

Gentle Monster

By Henry F. Pringle

Boris Karloff, horror man of pictures, is a very gentle man who was trained for the consular service. He reversed the usual Hollywood attitude by wondering whether he was good enough to make the grade on Broadway



YALE/JOEL—GRAPHIC HOUSE

Mrs. Karloff enjoys being the wife of the movies' most sinister man and suffers no chills as she gets a kiss from him

THE worst shock ever administered by Boris Karloff was not while playing Frankenstein nor any of the other blood-curdling roles which have sent movie audiences everywhere into pleasant hysterics. He delivered the shock while eating lunch in Hollywood last summer.

Those present at the luncheon were Mr. Karloff, Russel Crouse the playwright, and an actor's agent who was all poised to say, "No, that's not enough," when the subject of salary came up.

"We've got a play in New York we'd like you to do," said Mr. Crouse as the coffee was being served.

"No, I won't do it," said Karloff. "I think it's presumptuous for motion-picture actors to try to star on Broadway."

The agent nearly fainted. Crouse scalded his throat by gulping his coffee. Such a reply had never been made before in the history of either Hollywood or Broadway. For some reason which makes no sense at all every movie actor or actress talks incessantly about "doing a play on Broadway." They sigh that the screen, although lucrative, is no true test of an actor's art.

"I wouldn't do a play," Karloff continued at this historic luncheon, "unless it had three or four parts in it more important than my own."

After some minutes Crouse recovered his wits sufficiently to assure Karloff that the play was just that kind. He outlined the story of Arsenic and Old Lace, due to become one of the funniest shows in years. He told about the two

dear but insane old sisters who bustle about murdering gentlemen out of the kindest of motives. Most of the good lines would be spoken by the old ladies, said Crouse, in an effort to please Karloff.

"Good!" said Karloff. "Tell me about the part."

"Well, in a manner of speaking, you play yourself. You're crazy, too, and you've had a facial operation which makes you look just like Boris Karloff and you murder just as many people as your aunts do—I forgot to say they were your aunts."

Karloff was delighted. "Why, I'd be burlesquing myself, wouldn't I?" he said. "If the play is really as good as you say I'll take the part."

Six months later, after finishing another monster picture, he flew to New York for the rehearsals. It was a momentous occasion. Karloff had played stock in most of the tank towns of Canada and the United States, but had never been in a Broadway play. He read the part for Russel Crouse and Howard Lindsay, his coproducer, that afternoon and was far more frightened than any of Frankenstein's victims.

"I was terrible," he telephoned his wife, still in Hollywood, later that night. "I couldn't read the lines at all. I stammered and stuttered. I'm taking the plane back tonight."

Mrs. Karloff soothed her monstrous spouse and suggested that he try one more rehearsal. Boris did so. Crouse and Lindsay told him he was wonderful; they had known so on the previous day but had forgotten to say anything. In due course, Arsenic and Old Lace opened. The critics raved about the show and the cast. A matinee was scheduled for the next afternoon and producers Crouse and Lindsay stopped in Karloff's dressing room to congratu-



late him. They knew, from sad experience, that most actors would demand more publicity or beef about some review; anyway, complain about something.

"What a break for me!" said Karloff. "Think of it. A broken-down movie actor in a Broadway hit."

He really is that kind of person—modest and intelligent. What surprised the sophisticates of New York most about Karloff last winter was the high order of his intelligence and the wide variety of his knowledge, which came to light when he was a guest expert on Information Please.

Karloff stumped even so brainy a literary man as Franklin P. Adams in identifying a Mother Goose rhyme. He was as quick as John Kieran in thinking up poems beginning with the words, "It was . . ." He showed familiarity with the works of Joseph Conrad. He did not, on the other hand, know the difference between burglary and robbery.

He Knows His Audience

Although he is over fifty years old, Karloff is far from broken-down as either a Hollywood or a stage actor. He can get \$10,000 a week on the coast nearly any time he wants it. One of the problems confronting him now is a contract to do a horror picture this summer; if he has to go, it may be necessary to shut down *Arsenic and Old Lace* for six or seven weeks.

After the show had opened he developed a sensitive perception of the audience's reaction. It is unfair to reveal the plot, but it can be said that in one scene Karloff is about to perform an "operation" which would scare the daylight out of a wooden Indian. It was right for the audience to become nervous up to a point. Beyond that, though,

Surprise for frightened moviegoers is the sight of fearsome Frankenstein prosaically mowing the lawn at his Beverly Hills home

somebody might laugh hysterically or scream and the scene would collapse. Karloff plays it differently almost every night. He can sense when the audience is getting too jumpy. Then he terminates the action abruptly.

All of which is doubtless derived from his long, bitter, poverty-stricken years in provincial stock when an audience, getting out of hand, might start shooting at the actors. Boris Karloff is not the name he was born with, of course, but it is now his legal one. Traces of his English birth linger in his natural (as distinct from his Frankenstein) voice. It is modulated and his diction is very clear. The boy born at Dulwich on November 23, 1887, and christened William Henry Pratt, was supposed to become a British civil servant. His father, Edward Pratt, was in the Indian civil service and eight other sons—William Henry was the youngest of nine children—followed his career. The future Boris Karloff had a mind of his own, however. He wanted to be an actor.

The genesis of this seems to have been one or two performances in a Christmas church pageant when William Henry was nine. Prophetically, he played the demon in *Cinderella*. Two of his brothers clamped down on such nonsense, however, and training for government service began in earnest. He went to school in London until he was fourteen, to public schools in the provinces for five more years and then to the University of London, where he

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was supposed to study for the consular service in China.

"I knew I couldn't pass the examinations," Karloff says. "I never did any work in school, so I ran away."

He was twenty-two years old. His mother had died three years before. His father and brothers were at the four corners of the earth and it wasn't much of a home. Still intending to go on the stage, but without experience save for Cinderella, he struck out for Canada. After a brief six weeks on a farm he decided to return to England, claim a small inheritance of about \$500 and then go to Vancouver. This consumed all except \$5 of the legacy. He got a job with pick and shovel for the utility company. This and other odd jobs consumed a year and a half.

Headed for Movie Gold

William Henry finally decided to try the stage. He had heard of a theatrical agent in Seattle, so he wrote enclosing a list of all the plays he could remember having seen in London and saying he had played in all of them. The agent paid no attention, but some weeks later Pratt saw an advertisement for "an experienced character actor" for the Ray Brandon Players, then appearing in Kamloops, B. C. Pratt wired that he was extremely experienced and was told to report at \$30 a week. Kamloops was so remote that it was almost impossible to get another actor quickly. So the troupe kept Pratt, although his salary was immediately cut to \$15.

He gained some slight reputation as a heavy and called himself Boris Karloff, a name he had discovered on a remote branch of his mother's family tree. He appeared in every conceivable type of play, nearly always as the villain. He toured the small towns of the American Middle West and Northwest and by 1918 wound up, broke as usual, loading freight cars in Vallejo, California. But this was within striking distance of movie gold.

Karloff had met a casting director or two on his travels and got extra work at \$5 a day for one week. Then came a bit part at \$75; after that he alternated between stock companies and the screen. By 1922 he was typed as a "French-Canadian" at the studios and worked fairly regularly.

Next year the influenza epidemic caused drastic production curtailment and he faced the alternative of going back on the list of extras, a deathblow to his shaky reputation, or getting some other job. The only one he could find was driving a two-ton truck. So he spent a year and a half loading and delivering casks of putty. On Saturday afternoons he would hang around the

casting offices, but no parts were offered.

One morning the girl at the counter where he daily asked for mail said that there was a part in a stage version of The Criminal Code. Karloff hurried off to see the producer, got the part, opened in San Francisco and received his first critical praise. Columbia subsequently made it into a film. Having no players under contract, they let Karloff play his stage role.

This was the turn. Universal hired him for the villain in a film called Graft and then tested him for Frankenstein. In the years that followed he played in The Bride of Frankenstein and Frankenstein's Son.

Between his Frankenstein parts, Karloff played in such other gay movies as The Old Dark House, The Mummy, The Ghoul, and Bluebeard. Out of his considerable earnings, meanwhile, he had bought a house in Beverly Hills and married tall, pretty, blond Dorothy Stine. Tourists in Hollywood, gawking for a glimpse of movie stars, were sometimes disillusioned to see Frankenstein watering the lemon trees or pruning a bush. It was even worse to watch the monster wheeling his infant daughter in a baby carriage.

In New York one of Karloff's major troubles is that he looks like Boris Karloff. His skin has the gray tone of a cadaver. He has long, apelike arms, all the better to strangle you with. He has the six feet and the weight—170 pounds—with which to overcome any foe. He has cold brown eyes with which to spot his victims, and his hair, a final sinister touch, is threaded with gray. Thus people sometimes cringe from him in New York, to his vast amusement. What identifies him as an English gentleman trained for the consular service is his voice; that and his gentle, friendly manner.

Tough on the Timid

Life in New York differs sharply from Hollywood. There is no garden to fuss with. Everybody in the theater sleeps late and stays up until nearly dawn. Mr. and Mrs. Karloff do the same. Mrs. Karloff is constantly asked how it feels to be a monster's wife and answers, somewhat wearily, that the monetary returns are excellent. Karloff walks from the theater nightly to his subleased apartment on East 66th Street and is often gratified by the muffled scream of some passer-by. When he returned one noon from a stroll in the park two young girls loitered near the apartment house.

"That's Frankenstein!" one squealed to the other.

William Henry Pratt smiled at them graciously and went upstairs to have lunch with his wife and their small daughter, now two years old.

