CHARM, LIKE mercury, is elusive.

How do you pin it down? And how do you pin down Cary Grant, Hollywood's synonym for charm? For there's no doubt that, as rivals have grudgingly admitted for 25 years, "the guy's got it."

What is it? And how did he get it? The contradictions in his career shed little light.

Cary began as a clown, but later played opposite such queens as Ingrid Bergman and Marlene Dietrich, and at least one princess, Grace Kelly. He drove to Hollywood in a secondhand car, then became one of filmdom's 10 top money-makers and one of the world's 10 best-dressed men. A master of light comedy, he leaps into swashbuckling roles (remember "Gunga Din"?) and treads with equal assurance through heavy drama.

Cary turns on the charm for sophisticated Deborah Kerr.

Those who know Cary offer little assistance.

His wife, Betsy Drake, says, "I agree with anything nice that's said about him. I've been in love with him for over 10 years."

Sultry Sophia Loren, his costar in "The Pride and the Passion," furnishes the continental consensus. "His voice is so-o-o . . ." she shrugs, with a European wave of the hands, ". . . and the way he looks at you . . . !" She shivers. Then, abruptly, "He is such a gentleman."

Another former costar, Deborah Kerr, supplies a calm Anglo-Saxon summation. "First of all," she says, "he's the only man I know who becomes more handsome every year. Secondly, his manners are impeccable. But most important is his attitude. He wants people around him to be charming, so he charms them."

The unemotional masculine analysis is given by the producer of "The Pride and the Passion," Stanley Kramer. "The guy was born with it," Kramer claims. "The trouble is he has so much of it that people forget he's also a fine actor."

Cary himself adds to the confusion by denying almost everything. "I may act charming," he explains, "but actually I'm a snob."

Cary gives his British father credit for his personality traits. "He once told me," Cary recalls, "'It's better to buy one pair of good shoes than five cheap ones.'"

His parents were moderately well-off and Cary (who was born Archibald Alexander Leach) was no delinquent, but he ran away from home twice during his teens. His goal: show business.

He was a knockdown comic and eccentric dancer with an English troupe when he came to America. After a job at Coney Island as a stiltwalker, he stumbled into a few small roles on Broadway. Following a Summer singing operettas in St. Louis, he took off for Hollywood with a new name: Cary Grant.

In his first picture, "This Is the Night," he played Thelma Todd's javelin-throwing husband. And, if you want to know how well his charm has held together over the years, check the date: 1932.

In those early years, Cary, who since has traveled in the upper strata of society, was cast in two pictures opposite Mae West.

Does he deny it? He brags about it!

"She was great," the self-styled snob says. "I learned everything from her. She had perfect timing, a great instinct for getting the best of every scene."

Cary's instincts led him to drop contract work and try free-lancing. His instincts were right. In rapid order he captured roles in "Topper," "The Awful Truth," and "Bringing Up Baby," three all-time comedy classics.

Two decades and several score pictures later, that charming enigma Cary Grant is still up there at the top.

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