Russell Ball

NO mere "promising youngster." Not just a "clever child." Olive Borden is potentially a big star. She has that combination of magnetism and intelligence that lifts the *prima donna* above the small fry. The story of this hard-working youngster's rise to prominence is like an Horatio Alger story—with settings and adjectives by Elinor Glyn.

Acquiring a Taste for OLIVE

By Francis Clark

And oh, how easy *that* is to do!

IT was a tense moment during the filming of "The Monkey Talks." Olive Borden, wearing a wisp of a costume, was in the midst of an important scene, when a stout German puffed on the set and stood watching the proceedings.

All of a sudden a *basso profundo* voice, with a rich Teutonic accent, boomed above the grinding of the camera. A short, emphatic forefinger was pointed at Miss Borden and the voice shouted, "Dere is de only girl in the shtudio fit to look at! Und sotch sax appeal!"

Whereupon Mr. R. A. Walsh's assistants removed Mr. F. W. Murnau's ambassador from the set in direct Irish fashion.

In Hollywood it is correct to murmur that a young lady has "IT." But it is *not* nice to stand before her and bellow to the world that she has "sotch sax appeal."

Nevertheless, that is the sort of a girl Olive Borden is. She arouses latent Columbus complexes. When you see her, you want to shout, "What Ho! Here is a Big Star!"

You cannot dismiss her by calling her "another promising young actress." You cannot patronize her by labelling her as a "clever child." Miss Borden has, for all her youth and comparative newness, the combination of magnetism and intelligence that lifts the *prima donna* above the small fry.

Young Olive is no fidgety ingenue, made flighty by a burst of unexpected success. Nor is she a trembling adventuress into stardom. Nor does she, thank goodness!—try to hide her uncertainty by wise-cracking. In brief, young Olive is no fool.

AND, what is even nicer, her mother is no fool. Mrs. Borden is the sort of mother who can chaperon a pretty daughter without making an army of enemies. She takes the curse off movie mothers.

It's a pleasant story—the tale of these two Southern women who, by courage and tact, won out where so many other unhappy mothers and unfortunate daughters have failed.

Olive and her mother have an amusing way of marking their notches of success.

For instance, when Olive was working in comedies, she had only one dress and the household was run by a colored Mammy, brought on from Virginia.

In "A Dressmaker from Paris," Olive had two dresses.

In "Yellow Fingers," she acquired a personal maid.

In "Fig Leaves," she had added a secretary.

In "The Joy Girl,"—her newest film—Olive went to Palm Beach on location and society personages sought to make her acquaintance.

Mrs. Borden refused the advances of the yacht-owners by discovering that there was no clause in Olive's contract calling for personal appearance in society.

"We are," commented Mrs. Borden, "working women!" The Bordens aren't easily dazzled.

Olive tells amusing stories about her early days in pictures. She relates these anecdotes with a true sense of values, with a shrewd, clear insight into the amazing bypaths of Hollywood life.

She began her career, as you probably know, in comedies. Just an extra girl. But wildly bent on earning her thirty-five dollars a week. It seems that most of the other girls in the same studio were veterans. With some of them, the movies were—ahem!—a sort of side-line. Many of them were so busy with urgent social engagements that they didn't have much time to devote to their careers.

OLIVE'S mind was strictly on her salary envelope and she stepped into all the rôles left vacant by the members of the yachting set. It was surprising how many rôles she picked up that had been cast aside by girls who simply couldn't be annoyed with over-time work.

Lots of girls have worked their way out of Broadway choruses to leading rôles in just this way.

Olive's first chance in a big studio was in "A Dressmaker from Paris." One day someone invited her to call at the Paramount studio for an interview with Mr. Lasky. It was then that Olive acquired her second dress. In anticipation of knocking Mr. Lasky for a row of Rolls-Royces, Mrs. Borden made Olive a new black satin dress, trimmed with strips of fur cut from an old scarf that Olive had worn as a child.

The interview with Mr. Lasky was only one of those Hollywood jokes. Mr. Lasky had not sent for her; he hadn't even heard of her. But the casting director and Paul Bern took one look at Olive and immediately both asked her to be a member of the beauty chorus in "A Dressmaker from Paris."

It's tough to be handed a glorified extra girl part when you are all dressed up to sign a starring contract. But Olive took the rôle, because the Bordens like fried chicken for their Sunday dinner.

When Olive was working in "A Dressmaker from Paris," Lois Wilson walked on the set. The beauty chorus, made up of the best-looking girls in Hollywood, were doing their stuff. Paul Bern asked Lois which girl she considered had the best chance of doing something big.

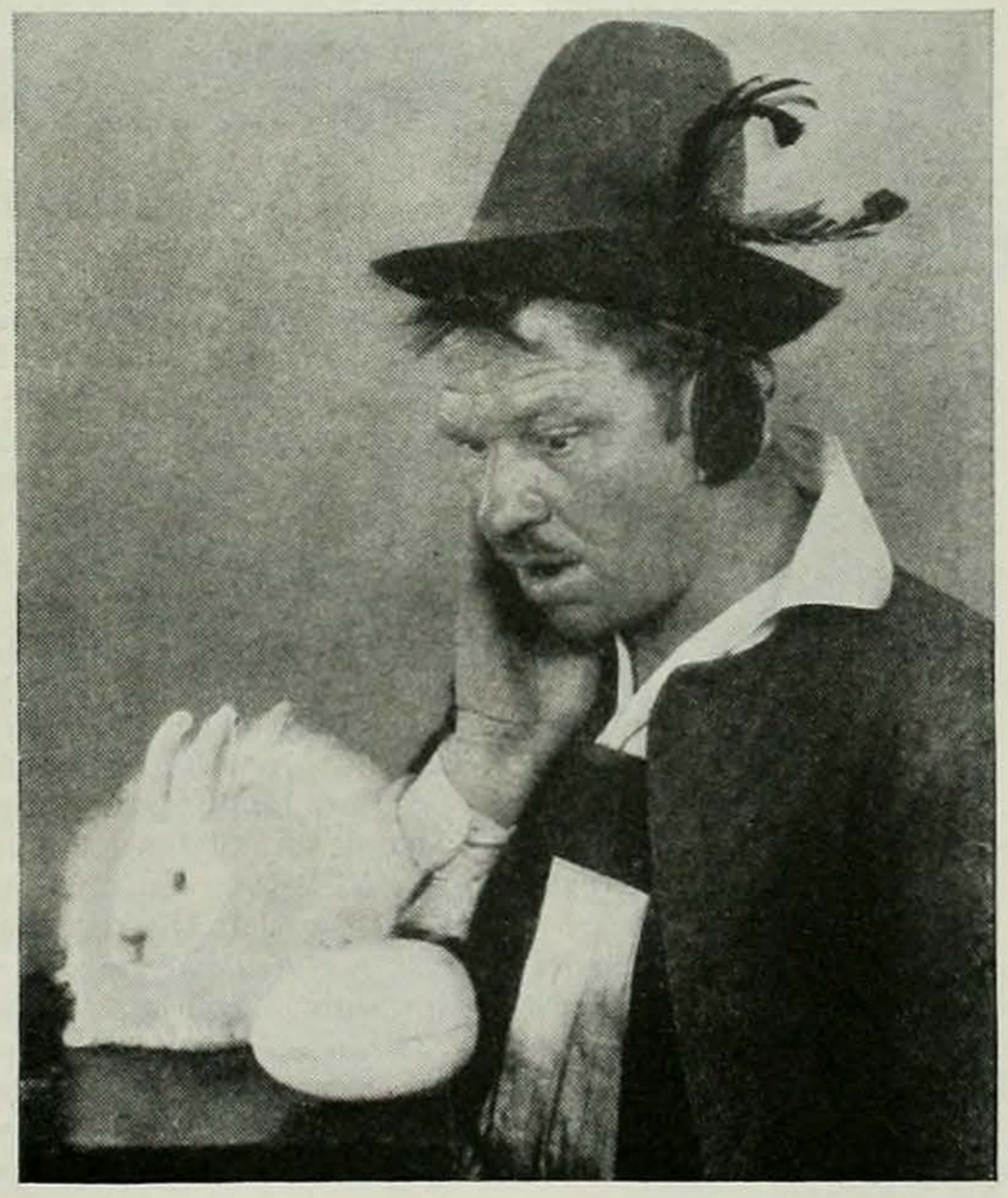
LIKE Mr. Murnau's assistant, Lois pointed to Olive and said, "That cute little one."

You have no idea—and probably Lois had no idea at the time—how much that meant to Olive.

The appearance in a Paramount picture did a lot for Olive. It lifted her out of the ranks of the comedy girls. Directors gave her small parts and then William Fox signed her up to a contract.

When Olive went to the Fox studio, she brought with her one quality that endeared her to the management. Olive loves to work and to work hard;

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 86]



"Listen, rabbit, you wouldn't fool me, would you? Little Wallace may believe in Santa Claus or press agents, but enough is enough. Come on, rabbit, and tell Mr. Beery that it's only an adopted egg"

The Emancipation of Virginia

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 73]

suggested that half wild creature of the Everglades. How come?"

"Contracts . . . and things."

There you have it. Contracts, yes, but mostly things. All her life there have been things to bar her from the complete fulfilment of her talents. Indifference on the part of her family when she commenced her career. Economic pressure.

Marital unhappiness. Oppression hung like wet sea-weed on her soul. But all the time there was that brave Irish philosophy that kept her from sinking into a slough of her own despond.

Virginia comes from Chicago, where there are many McSweeneys and Murphys and O'Hoolihans, also Pilsudskis, Olsens and Garibaldis. She had the good fortune to be born a McSweeney, as well as did her brother and sister. She was a McSweeney only until she decided to become a motion picture actress. Then she changed her name to Valli. That was when she was eighteen and through the course at school that taught pothooks and typewriting.

THE family was different. Her mother was sympathetic, but housework and a family drains time. Virginia was playing small bits and parts at the old Essanay Studio on Argyle Street.

There was no scurrying home to tell what she had done at the studio that day. Sometimes there was a question from one of the family, "What are you doing now?"

"Working in pictures." It might have been scrubbing for all they knew.

The little Irish girl had to keep her dreams to herself. She built a sturdy wall of reserve, not to be broken down by indifference. People say Virginia is too cool, too poised, too dignified.

That she lacks warmth. It shows on the screen, they say.

She will never be a great actress until she tears the wall down.

Essanay closed. Virginia got a job as a typist in an insurance broker's office on Michigan Avenue. Typing leases. But not for long. She quit to model hats. One noon she met a man whom she had known at the studio. There was a vacancy in a stock company in Milwaukee, he told her. They wanted an ingenue. Virginia never returned to the hat modelling job.

Dollar by dollar, she saved enough money to go to New York, where she returned to her beloved picture work. It was there she married. She and her husband came to Hollywood. Virginia was not happy, but she kept on with her career.

Picture after picture she moved through, beautiful, talented, reserved.

Still that wall surrounding her, wherein her dreams were cherished.

Her work and her beauty, however, merited her a Universal contract. Under it she was the cool, calmly poised heroine of "The Lady of Quality," "The Signal Tower," "Siege." She made "Wild Oranges," the best thing she ever did, to my way of thinking. In this wild eerie rôle, Virginia forgot herself. Forgot she had a wall built around her dreams and permitted them to peep forth. Back in Hollywood from the Everglades where the picture was made, Virginia became the beautiful lady of poise and cool distinction.

It was then Virginia decided something had to be done to save her work and herself. That there must be some escape from it.

She asked Universal to release her from her contract. They did. Some of the fetters were gone.

Then happened an unheard of thing. Women of Virginia's nationality and creed do not seek divorces.

But Virginia did.

No scandal. No violent charges. Just a quiet divorce and Virginia was free.

At that moment there came an offer from a German film company to make a picture abroad. It was just what should have happened at that time and the rock of Virginia's sturdy little wall began to crumble. Two months in Europe. Weeks in Munich, where the picture was made. Evenings at the opera, at concerts.

Week-ends in Italy, shopping in Paris, a hurried trip to London. An overwhelming sense of freedom, of independence, that she had never felt before.

VIRGINIA returned to Hollywood ready to fight for the rôles she was entitled to. But battle, for once, was not necessary. Howard Hawks, a pioneering young director who delights in juggling the marionette strings by casting villains as heroes and vice versa, gave Virginia the rôle of *Gaby*, a Parisian dancer in love with a king, by way of proving his theory. It's about the only colorful rôle she has had since "Wild Oranges," and it helped to knock down all that remained of that uncompromising wall.

Then "Evening Clothes" with Adolphe Menjou. Light, sparkling, gay. So was Virginia.

They say it is Luther Reed's best effort as a director.

There are going to be some surprised producers when they see the new Virginia Valli. And I, for one, predict there will be no simple, resigned gestures as she says, "no one will let me do things like 'Wild Oranges.'" She'll be too busy with vivid rôles.

There's something heady about this freedom.

Acquiring a Taste for Olive

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51]

she is not distracted by temperament nor by outside interests. In a year and four months, she has made nine pictures. The only vacation she has taken was to go to the hospital for an appendicitis operation.

Five weeks after the operation, Olive was back at the studio, walking the tight-rope for "The Monkey Talks."

Olive, as you can see, is still unaware that she is a Big Star. She still believes that stunt scenes should be performed without the aid of a double. She hasn't yet asked for gauze photography. She doesn't want to select her own stories or produce her own pictures. She still thinks that she is awfully lucky to be a star at all and doesn't believe that the public is in her debt because she condescends to make pictures for them.

And all these qualities are the signs of a star who is on the ascendant and not sinking off into a decline. In two years from now, we are going to shout, "I told you so!"