

JULY 7, 1945

OUR COVER GIRL . . . *Peter Churchill*

MISS LANSBURY, are you by any chance related to George?" That started it all. Angela, it seemed, *was* related to George. He was her grandfather.

The thought which prompted the question must have been that this issue of *SCRIPT* would be out on the day of the first General Election in England since the war. It is impossible to think of English politics—in a progressive sense—without thinking of George Lansbury, at least it is for me and for many others like me who lived in England in the years between the two wars.

"The Right Honorable George Lansbury, P.C. M.P.," that's how *Who's Who* lists him, but in the mines of Wales, in the foundries, in the sweatshops of Whitechapel, in the breadlines of unemployed, in the prisons—anywhere where life was tough—you had only to say "Old George" and they'd know who you were talking about. "The best loved man of our time," Clement Atlee, Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, called him.

Old George was born, bred, lived and died among the poor of London—and never had any money—yes, and that goes for the time when he was a member of His Britannic Majesty's Cabinet, too. But the folks down in the less desirable parts (we don't talk of slums) of the Bow and Bromley district of London where he lived could tell you what a difference it made to have a Cabinet Minister for a neighbor.

He always lived the same kind of life among the same kind of people and he was always trying to do the same kind of things, only the scale of his activities varied, never the content. Whether he was engaged, as in the early days, in local struggles against the unbelievable injustice in social conditions in the England of the eighties, or, in later, larger days, was facing the redoubtable Winston across the floor of the House, cutting through the Churchillian rhetoric with the very force of his simplicity, he never varied or changed direction for a second. And that went on for sixty years, more or less. No wonder he made an impression on English life.



Edgar Lansbury, Angela's father, wrote a book some years ago about his father. Angela showed me her copy (wouldn't let me take it out of the house) and in it I found many remembered pictures of George and of England. There was young George at the "dame's school" in Whitechapel, threading the old lady's needle (she spent her time sewing during school hours) and joining in gory street battles armed with hobnailed boots and the deadly weapon of a kerb-stone wrapped in a cloth cap.

There was George as a young married man, setting off with his wife and two children to Australia in a cargo boat, converted for the emigrant trade by partitioning the hold into a series of "small boxes" barely big enough to lie down in, and in which "to go to bed was like putting yourself into your own coffin."

Australia was no promised land, as it turned out for George. No work. Then a job—stone-breaking. Then work as a meat carrier for a slaughter house. Then work on a farm: wages three hundred dollars a year. Finally, a return to England and the job of raising a family on thirty shillings (\$7.50) a week.

Then there was the George of the long fighting years in the Labour Party, as editor of the *Daily Herald*, and eventually as a member of the government.

There were small touches, trivial but enlightening; a picture of the family being driven off for a vacation in

an open wagon—father's one conceit being his handling of horses. "Whatever old nag he drove, his talk and bearing were those of the driver of a thoroughbred."

Twice Lansbury went to prison for his ideas. The first time was in connection with the campaign for Women's Suffrage. The second prison sentence was in 1921. The reason: an unfair arrangement of local taxation whereby the poorer sections of London paid much more heavily than the rich sections. The result: a stink, the gaining of his point, and the gaining of many hundreds of thousands of dollars of public benefit for the district of Poplar which he represented.

Lansbury was a democrat who lived what he thought. And democracy, as he understood it, meant letting the other fellow do what he wanted, as well as your doing what *you* wanted. A simple enough proposition perhaps but one that still seems to be overlooked. An instance: Lansbury, a confirmed teetotaler, who had never tasted a drop of liquor in his life and frequently denounced the evils of drink, stoutly opposed all moves for prohibition or the curtailment of liquor sales (this was before America went dry) thereby irritating many of his followers.

His comment on Fascism, made at the time of the Nazi purges, was short and prophetic:

"Since Hitler came to power the normal results of massacre have followed. Those who took to the sword have died by the sword."

Reading the book again made me think, if George Lansbury had been born later, and were still alive, what a very great "after the war" Prime Minister he might have made for England.

Interested in the third generation of the Lansbury clan, I asked Angela how things were going with her. In frank Lansbury fashion she told me.

"The first time I came to Hollywood, two years ago," she said, cutting all the usual why-I-wanted-to-be-an-actress stuff, "I ran into a blank wall. I was told I didn't have a movie face, was too tall, and my accent was too English. My agent thought I ought to sing and be cute, so I sang and was cute—to the best of my ability.

"After each failure to land a job I changed my style of singing in the hopes of better luck. I tried everything from ballads to the French *disease* style, à la Lucienne Boyer, via swing and German *lieder*. The results were surprising. One day I overheard a talent scout from a major studio remark, 'That girl is absolutely nuts.'

"So I went to work wrapping packages at Bullock's-Wilshire. One thing I learned there was to tie such snappy knots and bows, that, come Christmas, I'm in great demand. I liked the smell of the cosmetic department best, so, later, I moved over there."

One day Angela heard they were casting at MGM, so she took a day off and had another shot at movies. This time she "came in on the beam."

I knew that Angela was the youngest actress to be nominated for an Academy Award, but what I didn't know was that when George Cukor picked her for the maid in "Gaslight" ("took a long chance on me," was the way she described it) she had never before played a part of any kind in any production. But, lest this should add to that old Hollywood Cinderella legend, let it be said that three years of dramatic school and English actress Moyna McGill for a mother had something to do with it.

So that's how Angela Lansbury lands (sorry about the pun, Angela!) on SCRIPT's cover.

Rob Wagner's

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