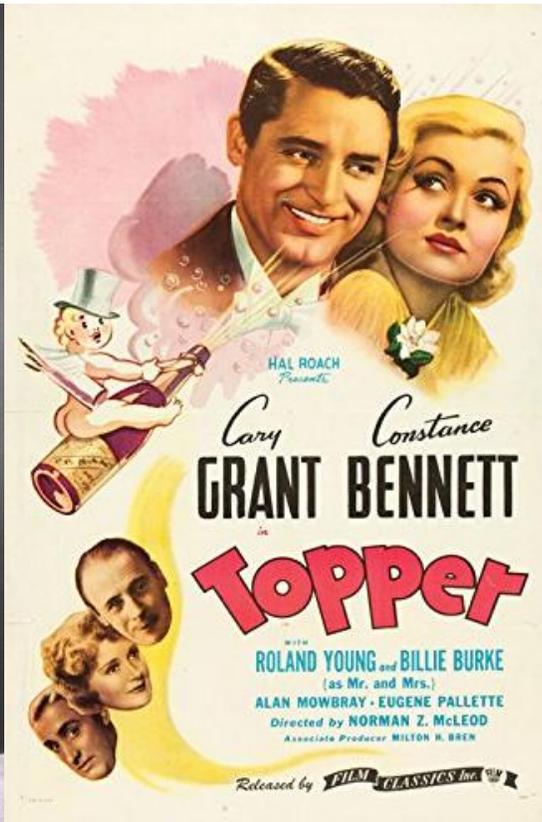


A Faustian Bargain

Many of my more seasoned readers will remember two beautiful sisters, Joan and Constance Bennett, both renowned American stage, film and television actresses. Joan appeared in more than 70 motion pictures both on the silent screen and well into the sound era. Sister Constance, for a period during the early 1930s, was the highest-paid actress in Hollywood, as well as one of the most popular. She co-starred with Cary Grant in the entertaining 1937 film, *Topper*. Joan is perhaps most remembered for her film noir roles in such movies as *Man Hunt* (1941) *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). Many of us, however, remember her as Spencer Tracy's wife and Elizabeth Taylor's mom in the original 1950 version of *Father of the Bride*.



Actress Joan Bennett



Constance Bennett in "Topper"

In addition to Constance, Joan had another older sister, Barbara, who married Morton Downey and was the mother of 1980s trash talk show host Morton Downey, Jr. But did you know that Constance, Barbara and Joan, daughters of actress Adrienne Morrison and actor Richard Bennett, were the granddaughters of a free person of color living in

nineteenth century New Orleans. Born September 4, 1844, in Kingston, Jamaica, Morris W. Morris (of English, Spanish, Jewish and African ancestry) embarked on a successful Shakespearean acting career in the late 1860s under the stage name Lewis Morrison. His most popular role was that of Mephistopheles in *Faust*. What follows is his remarkable story.



Stage Actor Lewis Morrison Morrison as Mephistopheles in Faust

Faust, an erudite and exceedingly successful person who is nonetheless depressed with his life as a scholar, is the protagonist of a popular German legend. This classic tale, based on the ostensibly historical Johann Georg Faust (circa 1480–1540), is the story of a man who trades his soul to the Devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. The “bargain” or “deal is struck between Faust and the Devil’s representative, Mephistopheles, who agrees to serve Faust with his magic powers for a set number of years, but at the end of the term, the Devil will make his claim on Faust’s soul, and Faust will be eternally enslaved.

To “strike a Faustian bargain”, therefore, is to be willing to sell one’s immortal soul in exchange for satisfying a limitless desire for

knowledge, pleasure or power. Playwright Christopher Marlowe popularized the legend in the late 1500s in England with his play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's reworking of the story over two hundred years later, Faustus becomes a dissatisfied intellectual who desires a "more than earthly meat and drink" in his life.



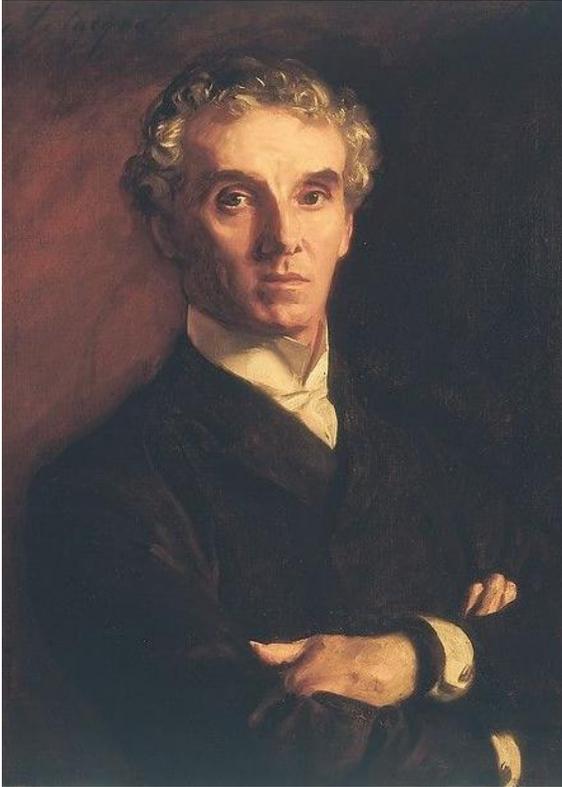
Faust playbill promoting Lewis Morrison in the leading role

The way this all comes down is that the Devil's representative, Mephistopheles, appears. He says "Let's Make A Deal" to Faust: Mephistopheles will serve Faust with his magic powers for a set number of years, but at the end of the term, the Devil will claim Faust's very soul, and Faust will be eternally enslaved.

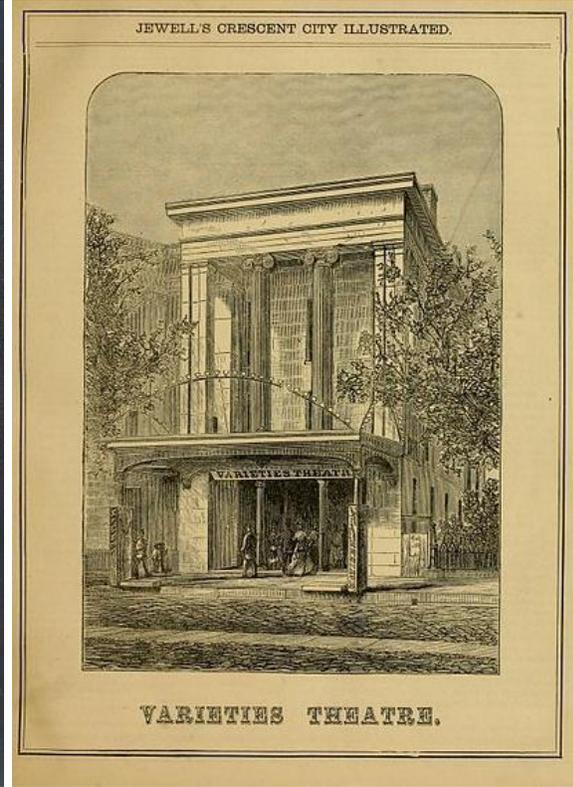
Nineteenth century audiences found this cautionary tale quite moving, and Morrison's performance was indeed convincing.

According to Lewis Morrison's obituary in the *Daily Picayune*, dated August 20, 1906, he "made his first appearance on the stage at the Old Varieties Theatre ... under Lawrence Barrett," after the Civil War. Readers may be interested to know that Barrett loaned Lewis Salomon, the very first Rex in 1872, his Richard III king's costume.

Morrison's initial performances in New Orleans were in minor roles alongside the great Edwin Booth and Charlotte Cushman until he was featured in larger parts. He became a well-known actor in New Orleans and moved on to the New York stage, where he gained greater fame in *Faust*. He eventually formed his own troupe that traveled the world with Morrison playing Mephistopheles in *Faust*.



Lawrence Barrett by Sargent



The Varieties Theatre on Canal

But before he gained national and international acclaim as an actor, Morris W. Morris joined the 1st Louisiana Native Guard (CSA), a Confederate Louisiana militia that was made up of free persons of color. Formed in the Crescent City in 1861 from the sizable free black population who volunteered their services, it was disbanded upon the Union occupation of New Orleans beginning April 25, 1862. Some of the unit's members promptly switched allegiances and joined the Union Army's 1st Louisiana Native Guard, which later became the 73rd Regiment Infantry of the United States Colored Troops. Morris was an officer and served among them as a lieutenant. The Guard's officers became the first black officers in the Union Army who fought together with former slaves who had escaped to join the Union cause and gain freedom. These African-American soldiers played a prominent role in the Siege of Port Hudson.

After the War, Morris was given an opportunity to tread the boards and pursue a career upon the stage, but not before changing his stage name to one with a more Anglo ring to it. Morris W. Morris, whose mother's maiden name Carvalho, a Jewish name, became Lewis Morrison. Morris descendant Phil Downey also feels sure that Morris' father was Jewish, but has "no firm proof on this matter."



1st Louisiana Native Guard

Downey believes his ancestor, Morris W. Morris, changed his name to Lewis Morrison for two reasons:

- "1) To escape his African heritage. He was probably considered a Creole in New Orleans. In his photos he has predominantly white features, and:
- 2) To escape his Jewish heritage. Sadly Jews and Irish Catholics, next to Blacks, were the most despised of White ethnic groups in the late 19th century."

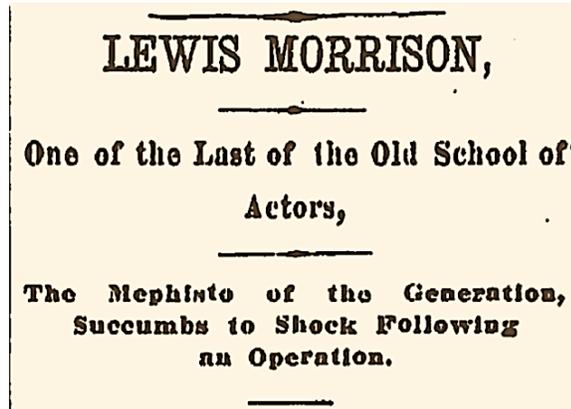
It is interesting how Morrison was able to transcend race and for many years succeed in his given profession. As for Morrison's skill upon the stage, an 1893 article in the *Picayune* said this: "Now that Booth is dead, it is a fact that Lewis Morrison, a wonderfully good actor and a perfect elocutionist, is the best representative of Cardinal Richelieu on the stage."

Morrison was married first to English-born actress Rose Wood, who was the grandmother of Constance, Barbara and Joan Bennett. He

was the father of actresses Rosabel and Adrienne Morrison. Rose and her acting husband were divorced in 1890, after which he married a much younger stage actress, Florence Roberts, in 1892. In addition to crossing the color barrier, Morrison was indeed the patriarch of an impressive theatrical family.



*1899 Morrison performance
Picayune ad*



Morrison's death in the Picayune

The Old Varieties Theatre on Canal Street operated at that location until 1899, when it was torn down. The man described as "The Mephisto of the Generation" died of "Shock Following an Operation" in Yonkers, New York, on August 20, 1906. That very year, the Varieties Theatre site was purchased as the location for the memorable Maison Blanche department store, a favorite shopping oasis for generations of New Orleanians. It is today the Ritz Carlton Hotel.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
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