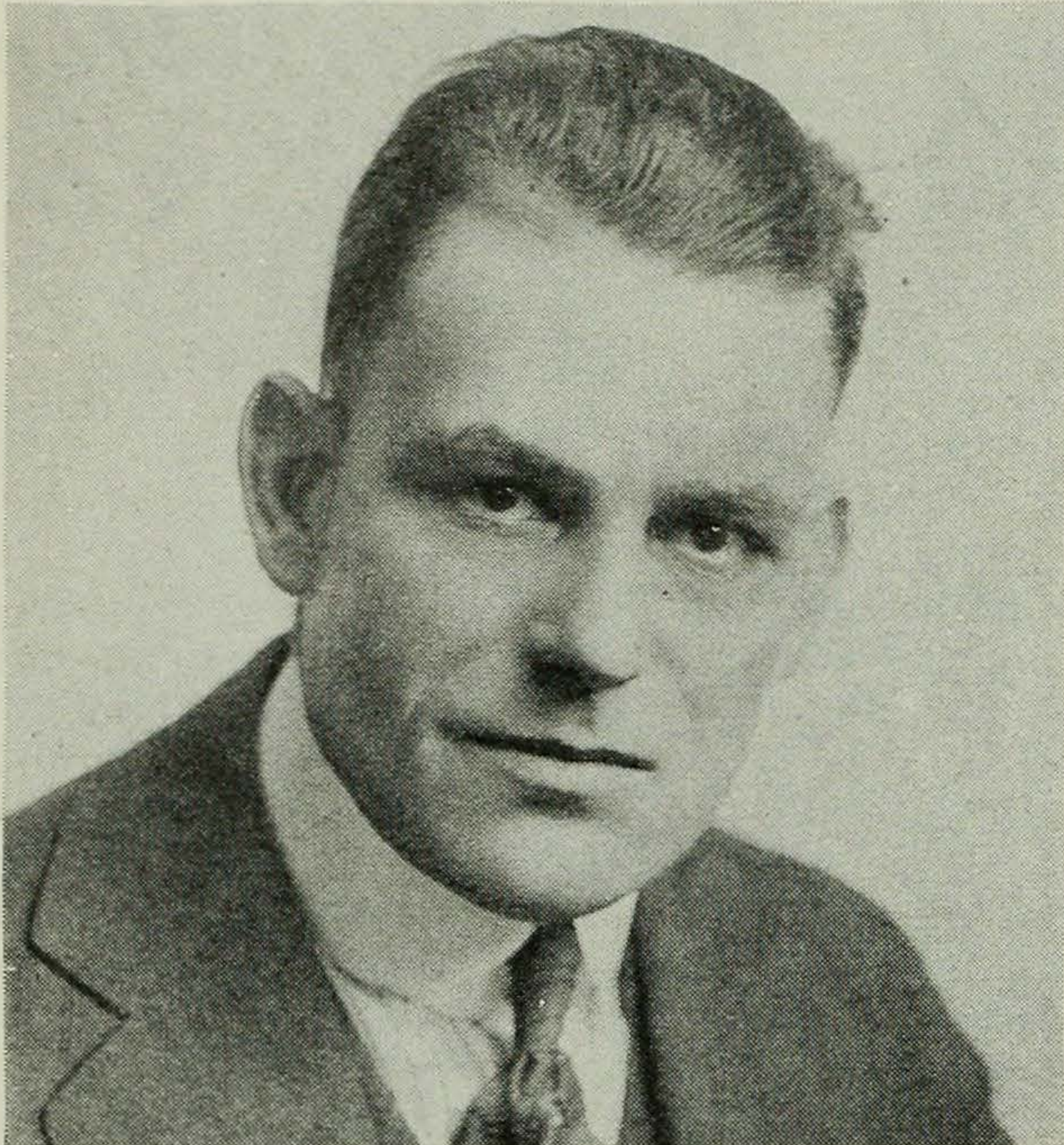


The True Life Story

Further revelations of the career



The song-and-dance man who wanted to be a comedian. Lon Chaney as he came to Universal

heard a voice calling me. Up against the roof of the stage, some thirty feet high, was a monster bat, waving a friendly hand at me.

OF course, it was Lon. He had been rigged up there for hours. At that distance the camera couldn't catch his face and any other man would have used a double. Lon thought the bat business important to his characterization, so he did it.

He came down nearly an hour later. He linked his arm through mine, paced his stride instantly to match my shorter step and marched me off to the company commissary. No fuss, no posing.

Then in the big studio dining room Lon and I gazed out across the green lawns and flowering hedges of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lot and cut back to the days of 1901 when the West was largely frontier and the Chaney boys were starting their first tour and troupe through the state of Colorado.

The boys tried to route their company through a series of one-night stands. But for such youthful managers the strain of ticket-taking, managing, bill posting, staging and acting was very severe. When their tenor, Charles Holmes, offered to buy the show from them and let them go along merely as actors, they relinquished their doubtful glory immediately.

Holmes started them out through the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Sparse, lonely, amusement-starved towns they struck. They went on through Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Arkansas and Texas.

I DID not get the story of Lon Chaney's childhood in a single talk with him. It took many hours of many days, but those days brought me something I value highly, Lon Chaney's friendship.

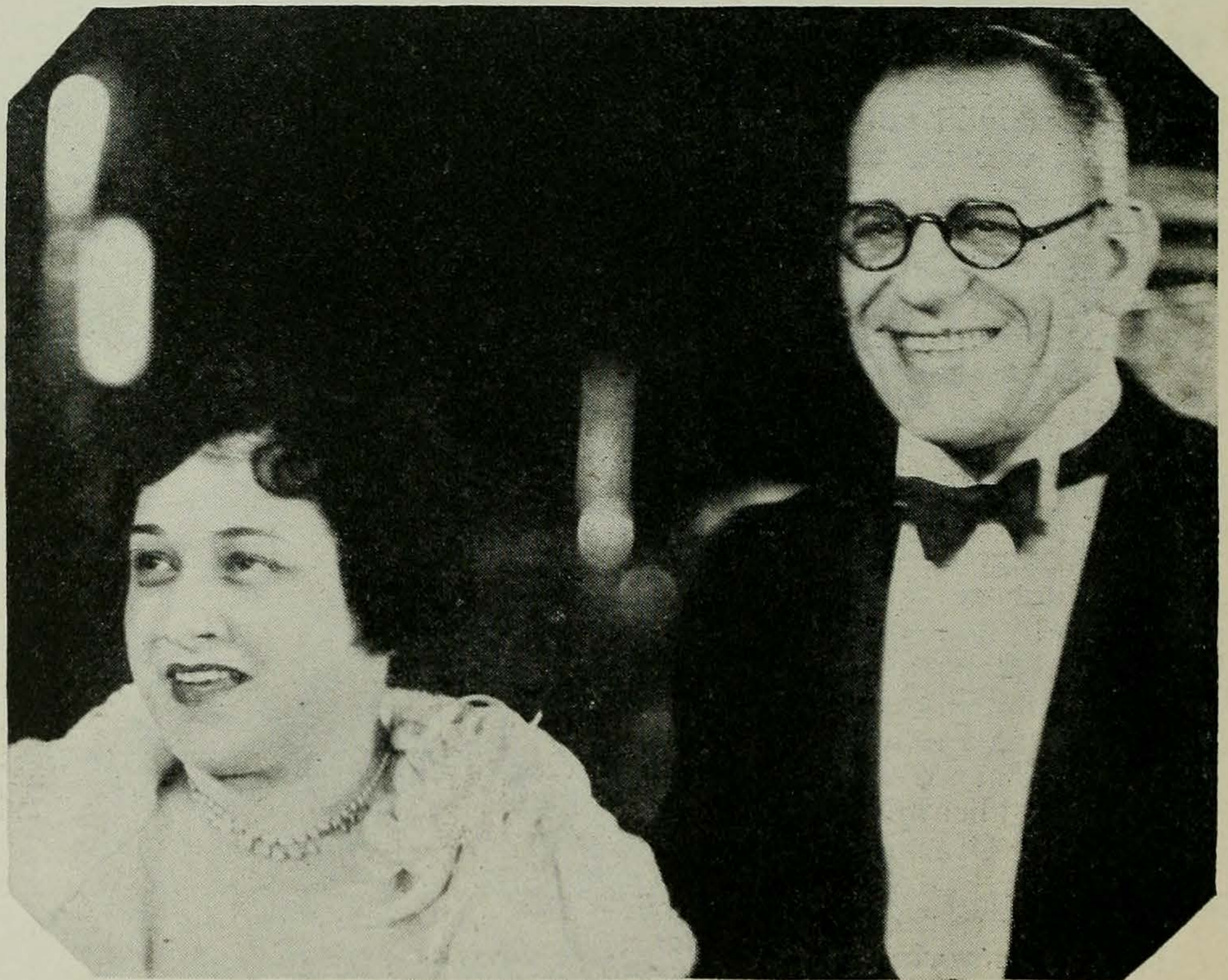
He had told me succinctly that he hated interviewers.

There were questions that I asked him which he flatly refused to answer. Yet after I had seen him several times, after I had once got behind the barrier of his silence, his shyness was broken down and the friendliness that makes stage hands and every person with a hard luck story love him, stood revealed.

When he desires he can be as subtly charming as an old world courtier. He let me come into his dressing room, hitherto sacred to his make-up. The first day there had been only a rough chair on which I could sit and, man-fashion, his combs and brushes and cigarettes were all over the place. The second time Lon had tidied the room and the chair had a cushion.

He loathes having people on the set. Yet he saw to it that I always found a comfortable place on "The Hypnotist" set that I might witness how easily he worked and with what economy of gesture.

Arriving one day at the studio I was told he was in his dressing room. I did not find him there. On the company stage I observed Tod Browning, his director, and the Kleigs were blazing. Suddenly I



The only picture of Mrs. Chaney Lon has allowed the public, snapped the opening night of "Tell It to the Marines"

of LON CHANEY By Ruth Waterbury

of the mystery man of the movies

Lon loved it. It was all new to him. There were such things as automobiles, electricity and large cities, he knew, but he never saw a town that boasted them. The company traveled along in a caboose that could be attached to any freight train. There were twenty-three of those terrible actors and they had to take turns cooking their meals over the car's wood-burning stove. Lon insists that the trains crept along so slowly they made a practice of shooting quail in the fields as they passed, then hopping off to retrieve them, and of catching the train in a walk.

HAMS among the hamlets. They played every town that rose to break the open stretches of the prairies. They felt sinfully luxurious when they found a theater with dressing rooms. Usually they had to put up a sheet back stage and reserve one side for the women, the other for the men. When there was room enough back stage for the trunks, that was a big night. Generally the trunks had to be put in the orchestra pit, along with whatever audience there was. When costume changes were called for the actors were forced to march solemnly front in full sight of the public, choose the necessary regalia and cart it back. As they went on, particularly in Texas, they began to regard theaters of any sort as miraculous. More and more they played stores and halls.

For footlights they used coal-oil lamps and when the script demanded a light change some performer would have to walk down stage, and adjust the lamp wicks. It was fortunate that neither actors nor audiences

possessed a sense of humor. Lon remembers one scene in their first play, "Said Pasha," in which the lights had to go out during a love scene. The lover entering worked his way to the front of the stage, turned out all the lamps and hurled his hot words at the heroine. But the plot required that *Pasha* should discover his daughter in the arms of her sweetheart. Since he could do no discovering in darkness, he had to go down and light the lamps before he could act surprise at the sight that met his eyes.

Naïve days, those, when the entertainment world was young. Lon Chaney today is known as the easiest star in filmdom to direct. His pictures are among the least expensive to produce. Thrift is as inevitable to him after that training as it is to Cal Coolidge.

Even with the unsophisticated tolerance of their audiences, Lon thinks they would never have drawn a house anywhere save for the "hard tickets" they issued. These were guarantees to the public that they would get their money back if they didn't like the show. The company gambled on the fact that no one would have the nerve to tell the truth about them and nobody ever did. Once they ran out of their "hard tickets." The town's only substitute was milk tickets. Adults came in on quarts, children on pints.

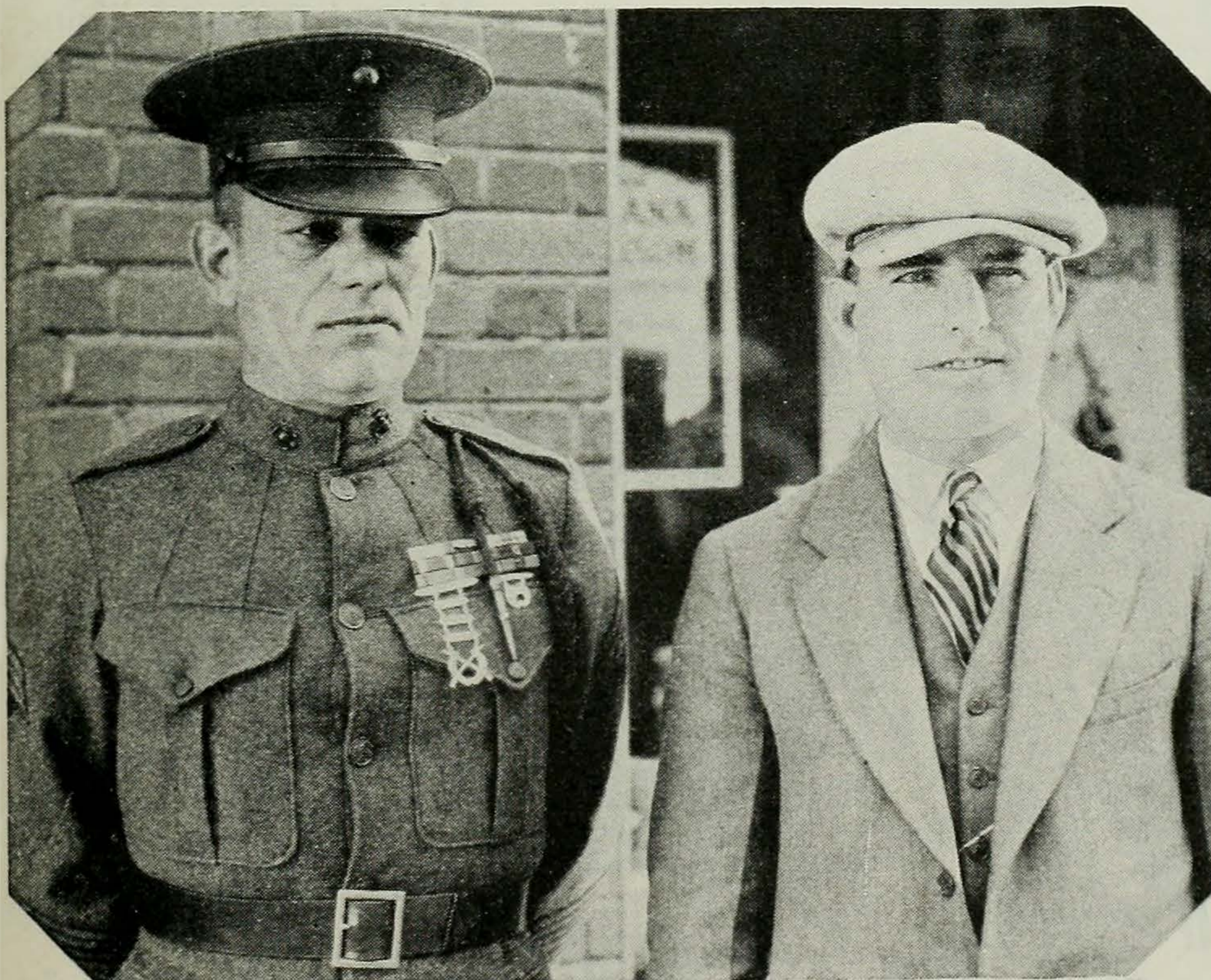
AS the original road builders had pushed on, those tawdry, tired pioneers of laughter followed their vague dream. Rough traveling, sleeplessness, loneliness, the lack of proper food. The youngsters counterbalanced it all with their optimism, the elders with the resignation of failure. It wasn't until they came into a Florida village on December 24th, 1903, that they jolted back to reality.

It was a ghastly little town, sand everywhere, and a few weather-beaten, sun-bleached buildings. None of them had any money. They counted themselves fortunate when they made enough money to cover expenses and get to the next stand.

But they simply had to have a Christmas.

Lon and his brother hunted a tree. They dragged a small pine back to the town hall where they were to stage their bill. They dug down into the company trunk for decorations, pathetic, glittering things, buttons off their costumes, tinfoil jewelry, cardboard crowns. They hung them on the tree and pretended it was beautiful.

All through the show that night, all the next morning—for wonder of wonders, this was a two-day stand—the company was busy devising Christmas gifts. As Christmas week is the worst the show business knows, they were poorer than usual. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 119]



Lon and his youngest brother, George Chaney, who is now editor of a small California newspaper

The True Life Story of Lon Chaney

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37]

Some of the women made rag dolls from bits of old dresses—not that anybody wanted a rag doll. It was the best they could devise. Lon could sketch a bit. He made caricatures of each member of the company and for the helpless ones who couldn't think of anything to make or how to make it, he drew extra sketches so that everyone had something to give, something to get.

THEY made a brave show of it that night. They danced. They sang. But the homely, dreaming boy who was their second comedian stayed back in the shadow so they couldn't see the tears of homesickness in his eyes.

Eventually they got back to Chicago, the Mecca of all barnstormers. Lon looked about the agencies but he could only sign for another tour. He got \$14 a week as second comedian with "The Cowpuncher."

Only one night of that hinterland heira stands out in Lon's memory. It was the performance when the understudy took the sick leading lady's place. Lon had to rush to her rescue in a scene where she was holding the villain at bay with a small revolver.

There was a real bullet in the gun. Nervous over her part, as she pressed the gun in Lon's hand, the girl pulled the trigger. Lon had five acts and seven scenes to go through before he could have his hand treated. He was a trouper. The show went on. But to this day his right hand bears the scar.

The next year he was out with "The Beggar Prince." In Champaign, Illinois, the prima donna lost her voice. The theater manager finally solved the problem of who was to take her place when he suggested his wife's sister. Lon saw the girl come to the theater, a lovely blonde youngster with a magnificent voice. He watched her through the four hour rehearsal she had for the rôle which she sung that night. It was her professional debut and Lon stood in the wings and envied her the bright future he saw ahead of her.

TODAY, as successful as she has been, she must, nevertheless, envy Lon Chaney. For she is Myrtle Stedman, a fine competent actress, but far from stardom.

"The Beggar Prince" stranded in Columbus, South Carolina. Now when companies strand, Equity sends for them and that is all there is to it. But twenty years ago stranding meant the troupe was absolutely broke. All that saved this group was the fact that William Cranston, a Canadian manager, was aware of their existence. He sent them fare enough to reach Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then routed them westward through the mining camps, the dance halls, and the snow-bound hills, westward to Vancouver.

The Canadians had some critical faculty. They flocked to see "The Beggar Prince" because they had seen

no play for months and months. But when the same troupe tried to repeat the tour from West to East the Canadians knew more. The company had added two new bills to the repertoire, "The Royal Chef" and "A Knight for a Day," but the public stayed away with great force. Again they stranded. By organizing a benefit and playing three days in one town they finally eked out their return fare to Chicago.

Back in Chicago, out of work, in debt, all that lay ahead of him another road tour with stretches when a few dollars could be accumulated to be followed by stretches when those dollars had to be spent. Lon was not so lonely now but he was more frightened. For he had married a girl of the troupe and he loved her. But they were both out of work and there was a baby coming.

ALL the tenderness and compassion of his boyhood days came into flower. He wanted to take care of that girl-wife. He wanted to give her luxuries. He wanted to prove himself the greatest song-and-dance man in the world for her. But in his secret heart he knew just what he was, a bum comedian, lucky to sign on with a ten-twenty-and-thirty outfit that would tour the tanks.

I tried to get Lon to tell me more about his wife but there I met with flat refusal. He is proud of his son and his son's wife. "Gosh, they're great kids," he says. But his love for his wife he holds inviolable from the public. Finally he showed me her picture, taken on one of their seasonable camping trips into the High Sierras. A little broad, smiling woman holding her morning catch of fish. I asked Lon if she wasn't less than five feet tall. "Four feet ten," said Lon, "and being part Italian she eats too much spaghetti." He grinned reminiscently. "She's courageous," he said finally. "We've gone through everything together. Let it go at that."

Lon tramped the streets of Chicago hunting a cheap room. When he found it finally in one of the city's shabbiest districts, he installed his wife in it and went searching food.

HE went to a saloon. He was no drinker then, anymore than he is today. But the musical director of "A Knight for a Day" had a piano-playing job in a saloon that boasted a free lunch. He and Lon were pals and he loaned the comedian a daily nickel with which to purchase the glass of beer that led to the free lunch. The lunch offered husky sandwiches. Lon would eat one for himself, smuggle away one for his wife. That way they lived until he got the post of stage manager with "The Girl in the Kimono."

They had to take the baby on the road with them. There was no help for it. Lon worked hard. He wanted the second comedian's place but a better man than he held it. The actor's name was Lee Moran. He is still a comedian in two reelers.



Sister Susie and the Steno' Job

She finished High School—with honors! Then business college gave her a "training" in six months and she started out to beat typewriters for a living.

Fine! But Susie was temperamental. Grinding drudgery might do for the type of girl whose ONLY aim is an early marriage. For Susie it was killing. So Sister Susie "took up the Saxophone."

Now Susie was just an average girl. You could never call her gifted or talented. But *within a week* she was playing tunes and in *six months* she could handle her Saxophone like a veteran.

Then things *happened*. First, a little club orchestra. Next, a local sextette. Then, some "home town" entertainment;—a sharp-eyed scout from a well-known booking office—a contract—and little Miss Susie hit the "big time" vaudeville, drawing down as much cash weekly as the salaries of half a dozen stenographers.

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John Chaney was in Los Angeles, manager of a theater, with a permanent home, a permanent address. When "The Girl in the Kimono" folded up on the road, Lon headed for the Pacific Coast. He knew that nothing worse than what he had gone through could lie ahead of him and at least the weather would be kindly.

There was a tabloid musical comedy stock company playing at the Olympic Theater on Los Angeles' Main Street. Seven shows a day, from one thirty to eleven at night, seven days a week. Wages, thirty-five dollars.

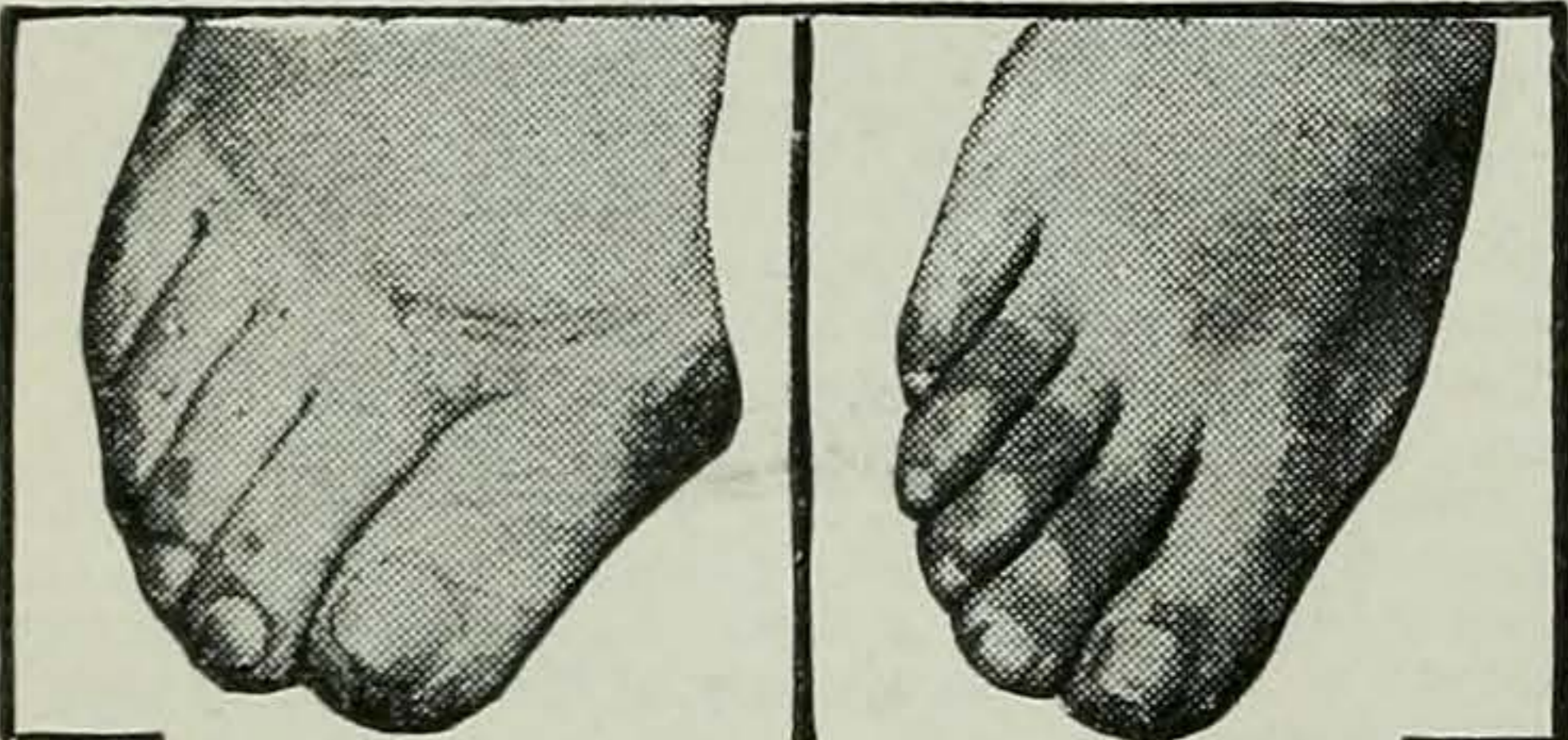
Killing, prostrating work, but permanent. Lon played there six months. Then he joined the Grand Opera House Company across the street. The leading comedians there were Roscoe Arbuckle and Robert Z. Leonard. The soubrette

was Francis White. Lon played German comedy, Jewish comedy, old men, young men, all the bits. He knew enough about make-up that he could play five rôles in one bill and not have the audience be aware of it. He was something terrible.

Slowly he began to improve. The showmanship that is like a lucky talisman for his career today began operating. He got his first reward when Dill of the producing firm of Kolb and Dill sent for him.

"The Rich Mr. Hoggheheimer" was going on tour and Dill wanted Lon as stage manager. Lon had to break up his home but he could not resist a part that had actually been offered him, that he hadn't had to beg for. When he got to San Francisco and Kolb and Dill decided they were going to center their producing activities there and wanted Lon as stage manager, he was in heaven.

In the two years in San Francisco he not only made a living wage with Kolb and Dill but earned a little on the side. Once he staged "Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway" at the Alcazar Stock Company. Lon as song-and-dance man staged the dances. He had to put the leading man through his steps and the leading man was nice about it but he kept Lon in his place. The leading man's name was Bert Lytell.



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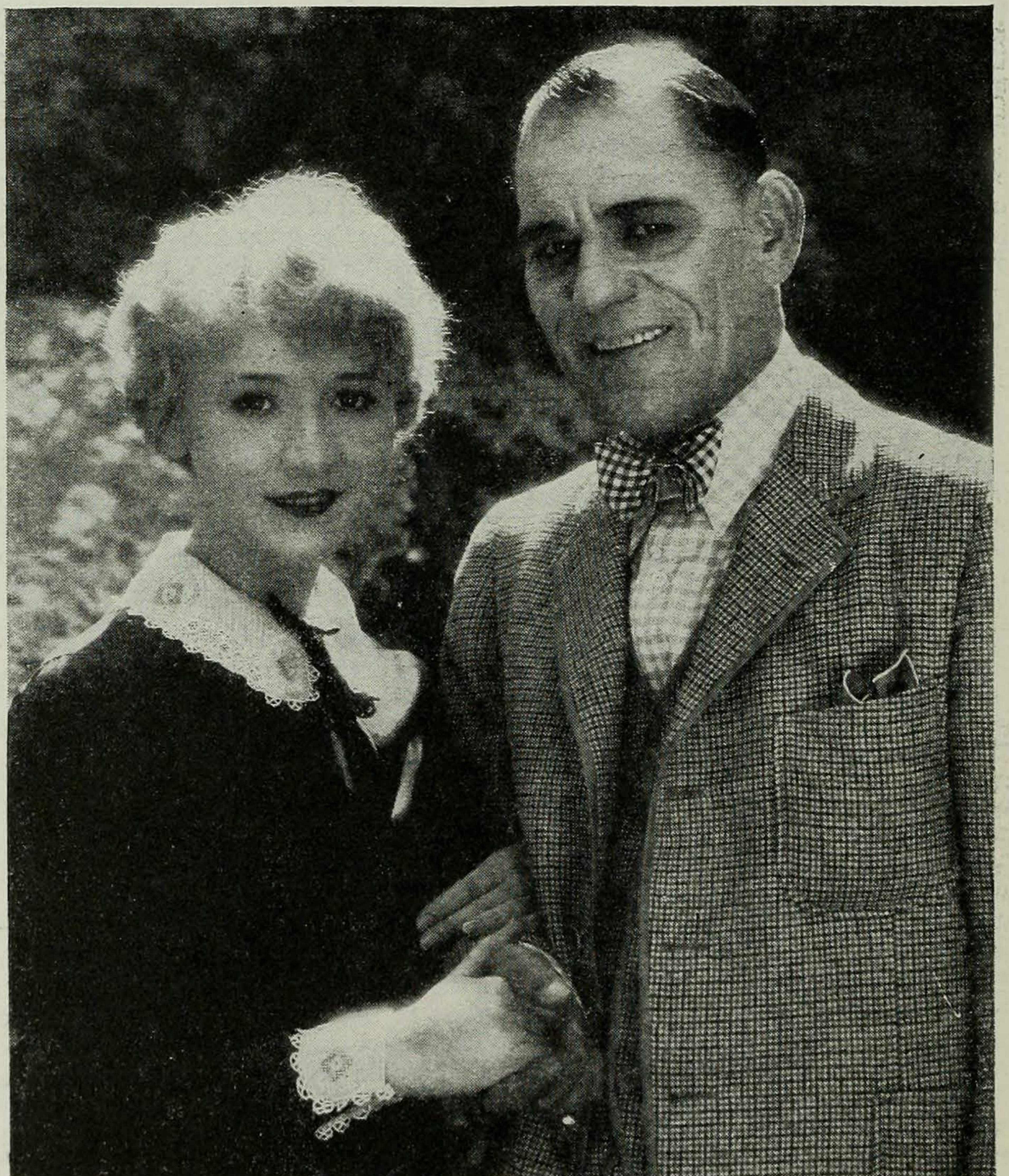
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see page 115

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Together they made good, Betty Compson and Lon Chaney, in "The Miracle Man." They both went up in the electric lights. Then Betty got a bunch of bad releases, while Lon went steadily, consistently ahead. Now they are reunited again in Lon's next picture, "The Big City"

A little money gave Lon poise enough to look once more toward the future. He kept hearing of the moving pictures down the Coast. The three Chaney's packed up. Lon was going to try his luck again.

Lon hunted up his friend, Lee Moran, who was working out in a suburb of Los Angeles called Hollywood. At the corner of Sunset and Gower Streets behind what had been a cattle corral was one ramshackle building. This was the Universal Film Company. Lee got Lon a chance there at three dollars a day.

The comedy man strutted his stuff. He quite truthfully believed there was nothing he could not do by way of pulling laughs, no make-up he could not don. The lack of word gags to get over the slap-stick, which bothered the others, troubled him not at all. He was back in the dumb atmosphere of his childhood where he clowned for his mother's amusement. They signed him for a company making one-reelers in which the other players were Louise Fazenda, Max Ascher and Gale Henry.

He was making very little more than

he had been when he started out from home, twelve years before. He was thirty years old. But he was a trouper. He saw only happiness ahead. He saw fame. He so thoroughly believed in himself as a comedian he couldn't know he was to find no success until he changed his acting completely. And he certainly would have believed no one if they had told him that his success was to come through one woman's keenness.

Today that woman is a scenario writer, one of the finest. Then she was an actress, not one of the finest. Yet even then she had perception. Her name was Jeanie Macpherson and she was the first person who insisted that Lon Chaney, the comedian, be cast in one of her pictures in a tragic character rôle.

He thought he was going to be terrible in Jeanie Macpherson's picture. Actually it was the turning point of his career, leading to "The Miracle Man" and stardom. Read how Lon Chaney found success. In the February issue of PHOTOPLAY.

ONE

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TWO

Then simply comb water-like liquid through hair. Clean, safe. Takes 7 minutes.



THREE

Arrange hair and watch color gradually creep back. Restoration will be perfect and complete.

The Shadow Stage

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 55]

NIGHT LIFE—Tiffany

A LONG step toward stardom is achieved by two people in this picture. They are Alice Day and Eddie Gribbon, while Johnnie Harron is right behind them. The locale is laid in Vienna before and after the World War—that latter period being most deftly covered in less than 100 feet of film and in a most effective manner. Harron and Gribbon are the performers in a beer garden—the former a sleight-of-hand manipulator and the latter his assistant. They are on their way to success but the war intervenes. On their return from the front they join the starving throng in the bread-line. It is there that the thought comes to the pair that the dexterity of the fingers of the one might be employed to effect their salvation from starvation. Harron turns pick-pocket and Gribbon disposes of the loot. The tale is about half told before the heroine enters. Then Alice Day appears and she, too, has turned crook to keep alive. She tries to lift Harron's watch but he catches her, feeds her and falls in love with her. The advent of the girl creates a triangle situation which brings the picture to an end with a most effective twist that will be adored by audiences. There is a lot of colorful atmosphere and a sustained suspense to the story and the manner of its unfoldment that will grip the fans.

THE WISE WIFE—Pathe-De Mille

THIS is a fair comedy—though not original—of domestic troubles and triangles. Hubbies do have a weakness for peppy flappers, so friend wife gets herself all modernized and lets Cupid do the rest. You won't be bored for the cast boasts of Phyllis Haver, Jacqueline Logan and Tom Moore.

THE RACING ROMEO—FBO

ANOTHER of the motor maniac yarns where the hero just must win the race. The story is slim and the comedy gags obvious. The chief claim to your attention is Red Grange and a cute little pup. Jobyna Ralston is the girl. As you might suppose, this is very poor entertainment.

THEIRRESISTIBLE LOVER—Universal

A FROTHY piece of nonsense concerning a handsome bachelor who has escaped from the matrimonial ties. And into his life comes a sweet young thing who changes everything—and there you have it. William Beaudine's skillful direction makes this real good entertainment. Norman Kerry and Lois Moran head the cast. You really shouldn't miss this under any circumstances.

RAGTIME—First Division

THIS is nothing but an old song revamped with a tin-pan alley composer as the hero and a charming debutante as the heroine. Pass this up.

EAST SIDE, WEST SIDE—Fox

THE celluloid version of Felix Riesenberg's popular novel is filled with all the ingredients that make good movie entertainment. It has a realistic background of New York and tells the tale of a river waif who fights his way to the top step of the ladder of success. George O'Brien and Virginia Valli give splendid performances. Allan Dwan directed. We recommend this to you without any reservation.

THE COLLEGE WIDOW—Warners

DOLORES COSTELLO goes collegiate and vamps a flock of football players. They all enter her daddy's school and what a team old Whozis has. They win the big game—Dear Old Alma Mater is saved—and incidentally pop keeps his job—that's why Dolores did all the vamping. Trite stuff.

LADIES MUST DRESS—Fox

THE let-down in the last half of this picture spoils it for being a truly hilarious comedy. The first half is one laugh after another. Virginia Valli learns that even a poor department store stenographer must dress to hold her man—and attract others. Lawrence Grey portrays a boy worth holding, while Earle Fox makes an attractive third to the triangle. Nancy Carrol and Hallam Cooley are a joy to behold as the jealous, nagging young married pair.

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