

Up from Tumbling

BY KATHARINE BEST

Cary Grant appeared in six Broadway productions and twenty-seven Hollywood pictures before anybody took notice. Then he played a dead man.

Cary Grant is one of Hollywood's most vociferous spokesmen for glamour, but it hasn't gotten him anywhere. Between 1929 and 1937 he appeared with Glamour-Girls Jeanette MacDonald, Queenie Smith, Fay Wray, Lili Damita, Carole Lombard, Nancy Carroll, Sylvia Sydney, Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Loretta Young, Elissa Landi, Myrna Loy, Katharine Hepburn, Joan Bennett, Jean Harlow, Grace Moore, and Mae West, twice—but they didn't get him anywhere.

In 1929 John Mason Brown said of *A Wonderful Night* and its male chorus, one of whom was Archie Leach (Grant's real name): "Much of its casting, too, seemed as questionable as its French. And in particular, its woefully unfunny men—Archie Leach, Joseph Textora, Hal Forde, and Allan Rogers—ignored the quality of the music entirely and sank into the regulation, though unsuccessful, stencils of the showshops." Arthur Pollock wrote: "Archie Leach, who feels that acting in something by Johann Strauss calls for distinction, is somewhat at a loss as to how to achieve it." And Richard Lockridge: "Archie Leach sometimes managed to miss the proper note entirely." Between 1930 and 1937 Cary Grant was seen in one beautiful bundle of Hollywood *oomph* after another, but the critical and statistical attention focused on his romantic antics was even less than that so generously supplied by Messrs. Brown, Pollock, and Lockridge.

In 1937 Cary Grant appeared in *Topper*. In less than a month his fan mail rose from the ignominious figure of about 200 letters a week to the significant number of about 1,400 a week. The *Times* wrote: "... we feel a positive pang when these two handsome and frivolous ghosts (Constance Bennett and Cary Grant) smash their fancy roadster." The

Tribune said: "... Cary Grant has never been better." He catapulted into immediate demand at the Hollywood studios, and now is considered one of the most competent comedians in the business.

Three things happened to Grant between his appearance with Grace Moore in *When You're in Love* (June, 1937) and his appearance as the spectral husband of Constance Bennett in *Topper* (July, 1937). Overnight he broke through the rigid boundaries of Hollywood's good scenarios. He was cast primarily as a comic instead of a romantic. He came under the influence of Hollywood's top-bracket directors. When, four months later, he appeared in Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth*, it was evident that a fine comedy talent had come into full flower.

It bloomed first in 1920 when the fifteen-year-old Archie Leach was preparing his first speaking rôle on the stage. He was understudying a clown in a Glasgow, Scotland, acrobatic troupe, a nimble though full-grown creature whose duty it was to be shot from understage through a star-trap, deliver a quaint, Cockney introduction, and drop from sight while drums rolled and a chorus sidestepped from the wings. Archie waited patiently for his chance, practicing his speech every morning, and standing anxiously beside the clown every night as the curtain went up. One night the clown did not arrive. The slight and jittery understudy took his stand on the trapdoor. It snapped upward. He was thrown high into the air, landed spraddle-legged on-stage, and recited his little poem in a falsetto voice that boomed deep every few words with perfect mid-teen fluctuations.

He remembers being pretty nervous, but the lights and the laughter and the excitement soon asserted themselves and he finished with a fine professional sweep of the arms and prepared to dive through the open trap. All of him went through with offstage precision except his head. There, in full glow of a spotlight, before the prancing legs of the entering chorus, poked the mortified face of a young man who considered his theatrical career at an abrupt end.

vens. In all these pictures Grant has captured the plaudits of the most exacting critics. These same qualities are now being cautiously groomed for a new part, the character of a renegade, swash-

buckling aviator who manages a small commercial airport in the dismal Ecuadorian seaport town of Barranca.

The picture is titled *Only Angels Have Wings*. Its events are taken from life, since each of its characters has at some time crossed the adventurous path of Howard Hawks, who has written as well as directed the story. Grant fits superbly into the oppressive, high-strung humors of the piece, giving his Geoff Carter the indirect characterization that is the film's one great experimentation.

There is no literal narration of events in *Only Angels Have Wings*. These outlaws of American aviation meet, enter naturally and actively into friendships and enmities, undertake their suicidal runs through the narrow fog-filled pass, and gradually, through the most spontaneous of actions, create a dramatic whole. Howard Hawks' oblique storytelling comes across in scene after scene. His characters sing or fight, eat or drink, with no apparent dramatic reason. The film is, reel after reel, the conflict of personalities under intolerable circumstances—until the climactic moment when everything dovetails into one logical, well-devised conclusion.

The re-created town of Barranca is so crowded, dirty, and suffocating with jungle humidity that a visitor from Ecuador announced to Hawks, "Goodness, I left this place only a month ago." Most of the action is performed within its 250 foot range, with the spectacular shots of planes fighting fog and rain and giant condor birds being photographed from a high peak in the nearby Sierras.

These latter scenes were the most difficult, yet are the melodramatic highlights in the story. With the government's permission, Hawks glued ruffs on the necks of vultures and owls, took his troupe and his very live props to the fortress set, and shot the scenes of condors flying into the propellers and wrecking ship after ship. The climax of this vivid adventure tale comes when a plane, with its windshield shattered by a condor, and with its engine afire, zooms through the cloud-filled pass toward Barranca and its little group of frantic vigilants.

Not all of *Only Angels Have Wings* is this grim. It is Grant's duty to add the jesting, whimsical note. His romantic passes at Jean Arthur take place as indirectly and as comically as his nerve-wracked efforts to forget a co-pilot just

killed. The comedy in the piece is tense, gusty, and full, and the Grant technique is ideally suited for so obvious a character so deviously constructed.

Grant is belligerently defensive of the screen actor's art. He is extremely conscientious on the set, keeping lights, position, sound frequency, gestures, and expression on his mind as well as the lines, a chore most actors leave to the director. He likes to improvise, and is particularly fond of working with Leo McCarey for that reason—*The Awful Truth* displayed some of the screen's most successful ad-libbing. To him a fine picture is one that is intensely democratic, that highlights the most interesting phases of the man or woman it is to dramatize, that keeps that character down-to-earth so that he is understandable to all who have the thirty-one cents for a double feature. That is why, he says, his Cutter in *Gunga Din* was successful—Cutter was a Cockney, one of the boys, and never tried to be anything else.

Cutter and the new Geoff Carter come as near the Grant ideal as any character he has ever played. He longs for the romantic swashbuckle of a Senior Fairbanks character, which, let us pray, he never gets. He does not like the deglamorization of picture stars that goes on today, and he does not like the film critics' casual dismissal of performances that he knows to have been most agonizingly created. "They seem anxious to have us offend them," he says, of the critics. "They forget that we work under the same lights that are used to third-degree a criminal."

Mr. Grant's ability as a professional acrobat was glimpsed briefly in two Hollywood pictures: In *Holiday*, when with Katharine Hepburn, he had to perform professional tumbling without seeming too agile. Hepburn, it seems, could keep right up with him. "Amazing girl," he says. And in *Gunga Din* when Grant and Sam Jaffe were required daily for many months to climb aboard an elephant and sit astride a prickly, four-foot back. "Days on end!" he sighs.

