

# George Brent Crashes Through!



*George Brent and Ruth Chatterton. Each is the other's favorite actor—which is a most fortunate coincidence, for by the time you read this they'll probably be married.*

**W**HEN George Brent reached New York nine years ago, his mind was made up. The stage was to become his stamping ground; the theatrical world was to be his oyster.

He was nineteen. He was broke.

For two years he had lived in an atmosphere of suspense and excitement as dispatch runner for the Irish revolutionists. For two years he had dabbled in theatricals, with the famous Abbey players in Dublin. He had just negotiated a successful, if hair-raising escape from Ireland, via Scotland, England and Montreal, and the stage seemed to him to be the only profession which offered any continuation of the excitement he had come to feel necessary for his peace of mind.

It was absurdly simple. He asked for a chance to play in stock and he got it.

"I was big," he explains, "and had a slight brogue. I got a place almost immediately."

*When Ireland became too hot to hold George Brent, he found new excitement in trying to "crash" the New York stage. Read how the movies discovered him—at his own suggestion!*

He sought the career of an actor—and found it one big obstacle race. Part II of his life story tells what he did about it

By  
*Carlisle Jones*

It began to look almost too easy. One played a while in stock companies and then one was called to New York and given leading rôles on Broadway!

He played one season in the Bronx and another in Brooklyn. He even saved a little money. Then he let it be known he was available for rôles in New York productions. He made the rounds of the agents and booking offices. He waited as patiently as his Irish nature and his hectic youthful training would permit.

When his money was gone he signed again with a stock company and went on the road. He repeated this procedure again and again, holding out for a New York rôle each time until his funds were exhausted and then accepting the first offer to play in stock that came along.

So it happened that Brent, in 1924, was sent out in one of the numerous road companies which were taking that modern day box-office miracle, "Abie's Irish Rose," to the "hinterlanders." Brent played *Abie*. He played *Abie* for a year and ten months throughout the middle west. He played it in theatres, halls, churches and barns. He played it in big cities and in small towns. He can name the principal theatre and hotel in every town of any size in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri or Colorado.

It is these audiences and hundreds more like them in all parts of the country, where Brent has played in stock, which the young actor hopes will remember him when they see him playing rôles in talking pictures. He believes that if they like him and his work on the screen his future will take care of itself.

A year and ten months of steady work let Brent return to New York late in (Continued on page 82)



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1925, with a comfortable bank balance. He wasted but little time and money hunting for a New York rôle. When none was forthcoming he organized a stock company of his own and went on a scouting expedition to find a likely location for it.

He found what he thought was a promising field for a permanent stock company in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and he signed a lease for a theatre there which bound him to pay a high rental for twenty-eight weeks. He brought his new stock company down from New York and opened the house.

The ensuing six months Brent puts down as the blackest days of his stage career. Week by week the New York bank balance dwindled. Time and insolvency ran a merry race for twenty-eight weeks. It was a draw. Brent paid off his company for the final week, made his last payment for rent and closed the books. He was twenty-two years old and broke again!

An unhappy venture into matrimony added to the complications of this failure. It lasted only a month and ended in separation and divorce. Brent himself never mentions it. His friends understand that he married a member of this first unsuccessful stock company, a woman older than himself.

Once again Brent went on the road in stock and again he saved his money and, when he had a little ahead, he organized another stock company of his own. The Pawtucket experience had taught him something about finances and he became a prudent producer. There were no other sheriffs in the offing.

Florida and New England were the new fields for his operations. Meanwhile, in 1928, he got his first New York chance in a play called "The 'K' Guy." It failed miserably and Brent went back to stock and the road.

He turned up in Denver with the world-famous Elitch's Gardens' stock company in the summer of 1929 and was leading man there for seventeen rôles. The assignment brought his total number of parts played close to the three hundred mark. Some of these had been at the rate of three new rôles a week.

Denver liked the tall, black-haired, hazel-eyed, Irish leading man and made no bones about it. The Elitch Gardens have graduated many famous players in their day and that engagement was actually the turning point in Brent's career. Fortune didn't exactly fall on his neck right then and there but things did look up a bit after the Denver engagement.

The first sign that his long apprenticeship in stock might bring results after the Denver appearance, came when he was offered a rôle in the Broadway production of "Those We Love," by John Golden. It was a short-lived success, however, but his own work won him a place opposite Alice Brady in "Love, Honor and Betray." Clark Gable was in the same cast. So, too, was Robert Williams, whose promising career in pictures was cut short by death a few months ago.

Under the management of Al Woods, who had produced "Love, Honor and Betray," Brent made the first of three disheartening treks to Hollywood in search of his future. He was told he was to play the lead in the screen version of "The Man Who Came Back," but he found Charles Farrell already playing the rôle when he arrived in Hollywood, and after numerous "tests" he was finally assigned

to a smaller rôle in "Under Suspicion," with Lois Moran.

He began writing frantic letters to Al Woods, urging the producer to call him back to New York for a chance to play in "A Farewell to Arms." He was eventually called back but too late for a part in that production and instead he played a rôle in another which closed when Woods went into bankruptcy.

Brent went back to Hollywood. There were several false starts. Eric Von Stroheim wanted him for a leading part in "Blind Husbands." Brent was enthusiastic. But the picture was never made and Brent played other inconsequential parts in almost forgotten productions. He was tested, he says now, for every good part that studio had in mind. But he never quite landed it. Meanwhile his friend and friendly rival, Clark Gable, had turned out to be a sensation. Only a few months before, in Hollywood, Brent and Gable had compared notes as to who was the more discouraged. Gable had won.



*Just between us Britishers! Herbert Marshall, popular English actor from the stage, and Adrienne Allen, also a daughter of John Bull, must have a lot in common to talk about.*

But now it was Brent who was discouraged. To add to his unhappiness he developed eye trouble and had to go east again for medical consultation and an operation on his eyes. His sister, the wife of Victor Watson, then the editor of *The New York American* and a well-known writer in her own name, took Brent to her home in the Adirondacks and nursed him back to health.

Once recovered it was necessary for him to start planning his career all over again. He made the rounds of the booking offices in New York. The road was impossible. Stock companies were returning to New York with discouraging reports about business. New York productions were opening and closing with disheartening promptness. Brent had never had a New York success and he knew Hollywood well enough to know that nothing would raise his stock there so much as a smash hit on Broadway.

But there were no smash hits available and so Brent left his name and prospective Hollywood address with all producers and started back for Hollywood.

"But I can fly back in two days, if anything comes up," he told them.

But nothing came up. In Hollywood an agent told Brent that he had arranged for the actor to make a test at Warner Brothers studios on a certain day.

"I'll be damned if I will," yelled Brent. "Tell them to—tell them I'll be there!"

So Brent made another test. He made it earnestly and he made use of all the things he had learned in the months since he made the first of innumerable screen tests for one company and another. Then he went home to see if there wasn't some mail from New York.

In due time a little group of executives, directors and players gathered in a Warner Brothers projection room to see the results of several tests made the preceding day. They were looking for promising talent in general and for a new leading man to play opposite Ruth Chatterton in "The Rich Are Always With Us," in particular.

Brent had never known any good to come out of a screen test. To this day he thinks they are unfair, foolish, and perhaps unnecessarily cruel. So he received a real shock when the agent called him by telephone and broke the news that Warner Brothers would consider signing him for a part opposite Ruth Chatterton and perhaps to a long term contract.

What Brent didn't know was that Ruth Chatterton, who had looked at screen tests of various players for two days running, had stood up in the projection room after Brent had said his little say on the screen and had demanded: "Where has this man been all his life?"

The rest is Hollywood history in the making. In rapid succession Brent was given leading rôles opposite Ruth Chatterton, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Blondell and again with Chatterton. There are plans for him to be featured in leading rôles in his own right in the near future.

He rented himself a bachelor bungalow on Toluca Lake and moved in with two wire-haired terriers and "Joe," a handy man about the house. It was there he received the first cloudburst of superlatives which welcomed his appearance with Miss Chatterton in "The Rich Are Always With Us," and which proclaimed him generally as one of the screen "finds" of the decade. It was his first real taste of fame. He was twenty-eight—and for practical purposes, still broke.

George Brent is convinced that whether he succeeds or fails—and it doesn't seem to be in the cards just now that he can fail—rests with the people of Denver and Pawtucket, Weeping Water, Oklahoma, and Topeka, Kansas, more than it does with the people of New York, even though he admits that a New York stage hit would have speeded up his screen career considerably. He wants to hear from the outlying precincts. He is convinced that as they go for motion picture personalities, so goes the nation.

Nine years' experience and some three hundred rôles are behind George Brent's present success. And further back, are eighteen years of adventurous living and an Irish ancestry that is rich in tradition and proud in spirit. And that, Miss Chatterton, is where George Brent has been all your life! And from now on his life is in your hands—another studio romance that turned into the real thing.