

SMOOTHIE

By Quentin Reynolds



Bill Powell, the Thin Man of the films, has a new lease on life. He has recovered from a long illness, has a new wife and is all set to charm you with more of his sophisticated work

ONE thing is true of Hollywood that is also true of New York and Duluth and London and, for all I know, of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. When one of the mob is in a jam, the rest of the mob feel bad about it. Well, Bill Powell had been operated on and was in a bad way, and there were a lot of glum faces in Dave Chasen's restaurant.

Ronald Colman came in, looking unhappy, and Jim Cagney said, "What do you hear?"

Colman shrugged and said, "They wouldn't let me see him. They said he was as well as could be expected."

People ordered drinks without enthusiasm and drank them without interest. Every now and then someone would phone the hospital and then report. It was always the same, "As well as could be expected," the hospital said. It went on like that for some days. It had been a tough operation. Then one day they let Colman in to see Powell and he came back to Chasen's with a good report. But it was an overoptimistic report. Powell wasn't out of the woods. He wasn't out for another three months.

M-G-M had the third Thin Man picture all set up to be shot. The script was ready and Myrna Loy and Asta were ready and Van Dyke was ready with his cameras. Powell came out of the hospital smiling a bit but looking drawn, and they thought they'd wait a while. Then he had a relapse. This went on for a year. He had another operation and a couple of months after that I saw him.

SMOOTHIE

"By the time I'm ready for Another Thin Man," he said bitterly, "Myrna and I will be too old to play anything but character roles."

"You'll be all right soon," I told him.

"That's what the doctors say. They say I'm all right now. They show me X-rays and they beam all over and they tell me I'm feeling fine. So I get up and walk across the room and fall flat on my face. Is that being all right?"

He rested a few more months and then one day he got up, walked across the room and didn't fall flat on his face. They told him to swim every day.

"What that's for I don't know," Bill told me then. "I don't play Weismuller roles. But I swim every day. For hours I swim. It's supposed to strengthen something or other."

He kept on swimming and he noticed that he'd gained a few pounds. Finally the doctors told him he could go to work. He was absolutely cured. He'd heard that before, but now he half believed it. He took long walks and he didn't get too tired. He gained weight and the shadows went away from under his eyes. His



cheeks filled out and one night he walked into Chasen's with Colman and it was just as it had been two years before. Powell was himself again. Powell had always played in a weekly poker game with Colman, Warner Baxter, Bill Hawks, Dick Barthelmess and a couple of others. One night he walked into the game and said, "Look out for me, suckers. I want some of your dough," and now everyone knew that Powell had come back.

Once Powell wanted to be a lawyer. It began in Kansas City when a high-school teacher who knew that Bill wanted to be a lawyer said to him, "You should study elocution. You need a good delivery to be a lawyer."

So young Bill Powell went into the public-speaking class. It was boring listening to the other students declaim, but finally it was his turn. He walked up to the front of the class and began. He looked at the rapt faces of his fellow students. They were really listening to

SMOOTHIE

him. He had memorized his piece well.

"At that moment," Bill Powell says now, "a ham was born. You know there's plenty of ham in all of us. It just needs to be brought out. I had never thought of being an actor. Since I was a child it had been planned that I was to be a lawyer. But I hadn't spoken twenty words in that public-speaking class before I knew that the law was not for me. I was going to be an actor. And in time I became one."

And he became a good actor. To-day he's as good an actor as you'll find in Hollywood. He is a terrific box-office draw and he makes a lot of money for himself and for his company. He has been working so hard since he landed in Hollywood that he never has had time to go Hollywood. He earned his way up the Hollywood ladder; he began to learn the business of acting that day in high school and he has kept at it ever since. He did it slowly, methodically, equipping himself technically, mastering his craft so that when the big break came he was ready for it.

Let's sit down with Bill Powell and listen to his story. It is a pretty ordinary story, he thinks.

He finished high school and then it was taken for granted that he would go to the University of Kansas to study law. He went to the University of Kansas, stayed one week, and then returned home to break the news to his family that he wanted no part of the law.

"They didn't seem a bit surprised," Bill says. "I thought that I had kept my acting ambitions to myself, but I guess I hadn't."

He got a job working as a clerk for the telephone company. He got fifty dollars a month.

"At the end of ten months I didn't have a cent and I owed my father twenty dollars," Bill says gloomily. "I was pretty desperate."

Mrs. Elizabeth Heywood, Bill's great-aunt, was his only hope; the only relative he had who had any loose change lying around. He wrote her a twenty-three page letter telling her how wonderful she was and suggesting naively that she could, if she wished, have the opportunity of helping him to save the American theater.

"I know that I can become a great actor," he wrote. "It seems a shame



SMOOTHIE

that lack of money is depriving the stage of my services. And all I need is seven hundred dollars."

Great-Aunt Elizabeth must have had a sense of humor, for she promptly sent Bill a check for seven hundred dollars. With the seven hundred dollars burning a hole in his pocket and with ambition burning in his breast he set off for New York, which received him with amazing calm. He paid six months' tuition at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and set about the learning of his craft.

Conceit is an Asset

"It was a good groundwork they gave us there," he says, recalling it. "Edward Robinson and Joseph Schildkraut were also learning to act there. Even then they both stood out. Me? I had nothing but high hopes and a great amount of conceit. If I hadn't had that conceit I would have realized that I was pretty hopeless and would have quit."

Things were pretty tough and Bill missed many a meal. But finally he felt that he was ready. He made the inevitable rounds of theatrical offices and agencies and finally got a part in Rex Beach's *Ne'er Do Well*. In fact, he got several parts. He played a young man, a middle-aged man and in the last act he had whiskers down to here.

Right after that he got a fairly good part, that of English Eddie Griggs in *Within the Law*. He was the heavy and he played it for nearly two years.

"I suddenly realized that I wasn't learning much playing the same part night after night, month after month," Bill says, "so I broke away and played stock. I played in Portland, Oregon, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Northampton, Massachusetts, and I played with Jessie Bonstelle in Detroit, Michigan. I played more than 200 different parts in two years, and I began to learn how to act."

Then he stormed New York again and got a part in, of all things, a musical comedy called *Going Up*.

"I sang, but never alone," Bill says now, "always with three or four others. But the play did me a lot of good. Frank Craven was the star of it and I learned a lot from that grand trouper."

Finally he got a break. He got the part of Javier in *Spanish Love*, a villain who redeems himself by dying in the last scene. The play ran forty weeks and the name of William Powell began to mean something.

One day he met a man named Al Parker, a picture director. Parker said, "Would you like to make a picture?"

Powell said, "Of course."

The picture was *Sherlock Holmes*, starring John Barrymore. Powell, new to the technique of pictures, did well enough and he learned a lot by watching Barrymore. He made a few other pictures in New York. When he wasn't working he was hanging around The Lambs Club. Bill used to stand at one end of the bar. Dick Barthelmess, who was about the biggest thing in pictures

SMOOTHIE

then, often stood at the other. They cordially hated each other. Powell hated Dick because he was so good and so successful while he couldn't get a real big part. Dick thought that Powell was a fresh upstart who ought to be spanked.

Presently Bill was offered a very good part in *The Bright Shawl*, which was to be made in Cuba. He was tickled to death with the idea until the ship was five hours out. There, standing on the deck, was Barthelmess. They glared at each other and then Dick said: "Let's go to my cabin and have a drink."

They went to Dick's cabin and had a drink and they got to talking. They talked all the way to Cuba and when they walked off the ship they were bosom friends; a friendship that has lasted to this day.

The *Bright Shawl* opened Hollywood's portals wide to Powell. Now he was off. When the talking pictures came in, the transition didn't bother him at all. Many of the silent stars turned out to have voices that squeaked like the brakes on a 1914 automobile. Powell had been training his voice ever since the fateful day at high school. His star immediately zoomed. Studios fought for his services and his salary leaped sky-high. Usually he played the heavy and vaguely this bothered him. He didn't want to be typed; didn't want to confine his acting to playing suave villains. Finally he went to M-G-M, where he was allowed to have a voice in selecting his own pictures. They handed him a script of *The Thin Man*.

"I read that script and I said to myself, 'There's a guy I know. I know that Nick Charles. I want to play him.' Well, I did, and I'm still playing him," Powell added.



SMOOTHIE

The Thin Man was in many ways a revolutionary picture. To begin with, the studio didn't think much of it. It was classed as a B picture and Van Dyke shot it in sixteen days, a record for even that fast worker. But it made film history. First of all, it promulgated the surprising theory that one could have fun even though married. Nick and Nora became the symbols of happily married life, and people for the first time saw romance on the screen between a husband and wife. The Thin Man was a terrific hit. The story was good enough but it was the playing of Powell and Myrna Loy that really made the picture.

He Makes It Look Easy

The Thin Man started Powell playing a new kind of character—a charming, gay, casual sort of person. Powell is excellent at playing an off-center character and making him believable. He played such a character in My Man Godfrey.

"Probably no one ever lived who was like Godfrey," Powell says. "But La Cava, who directed it, made the man seem quite plausible. Actually that was La Cava's picture. Every morning he'd give us some dialogue that he'd written during the night, and it was good dialogue. Working with someone like Van Dyke or La Cava is a great help to an actor. You have confidence in them."

On the screen Powell gives an impression of casual ease. That isn't an easy impression to give. Every motion with hand or cigarette or eyebrow that contributes to that impression has been studied carefully by Powell before the scene is shot.

"I work it like this," he explains. "First I read the entire script over a couple of times to get the feel of the character. Before we start shooting the picture I want to know all I can about that man, how he'll act under varying conditions, react to various situations, how he'll feel and think. Now when we're working we have to get up at seven, which is a tough hour to get up. The night before, I study the scenes that we're going to shoot the next day. I learn lines slowly. It doesn't come natural to me to memorize a couple of pages of dialogue in a few minutes. I take that scene to bed with me and read it and read it. I figure out every bit of business that might go well with that scene. That's all subject to the director's approval, of course. But I can't hop right on a set and ad lib bits of business. There's no harder work than figuring out how to make a character appear casual and at ease on the screen."

It is the accepted custom for actors, writers and directors to rap Hollywood. Very few of them admit that they like living in the place. Powell is an exception. He likes it. He loves it.

"We have everything here that New York has, except the theater. That is too

SMOOTHIE

bad, but there are compensations. For years I've been hearing about the horrible people out here who have lost all sense of values. They may be here but I never met them."

This has been a great year for Powell. He emerged from that terrifying shadow which threatened not only loss of career but loss of life. He came back stronger than ever and then one bright day he upped and got himself married, to Diana Lewis, a beautiful young starlet. Powell's mob approves of her too. As well they should, because the new Mrs. Powell has all of Bill's good humor and wit and she's a lot better-looking.



Collier's