

# BENDIX, THE MAGNIFICENT

BY DUGAL O'LIAM

PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S  
BY GEORGE DE ZAYAS



William Bendix has a face only a mother—or a Hollywood agent—could love. Coupled with his hilarious antics, it has proved to be a highly salable commodity

THERE are several ways to become a success in Hollywood. One is to own a beautiful face. Another is to have a gorgeous figure. Then there is William Bendix. In his slightly more than a year-long career in pictures, Bendix has made such a success of his well-nigh incredible appearance that the Motion Picture Exhibitors of America—an astute body, indeed—nominated him the actor most likely to succeed in 1944.

Bendix won this accolade because he tickles the grownups into hysterics and scares the daylight out of the kiddies.

There have been other Bendix triumphs.

He has become the first incorporated goon in history. The principal stockholder is William Bendix, who has been permitted to retain fifty per cent of himself in return for supporting half the film industry. When the WPA moved out of Hollywood, Bendix moved in. People got off the dole and on Bendix.

This last is a change Bill can appreciate. Three and a half years ago, he was on relief himself, when a grocery store, which he had managed, folded. With a wife and child to feed, relief was the only answer.

He is now owned, in various forms, by Hal Roach, Twentieth Century-Fox, Paramount, the Stewart Agency and himself. When he makes a picture at Fox, Paramount collects. When he makes one at Paramount, Fox collects. When he makes one elsewhere, both collect. Then Roach takes one half his fee for each picture, and the Stewart Agency collects ten per cent off the top. This is known as a revolving economy, and the thing which revolves fastest is Bendix's cerebellum.

"But don't let anybody kid you," Bill says. "It's a lot better than trying to make sense on a twenty-one-dollar-a-month handout."

Since his successes in Wake Island, Guadalcanal Diary, and Hostages, for Hollywood, he now commands \$70,000 a picture of which he retains half, or \$35,000. By excising the last three digits you arrive at his peak salary as a grocer. He admits he finds the extra three ciphers absorbing.

In less than three years, he parlayed an expression of dumb suspicion and a face like an iguana's into comparative riches.

His appearance is as hilarious off the screen as on. He's five feet ten, but his truncated figure makes him look shorter. He has the beam of a landing barge, legs like a pair of railroad ties, and he walks with the bobbing gait of a punch-drunk pugilist. Confronted with the hoary chestnut that he has a face only a mother could love, he replies gaily, "You think so, huh? Then you don't know very much about Hollywood agents."

## The Fault's with the Face

Bendix was born at Forty-first Street and Third Avenue in New York in 1906. His father, both grandfathers and assorted uncles were professional musicians. Asked if his neglect to follow in the family footsteps was due to the lack of an ear for music, he answers, with dolorous candor, "It was my whole face."

When Bill was six weeks old, a great event took place in his life. The Giacomo Stefanottis, neighbors and closest friends of his family, welcomed a daughter whom they named Therese. Almost immediately the destinies of Bill and Therese were merged and, after an interval of twenty-two years, they were married. They're still married and have a daughter, Lorraine, now 15.

Aside from a tendency to demoralize the little tots when he showed his face unexpectedly, Bill's school days were uneventful. He got his first job when he finished high school and at once became a celebrity. The job was mascot to the New York Giants under John McGraw. Everything was beautiful until Bill prepared to go south for spring training. Mamma Bendix had heard that ballplayers played stud poker and chewed cut plug in Florida—and Bill stayed home.

This calamity did not end his baseball career, however, and he became a semi-pro second baseman. His chief contribution to the advancement of the game was a method of fielding hard-hit balls with his face, but certain technical defects soon became evident in this system and completed the jocose program Mother Nature had begun on his features.

His nose seems to have been most vulnerable. Thrice broken, it now describes a tortuous course down his craggy visage.

The Henry Street Settlement on New York's lower East Side gave Bendix his first whiff of grease paint. He went with his pals to the center for a spot of boxing and was appalled to see them wind up in the dramatic class of Miss Eva Fry. But when that lady discovered his antics and detected the spark of genius, Bill became a full-fledged member of the Henry Street Players. In his first production, he played an undertaker, and the dumb concentration he bestowed on the role panicked the customers.

When the Stefanottis moved to Hillside, New Jersey, Bill's evenings were devoted to long trips to see Therese, and a hiatus developed in his dramatic career. There were compensations, however, since he was soon made manager of an Orange, New Jersey, store. Then the supermarket fungus crept over the East, and by the end of 1935, Bill's firm had succumbed, leaving Bendix at liberty and broke.

By day, he plodded the streets looking for a job. By night, he frequented small

cabarets where he was considered devastating and occasionally was given a fling at entertaining the patrons. For this, he sometimes got a few dollars. "Mostly, though," he says, "I got a beer."

Obviously this sort of thing was beneficial to neither his pride nor his alimentary canal, but it might have gone on indefinitely had not Howard Hall, a coach for the New Jersey Federal Theater Project, made his providential appearance. After catching the Bendix horseplay over the rim of a seidel, Hall sent him to Louis Simon, his project boss. Simon figured that Bill's face was worth the project's \$17.50 a week scale, just as a cure for the hiccups (which broke out quite often among his artistes), and hired him.

He was playing for Simon when Cheryl Crawford of the New York Theater Guild decided to become a producer. She hired Bendix for a play that rehearsed for six weeks, then expired without opening.

It was then that Bill was introduced to public relief. For seven months, he spread \$21.50 every thirty days over the project of keeping three people in shelter and groceries. Then Johnny Briscoe, a New York agent, informed Bill that the Theater Guild was looking for someone to play the policeman Krupp, in William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*.

Hal Roach saw him in the Saroyan play and signed him to contract which paid him \$300 a week, work or not, and half of everything he earned in excess of \$600 a week, the other half to go to Roach. There are those who are narrow enough to regard this sort of document as confiscatory, but in Hollywood it has a much prettier name. There it is known as a shrewdgie.

Bendix began his first Hollywood scenes with Spencer Tracy in *Woman of the Year*, in which he played, with an authority born of long research, a bartender.

Bill missed one studio connection in Hollywood by the pardonable error of doing nothing. He worked with Abbott and Costello in *Who Done It?* as the bumble-brained cop who got himself handcuffed. So consistent were the guffaws when he appeared on the set that Costello was moved to demand who was supposed to be the comic of the picture. His apprehension was later justified when the New York critics found that Bendix's antics provided the film's chief comical interludes, but Bill made no more pictures at Universal.

## Hidden Beauty Unawakened

Because Jules Levy, an independent Hollywood producer, thinks Bendix is the second Louis Wolheim, he is now preparing *The Hairy Ape*, Wolheim's greatest stage triumph, with Bendix in the title role and the conventional goon makeup. Since it will bring another \$35,000 into his treasury, Bill is accepting his fate with becoming equanimity, but he yearns for the day when accident, or something, will permit the hidden beauty to shine through his rugged exterior.

This ambition is based on an incident which occurred when he was being made up for the first time for his part in *China*. Probably seized by an inner urge to right some of nature's wrongs, the makeup man completely altered the Bendix physiognomy, obviously for the better. Bill appeared for action, beaming happily, but Director John Farrow took one look at the result and chased Bill off the set until he'd reclaimed his primitive charm.

"But it was wonderful," Bill sighs. "I looked just like Tyrone Power."

As the owners of his contract and the sharers in his success, Hal Roach, Paramount, Fox, Stewart, *et al.*, have one profound worry. Every time they think of what might happen if a plastic surgeon got hold of William Bendix, they break out in cold sweats. ★★★

# OUR UNSUNG ADMIRAL

By Frank D. Morris

RADIOED FROM HONOLULU

The chief of the new Central Pacific Command scares reporters to death, and that is why you haven't heard much about him. His time is spent putting over jobs like Midway and the Gilbert Islands. Collier's correspondent, walking in where angels fear to tread, comes up with a fine story

RAYMOND A. SPRUANCE must be on the Navy Department Secret Weapons list. In Washington, whenever the three-stripers or better get together to talk sea tactics, they are fulsome in their praise of the Halseys, the Nimitzes, the Kings, the Starks, the Fletchers and our other top-flight admirals, but when someone says, "Now, take Spruance," they all sit back and smile flatly and murmur "Ahhhh . . ."

However, outside of Navy circles, very few persons know much about the man who bosses our task forces in the Pacific and has never lost an engagement. But Admiral Nagano knows of Spruance: so does Tojo—because, if it weren't for Spruance at Midway, Japanese carriers might now be based at Pearl Harbor.

People who should know predict that Vice-Admiral Raymond A. Spruance will win the Pacific war in a walk. They mean it literally. He's the walkingest officer in the Navy. Eight or ten miles a day of heel and toe is just a warm-up for this man who, as second in command to Admiral Chester Nimitz, holds down the most important naval post in the Central Pacific, where we are now slugging it out with the Japs.

When Admiral Spruance isn't walking he's driving—driving himself, his subordinates, his ships and the enemy. He's a demon for work. He and Vice-Admiral F. J. Fletcher drove the Japs back at Midway last year when our carrier task force was greatly outclassed in size and number of ships. By clever deployment of his forces to get the most out of each, Admiral Spruance has been able to mow the Japs down. Shortly after Midway, Admiral Nimitz showed in a practical way what he thought of Spruance's performance in the battle by making him his Chief of Staff. As head of the newly created Central Pacific Command, Admiral Spruance headed up the conquest of the Gilbert Islands.

As Nimitz's right-hand man, he remained quietly in the background for over a year, until the Gilbert Islands attack, helping the Commander of the Pacific Fleet map most of the direct route to Tokyo. He swapped his flag bridge for a landlocked office at CINCPAC Headquarters and, with all the patience he could muster, watched the greatest navy in the history of the world develop from the ashes of Pearl Harbor. His name disappeared from the headlines. While the MacArthurs, the Halseys and the Eisenhowers continued to make page-one stories, Spruance was busy with a job at hand.

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Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, one of the greatest U. S. Navy tacticians of all time, on the deck of his cruiser flagship with Collier's Pacific Fleet correspondent, Frank D. Morris (right)

The admiral plots task-force jobs alone in his cruiser cabin. He plotted the taking of Tarawa and Makin here. For that job he assembled the most complex armada yet thrown against our Pacific foe

