

LILLIAN GISH

BY JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER

It occurred to me, gazing apprehensively at Lillian, that it might be wise to take a drawing-room on the New York train. We had been in West Chester, and we were standing on the station platform at West Philadelphia. Everyone who passed, or, rather, who approached, forgot what he might be doing, where he had been going, and regarded her from short distances. There wasn't a crowd, it was too bitterly cold for the casual; but no one on the platform was lost to us. Lillian had just been telling me that she hated a lot of clothes and was never cold. A fur coat, practically speaking, was almost all she needed between her and Winter; and she went on to explain how mistaken it was to refer to her as fragile. The fragility, it seemed, was more apparent than actual: I got the impression from her that when she was making "Way Down East" her favorite position was lying on natural ice with her loosened hair in the water of the river. An insurance company, called upon to protect Mr. Griffith against the risk of such scenes, would only chance its money on Lillian and her soundness. She told me this, more than once, I think, with a great deal of pride. As she said it she looked at me with the wistfulness, the drooping delicacy, of a young weeping willow at dusk.

The drawing-room to New York we got; and, finally, rid of the Pullman conductor and the train conductor, after assuring the porter once more that he had neglected nothing, I bolted the door on a public acting as though the car had been sharply tilted in our direction. I fastened the door, but, before I could sit down, a

firm knock fell on it. I hope you don't mind, I said to Lillian; but I'll be damned if I hear it! She was a little startled at the damned, but at the rest she smiled. The knocking, however, grew continuous; and in the end, I was forced to recognize it. Two men at once entered as though they had been comically propelled from behind. The first was vaguely familiar, but there was nothing vague in his greeting of me: he had gone to school with me—thirty years ago, that would have been—his memory of those days held nothing happier than me, and he saw me again, after so long, with a deep pleasure. . . . During this his intentness on Lillian was romantically complete.

The individual with this faithful friend of my childhood elbowed himself into view, and, prompted by their names, I introduced them to Miss Gish. I then explained that we were engaged in planning a moving, a very moving, picture, and they reluctantly withdrew. Lillian, sitting facing me, was turning over the pages of *Vanity Fair*; and I reflected that I was in a Pullman drawing-room, going to the city of New York, with, perhaps, the loveliest girl known. This surprised me in that I was surprised at my lack of surprise. If it had happened to me fifteen years before, if, at any time between twenty and thirty, I had taken Lillian from one place to another, I would have been in a state of incredulous delight. At the idea alone! But now—though no one in the world better appreciated her loveliness—I had a calm and very complete, almost a detached, view of her. The truth was that I was filled with the desire to use her beauty

for my own very definite and selfish ends.

At that time my experience in moving, exceedingly moving, pictures had hardly begun: and I saw, in imagination, the picture I would, without a doubt in the world, make with Lillian Gish. I had described it to her: no one, I told her, who has worked with you, has had the slightest idea of what your charm really is. Two men, and not unsuccessfully, have written about it, about you, for years—James Branch Cabell and myself. James thinks it is Helen of Troy; and, if he is right, then you, too, are Helen. I mean that you have the quality which, in a Golden Age, would hold an army about the walls of a city for seven years. Helen might be different from you in every apparent particular, from the ground gold in her hair to her dyed feet, but you are one at heart. Listen, in this picture none will ever possess you, no arms will be caught about you, dragging you down to the realities of satisfaction. You will be, like the April moon, a thing for all young men to dream about forever; you will be the immeasurable difference between what men have and what they want.

How, she asked, could that be done on the screen?

Easily, I asserted—that, heaven is my witness, was what I said. The stories for you are endless; we can choose any period of the world's history, any place in the world: and there you'll be, perpetually young and always old, as eternal, almost, as the ice. Timeless. Her celebrated wistfulness, at this, increased. Looking back, now, I can see that she was thinking of the moving pictures as she knew them. But she was touched, pleased; my admiration was strong enough to persuade her, for a minute, that what I described might be accomplished.

But I hadn't, yet, made clear what, in her, the special power was that no one had publicly recognized. All men, I continued, young and old, have a longing for a perfection of beauty; they never possess it; and so their dream is uninterrupted. If this

happened differently, and the loveliest of ladies flung herself into the arms of a man cherishing her as a radiant vision, while he wouldn't consider himself defrauded, still the dream would escape. He would find it, a star, still undisturbed in the sky of his imagination. The loveliest of ladies he'd soon grow accustomed to. And you, dear Lillian, as I have already said, are the fragrant April moon of men's hopes.

I will make a picture for you that, a hundred years from now, will send young men away from it forever dissatisfied with reality. No one, seeing you, will ever again be deeply interested in other girls. I recalled to her the legend of Diana—how a countryman, hearing Diana's horn through the woods, lost in vague restlessness his familiar content. You will be the clear and unforgettable silver of the horn! She expressed a concern, for a moment pleasantly granting the incredible, for all those young men. It was then necessary to discover the outline of a suitable story; and, in a few minutes, I rapidly explained one which held the elements we were searching for. Lillian liked it, and a sense of triumph, of actual accomplishment, swept over me. Then, in a plaintive and musical murmur, she spoke of money. A great deal would be necessary. I knew that much, at least; but I was certain I could explain any sum from any source for the purpose of making deathless her charm.

And the director—

We could almost do it ourselves, I assured her; we might have a purely technical director, a mechanical director. Such a person, she admitted, she had never heard of. Perhaps I might find one. He would, I replied, be procured; and it would take me no time at all to clarify in his mind the Platonic theory of love. The end, she asked, hesitatingly, wouldn't it be unhappy? Of course not! Death isn't as tragic as the loss of a vision. If we could show that to the public . . . she lifted her gaze to me and left me—it invariably did—a little breathless. It will be as obvious,

and as remote, as an apple tree in blossom. An apple blossom and never the apple.

II

At West Chester Lillian had been reading, in manuscript, that part of "Cytherea" where Mina Raff, a moving picture actress delicate in beauty, had a part. I wanted her approval of Mina since, without Lillian, she would never have existed. One was not the other; it was just as I've said. I didn't want Lillian annoyed when the book appeared. She read before an open fire of hickory logs, in a characteristic delicate primness, the primness of a lily; and when she had finished we spent a long while trying to find a more satisfactory phrase for moving pictures than moving pictures. There was, we found, none other; and some people came in for one of those informal suppers where plates are carried to the stairs and to the corners of rooms.

There were drinks, but the one offered to Lillian she most firmly refused. She didn't, in this sense, drink; she never smoked. It dawned on me that she was a prude. By prude I meant a person convinced that the world and the flesh were the devil: she had an instinctive recoil from the thought of a cocktail and the implication of a cigarette. And that, as much as anything about her, delighted me; it was, for her, so exactly right; it made flawless her quaint rigidity of bearing, her withdrawn grace. She was, I thought, amazed at supper; and it occurred to me that the conjunction of undoubtedly nice people and drinking she found not without its novelty.

She talked very little—Lillian chattered not at all—and when she did it was in response to questions about what she called her work. That, naturally, was her passion, it was her religion, since it had accomplished for her the offices of a religion—it had raised her from the earth to the sky. Into her personal objective belief I didn't inquire. Yet, in whatever

she said, she was insistent on the debt owed to those who had helped her, who had, in a way, made her possible. I objected there, telling her that no individual was essential to her. You would have inevitably discovered what you needed and used it until the value was gone, and then you'd have taken the next step in your career.

She didn't agree with me, she even suspected my remarks for a lack of gratitude. The innate coldness, the self-preservation, of the creative spirit, she, in effect, repudiated. Her friends she adored. They were, in addition to warm actualities, symbols of what it was necessary to maintain. She could no more hold back her gratitude than—than deny her love for her mother. In Lillian's case, of course, it was possible that her mother was all she maintained for her; but I wasn't touched by the sheer idea, the word, of mother; and I admitted this. There are mothers who are only a nuisance, a fatality, I declared; and, of all her delightful looks, the one she gave me then was the most entrancing. It was during this that I happened to think of her eyes as butterflies fluttering softly to their object. Her breath was suspended: it was clear that a bolt from heaven, driving me down to the ultimate cellar, would not have astounded her.

I went on, not too seriously, in an attack on the most celebrated objects of veneration, including home, the lamp in the window, loud patriotism, charity; and, as I progressed, she positively looked for the bolt from above; she regarded it as dilatory, a bolt not about its avenging business. Lillian had never before heard the coolness of logic applied to the figures of emotion, and I wondered how it was affecting her. I wondered if it were possible to add to her loveliness a mind liberated from the tyranny of mob sentimentality. And, in this connection, I repeated perhaps the most beautiful phrase ever conceived, the truth shall make you free. I wanted this, I am afraid, more for myself

than for her—wasn't she to act in the picture I had mentally projected for her, for us . . . for me!

The trouble with her was slight—she hadn't associated with the people and ideas that would have given a clear and aesthetic form to her thoughts. She hadn't the relative calm, the superiority, of an intelligent background. Lillian, God knew, was wholly superior; but the surroundings chance, and her needs, had led her into were not those to encourage a tonic hardness of mind. The acting profession, for example, was notoriously sentimental, generous with money and tears and sympathy and promises; loving its mother—why, practically, was its father never mentioned?—and declaiming the beauties of conventional curtains transferred from a stereotyped stage to informal reality. Inherently Lillian was infinitely better than this; but it had imposed itself on her willingness to believe good of everything that wasn't bad. That, however, was not her fault; it was the failing generally, of America.

It was, in particular, the weakness of moving pictures. The men who—no better presenting themselves—really had them in charge were without aesthetic background. They had been, in many cases, actors; with the stoutest of hearts their minds weren't tough enough to encounter life, now out of the theatre, and set it down with even a relative truth. They carried into the new suspended possibilities of moving pictures the stupid terms of the stage—a heavy, the lead, the juvenile; and into those tin moulds they forced, well—Lillian. I was thinking rather less about Mr. Griffith than of others; but when, in a picture that held Lillian's utter grace, he persuaded a hen to drop an egg on the head of the immemorial fat boy, I began to see that we couldn't turn to him for a visual legend silver like Diana's horn and tender like the veiled moon of Spring.

Some of this I said to her on the train and some through dinner at the St. Regis.

We began the latter promptly, a few minutes past seven; I made what seemed to me a few remarks, and a dining room captain told me that it was time to close. It was past midnight. A waiter gave me my account: on it there were charged six plates of raspberry ice, three English double corona cigars, and an alligator pear salad. The table cloth was traced with red lines—the raspberry ice—which formed the pattern of a moving picture; the cigars had vanished . . . I suspected Lillian of eating the salad, and it was time to go. I didn't remember the details of our talk, but I did know that she had grown enthusiastic: for us, then, our plans were complete. What remained was inconsiderable. Did she tell me that she was then rehearsing a moving picture over Keen's Chop House? It seems to me that, in addition, she described how every night, conferring with the author, a new ending was written. Or was it the entire picture? There was a bother about money, too. More promises. It appeared to me that Lillian had been imposed on.

Yes, she did tell me such an unhappy story: the author of the stationary picture was the daughter of someone famous—was it on the Paris stage or in French letters? Anyhow, for that reason, principally, she had been retained. Again that wide willingness to accept everything as for the best! The romantic misconception. She secured the fur coat, and, in her automobile, we returned to our several hotels. The automobile, at least, was a reality, a fact; that much she had spun out of the intangible film of her charm; she had materialized, from a magic lantern, a solemn and correct chauffeur and a perfumed spray of flowers in an engraved glass conc.

III

I was the last person in the world to deny the solidity of her accomplishment there: a limousine and maiden-hair fern, flowers, for a Winter night were more than admirable; they were indispensable. I left

her, at the Savoy, I think it was, and returned to the Algonquin; and it was a long while before I saw Lillian again. The brightness of our imagined picture grew dim; it flickered and went out; since, among other things, I had been unable to discover a director willing to hear the Platonic theory clarified for the purpose of Lillian on the screen. Money and plans widely different from mine took possession of her. During this time I became better acquainted with the actualities of moving pictures. I met other stars, mostly clusters of electric lights, a number of directors, and some pictures were made from my stories. Now, a moving picture was a very large pan indeed, but not, by many diameters, large enough to hold all the fish it was required to fry. There was the star, the director, the author of the story, the author of the scenario, the whole technical battery, the distributors, the public, and the investment—visible, usually, in the persons of one or even two reassuring beings standing, on the locations, in an apart and distinguished calm beside the cameras. Every one of them had to be satisfied. The author of the scenario, for example, was almost invariably an exceedingly attractive and forceful woman, a woman, safe in the chair of authority, whose general attitude was one of benevolence together with a total lack of any spare moments. I liked them very much, but I always had the feeling that they heard what I had to say exactly as they heard the running clicking of the cameras, a necessary but not insuperable noise.

There could be no doubt about where the authority, the unquestioned power, should be—with, of course, the director. The quality of being Lillian Gish, the difficulties of that accomplishment, made practically impossible the gathering of the other widely separated and indispensable requirements for a successful moving picture. Here, again, was the question of background—an enormous knowledge of what had and what could be done. The directors I met were insistent on the

difference of moving pictures from other formal methods of expression, but that was, except for technicalities, mere nonsense. The essence of their occupation, like the base of mine, was a story: that was, a logical and convincing arrangement, the clearest arrangement possible, of facts and emotions for a given emotional result.

The parallel between themselves and me they wouldn't admit; what I called a successful picture they regarded as a sum of money up to a half million dollars dropped magnanimously into the bottomless cavern of art. The word art was theirs; I detested and never repeated it. They suspected me of a melancholy nobility which I was willing to discharge at their expense. In the meantime, though, in momentary burning nobilities of their own, they produced ideals of art; with, financially, the result that their suspicions, where I was concerned, were solidified.

Yes, the director, and not Lillian, should control every aspect of a moving picture woven out of her; and in that, miraculously, she was entirely willing to agree. She had a wonderful temperament, plastic and strong, and with an inhuman capacity for work. I watched her in "Way Down East"; and, thoroughly sophisticated to the mechanics of exhibited feeling, when her baby died I had a most naïve contraction of the heart. She wasn't, there, a shining and unattainable moon; but she was absolutely satisfactory . . . when she was allowed to be. The picture as a whole was a vaudeville, nothing more; its parts had no more essential relationship to each other than the varied acts of an evening at a vaudeville theatre. The sole difference was this—that, fortunately, Lillian came upon the stage more than once.

When she appeared what had been dead took life, what had been meaningless took meaning, that contraction of the heart occurred. A story had to have movement and direction, it had to be composed to a centre, and the centre never, under any circumstance, lost sight of. Lillian was,

it turned out, the centre of "Way Down East"—the part Richard Barthelmess had was not, I thought, interesting to Richard—but her story was more blurred than focused on. What there was of it was admirably arranged by Mr. Griffith; but she was continually neglected for the laugh which, in moving pictures, is supposed to be the required support of a tear. Laughter, of course, could be quite all right, but it must be laughter in the tone of the whole, it must be the same voice, the same purpose, the single purpose—the story—speaking.

The trouble with that, it might be urged, lay with the censors—a force I had neglected to mention—for "Way Down East" was the story of a betrayal. But that, then, was a fault in selection; better that it should have been, with me, Platonics. If you couldn't have the picture of the stork winging downward burdened with his special errand then, obviously, you couldn't make the betraying of innocence sufficiently real. This, under the circumstances, was carried as far as might be, and the rest left to the accommodating and domestic hen. The photography was as fine as possible; and the river choked with ice, the crumpled figure at the frozen edge of death, were as stirring as the inevitable rescue permitted. Good vaudeville, but not Lillian.

In Lillian moving pictures had a miraculous possibility—the perfect medium of expression; but they were, so far definitely, unable to realize her. I didn't see "The White Sister"—I had no wish to see Lillian's pale charm against the rigid whiteness of a nun's headdress—but I

heard rumors of earthquakes and terrestrial disaster, and of extraordinary machines. Damn it, I wanted Lillian! I wanted a screen quiet and composed, out of which her magic would reach and touch all hearts with tenderness and longing and memory, with hopes. I wanted her to fill America with the illusion of the beauty of love. Instead of that a *terremoto*.

IV

Just before she left for Italy I saw her in a little private reception room of a hotel in New York. Her loveliness was more potent than ever. I had grown older, and, instead of talking, planning pictures never to be a reality, I wanted to sit as silently as possible and hold her slender hand. But, naturally, she was concerned with "The White Sister"; and, as usual, I couldn't hide from her that I disliked what she was doing. Anyone who cared to was free to deduce from this that I was merely self-seeking, impatient with developments that had no place for me. They could go to the devil!

She talked in little eager cool rushes; and again, it seemed to me, she had a belief in what I said. It was almost like the dinner at the St. Regis—time was obliterated. The April moon, the fragrant April evening, in a reception room at the Ritz-Carlton; an evening with a stir among the new maple leaves and the dim whiteness of early apple blossoms. She smiled, torn with doubt; a smile never to forget. I left her, and another phase of her career began, a new stardom in electric lights of a potential argente planet.

STELLA

BY THYRA SAMTER WINSLOW

As SHE dressed, Stella thought about Frank Simmons. He was coming to call in half an hour—it was half-past seven—and Frank was always on time. He would probably say something definite about getting married. Oh, he wouldn't propose in so many words, really. Men didn't do that. But they were to be alone for the evening and it would be easy enough to have him say something that would settle things. He had said a lot the last few times they had been together. She could have snapped him up if they had been alone. There had always been someone around, Margaret or Rita or Rita's Laurence. Well, she'd be alone with him tonight.

Stella dressed slowly so as to take up all the time, so that she would just be finished when Frank arrived. That was best. She hated that few minutes of waiting, after you've finished dressing, that interval when you sit with a book or play a Victrola record or run back and forth looking into the mirror, adjusting a stray hairpin, adding a little more powder.

She put on her best underthings, peach colored *crêpe de chine* with little scalloped lace edges. They wouldn't show, of course, but it sort of gives you confidence if you know you are looking nice underneath. She put on her newest, next-to-best dress. Her best dress was too formal for a casual call. This dress was brown satin with nice big chiffon sleeves. She could raise her arms and let the sleeves fall softly away. Nice sleeves. A nice dress. It had a big silver ornament at one side and made her look slender. It had been expensive but she could wear it all winter—after she was

married, even. It pays to buy a really good dress once in a while.

Stella ran the comb through her hair again and stuck in a few invisible hairpins. She wore her hair bobbed and it curled just a trifle. She knew the myth about bobbed hair being so much easier to take care of but she knew it took more time to keep her hair nice looking than it had ever taken when it was long. Still, it did make her look younger. That was the main thing.

Stella looked in the dressing-table mirror. No, she didn't look her age. She felt sure of that. Twenty-seven! What an awful age! Frank thought she was twenty-three. She hadn't told him that, actually, but Rita was twenty-three and he thought her just a little older than Rita. Would she have to tell him? Maybe. Oh, she could smooth that over all right.

She examined her face closely. Yes, there were wrinkles. Little ones at the corners of her eyes and rather deep lines from her nose to her mouth. Her cheeks were a little thin, too. She didn't have any gray hair, though. Of course she had found a few gray hairs from time to time, but if you pull them out when you first see them . . . That's all rot about ten coming in for every one you pull out. Twenty-seven wasn't old, these days. Being small kept Stella from looking her age. She knew that. Wasn't there an old German proverb about "*Alle kleine Hünde . . . ?*"

What would it matter, once she was married to Frank? She wouldn't let herself go. Of course not. She hated women who actually slumped. But it would be nice to relax, sort of. Even a good job,