

KATE THE GREAT—

# The Gal Who Loves To Be Hated

by F. FRIEDMAN



The face: vivid, freckled.  
The hair: red, wildly electric.

Somewhere in the long and colorful saga of Miss Katharine Hepburn is the tale of the curious journalist who once made a safari to Hartford, Connecticut, to hear Kate say the word *really*.

Did Miss H, the reporter wanted to know, really pronounce it "rally," as her detractors said? Or was it more like "rilly," or even "relly?"

A simple quest, had it involved the average or garden variety of movie star.

But Miss Hepburn is not the average movie star. She has been variously described as 1) "Katharine of Arrogance," 2) a "genuine 24-karat left-threaded nut," 3) a dame "who won't let anybody else get a word in sideways," and 4) an actress who, "if she were cast as Little Red Riding Hood, would end up eating the wolf."

Knowing this, the reporter was prepared to toss his query at Miss Hepburn, then jump 10 feet back to await the explosion.

Instead of fireworks, the unpredictable Hepburn, reeking with charm, admitted the reporter to the family's big brick house and invited him to join her in front of the living room fireplace. Clad in blue slacks and a sweater she didn't rally say rally, but something in between rilly and relly. Half sadly, she went on to tell how she had scandalized Hartford with some daredevil bicycle riding.

"I like to wear old white shorts," said Katie. "The trouble is when they get a little dirty they look almost flesh color. I've got an English racing bike and I get my hands way down on the bars and my bottom way up on the seat. Then I go like mad.

"People," Kate went on, "saw my bottom way up there on the seat, and from where they were looking, I guess they thought I had absolutely nothing on! You know, it's hard for anybody to look refined and respectable when your head is lower than your bottom."

What she didn't say was that, all through her life, Katharine Hepburn has pedaled like mad, head [Please turn to page 62]

Old friend Spencer Tracy is accustomed to the odd postures and personality foibles of his co-star Katie.



## Katharine Hepburn

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down and bottom up. From the time she was a child, those observing her have inevitably said, "What the hell is that?"

It is perhaps no more than could be expected.

Katie herself is characteristically honest about it. "I strike people as peculiar in some way," she admits, "although I don't quite understand why. Of course, I have an angular face, an angular body and I suppose an angular personality which jabs into people."

"Throw a hat at her," an enemy once said, "and wherever it hits it will hang."

She and the late Humphrey Bogart, with whom she made *The African Queen*, were two of a kind. As Bogey once said, "If you ever find a genuine eccentric, don't lose him. An honest screwball is more fun than a houseful of squares."

Bogey, it must be said, was truly fond of the eccentric Miss Hepburn, and today his widow, Lauren Bacall, is probably Katie's best friend. But Bogey didn't pull any punches when it came to revealing his adventures with La Hepburn.

"When you meet her for the first time," he commented, "she keeps reiterating what a superior person she is. You wait for the laughs that were promised, but you can't stand the dame. You begin to feel naked without your striped pants. Are you expected to kiss the hem of her skirt—or just fall on your face in the dirt? Even a minor suggestion to Katie could turn into a ringing argument."

"She couldn't sit without propping her slack-clad legs almost as high as her head. She would say 'yab' for yes, sweeten her tea with strawberry jam, shine her freckled face with rubbing alcohol, wouldn't you make-up except on her lips, or wear stockings, and never bothered with jewelry or perfume. 'Plain women know most about men,' she claimed. 'Beautiful ones are too busy being pretty.' Since she works hard trying to look like a crow, a man can only assume she knows."

The truth is, however—and with all due respect to the late, great Bogey—Katharine Hepburn is not quite that easy to pigeon-hole. She has been called a great actress and box-office poison; a good fellow and a temperamental snob. The fact that she affects observers so differently reflects, perhaps, the sharpness and vigor of her personality.

As a child in Hartford, she used to shove her head until she was 10, so that in her daily fights with the neighborhood boys, her playmates would have less of a handhold when they locked in combat.

One day, a catty acquaintance remarked to Mrs. Hepburn that it was a pity Kate was such a frail child. Kate, seeing through the synthetic pity, dashed across the lawn and hurled herself headlong into a tree.

She was spanked regularly until she was 9; then she began using some elementary psychology and figured out a way to stop the spankings: by taking them without crying.

"During her early days in the theater, a fellow actor screamed at her, 'You're a freak of nature—you'll never last!'"

The man who intended to make Kate her first legitimate proposal had to sit on a hill-top with her for three hours while she talked of life, love, art and Katharine Hepburn—and then go away without having had a chance to ask her to marry him.

All her life, she maintains, she has taken as many as five baths a day "to be able to think straight." "Those early icy baths," she says now, "are perhaps directly responsible for my later perversity. They gave me the impression that the bitterer the medicine, the better it was for you. That may be one reason why I came to think that the more insulting the press was, the more it stimulated me."

She has, on occasions, avoided interviews by dodging through washroom windows and down fire escapes, much like her idol, Greta Garbo. Once, in a monumental rage at a photographer who had followed her to her Hartford home, she screamed to her sister to bring out a shotgun. Her contrariness about interviews extends to the point where she demands, and gets, a huge *Closed Set—Absolutely No Visitors* sign hung on the door of every movie stage where she is working. "I won't talk to the press," she says, "because the press wants news, and I have no news for them."

On the other hand, she knows the names, the hobbies and the family antecedents of every crew member on her pictures. She is worshipped by a small clique of friends of all classes and returns the worship with equal fascination. Her charities are many and anonymous. She has been known to tip theater doormen \$20 for one night engagements—"and nobody," said an awed theater press agent, "ever tips doormen \$20."

"Stardom," said a close friend, "didn't make Katie the character she is—she was born that way." What's more, she labors valiantly to maintain the Hepburn legend.

"Miss Hepburn," said the publicist on her latest picture, *Desk Set*, "my name is So-an-So and I'm very happy to know you."

There was a Satanic gleam in Katie's eye as she looked the man up and down. "You won't be happy long," she countered, smiling. "Within a week, I'm going to make you hate me."

Some hard-bitten, star-calloused studio flacks, of course, are unawed by the Hepburn tantrums. One, in particular, says:

"Miss Hepburn doesn't know it, but her idiosyncrasies are tolerated by movie crews, because she provides a better show than any in which she is starred."

"She gave me that 'I'm going to make you hate me' routine, too, when I first met her. 'Is that so?' I said. 'Well, Miss Hepburn, I've got plenty of Miltons.'"

"Another time—she was making *The Rainmaker* then—Hepburn had spent the day really living up to her maxim, 'My daddy taught me never to lose an argument.' She had disagreed with practically everyone—make-up man, hairdresser, wardrobe woman, art director and so on—and she sank into a chair, seemingly exhausted but exhilarated. 'I'll bet,' she gloated, 'I'm the most unco-operative person you ever worked with.' 'No,' I said, 'I once worked with Jean Arthur.'

"Oh," said Katie, a little crushed. "I know, really difficult."

Not even Hal Wallis, producer of *The Rainmaker*, was safe from Katie's half-serious, half-joking tirades. Once, Wallis arrived on the set a moment after Katie and her co-star, Bert Lancaster, had finished a difficult scene. Wallis went into a huddle with director Joe Anthony. Eyeing him, Hepburn barked, "We just did the scene, Mr. Wallis, and we're not going to do it again. If you have any suggestions, kindly arrive before the scene is started, not when it's over."

Wallis, ignoring the barb, grinned and continued his huddle with the director. "Why," persisted Katie, "don't you go back to your office and get on the phone to your friend Anna Magnani in Rome?"

"I'll say this for Anna," offered Wallis, "when she did *The Rose Tattoo* for me, she didn't talk as much as you do."

Katie reflected on this for a moment. "Must be tough," she snapped, "having an actress like me who can talk English!"

Hepburn, it is said, always keeps her guard up, expecting a fight, while staying nice on the surface. She once called this "the usual preliminary before bashing someone over the head." But if no one swings at her, it throws her.

On one occasion, while she was making *Desk Set*, a local columnist managed to get on the set and sat chatting with director Walter Lang and co-star Spencer Tracy. The supposedly unavailable Miss Hepburn watched the trio from a distance, then suddenly darted over and crouched beside them, joining in the pleasantries. The columnist reported later, "It was all our combined efforts could do to get her into a chair. 'I hate sitting down in chairs,' she announced, 'I never do it if I can help it.'"

"Hepburn," chuckled a Fox publicist, "hates being ignored. I ignored her. I knew about her attitude toward magazine interviews; once, very early in her career, she barked at a questioner, 'I can't remember whether I'm married, but I've got five children.' Interestingly enough, as a child Katie used to shovel snow for ten cents an hour and spend it all on movie magazines. Anyway, I'd go on the set and talk with everyone but Hepburn. Maybe she was conscious of this; I don't know. One day, when I was passing on some news to the wardrobe girl, Hepburn edged over. 'Who were you talking about?' she demanded. 'Susan Hayward,' I told her. Katie walked away. She'd lost interest immediately."

Rossano Brazzi, the Italian heartthrob, has spoken glowingly of his weeks in Venice with Katie during the making of *Summertime*. "She is a strange person, but wonderful when you get to know her. As an actress, she is so magnificent that she lifts her co-workers into their finest expression."

When *Summertime* was completed, Katie paid Brazzi the greatest tribute to his acting ability. She insisted that he be co-starred and billed with her over the picture's title.

Another fervid admirer of La Hepburn is brusque Leon Shamroy, the Academy Award-winning cinematographer who filmed *Desk Set*. Shamroy is not a man to bandy compliments with any star; he has seen them at their best and their worst. But Hepburn made his work a delight.

"The easiest star I ever worked with," said

Shamroy, "I can be pretty blunt, and you'd think the two of us would be at each other's throats. But this is a real pro.

"Why, the dame was even enthusiastic in the mornings! Before she came on the set, she'd put in an hour of swimming or tennis. She was in make-up by six-thirty a.m., on stage by eight forty-five, and never late for a call. She's a perfectionist and she expects everyone around to be perfect, too. She didn't like the china the prop man furnished for her apartment in the picture, so she brought in her own china from her house. Said it would look better. She didn't want to bother about choosing her lunch every day, so she ate the same thing for six weeks: a steak, sliced tomatoes, milk and a caramel sundae.

"Sure, I know what they say about her." Shamroy went on. "But I'll tell you something: I gave her a present when we finished the picture. That's what I think of her. Some day she'll be a great director."

There was a time, when Katie first came to Hollywood, when studio admirers were virtually non-existent. Her own agent took one look at her and groaned, "My God, are we sticking RKO fifteen hundred a week for this?"

Her body, someone remarked, suggested a collection of fine bones held together by freckles; her vivid, coffin-like face was topped by red hair pinned any which way.

Broadway felt much the same way about her abilities. Cynical Dorothy Parker helped brush Kate off the stage with the acid comment, "She ran the gamut of emotions from A to B." Producer Joseph Verner Reed thought she might be better at high hurdles than at acting.

Her angularity of mind and body, say friends, comes to her by inheritance. Katie was born November 8, 1909, in Hartford, Connecticut, the second of six children. Her father, Dr. Thomas Norval Hepburn, is a noted urologist and surgeon; her mother was a champion of women's suffrage and other feminine causes. Mrs. Hepburn actually picketed the White House and made speeches on street corners. Young Kate was often beside her, handing out leaflets.

Katie was educated in Hartford, largely by private tutors. Later, she entered Bryn Mawr, her mother's Alma Mater. Bryn Mawr has high scholastic standards, and Kate at first very nearly flunked out. Then she discovered that if she wanted to act in college plays she would have to get high grades. Kate got them. She also spent half her time living like a hermit (she was a difficult, mixed-up child), and the other half making a public show of herself. Once, she took a bath in the school library fountain and rolled herself dry on the grass.

Some maintain that the arrogance and rudeness which she showed during her rise to stardom may be traced straight back to a terrible Easter morning in her childhood. Kate was 12 years old when her adored brother, Tom, three years older than she, was found hanging in the attic at the home of a friend. Kate actually cut down his body. To this day, no one in the family knows what happened, for Tom was a healthy, happy, popular boy.

Whether it was suicide or accident was a wholly academic question to young Kate Hepburn. "Her mind," said a close observer of that period, "could entertain only one

thought: her adored brother was dead. The shock left her so hypersensitive that she mistrusted and rejected the sympathy of her friends. Imagining that she was being put on the defensive, she undertook a savage offensive. This kind of attitude became a habit. It discolored her character."

Certainly young Kate Hepburn pursued the theater with an intensity and conviction her fellow actors had seldom seen. As soon as she got her diploma at Bryn Mawr (her official biography claims she has a doctorate in psychology), she went to Baltimore and applied for a job in a stock company there. Producer Edwin H. Knopf hired her—despite slippers, blue jeans, floppy sweater, stringy hair, freckles and shiny nose. It was easier than arguing with her!

When Hollywood beckoned, she asked for—and got—\$1,500 a week. She was making \$79.50 on Broadway. The effect of this \$1,420.50 raise was exactly what might have been expected of someone like Katie. She approached Hollywood with an ingrained notion that the place was vulgar and flabby-minded.

Kate's work in many of her early films was conceded to be good; she won an Academy Award for *Morning Glory*, and her Jo in *Little Women* was so moving that Tallulah Bankhead knelt to congratulate her. But she was not popular among her associates. Director George Cukor describes Katie's early attitude toward Hollywood as "subcollegiate idiotic." Newspaper reporters found her impossible and she seemed to go out of her way to insult everyone in sight. She wore baggy sweaters and patched blue dungarees (scandalous attire in those days). She reputedly read her mail sitting on the curb outside the studio.

Photographs of Katie taken in her early Hollywood days show her as a strikingly beautiful woman, with long red hair, green eyes, the Hepburn high cheekbones and a sensitive, sensuous mouth. "She has," wrote a critic, "intelligence, breeding, fire, a voice which in its emotional scenes can be satin, a body a ballerina might envy. . . . There is a grace about her very awkwardness.

Yet with all this, Miss Katharine Hepburn was not considered sexy enough for the starring role in *Gone With the Wind*. She begged David Selznick to let her play the lead. "The part was practically written for me," she said. "I am Scarlett O'Hara."

Selznick shook his head. "I just can't imagine Clark Gable chasing you for ten years."

Kate was furious. "I may not appeal to you, David," she shouted, "but there are men with different tastes!"

As indeed there were. Her early marriage to Philadelphia socialite Ludlow Ogden Smith—she was married at 19—lasted some six years. Reports have it that her husband, realizing the impossibility of asking Kate Hepburn to take on a commonplace name like Smith, actually changed his to Ogden Ludlow. This, however, did not help. The divorce, attributed to career problems, was more than amicable; Mr. Smith, or rather Mr. Ludlow, remained a good friend of Kate's and the Hepburns, and was usually referred to as "our dear, sweet ex."

There were other romances. One was with producer Leland Hayward, and Katie is said

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to have tried hard to improve both his reading and his tennis. Another was with playwright-director Garson Kanin, who was reported to have spent some \$700 in one week phoning Kate in Florida. There was also the friendship with multi-millionaire movie-and-aviation tycoon Howard Hughes, who was richer, taller and better at golf than Katie. He gave her business advice and followed her around in his plane, but though Katie was very much in love, the romance faded.

For some 15 years, however, the great, untold love story in Katharine Hepburn's life has involved a man who is not free to marry her—Spencer Tracy. The two first met on the set of *Woman of the Year*. The screenplay was one that Kate personally sold for the writers, Michael Kanin and Ring Lardner, Jr., to MGM for \$110,000. It also included her own services—for another \$100,000—and the proviso that Spencer Tracy be her co-star.

Katie at that time knew of Tracy only by reputation. When they came together for their first rehearsals, Kate said coolly, "I'm afraid I'm a little tall for you, Mr. Tracy." He replied, "Don't worry, Miss Hepburn, I'll cut you down to my size."

In spite of these tough words, so the story goes, both spent the first few days carefully observing each other's films—Kate in one projection room, Tracy in another. When actual shooting started on the picture, producer Joe Mankiewicz had a problem facing him. Katie's customary nasal delivery was curiously soft and mumbled; the Tracy toughness was oddly polished. "There they were," says Mankiewicz, "imitating each other." They made eight films together.

They also became fast friends.

"A strange, desperate and beautiful love story" is the way the friendship of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy has been described. Tracy had long been separated from his wife, when he met and fell in love with Katie. His marriage, as such, was over. His life, as a friend said, was his own to live. Kate, too, was a free soul, with no ties or obligations. But divorce for Tracy is out of the question.

It takes great courage, great fervor for a woman to go on loving for so many years,

knowing that the one man she wants cannot marry her. Katharine Hepburn has that courage. There were times when she made sure she would be away from Hollywood and Tracy. She accepted a starring role on the Broadway stage and was a smashing and lonely success.

Kate and Tracy at no time made their love a clandestine affair. People on the set, when the two work together, are aware of the drama involved; there is no comment about it.

Watching Kate and Tracy as they worked in *Desk Set*. A close observer was struck by the ease with which the two treated each other. They were, so far as he could see, merely old and good friends. "Kate was often in Tracy's dressing room; Spence was frequently in hers," said a production assistant. "The doors were open, always. If Kate bobbed a bit of dialogue, Tracy would slap his script down in mock anger, saying, 'Katie, you fluffed that line.' It was Tracy, too, who commented kiddingly, 'Working with Hepburn is like being involved in an automobile accident.'"

On the set the two ribbed each other almost without a stop. "I'm just wondering," Tracy told Kate one day, "if you won't get another Oscar nomination next year."

"Never!" Katie retorted. "I can't expect as much as a mention in any picture I do with you."

"Well, have it your own way," Tracy grinned. "I was going to say something nice."

"For a change, you mean," said Katie.

Today, Miss Hepburn is probably the last of the rugged individualists. Her curiosity is insatiable.

Whenever she goes to a new city, she must examine everything from museums to maternity wards. She still loves Africa and wants to go back. The first time she was there, for *The African Queen*, she stalked through the jungle with her shirttail flapping from her jeans, wringing her hands in ecstasy and twittering, "What divine natives! What divine morning glories!" And she immediately began searching for a bamboo forest because she wanted to know what it would feel like to sit in the middle of one.

There are several homes she uses, but when on the Coast she lives in the old John

Barrymore house—"one of the greatest places I ever saw," as Greta Garbo said. It is a big, secluded Charles Addams-type house on a mountain in Beverly Hills, and Katie occupies it with her long-time secretary, Phyllis Wilborn. For a while, Kate had a maid, but now she and Miss Wilborn do the scrubbing up.

Week ends, she visits Ethel Barrymore in nearby Palos Verde, drops in on Lauren Bacall to take the two Bogart children out for a romp, perhaps sees her friend, actress Vanessa Brown, or goes over to director George Cukor's house. Beyond that, Kate has little social life. Even though nominated for *The Rainmaker*, she declined to attend the Academy Awards. She claims she seldom goes out to eat. "I get indigestion and have to lie down after eating restaurant food."

She drives either a rented Thunderbird or her old '42 Ford that was given to her as a gift by writers Michael Kanin and Ring Lardner, Jr., after she sold *Woman of the Year* for them.

Certainly, she has every reason to feel that she has made a success of her life. She has been a top star for more than 20 years.

True, her roles must be fitted with a tape measure to the Hepburn personality. ("I'm always playing freaks—but happy freaks.") When she is out of the Hepburn character, she is pretty awful, as she was in *The Iron Petticoat*. But in character—in a story that fits her curious talents—nobody is her equal.

By her own estimate, Kate has earned over \$3,500,000. For *Desk Set*, she was paid around \$150,000 plus a percentage of the film. Most of the money goes straight back to Hartford, where Dr. Hepburn, now over 70, takes time off from his medical practice to manage Kate's nest egg.

But whether his daughter is truly and honestly happy, that is something else again. Perhaps, as one cynic conjectured, Katie's day actually begins with her gazing at herself in the glass, while intoning, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall; who is the most difficult of them all?"

Then again, perhaps her contrariness is just part of an attention-getting game.

No one, of course, except Katharine Hepburn, will ever know. ●