

The
Story
of
**“Sad
 Face”**
Zasu
Pitts

Tearfully funny,
 tragically comic,
 Zasu Pitts became
 a female “Merton
 of the Movies” en-
 dowed with true
 acting talent!

By

S. R. Mook

EIGHTEEN years ago
 come Michaelmas or
 maybe it was St. Pat-
 rick's day or even St.
 Valentine's and it might have
 been sixteen years or seventeen
 —neither the accused nor this
 biographer having much of a
 head for figures—Zasu Pitts
 dashed into the grocery store
 in Santa Cruz, California,
 seized a box of currants with
 fluttering hands and started
 out with them, murmuring
 something to the astonished
 grocer that sounded like
 “Charge it.”

She'd been living there (in



SCREENLAND gives you the first really intimate life story of an amazing actress who is better loved than many stars

Santa Cruz, that is, not the grocery) for a number of years, had looked over the crop of local boys who'd made good—and also those who hadn't—decided there was nothing to any of them, had talked things over with her mother and come to the conclusion the next best thing to matrimony was a starring career in the movies. Maybe they had even decided the career was preferable to matrimony but the latter was closer to home and seemed easier of accomplishment so if there had been any likely prospects she might have been content with second best for her life's work.

Fortunately the boll weevil had hit the Stalwart Youth crop in California that year and it was the realization of it that gave Zasu the frustrated look she still wears.

A day was set for her descent on the film capital and Zasu was all packed and rarin' to go when she suddenly realized she hadn't put up any currant jelly for the winter. She looked at the clock and was sure she wouldn't have time to do it before the train left. Her hands started fluttering—first towards the clock, which she thought she might set back a little, and then towards the door that opened into the street that led to the grocery. The door was closer so the currants won.

She got them on the stove but didn't have time to finish her cooking so she left her mother weeping and the berries stewing while she took the train to Los Angeles.

Established in a tiny apartment in downtown Los Angeles, she started looking for the work that never came. Directors took one look at her and asked her to please go home to mother. But that wasn't Zasu's plan. She wrote cheerful letters home and moistened the envelopes with tears. On days when she was too blue and discouraged to look for work, she amused herself by riding the escalators in the large department stores. When that palled she took to the fast elevators in the tall buildings—eleven floors up and the same number down.

Then someone at Universal saw her and thought the tragic look in her eyes was funny. They thought they recognized in her a female "Merton of the Movies" and gave her a test. They were right. Zasu thought she was being dramatic and the executives thought she had Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton backed off the map.

That test was probably the most unusual hundred feet of film ever run through a camera. They gave her a shawl and a rag doll and told her to hop to it and strut

her stuff. Zasu was tired from the strain and seized a rocking chair that happened to be on the set. She sat rocking and crooning to her baby. Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby hadn't been discovered then so I suppose you could call Zasu the original crooner.

Everything was very happy and peaceful when her supposed-to-be husband bounded in with the startling news that marriage irked him. As an afterthought he added that he was leaving her flat. Zasu took the news sitting but its import brought her to her feet.

There were no microphones in those days so she didn't have to worry about blowing out a fuse. She emoted long and lustily. In fact, you might say she emoted at the top of her lungs—and the salt air of Santa Cruz had developed them to an ex-

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Robbed of early fame at the threshold of a promising career, Zasu smiled tremulously, waved her hands perplexedly, and went forth to hew out a bigger and better name for herself. And she made good.

As with Duse, Zasu Pitts' most expressive acting medium is her hands. A world of pathos is inherent in those fluttering fingers! Left, in a scene from "Roar of the Dragon" with Gwili Andre and Richard Dix.



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traordinary degree. The "husband's" head began to ache and he didn't like scenes anyhow. He threw her aside with one grand gesture and leaped for the door. The force of the impact when he slammed it after him threatened for a moment to collapse the set but the carpenters had builded better than they knew.

Mrs. Leslie Carter as "Zaza" was never more abandoned in her grief than Zasu as she hurled herself against the door and shrieked with what was left of her vocal powers, "Remember the chee-ild!" But the "husband" was safe on the outside and too weak to remember anything or to take any steps about it if he had.

Zasu collected herself, reluctantly relinquished the rag baby which she felt had been a mascot, and turned an expectant face towards the discriminating group that had gathered to watch her test. Her surprise, when they offered her \$35 a week to play in comedies with Flora Finch, can be imagined. Hunger knows no pride, however, so she took the job.

In a few weeks they told her she wasn't funny enough and gave her the air. She cried all the way home on the street car and her tears continued on through the day and all through the night. The next morning the man who had fired her called her up and told her it was just a joke—they wanted to see how she'd take it.

She returned to work, somewhat subdued but grateful. A few weeks later she left again—this time of her own accord—and proceeded to the Mack Sennett studio.

"What chance," she asked, addressing the gateman, "do you think I'd have as a bathing beauty?"

He looked her up and down, down and up, stroked his chin and shook his head regretfully. "Not a chance," he announced.

"Thank you," said Zasu.

That settled and off her mind, she proceeded to the Chaplin Studio, and Charles Spencer Chaplin put her under contract. For six months she remained in her dressing room from early morn till eve but was never called on a set. Edna Purviance's dressing room adjoined Zasu's but the leading lady never vouchsafed her a "good morning." Zasu had nothing to do but think.

At the end of six months she concluded that sitting in a dressing room was never going to get her before the public—or even before producers—so she left Mr. Chaplin flat and started out again on the road she hoped would lead to electric lights that spelled "Zasu Pitts" in large letters above theatres.

Griffith signed her for "The Greatest Thing in Life" and then decided she was too much like the Gish girls. After many weeks of rehearsals she was told the master had unbounded confidence in her future but no further use for her at the moment. She was through—out!

Then an independent company saw her, thought she looked funny and gave her a chance. After that, Marshall Neilan signed her for a part in "The Little Princess" starring Mary Pickford. That was the turning point for Zasu.

She was called a "type" and used for all sorts of parts where awkwardness was required. She played with Florence Vidor in several pictures and furnished an excellent foil for Miss Vidor's patrician loveliness. Then Brentwood Pictures got hold of her and featured her for two years in small-town comedies. The pictures were cheaply made but they suited her peculiar type. She exercised a potent heart appeal



New blonde—new scenery! Dolores Ray, pretty stage actress, has graduated from the recent Ziegfeld stage show, "Hot-Cha," to the movies. Her first picture will be, "By Whose Hand?"

on the public and her fame grew. Also her following.

An independent company was organized and she signed a starring contract with them at a salary of \$1,000 a week. Then she went home on a visit.

She walked down the street to the house where she had spent her childhood. It was a white frame affair with bay windows and the yard was overgrown with weeds. "You'd never guess from the way it looks now," she ventured, "that I had one of the prettiest gardens in town. Raising flowers was my hobby and I had them set out in neat little beds. People used to tease me and tell me my garden looked like a cemetery.

She turned away from the house and continued her stroll. Presently she encountered the editor of one of the papers. "When they told me the big salary you were to get," he greeted her, "I didn't believe it. But when I saw the contract I certainly gave you a spread in the paper."

"You certainly did," Zasu agreed. Of all the praise heaped on her since then it is doubtful if any lies closer to her heart than that one item in her home-town paper.

She went back to the hotel at peace with the world. One of her childhood dreams, at least, had come true: she was occupying the best room in the best hotel in town.

Returning to Hollywood she waited for the company to start work on her first starring picture—an opus that was not to present small-town life for small-town theatres but one that would present her as an ingénue with ruffled dresses and all the accompanying fripperies. She received her thousand a week for a few weeks and then her backers dissolved and disappeared.

Improvident by nature, she hadn't laid up a cent. She had bought an expensive car, laid in a wardrobe suitable for the parts she had believed she was to play and bought powder and perfume sufficient for the student body of a seventeenth century boarding school for girls.

When her bubble burst she was left to regard her recent acquisitions with a contemplative eye and wonder "what to do?" Almost a year later she reluctantly came to the conclusion that the people at Universal had been right: she must be funny. This point settled, she curled her hair, donned a portion of her million dollar wardrobe and sallied forth to look for a job. Any kind of acting job she could get.

Somewhere along the road she had married Tom Gallery. They finally persuaded some San Francisco business men to back them and made a picture called "Peter-Jane." It took them two weeks to shoot and cut it. Following the completion of the home-grown vegetable, she worked in "For the Defense" and "Is Matrimony A Failure?"

Then she retired to await the coming of her baby. It turned out to be a girl whom she promptly named Ann and she has a fit if she sees it spelled with an "e" on the end. Sometime later she completed her family by adopting "Sonny"—a waif whom the late Barbara LaMarr had previously adopted and who threatened to be left homeless a second time when the latter passed on.

After the birth of her baby girl, Von Stroheim cast Zasu as the lame and tragic *Princess Cecelia* in "The Wedding March." It was a triumphal procession for Zasu. She scored a tremendous hit in the part and Von Stroheim to this day contends she is one of the greatest potential tragediennes on the screen.

In typical movie fashion the producers ignored her in the new field and insisted upon her playing comedy parts. She was soon disporting herself opposite Wallace Beery in "Casey at the Bat" and "The Big Sneeze." Asked how she could be content to return to comedies after the success she had achieved in drama, Zasu eyed her interrogator wistfully. "Nobody dropped me on my head when I was little," she ex-

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plained. "I've got to live and I want to make money. Once I laid off for two years trying to be an ingénue and there were no takers. If they won't pay me money to cry, I'll take their money to clown."

The talkies came in and it was found her quavering voice matched her fluttering hands and mournful eyes. There is probably no one person in the industry who has been as widely imitated at The Pitts.

Her stock went soaring and her salary kept pace with it. She was getting \$1750 a week and working constantly. Productions were frequently held up until she could finish one picture to go into another.

She felt her big chance had come when Universal cast her for the mother in "All Quiet On the Western Front"—a tragic, futile figure, too gentle to wrestle with the world, too innocent to fight with life. She gave a superb portrayal.

The night the picture was previewed, after the showing of the regular feature in a neighborhood theatre, her doom was sealed. The regular feature happened to be one of Zasu's comedies. The audience laughed until they were weak. When they saw her come on in "All Quiet" they thought her appearance indicated "comedy relief" in the otherwise grim drama and they started laughing again without waiting to learn the context of the action. The Universal officials, thoroughly alarmed at the reception given her and fearful lest the unexpected laughter ruin their masterpiece, did not wait to show the picture in another theatre. They got out the scissors and clipped Miss Pitts from the entire film—lock, stock and barrel—and re-shot her scenes with another actress in the part.

Zasu has been a comedienne ever since.

Then she and her husband reached the parting of the ways. They separated and lived apart for a year without taking steps towards a divorce. Both of them secretly hoped something would happen—some mir-

acle that would throw them together again—but it didn't.

Zasu was seen almost constantly with Charles Kaley and Bob Norman. Charlie had been brought out from Chicago to play "Lord Byron of Broadway." The director had wanted another actor for the part, had lost interest in the film when he couldn't get what he wanted. The picture had flopped. Charlie, as well as Zasu, had troubles.

Misery loves company so he and Zasu got together and swapped woes. Bob was taken along so, in case both of them talked at once, there'd still be someone to listen!

Night after night they sat at a small table in George Olsen's night club—in, but not of, the crowd. For once Zasu's status as a comedienne stood her in good stead: she didn't have to worry if she got wrinkles or if the late hours showed in her face. People would laugh at her no matter how she looked. The worse she looked the harder they'd laugh.

Her wide, mournful eyes belie the iron will that lies behind them. She has made a home for the two children and keeps it up. Once she referred to the children: "They're well raised and mannered," she said simply and, to my everlasting shame, I smiled. The idea of Zasu in the rôle of a conscientious parent was too much. "I mean it," she said mildly—and I was stilled.

She's as irresponsible off the screen as on. If she promises to be at a party in Hollywood at eight, the chances are that hour will find her dining on the terrace somewhere in Santa Barbara. She usually wears coat suits and her hair is blowing in all directions at once. I've never seen her in an evening dress.

Irresponsible or methodic, serge or satins, laughing or crying, hot or cold I can't think of anyone I'd rather be with. There's no one quite like her. She's—she's—well, she's Zasu!

What about Clark Gable Now?

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lywood has concluded that even brunettes and men—as well as blondes—prefer his type! About his imitators, Clark gallantly maintains a discreet silence.

Will he last? I think so. He isn't temperamental and high-strung like John Gilbert. Not sheikish like Valentino. Not complex like Phil Holmes. He has a depth and virility which the juveniles lack.

What if he plays "nice" rôles? His hit was made as a dangerous he-man. When he has portrayed straight leads he hasn't been as effective. Much has been written about his appeal being purely elemental. If he goes Beverly Hills, will he lose that necessary vigor?

They don't expect to do a lot of entertaining in their new home. Clark already feels the strain which Hollywood puts on its celebrities. He loves to go away between pictures. The Gables are fond of Hotel Del Monte and of the desert. Which reveals Clark's varying dress moods. He likes to dress up and yet he also enjoys turtle-necked sweaters and old pants! He never goes to Malibu.

Did the mustache he grew for "Strange Interlude" please you? To grow—or not to grow one again—that's what he and the missus debate these evenings!

Soon he will be loaned to Paramount to co-star with Miriam Hopkins in a fiery number entitled "No Bed of Her Own." Imagine Clark and Miriam, who packs an

elemental wallop herself, in a torch story like this!

"They won't rubber-stamp me if I can help it," he declares. "I have played a wide variety of parts so far, and I anticipate continued versatility. While they're guessing, they're interested. That's the way I figure.

"I'm in such a peculiar business," he concluded our talk, "that I can't put my finger on anything definite. It's based on public opinion, studio breaks, and downright hard work. I've noticed that the fellow who is given responsibility usually works more seriously than ever. Stardom? I'm satisfied that it's a real job that will keep me out of mischief. Please hope with me that the fans and the breaks will be kind!"

This man comes from the class of people who assume that they have to struggle and fight for what they get. He doesn't think the prizes of the world are handed out on a silver platter. Hard knocks have prepared him to stand the gaff of movie fame.

"Hollywood no longer awes me," he says. "If worse came to worse I could go back to slinging hash!"

He deserves his pre-eminent place on the screen because he's earned it by years of apprenticeship. And because there's no one else exactly like him. To the women he's brought a new brand of love. To us men a masculine and intelligent movie hero whom we can respect.