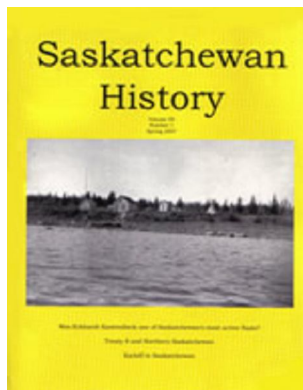


Karloff in Saskatchewan

Author's note:

This article describes Karloff's time with the Jeanne Russell Players in Saskatchewan in 1912. Like my article *Boris Karloff in Alberta* the piece reveals much that is new about Karloff and his stage work. This article also reveals, for the first time anywhere, details about Karloff's personal life that contradict information given by all previous Karloff biographers, and even Karloff himself!



Aside from the correction of three minor spelling mistakes,¹ and some new data I have unearthed on Karloff's first wife, Grace Harding, the article that follows is the same as that which originally appeared in the Spring 2007 edition of *Saskatchewan History* (Vol. 59, Number 1).

Please note, however, that this version of my article *does not* include the extensive references and endnotes. These are available in the original magazine, which can be purchased at www.saskarchives.com/web/history-subscriptions.html

Please support *Saskatchewan History* magazine by purchasing a copy.

Thank you.

Regards,

Stephen Jacobs



¹ *Burmester* in place of *Burmaster*, *Rossland* instead of *Crossland*, and *Crosman* instead of *Crossman*.

Karloff in Saskatchewan

by Stephen Jacobs

On the 17th May 1909 a twenty-one year old Englishman, William Henry Pratt, arrived in Canada. Within a quarter of a century people around the world would know this man by his adopted name - Boris Karloff. Yet when Billy, as he was known, disembarked from the liner 'The Empress of Britain' in Montreal his initial intentions were far removed from the bright lights of Hollywood.

The early years

Billy was born on the 23rd November 1887 at the family home in Camberwell, South London. His father, 61-year-old Edward John Pratt, was a retired 'Assistant Collector of Salt Revenue' from the Indian Civil Service in Bombay. In 1864 Edward, then aged 38, married 16-year-old Eliza Millard. By the time the couple had returned to England in 1879, Eliza had presented her husband with six sons and a daughter. A seventh son, Richard, was born in London in 1882 and was followed by Billy five years later. Despite the birth of another baby Edward and Eliza's marriage had reached the end of the road. It was never a happy union and in 1888, after twenty-four years of marriage and nine children, they parted company.

Karloff later stated he lost both parents when he was young. "Both my parents died during my childhood," he said. "I was reared by one amiable stepsister and seven stern older brothers, who knew exactly what I was to be - a government servant in the family tradition." It was a claim he made several times in interviews, one that has been repeated by journalists and biographers ever since. However, this statement is untrue. Both of Karloff's parents were, in fact, alive throughout his early years. The 1901 census records his mother Eliza (aged 52), her sons George (33), Richard (18) and William (13), Eliza's nephew, Havelock J. Millard (20), and the family servants, the cook, Rosetta E. Brightman (18) and, presumably, her sister the housemaid, Eliza J. Brightman (16) as being in residence at 38 Uplands Park Road, Enfield on the 31st March of that year.

Billy's father, Edward, passed away later that year. On the 28th October 1901 he made his will at St. Thomas's Home, part of St. Thomas's Hospital in Lambeth, South London. He died two days later, aged 75. He left no provision for his family from his sizeable estate.

Growing up in a fatherless environment, Billy was spoiled by his mother. Yet being the baby of the family had its drawbacks. "[M]y brothers were always keeping me in my place," he recalled, "or what they considered was my place." It was intended that Billy would follow his father and brothers into Government Service but Billy's interest lay with the theatre.

His enthusiasm for acting had already taken him onstage. For two nights each Christmas a parish play, or pantomime, was produced at St. Magdalene's Church Hall in Enfield. On one of the nights the 'Band of Hope', a temperance organisation for working-class children, put on an entertainment. At Christmas 1896, at the age of nine, Billy made his acting debut appearing in one of the plays - a version of *Cinderella*. "Instead of playing the handsome prince, I donned black tights and a skullcap and rallied the forces of evil as the Demon King," he recalled. "From then on I resolved to be an actor."

The family had already produced one actor in George. Although his theatrical career had not been too successful George was to prove an influence on Billy, as his childhood friend Mrs. Noel Horsey (née Hearn) recalled, "He worshipped his brother George, who was the only one who was good to him. George was an actor. I expect possibly that's why Billy always wanted to be one." Of this brotherly influence Karloff said, "His dramatic experience was really no encouragement for me. Despite the fact that George was an extraordinarily handsome man, he never went very far on the stage, which was the reason he gave it up for a city job. But I tried to emulate him." Sadly, on 23rd January 1904 George died from double lobar pneumonia. He was thirty-six years old. When Billy's mother died on the 15th December 1906 his future was left in the hands of his siblings.

The toss of a coin

Even after an unimpressive academic career, his brothers' expectations for a career in the consular service career remained. "After I left school I went to a crammer in London," Karloff explained. "I was supposed to be reading for the exams, instead of which I haunted the galleries of all the theatres of that time." The time at King's College, in which he specialised in Chinese customs and languages, proved fruitless. "[T]he first-term reports amply reflected the fact that I had attended more plays than classes," he said. "I was, in fact, fast becoming a disgrace to the family name."

An opportunity to escape came when Billy turned twenty-one. An indenture provided him with £100 from his mother's estate. When Billy collected the money he had already determined to leave the country. "The family had been informed that I intended to leave home," Karloff said. "I felt I had to get away and work things out on my own." He limited his choice to two destinations but, unable to decide, trusted to chance. "I tossed a coin as to whether I should go to Canada or Australia... with the idea of being an actor in shows, and I knew nothing about it." The "unfortunate losers" were the Canadians. "[J]ust about that time the Canadian Government was sending out an appeal for immigrants," Karloff explained. "I had no idea what Canada was like. It was all a fantastic and frightfully exciting adventure."

A second-class passage was arranged and Billy left home, bound for Liverpool, on the first leg of his journey. His departure was surprisingly easy, as he recalled. "Fortunately, there were no brothers at home at the actual time of my departure. I don't remember that any obstacles were placed in my way or that I had to overcome any great difficulties."

Alone at Liverpool Billy boarded his ship, the liner 'The Empress of Britain' and on the 7th May 1909, set sail bound for Canada. He was finally free from his nagging brothers and they, equally, were free of him. "I imagine," he said, "that when I got on the ship, brotherly sighs of relief could be heard in various far-flung British outposts. There was no weeping and no distress. I was on my way. To what, I didn't exactly know."

A life on the soil

Before leaving England Billy had arranged for employment in Canada as a farmer. He was told that when he reached the Canada Company's Toronto office he would be given his assignment. "There were some plans to go on to a farm in Ontario to learn farming," he said, "then to buy some virgin land and develop it by myself." The Toronto office directed him to a farm in Hamilton, Ontario owned by an Irishman, Mr. Terrance O'Reilly. On arrival, however,

he found things had not gone to plan. "I arrived all smiles and blushes - but the fellow had never heard of me, wasn't expecting anybody, didn't want anybody. Farmer O'Reilly and I just looked at each other - I had only pennies left, no way to get back to Toronto. Thank God it was spring and work on the farm was beginning. O'Reilly finally said, 'All right, you can stay.' I stayed three months at ten dollars a month - and what a rough ride! O'Reilly would get me out of bed with a pitchfork at four in the morning to catch the horses in the fields and bring them in. I'd never known a horse personally before and knew nothing about them... I soon learned."

When Billy left O'Reilly's farm he made his way westward. "Banff appealed to me, but it was no use as a place to find a job," he later said. "So I went on to Vancouver. With exactly a pound to my name, I arrived in this delightfully situated metropolis of the west and began to look for employment." All he found was disappointment. "There wasn't a hope of stage work," he recalled. "There was little doing in the theatre at that time and, in any case, managers were not interested in gangling youths with no experience. The dire necessity of eating was soon apparent." Billy took what work he could. "Men were wanted to dig a race track and a fair ground," he said, "and the pay was one and threepence an hour."

A chance encounter allowed Billy to put aside the pick and shovel, albeit temporarily. "Walking on the street one day, Hugh Arthur, a friend of a brother of mine in China, spotted me," he said. "There was a boom in land at the time. He suggested that I should become a real estate salesman." Billy took the advice and was employed as a broker with 'Ward, Burmester, and von Graevenitz'.

Wedding bells

It was during his time with the company that Billy met Jessie Grace Harding. Grace, as she was known, was, like Billy, born in England. In fact, she was born on the 16th December 1885 at 'Hill View', Birdhurst Rise in Croydon, Surrey - a mere seven miles from Billy's birthplace in Camberwell. Perhaps this common thread first drew the two together. Grace's parents, Harry Laurie (a chartered accountant) and Mary Jessie Maria Harding (née Dallimore), had married in Kingston, England early in 1885 and later emigrated, with Grace, to New Zealand. Around 1904 the Harding's moved again, this time relocating to Canada and, two years later, they settled in British Columbia. It is not known how Billy met Grace or for how long they were courting but on the 23rd February 1910 22-year-old William Henry Pratt wed 23-year-old Grace Jessie Harding in Vancouver's Holy Rosary Cathedral.

Along with a new wife came new responsibilities. Unfortunately the broker job was not as productive as Billy had wished. "Little better than a glorified office boy, I made some money and gave Hugh £2 occasionally towards buying a lot for me," Billy recalled. "This did not work so successfully and, when there were no immediate returns, I shovelled coal and did some more ditch-digging. It was less of a hardship this time. Youth soon gets used to work, no matter how rigorous it may be."

While in the metropolis, Billy received an interesting business proposition. "Probably one of the greatest things that happened for me was in Vancouver when I was 22 years old," he later said. "Someone offered me a half interest in a goldmine for £100. I had the money. I asked the advice of a banker friend. He said, 'No.' That mine was subsequently sold for £3,000,000. But imagine what would have happened to me. It would have ruined me."

Fortune did, however, occasionally smile on Billy. "Late in December, 1910, I called at the Hotel Vancouver for some reason," he explained. "A man passed through the lobby. His face seemed distinctly familiar to me. Upon inquiry, I found he was my brother, John, on his way from China to London. Sportingly he loaned me £20, enough to keep me going for a while in my planned attempts to get on the stage."

So far Billy's work experience had extended only to manual labour and office work. Despite this, and regardless of his newly married status, his theatrical ambitions remained undiminished. "For months, I had made overtures to three Vancouver stock companies," he said. "There didn't seem a chance, not even a faint hope, of becoming an assistant to the assistant stage manager." Then one day while looking through an old copy of *The Billboard* Billy noticed an advertisement for a theatrical agent in Seattle. "His name was [Walter] Kelly. I went to see 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."

An inauspicious beginning

While despondent at his lack of success Billy saw an advertisement in a newspaper. A stock company, the Jeanne Russell Players, were looking for a character actor. He applied for the job using the name 'Boris Karloff.' "I cast around for a name because I felt the name Pratt was not the best stage name one could choose," he explained. "I remembered the name Karloff, which was on my mother's side, though so far back it didn't make any sense. I took the Boris out of the air, put them together, and I must say the combination has been extraordinarily lucky for me."

Two months after the trip to Seattle Billy was working once more for the B. C. Electric, surveying at Lilloet Lake, when he received word from Walter Kelly. "A letter from him arrived... telling me that I had been engaged to join the company at Kamloops at the princely salary of £6 a week." Karloff left without hesitation. "I left my axe in the air, practically, and hot-footed it down to Kamloops and joined this little company," he said, "and that was the beginning of my so-called theatrical career in western Canada" It is likely that Karloff 'hot-footed' alone, leaving his wife in Vancouver.

The Jeanne Russell Stock Company had been in existence since around 1908 and although Karloff later joked the troupe "had such a bad reputation that nobody would join it. That's why they sent for me" they were, in fact, well respected.

The company had regularly played at Edmonton's Dominion Theatre, which was managed by Russell's brother-in-law, Lee Brandon. The company was directed by Jeanne Russell's husband (and Lee's brother), Ray F. Brandon, who also appeared as its leading man. Their repertoire included *The Galley Slave, Paid in Full, The Squaw Man* and *The Young Mrs. Winthrop*.

With no professional acting experience Karloff arrived in the city of Kamloops "feeling no slight trepidation at the prospect of my first professional stage work. I hadn't the foggiest idea of how to take stage direction. Rehearsal routine and make-up were both completely foreign to me." Although Karloff joined the troupe in Kamloops he did not tread the boards there. "They were rehearsing new plays for the new season," he later wrote, "and all I had to do for the few days I was there before we moved on to the next town was to watch the re-

hearsals. And thank God that WAS all as I was a green amateur and I didn't know right from left so far as the stage was concerned."

Boris Karloff's first professional appearance with the Players was in the role of 'Hoffman', the sixty-year-old banker in Ferenc Molnar's play *The Devil*. Although he had bluffed his way into the troupe his performance betrayed his lack of experience. "I had finally become an actor, but I mumbled, bumbled, missed cues, rammed into furniture and sent the director's blood pressure soaring," he admitted. "When the curtain went up, I was getting thirty dollars a week. When it descended, I was down to fifteen dollars."

Karloff had, however, ample opportunity to learn his new craft. The troupe travelled through western Canada playing in towns and cities such as Grand Forks, Rossland, Nelson, Cranbrook, Fernie and Calgary. Their 1912 season of plays included *The Man From Home*, *The Little Minister*, *The American Girl*, the Irish comedy *Cousin Kate*, Ouida's *Moths*, Harry D. Cottrell's play *The Halfbreed*, *A Texas Ranger*, *The Devil*, *Jesse James*, and *Emanuella*.

The troupe, which included Jeanne Russell, Ray F. Brandon, Margaret Beaton, Irving Cook, Donald Gray, Frank Burton, G. C. Garretts, and Karloff, would take accommodation in the towns hotels or, more commonly, in its rooming houses where they were forced to live as best as they could. "Karloff was a profound student on this subject," Samuel Grafton later wrote. "A stock-company actor had to learn to fry an egg on the bottom of an electric iron, propped up on his hotel room floor between the bedpost and the Gideon Bible. (No butter was used, because that would have made the egg slide off; and one had to keep jiggling the iron.) Canned soup, always mulligatawny, because it had meat in it, was cooked in a dresser drawer over a canned-heat fire. New suits were selected from uncalled-for garments at cleaning establishments at a standard price of \$5. Since the cast pressed their own clothes, a man's electric iron, which also served as his egg cooker, was his most precious possession, thoughtfully bought and fiercely guarded. "If you were going to be in a small town for any length of time and needed a boarding house," says Karloff, "you enquired around as to where the local schoolteachers stayed and asked for lodging there. You could be sure the place would be very cheap and very clean."

On stage in Regina

By April 1912 the company had arrived in Saskatchewan's capital city Regina where they were booked to play the 800 seat Regina Theatre on 12th Avenue and Hamilton Street. The troupe took to the stage for the first time in the city with a presentation of the comedy drama *The American Girl* on Monday 1st April. The story, the *Regina Leader* informed its readers, ran thus:

[A] young Southern girl meets and falls in love with a young English artist, who is living in the vicinity of her mountain home. They are secretly married and shortly after the wedding he is called to England by the illness of his brother. While he is away a former suitor of the girl obtains possession of a mortgage on the farm where she and her mother live. He forces them from their home and they take refuge in the city. The husband returns from England but cannot find his bride. After years of searching he returns home mourning her as dead. Twelve years elapse when by chance they meet in London."

The play and its performance, however, did not meet with the newspaper's theatrical reviewer who later commented that 'the insipid melodrama... with its idiotic plot and amateurish lines without doubt prejudiced many of the audience against the company, but the error of including such rubbish in the repertoire was undoubtedly righted to a large extent by the rather clever bill of last evening.'" This second production, Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson's satirical comedy *The Man From Home*, was, the reviewer wrote, 'so distinct an improvement on that of the night before... that one should never have known without glancing at the programme that it was the same company which was playing it."

Tarkington and Wilson's comedy told the story of an American girl:

... who becomes enamoured of a worthless young English nobleman. Her ward, a young American, "The Man From Home," rescues her by showing her how false are her ideals and she eventually turns to him. A scheming English earl and a countess of like character, together with a Russian arch-duke and some others, assist the plot to its foregone conclusion.

... The title part is taken by Ray F. Brandon, and is fairly well handled... Miss Jeanne Russell is also good in the part of the girl... The role is not a brilliant one, but Miss Russell does as well as possible with it...

It would be impossible to say how truly Boris Karloff presented the character of a philanthropic Russian grand duke [Vasili Vasilivitch] - the species being up to the present unknown. He appeared quite convincing, however, and the character was pleasing if not familiar."

Although the reviewer praised the production in general, one aspect of the evening's entertainment proved irksome. "One thing with which the company might well dispense is the so-called vaudeville between acts," he wrote. "It spoils the theme of the play, and further, is distasteful to those who are yet forced to sit and listen. More than that, it cheapens the quality of the company as a whole. This, however, in no way refers to the singing of G. D. Gray, who could not be classed as a "vaudeville singer". He is well-known in this city as the finest baritone who ever made Regina his temporary home. He also has the good taste to choose songs universally known and liked. "Thora" and "Three for Jack" were those he chose for last evening. Mr Gray was a one-time resident of this city, and his excellent voice is still remembered by many." The following evening the company presented the Irish comedy *Cousin Kate*.

Arrival in Saskatoon

In mid April the company arrived in the city of Saskatoon. The *Daily Phoenix* announced:

Canada's representative stock organisation, the Jeanne Russell company, will be the attraction at the Empire theatre [for] three nights starting Thursday, April 18th. The opening play will be Booth Tarkington's and Harry Leon Wilson's clever satirical comedy, "The Man from Home." This play, founded upon the prevailing tendency of American heiresses to marry titled foreigners, has enjoyed a popularity both in the United States and England that has never been surpassed.

It is picturesque, appealing in theme, and delightful in action. The

scenes are all laid in the grounds of the fashionable hotel Regina, Margireta, near the city of Sorrento, [sic] Italy. The two leading characters, Daniel Voorhees Pike, the "Man from Home," and Ethel Granger Simpson, the heiress in search of a title, both hail from Kokomo, Indiana, U.S.A. The other characters in the piece are either Italian, French, English or Russian. The Grand Duke of Russia plays an important part in the telling of the story...

Within days of this announcement a tragic story was filling the newspapers. On the 15th April the 'unsinkable' R.M.S. Titanic struck an iceberg on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York and sank in the cold Atlantic with the loss of 1,523 lives.

On the 18th April the Jeanne Russell Players took to the stage in Saskatoon. According to *The Daily Star*, the performance of *The Man From Home* attracted "a fairly large audience, and the show was one of an enjoyable character. The opening act was not so well done as it might have been, but as the play progressed the work of the company improved. Mr Ray F. Brandon has many admirers in Saskatoon, and in the role of a hard-headed, although romantic, Yankee, he was seen to great advantage. Miss Jean [sic] Russell possesses considerable talent and her interpretation of the role of the young lady who was determined to marry a title no matter what it might cost her in the way of money she was spirited and attractive. Mr. Boris Karloff, as the Russian grand duke, proved himself a capable artiste..." *The Daily Phoenix* wrote:

Ray F. Brandon's friends were glad to see him again last night though he was hardly to be recognized in his Indiana slicker and accent. He was "the man from home" who had journeyed to Sorrento to save his ward from marrying a title at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars in stage money. A real monkey-wrench and a more or less saleable motor car had a part among the stage settings, the car furnishing a splendid hiding place for the escaped Russian insurgent... Miss Russell was the American girl who would be a countess even though the title was costing as much as a whole street in Sorrento was worth. In the early acts her ruling passion leaves no room to be civil to D. V. Pike, the man from home while Mr. Pike in turn does not waste many endearments upon the duke his ward is buying. Mr Karloff gave a good portrayal of the Russian nobleman and Mr. Cook was quite admirable as the smartly dressed American. Between acts were vaudeville stunts. Among the best of them were two songs "Italian Love" and "Which would you rather, a grand baby or a baby grand" sung by a young lady act in Venetian red costume.

The following night the company staged J. M. Barrie's comedy *The Little Minister* and on Saturday 20th April the company presented a matinee and evening performance of Molnar's *The Devil*.

On Monday the *Daily Phoenix* headlines ran: "INVESTIGATION INTO TITANIC DISASTER ADJOURNED TO MEET IN WASHINGTON." Inside, the paper announced a performance of *A Texas Ranger*, to be staged that night by the Jeanne Russell Players. The review appeared the following day:

A full house got round to the Empire last night to see the Texas

Ranger range and to watch how cowboys make love and war with the accents on the war. Ray F. Brandon was the hero of this play of the plains, who graduated from ranching to being a mine owner. Miss Jeanne Russell played leads for the ladies. Her role got her into a mock marriage from which she gets rescued in the last act at which point also the villain dies a melodramatic death. Frank Burton was seen as the comedy purveyor, Dalrymple. Donald Gray had a slim part but made up for that by singing between acts. "America Girl," will be the play presented tonight by Mr. Brandon and his company.

The *Saskatoon Daily Star* commented, "[*The American Girl*] gives Miss Russell the best chance that she has been afforded since the company came here. Ray F. Brandon will appear as a theatrical manager, a part in which he stars. The balance of the company will be cast to the best advantage and a special scenic production has been prepared." On Wednesday, the Players presented *The Squaw Man* and followed this, the following evening, with *Jesse James*. We cannot know how these plays fared in Saskatoon as, unfortunately, none of the local newspapers ran reviews for these one-night productions. The next night the company staged *Emanuella*, as the *Daily Phoenix* announced:

It is not often that an absolutely new play is seen in Saskatoon, but Miss Jeanne Russell will appear tonight at the Empire in the title role of "Emanuella," a three-act farce written especially for her by Helene Ripley [sic], whose stage name is Margot Beaton. Miss Russell determined to make it part of her repertoire in order to test its power with critics and public. The verdict of both has been so encouraging that she has determined to make it her only vehicle next season, opening for a run in Chicago, before touring the United States and Canada... The weak point in the play is the name. It seems to indicate a religious subject. In spite of Shakespeare, there is everything in a name. Can you suggest a good name for this farce? A prize [sic] of \$10 will be given for the best name suggested. Study the situations carefully tonight and present your suggestion at the box office before five o'clock tomorrow evening, at the end of the third act of "The Halfbreed" which is Saturday's bill.

It is unclear whether the Players remained in the city or did a brief stint elsewhere but, two weeks later, on the 9th May, the company began a three-night run of *The Moonshiner's Daughter*, "a gripping story of life among the makers of moonshine whiskey."

The company remained in Saskatoon, at least until mid May, before moving on. Life in a stock company was an exhausting existence. They had been on tour for a year. "[H]ow we worked!" Karloff said. "We rehearsed all day and every day, and we played in the evenings in any sort of barn or shack wherever we happened to be."

An ill wind

By June the company found themselves in the centre of the Canadian plains stranded back in Regina. "Everyone in the company, including myself of course, was absolutely flat broke," Karloff said. "The situation was rotten and the prospects dismal. Maybe the finger of Fate was pointing at me. The day after the manager announced our complete lack of funds and inability to proceed, there was a terrific storm in Regina..." At 5 p.m. on a hot Sunday, the

30th June, a 500-mph tornado tore through Regina's downtown. Twenty-eight people died, 2,500 were rendered homeless and \$4 million of property was damaged. The tornado had ripped through the city in three minutes. "However," Karloff mused, "it was a case of an ill wind blowing no good all right - because we all got jobs clearing up the debris..."

It has been reported that following the tornado the Jeanne Russell Players announced it would stage a benefit performance of the comedy *The Real Thing* and donate half the receipts to the city. The performance, we are told, never occurred and the Players disbanded. In fact, Henrietta Crosman and her company, and not the Jeanne Russell Players, gave the benefit performance on the 4th July.

Moving on

When the debris was cleared, and with no prospect of any further stage work, Karloff searched for other employment. He discovered the Dominion Express Company, a haulage concern owned by Canadian Pacific, required men. "Being fairly husky, I got temporary employment," Karloff said. "Again a stroke of luck. The company sent me to the railway station to collect some crates of goods. As I crossed the tracks to the warehouse, someone threw an old copy of *The Billboard*, a theatrical journal, from a train window. Casually I picked it up and glanced at it. I saw an announcement that the Harry St. Clair players, a repertory company, at Prince Albert, wanted a young leading man. I dashed off a letter of application post haste and, to my surprise, I received a reply a few days later asking me to join them in Prince Albert."

With the promise of another acting job Karloff made his way to the Harry St. Clair Players. "St. Clair was absolutely honest," said Karloff. "If there was no money in the office, the ghost didn't walk, but when business was good he paid us what he owed us. In some towns we stayed a week, in others we settled down for a run. I was a quick study and the quickest study got the longest part. So I played leads in *Paid in Full*, *Charley's Aunt*, *East Lynne*, *Way Down East*, *Bought and Paid For*, *Baby Mine*, *What Happened to Jones*, *Why Smith Left Home*, and many other melodramas. We all took turns at being stage manager, and we never had a dress or prop rehearsal."

Being constantly on the road took its toll on Karloff's marriage and, if the surviving documents can be taken at face value, Karloff had an affair with Jeanne Russell's sister, Helene. It is unknown how Karloff's wife, Grace, became aware of her husband's indiscretions but she petitioned for divorce citing Helene Russell, along with Karloff, as co-respondent. On the 8th January 1913 the petition was placed before the Honourable Mr. Justice Murphy in the Supreme Court of British Columbia. Neither Grace nor Karloff was in attendance when the marriage was dissolved. Karloff was ordered to 'pay to the Petitioner her costs of this action as between Solicitor and client forthwith after the taxation thereof.' It must have been an unwelcome financial burden on an already meagre existence. Karloff's ex-wife, Grace, remarried ten days after the verdict, this time to one Cecil Angus Hadfield.

Initially Karloff stayed with Harry St. Clair for a year. "At the end of the engagement I had \$800 simply because St. Clair held back a certain amount each week and paid it at the conclusion of the season. With that nest egg I went to Chicago determined to have a chance at the big time. I arrived there October 13, 1914, and found that no one was the least bit interested in my experience. The British army had rejected me because of a heart murmur, my

money was disappearing rapidly and I decided that I had better get back to the sticks where I was appreciated." After rejoining St. Clair for another year Karloff left the troupe for the last time in 1916. He then spent the next couple of years touring with various companies across the western states of America. Then, in Los Angeles in 1919 following an abortive attempt to appear in vaudeville, Karloff turned to the film studios for employment. "I appeared before the camera for the first time in a crowd scene being directed by Frank Borzage at Universal City," he later recalled.

Even after he began to rise in films, Karloff's first love remained the theatre and he would revisit the stage in the years leading to his success in *Frankenstein*. Yet he never forgot the early days when he learned his craft in the towns and cities across western Canada. "Sometimes I barely managed to keep alive. It was hard work but it was valuable experience," he later said. "We must have done some terrible acting, but let me say a word for the intelligence of our audiences. In towns where we did a different play each night we asked the audience to vote for the one they wanted us to repeat as our closing bill. You really can't fool the public. Our audiences invariably picked the best play."



Acknowledgements

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