

My LIFE

First Installment of the touch-
of a tragic child who became

promises. You must make living a sort of gay curtain to throw across the abyss into which you have looked and where lie dread memories.

I think that wildly gay people are usually hiding from something in themselves. They dare not be quiet, for there is no peace nor serenity in their souls. The best life has taught them is to snatch at every moment of fun and excitement, because they feel sure that fate is going to hit them over the head with a club at the first opportunity.

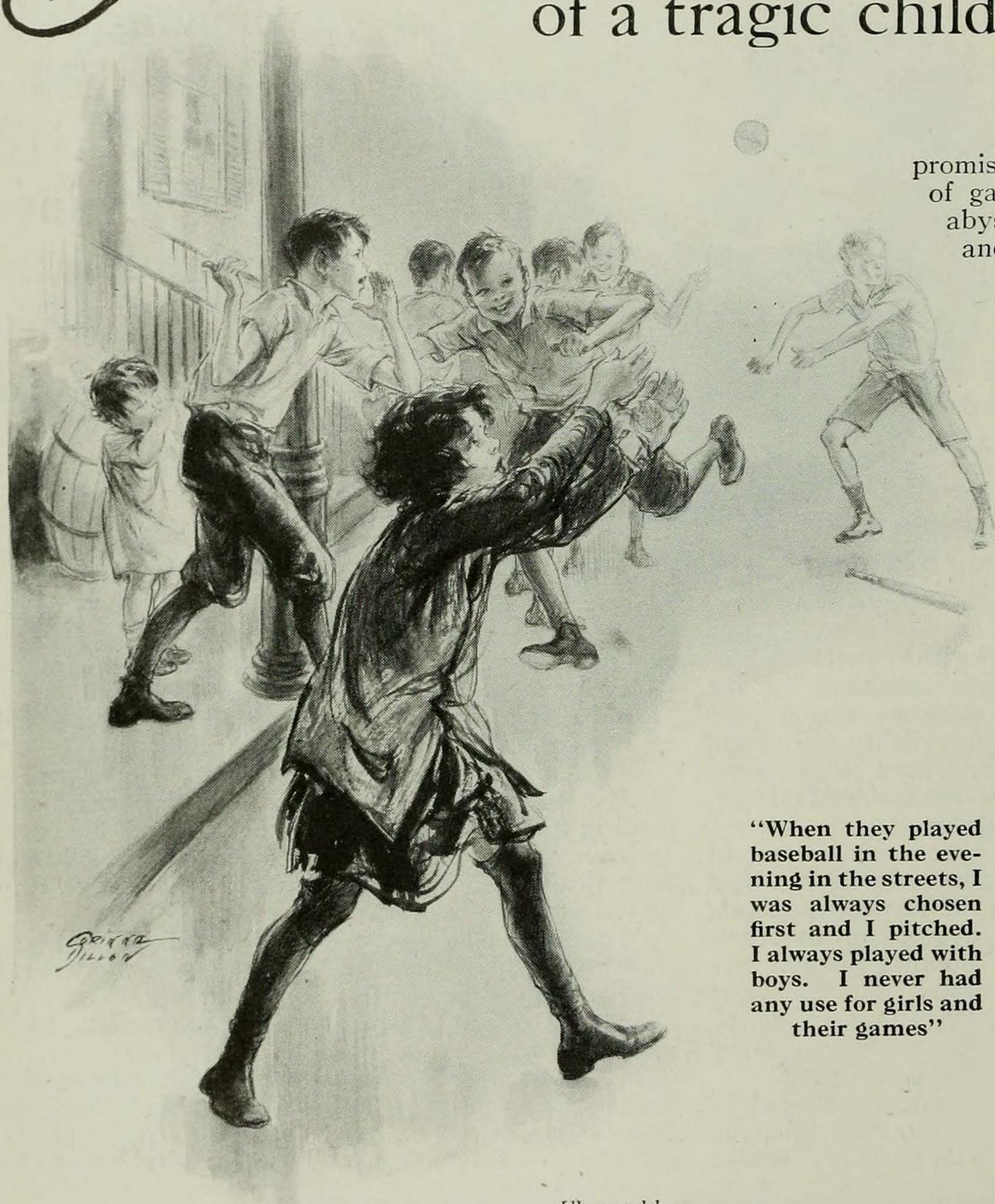
I DON'T want to feel that way. But I do. When I have told you about my short life, maybe you will understand why, in spite of its incongruity, I am a madcap, the spirit of the jazz age, the premier flapper, as they call me. No one wanted me to be born in the first place.

And when I was born, at first they thought I was dead. They thought every spark of life had been strangled out of me during my long and stormy entrance into this world. They fought for hours, fanning the poor, feeble little flame of life that was in me, and it would flare up and then die down again, quite as though I didn't want to stay.

Everything was against my coming here at all, everything was against my staying here.

There have been a great many times when I wish they hadn't fought quite so hard to keep me here. But I don't feel that way any more.

I don't know an awful lot about my ancestors or relations. It isn't really strange if my memory is not good, if I am not very definite about facts and dates. I have been trying all my life to forget, not to remember. Besides, young people aren't much interested in family history. At least I wasn't. I don't like my relations, anyway. They never paid any attention to me until I was successful and they weren't kind to me or to my mother when we needed it so much. I try not to have resentment against them, but I don't care anything about them.



“When they played baseball in the evening in the streets, I was always chosen first and I pitched. I always played with boys. I never had any use for girls and their games”

Illustrated by
Corinne Dillon

WHEN I write down at the very beginning that I am twenty-two years old, I can hardly believe it.

I feel much older than that. I feel as though I had lived a long, long time. That is because I have suffered so much, and suffering makes you feel old inside, just as happiness makes you feel young even when your hair is white.

I think this story will surprise you very much. It isn't at all the sort of life story you would expect to belong to Clara Bow. For you know the Clara Bow who has been driven by misery and loneliness to clutch at joy and merriment almost wildly.

There is only one thing you can do when you are very young and not a philosopher, if life has frightened you by its cruelty and made you distrust its most glittering

STORY

By
CLARA BOW

as told to

Adela Rogers St. Johns

ing human document
the very spirit of gayety

My father is the only person I care for, really.

My mother was a very beautiful woman. She came of a good family in New York State and her mother was French and her father was Scotch. They lived on a country place a few hours from New York City. I was never there, because it was gone before I was born. But from what my mother told me it must have been quiet and beautiful and prosperous.

Perhaps that was the reason that my mother didn't want to marry. She idolized her father and loved the home where she had been born and brought up, and that was all she wanted from life. Marriage frightened her. She felt no need of anything more in her life than her father and mother and the quiet life she led in the country.

On an adjoining farm lived a family named Bow. They had always been neighbors. The Bows were Scotch and English, of the kind I guess that make landed farmers and squires in the old country. There were thirteen children in the Bow family and my mother had always played with them. The youngest of them was a boy, Harry Bow. And

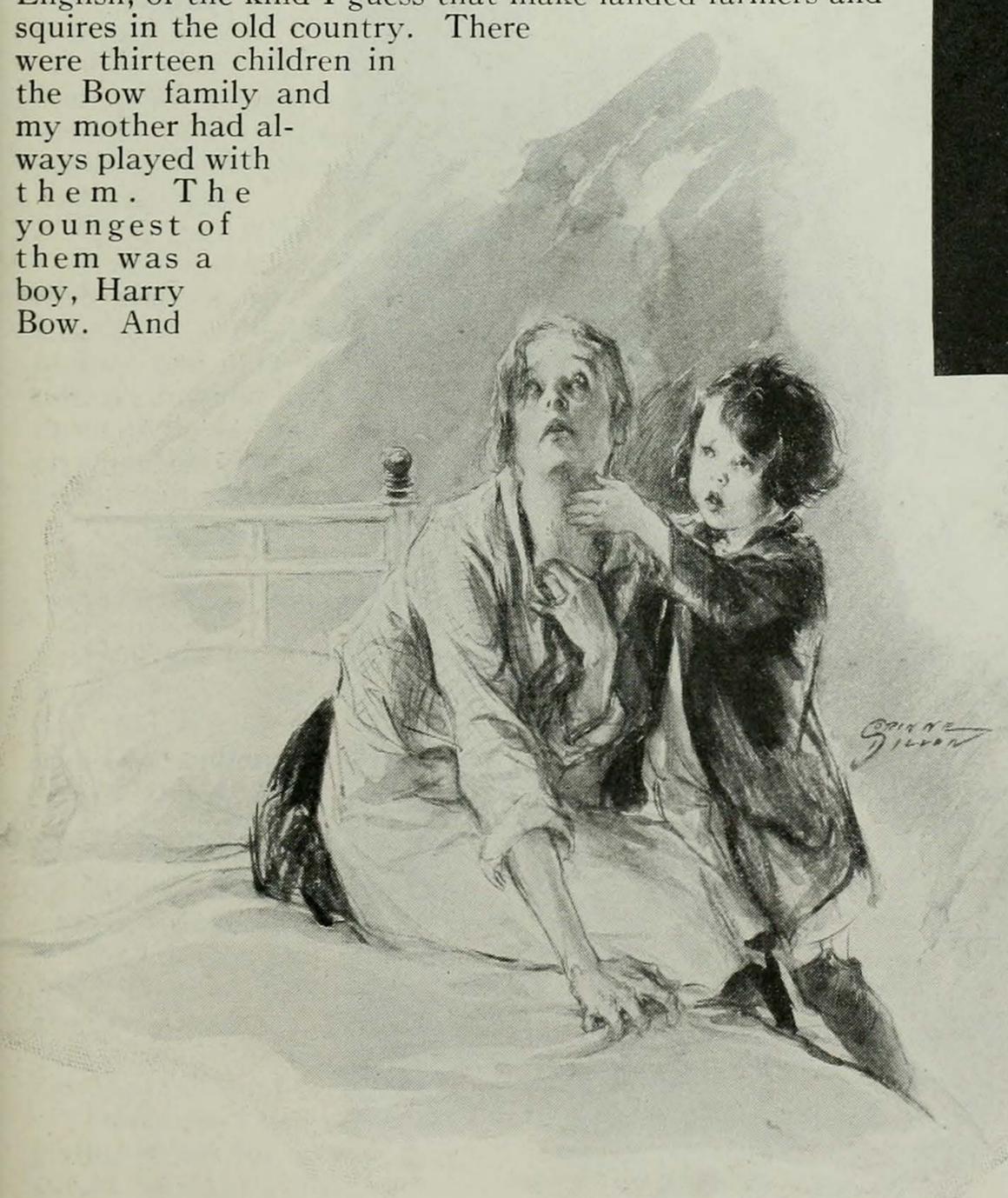


Clara Bow's first professional photograph, taken at the age of sixteen, when she won the contest that put her on the screen

he was the darling of the family and just about my mother's age. He was a handsome, talented boy who captivated everybody. He just made people like him so much that they didn't stop to think much else about him. He had a merry laugh, and he could ride and play and was always good-natured and happy.

My mother's mother adored him.

When she knew that she was dying, she called my mother to her and told her that this young man had asked for her hand and that she must marry him. My grandmother was very old-fashioned, very French in her thoughts and traditions, and she did not believe that a girl could be happy unless she was married. She said she couldn't die happy unless she knew that her daughter [CONTINUED ON PAGE 78]



"I would massage her throat. It is terrible to see someone you love suffer like that"

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31]

had a husband to care for her and provide for her later years.

They promised.

They were married shortly after she died.

I do not know all the story of what happened here and it is too painful for my father to speak of.

But you see my father had been terribly spoiled. He had neglected his opportunities for education and training. He often speaks sadly now of his wasted youth and I know that is what he means. He had a quick, keen mind, he had imagination, he had all the natural qualifications to make something fine of himself. But he just didn't.

HIS people thought him too young to marry; they realized he was not able to face the world and take care of himself and a wife. They were very unjust it seems to me, for after all his life had been in their hands. But they cast him off after his marriage.

My mother's people had gradually lost what money they had—they had never been rich—and I think my grandmother must have been the business head of the family, for after her death things went to pieces very quickly, and the home my mother had loved was sold.

So, soon after they were married, my father and mother and her father moved to Brooklyn and my father started a small business there. They lived in a very small place to begin with, only two rooms, and it was hard on them both. My mother had always been accustomed to country life and she always hated the city. My father had never worked and he had always had money and attention. My grandfather was unhappy over the loss of his wife and his home and over being dependent upon them.

I DO not think my mother ever loved my father. He knew it. And it made him very unhappy, for he worshipped her always. His devotion to her, his unflinching gentleness and kindness all through the years of her illness is like a miracle to me.

There were two children born before I came along, both girls. One lived two hours. One lived two days.

My mother came forth from the tragedy of that second death a woman



The Clara Bow that Hollywood knows. "When I have told you about my short life, maybe you will understand why I am the spirit of the jazz age"

broken in health and spirit. I don't think she ever recovered from those two terrible illnesses, nor from the sorrow and horror of losing her two first born babies.

The doctor told her she must never have any more children. And she said over and over that she didn't want any more. They might die, as her two little girls had died. They might leave her without any reward for all she had gone through, without the comfort of a baby's presence which wipes from a woman's mind the suffering of such times.

She didn't want me. Terror possessed her all the time before I was born. Would she die, as the doctor had said? Or, if she survived the ordeal that had nearly cost her her life twice before, would the baby die, as the two others had died? If so, would she lose her reason? She was almost mad with apprehension and fear.

I don't suppose two people ever looked death in the face more clearly than my mother and I the morning I was born. We were both given up, but somehow we struggled back to life.

From that day to the day she died my mother never knew a moment free from ill health of the most shattering kind. She idolized me, but with a strange, bitter love, almost as though she was afraid to

love me for fear I, too, would be snatched away from her. She used to watch me when I ran about the house as a little thing, never taking her eyes off me, and in their depths were many things I was too young to read.

I loved her terribly. Her beauty to me was something divine. She had long, golden hair that hung way down below her knees, the most beautiful hair I have ever seen. It shone like pure gold. I used to make up fairy stories about it. And her face was pale, almost transparent, with fine chiselled features.

THE pain had worn her face thin, but it hadn't lined it, and still, to me, in spite of all that happened, the word beauty brings up a picture of my mother's white thin face under that mantle of gleaming hair. She was tall and slim and carried herself like a princess, so I think it must be true that she had good blood in her. No woman could have carried herself like

that in the midst of so much misfortune unless she had.

When she was mean to me—and she often was, though I know she didn't mean to be and that it was because she couldn't help it—it broke my heart.

I wasn't a pretty child at all, in spite of the fact that both my parents were and such a contrast to each other. My mother so slim and fair, my father a squat strong man, with black hair and twinkling black eyes. My eyes were too black, and my hair was too red.

But I was sturdy and healthy. When I was little people always took me for a boy.

WE lived then, and all the rest of the time we stayed in Brooklyn, in the upstairs of a house on a side street in an ordinary neighborhood. I went to the nearest public school and played in the streets like the other children. I always played with the boys. I never had any use for girls and their games. I never had a doll in all my life. But I was a good runner, I could beat most of the boys and I could pitch. When they played baseball in the evening in the streets, I was always chosen first and I pitched. I don't think I had very good clothes, they were rougher and older [CONTINUED ON PAGE 104]

My Life Story

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 78]



I consider MELLO-GLO Face Powder a real contribution to cosmetics. Its soft velvety texture gives a youthful bloom that doesn't wear off quickly. Miss Desirée Tabor (Operetta Star famous for her beauty), 66 W. 46th St., N. Y.



My friends tell me that my complexion is lovelier since using MELLO-GLO Face Powder. It spreads so smoothly that not a single pore is visible.

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than the other girls', and the girls used to say snippy things to me and shout "carrot-top" and things like that. Outwardly, it seemed as though I were just a rough, strong little tomboy. But tragedy seemed to mark me early for its own.

I was about five when the first thing that really stands definitely in my mind happened. Clear, with all the little details. All children have those memories, I guess, but oftenest they are happy. Mine are not.

MY grandfather, who lived with us, was very dear to me. Father worked so hard and mother was always ill, always strange and depressed, sometimes smothering me with kisses and sometimes without a word of any kind for me. My grandfather was the one who played with me and taught me little things and sometimes told me stories. He must have been a very good and gentle old man, for he used to look after mother and me both.

He had built a little swing for me. I used to sit on the floor and watch him while he was making it. He fixed it so that you could pull it up out of the way, on hooks. There wasn't much room, you see. We thought it was a very famous contrivance and perhaps it was. On cold winter days, when I couldn't get out to play, grandfather used to swing me and we had great fun that way.

It was very cold on this particular afternoon. Snow lay everywhere, the whole outdoors was white with it. It was even a little cold in the house. We had always to economize on coal. Sometimes we had to economize on food, too. There was usually enough of these things, but never just plenty, never all you wanted. Scrimping the corners, that's the way it was in our house.

I WAS cold and lonesome. I went out into the kitchen, looking for something to do. My mother was washing and she didn't speak to me. Her face looked desperately ill, white and weary. I felt she shouldn't be washing. She was washing a red tablecloth for the kitchen table. While I stood there I saw tears dropping from her eyes and splashing into the soapy water. I felt like crying, too.

I went back in to my grandfather and asked him to swing me. He got up and pulled down the swing and began to push me, and pretty soon I forgot I was cold and that mother was crying again, and began to shout with glee. Then, suddenly, the swing gave a violent twist so that I nearly fell out and then it stopped, and I heard a kind of dull fall behind me.

I looked around and my grandfather was lying on the floor. His face was purple and his eyes were open and staring.

My screams brought my mother to the door. In her hands she still held the red tablecloth. It dripped water all over the carpet. She threw it down and ran to my grandfather, saying over and over, "Father, speak to me. Speak to me." She looked so wild I was frightened and ran downstairs and called a neighbor.

They brought a doctor, but it was too late to do anything. He had died instantly, while he was pushing me in my little swing. That was my first encounter with death and I didn't believe it. I was quite sure they were mistaken.

The first night as he lay in his coffin in the dining room, I crept out of my bed and lay down on the floor beside him, because I had a feeling that he might be lonely. My father found me there in the morning, almost frozen. I said, "Hush, you mustn't wake grandfather. He's sleeping." But I knew that he was dead. I missed him very much.

That was a terrible blow to my mother. There had existed a great love and sympathy between them. He was the only one who could make her laugh and talk naturally. Often, when they sat together talking, I would see her pass her hand across her head, as though something cleared away.

AFTER his death, she was sad for a long, long time. She wanted to die, too. She often spoke of it. But she never mentioned suicide. Her courage was too high for that. Though she suffered all the time, more and more, and was depressed, and couldn't seem to rise above it, she went on as best she could.

My school life in those earliest days didn't seem to make much impression on me. I have no distinct impression of any of my teachers, or my school mates.

I had one little playmate, though, to whom I was devoted. He was a little boy who lived in the same house with me. I think his name was Johnny. He was several years younger than I was and I used to take him to school with me, and fight the boys if they bothered him. I could lick any boy my size. My right was quite famous. My right arm was developed from pitching so much.

One day after school I was alone in our house upstairs when I heard a terrible noise downstairs. For a minute it curdled my blood, then I ran down wildly. Johnny had gone too near the fire and his clothes had caught and were burning and he was screaming with pain and fright. His mother was standing there, wringing her hands and screaming, too, like a crazy woman and not doing a thing.

When I came tearing in Johnny screamed "Clara, Clara, help me." He ran over and jumped into my arms.

I HAD just enough sense to know what to do. I laid him on the floor and rolled him up in the carpet and tried the best I could to put the fire out. The poor little fellow struggled and screamed all the time.

I shouted for his mother to get a doctor and she ran out. I stayed alone with Johnny, holding him in my arms rolled up in the carpet and trying to soothe him and quiet him. I was crying all the time myself and pretty nearly crazy, too. I seemed to feel the fire on my own flesh, and every time he cried out it seemed to me I couldn't bear it any more.

The doctor came. He couldn't do anything. The little fellow died in my arms. He was just—just all burned up, that's all. I tried to pray then, begging God not to let him suffer like that. The last thing he said was "Clara—Clara—"

When I knew he was dead I went upstairs and cried for hours. I have never cried but once like that since. That was when my mother died. It seemed to me that life was just too terrible to be borne. When my mother came in I was asleep. I had cried myself into complete exhaustion, and I was ill for several weeks. The shock had been too much. For months I used to wake up and think I heard that little fellow calling "Clara—Clara—help me." Things like that are terrible for a little child to go through—I was only about eight or nine, I guess.

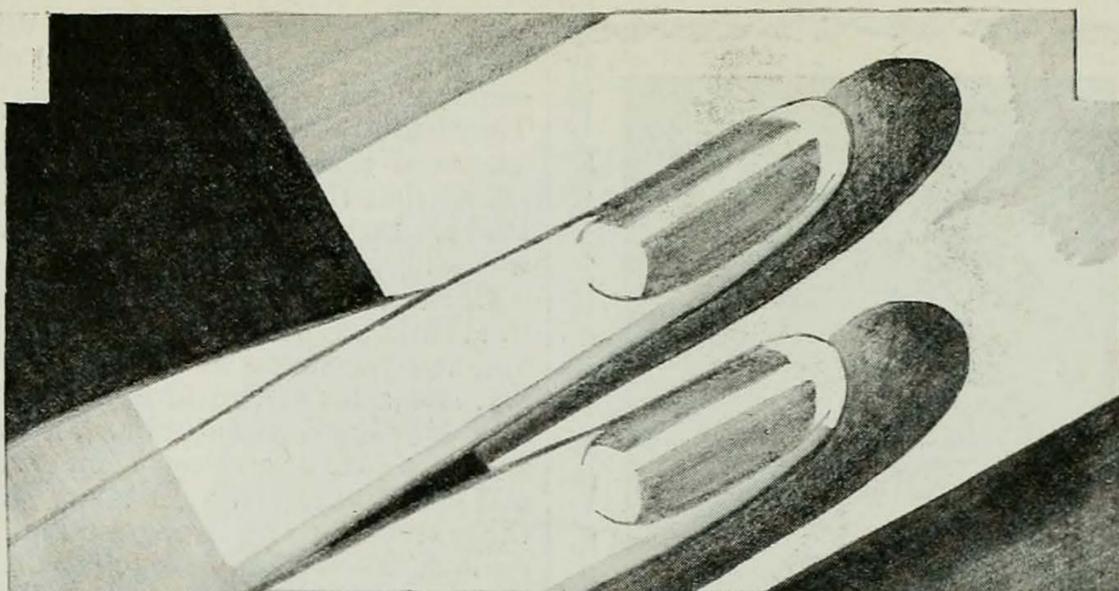
As I got older, I played with the boys more and more. I still was an awfully plain kid. I was shy and nervous around girls. They were always hurting my feelings and I thought they were silly anyway. I wore plain clothes and kept my hair tied back out of my face. I was as good at any game as any of the boys. And just as strong. They always accepted me as though I had been one of themselves.

We used to skate together and play baseball and all sorts of rough games in the street and I never felt there was any difference between us. At night sometimes we would build a bonfire and sit around it after we had skated awhile, and the boys never noticed me. They talked about everything just like they were alone. That was where I learned what boys really think. I knew how they judged girls. I knew which ones they could kiss and how they made fun of them. I was mighty glad they didn't think I was a sissy. I'd do any darn thing to prove I wasn't. We used to hop rides on trucks and get lost and do all sorts of crazy stunts. They let me take care of myself, too, just like I'd been another boy. Once I hopped a ride on behind a big fire engine. I got a lot of credit from the gang for that.

All this time my mother was growing more ill. She had always been subject to fainting spells and they grew gradually worse. They weren't fits and they weren't regular fainting spells. Often they would happen two or three times a day, and then maybe she would be free from them for a long time. When she felt them coming on she would look at me so pathetically. Like a woman caught in some trap. Then her eyes would grow glassy and she would start to gasp for breath. It was just as though she were being strangled. She would fight and fight for breath.

Usually I was alone with her, and I would run to her and massage her throat to try to make her breathing easier. I'd say, "Mother, mother, don't—please don't." When father was there sometimes we'd cry together, because it is terrible to see someone you love suffer like that and not be able to help them.

We never had much money, you know, and so we couldn't consult any specialists. Our own doctor told us it was a nervous disease. My father said her mother had once told him that when she was a child



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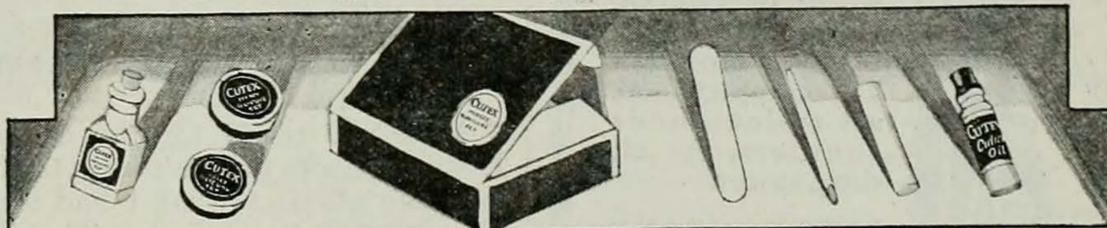
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she had a bad fall on her head. When I was four years old she fell again, on the stairs, and it opened up the old scar. They had to take stitches in it. Probably advanced brain specialists today would tell us that that had a lot to do with it. Perhaps they might have helped her, but we didn't know what to do.

Of course when she was having her bad times I had to do most of the house work and the washing and cooking. Father had had a lot of bad luck. Everything seemed to break against him. He worked as a carpenter or an electrician, or at any odd jobs that he could get to do. Everything seemed to go wrong for him, poor darling. He wanted so much to do more for us and he worked so hard, but just bad luck followed him all the time. So I had to do the best I could taking care of mother and the house, but I wasn't very good at it. I never had any knack about housework, or cooking. I got to be a pretty expert nurse for mother, but it always frightened me when she got bad and I dreaded seeing her suffer.

WHEN I first started to the Bayside High School in Brooklyn, I was still a tomboy. I wore sweaters and old skirts made over from my mother's. I didn't give a darn about clothes or looks. I only wanted to play with the boys.

I guess I was about fourteen or maybe fifteen when my mother had quite a long spell of being almost herself. Her health was better and things brightened up quite a good deal. Then she began to take a little interest in my clothes and my looks. She combed my hair a new way, so the curls fell around my face, and she made me a pretty dress, that was cut in at the waist and showed pretty plainly that I wasn't a boy after all.

Right away there was a change in the boys' attitude toward me. Oh, I was heart-broken. I couldn't understand it. I didn't want to be treated like a girl.

There was one boy I knew who had always been my pal. We always fought each other's battles and he used to catch on the baseball team I pitched for. Well, one night when we'd been out skating, he kissed me on the way home.

I wasn't sore. I didn't get indignant. I was horrified and hurt. It seemed to me that the end of everything had come. I knew now that I could never go back to being a tomboy. The boys wouldn't let me. They'd always liked me so well, I'd always been their favorite. Not to kiss or be sweet on, but because I was game and could run fast and take care of myself. They'd always liked me better than those sissy girls that put powder on their noses.

Now that was over. No matter how much I wanted to be a tomboy still, I couldn't. The boys wouldn't let me.

I WASN'T ready for the dawning of womanhood, for the things that would take the place of what I had lost. I'd been cast out by my pals. The girls still made fun of me for being a tomboy. I was absolutely alone.

I had never liked to study. I was just skimming along because I was naturally quick, but I never opened a book and the teachers were always down on me. I don't blame them. I guess I must have looked pretty hopeless. But I often think now, when I have come of myself to

realize how I love reading, how much I want to know things, that it wasn't all my fault. If they had made me see what I see now, by myself, I know I would have been good.

In this lonesome time, when I wasn't much of anything and hadn't anybody except Dad, who was away most of the time, I had one haven of refuge. Just one place where I could go and forget the misery and gloom of home, the loneliness and heartache of school.

That was to the motion pictures. I can never repay them what they gave me.

I'D save and save and beg Dad for a little money, and every cent of it went into the box office of a motion picture theater. For the first time in my life I knew that there was beauty in the world. For the first time I saw distant lands, serene, lovely homes, romance, nobility, glamour.

My whole heart was afire, and my love was the motion picture. Not just the people of the screen, but everything that magic silversheet could represent to a lonely, starved, unhappy child. Wally Reid was my first sweetheart, though I never saw him except on the screen. He was Sir Galahad in all his glory. I worshipped Mary Pickford. How kind and gentle and loving she was. Maybe there were people like that in the world.

A great ambition began to unfold in me. I kept it hidden for fear of being laughed at. I felt myself how ridiculous it was. Why, I wasn't even pretty. I was a square, awkward, funny-faced kid. But all the same I knew I wanted to be a motion picture actress. And I can say one thing, right here. If I have had success beyond my own greatest dreams, it may be that it is the reward for the purity of my motive when I first dreamed that dream. For I truly didn't think of fame or money or anything like that. I just thought of how beautiful it all was and how wonderful it must be to do for people what pictures were doing.

One day I saw in a paper an announcement of a contest. Not a beauty contest. I wouldn't have dared to enter that. This said that acting ability, personality, grace and beauty would be judged in equal parts.

I WENT to Dad. Shyly, I told him my dream. He was so kind. He always understood. He was harassed and miserable and overworked, but he was kind and understanding always.

He gave me a dollar. I knew, even then, what a sacrifice it was to him. I went down to a little cheap photographer in Brooklyn and he took two pictures of me for that dollar. They were terrible.

Without daring to tell mother, I sent them in to the contest. And sat down to wait and pray.

No star ever has spoken so frankly, so bravely about her childhood and early struggles. No actress has written more dramatically or truthfully about her rise to fame. In the second installment of her Life Story, Clara Bow tells Adela Rogers St. Johns about her first pathetic efforts to find a place for herself in the movies. You won't want to miss a word of this great Life Story.