

Document Citation

Title	Joan Crawford, the ultimate star -- excerpt
Author(s)	Alexander Walker
Source	<i>Harper & Row, Publishers</i>
Date	1983
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	79-83
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	Crawford, Joan (1908-1977)
Film Subjects	Possessed, Brown, Clarence, 1931

JOAN CRAWFORD - ALEXANDER WALKER

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Joan Crawford and Clark Gable were teamed together for the third time in *Possessed* (21 November 1931), the last of four Crawford films to be released in 1931. It had been rushed into production after the disappointment of *This Modern Age* (29 July 1931) which, despite its title, was as *passé* as its characters, drunken playboys, worldly Frenchmen and reckless rakes. The only satisfaction for Crawford was playing opposite Pauline Frederick (cast as her mother and her lover's mistress). The cultured speech of the older actress influenced Joan's own tones in the lady-like roles ahead of her.

Possessed is arguably the best film she made in the 1930s. Without a doubt, it is the one that presented her definitive portrait of a working-class girl's morality in Depression era America: her upward mobility, her gift of assimilating herself into the new class, her near-neurotic need to succeed and her interpretation of success as marriage, wealth and status. Its director, Clarence Brown, could reveal the grain of MGM's star actresses, show what they were made of inside, better than anyone else; George Cukor sometimes gave them more 'edge', but seldom that straight through view to the heart of the material. And so confidently, too, so immediately!

The opening scenes of *Possessed* can hold their own with the neo-realist movement in Italian cinema twenty years later. A paper-box factory in some worn-down little town empties at the end of a long, hot day and Crawford exits with the throng. In a few seconds, Brown sketches the authentic background of working folk, their frame houses by the railroad, the housewife drawing water from a stand-pipe by her front gate, a husband tipsily arguing to be let in with another wife resolute on keeping him out. Brown shot on location; a newly acquired 360° camera platform puts

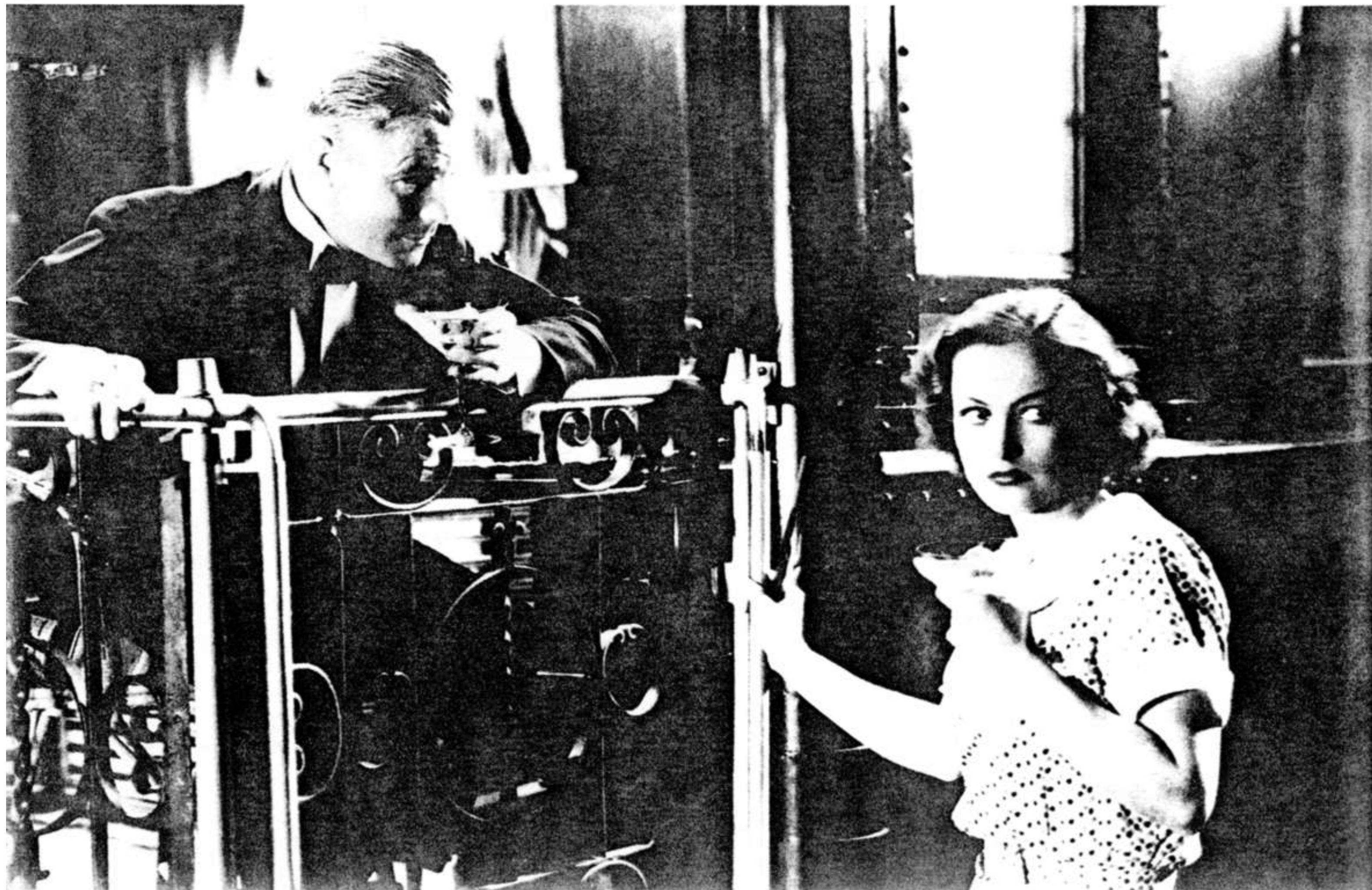
the depth into this vivid glimpse of proletarian life. And Crawford and her factory-gate beau, played by Wallace Ford, prove how well they can hold a scene in the long unbroken tracking shot accompanying their homeward amble beside the railroad lines. 'Tired?' he asks. 'Not just tired... dead.' 'What do you want anyhow?' 'I don't know. I only know I won't find it here.' Lines like these with their familiar echo of desperation substantiated the existence of millions of working-girl film-goers who heard them, engaged their understanding, enlisted their sympathies. Brown timed the shooting perfectly: it is the 'magic hour' at the end of the day, when the sun has set, but its borrowed light from over the horizon gives a feverish glow to Crawford's declaration, 'I can't wait.'

And then as she halts alone beside the tracks to let a train haul slowly by, a vision of the Other America passes with miraculous smoothness in tantalizing review in front of her. Behind the loco is a private railroad car; the lights are already a-glow inside; and as Crawford watches it, her back to the camera, images of affluence go by as though across a cinema screen, each compartment dangling the luxury of those who 'have' before the eyes of one of those who 'have not'. Oysters are being fastidiously shelled in the kitchen, next door a pre-dinner cocktail is being shaken, a maid is caressing a silk slip with an iron, a manservant shines his master's shoes... and so on, along the length of the carriage, past a couple in evening gown and tuxedo dancing

PREVIOUS PAGE Crawford in *Grand Hotel*.

BELOW *Possessed*: Working girl finds temptation and champagne when she meets Skeets Gallagher's Manhattan millionaire in his private railroad car.

OPPOSITE Gable and Crawford share a reflective moment between takes on *Possessed*.





ABOVE Director Clarence Brown insisted on a neo-realist approach to the working-class *milieu* shot on location in *Possessed*...

BELOW... but Brown (left) also knew when the studio glamour was needed for Crawford and Gable living in affluent sin.



to a portable phonograph, the man bending seductively over the woman, all wordless, wistful and Gatsby-like, until the locomotive grinds to a halt and on the observation platform exactly opposite her, a middle-aged Manhattanite pouring himself champagne impishly offers a glass to the mesmerized Crawford. Is there any other scene of social seduction which hits its mark so impeccably in every sense? Skeets Gallagher's affluent stranger pouring out the wine starts Crawford pouring her heart out; and the dialect of her dream versus his experience is a brilliant bit of shorthand for the way that America interpreted the class struggle in terms of social opportunity. 'I mean to get away.' 'Off to the big city to be done wrong?' 'To be done right ... my clothes, my shoes, my hands, the way I talk, everything's wrong with me.' He gives her his card with a Park Avenue address; a little tipsy now, too, she accepts it the way she might take an unexpected bonus from the boss, not quite believing it is meant for her. The wine is what emboldens her to leave home a few dramatic minutes later: the address on the card is where the American Dream begins. Not only is the economy of this sequence masterly, the acting, too, is perfectly on pitch, catching undertones of longing on Crawford's part, modulating Gallagher's lurking cruelty into perceptible pathos.

P.G. Wodehouse might have had a hand (at least a line) in the following sequence when Crawford, her ambitions clutched as tightly as her slim purse, appears at Gallagher's apartment just as the man who dangled opportunity in front of her is pulling out of a hangover. Politely, sheepishly, he bows at her, and water jets out of the icebag on his sore head. 'The damn thing isn't house-broken,' he snorts at his manservant. 'Ambrose, take it out for walk.' He quizzes her: 'What are you here for?' She is just as direct: 'For me.' He counsels her: 'There's only one way for a girl to get along in this town - find a rich man ... Never look [men] in the eyes, take a peek at their pocket-book ... Don't tell them too much about yourself - men are like Christopher Columbus, let them discover America.' The lesson over, she is about to leave. 'Down?' asks the elevator man. A split-second hesitation, then: 'No, not *down*.' And back into the apartment she goes, to try out the lesson on the two men who have just entered it. 'Are you rich?' she asks the older one. 'Awful.' 'That's nice. I couldn't waste my time with you, if it were otherwise.' But it is on the other man that she scores. 'Careful, she's after your money,' Gallagher warns him. 'Are you?' he asks. 'Yes.' His moustache expands along a lip that curls with disinterested amusement; his eyes twinkle with flattered curiosity; his whole presence doesn't just betray his interest in her, but registers it frankly. Thus is the Clark Gable image fully rounded at last.

One doesn't need to believe in the story of *Possessed*. All that's needed is for one to believe in Crawford and Gable. They make it easy. It is not just a case of good casting: it is an *attachment* to each other that has the tangible completeness which only players who are at ease or involved with each other manage to register so satisfyingly on the screen. But the story matters, too. For its time *Possessed* was a bold film. It recognized that love without marriage was sometimes desirable. It is the truth of the relationship that preserves its boldness despite the way that time has turned its singularity into commonplaceness. Gable's rich attorney will not marry Crawford even though divorce has left



Possessed was one of the greatest hits that Crawford and Gable made in the early 1930s; each brought out the star in the other.



82 him free to do so. His last wife left him for their chauffeur. 'Losing a sweetheart is a private misfortune,' he says in a Wilde-like quip, like an olive in the dry Martini, 'but losing a wife is a public scandal.' To avoid a second 'scandal', he grooms Crawford as his mistress, turning her into a working-girl's fantasy of *soignée* assurance and gaining her love so completely that she is willing to live in the luxury apartment he rents under her name ('Mrs Moreland'), which suggests her support comes from some other man's alimony and not from his account. Again thanks to its stars, the movie makes a strong case for being a kept woman without regrets. 'I left school when I was twelve,' Crawford says, 'I've never known how to spell "regrets".' Marriage is weighed, and found wanting. 'I wonder how many wives would be so understanding,' Gable muses, and receives the full withering force of his mistress's realism: 'These things don't happen to wives.' Even when Crawford later offers to withdraw from the situation, fearing she'll hurt Gable's political ambitions, and incites a row to make the parting easier, one does not feel the audaciousness has been neutered; for she still gives the go-by to the narrow, conventional nature of her *petit bourgeois* beau from long ago who shows up in New York, prospering and courting Gable's influence, but lacking all his generosity and boldness. Her old lover simply wants what she has already acquired: money and power. But she is a woman and has risked all to get them. It is one case of the 'double standard' working out to the woman's advantage.

It is a truism of star acting that players don't take off their make-up at the end of the day. If so, then there are plenty of good reasons in the script of *Possessed* why Gable and Crawford should have fallen in love during the shooting. Lines like 'The surest way to lose a woman is to marry her', or 'Even if married, I couldn't respect you more than I do', might have been calculated to keep an illicit relationship going after work, too. It did, if Crawford is to be believed. But it never came to more than a 'relationship'. The reason throws light on the awesome responsibilities that stardom carried for two people who were, as she put it, 'peasants'. Both were bemused by the suddenness of their celebrity, and not a little fearful that they might lose it as fatefully as they had gained it. Ultimately, this is what deterred them from provoking the sort of scandal which in the film comes near to wrecking the political ambitions of the Gable character. In *Possessed*, scandal has its origins in their not being married to each other; in real life, it would have originated in their being married to others. Neither star dared risk a double divorce at that point in their careers. Indeed, there was a fifth party whose interests had to be considered – namely MGM. The penalties were already spelled out in the contracts' morality clauses. But there is other, inferential evidence of Mayer's watchfulness over Gable and, obliquely, over Crawford. It is spelled out in his response to an attempt at this time by Gable's first wife, Josephine Dillon, to profit from her old relationship with him. Not two months after Gable had married Rhea Langham – *remarried* her, to be precise, since an MGM lawyer had discovered that their first marriage was not legal under Californian law – Mrs Dillon wrote a shrewdly calculating letter to Mayer. She had, she pointed out, 'received a number of offers for the story of my experiences as the wife and coach of Clark Gable. I have prepared such a story and have it ready for mailing to a publication.' The

letter, dated 2 August 1931, continued: 'Mr Gable has given me no cause to be concerned for his welfare, but your company has never done me any harm and this story will probably damage one of your properties. If you would rather buy this story from me ...'

The point was easy to get. Lyn Tornabene has published the letter in full in her biography of Gable, but unaccountably omitted the studio's reaction to it. It would seem that Mayer himself was out of town at the time, since his unwaveringly loyal secretary, Ida Koverman, sent a memo about it to Thalberg on 18 August 1931. 'Mrs Gable called yesterday to know how much longer she should wait for Mr Mayer. Said that she had received another wire from New York asking her to send on her manuscript and she didn't know what to do until she heard from Mr Mayer relative to this matter. Mr Loeb [of Loeb, Walker and Loeb, outside attorneys retained by MGM] today advised through his secretary that if possible you might get in touch with Mr Clark Gable and find out what he is going to do. Mr Loeb recommends that you use no pressure on Mr Gable and if Mr Gable doesn't want to come through, Mr Loeb advises we can then tell Mrs Gable that we are not interested in buying the manuscript. He [Mr Loeb] cannot take very seriously the consequences that might result from the publication of any article ...' Perhaps Mr Loeb couldn't. But Mr Mayer could – and *did* – when he was acquainted with the matter. Mayer immediately wrote a letter to Mrs Gable. Unfortunately, it has not survived; but its contents may be readily guessed from her reply of 31 August 1931, addressed to Mayer personally. 'This is an acknowledgment of my debt to you for your great kindness. The world looks much brighter than it did ...' It was, in fact, \$200-a-month brighter, for this was the sum Gable had agreed, at Mayer's stern urging, to pay for his first wife's silence.

How much greater, then, would Mayer's fury and retribution have been had he been confronted with the damage which double divorce suits might have inflicted on two of his top contract artists, Gable and Crawford, one of whom was gaining in popularity with every picture he made while the other was now a hugely lucrative part of MGM's corporate profit? Fortunately, he never needed to face it. He may have warned them: we do not know, for no record has survived which suggests a rebuke of this nature. But both stars backed off for the moment; and later, when one of them was matrimonially free, MGM, as will be recounted, had ensured the continuing good conduct of the other by links that were stronger than marriage.

But if the appearance of rectitude was preserved by such manoeuvres, morality elsewhere was distinctly disturbed by the relationship of Crawford and Gable in *Possessed*. Film censorship in England was much stricter than in America at the beginning of the Talkie era. Though then (as now) a tiny self-perpetuating private body, answerable to no one for the way it conducted its affairs, the decisions of the English censors were backed by the laws of cinema licensing: if the censors withheld approval from a film, it was denied public exhibition. And early in 1932, MGM was informed that *Possessed* would be banned in England in its entirety due to its pair of lovers living in sin *and enjoying it*, as if a man-mistress relationship were more natural than

OPPOSITE Hurrell's Crawford in a more relaxed mood.

84 the mixed blessings of wedlock or even the miseries of adultery. (At this time, three other MGM films, *Freaks*, *Night Court* and Crawford's *Letty Lynton*, the film following *Possessed*, were also banned in England for various reasons.) Getting round the ban was Thalberg's responsibility. It involved re-shooting parts of the film, so as to give a different interpretation to the story. This was quite practicable (for a price) at a studio where the artists were always contractually available. But as may be imagined, it would cause quite a bit of re-jigging in this case. How MGM went about it sheds rare and hence valuable light on Hollywood morality, on the lengths that the studio was prepared to go for two 'money' stars like Crawford and Gable and, finally, on Thalberg's frequently praised but seldom illustrated talent for remaking movies after they had been shot so as to make them more popular or, in this case, more acceptable.

On 26 February 1932, Thalberg cabled MGM's New York office asking, 'Will British censors pass *Possessed* if story is reconstructed as follows? Gable is scion of the important family. [In the film as shown in America, he was simply a rich lawyer.] Prior to opening of picture he has made one unfortunate marriage and been threatened with disinheritance. [In the original, his marriage had failed because, as stated, his wife had eloped with their chauffeur.] When Gable realizes he cannot have Crawford without marriage, he agrees to keep it a secret to the world – therefore to the world she appears his mistress ... Meanwhile, political enemies, counting on mistress angle, discover marriage and destroy record of it. Gable, outraged, wants to admit marriage and fight enemies. [In the original, he had defended his right to a private life.] Crawford realizes he loses his inheritance if he proves marriage, or career if he does not. [Originally, he had just risked losing a gubernatorial election.] She steps out, leaving balance of story as is.' Thalberg added, in something of an understatement, 'Naturally dialogue will be changed in many scenes.' But on 9 May 1932, he was advised by cable from London that even this ingenuity did not soften the English censors. 'Suggest you send another detailed synopsis,' he was told. So Thalberg and his writers tried again.

On 4 October 1932, he cabled MGM's London office: 'Would censors accept the following reconstruction of *Possessed*? Gable married to hopeless invalid and spends time in European spas. Has great regard and affection for her and believes loyalty lies with her despite everything. His relations with Crawford based on this and they enter into their equivocal position rather than disrupt his marriage and hurt helpless woman. Emphasizing Gable's respect for marriage relationship. Later, when both hopelessly in love and have suffered together because of sacrifice, wife dies. They grateful at prospect of sanctifying union when his proposed running for office comes up. He is asked to give up mistress and, when approaching marriage is announced, is told it will ruin his career to marry mistress on eve of election. Now plays as before, with Crawford sacrificing her happiness for Gable's career ... Please advise immediately, Thalberg.' Eventually this was substantially the form in which Britain saw the picture. It did good business. But its business generally was record-breaking and it is easy to see what MGM considered was a primary cause of this in the memo sent on 31 October 1931,

from Howard Strickling, at the studio, to Howard Dietz, the New York-based head of publicity and advertising: 'In future advertising *Possessed*, we will play up Gable larger and if okay with you will read as follows Joan Crawford (100 per cent-size type) with Clark Gable (60 per cent) in Clarence Brown's Production (50 per cent) *Possessed* (100 per cent).' Crawford's name was still above the title, as big as it, and in front of Gable's; but the day would come when she would be locked in combat over which of their names, by then equally aggrandized, should come first. In Hollywood, it is easier to surrender a lover than surrender a credit. //

It is said that Crawford begged Mayer to cast Gable opposite her in *Letty Lynton* (7 May 1932), in which she played a woman who kills for love, but that Mayer turned her down because he wanted to keep the distance between the stars wider than a camera two-shot. *Letty Lynton* was based on one true-to-life scandal (the Madeleine Smith poisoning case) and Mayer didn't wish to provoke another less lethal but possibly more expensive one. Unfortunately, like so many good Hollywood myths, this is untrue. Gable was simply not available at the time, since William Randolph Hearst, anxious to put some pep into the amiable but anaemic screen reputation of his mistress Marion Davies, had successfully requested Gable's stud-like presence in her next film. *Sally of the Circus*, however, did nothing for either of them.

Robert Montgomery took the role of the man who falls in love with Crawford aboard ship from Buenos Aires to New York, only to have her jealous, brutal lover (a badly miscast Nils Asther) turn up at the pierside and later blackmail Crawford into coming to his bedside. In desperation, she poisons him – or, at least, doesn't hold back his hand when he gloatingly drains the champagne she has heartbrokenly doctored for herself in a mood of suicide before dishonour. It is an astonishing narrative twist for its time. It comes as near to condoning homicide as any Hollywood film possibly could before the Production Code was stringently revised to ensure that girls like Crawford paid the penalty. She gets off, much as Madeleine Smith did. The film was based on Mrs Belloc Lowndes's novel, inspired in turn by the Edinburgh poisoning case, though MGM had wished to buy a play entitled *Dishonored Lady*, which told the same story. But as the Hays Office banned the use of such an 'inflammatory' title, the studio settled for the novel – and later on had to settle a plagiarism suit that made legal history (see Filmography).

The suit may have had more suspense than the film. The trouble is, Crawford in this kind of role has no aura of mystery, only a past; and Robert Montgomery has no sex-appeal, only a personable charm. Gable was obviously much missed. Only Garbo could have made Letty a compelling character – and Garbo by this time was heartily sick ('Always the vamp, I am always the woman of no heart') of *femmes fatales* like Letty, a woman with a secret past, a moral though far from insolvent outcast, a traveller through the impermanent world of hotels *de luxe*, ships' state-rooms and *boîtes de nuit* where Society and the Underworld thrilled each other. She avoids all commitments except the one forced on her by destiny. One can hear Garbo sepulchraly keening a line like, "'Home" and "mother" ... who ever put those two words together?' One imagines at times that one sees Garbo, too, in Adrian's