

# THE MANY MOODS OF Robert Mitchum

By BILL DAVIDSON

An exclusive account of the turbulent career and times of Hollywood's rugged nonconformist. A *Post* editor tells the candid, first-hand story.

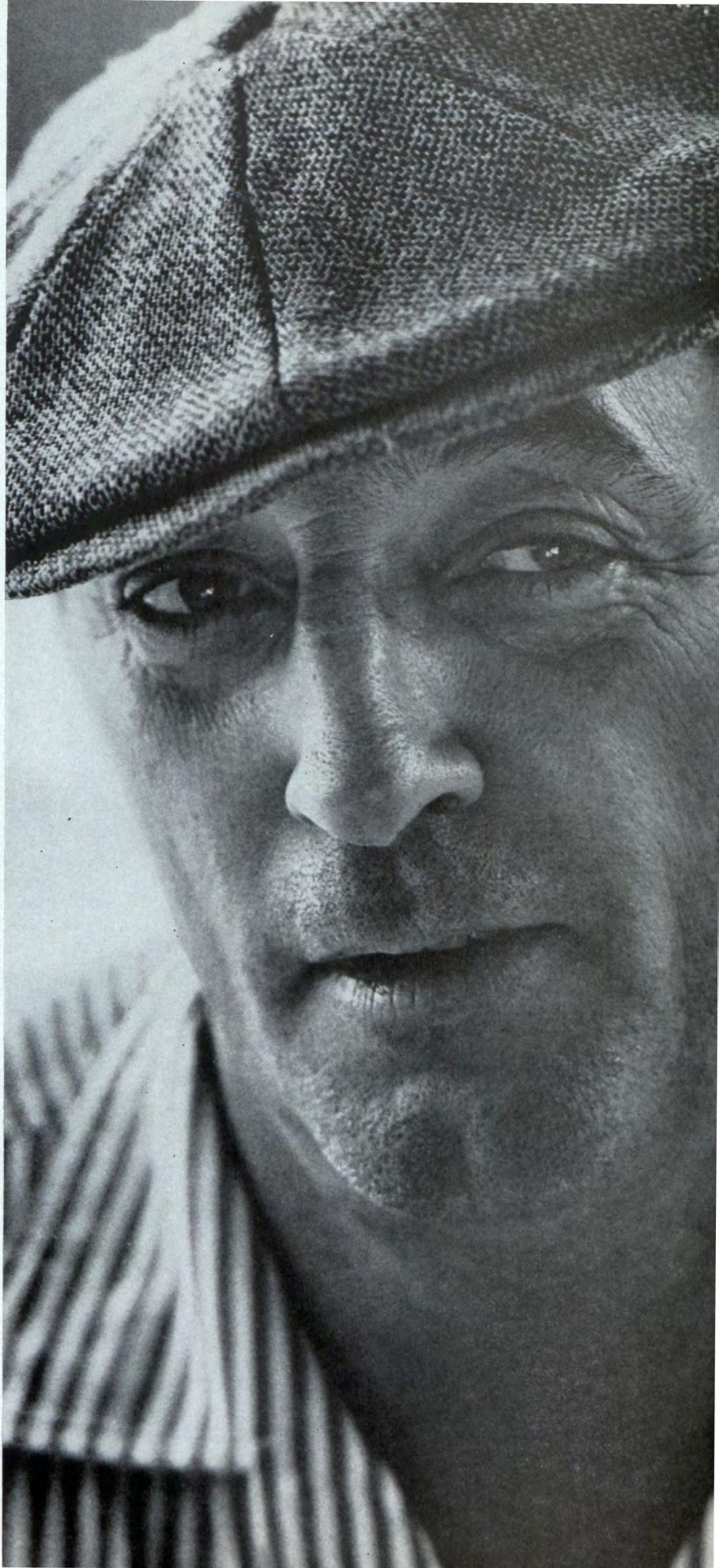
While Robert Mitchum was in Savannah, Georgia, filming his current hit, *Cape Fear*, he often startled coworkers by singing in his clear baritone, "How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood; when fond recollection presents them to view." At the fifth repetition the film's British director, J. Lee Thompson, asked Mitchum, "Why?" The big actor replied, "Man, this is the place where I first tangled with the law. They put me on the chain gang when I was just sixteen years old. These are the scenes of my childhood, man, and they are dear, very dear indeed, to my heart."

In three sentences Mitchum summed up his entire bitter, cynical philosophy—a veneer of toughness which armors a sensitive nonconformist whose psychic wounds still ache. His mention of the chain gang was no joke. He is perhaps the only American with a legitimate income approaching \$1,000,000 a year who has served two sentences: seven days on a Georgia road gang for vagrancy back when he was a poor boy, and fifty-nine days in a California jail on a narcotics charge after he became a wealthy actor.

On his return to Savannah nearly thirty years after his sentencing there, Mitchum charmed society ladies at teas and cocktail parties and held court on the porch of the DeSoto Hotel daily for a throng of admirers, who listened with delight to his stories. But to a deputy sheriff assigned to guard the movie location, he snarled, "Lay off me. I escaped from your Chatham County chain gang in 1933 and I still owe you some time—but you're not going to get me back."

Then he handed the deputy sheriff twenty dollars to buy lunch for himself and his fellow deputies.

The show of generosity after the snarl was typical of Mitchum. He embodies most of the contradictions of humanity in one large, unhandy, six-foot-one pack-



**Mitchum** age. His moods swing from one extreme to another so rapidly that he may sound like a gentleman-scholar one minute, or an embittered, foul-mouthed hoodlum the next. He is forty-five years old and has been a movie star for twenty years, but neither the film industry nor the public feels sure even now that it knows the real Mitchum.

Some stories about him, such as his antipathy toward policemen, are quite true. To this day and to their faces, he refers to them derisively as "the fuzz," an uncomplimentary slang term which he learned when he was one of the wild boys of the road spawned by the depression. He resents authority and instinctively fights it. From the age of fourteen, when he quit his poverty-stricken home to hobo aimlessly in search of food and work, he has smarted under what he regards as official brutality and dishonesty.

Of his clash with the law at Savannah, Mitchum told me, "I had hopped a freight train with about seventeen other kids and headed South. In my pocket I had thirty-eight dollars—all I had in the world. When we reached Savannah, I was cold and hungry. So I dropped off to get something to eat. This big fuzz grabbed me. 'For what?' I asked. He grinned. 'Vagrancy—we don't like Yankee bums around here.' When I told him I had thirty-eight dollars, he just called me a so-and-so wise guy and belted me with his club and ran me in.

#### Stretch on the Chain Gang

"After I had five days of waiting in jail, nine men to a cell, they took me to court. I'm sitting there, waiting to be sentenced for vagrancy, when suddenly I realize I'm listening to a burglary case. A couple of fuzz get up and describe the burglar that hit a shoe store, and it dawns on me that they're giving an exact description of *me*. Then in a daze I hear the fuzz that arrested me testify that forty dollars had been heisted from the shoe store and that when he took me in, I still had thirty-eight on me.

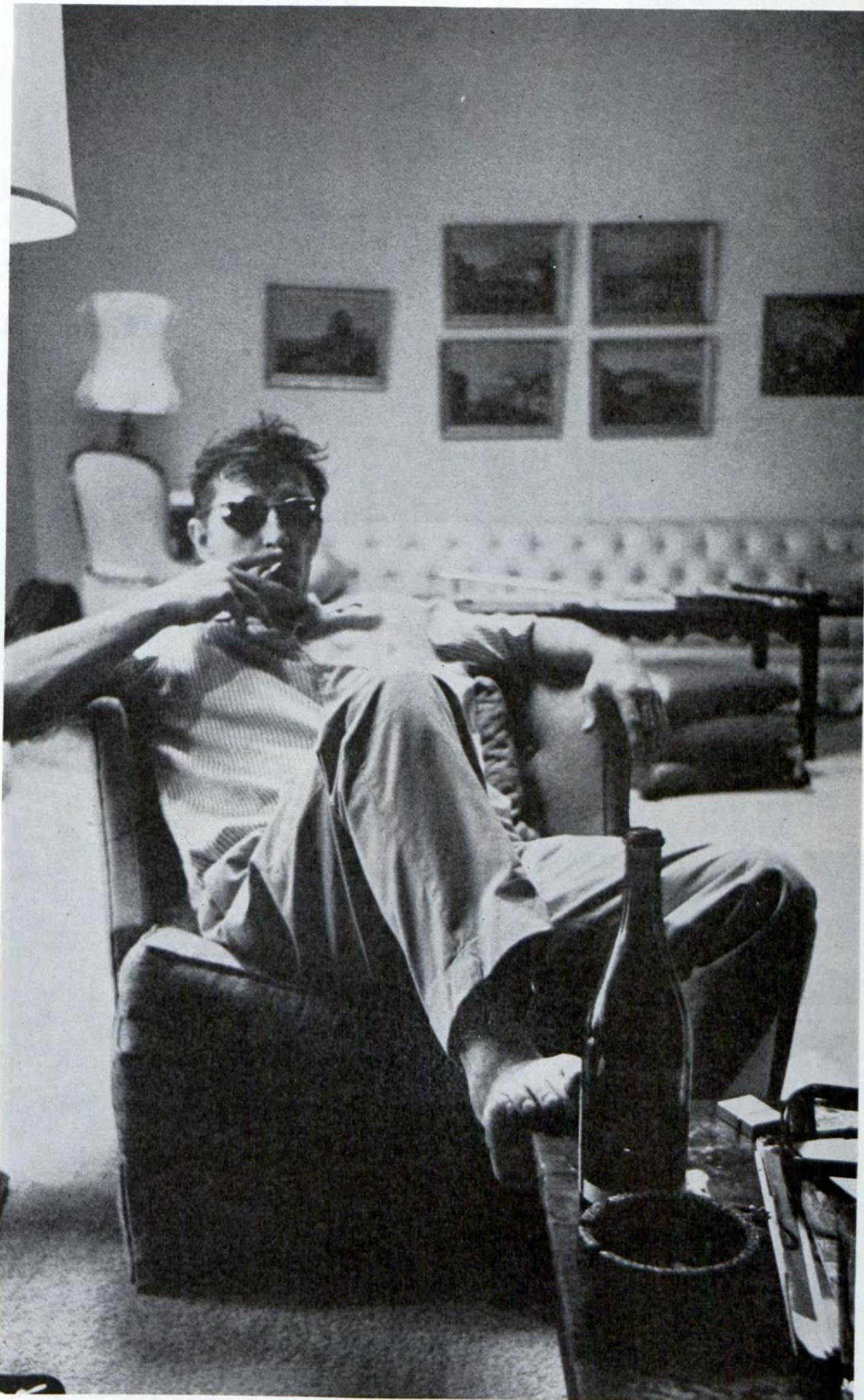
"So here I am, age sixteen, facing maybe ten to twenty years for burglary. So I get to my feet and ask the judge just one question, 'Just when did this burglary take place?' The judge looks at his papers and says, 'You should know—it was on Wednesday.' I say, 'Your honor, do you know where I was on Wednesday? Hell, I was in *your* jail. I was arrested on Sunday.'

"The judge clears his throat, and shuffles his papers, and says, 'Well, I guess I can't hold you on that charge, but a nice little indeterminate sentence for vagrancy should straighten you out.'"

For seven days, Mitchum says, he repaired roads in the vicinity of Savannah. Then the guards relaxed their vigilance after removing the prisoners' chains. "I split, man," he told me. "They just fired a few shots after me, and that was that. In those days they wouldn't spend sixty cents to catch you if they missed you with a rifle. They'd just go out and round up someone else to take your place."

During the next two years Mitchum made nine freight-hopping trips around the United States and continued his harsh education in the practicalities of life. He slept in hobo camps and jails, occasionally earning a dollar as a laborer or dishwasher. "I learned all about the

Mitchum the primitive most often dominates Mitchum the sophisticate.



*Mitchum relaxes on a day off in Hollywood with a bottle of wine, hi-fi music and conversation.*

"After a quarrel with Dorothy . . . I began drinking much more than was good for me."



Mitchum and his sons: Jim (left), an actor with a strong resemblance to his father, and Chris, a pre-med student.



Cattleman Mitchum and his wife Dorothy at their 200-acre Maryland estate. They have been married 22 years.

**Mitchum** fuzz and the inside of jails," he says. "When I was too cold and hungry, I'd check in at the local police station. They'd put me in a cell overnight. In the morning I'd have to sweep up to earn my board and keep. I thought I was really living. But I used to cry myself to sleep every night wondering what my poor mother thought. I'd say to myself, 'She must be worrying about me.'"

Mitchum's mother, a Norwegian-born daughter of a sea captain, certainly did not lack for worries. About two years after Mitchum was born, on August 6, 1917, at Bridgeport, Connecticut, a switching-yard accident killed her husband, James Mitchum, a railway worker. She was left with a daughter, Julie; little Robert, and baby John. To support her family, she worked as a Linotype operator for The Bridgeport *Telegram*. Mitchum recalls "long, unsupervised hours while mother was at work" and "the bloodied noses and broken windows of boyhood."

### Odd Jobs and Hard Times

Mrs. Mitchum finally sent the growing boy to live with his grandmother in rustic Felton, Delaware. The country environment did not soothe him. "They thought I was some kind of degenerate," he says. "They ran me out of town so many times that it finally took." He had already been kicked out of school. While living in New York City with his older sister Julie, who then worked as an actress, he attended Haaren High School. But he quit formal education there at the age of fourteen and never resumed it.

"I was a thin, shifty, ferret-faced kid," he says. "The girls didn't want any part of me. They liked my younger brother John. I was hungry all the time and always in trouble, so I just took off."

With boyish romanticism, his first move was to run away to sea. Claiming to be eighteen, he shipped as a deckhand on a salvage vessel out of Fall River, Massachusetts. When the ship operators discovered he was only fourteen, placing them in violation of child-labor laws, he was dumped ashore. Later he hoboed his way to the West Coast. "I worked in one-arm-joint restaurants washing dishes and hauling slop, and when I got to California, I just lay on the beach and rolled drunks. I didn't know any better."

Heading back East by slow freight, young Mitchum dropped off to hunt work in the Pennsylvania coal fields.

"I got to this little town, and a nice lady saw me wandering around and she took me in and gave me a room. She gave me sandwiches for lunch and sent me off to a coal mine, where her brother hired me. I went down into the pit with a sledge hammer and took one look around that cramped hole and almost went out of my mind.

"As I now know, I've got claustrophobia. The only thing that kept me down there was a 250-pound Polish foreman who waved a twenty-pound break-out hammer at my head and said, 'You no quit.' I no quit, but I was so sick I couldn't eat. I gave my sandwiches to the foreman every day. At night I'd just stand around on the street and watch the miners making passes at the girls. I lasted long enough to pay the lady who was so nice to me and then I cut out again."

The New Deal tried to help Mitchum and other wild boys of the road with its

He can sound like a scholar one minute, a hoodlum the next.



Mitchum toys with a flute on the location of *The Sundowners*. He won praise for his portrayal of a shepherd in the film.

**Mitchum** Civilian Conservation Corps. In 1934 Mitchum toiled briefly on a soil-reclamation project, digging ditches and planting trees. Then he struck out by freight train for California, where his sister Julie, now married, had settled.

A few months later the rest of the family arrived from the East in a share-the-ride jalopy. The widowed Mrs. Mitchum had married a British veteran of World War I, Hugh Morris, seven years earlier. Robert's brother John and half-sister Carol, child of the second marriage, accompanied the family West. They all lived in a three-room house in Long Beach while young Robert worked as a longshoreman, truck loader and building maintenance man.

Robert came to appreciate his stepfather, whom he had resented years earlier. "You know how it is with stepparents," he says. "I'm afraid we kids didn't give this one much of a break for a long time. He had a box filled with medals from World War I and snapshots of himself on camels in Egypt, climbing out of old biplanes in France, and saluting the quarterdeck on windjammers in Australia. When we were very small, we couldn't understand that he was full of shrapnel and couldn't work hard enough to keep us all together as a family unit. Instead, he had to stay at his newspaper editor's desk in Connecticut while mother lived with grandmother in Delaware."

In 1935, when he was eighteen, Mitchum hit the road again and had two experiences which were to play vital parts in his later life. Back East he visited Dorothy Spence, a girl he had once known in Delaware, who was then working as a secretary for a Philadelphia life-insurance company. Five years later, in 1940, he and Dorothy were married, and she has been Mrs. Mitchum to this day.

#### First Use of Marijuana

His second experience in 1935 ended unfortunately. He went to Toledo, Ohio, to visit a friend, Frederick Fast, whom he had known in California. Fast told me, "Bob called me one day out of the blue. I went downtown and picked him up at a center the city ran for boys on the bum. He lived with us during that winter of 1935-36. My father gave him a job operating a punch press at the factory he owned. Bob hated it, and he soon got fired. I remember he used to infuriate my father, a conservative gentleman, because he'd come downstairs wearing shoes but no socks. The temperature might be below zero, but Bob was on a kick then where he didn't like socks and just wouldn't wear them."

Bob also got on a more serious kick at the time, as it developed. In a probation report thirteen years later, after his narcotics conviction in California, he wrote, "My first use of marijuana was an isolated instance in 1936 while I was working in Toledo, Ohio."

Through the four prewar years that followed, Bob worked at odd jobs in California, and acted, wrote and directed for a little-theater group. Two of his plays were for children. They were produced in Long Beach with what he terms "some degree of local success." He wrote an oratorio that was presented in the Hollywood Bowl at a benefit for European refugees. Then he became a ghost-writer for Carroll Righter, an

astrologer who was then a darling of the women's-club lecture circuit. Bob toured the country with Righter. At last he was eating regularly.

Then, presumably with the planet Venus in the ascendancy, Mitchum married Dorothy. After the wedding, in Delaware, they went to live with his entire family in the tiny, overcrowded home in California. Soon a baby was on the way. Bob had to give up his migratory job as an assistant interpreter of the stars and take a sheet-metal job at the Lockheed aircraft plant. Again he rebelled.

"My mediocrity as a sheet-metal worker was established at Lockheed, and my utter inability to adjust to the midnight-to-morning, or 'graveyard,' shift resulted in chronic insomnia," he wrote later in the probation reports. As he explained to me:

"After an entire year with practically no sleep, I suddenly went blind one night on my job at Lockheed. They rushed me to a hospital in Glendale. Finally my sight came back, and they let me go. The doctor said, 'There's nothing wrong with you.' I said, 'What do you mean there's nothing wrong with me? You don't go blind for nothing.' The doctor answered, 'No, but let's say it's mental. It's because you hate your job. You'd better quit.' I quit."

#### "The Story of GI Joe"

While his wife went to work again for an insurance firm, Mitchum began seriously hunting full-time work as an actor. With the United States now in World War II, the draft had left a large gap in the ranks of film actors. His first role landed him in a Hopalong Cassidy movie, playing a villainous character whose principal function was to be toppled from his horse by hero William Boyd. That part led eventually to his memorable role as the beloved infantry captain in *The Story of GI Joe*. For that performance he won his first and only Academy Award nomination. Before the film was released, he was drafted and became Private Mitchum, at Fort MacArthur, California. His eight months of military service were peaceful. "I met a lot of guys of the type I used to bum around with, and we spent most of our time swapping lies," he says. Discharged in 1945, he discovered that he was a big movie star on the strength of *The Story of GI Joe*. RKO lent him a fat sum to buy a house and put him in one movie after another. But his new-born career sagged.

"Mitchum was psychologically ill equipped for his sudden rise to fame," an official probation report of the state of California said years later. Mitchum's own version, in his report to the probation board, which is his basic explanation of his life, described the situation with more sympathy for himself:

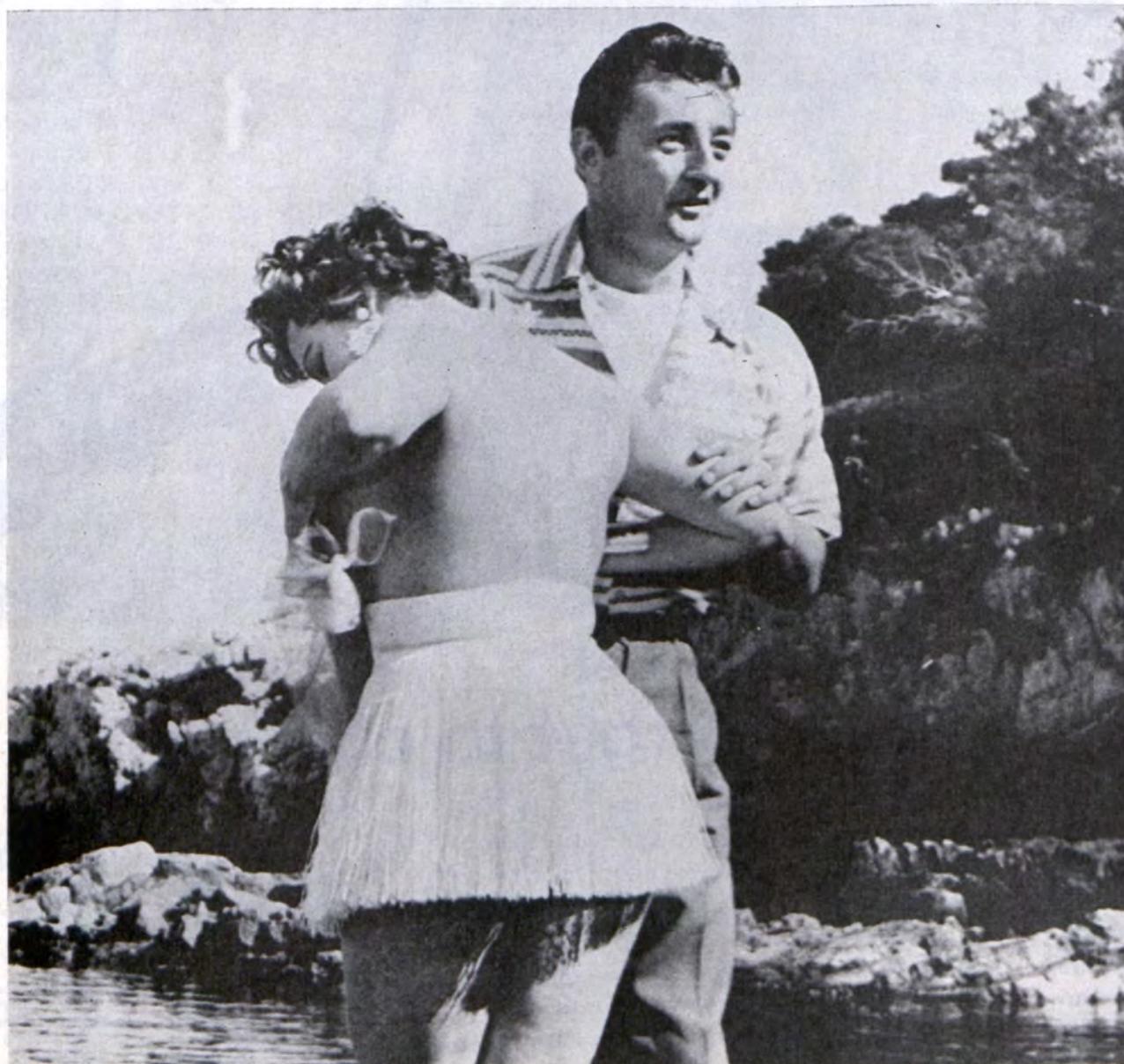
"The new popularity brought new faces, with endless requests for assistance—requests which were always met. I suppose I honestly believed that I was helping to erase a moral debt by granting aid to others of the same social-financial background who had remained less fortunate than I. At any rate, the rumor spread that I was a soft touch—and an additional and more disquieting rumor that I was associating with people who indulged in the use of marijuana.

"This last gossip brought a swelling stream of acquaintances who appeared to

“One of the finest instinctive actors in the business, almost in a class with Tracy.”



On the set of *Two for the Seesaw* Mitchum is directed in a movie clinch with Shirley MacLaine.



A real-life clinch found Mitchum cavorting with publicity-seeking actress Simone Silva at Cannes in 1954.

**Mitchum** accept me as one of their number. . . . Although progressing famously in my profession, I was constantly obsessed with the phantom of failure, and in the next two years I several times answered entreaties by sharing a cigarette with one or more of these sycophants.”

Mitchum maintained in his report that, except for his use of marijuana in Toledo in 1936, he never touched the dream weed until 1947-48, “when I was working very, very hard.” He wrote, “I was never a confirmed smoker of marijuana and never purchased marijuana for use by myself. The only explanation I have for the use of marijuana is the fact that when you are in the company of people who use it, it is easier to go along with them than not to. . . . I was absurdly naïve.”

Mitchum’s naïveté during that period appears to have extended to finances and much more. He wrote:

“In late 1947, endowed with a new contract and facing a new future which promised relief from my financial obligations to my family, the picture faded when my best friend and trusted manager admitted the complete disappearance of my funds and refused an accounting. More hurt than angry, I refused to prosecute, although I was eventually subpoenaed by the state as a witness for his prosecution on another matter. His reaction to my involuntary appearance was an avowal of vengeance which assumed form in a campaign of careful slander and a confident cultivation of my mother and sister, instilling in them the belief that I had maneuvered his failure and, in reality, was myself the thief.

“Records prove the monstrous falsity of this concept. However, my mother and sister, doubting my sanity, implored the cooperation of my wife in suggesting my visit to a psychiatrist, which suggestion I accepted. Dr. Frederick Hacker, whom I visited, adjudged me rational but suffering a state of overamiability, in which failure to please everyone created a condition of self-reproach. He suggested that I risk their displeasure by learning to say ‘no.’

#### Drinking Away Dejection

“Soon after these visits, my wife and I, with the children, traveled to Delaware to visit, and I remained there until June, 1948. Following a quarrel with Dorothy concerning continuance of my career, I left to return to Los Angeles, expecting to begin work in a film on the fifteenth of June. After weeks of tests and fittings, the picture was canceled. I began painting and remodeling our present house and looking about for a new one. I was somewhat depressed over the lack of communication from my wife in Delaware, and I began drinking a great deal more than was good for me.”

That turbulent phase of Mitchum’s life ushered in his most serious encounter with the law, on the night of August 31-September 1, 1948. His discussion of the episode with me covers many details never before published. He did not make these revelations even in court, where he pleaded mute, or “no defense.” Taking the events in order, he told me:

“I spent the afternoon and evening with Robin Ford, one of the hangers-on who attached themselves to me after I got out of the Army. He was a bartender when I first knew him. At the time, how-

"This is the bitter end of everything. All's shot to hell."



In a photograph widely distributed at the time, Mitchum mops a Los Angeles jail corridor while serving his 1949 sentence for narcotics.

**Mitchum** ever, he was working for an insurance and real-estate firm. We had been together all afternoon looking at houses, as I was in the market for a new one.

"Ford had previously introduced me to a pretty blond chick named Lila Leeds. To me she was just another girl-about-town, and I had seen her twice—with Ford. Late in the afternoon he told me that she had just moved into a new house and that he wanted me to see it. I was busy getting ready for a new picture at RKO, *The Big Steal*, and I had to read the script, so I said no. But when we got back to my house about six P.M., he phoned her. She called back and asked me to drop by with Ford some time after ten P.M., when she'd be finished with decorating. I said I was tired and doubted that we could come, but that we'd try."

Between six and eleven P.M. the two men drank a fifth of Scotch in Mitchum's kitchen, according to his probation report. Then Mitchum decided to drive to San Fernando Valley for spareribs.

"I asked Ford to go along," he told me. "Ford said he'd like to, but that first we'd have to stop at his house to get a coat; he was in his shirtsleeves. On the way to his apartment in Hollywood he asked me to pull up at a street corner. He got out and made a phone call. I looked at the dashboard clock. It was exactly 11:20 P.M. At his apartment I think he made another phone call. Then we started from Hollywood through Laurel Canyon to the San Fernando Valley, and again he asked me to stop and made a phone call. He came back and said he had just talked to Lila Leeds and that since her house was only a few blocks away, why didn't we drop by. I was pretty hungry for those spareribs by then, but I said 'OK, just for a minute.'

#### The Party at Lila's

"We started looking for Lila's house at 8443 Ridpath Drive, but never having been there before, I missed the house on the first pass. Finally I found it and we went in. There were two girls there, Lila Leeds and another kid who I later found out was named Vicki Evans. There also were some boxer puppies.

"I said, 'I thought I saw somebody outside,' but I looked out the window and couldn't see anything. Miss Leeds handed me a lighted cigarette and I looked up and this time I was sure there was a face at the window. I said something to that effect and the Evans girl yelled, 'Oh, it's just those damned dogs.' She rushed to the kitchen door and opened it. The next thing I knew, there was a crash and in came two men holding the Evans kid in front of them as a shield. I thought they were holdup men, and I crouched to throw a small table at them, but they shouted, 'Police officers!' I dropped the table and they grabbed me. Then I looked at my watch. I hadn't been in the house more than seven minutes."

The two officers were A. M. Barr and J. B. McKinnon, of the Los Angeles narcotics squad. Nine additional local, state and Federal narcotics officers arrived almost on their heels. They confiscated Mitchum's cigarette and twenty-three others in the room. All proved to be marijuana. Mitchum and his companions were handcuffed and hustled off to jail.

The police version of the arrest differed considerably from Mitchum's. Be-

fore breaking in, Barr said, they watched the party for two and a half hours. Through a microphone hidden in the chimney, they heard Miss Leeds say before Mitchum and Ford arrived, "The boys are on their way up and they're loaded." Just before the raid, the police testimony continued, Miss Evans exclaimed, "Oh, this tastes funny. What if it knocks me out? Oh, daddy!"

After his arrest, the police claim, Mitchum admitted, "Yes, boys, I was smoking the marijuana cigarette when you came in. I guess it's all over now. I've been smoking marijuana for years. The last time I smoked was about a week ago. I knew I would get caught sooner or later. I'm ruined."

When he was released on bail the next morning, Mitchum was quoted by reporters as saying, "This is the bitter end of everything—my career, my home, my marriage. All are shot to hell. My wife left me two months ago, when she heard about one or two marijuana parties I'd been on. She and the kids were coming out here from the East and we were all set for a big fat reconciliation. That is, we were all set until she hears about this."

Mitchum was indicted on two charges: Possessing and conspiring to possess marijuana. He stood trial on the second charge only. Waiving a jury trial, he threw himself on the mercy of the court. The judge sentenced him to sixty days in the Los Angeles County Jail, a one-year suspended sentence, and two years' probation. After fifty-nine days, during which he wore prison garb, worked at odd jobs and was plentifully photographed by the press, he was released. But the case was far from closed.

In 1949 and again in 1951 there came two remarkable sequels. First, the Los Angeles district attorney launched an investigation into persistent rumors that Mitchum had been framed, either by enemies or by policemen who needed a splashy headline story to obscure their inaction against narcotics rackets. Lila Leeds told the district attorney's investigators that Vicki Evans, who had smoked reefers with her many times before, did not touch one all that day. Further, Miss Leeds wondered aloud why the police, who had testified to seeing her smoking earlier in the evening, had not broken in then and arrested her hours before Mitchum arrived. (Mitchum's attorney, the late Jerry Giesler, said in his memoirs that he believed Mitchum's "tribulation was a deliberate design on the part of someone who wished him ill.")

#### Questions About the Raid

Mitchum himself made no accusations, but he said to me: "I'd still like to know the answers to some pertinent questions. Why were the newspapers tipped off, before I even arrived at the Leeds house, that a big-name movie star was going to be picked up on marijuana charges that night? Why did Robin Ford stop off to make so many phone calls that night? Why didn't the police raid the Leeds house earlier, since they testified they had seen Miss Leeds smoking long before I arrived? Why did Vicki Evans go to the kitchen door just as the police broke in, and why was she the only one of us who never was convicted? Why did a half dozen other movie stars come up to me later and thank me, saying they had been invited to a party at that house that night,

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"This guy is a fascinating character—  
more complex than Brando or Sinatra."

**Mitchum** but when they arrived it was already surrounded by police cars, lights flashing, so they took off?"

Although results of the district attorney's investigation were not publicly announced, on January 31, 1951, the court quietly reviewed Mitchum's case and ordered that "the verdict of guilty be set aside and that a plea of not guilty be entered and that the information or complaint be dismissed." The court's action was prompted by Mitchum's request for a review of his case on completion of his probation period. Whether the action resulted from his exemplary conduct during probation, or whether it reflected legal doubts concerning some circumstances of his arrest is anybody's guess—like so much else about Mitchum.

The star himself never attempted to publicize the court exoneration. His complete silence has, in fact, been astonishing, since he had top geniuses of studio press agency at his side.

Looking back at the 1948 arrest and its aftermath, one might say that it did not hurt Mitchum's career and may even have benefited him. The movie public seemed to respect him for taking his medicine without whining. While he certainly lost all resemblance to a model for American youth, people flocked to see his pictures. His wife Dorothy returned from Delaware with their three children. Mitchum made up with her and also with his mother and sister, with whom he and Dorothy had long bickered. He returned to work at RKO immediately upon getting out of jail, but he was broke.

"It took me from 1948 to 1951 before I was on my feet financially again," he told me. He owed his defense attorney, Jerry Giesler, \$50,000 in legal fees. Howard Hughes, then head of RKO, lent him the sum at 6 percent, to be deducted from future pay. Mitchum paid off, then became his own boss.

As a free-lance actor with his own independent production company, Mitchum commanded a salary as high as \$300,000 per picture and made such fine films as *Night of the Hunter*, *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, and *The Sundowners*.

But Mitchum, the towering screen success, has not fully outgrown Mitchum the rough-and-tumble bucko. His tendency to tangle with cops and other male types persisted through the 1950's. In 1951, he floored a soldier named Bernard B. Reynolds, a professional heavyweight boxer, in the bar of a Colorado Springs hotel and, according to a Military Police sergeant, kicked Reynolds "in the head." In 1953 he outraced a Los Angeles motorcycle cop in his sports car at seventy miles an hour, and was charged with "evading arrest" and "resisting and obstructing an officer." A year later he rammed his car into the rear of another vehicle that had halted at an intersection, was sued for \$50,000, and settled the case out of court for an undisclosed amount. In 1956 he flattened two U.S. Navy sailors in a barroom brawl on the Caribbean island of Tobago and became involved with the Navy Shore Patrol.

In a sort of international change of pace, Bob won himself some questionable publicity in 1954 by clinching instead of

punching. At the Cannes Film Festival that year, he happened to be next to a shapely damsel named Simone Silva. She suddenly yielded to an urge to remove the top of her picnic costume in the presence of about fifty photographers. In the ensuing scramble, three photographers fell into the Mediterranean, one fractured his ankle, and another suffered a broken elbow. But the survivors managed to record the scene—showing a leering Mitchum with his arm around seminude Simone.

During the past year, however, Bob has shown restraint. A few months ago an upholsterer's apprentice cornered him in a Dublin pub, nagged him for his autograph and compounded the annoyance by calling him Kirk Douglas. Mitchum obliged by writing a brief obscenity and signing Douglas's name. His reward was a punch in the eye. With noteworthy self-control, Mitchum did not strike back at the apprentice, a much smaller man. Indignantly the apprentice informed the Dublin press that Mitchum had insulted motherhood, patriotism and the Irish flag. The furor subsided when Dublin police expelled the apprentice as an undesirable person.

A more recent contretemps came about while Mitchum was making *The Longest Day*, a 20th Century-Fox film about the Allies' D-day landings in World War II. Mitchum, playing Brig. Gen. Norman Cota, was wallowing on a landing craft in the English Channel on a cold, rainy day when he made a characteristically pungent remark about the inefficiency of the film's production staff, which had him prematurely at sea while a detachment of U.S. infantry, working as extras in the scene, were still trying to board their landing craft in the choppy surf off the beach. This was overheard by a newspaperman, who interpreted it in his dispatch as a blast against the efficiency of the U.S. Army. Although the Army denied that Mitchum had said any such thing, the incident became a *cause célèbre* for many days in the newspapers.

### "Just Be Against It"

On that occasion Mitchum insisted that he didn't know his explosive remark was loaded. However, nearly every remark he makes in public is uttered for its shock value. He told me he subscribes to the policy of the late Humphrey Bogart, who said, "I don't care what it is. Just be against it." In this vein Mitchum recently replied to a woman who asked him to contribute to the S.P.C.A., "Don't you think all dogs should be shot?"

Sometimes he outrageously embroiders stories about people he has known. He told me about a romance between a girl of eight and a fifty-five-year-old man. On checking, I learned that the girl actually was nineteen and the man all of twenty-five. One afternoon he entertained two unemployed actors, one of whom he referred to as "the Hog," with one of the bawdiest stories I have ever heard—about love practices among coal miners in Pennsylvania.

Yet Mitchum can be, in a twinkling, a man of startling erudition and tenderness. Ten minutes after telling the shocking story about miners, he talked with

affection and respect of his wife Dorothy, to whom he has been married for twenty-two years, and of his three children, Jim, Chris and Trina, who are well brought up and whom he obviously adores. He is happiest when he can escape from the frenetic overstimulation of Hollywood to his family and 200-acre estate on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In this atmosphere Mitchum does such gentle things as writing poetry to ten-year-old Trina. One poem read in part:

*How about this child!  
With the fresh smell of April  
And tears cheering the heartbroken smile  
of her hope  
And, moist-handed,  
Praying in song so rich  
That listeners die  
Upon its wish.*

In an embarrassed way Mitchum admitted to me that he had written and published both music and literature. One of his songs, *The Ballad of Thunder Road* (recorded in his own baritone voice in 1958) was still among the Top 100 popular records in the monthly poll of *Cash Box*, the music trade publication, as recently as April, 1962. His poetry has appeared in esoteric magazines, and his short stories and articles—all under his own by-line—have been sold to national magazines. One article, which appeared in *This Week*, was about his stepfather, an elderly British hero of World War I, who, when he was sixty-three, falsified his age and became captain of a military supply barge in the Pacific in World War II.

In his dressing room one day Mitchum startled me by reciting Wordsworth sonnets and by whistling the obscure classical music from which several Academy Award-winning musical scores had been stolen. Directly behind him, as he recited and whistled, was a large photograph of a depraved-looking Mitchum, hair askew, eyes at characteristic half-mast, whiskey glass characteristically elevated toward the sensuous mouth. The photo, radiating evil, was mounted on a gag poster which indicated that Mitchum had won a vodka-distiller's acting award for the year. Mitchum caught me looking at the poster and abruptly terminated the sonnet he was reciting. "Forget about the poetry," he snapped. "That picture's the real me."

The game of defining Mitchum is widely played by many, including the man himself, but I have yet to find a sure winner at it. A director who knows Mitchum well told me, "This guy is one of the most fascinating characters we have in Hollywood—far more complex than Brando or Sinatra. He's a strange, lonely man in almost constant conflict with himself. There's Mitchum the primitive and Mitchum the sophisticate. I think he really wants the sophisticate to win out, but for some strange reason he feels comfortable only with the primitive and allows it to predominate."

The public knows mostly Mitchum the primitive. Once in 1953, for example, Mitchum, who has constant problems with telephones and often stops up their works with wads of chewing gum to prevent them from ringing, attempted to get

“Only difference between me and other actors is that I’ve spent more time in jail.”



Between takes in the filming of *The Longest Day*, Mitchum switches from a prop cigar to a cigarette.

**Mitchum** a dial tone from the operator to make an outside call. When the dial tone was not forthcoming, Mitchum destroyed his dressing room. The Los Angeles *Herald-Express* reported:

Robert definitely made a partial wreck out of the room. He is said to have jerked two phones from the wall, to have broken a glass on his neon-lighted dressing table and to have kicked a hole in a big ceramic pot holding a plant. After that he proceeded to the set and is said to have told assembled fellow workers, “If they treat me like an animal, I’ll behave like an animal.”

On another occasion Mitchum participated with fellow wreckers Frank Sinatra, Broderick Crawford, Lee Marvin and Myron McCormick in the partial demolition of the California Studios during the making of Stanley Kramer’s *Not as a Stranger*, which the noted producer-director remembers as “ten weeks of hell.” Sinatra and Mitchum headed the cast of the picture and somewhere along the way there was a simulated barroom knife fight in the dressing rooms, resulting in shattered doors, uprooted telephones and a smashed balustrade through which the 240-pound Crawford hurtled to the street uninjured.

#### “Knocking Out” a Boxer

On the other hand, Mitchum the sophisticate is an incredibly sensitive human being. In *Cape Fear* he went out of his way to be gentle with an extremely nervous Barrie Chase, playing her first dramatic role in a picture, and director J. Lee Thompson gives him much credit for Miss Chase’s extraordinarily fine performance in the film. In *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, director John Huston ordered Mitchum to put up a real fight on the beach at Tobago with a 240-pound native giant named Irving Allen, whom Huston hoped to convert into a heavy-weight boxing contender. The six-foot-one-inch, 190-pound Mitchum, who even at forty-five has the muscular, broad-shouldered body of a football end, poked gently at the fearsome-looking Allen for three rounds, then pushed him to the sand for a “knockout.” Mitchum told me, “Irving was just a big, lovable guy who worked as a baby sitter. He couldn’t fight a lick, so why should I make myself look good by clobbering him.” (Mitchum’s analysis of Allen’s pugilistic ability was correct. In the first fight in which Huston matched him in London, he ran out of the ring—and that was the end of his career as a professional boxer.)

In *The Sundowners*, director Fred Zinneman told me, when Mitchum had to shear sheep, he almost wept for fear that he would lacerate the animals’ skins and that they would bleed to death.

Zinneman’s general appraisal of Mitchum explains why he is one of Hollywood’s most-sought-after male stars. “Bob,” the distinguished director says, “is one of the finest instinctive actors in the business, almost in the same class with Spencer Tracy.”

Yet Mitchum, the human contradiction, refusing to be exalted, snarls, “They pay me and I have to get up early in the morning to work for them, so it’s all the same to me. The only difference between me and other actors is that I’ve spent more time in jail than any of them.”

THE END