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Memoirs of a Monster

At Halloween the world's most famous bogeyman looks back on his thirty-year career in horror.

By BORIS KARLOFF, as told to Arlene and Howard Eisenberg

It is not true that I was born a monster. Hollywood made me one. That was thirty-one years ago, and I have lived menacingly ever after. While some potential victims have eluded my fangs, claws and other assorted horrors, I myself have found it almost impossible to escape monster roles.

Take the memorable time in 1947 when I was offered the part of the gentle Professor Linden in a forthcoming Broadway production of *The Linden Tree*. I was delighted—but the playwright, J. B. Priestley, was not. "Good Lord, not Karloff!" he told producer Maurice Evans. "Put his name up on the marquee and people will think my play is about an ax murder."

I cabled Priestley in London:

I PROMISE YOU I WOULD NOT HAVE EATEN THE BABY IN THE LAST ACT.

Upon that solemn assurance, he withdrew his objections. The part was mine. But *The Linden Tree* folded in less than a week, and I've always been haunted by the thought that possibly Priestley was right after all.

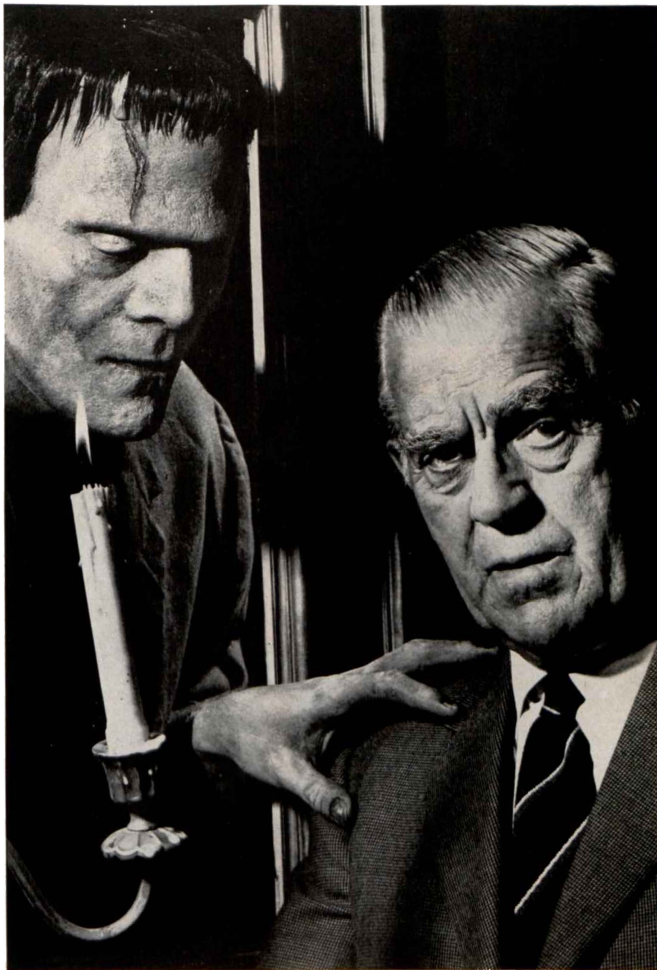
On rare occasions I have managed to step out of character. As jovial Father Knickerbocker in a *Shirley Temple* Storybook television show; as a wise Seneca chief in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Unconquered*, and in my favorite role of the kindly Gramps in *On Borrowed Time* in stock. But even then I felt that the audience was waiting for me to unmask and exterminate the rest of the cast.

An Ordinary Childhood

Such morbid expectations also appear to shadow my offstage life. If I stroll into the garden, spade in hand, the postman is almost certain to quip, "Disposing of another body, Mr. Karloff?" Groucho Marx's standard greeting to me is, "How much do you charge to haunt a house?" Bright young advertising men are forever soliciting testimonials from me for such things as devil's-food cake.

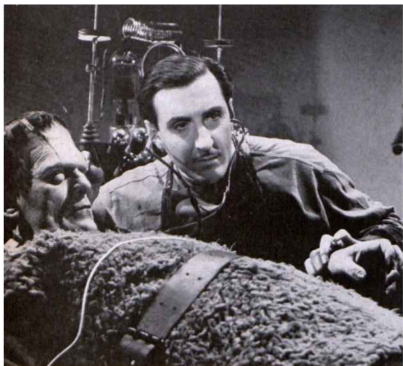
Actually I am assured that I was a quiet infant, and a gentle boy. No whippings by cruel stepparents scarred my childhood. No sadistic governesses read me horror stories by flickering candlelight. My childhood as William Henry Prait in the serene London suburb of Enfield was extraordinarily tame. Both my parents died during my childhood. I was reared by one amiable stepstater and seven stern older brothers, who knew exactly what I was going to be—a government servant in the family tradition. But my scholarship, or lack of it, during four years at Uppingham, a boarding school that I attended in 1902-06, bespoke my disinterest in any profession based upon higher learning.

Actually my macabre career was already settled. At the age of nine, I had appeared in a Christmas-play version of



Karloff, who first played in *Frankenstein* in 1931, hasn't been able to shed monster image.

"Some parents and civic groups thought *Frankenstein* was too horrifying for children to see. . . . The children thought otherwise."



An intent Basil Rathbone listens to Karloff's heartbeats in a scene from film *Son of Frankenstein*.



As the Oriental despot in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, Karloff devised fiendish tortures for his enemies.



Hamming it up on the set of *The Raven*, his latest movie, Karloff quips with Peter Lorre and Vincent Price. He broke them up with weird facial expressions.

Karloff *Cinderella*. Instead of playing the handsome prince, I donned black tights and a skullcap with horns and rallied the forces of evil as the Demon King. From then on I resolved to be an actor.

At Kings College, London, years later, the first-term reports amply reflected the fact that I had attended more plays than classes. I was, in fact, fast becoming a disgrace to the family name. In those days black sheep were exported to Canada or Australia. When I blithely flipped a coin in the family solicitor's office, the unfortunate losers were the Canadians.

At 4:30 one morning, a month or so later, I found myself in a Canadian pasture, halter in hand, wondering how to round up four reluctant horses.

A week or so later, at Vancouver, British Columbia, I landed a pick-and-shovel job with the B. C. Electric Company—\$2.80 for a ten-hour day—digging drainage ditches and clearing land.

Mumbling and Bumbling

Then one day in an old copy of *Billboard*, I came across the advertisements of a theatrical agent in nearby Seattle. His name was Kelly. I went to him and shamelessly told him I'd been in all the plays I'd ever seen, that I was forced to retire to Canada temporarily for my health and was now hale and ready for a comeback. Two months later, while chopping trees, I received a brief note, "Join Jean Russell Stock Company in Kamloops, B. C.—KELLY." I left my ax sticking in a tree.

On the train I concocted my stage name. Karloff came from relatives on my mother's side. The Boris I plucked out of the cold Canadian air. I had finally become an actor, but I mumbled, bumbled, missed cues, tammed into furniture and sent the director's blood pressure soaring. When the curtain went up, I was getting thirty dollars a week. When it descended, I was down to fifteen dollars. The play, significantly now, happened to be Molnar's *The Devil*.

I learned the acting trade during the next six or seven years, playing vintage pieces like *East Lynne* and *Charlie's Aunt* all over western Canada and the United States, and living on eggs fried on inverted pressing irons in "no cooking" boardinghouses. Then I wandered into movies, via a five-dollar-a-day extra role as a swarthy Mexican soldier in a Doug Fairbanks Sr. film, *His Majesty, The American*. For the next eight or nine years, I played extra and small featured roles when things were good, loaded cement sacks in warehouses when they weren't. At 42 I was an obscure actor playing obscure parts. I quit writing home—for I had nothing to write about.

My big break came while I was downing a sandwich-and-tea lunch in the Universal commissary. After a string of sweet-and-kindly roles, I had played the diabolical Galloway, the convict-killer in *The Criminal Code*. Someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Mr. Whale would like to see you at his table." Jimmy Whale was the most important director on the lot. "We're getting ready to shoot the Mary Shelley classic, *Frankenstein*," Whale said, "and I'd like you to test—for the part of the monster."

It was a bit shattering, but I felt that any part was better than no part at all. The studio's head makeup man, Jack Pierce, spent evenings experimenting with me. Slowly, under his skillful touch, the monster's double-domed forehead, slop-

ing brow, flattened Neanderthal eyelids and surgical scars materialized. A week later I was ready for the test. I readily passed as a monster.

To fill out the monster costume, I had to wear a doubly quilted suit beneath it. We shot *Frankenstein* in midsummer. After an hour's work I would be sopping wet. I'd have to change into a spare undersuit, often still damp from the previous round. So I felt, most of the time, as if I were wearing a clammy shroud myself. No doubt it added to the realism.

The scene where the monster was created, amid booming thunder and flashing lightning, made me as uneasy as anyone. For while I lay half-naked and strapped to Doctor Frankenstein's table, I could see directly above me the special-effects men brandishing the white-hot scissorslike carbons that made the lightning. I hoped that no one up there had butterfingers.

Frankenstein was the first monster film of any consequence ever attempted. That, plus the sensitive theme of a man, Doctor Frankenstein, playing at God, made the then-powerful Hayes office hesitate to release it. But director Whale had filmed it with restraint and delicacy. It finally was released for its premiere on December 6, 1931, at Santa Barbara. I was not even invited and had never seen it. I was just an unimportant free-lance actor, the animation for the monster costume.

Then my agent called one morning and said, "Boris, Universal wants you under contract." I thought, *Maybe for once I'll know where my breakfast is coming from, after more than twenty years of acting*. I soon found myself mildly famous—although not by name. On a motoring holiday in France, for example, I lost my way. In the dreadful remains of my schoolboy French, I inquired in a tiny village butcher shop. The proprietor looked me in the face and exclaimed, "Frankenstein's Monster!" That sort of thing has lasted for thirty years.

A Ghoul Gains Followers

In a Hollywood studio baseball game, *Leading Men* versus *Comedians*—my category escapes me at the moment—everyone fled in mock horror when I batted, allowing me to lumber around the bases for a home run. At radio-show rehearsals the orchestra hissed me realistically, and I leered back. Columnists imaginatively concocted the Karloff cocktail—one sip sent the drinker into shock. Monster fans mailed me such birthday gifts as voodoo dolls.

Not everyone, however, felt enthusiasm for monsterism. Some parent and civic groups felt *Frankenstein* was too horrifying for children to see and should be limited to "adults only." The children thought otherwise. On the very first Halloween after the film's release, a crowd of laughing pint-sized ghosts and goblins rang my doorbell and invited me to join in their trick-or-treat rounds. As I wasn't appropriately costumed, I had to decline. Over the years thousands of children wrote, expressing compassion for the great, weird creature who was so abused by its sadistic keeper that it could only respond to violence with violence. Those children saw beyond the makeup and really understood.

Frankenstein transformed not only my life but also the film industry. It grossed something like \$12,000,000 on a \$250,000 investment, started a cycle of so-called boy-meets-ghoul horror films and quickly made its producers realize they'd made a

"My approval of good, scary fun doesn't extend to shows where blood and guts are sloshed around wholesale . . ."

Karloff dreadful mistake. They let the monster die in the burning mill. In one brief script conference, however, they brought him back alive. Actually, it seems, he had only fallen through the flaming floor into the mudpond beneath and could now go on for real and real.

The watery opening scene of the sequel, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, was filmed with me wearing a rubber suit under my costume to ward off chill. But air got into the suit. When I was launched into the pond, my legs flew up in the air and I floated there like some sort of obese water lily while I, and everyone else, hooted with laughter. They finally fished me out with a boat hook and deflated me.

In March, 1933, I returned to England. My two eldest brothers, Ted and Fred, had retired from Indian Civil Service and were living in London. Jack had been transferred from China to take charge of Far East affairs in the Foreign Office.

A little later I got a surprising reaction from my staid and proper British brothers. Some friends from Hollywood were in London, and before they left for home we gave a sort of joint cocktail party. All went well until a newspaper photographer approached me. "I understand you've some brothers here," he said. "Could we get a photograph or two?"

I was appalled. I thought, *How am I going to break this to them? They won't approve at all.* I got them off in a corner and mumbled, "Awfully sorry about this but, you know, publicity and all that. I swear I'm not responsible for the photographer being here. But, well, to cut it short, they want to take pictures of us. They want us in the next room, lined up against the mantelpiece."

Jockeying for Position

Well, you never saw such a stampede. The three reserved, distinguished elderlies—Ted, who'd been judge of the High Court in Bombay; Fred, who'd administered an entire province in India; and Jack, who'd been chief magistrate of the Consular Court in Shanghai—all but got stuck in the door getting through. And there was quite a to-do about who was to stand where. I fought to keep my composure, but inwardly I was laughing.

Returning to Hollywood, I played the monster in *Son of Frankenstein*—my third and last such role. Others perpetuated him in later films. In a switch, I twice took the part of Doctor Frankenstein myself and found it comfortable to be less loathed with makeup.

Next I became a succession of crazed scientists. The formula was successful, if not original. The scientist would set out to save mankind. His project would sour and he with it. In the end he'd have to be destroyed regretfully, like a faithful old dog gone mad. The scriptwriters had the insane scientist transplant brains, hearts, lungs and other vital organs, the pellets and when they run out of parts of anatomy that could be photographed decently. While it lasted I:

- Robbed graves in *The Body Snatcher*.
- Slew with an ax as the leering executioner Mord, in *Tower of London*.

- Frightened my enemies to death in *The Walking Dead*.

I also:

- Cheated the hangman in *The Man They Could Not Hang*.
- Invoked the curse of the Pharaohs as a vengeful mummy in *The Mummy*.
- Aggravated the hell of eighteenth-century prison life as the warped warden in *Bedlam*.
- Ruthlessly pushed dope to little Jackie Cooper as a dope peddler in *Young Donovan's Kid*.

I must confess that I didn't accept this constant and continual madness quite placidly myself. Once, during the crazed-scientist cycle, I said wearily to the producer: "These things are all right, but

Lindsay and Crouse offered me the part of Jonathan in the Broadway production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Keep in mind, I'd never acted on Broadway, but only in the sticks, or in films. What really sold me on taking the part was a line of Jonathan's in his first scene. He'd just murdered a kindly motorist. Another character says, "He was a nice chap, that man who gave us a lift. You shouldn't have killed him. Why did you do it?" And Jonathan replies, "He said I looked like Boris Karloff."

I expected that a line like that, spoofing me so early in the play, would disarm any New York audience. Then I began wondering: Would it? Could I put over a big stage role? By the time I arrived in New

York, I've got to get out of your play. Do I owe you anything?"

I walked some more and thought, *If I do that, honest though it is, I've certainly had it in New York and haven't done myself an awful lot of good in Hollywood either. Somehow I've got to go through this.*

At 5:30 A.M. I returned to my hotel, catnapped briefly, then went to rehearsal. I'd always stuck on the word "Come" in my first line. Now I walked on, took a deep breath and said, "Come in, doctor."

Not a stutter. By that evening all was OK. The show's reviews were better than ever. It was a big, beautiful hit, and we settled down for a long, happy run of about 1400 Broadway performances.

Later I played Captain Hook, the villain with the wicked, steel-hooked arm, to Jean Arthur's *Peter Pan* on Broadway. At the end of the first act at matinees, we'd peek from behind the curtain and watch the kiddies leaping hopefully off their seats, trying to fly like Peter Pan. After the show I'd corral as many as my dressing room would hold and ask, "Would you like to try on my hook?" Even little blond angels would reply, "Yes, sir."

They'd turn to the mirror, put on the most terrible face they could make and, without fail, take a terrific swipe at themselves in the glass. Far from being frightened by the villainous Captain Hook, they had caught on to his fun and pomposity. For it is a fundamental instinct of kids to play games, and they knew very well that the swordplay, the ominous crocodile, the poisoning of Peter Pan and all the assorted stage violence was just a game—just good, scary fun.

Villain by profession though I may be, however, I must say that my approval of good scary fun does not extend to shows where blood and guts are sloshed about wholesale, simply to create nightmares.

A Black Sheep No More

Nowadays I find time to play occasional light comedy in Milquetoast roles, to give syndicated radio advice to parents on child rearing and even to make phonograph recordings of childhood favorites such as *Mother Goose* and *The Reluctant Dragon*. Occasionally someone asks me if I regret my years as a monster, if the role hasn't been like an albatross around my neck.

Rubbish! Thanks to the monster, I've worked steadily at the work I love best. And I've been well paid—in more ways than with money. Here I am, 75 years old with this month, no longer the black sheep of the Pratt family, still hard at work, still enjoying life to the fullest with my wife Evie. I commute some 12,000 miles between my old stamping grounds in England and this country. But I must admit one unfulfilled longing. I would love to be in a play in London.

The only time I ever trod the boards there was in a benefit for the Actors' Orphanage, doing a comedy sketch with Hermine Givold. Even so that, I was absolutely thrilled. But if I never get to do the "real" thing in London, it would be indecent for me to grumble.

After all, I've always been a very happy monster.

don't you think we should perhaps spend a little more in the writing, or change the format?" He was in an expansive mood. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a great chart. "Here," he said, "here's your record. We know exactly how much these pictures are going to make. They cost so much. They earn so much. Even if we spent more on them, they wouldn't make a cent more. So why change them?"

During my most monstrous years, I naturally associated with such aristocrats of Hollywood villainy as Bela Lugosi, Lon Chaney Jr., Peter Lorre and John Carradine. Offscreen I found them to be the gentlest of men.

One of my own most terrified moments came in 1940, when the noted playwrights

York, I was almost shaking from sheer fright. I'd rushed through a hard week at Columbia studios, then taken an all-night flight East. At the theater they handed me a script, and we did something I'd never done in stock or repertory—we sat down, cast and director together, and read cold turkey. I was so tired, and so frightened of my New York role, that I began to stutter—something that always besets me when I'm tired. I rehearsed in stutters for three days, continually thinking that it would cure itself. But instead it grew worse. The third night I wandered the streets of Manhattan wondering what to do. I thought I'd have to walk up to the management and say, "I'm very sorry. I've made a mistake, and so have