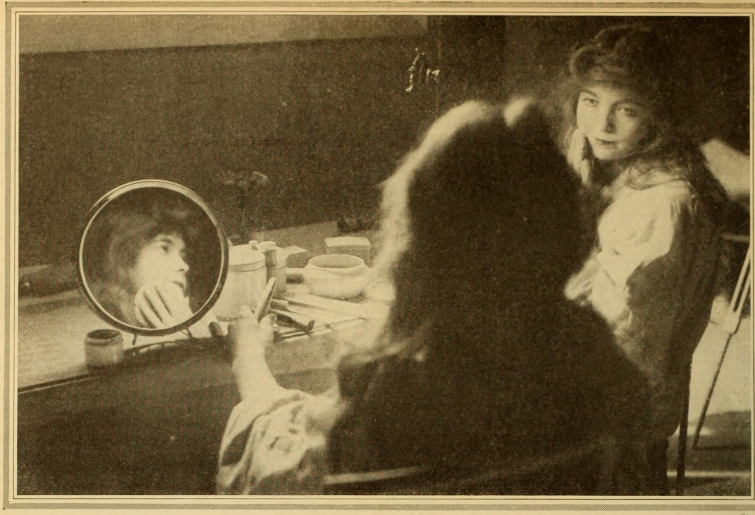


Dorothy and Lillian in their dressing-room.

Stagg

The Real Lillian Gish *Vs. The Imaginary*

Preconceived notions are invariably wrong —particularly so in the Gish Case.

By Julian Johnson

MOST people have a preconceived notion of Lillian Gish, just as they have of the Kaiser, business hours on a submarine, a big party in old Rome, summer at the North Pole, what a Chinaman is thinking about, the origin of the American Indian, Theda Bara's private life, Mary Miles Minter's real age, or Mr. Griffith's next picture. Like the Hun philosopher's idea of a camel—he never saw one, but evolved a picture from his inner consciousness—preconceived notions are almost invariably wrong. And never more so than in the Gish case.

There is a growing suspicion that the word "Gish" is an adjective rather than a proper name. In so far as it applies to Lillian. It must be admitted that there is ground for this suspicion.

It has been Lillian Gish's privilege to rise to world-wide celebrity as a *figurante* of innocence, maidenhood and springtime love in the photoplays of D. W. Griffith—and, in one frock or another, out West or back East, down South or over in France, she has never played anything else.

Lace and lavender, roses in moonlight, gentle kisses, old tunes pianissimo, a mystic Rocking Cradle, flower-hung garden walls—these are the things you unconsciously associate with Lillian Gish. Fresh blood on new-fallen snow is a terrible thing to see, much more terrible than blood on ground. So Mr. Griffith makes Lillian Gish the snowy background for the blood of his battles: rapine coils at her feet, the bat wings of murder flap past her head, the red hands of atrocity and terror reach toward her out of the murk—and never quite touch her.

That's why the picture populace has considered and does consider Lillian a pale, perfumeless lily, off as well as on.

The yardstick on a woman's brain is her sense of humor. Women are naturally a little more flexible than men, they are more facile and more adroit, and when they can give and take a joke they become the real sovereigns of the earth. Of course it is a popular tradition that no ingenue can possibly have a sense of the ridiculous—else she would laugh at herself and automatically go out of the ingenue business. Perhaps because she is one of the greatest professional ingenues in the world, Lillian Gish artfully locks her sense of humor up in her dressing room when called onto the set. In fact, knowing when not to laugh, and never laughing in the wrong place, is laughter's Scottish Rite. So far, Lillian of the lillies has never untied so much as a wan smile—in public—which has not been of the sub-deb order.

But on Serrano avenue in Los Angeles there is another sort of Lillian: an ingenue in appearance, still, but a rather suave and well-poised woman in reality, in spite of

the fact that she is scarcely over the top of twenty years. She is the studious rather than athletic type of girl—she leaves the muscle stuff to the "Little Disturber" in the same household—a girl who despises the shams of society, a girl who is much more at home with Balzac and Thackeray and Dickens and Galsworthy than with Chambers or Owen Johnson, a girl who has just returned from Europe more intensely devoted to America than ever.

To begin with, Lillian Gish is an enthusiast about the war. She is very much of an optimist, and she sees from the chaos of destruction the supreme reorganization of the world.

"I think this is a wonderful age to live in!" she declares. "It seems to me the world was going to sleep in selfishness—not a part, but all of it. America was quite sure that its inventions were the most wonderful things of history, England was all tied up in social traditions and class distinctions, and Germany, the supremely selfish thing of the Universe, was headed for a reincarnation of the old Roman Empire.

"When this is all over, the world is going to quit being provincial. We'll be less citizens of the Loire, or Kent, or California, and we'll be more citizens of the world. We'll understand each other.

"You know, we've got into a terrible habit over here: we think that the first thing to do to win is to call the Kaiser all the names we can think of—and the rest will be easy. They've passed that stage in England and France. The French and English are giving the devil his due just to beat him at his own game! It was only when I had been there quite awhile that I began to see that this spirit of sizing up murderous German ambition and soulless German accomplishment in a cool, dispassionate way was just about the worst thing that could happen to the Germans. When people get angry they lose their heads and call names. When they're perfectly calm, and patient even in suffering, and just quietly determined to win—then they're awfully dangerous!"

And Miss Gish has some right to be a war critic, for she has been in the battle line in France, and went through eight air raids in London.

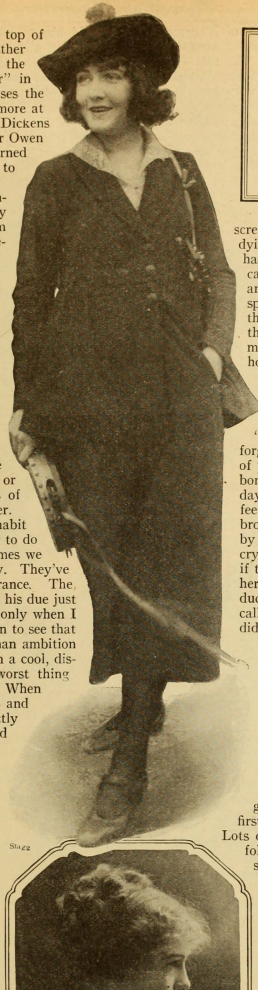
"Almost always," she declares, "there were warnings—the aircraft guns in the distance, then nearer; finally, the deep, heavy boom of the falling bombs. Only once was our fright very sudden and intensely real. It had been a quiet evening, with no thought of an impending raid. We were living in the Hotel Cecil. Suddenly the biggest noise in the world came from the courtyard and street below. In the tremendous roar of the explosion the whole hotel rocked as though in an earthquake. I was flung from my chair, and in the dark—it is almost a criminal offense to turn on the lights in an air-raid—people rushed about like little ants in a hill you've just stepped on. The most dreadful part was the screams and groans of the wounded and dying in the street below, for the bomb had struck a party in carriages. One cannot venture into the street when the anti-aircraft guns are barking, for the spray of shrapnel is even more dangerous than German high explosive—and there they lay, begging for aid, for fifteen full minutes, under our windows! It seems hours. As soon as the guns ceased of course almost everyone in the hotel rushed to them . . . not many were living, then . . . I shall never forget it.

"Another thing, that I wish I could forget, was my visit to the homes of a lot of poor mothers after a school had been bombed by a German squadron at midday, flying at the great height of 18,000 feet. I saw one woman whose little brood of three had all been torn to pieces by German nitroglycerin. She wasn't crying. She wasn't saying anything. But if there is a hell I saw it in the depths of her dry, sunken eyes. If I could reproduce that look on the screen they would call me greater than Bernhardt. And if I did I should go insane."

Mr. Griffith, it seems, was the bane of the party's existence—he and Billy Bitzer, the cameraman, but Bitzer was not quite as venturesome.

"Bobby Harron was fairly tractable," says Lillian. "In other words, if there was a lot doing, he'd take us—or get us where we could see, if possible. But Mr. Griffith—! He might be at dinner with a general, and if the air-guns began to sound he grabbed his hat like a little kid at the first shouts of a ball-game, and vanished. Lots of times he didn't come home till the following day! He was always in the street—he actually chased the darned things, as if trying to make them drop a nice sample bomb on him!

One of Mr. Griffith's peculiar studies for future years was collected in a camouflaged camera-nest near the Opera, in Paris. Here, for an hour or so on a number of days, Bitzer ground steadily and unobserved on the countenances of passers-by: the soldier, the widow, the old man, the Englishman, the bride, the child, the American, the coquette, the poilu's wife—he has a record of the unconscious war-face of every manner of human being in Paris. Lillian Gish, with Dorothy, started her act-



Stagg

Carpenter

Top—Dorothy Gish as "The Little Disturber" in "Hearts of the World." Below—Dorothy herself.

"WHO do you think are the most ideally fitted of all people—according to the British—to become airmen? Not the British officers, nor young French adventurers, nor even American racing drivers. The American cowboys! An airplane does the same thing to your liver, I guess, that a bucking broncho does. Driving anything on a level is no preliminary training, but the fellow who has 'zoomed up'—as the airmen say—on some bad little horse in Arizona is perfectly broken for the saddle of a scout plane."

ing career as a child in the melodramas of Blaney and Al Woods. Later on she attracted Belasco's attention, and played principal fairy—or something like that—in "The Good Little Devil," with Mary Pickford. But she says that she was utterly unsuited to this role—hadn't enough experience for it in any way. Then she went to the Biograph, and under Mr. Griffith's direction, where she has remained ever since.

The sisters Gish—Lillian and Dorothy—have always lived with their mother, Mrs. Mae Gish, yet have not escaped the customary quart and a half of rumors of engagement and impending marriage—little Dorothy being perhaps an especial victim. So far, neither of them has any matrimonial intention in reality.

Serrano avenue, and their home, is not twenty minutes ride from the old Fine Arts studio which has modestly draped the birth of numerous masterpieces. Lillian, in her odd moments of neither working nor reading, is essaying swimming, French and piano. Dorothy—when not hopping about the country in her new enclosed car—is swimming to beat the band.

And Dorothy, being a selfish little sister, clips the end off her sister's interview: "Want to know where the 'Little Disturber' character *really* came from? Well, she was a little cockney girl; she's English, not French at all. Mr. Griffith saw her on the Strand one day, freshness, wig-wag walk and all. He followed her for hours—or rather, we did, and then I thought he was dreadful to make me play her. I couldn't. Besides, I didn't like her. I thought she was crazy! But Mr. Griffith insisted, and then I cried. He insisted some more, and—and I did. And I'm glad, now."

Think you that Lillian brooked or cared for the Little Disturber's interruption? She wound up the party herself after all. "When I'm thirty," she announced, "I'm going back to the stage. I want to play real women—not impossible heroines, or namby-pamby girls. I should like to play Becky Sharp—just to let you know how I feel about parts!"

Personally, I think Lillian Gish is going to play a lot of very real women before she leaves the screen—if she ever leaves it. She has the capability, the perception, and the intelligence.

Lillian Gish in an amusing scene from the Griffith wardrama, appearing with Ben Alexander, who thus became the greatest boy actor on the screen.

Stagg