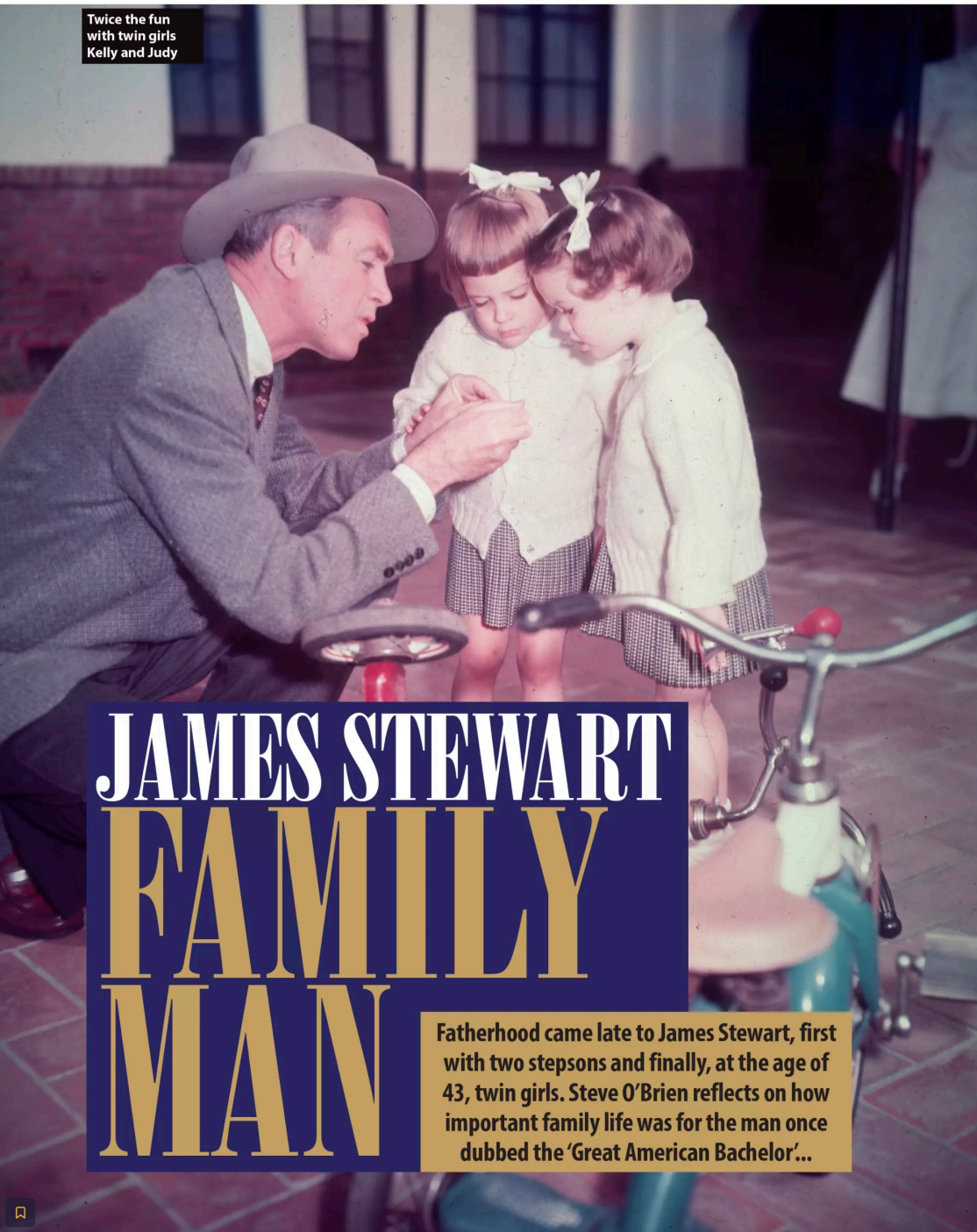


Twice the fun with twin girls Kelly and Judy



JAMES STEWART FAMILY MAN

Fatherhood came late to James Stewart, first with two stepsons and finally, at the age of 43, twin girls. Steve O'Brien reflects on how important family life was for the man once dubbed the 'Great American Bachelor'...

DID YOU KNOW?

Before meeting Gloria, James Stewart had been romantically connected to many Hollywood starlets including Ginger Rogers, Norma Shearer, Marlene Dietrich and Olivia de Havilland.



She needn't have worried. Jimmy, she said, 'was never bored or annoyed' with Ronnie and Michael, although, as she found out, disciplining them was not something that came naturally to the actor.

One day, Michael had been playing with his pet lizard and had, in typical little boy fashion, squashed it, causing its tail to come off. An enraged Gloria yelled at him, 'You're going to show that to your daddy, and he'll see to it you're properly punished!'

When Jimmy returned home, Gloria explained what had happened and a stern-faced 'Daddy' took Michael by the hand and walked him to his room.

'The minutes flew by, no sound was to be heard,' Gloria recounted. 'Finally, bursting with curiosity, the governess and I tiptoed upstairs and listened at the door.'

Any cinemagoer watching *It's a Wonderful Life* over the Christmas of 1946 would have seen in its lead actor James Stewart the epitome of the all-American patriarch, so assured was his performance as the doting dad of four in Frank Capra's festive favourite. Yet at the time of making that movie, the 38-year-old had yet to settle down with a family of his own, and his single status was so notorious that gossip columnist Hedda Hopper had called the actor the 'Great American Bachelor'.

He'd nearly been married once, to the singer Dinah Shore, but the woman who finally stole Jimmy Stewart's heart was a former model, with whom he'd been set up by his friends Gary Cooper and his wife, Rocky. Luckily, the Coopers proved eminent matchmakers and, at a star-studded party the couple had laid on at their home, Jimmy Stewart and Gloria Hatrick McLean finally met, bonding immediately over a love of golf and sailing. It was, the actor would recall, 'love at first sight'.

Unlike Jimmy, however, Gloria was already married, albeit separated from her husband, newspaper heir Edward McLean

Jr. The union had produced two children, Ronald (born in 1944) and Michael (1946), but having recently moved to Los Angeles, singledom was not working for Gloria. She'd told her friends, Gary and Rocky, that she was looking for 'a decent man with a strong character [and] a proper father who could raise her sons.'

And raise them he did. After his and Gloria's nuptials on 9 August 1949, Jimmy became Ronald and Michael's full-time dad, taking them on as if they were his own.

STEPPING UP

'It was my impression that Jimmy came along at the right moment to fill a void for the boys,' the socialite Mignon Winants reflected in Donald Dewey's biography of the actor. 'Neddy [Gloria's ex-husband] liked all his sons, but from some distance. He spent most of his waking hours being the playboy that he was. With Jimmy, the boys had a real father, and one who really took to the role as well as anyone could.'

Though Gloria would later tell *Photoplay* magazine that Jimmy, 'was used to seeing the boys around the house', she admitted that she had, 'a twinge or two' about how her new husband would cope being around the children 24/7.



Gloria gave birth to Judy and Kelly on 7 May 1951



In 1950 the family visited the UK for the London premiere of *Harvey*

'Now, Michael,' they heard Jimmy say. 'I want you to remember something. Think how embarrassed that poor lizard is going to be without its tail.'

'That was it! Some punishment!' Gloria recalled. 'The door opened and out they came, Michael grinning like an imp and Jimmy practically swaggering like a conquering hero.'

It was in 1950, a year after they'd married, that Gloria discovered she was pregnant and on 7 May 1951, the Stewarts welcomed twins Kelly and Judy. 'Where Gloria and I got so fortunate,' the actor would say, 'was that we got twin girls to go with two boys.'

MILITARY MAN

By all accounts, Jimmy was as devoted to his daughters as he had been, and continued to be, to his stepsons. 'Once my dad dressed as Santa Claus and came into our bedroom – my sister and I were astounded,' Kelly recalled in 2020, about one Christmas when she and her sister were little, remembering how, even though she knew it was her dad, he never broke character. 'I slapped him on the back and nudged him, but he just carried on as Santa,' she said.

If Jimmy was naturally paternal, Gloria's temperament, it seems, was less suited to parenthood. The writer Leonard Gershe told Donald Dewey that Mrs Stewart was 'certainly never maternal in



Ronald and Michael were just five and three when James Stewart married their mother Gloria

any Mother Earth sense', even to the point of grumbling about her children in interviews. 'Kelly follows Judy except in devilment,' Gloria told one reporter in 1954. 'Kelly makes my blood run cold sometimes. They adore each other. But when you take Judy on your lap, she completely relaxes. Kelly stiffens.'

But while Jimmy was, by nature, the more placid parent, there were some things that provoked him. When in the Sixties, America found itself at war in Vietnam, the Republican-leaning Jimmy had firmly held pro-war views about the conflict in South-East Asia, a stance that caused much friction



Proud Brigadier General Jimmy Stewart was there when stepson Ronald Stewart was sworn into the Marine Corps on 13 October 1967

within the family. 'I hate them,' he said when asked by an interviewer some years later about draft dodgers. 'Whether right or wrong, their country was at war and their country asked them to serve, and they refused and ran away. Cowards, that's what they were.'

Like many American families at the time, fierce arguments about the rights and wrongs of that conflict would often erupt around the dinner table. Michael's abhorrence of the war was so great,

he'd go on protests, much to the disgust of his father. Kelly, too, was sympathetic to the anti-war cause, even if she was less militant than her older brother.

Ronald's position, however, was more aligned with his dad's and, following his graduation, he enlisted in the Marines. When the 22-year-old was inducted, his bars were pinned to his uniform by one Brigadier General James Stewart (a veteran of the Second World War, he'd been promoted in 1959, becoming the highest-ranking actor in American military history). Shaking Ronald's hand, the proud father pulled his stepson close and told him he would visit him the first chance he got, wherever in the world he ended up being stationed. In 1967, however, there was only one place that was likely to be – Vietnam.

In early June 1969, everything seemed to be going well for the Stewarts. Kelly and Judy were about to graduate, and Michael was newly engaged and readying himself for married life. But then, on 8 June, Jimmy

and Gloria received the knock on the door every parent of a serving soldier fears. Marine 1st Lt Ronald McClean had been killed in action in the Quang Tri province of South Vietnam. He was just 24 years old.

Ronald's death devastated the now 60-something actor and he would spend the next months engulfed in grief. His depression was so overwhelming that production on the movie he was shooting at the time of his stepson's death, a comedy-Western titled *The Cheyenne Social Club* (1970), was shut down. When filming resumed, Jimmy's co-star Henry Fonda did his best to support his friend. 'He and I avoided talking about the war before the tragedy,' Fonda said. 'Now I did everything to take his mind off it. We chawed about old times at the Madison Square Hotel in New York, and our early bachelor days together in Brentwood.'

HEARTBREAK

Jimmy would work through his grief, but sadness remained at how fractured his beloved family now was. Not only was Ronald gone, but Michael was married and the girls were at college. The family nest that had meant so much to the actor in the Fifties and Sixties was no more.

The following decade, however, would see Jimmy and Gloria become grandparents for the first time, when Michael (whose relationship with his stepfather had healed, in the aftermath of Ronald's death) and his wife Barbara had a baby boy. Then in 1979 Judy married Steve Merrill, a venture capitalist from San Francisco. Kelly, meanwhile, had become hitched to Cambridge University professor Alexander Harcourt and was embarking on a career as a primatologist.

At the dawn of the Nineties, Jimmy would need the emotional support of his children and



Ronald was 24 when he was killed in action in Vietnam

A traditional father

In the book *Raised by the Stars*, published in 2011, Kelly Stewart-Harcourt painted a picture of her father as a gentle, if traditional, figure. 'Dad sat in a big comfy armchair that had a matching footrest and no one else ever sat in that chair when he was home!' she told author Nick Thomas. 'When he was working on a movie, he would sit with the script in his hands and his lips moving, saying his lines to himself. He never said anything out loud. I have that image of him burned into my mind. We never read any of the lines with him. Except for that, he rarely brought his work home with him.'

She went on to reveal that he wasn't 'a hands-on dad' but was instead a man fashioned by the traditions of the time, when the father went out to work, leaving much of the day-to-day parenting to Gloria and the children's governess. 'He didn't help us with our homework and I doubt he ever changed a diaper,' Kelly explained. 'But he taught by example and just had a very quiet way about him.'

DID YOU KNOW?

In her career as a primatologist, Kelly Stewart-Harcourt worked closely alongside the late Dian Fossey, who was the subject of the 1988 feature *Gorillas in the Mist*.



Kelly married Alexander Harcourt in 1977



Jimmy was relieved to have the support of his best friend Henry Fonda to help him through his grief while filming *The Cheyenne Social Club*



In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey was father to Janie, Zuzu, Pete and Tommy

grandchildren even more when Gloria succumbed to lung cancer at the age of 75. After more than 40 years together, her death hit Jimmy hard. 'It's just wrong,' he told Gloria's niece, Karin Lopp, at her funeral. 'It's absolutely wrong that it happened this way.'

In the aftermath of his wife's passing, Jimmy retreated from public view, spending most of his time in his bedroom, emerging only for meals or for visits from Michael, Kelly and Judy. In June 1997 he suffered a pulmonary embolism, which in turn caused a fatal heart attack. He died, aged 89, on 2 July with his children by his side.

A TEACHER BY EXAMPLE

In the years since James Stewart's death, his three children have been the gatekeepers of his legacy. In 2007, all three appeared together when the US Postal Service issued a stamp featuring their father's image, with Kelly saying, 'Our family is so honoured. I'm sure my father would be humbled as well. He received many awards throughout his life and I'm sure he would view this as one of the most cherished.'

Kelly was also on hand to slam White House staffer Natalie Harp at the Republican National Convention in 2020, when she likened then-President Donald Trump to the character of George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*. 'Given that this beloved American classic is about decency, compassion, sacrifice and a fight against corruption,' Kelly told *The New York Times*, 'our family

considers Ms Harp's analogy to be the height of hypocrisy and dishonesty.'

Even now, 27 years after his death, James Stewart's legacy as a father continues to make a difference. Kelly has said it was the holidays her parents took her on that inspired her to become a naturalist (she specialises in Africa's rare and endangered mountain gorillas) and the example he set as a father would provide a moral framework for her and her siblings that they would carry into their adult lives.

'Dad as a father was great,' Kelly told ABC News in 2022, 'because he never lectured us on how to be good... He taught us by the way he lived.'

'Gloria and the children continue to bring me enormous pleasure,' Jimmy once gushed in a 1985 interview. 'On the whole, it's been a darn wonderful life.'



A Wonderful Life

The public know James Stewart more as the father to *It's a Wonderful Life*'s Janie, Zuzu, Pete and Tommy than they do Ronald, Michael, Kelly and Judy, but that may change soon, with the news that a big-screen biopic of one of the silver screen's greatest actors is in development, with Kelly Stewart-Harcourt acting as its executive producer.

'I am so honoured Kelly and her family are trusting us with their father's legacy,' producer Aaron Burns said in a statement earlier this year. 'We are excited to take moviegoers on a journey to discover the real Jimmy, and how his father's prayers and his collaboration with Frank Capra guided him through his darkest hours. Jimmy came to truly embody the characters he played, as husband, father, and citizen.'

'Our family is thrilled that Aaron and his team approached us about bringing Dad's story to life on the big screen,' added Kelly. 'Everyone loved him as George Bailey. Now they can learn how that movie intertwined with other parts of his life in so many important ways.'

I know the face...

BARBARA LOTT



Born: 15 May 1920, Surrey, England

Died: 19 December 2002, London, England

Screen debut: Mr Kettle's Granddaughter in *Look Up and Laugh* (1935)

Screen credits: 115

Best known for: Barbara trained at RADA but her film career as a child actor was helped by her father William, who managed Ealing Studios before the Second World War. She was a familiar face on TV from the Forties onwards with many appearances in *ITV Television Playhouse* (1958-59), *Dixon of Dook Green* (1967-70), *Crown Court* (1973) and *Coronation Street* (1968-72). She played Nana in the mini-series *Ballet Shoes* (1975) and found fame in later life with comedy series *Rings on Their Fingers* (1978-80). However, she will always be best remembered as Ronnie Corbett's overbearing mother in *Sorry* (1981-88).