

PAGEANT

MAY 1952

The Real case of the

LUCKY LEGS

—starring Betty Grable



BY LLOYD SHEARER

■ RECENTLY, Betty Grable parked her Mercury convertible on a side street in Beverly Hills, lit a cigarette, and waited for her bandleader husband Harry James to come out of the bank.

A group of Marines on leave from nearby Camp Pendleton, spied the world's most popular blonde and immediately moved in.

Leaning against the car door, the brashest of the lot took optical inventory of the Grable figure. "Y' know," he reported to a buddy, "her legs ain't so hot."

Grable grinned back. "I don't think they're so hot myself."

Betty Grable

Hard-driving mama and daughter Betty



Little portent here, of frame to come



At 5, she could play uke, dance, sing

Betty Grable

This modest confession is, of course, a minority report. As any red-blooded U.S. male will testify, the sexy, well-turned legs belonging to Elizabeth Ruth Grable have been one of America's star attractions for all of 20 years now.

Impressions of these famous gams have been preserved in concrete outside Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood; more than three million photographs of the stimulating Grable figure—five-three, 112 pounds, bust 39—have been mailed to servicemen throughout the world; experts have declared her leg measurements—ankle 7½, calf 12, thigh 18½—the paragon of physical proportionment; and the motion picture industry, highly mindful of all this, has produced 40 Betty Grable films largely featuring, well, her legs.

The pictures have been seen by more than 200 million people, have grossed more than 100 million dollars and have been successful in inverse ratio to the amount of clothing the pin-up queen has worn.

To date, the only Betty Grable films which have coined little or no money—though none of her films ever loses a red cent—are the five non-musicals in which she was amply covered up. All her other starring pictures for 20th Century-Fox have been so commercially profitable that the studio has been able to afford several ventures into more adult—hence hazardous—filmfare. Thanks to the Grable box office bonanza, her boss Darryl Zanuck, has managed over the years to risk such intelligent products as *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Snake Pit*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *All About Eve*.

Thus the Grable anatomy not only has raised Hollywood's artistic level



Her first 10 years in showbiz were undramatic. She was a chorus girl, decorated old Wheeler-Woolsey comedies...

4
Betty Grable



**-displayed little personality, cared little
little for career**

but Betty's own living standards. Twenty-two years ago when she was 13 and fresh to the business, Betty earned \$50 a week as a chorus girl. Today she takes in \$300,000 a year. For three consecutive years, 1946 through 1948, she was the highest salaried woman in the world. For the past 10 years she has never left the list of the nation's 10 biggest box office attractions. She also gets more fan mail—from 3,000 to 10,000 letters a week—than any other star in the motion picture industry. Oddly enough, most of it comes from women hungering for the Betty Grable beauty secrets.

"After all," one fan wrote her recently. "You're not a chicken any more. You're 35. You've been married twice, and you've got two kids. How come your leg measurements are the same as they were in 1932?"

"I wish I could tell them," Betty says, "that I take milk baths or hang by my feet from palm trees. The truth is I don't do anything. I honestly think my legs are just ordinary legs."

When it comes to appraising her talent, Grable is so refreshingly realistic it is difficult to believe that after 20 years in Hollywood, she

still remains immune to the hyperbole of press agents.

"I can't act," she admits (the editors of the *Harvard Lampoon* voted her the World's Worst Actress). "I can't sing. My voice is just a small voice, not trained or anything, and my dancing is only fair."

5
Betty Grable

Then how come her success?

George Jessel who has produced at least half a dozen Grable musicals, explains, "The average guy in the audience feels that if his wife would only reduce and dye her hair, he'd have another Betty Grable."

Mervyn LeRoy, who discovered Lana Turner and knows as much about audience reaction as any director in Hollywood, claims there is no connection between screen fame and talent. "Betty," he says, "has a nice, clean, sexy personality. Personality is what any audience goes for. A girl doesn't have to be a great actress or even a good one to succeed in movies. Our biggest stars have frequently been our lousiest actresses."

One of Betty's closest associates, Marie Brasselle, her hairdresser, accounts for Betty's success in this way: "With her figure and all, she's kind of a hot-looking dish, but people don't mind that because they know she's plain and nice. A few years ago, Zanuck wanted to give her the dramatic lead in *The Razor's Edge*. Any other star would've grabbed it, but Betty said 'Are you kidding? I'd just louse it up for you.'"

Although Betty's been in Hollywood intermittently for two decades, she has really appealed to movie audiences for only one. Her first 10 years in show business can best be described as mediocre. She labored in the chorus lines at several studios. She was featured as the sexy-stooge in a series of Wheeler & Woolsey comedies at RKO. She sang with Ted Fio Rito's band, pulled a short vaudeville stint with Barbara Stanwyck and Frank Fay, posed as a Paramount sweater girl for several years and was then fired.

All this time Betty was constantly managed by her mother, Lillian Grable, a shrewd woman who had reluctantly abandoned her own stage career to marry a St. Louis bookkeeper. It is no secret in Hollywood that Lillian Grable has always been the driving force behind her daughter's success.

"Betty never particularly cared about becoming a big star," her mother admits. "I was the one who drove her.



She and husband Jackie Coogan starred in an old '38 musical, "College Swing"

Betty Grable



Teenage actress

Sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing, but I think she's happy."

Betty Grable was born a blue-eyed brownette in a small red-brick bungalow at 3955 Lafayette Avenue in South St. Louis on December 18, 1916; she was the youngest of two daughters. When her sister Marjorie flatly refused to take dancing lessons or show any aptitude for show business, Betty became the vehicle for all her mother's vicarious hopes. At five, she could play the saxophone, strum a ukulele, excel in tap dancing and ballet.

Not long after the family had moved into the Forest Park Hotel (Betty's father, Conn Grable, had gone into the investment business and made some money as a broker), the St. Louis Cardinal baseball team entered the lobby, on the way home from the ball park. They ran into five-year-old Betty. She was barefoot, clad only in a tiny hula-hula skirt, and strumming madly away on her ukulele. Frankly captivated, the Cardinals appointed her their unofficial mascot. Next day Mrs. Grable erected a dance platform in her apartment so that Betty might have handier practice facilities.

By the time she was 12, Betty realized that her mother was not to be denied. The woman was set on making her daughter a showbusiness success despite the active disapproval of relatives.

In 1929, Mrs. Grable withdrew Betty from school in St. Louis, the Mary Institute, left her husband at home, and set out for Hollywood. Here in America's pasteboard Promised Land, she overstated her daughter's age so that the 13-year-old might get a chorus girl job at the old Fox Studio. Betty landed it and was made up in black face so no one would suspect her true age. When a studio executive finally saw her without makeup, he

⁷ Betty Grable



The way Betty's public likes her - with plenty of Grable showing had her fired rather than violate the Child Labor law.

Prodded by her mother, Betty next went over to Sam Goldwyn's and was signed for the chorus line of Eddie Cantor's *Whoopee*. Nowadays Goldwyn likes to say, "You know, I had that Grable girl under contract once. Wonder why I never did anything with her?"

The simple truth is that it was very difficult to make anything out of Betty Grable from 1930 to 1940, because she was filling out, growing up and constantly falling in and out of love. A director who remembers her as the perennial Paramount coed in such collegiate-type atrocities as *Campus Confessions*, *Pigskin Parade* and *College Swing*, says, "She was always a well-built kid, getting a lot of bathing suit publicity, but she didn't register. There was no character in her face, no personality, and I don't think she really cared. Not about her career, anyway."

Betty was interested in boys and spent many long hours concocting schemes for outwitting mother's bloodhound chaperonage. In 1937 she man-



Romance with George Raft met stalemate



Her marriage to Jackie Coogan flopped aged to marry the ex-child star Jackie Coogan, but they were divorced three years later.

Having failed at love, the song and dance girl decided to leave town and concentrate on her career. She was playing the San Francisco Exposition with Jack Haley, when Darryl Zanuck happened across some Betty Grable cheesecake art in a Los Angeles newspaper. "This girl generates a lot of sex," Zanuck is supposed to have said. "I think we should sign her."

"But she's already signed for the New York musical, *DuBarry Was A Lady*," he was told.

"That's . nothing," Zanuck said. "Have her report here after the run."

Ethel Merman, as is her practice, took top honors in that show, but Betty received uniformly excellent notices and for the first time honestly felt that, with a lucky break or two, she might attain the success her mother was always striving for.

The break wasn't long in coming. Alice Faye, reigning beauty on the Fox lot, came down with appendicitis, and Betty was called West to replace her in *Down Argentine Way*. Betty not only replaced Alice in that one but co-starred with her in *Tin Pan Alley*, stealing the show, and then a few months later, replaced her completely as the leading actress on the lot.

Coincident with this new-found screen success, Betty fell tempestuously in love again, this time with an ex-Dead End kid from New York who had changed his name from Ranft to George Raft. From 1940 to 1942 they went everywhere together. A Grable-Raft wedding announcement seemed certain until a bit of sad news wedged its way into the romance. George Raft already had a wife; in fact, he'd had one back East for years.



Marriage to Harry James—100% success

Betty's mother, who had divorced her own husband at the time Betty had shed Coogan, protested bitterly, but her daughter was adamant. She would not break off with Raft. Everything would work out, she insisted. When, after two and a half years, Raft failed to sell his wife on a divorce, Betty succumbed to her mother's logic and gave him up. "I was never really in love," she confessed later, "until I met George Raft. Our romance was an adult love—entirely different from what I felt for Jackie."

A year later, Grable again found herself in the same predicament—in love with a man who was separated from his wife. Only this time it was Harry James, and he was able to persuade his wife, Mary Louise Tobin, a former singer in the Benny Goodman band, to obtain a Mexican divorce. A week later, James arrived in Las Vegas, Nevada. At 4:15 A.M. he and Betty routed a minister and a county clerk out of bed and were married in a hotel room. "Harry is a very great man," Betty told reporters. "Compared to him, I'm a nobody."

Ever since that marriage in July, 1943, Betty has been exceptionally lucky in both her professional and home-life. She has been voted the nation's top box-office attraction six times in nine years, a record no other actress can approach. She has earned more than \$2,000,000 in salary and turned down another \$2,000,000 in personal appearances.

As a general rule, Grable rarely throws her weight around at 20th Century. A few years ago, she wanted to know why she couldn't have a dressing room on the street floor instead of the second. Her belongings were moved down in half an hour. A few months ago, she said she thought the public



**The James family—with daughters
Vicki, Jessica**

was tiring of formula musicals and why didn't the studio buy *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Zanuck bought the screen rights, and Betty will star in it early in 1953. Right now, she is rehearsing *The Farmer Takes a Wife* with Ray Bolger.

People who remember her from the old days insist that money and success have wrought remarkably few changes in Betty's character. With little schooling, she is still no "brain," prefers the race track to the library, the comics to the editorials. She still chews gum, wears sweaters and slacks, admits she has "no clothes sense whatever," consistently stays out of all night clubs, declines to hire a secretary, tries to take care of her two daughters as much as possible; admits, "I'm still very much in love with Harry."

She and her trumpeter live in a large Beverly Hills mansion complete with swimming pool and guest house, but they do relatively little socializing. At the moment, they are horse-crazy and spend most of their spare time at the track or the breeding ranch they own at Calabasas, California. The James ranch, with some 20 thoroughbreds, is managed by Betty's father.

Betty has worked things out so that she makes her two films a year while Harry and his band are on the road. Having herself been forced to take dancing lessons while very young, she refuses to inflict similar punishment on her two daughters. "They can have dancing or music lessons whenever *they* want to," she says.

From time to time, Betty tells intimates that she'd just as soon "give up my career and spend all my time taking care of the girls and following the ponies with Harry." But two things stand in her way.

After 20 years, the movie business has gotten into her blood; and besides she still has to reckon with her mother, who lives in Betty's old Hollywood house.

When Betty starts a new picture, Mrs. Grable still reports to the studio

Betty Grable

and scolds her daughter for eating too many desserts, being too lazy, neglecting practice and blowing lines.

Psychologists have suggested the possibility that Betty may one day wind up hating her mother for having prodded her into a life of wealth and fame; but since money and success have brought her a fair share of happiness, Betty doesn't feel this is very likely.

"So long as mother is around," she says, "I could never quit. After 20 years I'm the kind of success she always wanted to be."



PAGEANT