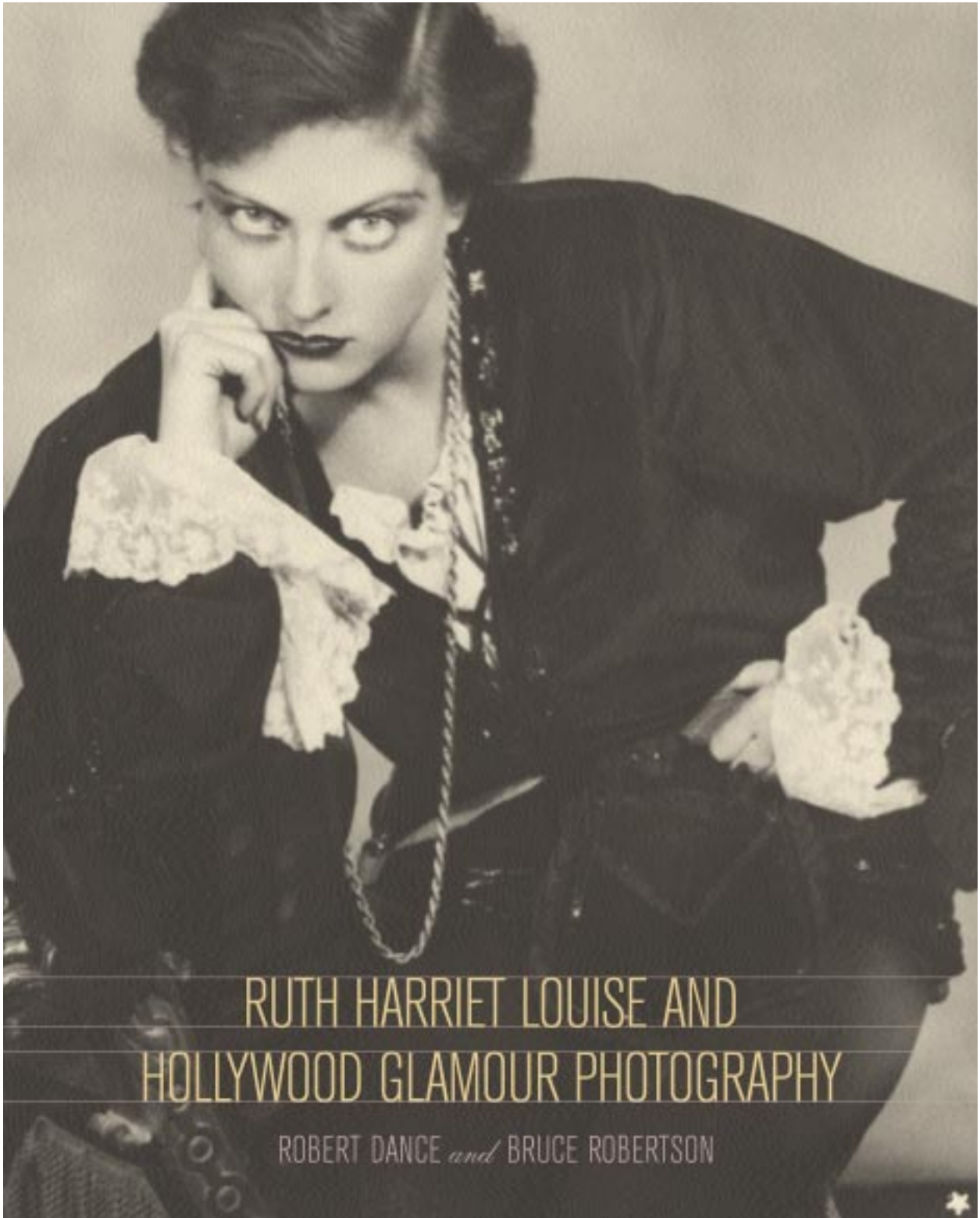


Excerpted from



RUTH HARRIET LOUISE AND
HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

ROBERT DANCE *and* BRUCE ROBERTSON

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chapter 1

RUTH GOLDSTEIN BECOMES RUTH HARRIET LOUISE

RUTH GOLDSTEIN WAS HIRED BY METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER as chief portrait photographer in the summer of 1925. Her transformation into Ruth Harriet Louise involved hard work, a certain amount of luck, and the indispensable element of talent. Contemporary sources discussing Louise's career always begin with a mention of her gender, youth, and attractiveness, as though what was interesting about her was how much she looked like her subjects. As one journalist put it, "If you saw her walking across the lot you'd think that she was a star going from one set to the other. She is as pretty as a star but instead of being one of them she bosses them!"¹ Her work and the extraordinary fact that she was the most reproduced photographer in America during her tenure at MGM seemed less important to outside observers. Louise, however, had a different view of herself: "With actors, of course, . . . having their pictures taken is part of their business and they are more or less in my hands. I don't mind bossing them around one bit—I realize some of their success depends on me."² She was absolutely correct.

One Girl and Six Men -- and She "BosSED" Them All



"ONE GIRL... AND SHE BOSSED," *HOLLYWOOD LIFE* (AUGUST 1926)

Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Louise had been at MGM barely a year when she was featured in *Hollywood Life*. Seen here in a self-portrait, she is surrounded by six of her subjects, the leading (male) directors of the day.

Ruth Goldstein was born in New York City on January 13, 1903, the daughter of Rabbi Jacob Goldstein and Klara Jacobsen Goldstein. She was the second child; her brother, Mark Rex Goldstein (1900–1945), was three years older. Her parents had immigrated to the United States not too long before the turn of the century; Jacob (1859–after 1925) had been born in London and Klara (1872–1956) in Vienna, but they journeyed to the United States, it seems, through Australia.³ Once in the New York area, the Goldstein family moved every few years, changing both homes and congregations, until eventually they settled in Trenton, New Jersey, around 1915.⁴ In 1921 Rabbi Goldstein left Trenton and accepted a position with Temple Anshe Emeth in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a dynamic and rapidly expanding congregation closely allied to the American Jewish Congress, a progressive Zionist organization. It is fair to assume that the rabbi and his family were equally progressive; the children were certainly cultured and musical, as old friends and contemporary documents record.⁵ The Goldsteins lived in a modest two-family home in the suburb of Highland Park, just across the Raritan River from the temple—an easy walk or quick trolley ride away. After New York or even Trenton, New Brunswick must have felt quite provincial. After all, it had only one first-run movie theater, the Opera House, while Trenton had seven.

Louise's brother, Mark, attended Columbia College the fall semester of 1918, taking classes in economics and science. He left the family in 1922, shortly after the move to New Brunswick, to find his fortune in Hollywood. He was drawn there by the success of their cousin Carmel Myers (the daughter of Klara's sister, Anna, and her husband, Isodore, a rabbi in San Francisco), who had a flourishing career as a motion picture actress. While visiting Myers, Mark discovered that he had his own skills to offer Hollywood. Although show business was not new to the young man—he was, as the *Banner*, the newspaper of the Young Men's Hebrew Association in New Brunswick, described him, “director of the recent Flapper Revue and lyric composer par excellence”⁶—he obtained his first job because of his scientific aptitude. A story often repeated has him visiting a set on which his cousin was working at Century Studio. The comedy director Al Herman was trying to shoot a gag involving a “mechanical contrivance” that kept failing to go off. Mark, calling on his knowledge of physics, helped set up the gag correctly, and immediately found himself with a job as “prop boy” for Mr. Herman. By 1924 he was working as a writer at Educational Pictures (page 65), and later he became a director. By the time he returned to New Jersey in 1925 to marry, he had changed his name to Mark Sandrich, adopting an anglicized version of the original family name, Sandreich, which his father had changed to Goldstein before coming to the United States.⁷ Within a few years he would become famous by directing the classic Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies *Top Hat* and *Carefree*.

New Brunswick was the home of the New Jersey College for Women (later Douglass Col-

lege, a part of Rutgers University), but Louise did not pursue further education. Sharing her brother's interests in the theater and music, Louise appeared in local musical comedies put on by the youth of the temple. In one such production, "Captain Applejack," she portrayed Anna Valeska, a supposed Russian spy. "No one would think," wrote one reviewer, "that our sweet, gentle Ruth could transform herself into such a double-crossing vamp."⁸ This sweetness was remarked on by everyone who encountered her. She was, in the words of her sister-in-law, "natural," with a no-nonsense attitude. What also stood out were her large, attractive eyes and youthful intensity, so much so that later she was sometimes mistaken for Joan Crawford on the lot of MGM.

Like her brother, Louise soon sought work at a juncture between science and art when, in 1922, she set herself up as a commercial portrait photographer. As she explained to a reporter in 1926, she had wanted to be an artist, a painter, "but somehow her fingers failed to create the images of her active mind." Sitting for a portrait by famed New York portrait photographer Nickolas Muray, however, "she realized what he could do with lights and shadows and a camera and saw that he was not merely 'taking a picture' but creating a personality." Encouraged by this revelation, she enrolled in a photographic school, but then dropped out to apprentice herself "in the studio of a well-known photographer in New York" (probably Muray).⁹ Once she had gained the skills she needed, she set up her own studio in New Brunswick, in Montalvo's Temple of Music, a music store down the block from Temple Anshe Emeth.

She began advertising her services as early as the fall of 1922, listing her qualifications as "D.G.P."—Darn Good Photographer, we can assume. "Won't you visit my studio, and let me perpetuate your personality," she coaxes in the *Banner*.¹⁰ It was a one-room studio, and she was the only staff member. According to a 1927 account in *Royal Magazine*, "She did it all, from the taking of pictures to retouching, developing, printing, even down to scrubbing the floors."¹¹ The following year she listed herself in the city business directory, a clear expression of her professional ambitions. She also assumed what would become her professional name: the first published appearance of "Ruth Harriet Louise" appears in a listing in the *Banner's* holiday greetings issue of September 1923.

Although few photographs from this period survive, we can learn something of her early thoughts as a photographer from a short essay, "The Better Photography," she published in November 1922 in the *Banner*.¹² "Good photographs," she writes, "like good books, or a resonant mellow old violin, possess a soul. . . . A violin sings to you, a book holds a mental seance with you and makes you think. Even so a photograph can talk to you. If it is the better type of photograph, it not only talks to you, but it strikes you between the eyes and makes you gasp for breath." Balancing this romantic emphasis on soul and the emotional response to photographic art, however,



MARK SANDRICH, 1928

Private collection

Louise made this portrait of her brother in late winter 1928, when he was working as a writer at Educational Pictures. Soon he would move to RKO and direct Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

is a confident assertion of her knowledge of the “science” of photography, in the handling of lighting, film, and chemicals and the making of fine prints.

Certain aspects of her character as a Hollywood photographer can be discerned even at this preliminary stage. First, there is an interest in fashion. In a striking simile, she compares a good photograph to a glamorous evening dress: “The difference between a photographic study, and an ordinary picture is just like a gown of Poiret of Paris compared to a dress displayed in the shop window of some small town shop. One is a creation expressing individuality, and grace, the other is—well, the other, let us say, is a necessary evil!” Evident in this comparison is also her ambition, since by most reckonings a teenager (even a precocious one) in the town of New Brunswick would be more like the small-town shopkeeper than the Parisian couturier.

In addition, she carefully enunciates her criteria for a good photographic portrait. First and foremost, “the photograph must express personality.” Flaws in appearance should be minimized through posing and lighting, and in the print itself the subject’s features should be softly and evenly modeled (Louise decries “needle point sharpness”), not “over-touched and lighted till a soft round face looks like a paste” but revealing real skin texture. Finally, the print should be finished and presented pleasingly. Only with regard to retouching would Louise’s Hollywood technique differ from the program she set herself during her first months as a professional photographer.

How commercially successful she was is uncertain.¹³ The only photographs we know of from this period are family portraits and portraits of her father’s congregants. Certainly Louise worked hard at her career within the limited realm of New Brunswick, keeping abreast of photographic trends in New York. She also took advantage of the first opportunity to move on to a larger arena. Soon after her brother’s marriage and his return to Hollywood in March 1925, Louise moved to Los Angeles.¹⁴ With a safe, chaperoned environment provided by Mark and Freda Sandrich to welcome her, Louise immediately set up shop in “a tiny studio on Vine and Hollywood, close to Famous Players-Lasky Studio” and began to forge an independent career.¹⁵ Two sessions can be dated with great certainty to the months before her MGM contract. One was with the Fox director Emmett Flynn, who continued to use Louise’s photograph for publicity for many years.¹⁶ And Samuel Goldwyn, working as an independent producer, hired Louise to photograph his latest discovery, Vilma Banky, in costume for *Dark Angel* (which was in production in June 1925). A portrait from this session appeared in *Photoplay* magazine in September 1925, Louise’s first published Hollywood image. In Louise’s account, within three weeks of arriving in Los Angeles she was brought to the attention of “a man who was a big power in the moving picture world.”¹⁷ This might have been Goldwyn, but more likely it was MGM studio boss Louis B. Mayer.

To make this jump, especially so quickly, Louise needed talent, luck, and connections. We

know she was talented, and her meteoric rise suggests considerable luck. Her Hollywood connections, however, played an especially important role in her quick success. With a brother established at Educational, she might have found some work at that small studio, but hardly at MGM. Rather, the key to Louise's success was certainly her cousin Carmel Myers.¹⁸ Myers, who was just completing the filming of *Ben-Hur* on MGM's Culver City lot (page 9), not only was on good terms with Goldwyn, but was also very friendly with Louis B. Mayer and his family: she was often Mayer's choice to chaperone his daughters. Nepotism ruled the MGM lot, as it did nearly all the Hollywood studios.¹⁹

Myers, in fact, was the first Hollywood actress Louise photographed (though the session took place not in Hollywood but in Manhattan), and it was through Myers's intervention that Louise came to the attention of MGM.²⁰ Early in the spring of 1925, Myers had returned from Italy to Hollywood along with the rest of the cast and crew of *Ben-Hur*. She stopped in New York on the way, and it was there that Louise photographed her cousin. As reported in 1928: "Carmel could not arrange to get to Ruth's home, which was out of the city, so the girl took her camera and all of her heavy lights to Carmel's hotel. It was this very sitting ultimately that changed the tide of her career, for Carmel returned to the MGM studios with the portraits and showed them to Mayer."²¹ Mayer, however, wanted proof that Louise could handle the responsibilities of such an important job, so MGM actress Paulette Duval, a close friend of Myers, was sent for a sitting. Although Duval was not impressed by Louise's youth and required some cajoling, the results were excellent and brought Louise an interview. The studio bosses were prepared to accept a young woman as an actress or even scriptwriter, but were dubious of one in a male-dominated technical field and asked if she were receiving help. "Send some other star—a man, if you like—and he can watch the whole proceeding from beginning to end," Louise suggested.²² Yet that proved to be unnecessary, and before the middle of the summer she had a contract with MGM.

67

When Louise arrived in Los Angeles in 1925, Hollywood was already a marvel for the entire country. As early as 1920, the reaction was ecstatic:

No one can breathe [Hollywood's] atmosphere long and not be profoundly conscious that some tremendous force is stirring here. It is for our generation an almost incredible experience to watch the beginnings and development of a wholly new art. It is no use for gentlemen with a Broadway past to assert, with a pungent oath, that it is not an art, but just the "show business." It is, or is going to be, an art and a great one, and in Hollywood they realize the fact with a kind of vague terror. It is a little as if they had somehow unloosed a great and beautiful beast and

were wondering whether, with their inexperience, their ineptitudes, and their vulgarities, they could long hold and control him.²³

By 1925 the beast was even larger: investment in the industry was reckoned at \$1.5 billion, with seven hundred or so feature films made every year. The United States alone had some twenty thousand movie theaters, which sold 130 million tickets a year on average, if we are to believe industry figures—equaling approximately one visit to the movies for each man, woman, and child in the country.²⁴ As Harry Reichenbach, one of the great publicists of the day, observed: “Pictures were the new Klondike and people swarmed to it like grifters to a mardi gras.”²⁵

The biggest change between 1920 and 1925, though, arose from the decision by a small group of Hollywood’s biggest producers to consolidate the industry. As a result of this move, the array of small film companies that characterized early Hollywood soon gave way to a core group of stable enterprises that were to dominate the industry for the next three decades. Whereas in 1924 there were some nineteen studios still in Hollywood, by 1935 only eight major ones ruled the scene. The most important single development leading to consolidation was the creation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios in 1924, under the supervision of Louis B. Mayer (1885–1957) and controlled by Marcus Loew in New York.²⁶ Loew, who owned a large chain of theaters, had purchased Metro Pictures several years earlier as a means of enlarging his empire and securing a steady supply of movie offerings. Louis B. Mayer had been a small-time theater owner who made a fortune by acquiring exclusive rights to exhibit D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* in New England. A founding partner of Metro in 1914 in New York City, by 1918 he was in Los Angeles with his own production company, part of the larger movement of studios to the West Coast. The third piece in this complicated puzzle was Goldwyn Studios, shares of which Loew had been purchasing throughout the winter of 1923–24. In late April Loew reached a merger agreement with Samuel Goldwyn, who no longer controlled the studio (he had been forced out in 1922) but who remained a large shareholder. So too was William Randolph Hearst. Newspaper and magazine publisher as well as sometime politician, Hearst also owned Cosmopolitan Pictures, which existed primarily (though not exclusively) to make films starring Hearst’s mistress, Marion Davies. Cosmopolitan’s films were distributed by Goldwyn Pictures. In the various negotiations leading up to an agreement, satisfying the egos and filling the pocketbooks of Mayer, Goldwyn, Hearst, Loew, and their many partners must have been a monumental challenge. Nonetheless, on Saturday, April 26, 1924, the completed merger was celebrated by a large party on the front lawn of the former Goldwyn Pictures, now rechristened Metro-Goldwyn Pictures (the name would become Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer by the end of 1924).



MGM FROM THE AIR, 1925-26

Culver Pictures

MGM from the air about the time Louise
joined the studio.

Given the complexity of the merger, and the often tense and acrimonious prior relationships of all the partners, it was far from a foregone conclusion that MGM would prove any more long-lived than its predecessors. Yet owing largely to the authority and vision of Mayer and his chief production assistant, Irving Thalberg, the constituent parts did quickly meld into an empire. Goldwyn's Culver City lot, which was perhaps the best filmmaking facility in Hollywood, took over films already in production. Metro Pictures and Louis Mayer Productions, both smaller operations, contributed primarily stars and directors under contract; in addition, Mayer provided the management team necessary to integrate the disparate pieces. Within the year, *Cosmopolitan* would come into the MGM fold as well, giving up independent production facilities in New York and Los Angeles to make its films exclusively in Culver City. Moreover, Hearst's newspaper chain could be counted on for positive reviews and for feature articles spotlighting the new studio, its films, and its stars. Finally, theater owner and now studio emperor Marcus Loew was in a position to regulate the product he needed to fill his many seats, in movie palaces in and around Times Square as well as numerous small theaters situated primarily in the Northeast.

Once the merger was completed, Mayer seems to have turned his attention toward developing talent, for he knew that the studio's success would depend on a reliable stable of performers and an equally strong crew behind the scenes. Money seemed to be no object in Mayer's quest for talent; in the single year of 1925, for example, MGM placed under contract the established actresses Lillian Gish and Marion Davies and future stars Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford. The studio's population grew quickly as every department added new employees to meet the ambitious production schedule of one new feature a week and numerous short subjects.

Louise came into this swarming enterprise in midsummer 1925. Six-month contracts were typical, and undoubtedly Louise signed on for half a year with renewal options at the discretion of management. Just twenty-two when she first set foot on the lot, Louise entered a world where youth was not a novelty, much less a hardship.²⁷ As one awestruck commentator exclaimed: "Movie-land is, above everything, the land of youth, where success may come overwhelmingly before you are twenty-one."²⁸ Early female stars such as Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson were household names as teenagers. Garbo, already a star in Europe, arrived at MGM just a few days before her twentieth birthday, and producer Harry Rapf signed Lucille LeSueur (later Joan Crawford) to the studio when she was only eighteen years old.

Within the context of the enormous MGM enterprise, Louise's responsibilities might seem somewhat trivial. She was hired as a portrait photographer, high in the pecking order of still photographers but still small fry in the ego-driven world of producers, directors, stars, and designers. As it turned out, her job was in fact much more important than she might at first have imagined.



GRETA GARBO FOR *THE TORRENT*, 1925

The John Kobal Foundation

Two weeks after the shooting was completed on her first American film, *The Torrent*, Garbo was back in Louise's studio on December 31, 1925, for one final session.

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Mayer's careful and thorough rationalization of all parts of the movie business included publicity; indeed, from the beginning of his career Mayer had taken an intense interest in how film studios created and promoted stars through photography.²⁹ Because it was a concern of Mayer, this difficult task would become a principal concern of Louise and her portrait studio as well.

Louise's timing could not have been better. Competition in her field was intense; when she arrived in Los Angeles there were about thirty-five portrait studios, making it potentially very difficult to get noticed. (The fact that all the prominent photographers in Hollywood in 1925—notably Walter F. Seely, Melbourne Spurr, and Witzel—were men was a problem, but Hollywood was still generally hospitable to women professionals.) Most of Hollywood's portrait photographers specialized in promoting movie actors; about the same number of photographers worked in New York shooting theater and film performers.³⁰ Opportunities were expanding in Los Angeles, however, and declining in New York as more motion picture studios shifted operations to Hollywood. Although the number of photographic studios and portrait photographers who advertised would not change much in the next few years, the way of doing business would, and quite radically. So too would the kinds of photographs taken.

The year 1925 was an auspicious one for MGM. *Ben-Hur* and *The Big Parade*, both of which premiered at the end of 1925, were among the silent era's biggest commercial and critical successes (see color plate 1). As these films opened, Garbo, who had sent a shock wave through Hollywood the moment she stepped before a camera, was wrapping up her first MGM production, *The Torrent* (page 71). At the beginning of the year, however, the outlook was not so rosy; in fact, Mayer had skirted real disaster. His single greatest headache, and one that might have cost a lesser mogul control of his studio, was the production of *Ben-Hur*, a project inherited from Goldwyn Studios. In development since 1920, when Sam Goldwyn acquired the rights to Lew Wallace's popular 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur* began filming in the summer of 1924. While Mayer, in California, steered the new merger, production on *Ben-Hur* progressed badly in Italy, eating up scandalous amounts of money. Finally, Mayer decided to go to Rome to oversee what was quickly becoming a fiasco. In January 1925 he decided to bring the production home, scrapping most of the Italian footage. For the next many months Mayer's team endeavored to squeeze something golden out of this incredibly expensive goose, a process that included the enactment of the famous chariot race in Culver City in October and did not let up until the film opened on December 30, 1925. Throughout much of this period, especially the spring of 1925, MGM faced real financial problems. Stories circulated throughout Hollywood, such as the one of the bit player who was fired because his costume didn't fit; it was cheaper to hire another player than to alter the costume.³¹

Nevertheless, Mayer fearlessly carried on, and even continued to expand during this tumultuous period, realizing that his greatest assets and most worthwhile expenses were his players. In September 1925, for example, MGM advertised the addition of six new female and six male stars to its heavens. Louise, of course, was not listed, but it was her photographs that would end up promoting these stars and preserving their memory.