

Diana Barrymore's LAST 30 DAYS

by Hugh Strathmore



Police remove body of Diana Barrymore from her New York apartment Jan. 26. Alcohol and sleeping pills had put an end to her turbulent career.

Needled by a Taunting Blonde who Called Diana a Sissy, She Broke her Pledge and Reached for that Tragic Drink!

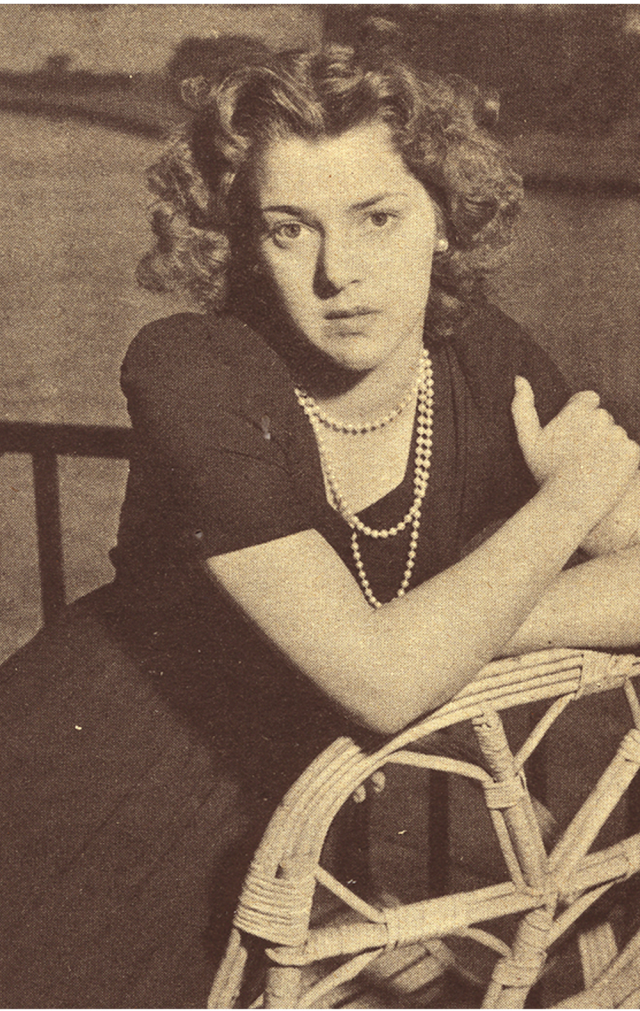


Diana's husband, Robert Wilcox, was found dead on train in 1955.

THEY SAY Diana Barrymore wanted to die—those who thought they knew the tempestuous, star-crossed actress well, yet knew her not at all.

Even these, her closest friends, did not realize the final tragedy—that Diana in her last days on earth suddenly became aware that life was sweet, that there was still time to accomplish all of the things that remained to be done.

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The young Diana had many hopes. She never dreamed she would fight a life or death battle with drink.

By this time, of course, it was too late. She had already begun her final battle with booze and barbiturates—the enemy she could never control before and the enemy that was to kill her in the end.

No one was really surprised by the terse medical report which in scientific terms stated: "Death was caused by an acute alcoholic intoxication enhanced by the effect of ingested barbiturates."

While the sedative pills alone were not enough to cause death, the medical examiner pointed out that a large amount of alcohol in the system, along with steady dosages of pills act to form a deadly combination.

Those of us who knew Diana were aware that she had finally learned that she couldn't control her drinking—that she had stopped and was now trying to re-establish what promised to be a bright career.

We didn't see how she could miss. The unhappy marriages, the drunken appearances on stage and the boudoir battles with fly-by-night boy friends all seemed to be in the past. Only happiness could lie ahead.



Diana's friend, Mrs Essie Kupcinet (left) who officially identified the body, attends funeral with daughter Caryn.

The only thing that stood in her way was that remaining bit of stubborn pride—that something inside her that wouldn't admit that the hooch had her licked. She was almost convinced, but not quite.

In her last few days, when she was drinking around the clock and gulping the deadly pills by the handful, she at last faced the fact that she could not beat the bottle. But she was already on the merry-go-round and the brass ring was nowhere in sight.

I REMEMBER the gay Christmas Eve party at which Diana took the fatal first drink. All of us were away from home—theatrical people, writers and socialites—drinking more than we should in order to

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hide our loneliness.

Diana was sipping a gingerale and somehow, she looked a little more lost, a little more afraid than the rest of us. She hadn't had a drink in some time now and we were proud of her.

It was a kitteny, blonde socialite who started Diana on her final whirl. She urged Diana to "live a little. One drink won't hurt you."

She kept insisting, even though Diana refused again and again. No one else seemed to notice, but finally I decided to butt in even though it was none of my business.

Maybe it was because I had known Diana for a good many years. I had seen her at her worst with the hooch in her, and at her best without it.

"Look, Sybil," I said, trying to control my temper. "Can't you see that Diana doesn't want any. Why don't you be a good girl and let her alone. It's her choice whether she wants to drink or not."

Sybil shrugged unconcernedly and returned to her own drink. "Oh all right, Hugh. If Diana's determined to be a sissy and not have one little drinkie I won't interfere."

That was all Diana needed—to be called a sissy by some useless slut who had nothing to do but think of where her next lover was coming from.

She grabbed up the drink and drained it slowly, deliberately. It was shortly after midnight on Christmas Day, and as she drank she looked at me with quiet understanding and, I think, full knowledge of what she was doing to herself.

I tried to stop her, but it was too late. She knew and I knew that it was the first one that causes all the trouble. It acted on her as it does on so many alcoholics—setting up a compulsion which cannot be resisted. One drink is too many and a hundred not enough.

She became gayer with a few more drinks, but it was only apparent in her face. Her eyes were full of a deep foreboding as she proceeded to "live it up" with a vengeance.

Finally, she had enough of our party—a party that had suddenly become too dull. As she got up to leave, she ruffled my hair. "Poor Hugh," she said. "Don't worry so. I'll be all right."



Above, Diana and mate John Howard after release from jail in traffic dispute.

alive. Perhaps she realized it, too. She turned and waved, smiling in a forlorn, lost sort of way.

Maybe I should have gone after her. I don't think that anything I might have said would have done any good, but I've spent many a sleepless night since—wondering.

SYBIL, involved in a rambling conversation with someone across the big round table, didn't even realize that Diana had slipped away.

"Where's Diana—gone to powder her nose?" Sybil asked, looking at me with those half-focused innocent blue eyes.

"Sybil," I said, the barest hint of a threat in my voice, "for the first time in a long long time, I feel like hitting a woman. You say another word to me tonight, and I'm going to do it."

"Oh-h-h," she squealed, "the terrible tempered Mr. Strathmore. I didn't think you were so dominating. What's more, I think I like you better this way."

I'll be damned, if she didn't move over into Diana's empty chair and practically melt against me. "Do you really like to hit women?" she asked, looking

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Howard at trial as a result of vice raid.

up at me with those china blue eyes and practically wiggling out of her dress with excitement.

The expression on my face must have been answer enough. "No," she whispered. "I'll be good. I don't want you to beat me—not until later." She shivered again, and I forgot that I was mad.

Sybil evidently thrives on rough treatment. When I took her home, she reminded me of the punishment I had promised to hand out and saw to it that I kept my word. A strange woman—sicker in her way than Diana, who was mentally okay as long as she was sober.

I guess I was more ashamed of myself than anything else when I left Sybil's apartment. I'm going to send her a copy of this in hopes that it will cause her to realize what she did to Diana in urging her to have that first drink. I don't think it will bother her, though.

It was exactly one month from that Christmas morning that Diana Barrymore was found dead in her apartment at 33 E. 61st Street. There was no hint of trouble on her face that morning of Jan. 25th when she was discovered. Death had wiped away all traces of pain and heartache. She had found peace, at last.

Although I didn't see Diana again, I finally did manage to reach her on the phone about two weeks after Christmas. By this time she was almost ready to stop drinking, but she didn't know how. I suggested a drying out hospital, but she would have none of it.

She hadn't started taking the pills yet. But she always turned to them when her nerves started to go—when the shakes became uncontrollable and she lay awake, sweating and shivering at the same time during the long nights.

I don't suppose she really wanted to quit, yet. Things hadn't gotten tough enough. She was still in pretty good control, managing to get out to the constant round of parties where she could find companionship.

At any rate, I could sense the impatience in her voice. She was anxious for me to finish the conversation—the lecture—so she could get back to her drinking.

As I hung up, I remembered her appearance on a TV interview, when the tough-minded questioner asked her if she had ever tried Alcoholics Anonymous and her answer: "It doesn't seem to work for me."

Maybe that was the reason, I thought. She expected A. A. to do the work for her, without having to do anything herself. I had little understanding of the organization, but I did know that it helped several of my friends—people who had faced up to the problem and were willing to help themselves.

This time it might work, I thought, excitedly. I picked up the phone and dialed her number again. It rang and rang and rang, but no answer. She had either gone out, or she wasn't going to be bothered by anybody.

I DON'T know why I even tried to get in touch with her again. Maybe I didn't want to admit my own failure to help her. But what could I do? I was simply a good listener—someone Diana could tell her troubles to without getting involved.

Somehow, I felt responsible though. Maybe it was because she opened her heart to me that I felt a responsibility to give what help I could.

My agent had lined up an out-of-town magazine article and I was due to leave New York that evening for two weeks. Perhaps she'll be ready for Alcoholics Anonymous when I get back, I thought.

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By then she'll be ready to stop drinking, I reasoned, hoping at the same time that she would be all right, and perhaps even muster up the strength or desperation to call that organization herself.

I had little time to think of Diana during the next two weeks. Mutual friends have told me since that she holed up in her apartment for days at a time—refusing to talk to anyone or see anybody. Except for the people at one small drinking party or two, the bottle was her only friend during these last days.

There were times when neighbors heard screams and moans during the night as Diana wept her final tears and saw the crawling snakes and spiders that are symptomatic of delirium tremens, or d. t.'s.

But they were used to noises from the Barrymore apartment, and so ignored the final cries of a dying human being. By this time, Diana was on the barbiturates, which helped her sleep, but acted in deadly partnership with the alcohol.

My work accomplished, I flew back in to New York late on Jan. 25. In the last hour before we landed at Idlewild Airport, my thoughts again turned to Diana.

I felt that she would be able to find help this time—that she would be ready to listen to what the ex-drunks from Alcoholics Anonymous had to say.

As I strolled into the terminal, I stopped by a newsstand to pick up one of the early editions. The black print of the headlines screamed their message at me—"DIANA BARRYMORE DEAD"—and I knew that Diana's tragic story could now be amended to read: "Too Much, Too Soon—Too Late."

I stopped in the airport bar for a couple of quick belts, knowing, as Diana must have finally known, that I wouldn't find an answer to the numbing sorrow in alcohol.

Perhaps I drank too much. I don't remember getting back to my apartment. All I remember is waking up the next morning with a terrific hangover and an overwhelming desire for another drink.

They tell me that these are bad signs—not remembering and waking up in the morning only to drink again, without bothering to think of breakfast, lunch or dinner unless it comes in a bottle.

I DID manage to get through the next couple of days until the funeral. There I heard Gerold Frank, who co-authored her biography, note that the struggle was over for this frightened child.

"When her father, John Barrymore died," Frank said, "the words 'good night, sweet Prince' were well used for him. Now good night, sweet, lost, bewildered Diana."

I left the funeral chapel before the minister delivered the final words and they closed the casket on Diana Barrymore, who took her final bow at thirty-eight.

Outside, I headed for the nearest bar and all the whiskey I could hold—realizing as I did so that I was hopping aboard the same merry-go-round that had killed Diana.

I had been drinking much too much for a good many years—maybe that was the reason Diana and I could talk to one another so easily. We were both doing something to ourselves that we didn't like.

My case wasn't so bad, but I could see that it was getting worse—the black-outs, the early morning drinking, skipping meals and all of the other symptoms of alcoholism were present. I had been hiding my own problem by worrying about Diana's.

I guess this was the first time I faced up to it. Believe me, I didn't like what I saw. I was going down the same road and it was up to me to see if I could do something about it before it was too late.

A few more drinks to bolster up my courage, and I called one of the old friends who had stopped drinking

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through Alcoholics Anonymous. He was down within an hour to help me help myself.

Luckily, I hadn't been taking any pills. I was able to get over a king sized hangover in a couple of days with only a slight case of the shakes. The boys from A. A. helped me tremendously in weathering the period when I felt that I would give anything for just one more drink.

I seem to be over that now. With a couple of weeks of sobriety under my belt, I feel that life isn't so bad, after all.

All this time, I guess I thought I was helping Diana. As it turned out, her tragic death helped me. Finally, I had to face my own problem. Wherever she is, I think she realizes that.

◦Editor's Note—Hugh Strathmore is a pen name of an old and valued friend of the late Diana Barrymore. ●

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