

# ALONG THE MAIN LINE

## A Note or So on Katharine Hepburn, the Lady of 'The Philadelphia Story'

By JACK GOULD

THE legend of Hepburn ranks close to that of the bigness of Garbo's feet. For a decade the fable has flowered and bloomed to proportions that would make didactic Aesop turn over in his Delphic grave. Friends and foes complained that she carried her Yankee nose a notch too high; the clinging-vine division of the gentler sex raised hob over her dungarees; hacks for the fan magazines had her squatting in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard. The headline writer had a good time.

Alas, there has been a "great change." On every hand assurances are volunteered that to the legend of Hepburn must be added a new chapter. Sweetness and light have come to the little spitfire. Time and a hit show have wrought nothing but good, it is alleged on high authority by persons close to persons in usually well-informed circles. All may be forgiven and forgotten.

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The fact of the matter is that Katharine Hepburn has changed but little. The truest explanation perhaps is that she bets on long shots. Last season she jolted Hollywood circles by buying up for a tidy sum her contract with a motion-picture firm to stake her reputation and future on the stage. Twice before she ran out of the money on the legitimate tracks, the drama critics keeping the stakes. This time, wearing the Theatre Guild's colors, she came in several lengths ahead on "The Philadelphia Story."

As is the gambler's way, Miss Hepburn has enjoyed winning. For all the fame she may have garnered in the celluloids, her real ambition has been to achieve success behind the footlights, if for no other reason than that when in her 'teens she told her schoolmates she was going to be an actress. The schoolmates laughed. Miss Hepburn now has the last laugh at \$3.30 a head at the Shubert.

Katharine Houghton Hepburn was born twenty-nine years ago in Hartford, Conn. Her father, Dr. Thomas N. Hepburn, is a noted surgeon and comes from an old Virginia family. Her mother, a native of Boston, is one of the leading advocates of birth control and has long fought for the social betterment of women. Her brother Richard is a Harvard graduate and a playwright, having had one play, "Behold Your God," produced at Jasper Deeter's Hedgerow Theatre. One sister, Marlon, a senior at Bennington, also is interested in writing. Her other brother, Rob-

ert, a senior at the Harvard Medical School, and other sister, Peggy, also at Bennington, inherited their father's love of the scientific.

Young Katie leaned to the tomboyish side and bossed the neighborhood gang. With a houseful of brothers with whom to play, her sisters being considerably younger, she took an early dislike to being a girl and soon donned boy's trousers (Hollywood, kindly copy). Generally she ran around with bobbed hair but once astonished her parents by shaving off all her titian locks. She had long, bony arms and legs and she knew how to put them to good use. Once a local bully struck her young brother. With a shrill shriek young Katie went into action, mopping up the sidewalk with the unfortunate youth.

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Dr. Hepburn has a Summer home at Fenwick, Conn., near Saybrook Point, and it was there that Katie was introduced to the intricacies of the stage world. With Robinson Smith, the producer, with whom she grew up; her brothers and a nameless young beau who did not mind painting sets, she established a repertory company in the dining room. Fruit boxes, pillows, Mrs. Hepburn's powder and miscellaneous furniture were used.

One production was "The Blue Beard," in which Mr. Smith played the leading lady, but perhaps the young group's prime achievement was their presentation of "The Beauty and the Beast" for the benefit of the Navajo Indians in New Mexico. Bishop Howden of New Mexico had been guest preacher in the local church and had devoted his sermon to the plight of Navajos. The youngsters decided immediately on a benefit performance and fixed the box-office top at 50 cents. The mothers of several of the young girls in the troupe thought the price too high and through their daughters conveyed their thoughts to the second generation of Hepburns. Katie and her brothers promptly called a production board meeting and bounced the little girls with the disapproving mothers right out of the company. Katie played the beast and wore a blue Fauntleroy suit with silver stripes and a donkey's head. The benefit was a huge success, \$60 being collected. The Navajos bought themselves a phonograph which had a horn that was the envy of all New Mexico.

Miss Hepburn attended the Oxford School for Girls in Hartford and in 1924 entered Bryn Mawr College. She majored in history

under Dr. Howard Levi Gray, head of the history department, and was usually a "high merit" student, which in Bryn Mawr language means her marks were probably about 78 per cent. The Bryn Mawr faculty remembers Miss Hepburn's class (1928) as one which had a peculiar love for grubby appearances and old clothes. One of Miss Hepburn's favorite garbs was an old green coat fastened with a safety pin, which did not exactly start any new Bryn Mawr fashion. She later wore the identical coat in "Morning Glory," one of her most successful pictures. As for beauty, many thought that her roommate, Virginia Fain, now Mrs. Charles Dickerman Williams, of 1,150 Fifth Avenue, was more restful on the eyes.

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The late Dr. Horace Howard Furness Jr., the noted Shakespearean scholar, was the first talent scout to pick out Miss Hepburn. In her senior year he selected her for the lead in the May Day play, "The Woman in the Moon," which he re-edited for the occasion. She had appeared earlier in "The Cradle Song" and "The Truth About Blayds," but it was in "The Woman in the Moon" that she really clicked. Writing in the April bulletin of the Bryn Mawr Alumnae, on the occasion of the benefit of "The Philadelphia Story" for the Mrs. Otis Skinner Theatre Workshop at the college, Mrs. Hortense Flexner King, '07, says:

"We could still see the girl with the tight bun of reddish hair, screwed up on the top of her head, scurrying into the library with an armful of books. (Miss Hepburn playing Miss Hepburn, under the direction of Dr. Gray, was the title of that drama.) Or we could see her on that one occasion when she gave a hint of things to come, dressed in the Greek costume of "The Woman in the Moon," walking barefoot in the May Day procession, not noticing the sharpness of the grass in front of the grandstand."

If Bryn Mawr did not realize at

the time the potentialities of Miss Hepburn, it was to pay dearly for its lack of foresight. The college subscribes to a clipping service to follow the activities of its students. One month's clippings on Miss Hepburn when she made her Hollywood mark cost the school \$600.

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It was at Bryn Mawr that Miss Hepburn decided definitely to go on the stage and, while reportedly all her family did not approve at once, she carried her point. Her rise is probably without parallel in recent years. Her first professional part was in Edwin Knopf's stock company in Baltimore. After two weeks she came to New York to study voice under Frances Robinson Duff. She next landed in Great Neck, L. I., in a tryout of "The Big Pond." The job lasted for a single Saturday night performance.

"Who's Who in the Theatre" to the contrary, she did not make her New York debut in "Night Hostess" under the name of Katherine Burns. She withdrew after the tryout in St. Paul and Indianapolis. Her initial Broadway vehicle was "These Days," produced in November, 1928, by Arthur Hopkins, and to John Anderson, critic of The Journal and American, goes credit for being the first local reviewer to mention her in an article. She then understudied Hope Williams in "Holiday," but Miss Williams did not get sick. Miss Hepburn had to wait until she had the part in the films.

Next came a road tour in "Death Takes a Holiday," with Philip Merivale. Miss Hepburn recalls that a member of the management told her that "Lee Shubert is giving you the privilege of withdrawing." She replied that she was not withdrawing for Mr. Shubert or any one else because she wanted the job. She was fired.

"Art and Mrs. Bottle," in which Jane Cowl was starred, really served to make Miss Hepburn known in theatrical circles at least. In "The Curtain Falls" Joseph Verner Reed

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said that Miss Hepburn was hired and fired a half dozen times, Benn W. Levy once remarking: "Why, she's revolting. And she's got vaseline on her face; her skin glistens. No allure. Impossible. Out with her!" She survived Mr. Levy's tirade and also Jane Cowl's momentary dislike.

After a Summer at Milton and Irving Stiefel's Ivoryton, Conn., theatre, where she was known for rehearsing long hours on her own initiative, Miss Hepburn returned to Broadway in "The Warrior's Husband" in March, 1932. In that she received the long-awaited break and was soon Hollywood-bound.

Miss Hepburn had one handicap when she went to Hollywood. She was born a lady. Her home in Hartford was always alive with intelligent discussion and activity common to a large household. By comparison Hollywood night life seemed dull and stupid and she kept to her own home in the evenings. For years she had worn a bandana over her head, and trousers; the one to keep her hair neat in the wind and the others because they were darn comfortable. Hollywood pegged her eccentric without even inquiring. As a member of a cultured family she was naturally reticent to discuss matters which she considered strictly her own business. Hollywood misunderstood breeding and independence for the "act" to which they are so accustomed.

Miss Hepburn's relations with the press have not always been of the happiest. While some newspaper men have argued that perhaps she does not always realize when she is legitimate news, particularly after Howard Hughes visited her immediately following his spectacular flights, Miss Hepburn can make out a good case against the press. Her privacy has been unreasonably violated on a number of occasions. A Chicago reporter once asked her questions which betrayed the fact that he had obviously listened in on her private telephone conversation a few minutes earlier.

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One of Miss Hepburn's chief bones of contention are the Hollywood fan magazines. She granted them the usual courtesies at first only to find they attributed remarks to her which she never made. In answer to a question if she had any children she once said she did, adding that they were adorable little pickaninnies. The writer printed it verbatim, not even indicating, or realizing, maybe, it was a gag. She ultimately decided to end such interviews and was labeled high-hat. Long ago she gave up itemizing the number of men with whom she was supposed to be "romancing," the most recent linking her to Philip Barry, author of "The Philadelphia Story" and a contented husband and father. She has been married and divorced once—to and from Ludlow Ogden Smith, an insurance broker.

Miss Hepburn is not peeved by the reviews of "The Lake" here and "Jane Eyre" on the road. She thinks the critics were right. In an interview her blue eyes look straight at you and she answers questions right from the shoulder. Her mind works at lightning speed. Her complete honesty is obvious at once and she will have no truck with the unreal. A reporter for The New Yorker Magazine was once interviewing her and she sensed a tension in the room. Point-blank she asked him if he didn't cordially dislike her. He admitted it. She said the same went for her disliking him. The interview ended.

Typical of Miss Hepburn was her

gesture on behalf of the American Red Cross when she was playing in the ill-fated "Jane Eyre" in Chicago. Stipulating that not a word of it should be released to the press she organized a benefit performance for the flood sufferers and turned over the entire receipts—\$2,300—to the Red Cross. That was at the time she was being ragged publicly for all sorts of imaginable sins.

Miss Hepburn enjoys an unrivaled popularity with the backstage crews, and her loyalty to them is unique in the theatre. Herman Bernstein, her company manager; Al Bowness, the property man; Walter Hemingway, stage carpenter, and Gertie Gubser, wardrobe mistress, are all with her again in "The Philadelphia Story." She frequently lends them the use of her limousine and goes out with them often. Too, she enjoys touring and believes an actress must go on the road if it is to be worth while for good authors to write scripts for her.

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Perhaps Miss Hepburn's two most ardent fans are Charles Newhill, her chauffeur, and Charles Lawrence, who sells the souvenir programs at the Shubert. Both Newhill, known as "the fighting blacksmith," and Lawrence are former professional boxers and keep in trim by sparring in Shubert Alley during performances. Woe to the hapless intruder who tries to invade Miss Hepburn's privacy! They also protect her in crowds and from the nightly mob of autograph hounds. (Miss Hepburn as a rule does not give autographs, because she does not think it fair to do a few and not all and she does not have the time nor wrist for that.) If she is not driving herself Miss Hepburn almost always sits up front with Charlie Newhill, scorning the more spacious back seat of the limousine, which bears the New York State license of H-97.

Miss Hepburn is an expert athlete and sports occupy considerable of her off-stage time. She takes skating lessons from Willy Boeckl at the Madison Square Garden Skating Club, where she won a bronze medal for figure skating. She shoots golf in the low eighties and once reached the semi-final of the Connecticut Women's Golf Championship. She is strong off the tee, but an improved iron game would bring her score down to woman's par more consistently. She is proficient on the tennis court and in the swimming pool.

Miss Hepburn passes her weekends at her family's home on Bloomfield Avenue in Hartford and lives here quietly in the Turtle Bay section, in East Forty-ninth Street. Leopold Stokowski used to be a next-door neighbor but moved out. Occasionally she entertains in the garden in the backyard. This Spring she put out some irises.