COLUMBIA

Bad man Borgnine, as Sgt. Fatso Judson, armed with cold steel and ready for violence.

M-G-M

Town bully in Bad Day at Black Rock, Borgnine goaded one-armed Spencer Tracy into a fight.

GLOBE

In Marty, with Betsy Blair, he pulled a switch, won raves for his role as a lovelorn butcher.

He Gets $150,000 a Year for Being Mean

By DEAN JENNINGS

The most sought-after villain in Hollywood is plain, paunchy Ernest ("Fatso") Borgnine, who tried to knife Frank Sinatra in From Here to Eternity.

IN a rented bungalow on a side street in North Hollywood—an unfashionable neighborhood never prowled by the rubberneck buses which take tourists past the homes of movie stars—there lives a 215-pound, bearish man who started life with the improbable name of Ermes Effron Borgnine.

Variously called Ernie, Duke or even Bugs, he is a shaggy-haired, paunchy man of thirty-eight with a relief-map face that is not apt to raise the blood pressure of young, lovelorn maidens. He drives an old car, and wears ready-made suits. His conception of pleasure and comfort is to sprawl on the floor every night with a can of cold beer, and gape at his television set. His wife picks out his neckties, and his closest friends are a plumber and an insurance salesman. He has a tendency to doze off in soft chairs after a heavy meal. When his wife is out, he doggedly mops the floors, cooks up a batch of spaghetti or yaks over the back fence with the neighbors. He doesn't know any movie stars, and when he sees one he is likely to feel self-conscious. Thus, except for his size, he is more or less the average man.

Consequently, in a town that tenaciously sets up certain minimum standards for the nobles of the cinema, it is surprising and perhaps a little aggravating to some that plain and homely Ernest Borgnine, as he is now billed, is not only a star in the $150,000-a-year class but is already being mentioned for an Academy Award as the result of a classic performance he gave as a kind but bumbling butcher in Marty, a picture which won the Cannes Film Festival award last spring. Hollywood's intramural wonder is further stretched by the fact that Borgnine, a ten-year Navy veteran who was down to his last dime not long ago, is neither a horseback hero nor in the parlor-paramour class. Instead, despite the off-beat lead as a good man in Marty, he is getting a reputation as the most homicidal man on celluloid. "I see how brutal I look on the screen," he says with candor, "but I don't know how I do it."

The Borgnine transmutation is so realistic that it unnerves observers who should be immune. When he played the vicious Army sergeant Fatso Judson in From Here to Eternity, two colonels were called in as technical advisers on a scene in which Fatso reaches for a club to bash an enlisted man.

Borgnine played it with such intensity and so much hatred on his face that the two officers shuddered, and when it was over they called him to one side. "Please, Mr. Borgnine," one said gravely, "you'll hurt the Army if you play that so violently. It's exaggerated."

Borgnine, whose eyes were still emotionally glazed, shrugged and said, "I'm sorry. I'll do what the director says."

Director Fred Zinnemann compromised with a shot that merely showed the actor stealthily reaching for the lethal club, and audiences were left to imagine how he used it on the soldier. Borgnine's interpretation was eventually sustained by a flood of letters from Army veterans, and by James Jones, author of the book. "*You're* Fatso Judson!" Jones cried, rushing across the set at the time and hugging Borgnine. "You're the Fatso I wrote about."

Borgnine's shockingly cold portrayal in From Here to Eternity, the picture which won the Academy Award for 1953, marked his emergence from obscurity and made him what is called a "hot property." Thereafter, in quick succession, he was a glacial gunman in Johnny Guitar, a merciless master of gladiators in Demetrius and the Gladiators, a bullying townsman in Bad Day at Black Rock, a rough freebooter in Vera Cruz, and an avenging farmer in Violent Saturday.

The Hecht-Lancaster studio, which has him under contract, likes to think that Borgnine is the symbol of a new masochistic era on the national scene. They suggest that the women of America—apparently male patrons don't count—are no longer intrigued with traditional movie lovers and now want to be belted on the chops vicariously, or even pushed over cliffs by ugly ruffians like Borgnine.

Borgnine—he pronounces it Borg-9—takes a narrow view of the killer label. Having now demonstrated in Marty that he could be a cavalier, he has an understandable claim to versatility and a fear of being typed. "Of course I don't kid myself," he says. "The answer is right there every time I look in a mirror. People don't start arguments with me. I'm the big physical type they don't want to mess around with. No man ever slides up to me and says: 'I can lick you.' Sometimes I wish they would. I don't want to get into a groove."

Women, on the other hand, are already casting fawn-eyed glances in his direction when they recognize him on the street. One recent night outside the Sutton Theater in New York the woman alongside him was nudged by a frankly appraising female. "Tell me," she said bluntly, "do you know if Mr. Borgnine is free or is he married?" The lady thus addressed snapped: "Yes, he's married, and I expect him to stay that way. I'm his wife."

The prospect of encountering this sort of predatory pursuit on an intensified scale slightly dampens

Borgnine's enthusiasm for the future. Like other bruisers before him, he says he longs for more genteel roles. But his agent, Paul Wilkins, who has purposely turned down $100,000 worth of work for his client in recent months, says Borgnine's worries are premature.

"I told him he might burn himself out by playing the dog heavy every time," Wilkins says. "But for the time being we had to get money in the bank so he could reject some of these jobs. With careful selection he can make a tremendous career for himself, and go on and on until he's too old to work." And so saying, Wilkins hustled Borgnine over to Columbia and signed him to costar in a big-budget prairie opera called Jubal Troop. Borgnine may not be an ordinary dog heavy in the picture, but he is an icy-veined ranch hand who seduces his benefactor's wife and gets killed for it. "It's really an actor's dream role," Borgnine says grudgingly. "The audience will hate me."

Learning About the Navy—the Hard Way

NO one in Hollywood can put a definitive finger on the elusive quality that makes Borgnine's villains so remarkably real. When he impales a man on a pitchfork in Violent Saturday the fury shows in his eyes, and the customers gasp and recoil in their seats. In Bad Day at Black Rock he forces Spencer Tracy's jeep over a cliff, and his face has the chilly blankness of every murderer since Cain. Once, during the filming of From Here to Eternity, he snarled at Frank Sinatra, according to the script: "Why, you dirty little Wop, I'll ——" Sinatra reacted with such wild rage that Borgnine instinctively backed away and abandoned the script. "Now wait a minute, Frankie," he said. "Wait a minute . . . you know I'm Italian too." The scene had to be reshot, and Borgnine still isn't sure whether Sinatra had responded with a superb bit of acting or whether his own characterization had aroused genuine resentment.

Borgnine's film characterizations seem to be so indelible that they follow him into his private life, and many people are chary of asking him for an autograph. "I walk down the street," he says, "and I see them doing the double take. I hear them say: 'There's that miserable Fatso.' They must think I'm a bad guy off the screen too."

Actually Borgnine is an intensely shy, sensitive and often lonely man who is never satisfied with his work, and who is not convinced that he has great talent. "Ernie's just a big St. Bernard who wants to be patted," one acquaintance says. But among his nonprofessional friends the feeling persists that his screen violence is really a safety valve for a rebellious nature. Borgnine himself doesn't discount that analysis, and his most vivid personal memories are concerned with mental and physical wounds that were more or less his own doing.

As a boy, for instance, he carefully avoided school cliques and brawls. In his first and only fist fight he was thoroughly bloodied. Years later, he took up boxing while on duty aboard the U.S.S. Lamberton, at San Diego. One day he made the mistake of choosing a fighter named Bill Boyd, then a protégé of Jack Dempsey, and was knocked stiff with one punch. He never boxed again.

During his first year of service, Borgnine was eating in the mess hall of the Lamberton when the chief boatswain's mate walked in and told him to relieve the man at the wheel. "O.K., Boats," Borgnine said. "I'll go up as soon as I finish my breakfast." The chief scowled and repeated the order. Borgnine didn't move, and the chief suddenly yanked him out of his seat, smashed him twice across the nose and said: "Now!"

Borgnine wiped the blood from his face, and went out on the double.

On another cruise, aboard the U.S.S. Shawmont, Borgnine was cured of lying around in his bunk after reveille by a chief gunner's mate who frequently and angrily whacked him on the backside with the club end of a pool cue. "I always swore up and down," Borgnine says wryly, "that if I ever met that guy outside of a uniform I'd get a pool cue and break it over his head, but I never saw him again. He was right, of course. They were all (Continued on Page 67)

SID AVERY

Borgnine, Leigh Snowden and Pat Crowley on the set of Square Jungle, in which he plays a boxer's manager. Says Ernest: "I can see how brutal I look on the screen, but I don't know how I do it."

At home with his wife, Rhoda, and daughter, Nancy. Borgnine met Rhoda while he was doing a ten-year hitch in the Navy. She almost gave him the gate when he quit the service to become an actor.

SID AVERY

HE GETS $150,000 A YEAR FOR BEING MEAN

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right when they gave an order, but I nursed grudges for a long time, even after I became a chief myself."

Borgnine has been out of the Navy since 1945, but he was so thoroughly disciplined during that ten-year hitch that his conversations with complete strangers are still sprinkled with "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." Moreover, he deferentially addresses directors, producers and other executives as "Sir," or "Mister" even when they urge him to be more informal. Borgnine's former shipmates, incidentally, sometimes send him congratulatory telegrams or impulsively call him late at night from Chicago, New York, Norfolk and other cities. These belated sugary tributes make him misty-eyed and he says, half apologetically, "I can't help it. I just sit there and blubber."

While his Navy service may have covered up the internal erosions with scar tissues, Borgnine is not entirely subdued and permits himself an occasional outburst. Some time ago, while he was pacing the floor in his New York apartment and trying to memorize a role, a pianist began pounding the keys in an adjoining flat. The walls were thin, and with each *fortissimo* Borgnine stepped up his furious pacing. His patience finally ran out and with a mighty swing he drove his fist through the apartment wall. The startled pianist fled to the safety of the street. Borgnine later fibbed to his wife, Rhoda, that he had fallen off a ladder, and it was more than a year before he sheepishly told her the truth.

"Ernie has always learned the hard way," says Paul Wilkins, "but he doesn't make the same mistake twice. When he first came to Hollywood my secretary called him one morning and told him he had fifteen minutes to be at Columbia on a rush call. 'Well,' Ernie told her, 'you advise Mr. Wilkins for me that I have no car, and if he wants me at the studio he'd better come and get me.' I heard about that pretty fast and called him right back. 'Look, boy,' I said, 'I'm not a cab company. It's tough enough for an agent to get jobs for actors without having to carry them there too. Let's get that straight right now.' Ernie was silent for a moment and finally said, 'Oh, I guess you're right.' He was at Columbia in fifteen minutes and he got the part."

Borgnine himself can laugh at these once-thorny episodes now and credits an old friend, a New Haven plumber named Joe Simone, with providing the philosophical clincher. Not long ago he and Joe were driving along a country road in the latter's car, which, as Borgnine puts it, was "rattling and shaking like a bucket of bolts."

"Joey, Joey!" Borgnine protested. "How can you stand all that terrible noise? Aren't you afraid the heap will fall apart?"

"No," said Joe. "I just turn up the radio louder."

Borgnine, it would appear, has been bothered by figurative shakes and rattles all his life. His parents were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Borgnine, formerly Borgnino, of Hamden, Connecticut, both of whom had emigrated from Carpi, Italy, at the turn of the century. Before her marriage, Mrs. Borgnine was Countess Anna Boselli, but she never had any use for the title.

Her son was born in Hamden, near New Haven, on January 24, 1917, and was saddled with the name Ermes Effron Borgnine because it appealed to her poetic sense. When he started off for school in 1923 his mother dressed him in a velvet and lace Fauntleroy suit. The neighborhood kids promptly stuffed Ernie inside a truck tire and rolled him down a hill into a mud flat. That was the end of the Fauntleroy suit—Borgnine is allergic to velvet and lace to this day—and the effete Ermes was soon dropped for the more American Ernie. The tire incident, unfortunately for him, aroused the sympathy of the school authorities and he became the teacher's pet. "That loused up the whole deal with the other kids," Borgnine says, "and I could never break in after that."

Borgnine had no early stage experiences nor an unquenchable urge to be an actor. The only performance in his first thirty years of life was a single appearance as a singsong Chinese in a high-school play at New Haven.

Borgnine enlisted in the Navy when he left high school because he was not equipped or trained for anything else. He learned how to fire guns, swab decks, put hospital corners on bed sheets and say "Aye, aye, sir!" with enthusiasm. It would have been an abortive ten years, since he didn't learn a trade, except for what he happily calls "my three R's." R for Rhumba, at which he was so skilled that he won prizes at service dances. R for a heavy gold Ring with a Navy insigne, which was given to him by a sentimental lass, and which he insists on wearing for luck in all his pictures. And R for Rhoda Kemins, a red-haired medical technician he met in 1943 when he was a patient in the Brooklyn Naval Hospital.

"It seemed to me that he was just another sailor asking for a date," Rhoda says candidly. "He did seem polite and gentlemanly, which, for a sailor, was a little odd. But beyond that I just couldn't see him at all."

Borgnine proposed to Rhoda despite this inauspicious start, but she turned him down. It is a tribute to his persistence, and one of the clues to his movie success, too, that he pursued her like a sub chaser for seven years before she ran up the white flag. Rhoda now says that Ernie's Odyssey was prolonged, and almost terminated, because he quit the Navy and quixotically decided to become an actor. "That just about did it," she says. "It just didn't seem like a man's work. It was so unreal."

Borgnine himself admits he took the step with gargantuan impudence, like a schoolboy picking a fight with Rocky Marciano, and blames it on his mother. "Ernie," she said casually one day, "you always liked making a darn fool out of yourself. Why don't you take up acting?"

Borgnine still considers her proposal a provocative *non sequitur*. He had never been a cutup, had no interest in the stage and doubted that being a darn fool, which he was not, was an essential quality for, let's say, Hamlet. Nevertheless, he went along with her quaint reasoning, took his GI benefits and enrolled in the Randall School of Drama at Hartford. On his first day in class, he was asked to read aloud a passage containing the word "diamonds."

"Mr. Borgnine," the teacher scowled, "how did you pronounce that word?"

"Dimonds," he grinned.

"The word, Mr. Borgnine, is d-i-a-m-o-n-d-s. Pronounced dye-*a*-monds."

Borgnine's blurting reaction to that was a common cuss word frequently heard aboard cruisers and destroyers.

The classroom rocked, but the teacher didn't blink. "Mr. Borgnine," she said, "if you apply such strong feeling and pronunciation to all your reading, you will have no trouble as an actor."

At the end of the course, after he had won the lead in both school plays for that season, Borgnine gloomily told Miss Ann Randall that the stage was not for him. "It's just more of that darned 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir,'" he said. "I had enough of it in the Navy, and for once I'd like to be my own boss."

Miss Randall snatched up a ruler from her desk and gave him an old-fashioned rap on the knuckles. "How dare you talk like that?" she said. "You—who have so much talent! Now get busy and do something with it."

"It was just like old times," Borgnine says. "She wasn't a boatswain's mate and it wasn't a pool cue. But that did it. I got mad all over again."

He spent the next four years at Robert Porterfield's famed Barter Theater in Abingdon, Virginia, where, in addition to playing everything from butlers to heroes, he painted scenery, drove company trucks and used his powerful back to carry 500-pound light boxes. He was paid thirty dollars a week and, thus fortified, he persuaded Rhoda to abandon her hospital career. They were married in the Brooklyn City Hall on September 2, 1949, and went on tour together while Ernie played a male nurse with Jimmy Dunn in the road company of Harvey.

Borgnine was barely making expenses in minor television roles three years ago when Max Arnow, of Columbia, came to New York looking for unknown faces to play with Broderick Crawford in a shooting melodrama called The Mob. Borgnine was tested for the part of Joe Castro, a run-of-the-mill gunman, and was asked to pretend he was grilling a fellow gangster suspected of being a stool pigeon. The camera turned and Borgnine froze for a moment. Suddenly—and who knows what plaguing adversary from the past took shape before his eyes?—Borgnine's hand shot out and slapped his imaginary victim on each cheek.

"I don't see that in the script," Arnow said.

"That's bad?" Borgnine asked.

"No, that's good."

Borgnine does not know what impelled him to let go with that vicious sweep, but that unplanned bit of business, as such actions are called in the trade, helped him cross the long bridge between New York and Hollywood. Not long afterward, when Arnow was casting for From Here to Eternity, he remembered Borgnine's formidable bulk and sent for him.

Up to that period Borgnine's income as an actor had averaged $3500 a year. But when the talent prospectors saw the Fatso portrayal there was a scramble for his wicked services, and in four pictures his pay check rose from $500 to $1250 a week. Late in 1954, Harold Hecht and Burt Lancaster, who had used Borgnine in Vera Cruz, bought a charming little story called Marty, in which the hero was a fat and loveless Bronx butcher whose relatives were goading him for still being a bachelor at the age of thirty-five.

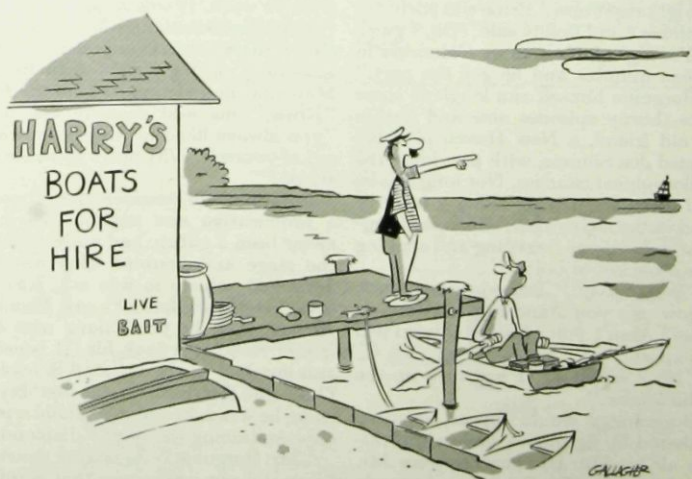
Lancaster, who had never seen Borgnine when he was not committing some form of mayhem, was nevertheless convinced that Ernie's homely pan was ideal for the sympathetic Marty role. But author Paddy Chayefsky, and Delbert Mann, who was brought from New York to direct, weren't sold until they chartered a small plane one afternoon and flew to the mountain district of Lone Pine, California, where Borgnine was working in a picture with Spencer Tracy. They found Borgnine in a motel, dirty, unshaven and exhausted after a punishing day on location, and handed him the Marty script.

"Go ahead and read it out loud," Mann said.

Tired as he was, Borgnine instantly performed the remarkable metamorphosis which seems to be his forte, and Mann found himself listening to Marty Pilletti, the friendly but inarticulate butcher, Bronx inflection and all, who had never had a steady girl. "It was one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had," says Mann warmly. The picture was rehearsed for only two weeks, was filmed for less than $350,000, and flabbergasted the big-budget movie makers when it won first prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Hecht and Lancaster quickly backed up their original judgment with a contract that guarantees Borgnine two pictures a year, at a substantial $2000 a week, and permits him to augment that income with work at other studios.

The Borgnines—Ernie, Rhoda and daughter Nancy, three—were not pre-



"The best spot I know is out past that first buoy—you'll see some channel markers, follow those out to where the bay meets the ocean, then head straight down past Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville and Miami, till you hit Key West—there they got fish."

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pared for this rags-to-riches transition and are stubbornly steering a course away from the Hollywood maelstrom. In North Hollywood they are virtually anonymous, even in their immediate neighborhood, and they get almost apoplectic when their Bronx or Brooklyn friends make barbed inquiries about swimming pools, mansions and butlers. "Their sense of proportion is gone," Rhoda says tartly. "They can't imagine that we live just like they do."

They do not fraternize with other movie people, and Rhoda stubbornly does the cooking, cleaning, sewing and other household chores, with an occasional assist from Ernie. They belong to no clubs and their evenings are devoted to the television screen or gin rummy. Rhoda suffers from unshakable premonitions about the celluloid world.

"It's a tough business and I'm really afraid of it," she says glumly. "When you're back East you read gossip about this woman with that man. This marriage is breaking up, or that one is. It's nerve-racking to be in the public eye, and we'd like to avoid it. But I'm learning fast. I'm learning we can still live a quiet life and pick our own friends."

Borgnine does not share these alarming views because, as his friends and coworkers say, he is still essentially a simple man who is humble and abashed to find himself on the same set with the great names of Hollywood. He is a sentimentalist who presses flowers between book pages, a rustic who expresses awe with frequent use of the phrase "Gee whillikers," a rebel who literally bangs his head against his living-room wall when things go wrong.

Although Rhoda is a shrewd manager who writes all the checks, examines the movie contracts, and makes a showcase out of the living room by having all his scripts bound in rich leather and prominently displayed, she is still ingenuous and takes a kidding from the neighbors and friends. She innocently confides, for instance, that when Ernie goes on location she pins little tags on his shirts, socks and ties: "This tie goes with the blue suit," and so on.

Borgnine, though, is not as naïve as he was, and the movement of his destiny was recently demonstrated while he was making a picture called Last Command. The action called for him to smash a pane of glass with a pistol barrel, and in the process he cut one finger.

"Get a doctor! Get an ambulance!" one executive screamed. "Borgnine's hurt!"

Borgnine glanced at the cut—it was about the size of a mosquito bite—and smiled the secret smile of a man who knows that fate has chosen him for big things. "A year or two ago," he said, "I could have cut my arm off, and somebody surely would have said: 'Hey, you! If you're going to bleed to death, do it outside.'"

I WAS A PRISONER OF SILENCE

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There was something extra in my prayer that day.

Sunday came. As far as I was concerned, the sermon had to last my congregation a long time. My concluding words were, "And we know that nothing can take us out of His hands or care." I then told the congregation that I had to be silent for an indefinite period and that for some weeks, maybe months, I would not be in the pulpit. That noon, after a committee meeting in my study, I stopped talking. I did not speak even to my family while we were driving home. It was rough, but it had to begin sometime.

On Monday the questions were: What should I do? How should I plan my days? Some of our friends advised going away and laying aside all duties and responsibilities. I chose to remain where I was to try to live as normal a life as possible, to help administer church affairs, to be on hand to assist staff and church officers. I went to my study daily on a reduced schedule. The staff and the people were accustomed to seeing me around the church. I think it was a good thing for people whose problems I had shared to see me with a problem of my own.

That was the beginning. I found that spending days and weeks and months in silence, while trying to live a normal life, brings strangely mixed experiences: frustration and fear and doubt, laughter and deepened affection, and a new personal knowledge. There is a curious loss of the sense of time, and there is time to examine what life means. Ordinary experiences have new meaning: You see afresh the light of early dawn and the slowly darkening shadows of evening. You enjoy the warm wetness of a dog's tongue licking your hand. You catch overtones of destiny in the joyous, sometimes tuneless whistle of a certain blue-eyed, fair-haired boy. The joy of a family reading together comes alive again.

I learned immediately to avoid meetings, particularly discussion meetings where I would feel sure I had a word that could clarify the situation. I would have the urge to speak, but would not dare to speak. I stopped going to such meetings, even church-council meetings.

New methods of communication had to be found and used—gestures or a few words scrawled on a pad. If your writing is like mine, even this means of communication can shut you off. People asked me to repeat what I had written, just as they would have asked me to repeat if they had not heard what I said. I was stuck. People could not understand my simplest comments and needs because I had to write everything.

I had to learn to write all over again. No more separated letters, no more strange *t*'s and *d*'s and *g*'s; no more words joined together. How long the final improvement, such as it is, will last I do not know. But I write better now than at any time since grammar school.

I had one fear—that I might leave home and forget to take my means of communication. Several times I found myself driving downtown without pad and pencil. I had a sense of isolation, of being cut off from people. It was really very foolish, but it was hard to keep my imagination from running wild. Suppose some Beacon Street driver scraped my fender, what would I do? How would I convince him I was not the idiot my silence might lead him to suspect? And how would I tell him my opinion of his driving?

All I took with me into my silence was what I had before the silence came. What about those words with which I used to counsel others in perplexity and fear, in a hospital, in a home, standing beside a body from which life