laemmle. The fifty-one-year-old Laemmle was unabashedly wealthy, the founder of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. At five foot one, the elfish Laemmle had to look up at Irving, who was five foot six. Laemmle asked the young man’s opinion of the moving pictures that he projected on a bedsheet on his front porch. Irving’s comments were articulate and well received, but Laemmle did not offer him a job. When Laemmle next saw Irving, the boy was working in Laemmle’s own office at 1600 Broadway in New York as a \$35-a-week secretary to his assistant, D. B. Lederman. Unlike many of Laemmle’s employees, Irving had secured the job by applying for it, not by virtue of nepotism. Irving made a practice of writing memos to suggest improvements, both in office management and in the films he screened with Lederman. These memos so impressed Laemmle that he told Lederman to find another secretary. Irving became Laemmle’s secretary, earning \$60 a week.

Among Irving’s duties was transcribing Laemmle’s comments during screen-

ings of the latest Universal product. It was the mogul's habit to review practically every new release. He began asking Irving's opinion. Irving was not a sycophant. If he thought a film could be improved, he said so. Laemmle took umbrage when Irving criticized a film starring world-famous prizefighter James J. Corbett. Irving thought it was poor.

"But it has Corbett!" Laemmle corrected him. Irving had to concede the point.

While working in Laemmle's office, Irving made the acquaintance of another well-read youth. Eighteen-year-old Samuel Marx was working in the company's export department and enjoyed passing time with Irving at the cafeteria downstairs. Their conversations revolved around the film industry. Irving was committed to it. "It changes so fast that it offers unlimited opportunities," said Irving. He admitted that Universal's films were second-rate, even if they were profitable. "The people have to take what we give them," he told Marx over a dinner tray one night. "It seems to me that they deserve better." Both boys knew why audiences were getting mediocre films. Uncle Carl had a penchant for hiring relatives; his California studio was a nepotistic nest. Irving looked into the dark-paneled expanses of Thompson's Cafeteria and wished he could get to the fellows who were grinding out films for Universal. "I'd make them do it my way," he said, "so they'd never know if their way was better."

Like most film companies, Universal had corporate headquarters in New York and production facilities in California. Laemmle had founded "Universal City" in 1915 on 230 mountainous acres in the San Fernando Valley, just up the Cahuenga Pass from the unincorporated part of Los Angeles called Hollywood. A mere three years after feature films had been introduced in America (with 1912's *Oliver Twist*), Universal City was a town devoted to their manufacture. Universal maintained a schedule of nearly two hundred films a year—melodramas, comedies, westerns, and serials—made quickly and cheaply. Because Universal did not own a theater chain, it relied on independent theaters, many of which were outside the big cities. Its middlebrow product appealed to rural audiences.

Mismanagement and bickering were slowing Universal's release schedule. Studio managers came and went. Since opening the plant, Laemmle had hired (and fired) sixteen. The studio was currently being run by Isadore Bernstein, Laemmle's brother-in-law; by Maurice Fleckles, a Laemmle cousin, who was after Bernstein's job; and by novelist Tarkington Baker. Julius Stern was in charge of comedies. When a manager questioned their quality, Stern snapped at him: "Our comedies are not to be laughed at!"

In the fall of 1919, Laemmle made one of his periodic trips to California. Just before he left, he told Irving that he needed him to come too. This would be Irving's first time away from New York—and his mother—but he was more excited than anxious. Henrietta packed a hot water bottle in his luggage and made sure he was wearing woolen underwear under his suit. She had no idea what California would do to her son. She burst into tears at Grand Central Station.

Irving found California stimulating and the studio awe-inspiring. Robert H. Cochrane, one of the few Universal executives not related to Laemmle, watched Thalberg with interest. "When Laemmle brought Thalberg to the Coast, he would accompany the boss around the lot, sit in on conferences and such. He was a keen observer and would make suggestions that were helpful and valuable. He had a good business mind as well as an artist's mind." Laemmle let Irving get the lay of the land while trying to find out who was slacking.

Frances Marion was already known as the most prolific writer of original scenarios (and the highest paid) when she visited Universal. "While I was sitting in Mr. Laemmle's outer office, patiently waiting like a milkman's horse," she later wrote,

I whiled away the hours talking to his secretary, a young lad with a sensitive face, the dark searching restless eyes of the ambitious, and a frail body. He seemed so knowledgeable when he discussed any subject, from movies to art to philosophy, that assessing his future, I knew he would not remain a secretary for long. The upshot of this visit was that on my next appointment at Universal I brought him an armful of the books I had used during one of my summer courses at the University of Southern California.

At the end of 1919, Laemmle demoted two of the three current studio managers. He then announced that he was returning to New York, but without Irving. "I need someone to keep an eye on things for me," said Laemmle. Surprisingly, he mandated that Irving work on an equal basis with Stern, Bernstein, and another executive, Samuel Van Runkle.

On January 2, 1920, Laemmle left for New York. He had neglected to tell Irving the extent of his authority. As Stern, Bernstein, and Van Runkle soon discovered, Irving did not need to be told. "It was one of those periods when people were getting fired right and left," Irving said later. "I took charge because there was no one left to take charge." The young man who had spent years chafing under the restrictions of ill health could now assert the confidence that Henrietta had burned

into him. It was time to go after the “facts, action, and power” of William James. “In a business where no one had the courage of his own convictions,” said Irving, “I knew I was right that I should make them do it my way.”

In February, after receiving telegrams from angry executives, Laemmle sent Pat Powers, one of his partners, to see what Thalberg was doing. The report was positive. Laemmle returned to Universal City in March, and Irving told him point-blank: “The first thing you should do is establish a new job of studio manager and give him the responsibility of watching day-to-day operations.”

“All right,” said Laemmle. “You’re it.”

“I’m what?”

“I would like that you should stay here,” Laemmle answered. “You are completely in charge of the studio.” On April 30 Laemmle departed for Europe with an entourage of relatives. Thalberg was left with nine productions to oversee, three times as many scenarios to develop, and a shortage of funds.

“Irving fought his way through this tangled mess,” recalled Norma Shearer, “but to get the wheels really turning, he needed money. There was none in the till and banks were adamantly against any further loans.” Because Laemmle would be gone until November, Irving had to go alone to meet the Bank of Italy president, A. H. “Doc” Giannini. “In spite of the man’s resistance,” said Shearer, “Irving made a splendid presentation—he was a persuasive speaker—and he gained his objective. The president presented papers for him to sign, as he was now general manager of Universal. Irving said politely: ‘I am sorry, sir, but my signature won’t do you any good. I’m not twenty-one yet.’”

When Irving G. Thalberg turned twenty-one—on May 30, 1920—he was earning \$450 a week as general manager of Universal City. Before long, journalistic wags were calling him the “Boy Wonder of Hollywood.” Henrietta was not surprised at his ascendance. When she asked him what he was going to do next, she did not have to speak the obvious. They both knew his time was limited.

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Most of the “film folk” working in Hollywood in 1920 had come from the East Coast. The warm heaviness of the air, the scent of winter-blooming jasmine, and the dusty streets that meandered into orange groves were a shock to their systems. “In those days it took a long time to travel to Hollywood,” recalled actor Conrad Nagel. “It took five days by train and then that long, ridiculous layover in Chicago. And when I got there, I hated it. Oh, gosh, did I hate Hollywood. You see, we came out of the bitter cold of New York into the terrific warmth of California, and it was

all I could do to stay awake. I'd get on the set, and if I stood still for two minutes, I'd doze off." Actress Marion Davies had a similar reaction. "When I first arrived in Hollywood, I didn't like it," she wrote. "I couldn't understand the big wide spaces. I was a city girl, and I was afraid of everything. After a while I learned to like California, so that when I went back east, I didn't like New York any more. I got to feeling crowded in, crushed." Buster Keaton, who was both directing and acting in his own films, adjusted quickly. "We were all young," he remembered. "The air in California was like wine. Our business was also young—and growing like nothing ever seen before."

How did Irving Thalberg, a short, slight easterner with little education and less experience, learn to handle himself in the wilds of Hollywood? After a day of story conferences and casting, screening, and editing, the young studio manager would partake of the seductive climate. His friend Sam Marx later wrote: "Thalberg liked to stand in the doorway of his office to steal a few moments of contemplation, with the leaves of the tall red eucalyptus trees on the near hill rustling tremulously and the late sun throwing an orange glow over the sets and stages at Universal City."

Anyone encountering Thalberg at twilight might wonder if he was really an adult. He weighed 122 pounds, and his shallow chest cavity and thin limbs made him look undernourished. In striking contrast to the spareness of his body were the thickness of his black hair, the expressiveness of his eyes, and the symmetry of his features. In a town full of "pretty" men, he had an unselfconscious beauty. Novelist Edna Ferber wrote: "I had fancied motion-picture producers as large gentlemen smoking oversized cigars. But this young man whose word seemed so final at Universal City turned out to be a wisp of a boy, twenty-one, so slight as to appear actually frail. Something about this boy impressed me deeply." When journalist Louella Parsons interviewed Thalberg for the first time, she was surprised at his youth, but decided that "it was no boy's mind that was being asked to cope with the intricate politics of Universal City."

When fledgling screenwriter Lenore Coffee first visited Thalberg's office, she stared at him. "Although I had seen photographs of him," she wrote, "I was not prepared for the slender body, the delicately boned and strikingly Italianate face. I thought immediately of how he would look as a Renaissance prince, for he had a princely air." In his first years in the industry, Thalberg had learned to compensate for his appearance by carrying himself with authority. "When you were shown into his office," wrote Coffee, "he was invariably standing behind his desk, looking at a letter or fiddling with various objects with an abstracted air, as if he were

quite unconscious of your presence. After a good moment he would look up as if startled to find you there. On leaving the studio, I kept thinking back what a remarkable young man he was. Although barely twenty-one, he had enormous dignity. I couldn't imagine anyone taking a liberty with him, either in business or in his personal life."

Thalberg never questioned himself, and woe to anyone who did. The director of a film called *The Flirt* had shot so many angles that the editor did not know where to begin. "Cut it all from the point of view of the father," Thalberg instructed him, "and it will come down to the proper length."

"It worked!" exclaimed the editor a few days later.

"What did you expect it to do?" asked Thalberg, to whom being right was becoming a way of life. Since his production methods were new to Hollywood, no one dared ask if he was performing them correctly. They followed orders, learning all the while. Thalberg started with scripts, which were often cliché-ridden yarns without suspense or surprises. He had to make them good enough to shoot—and better than the competition. Cochrane later asked Laemmle how Thalberg was able to assimilate filmmaking techniques so readily. "Irving was that way from the first," replied Laemmle.

"He understood stories," said Shearer. "He had read so much. He got the wheels turning by first revising the scripts and then putting more pictures to work, by assigning directors and casts, by contending tactfully with conflicting authority when he could, and by overruling when he couldn't. He would just make up his mind and bear the consequences." Predictably, there were Universal employees (and Laemmle relatives) who resented Thalberg's manner. A number of actors and directors, including Harry Carey, Mae Murray, and Robert Z. Leonard, went to studios where they would not be supervised so closely. For the most part, though, Thalberg won over his staff.

Carl Laemmle had two children. Rosabelle was eighteen. Carl Jr. (born Julius) was thirteen. Their mother had died of influenza in January 1919, so Rosabelle ran the home at 465 West End Avenue in New York. Thalberg had encountered her at the Broadway office, where she had made it clear that she was not interested in friendship with a secretary. He watched the self-assured girl come and go, and then spent dinners with Sam Marx talking about her. By the spring of 1921 Thalberg's authority had thawed Miss Laemmle. She came to California and began to spend time in the editing room, watching patiently as he edited and re-edited a Priscilla Dean vehicle called *Reputation*. He moved scenes around, pulled them, and then replaced them, trying to give the mediocre film some dramatic power. He hoped

that Laemmle would find it worthy of a special release. When Thalberg finished, Rosabelle felt that her father should make a special trip from New York to see the results. Thalberg and Rosabelle were understandably nervous as Laemmle watched the film one night in a chilly screening room. The film had no accompaniment but the chatter of sprockets in the projector gate. When Thalberg turned to check Laemmle's reaction, he was disappointed to see the older man's head tilted back, resting on the frame of his chair. When the lights came up, Laemmle got up, stretched, and then walked out.

"Your father fell asleep," said Thalberg.

"No," replied Rosabelle. "He always tilts his head back when he doesn't want to cry."

Thalberg did not believe her. He was so downcast that he slept in a chair in his office that night. The next morning he received a telegram sent by Laemmle from the train station. "Please thank all connected with the finest picture ever to carry my name."

Before long, the general manager and the boss's daughter were seeing each other regularly. Henrietta had met Rosabelle in New York and was less than thrilled. Her son was too young to be serious about any girl, and he could do better than this stuck-up child with the pointed chin. (Rosabelle had at one point tried to become a film actress, but screen tests showed that she was not photogenic.) Henrietta made her feelings known, but Thalberg and Rosabelle continued with an involvement that was sincere if not passionate. He devoted most of his energy to work, and he was not given to displays of affection, either in public or in private. He became known for his dislike of physical contact; it was as if he might break if someone touched him. In the parlance of the time, he was a "cool customer." This coolness could be mistaken for coldness, and would be a component of his success.

After living in a series of modest hotel rooms, Thalberg missed his family. He moved them from 1303 Bushwick Avenue in Brooklyn to 446 South Norton Avenue in Los Angeles. After settling in the attractive two-story home, Henrietta resumed her role as matriarch, guardian, and nurse. This made it easier for her to drive a wedge between her son and his imperious girlfriend. The romance continued, but after seeing Rosabelle through his mother's eyes, Thalberg began to have doubts.

In late 1921, after two years at Universal City, Thalberg tried collaborating on a scenario. He would not put his name on it, however. He was not satisfied with its story. *The Dangerous Little Demon* was credited to "I. R. Irving." This was the

first and last time that he allowed any part of his name in the credits of a film. The incident also marked the beginning of both his insecurity about writing and his ambivalence toward writers.

In November, Julius Stern was elected second vice president and installed as Laemmle's personal representative in Universal City. The move was made, in part to stop rumors that a boy was single-handedly running the studio, and in part to release Thalberg from tiresome duties. "I am freeing him from the details of business administration," said Stern, "in order that he may devote his entire time to production." He wisely left Thalberg alone.

The only real resistance Thalberg encountered was from Erich von Stroheim, the headstrong Austrian director who had joined Universal when Thalberg was still in New York. Stroheim had been an out-of-work actor known for playing German villains in World War I epics when he convinced Laemmle to let him write, direct, and star in a low-budget film. In *Blind Husbands*, Stroheim portrayed a bullet-headed, monocle-wearing, heel-clicking officer who seduces married women vacationing in the Alps. In the process of creating this decadent milieu, Stroheim ignored his \$25,000 budget and worked his company day and night, shooting hours of morbidly sharp images. By the time *Blind Husbands* premiered, it cost \$250,000. Happily for Universal, the cynical film grossed almost half a million and made the thirty-three-year-old Stroheim a star. For the first time, the little studio had a film that was both profitable and prestigious, an insightful work in the tradition of Arthur Schnitzler.

Emboldened by this success, "Mr. von Stroheim" began to snap his riding crop at anyone who questioned him. He cultivated the image of a Viennese officer; like the "von" in his name, it was a fiction. He was a middle-class Austrian Jew with no authentic connection to the Hapsburgs. But this was Hollywood, where everyone was self-invented. "Von" Stroheim was an "artiste," and if his cynical vision of Alt Wien made money, his eccentricities could be excused. In June 1920 Stroheim commenced his third film, *Foolish Wives*, and set tongues wagging with a full-size reproduction of the plaza at Monte Carlo. A year later, Thalberg was shocked to discover that the film was still shooting. He called the director to his office. "I have seen all the film and you have all you need for the picture," said Thalberg. "I want you to stop shooting."

"I have not finished as yet," said Stroheim, who stood flanked by a retinue of assistants.

"Yes, you have," said Thalberg. "You have spent all the money this company can afford. I cannot allow you to spend any more." Thalberg picked up a contract

and read the clause that said, “The Director agrees that he will direct as ordered by the Producer.”

“You will have to fire me first if you want to give me orders,” laughed Stroheim. “If you remove me as the director of this picture, you also remove me as star. How will you finish it then?” Stroheim and Thalberg were about the same height, but Stroheim was stocky and muscular. “If you were not my superior,” said Stroheim, “I would smash you in the face.”

“Don’t let that stop you,” said Thalberg, unflinching.

Stroheim glared at him for an instant, then thought better of it. He strode off, muttering, “Since when does a child instruct a genius?”

Thalberg said nothing, and Stroheim continued filming night scenes at Lake Forest, California. William Daniels, a twenty-five-year-old cameraman who was working on both his first Stroheim film and his first feature film, reported to the set at dusk and found the cameras missing. “I got a car and went after the cameras,” recalled Daniels. “I was told that Thalberg had removed them permanently. By the time I got back, he had taken the lights away too.”

*Foolish Wives* premiered a few months later, and it created an even greater sensation than *Blind Husbands*. It made more money, too, but as Thalberg pointed out, most of that money paid for footage that Stroheim had shot but not used. The two men reconciled in time to attend the New York premiere of *Foolish Wives*. While there, Thalberg began a practice that would serve him throughout his career—seeing Broadway plays to sniff out potential properties. On this trip, Stroheim went with him to watch Richard Bennett play the pathetic clown in Leonid Andreyev’s *He Who Gets Slapped*. On the train back to California, Thalberg noted Stroheim’s preoccupation. “Got an idea?” asked Thalberg.

“Half an idea,” replied Stroheim, recalling the carnival setting of Andreyev’s play and that of Ferenc Molnar’s *Liliom*. Back at Universal, Stroheim and Thalberg spent two months thrashing out a script for Stroheim’s next project, *Merry-Go-Round*. Stroheim promised Thalberg that he would adhere to the script, the schedule, and the budget. On the set in late August, Stroheim promptly forgot his promise; it was absurd to think that Thalberg or anyone else could control him. According to Shearer, Thalberg “watched Mr. von Stroheim use up 83,000 feet of film just for the first few scenes. Wise words quietly spoken failed to check this extravagance.” One of these scenes was scripted as a banquet but shot as a drunken orgy. “Stroheim served real champagne by the bucketful and whisky as well,” recalled Daniels. “All the extras got loaded. A girl stepped naked out of a punchbowl. It was during a shot when I irised in on her that von Stroheim passed

out cold.” In late September Thalberg called Stroheim to his office to warn him that he was on the verge of being fired.

“That is impossible,” replied Stroheim. “*Merry-Go-Round* is my picture. I conceived it, and I will see it through to the end. No one can take von Stroheim off a von Stroheim picture.”

“Perhaps that was impossible in the past,” said Thalberg quietly, “because you appeared in your other films. But you are not acting in *Merry-Go-Round*. And so you can be replaced.”

On October 6, 1922, Thalberg wrote Stroheim: “You have time and again demonstrated your disloyalty to our company, encouraged and fostered discontent, distrust, and disrespect for us in the minds of your fellow employees, and have attempted to create an organization loyal to yourself, rather than to the company you were employed to serve.” Thalberg had also seen the rushes of the banquet scene. “Among other difficulties with which we have had to contend,” wrote Thalberg, “has been your flagrant disregard for the principles of censorship and your repeated and insistent attempts to include scenes photographed by you, situations and incidents so reprehensible that they could not by any reasonable possibility be expected to meet with the approval of the censorship boards.” Thalberg ended his letter by telling Stroheim: “You are discharged from our employ, your discharge to take effect as of this date.” Shock waves were immediately felt in Hollywood.

“This was the first time a director had been fired,” said producer David O. Selznick in 1964. “It took guts and courage. Thalberg was only twenty-two. Remember that a matter of hundreds of thousands of dollars in those days could wreck a company, particularly a company which was not that strong.” With this bold act, Thalberg established the precedent of the omnipotent producer. In a few years it would change the structure of Hollywood filmmaking, shifting power from directors such as Stroheim, D. W. Griffith, and Rex Ingram to producers such as B. P. Schulberg, Darryl Zanuck, and Sol Wurtzel. For the time being, though, its significance was that of a David-and-Goliath story. A frail, untutored youth had bested a powerful, worldly man. It was incredible that Thalberg should dare to do this, let alone succeed. Where did he get the will, the courage? Only a handful of people in Los Angeles knew the wellspring of his ambition. It was his inescapable realization that time was running out. After staring down death for years, he would not be cowed by a strutting poseur.

The money Thalberg saved Universal on *Merry-Go-Round* went in part to a pet project. Lon Chaney, a miraculously clever character actor, had suggested to

Thalberg that Universal produce *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with Chaney himself as star. Thalberg was in favor of the idea, having read the book in his sickbed years earlier. Universal was doing well enough to afford an epic production, one that could open at the newly completed Astor Theatre in New York. Laemmle approved the project, which included the construction of a full-size façade of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, a sprawling town square, nineteen acres of sets, and a cast of two thousand. While Laemmle was in Europe, Thalberg authorized additional crowd scenes. By the fall of 1922, it appeared that Thalberg would have a masterpiece in his portfolio, not to mention a new star. But Thalberg was not happy at the “Big U.”

Henrietta had given her son a sense of self—his poise, his impatience with mediocrity, his need to achieve success in a limited time. She pondered the question of his marrying. Doctors told her that his heart was strong enough to sustain the exertions associated with sexual intercourse. If his heart was overtaxed by long work hours and corporate struggles, however, there might be danger. Henrietta saw it at Universal, which took for granted the improvements her son had effected. She also saw it in Rosabelle. If her son married the boss’s daughter, he would be tied to Universal. Henrietta was happy for his accomplishments there, but it was not the most admired company in the industry. There was one maxim he had not read in William James, pragmatic though it was: “Never remain in a job after you have gotten all you can from it.” Would Laemmle let him make more films like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, or would he have to content himself with middlebrow material?

When Laemmle returned from Europe, he was gravely concerned about the money that Thalberg had spent on the Victor Hugo epic. After he reviewed the rough cut, however, he did an about-face and ordered a lavish publicity campaign and a special release program. Thalberg thought this an opportune time to ask for a raise. He had, after all, been earning \$450 a week for nearly three years. He was stung when Laemmle refused, citing operation expenses. Thalberg accepted Laemmle’s decision without argument but conjectured that economy was not the real reason. The romance between Thalberg and Rosabelle had lost its blush, and he did not want to marry her. Henrietta had warned him that he could never run the Fox Film Corporation or First National if he married into the Laemmle family. By the same token, he was refused a raise because he was not part of the family.

Even so, Laemmle’s refusal made no sense. He allowed his relatives and even Stroheim to squander money, yet he was unwilling to share it with Thalberg, whose value to the company had increased demonstrably. Thalberg became qui-