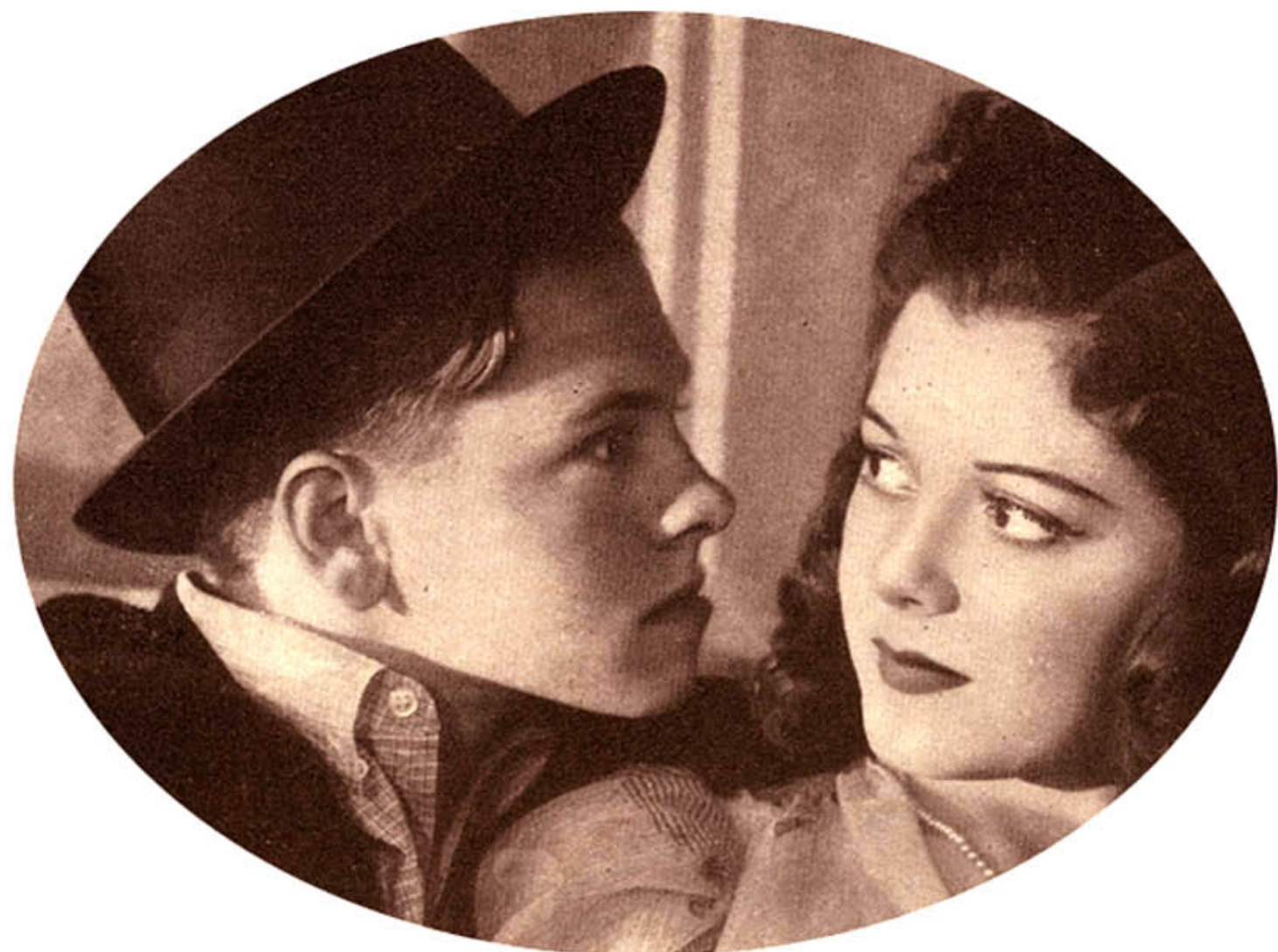


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JANUARY 31, 1942

MICKEY ROONEY

THE LIFE AND LOVES OF
BOX OFFICE MAN NO. 1



Ann Rutherford and Mickey in the second Hardy Family picture, *You're Only Young Once*

BY FREDERICK VAN RYN

★ AT twelve o'clock noon on September 23, 1941, all work came to a stop in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios. Stars, directors, producers, writers, cameramen, electricians, and stagehands gathered around a huge birthday cake decorated with twenty-one candles and listened to Louis B. Mayer pay tribute to a boy whom he described as "a great moral force in the Western Hemisphere." So loud were their cheers and so sincere their enthusiasm that the Great Moral Force, a five-feet-three hundred-and-thirty-pounder, found himself stumped for the first and probably the last time in his career. He kept on tugging at the cuffs of his sleeves, a gesture which he leached from his pal and idol Clark Gable, and could think of no more eloquent reply than: "Gee whiz, folks, I'm the luckiest guy in the world!"

Half an hour later, with the words of lavish praise still ringing in his ears, he was back in harness on the sound stage where they were shooting *Babes on Broadway*.

It was not until the following weekend that the Mighty Mite was able to inspect his numerous presents. They ranged all the way from a beautifully decorated dressing room (a gift from Norma Shearer) to a pound of homemade cookies (a gift from an Andy Hardy fan in Bismarck, North Dakota). Everybody in America remembered Mickey's twenty-first birthday and Mickey felt like hugging everybody in America. He was laughing and shouting when suddenly he came across a package which made him gasp. It was a 16-millimeter copy of Mickey's *Touchdown*, a Mickey McGuire picture in which the Great Moral Force had appeared ten years before. It was as if some one had turned back the clock and sent the lucky Rooney scurrying once more through ten hectic years. For there, between that dated two-reel quickie and that extravagant dressing room, was his whole miraculous story. The former stood for 1931, the year when Hollywood gave the brush to the tough boy in the derby hat. The lat-

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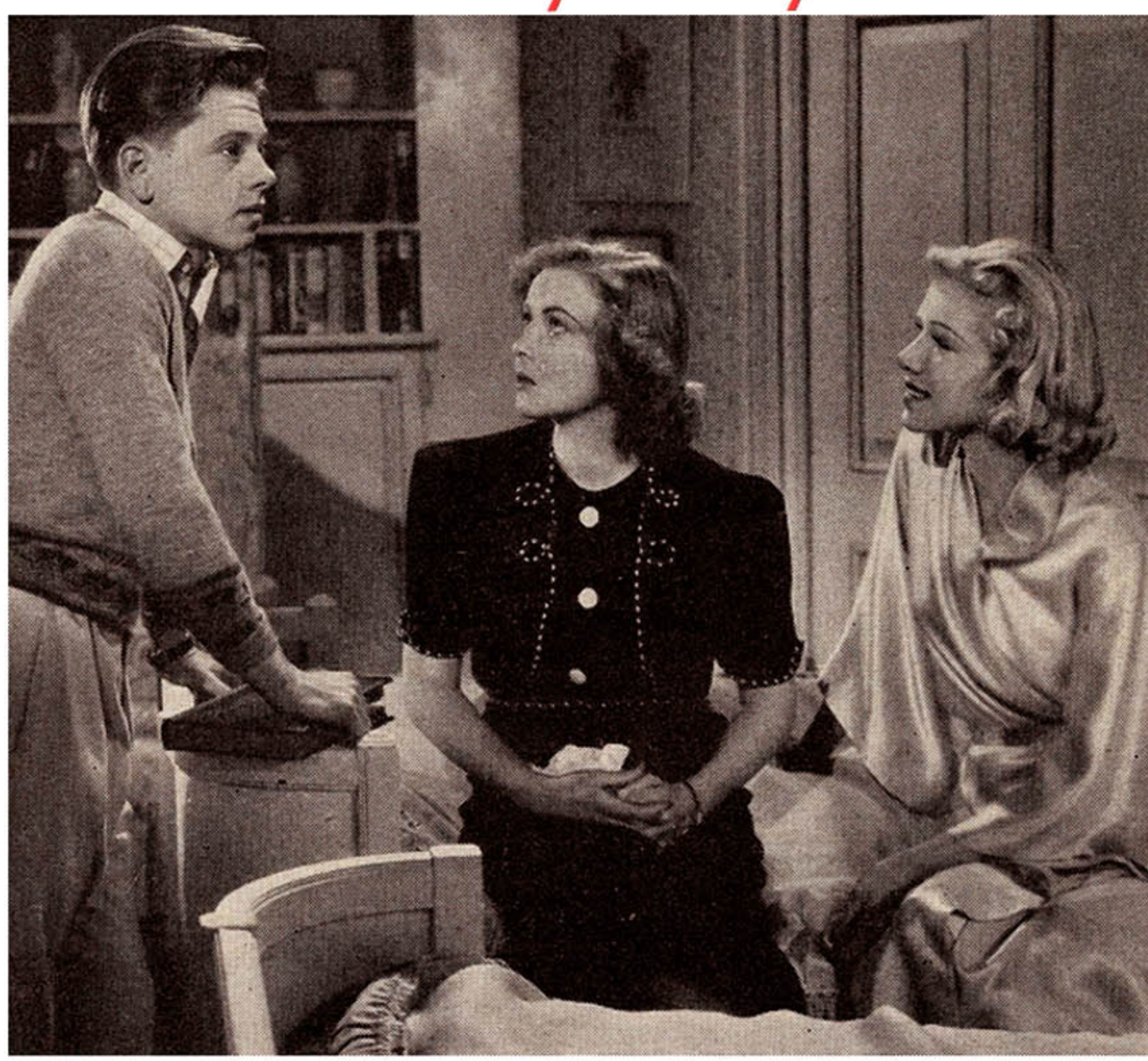
Mickey and Spring Byington, who played Mrs. Hardy in the first of the series, A Family Affair.

ter symbolized 1941, the year in which Mickey Rooney was voted for the third successive time Number One Box-Office by America's twenty-four thousand motion-picture exhibitors.

Mickey's achievements in the first few years of the ten-year period were not spectacular. In 1932 he played in vaudeville in Chicago. No strides forward. . . . In 1933-34 he appeared in forty pictures. Only one of them, Manhattan Melodrama, brought him a modicum of success. In 1935-36 he gave several good performances and was noticed by insiders. David Selznick said he would "go far." Robert Montgomery, who played with him in Hide-out, thought him the greatest scene stealer in Hollywood. Two or three directors praised his versatility. But that was all. As far as one hundred and thirty million Americans were concerned, the name Mickey Rooney meant very little.

Unbeknown to the young man, his rendezvous with destiny was scheduled for March 19, 1937. On that day a picture called A Family Affair was released and shown in several cities in the United States and Canada. A Family Affair was to become known later as the first of the Hardy Family pictures, but at the time of its making it was described in a somewhat different fashion. The boys in the publicity department referred to it as "that potboiler with Lionel Barrymore that the B-picture guys are working on." Consequently A Family Affair was not given the benefit of ballyhoo that accompanies the release of "important" pictures. No picture is considered important in Hollywood unless it costs at least one million dollars and stands a chance of losing about half that much. A Family Affair was concocted on less than two hundred thousand and no one expected it to gross more than three hundred thousand at the very best. Aside from Barrymore, there was no one in the cast who rated a line on the marquee.

Hollywood's contempt for A Family Affair was wholeheartedly shared by the critics. It was, they said, just one



Another scene from *A Family Affair*. The girls are Cecilia Parker (left) and Julie Haydon.

of those things—a boob-trap that failed to work. The public was the last to speak up. It spoke up in no uncertain terms. City after city and town after town reported that the cash customers went wild over “that Hardy picture.” So much so that they refused to leave the theater when the show was over and insisted on seeing the feature a second time. “For gosh sakes,” wired the exhibitors, “let’s have more of that Rooney kid. He panicked ’em. The way he tripped over that doormat and looked in the eyes of that Polly Benedict girl—that was really something. The kid is a gold mine. And so are all the others. Please make another Hardy picture—right away.”

The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer officials rubbed their eyes. The utterly unexpected and the hopelessly unexplainable triumph of *A Family Affair* was about the biggest headache any one could have wished upon them. Hollywood bows to no one in its passion for hitting the jack pot, but Hollywood loathes riddles. And *A Family Affair* was both a jack pot and a riddle. The people who went wild over Andy Hardy and his puppy romance with Polly Benedict were strange and dangerous people. The first thing one knew, they might refuse to go wild over Clark Gable and Greta Garbo. And then what?

★ **MANY** conferences were held and the best minds of the industry mobilized in gallant attempts to solve the Hardy mystery. Finally some one suggested what struck everybody as a staggeringly brilliant idea. “Let’s make another Hardy Family picture,” said the genius. “If it flops we will be well rid of the headache. If, on the other hand, it clicks, why, then we’ll know that the darn thing is an honest-to-goodness trend.”

And so Carey Wilson, the producer, George B. Seitz, the director, and Kay Van Riper, the writer, were told to roll up their sleeves and go to work on another Hardy Family yarn. Opus number two was to be called *You’re Only Young Once*. Certain changes were made in the cast of characters. Lionel Barrymore, who played Judge Hardy in *A Family Affair*, was replaced, either for reasons of economy or because of his reluctance to put up with Rooney’s antics, by Lewis Stone. Mr. Barrymore, Mickey’s bosom pal by now, admits having developed homicidal tendencies during the shooting of *A Family Affair*. The parts

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-Mickey Rooney



of Mrs. Hardy and Polly Benedict were to be played by Fay Holden and Ann Rutherford. In A Family Affair they were entrusted to Spring Byington and Margaret Marquis.

When Ann Rutherford discovered that she was to impersonate Andy Hardy's sweetheart, her blood pressure leaped. Not because she was so keen on Rooney but because she knew him a bit too well. In the previous two years she had seen a lot of him in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer school for minors, the Culver City version of a little red schoolhouse built right on the premises of the studio. There were eight pupils in the school, Freddie Bartholomew and Jackie Cooper among them; but to Ann Rutherford it seemed as if there were at least eighty, all of them Rooneys. No matter what part of the schoolroom she would move to, Rooney would move right after her, and then her hair would be pulled or a spitball would land on her head. In vain she pleaded with their teacher, an unfortunate young woman by the name of Mary McDonald, to protect her from Rooney. Mary herself was badly in need of protection.

The Rooney-Rutherford difficulties ironed out, George Seitz went ahead with the picture. It was released on November 22, 1937, and the public response was so terrific that opus number three, known as Judge Hardy's Children, was put into production immediately.

By early spring of 1938 even the greatest skeptics on the Metro lot had to admit that the darn thing was a trend—a trend with a vengeance. Opus number four—Love Finds Andy Hardy—was rushed through.

In the following three years six more Hardy yarns were concocted in Culver City. The Metro-Goldwyn officials become surprisingly inarticulate when asked to give the exact or even approximate figures dealing with the gross and net income from the Hardy pictures. There are at least two reasons behind their reticence. In the first place, they consider it a bad policy to let the Hardy fans know that their beloved pictures are being made for a small fraction of what it would cost to turn out a Garbo or a Jeanette MacDonald-Nelson Eddy super-super. In the second place, there is always the possibility of Mickey Rooney or

-Mickey Rooney

his mother or his stepfather acquiring fancy ideas as to how much money the Mighty Mite should be paid.

★ **INSIDERS** claim that an average Hardy Family picture costs somewhere between three hundred and four hundred thousand dollars, and grosses, in the domestic market alone, anywhere from a million and a half to two million dollars.

Mickey's salary is as grave a state secret as the earnings of the Hardy Family pictures. It is the firm conviction of insiders that he gets one thousand dollars a week and a bonus ranging from twenty-five to forty thousand dollars per picture. Considering that he makes from four to five pictures a year, his earnings must be somewhere between a hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Very little of that money is being given to Mickey. The lion's share goes into a trust fund.

If the success of the Hardy Family pictures is baffling to their creators, it all but crucifies those connoisseurs who swear by *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Informer*, and other epics with a "message." A well known writer, when approached by the Metro-Goldwyn people a few years ago and offered a contract to write a Hardy Family story, replied haughtily: "Yes, I'd love to do one for you, provided you will permit me to have every single member of the blankety-blank family killed in a railroad accident in the last reel." That was very funny, thought the writer, but Mickey's was the last laugh. When the writer's next book appeared, it was bought by twelve thousand people. When Mickey's next picture appeared, it was seen by sixty million people.

★ **THAT** at least a goodly part of those sixty million men and women take their Hardys seriously can be proved without any difficulty. A glance at the mail received by Carey Wilson, George B. Seitz, Lewis Stone, Mickey himself, and all other parties responsible for this Frankenstein's monster will sway the opinion of the bitterest Hardy detractors.

Lewis Stone, who probably gets more mail than even Mickey, says that he actually feels embarrassed when reading his voluminous correspondence. So great is the nation's faith in



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-Mickey Rooney

Judge Hardy's discretion and wisdom that perfect strangers write to Mr. Stone and tell him the most intimate things about themselves—their love affairs, their various diseases, and their encounters with justice.

Mickey's fan mail provides more cheerful, if less interesting, reading. Nobody expects him to give medical or legal advice. A shining example of young American manhood, he is merely asked by the parents of unruly kids to try to contaminate them with his goodness.

The persons who have known Mickey for years are watching with a mixture of amusement and concern the constantly widening gulf between Andy Hardy and the "real" Rooney. Shrewd as the Mighty Mite is, it is no mean task even for him to reconcile the impulses of a healthy twenty-one-year-old boy with the preposterous code of behavior created for Andy Hardy by Kay Van Riper and Aurania Rouverol. No one expects Ann Rutherford to act like Polly Benedict in her private life. But Mickey has to be Andy twenty-four hours a day. His approaching marriage to Ava Gardner is apt to precipitate a grave crisis in the Hardy family. Married men have been known to be saps, but none of them, at least not within the memory of the oldest Hardy fan, has been as sappy as Andy. It looks as if Les Peterson and the rest of the publicity boys would have to offer some sort of all-embracing explanation to the aroused citizenry. It is up to them to prove that the facts of life can be disseminated by the storks.

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