

Photo by  
STAGG

*A* PHOTOGRAPHIC impression of a genius in exile—  
Erich Von Stroheim, the stormy petrel of Hollywood

# Hollywood's One Real Genius—"VON"

*By Harry Carr*

The best analysis ever written of the most misunderstood man in pictures

**A**ND now, as to Von . . . . .  
Erich von Stroheim is the most misunderstood character of the screen. The one who understands him least of anybody in the world is Erich Von Stroheim.

His firmest conviction is that Von Stroheim is a hard, cruel, rather ruthless, altogether terrible person who is in motion pictures only because he can't be a soldier. Von is convinced that his soul has been torn out by the roots because he can't ride in tight white leather pants and a gleaming snicker-snee in his sword hand, guarding a fat emperor with halitosis and a secret appetite for wienerwursts. Whereas, he is really a soft-hearted, sentimental rebel who would be bored to death by the army.

To analyze Von Stroheim is about as simple as trying to analyze a Democratic convention.

The trouble is, there are so many Von Stroheims.

There is one Erich Von Stroheim who is a fussy, hair-splitting cranky German college professor.

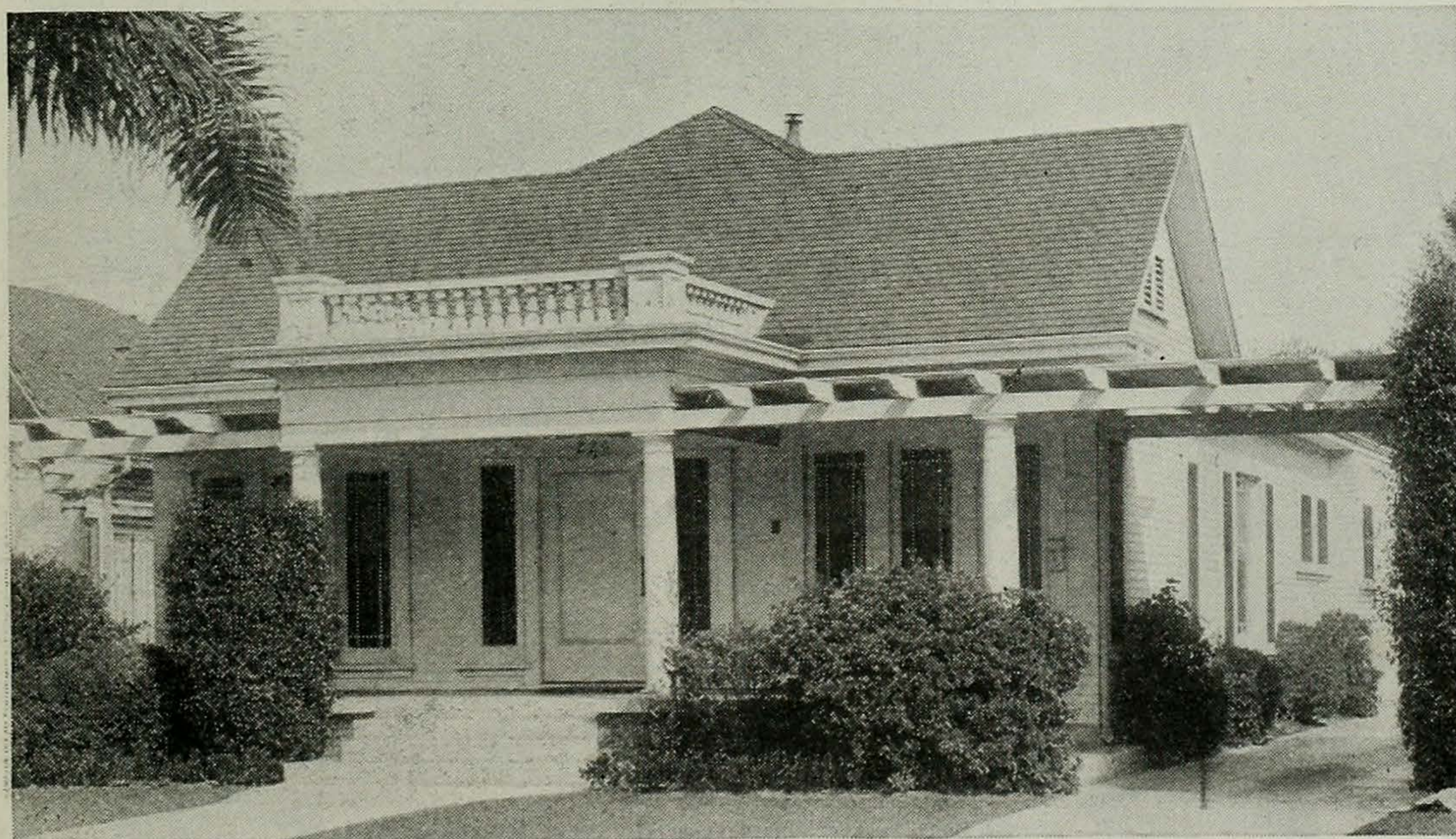
There is another Erich Von Stroheim who is a soap box orator: he could argue a bone out of a bulldog's mouth.

Still another who is a sentimental star gazer.

Yet another who is a very naughty, capricious "contrary"



**A hair-cut, afternoon tea and work—all at the same time. But Von Stroheim's mind is completely engrossed in the scrap of film before him. He always works with Teutonic thoroughness. He's as fussy and cranky as a German college professor**



**Von Stroheim's simple little cottage is a strong contrast to the elaborate mansions in Beverly Hills owned by other directors who are more adaptable to the demands of the business offices**

little boy—subject to tantrums—and very much in need of spanking.

Mostly, he is a naughty little boy. His golden genius for dramatic writing is a child playing "pretend." His famous "towering rages" of which you hear so much are a bad little boy kicking the nasty mean table which has bumped him on the head. Even his punctilious insistence upon detail has in it a good deal of child—the little boy who wants everything just so—or he won't play.

In this, he runs true to type. Every great genius is, at heart, a child. And Von is a great genius. I know them all. He is the only one who could be fairly called a genius.

Griffith is half evangelist and half actor. De Mille is an adroit and skillful mixer of certain theatrical lotions—and notions. Lubitsch is a master  
[ CONTINUED ON PAGE 138 ]

# I Used To Be a 'Stylish Stout'

The personal story of a woman who made herself over into a slim, graceful, buoyant healthy person—free from the ill-effects of obesity.



"IT was a perpetual torment for me to be stout. I couldn't go anywhere without being reminded that I was fat. I couldn't walk a block without sitting down. Even the lightest housework quickly tired me. My heart would beat too fast if I hurried. I was afraid to accept invitations because I knew people would always be talking about me. You can imagine what misery fat caused me—aches and pains in my body as well as mental worry.

"But that's all over now, and all the credit for my wonderful improvement goes to Annette Kellermann. I had heard how she, called the world's most perfectly formed woman, had once been a puny, ailing sickly child. I found out that her figure had not changed by a fraction of an inch, or by the least part of an ounce, in over 16 years. I wrote to Miss Kellermann, told her all about myself, and asked what she could do for me.

"In reply she sent me a charming letter and a copy of her delightful book called, **The Body Beautiful**. That book, I can truly say, was the turning point in my life. It rescued me from the misery of fat, and showed me the way to make myself exquisitely slim in a short while. And it was so very easy. Actually, it was a delight for me to follow her instructions—light exercise for only 15 minutes a day, and plenty of the right kind of satisfying food that produced energy instead of fat. It was a revelation, even to me, how quickly my weight began to decrease. I felt better from the very first day.

"Please don't think that my case is unusual. Miss Kellermann has helped me wonderfully. But she has also helped 35,000 other women. So, if you are inclined to stoutness, write at once for Miss Kellermann's book and get her advice on reducing. It may be worth more than you realize in greater vitality, better health and a more beautiful figure."

\*\*\*\*\*  
Miss Kellermann will be glad to send you, free, a copy of her book, "The Body Beautiful." She will also tell you about her method of reduction—a sane, sensible, scientific way that takes off your weight and at the same time increases your energy and strength. Simply send the coupon below or write a letter. There is no obligation. Annette Kellermann, 225 West 39th Street, New York, Suite 465.

**Annette Kellermann,**  
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# Hollywood's Own Real Genius

[ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39 ]

technician with a gorgeous and sophisticated sense of humor.

Von is the only one from whom genius flows like water from a well. Perhaps charged water, fizzing and hissing out of a siphon bottle, would be a better description.

I helped Von write "The Wedding March." During those long weeks I learned to have for him a real and genuine affection. And, most of the time, I wanted to shoot him. Or boil him in oil if I were sure it would hurt worse.

IT was a wonderful and maddening experience. I was a wreck at the end of it.

We worked in a little cottage at La Jolla on the cliffs about ninety miles south of Los Angeles. Von got up every day about noon—cleaned and polished as though for an inspection of the Emperor's Life Guard Mounted.

For two or three hours we mapped out the scenes. Then Von went down to the beach with a secretary and dictated them. After dinner we talked over some more scenes; and he sat up until 3 a. m. dictating them.

Some of the problems we argued were amazing. In the story there was to be a motherless girl. Von said he couldn't write about a motherless girl—unless he knew what her mother was like.

So we had to sit down and spend days on end manufacturing the life story of a woman who was never intended to appear in the story. We told how she fell in love with her husband; their early struggles together; the coming of wealth; his temptations; and her sorrow. Finally her illness and death.

Actually, Von made me invent a placard to be placed outside her house when she was dying: "Please walk your horses quietly through this street: serious illness within." And he translated it into German. And—mind you—this woman was never to appear in the story.

"Now," said Von, when we properly killed off the lady, "I know what the girl is like."

Another time, he made me lay out a huge war map, with hospitals, ammunition dumps, and trenches because he said he had to "feel" a cavalry regiment that was to go passing by another scene. This sounds silly. Well, it isn't. Cavalry that has been in action has an entirely different "feel" from cavalry that hasn't. Just so, you can't understand any girl until you have seen her mother. If you knew the mothers of all the Hollywood stars . . .

Some of this reality he carries to absurdity. He had all the undies of the soldiers in "The Merry Widow" marked with the coat of arms of a mythical country. Paid \$11,000 to have special medals designed for an imaginary army. In "Foolish Wives" he had a complete electric bell system put in a prop hotel. It was on the other side of the scenery where it couldn't be seen; but he had to feel that it was there.

I THINK it is all due to his Teutonic sense of thoroughness. It is the same thing that made him use up 7000 feet of film and three weeks' time on a little episode in "The Wedding March" that should have taken fifty feet and half an hour. If that story had been filmed the way he wanted to write it, the thing would have run for seventy-five reels. It just has to be "right" whether or not it ever gets into the picture.

The truth is, Von knows better; but there is something in his soul—artistic conscience if you care to call it that—that will not let him do anything in a slipshod way. If somebody asks him to write his name on a photograph, he will work an hour on a good inscription.

Like all very imaginative people, he is as superstitious as a Georgia crap shooter. A spider in the morning, shoes on the bed, a cat crossing his path simply give him the heebee-

geebees. I was always careful to see that his first sight of a new moon should be over his right shoulder.

One night, we had a terrible time over it. He was taking a big scene with an overhead expense like the French national debt. I beckoned him to a studio doorway to see the moon crescent. But he was stopped by a sudden panic. It seems that it is no good unless you jingle silver in your right pocket. And Von had no silver. I offered him two dimes. No good. Had to be his own money. I suggested he do something for which I would pay him twenty cents. Great idea. I suggested that he walk across the set and back. No; no good. In the end we had to go over to his bungalow where he painstakingly worked out a suitable scene. I paid him the two dimes. The night was saved.

ONE of Von's lovable points is his perfect courtesy. One day we argued until we were both exhausted; and glaring at each other. I was thinking how I would like to run that big cavalry sabre through his gizzard (he always carries one when he writes). Suddenly he jumped up. Apologized almost abjectly. He had given me a cigarette; but had forgotten to light a match for me.

No matter how rushed he is, I have never seen him fail to bow and click his heels if the humblest extra man comes up to speak to him.

Like all genius, he pendulums between extreme humility and arrogance. Psychologists tell me all of them are like that. One of my jobs was to stand behind the camera while he acted his own scenes. He always came up, shaking his head mournfully and despairingly. "No good; huh?" he would say. Once I was so swept away by his genius as an actor that I told him it was good the very first time. He gave me a look of hurt reproach. Treachery is hard indeed to bear from a friend. "Harry," he said, "you know that you are the only one I have to depend on; and you know what this picture means to me; and yet you tell me it was good!"

THE next time, I made him repeat the scene seven times. At the end, he walked over to the leading lady; bowed with a click of his heels; shook her hand and said: "The two rottenest actors in Hollywood."

When he first came to America, a young aristocrat from the Austrian cavalry, he had to take any job he could find to keep from starving. He was a section hand on a railroad; a boatman at Lake Tajo, a roustabout, book agent and what have you. Many Hollywood celebrities like to conceal these experiences: not Von. I remember one day, when he was making the pageant in "The Wedding March," a large herd of saddle horses were brought up. Von took one look at them and turned on the livery stable help in a fury. "That isn't the way to groom a horse," he yelled. "I groomed horses in this very stable myself and I would have been ashamed to have sent out a horse like this."

One thing I never could get over was Von's prodigious memory. One day, in one of the wine garden scenes, he had ordered some extras uniformed as gendarmes from the Austrian Tyrol. I thought he was going to throw an apoplectic fit when he saw them. When he calmed down to the point of coherent language, it developed that the corporal of gendarmes wore a rain coat which clasped with a metal clasp; whereas, before 1914, their rain coats buttoned.

I would like to ask anybody who reads this to go out and look at a policeman; then come back and accurately describe his uniform. And remember that Von hadn't seen a Tyrolean gendarme for seventeen years; then only in the

most casual way—without special notice or purpose.

His mind seems to be like a photographic plate.

People often ask me this about Von Stroheim: they hear the most terrible stories of his brutal treatment of actors; why then are the actors always so crazy about him?

You will remember that they fired Von Stroheim in the middle of "The Merry Go Round." The new director told me what happened when he took charge and introduced himself to the actors. He first introduced himself to Norman Kerry, the leading man. Kerry could not speak for crying. His shoulders began to heave; tears ran down his cheeks.

"I LOVED Von so," he sobbed; and fled to his dressing room. Mary Philbin gave one wild boo-hoo and rushed off the stage.

And yet everything they say about him is true. In "The Wedding March," if every scene hadn't ended with Fay Wray in hysterics, we would have thought something wasn't running true to form. He used to shriek at her to go back to the cow operas whence she came.

I remember, at the end of one scene—the marvelous confession scene—that he threw his megaphone clear across the stage and stalked in a white fury from the scene. Another time, she got so panic-stricken that she couldn't cry in a scene.

In his rage, he made her eat half a bottle of Spanish chili peppers. If you have ever eaten one, you will know that you can take a live coal afterward to cool your throat.

ZaSu Pitts used to be driven almost to the point of suicide.

George Nichols had to be carried from the sets in a state of collapse.

Yet they all adore Von. There are several reasons. For one thing, being all actors, they get a certain kick out of the melodrama of it—as he does himself. I never was able to decide how much of this rage—and the hysterics—was "acting"; and how much genuine.

For another thing, they know he doesn't mean a thing by it. Two seconds after he has told them they are all idiots who ought to be locked up, he is doing something sweet and thoughtful. He is so generous he would give anybody his shoes. The greater reason, however, is that they know he is making them act. Rather, that he is keeping them from "acting"; and is making them do simple, natural and sincere things.

The difference between genius and the commonplace is only a narrow hairbreadth line. Take a horse race: one horse wins and is sold for a fortune before he leaves the track. Another horse is given away in disgust to a vegetable peddler.

Yet only a few feet between the winner and the loser at the finish.

The difference between a world-famous crack shot and a bad marksman is only a deviation so slight that the eye could not detect it at the end of the gun barrel.

IT is the little extra touch that is hard to get. Von can get it; so he is one of the great geniuses that this age has known. The actors feel this by instinct. They are willing to suffer with him for that little last extra crack that opens the secret door to let the great white light flood in.

At the end of every picture, it is whispered around Hollywood that Von is now ruined. No other producer will ever touch him with a forty foot pole.

He is finished.

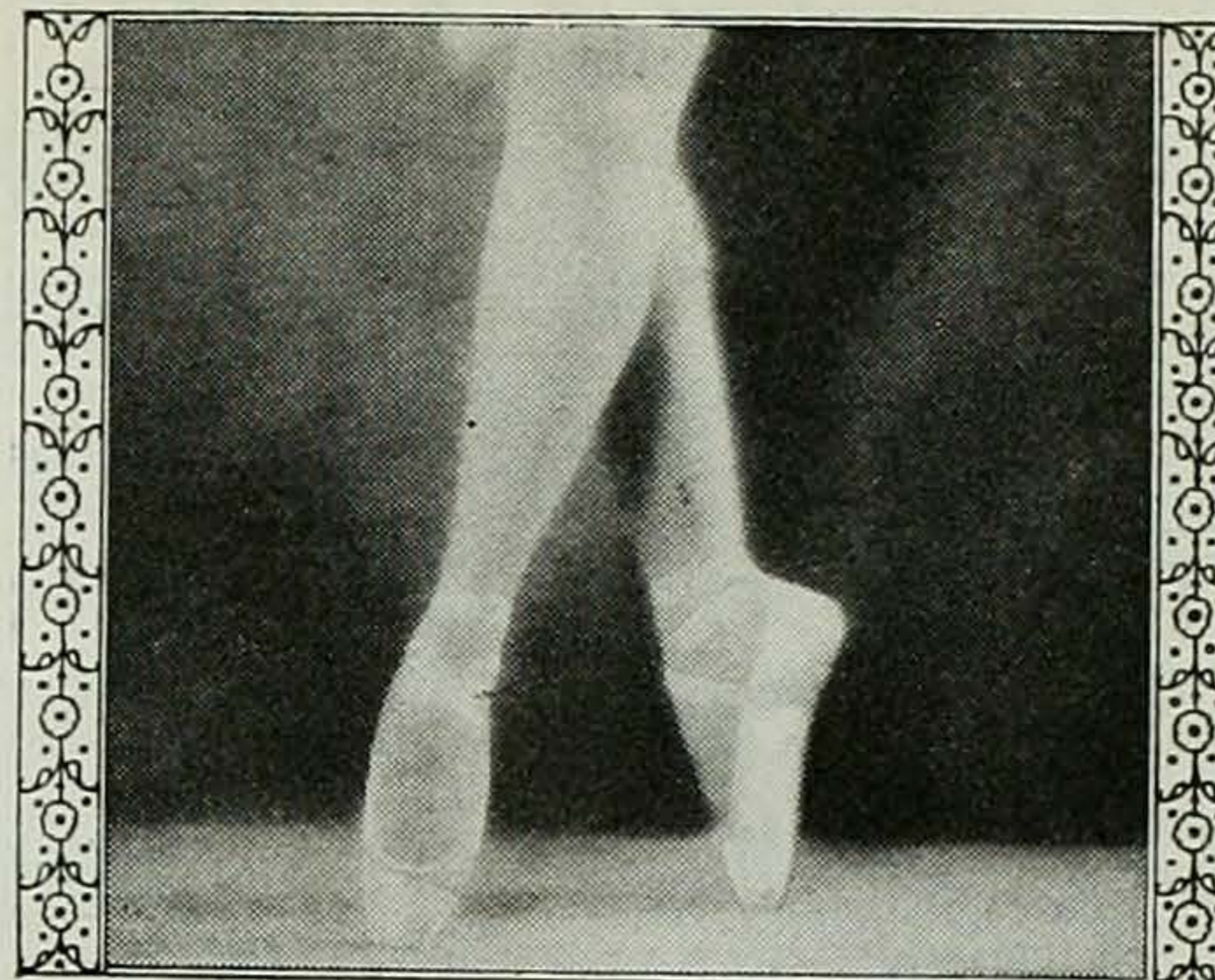
Von always agrees with them. Right now, I have no doubt that he is debating methods of suicide.

He is resigned to go back to his section gang with a pick and a red flannel shirt.

But Von will never be ruined. They never can find another. You might as well try to stage an imitation of Niagara Falls or the Yosemite.

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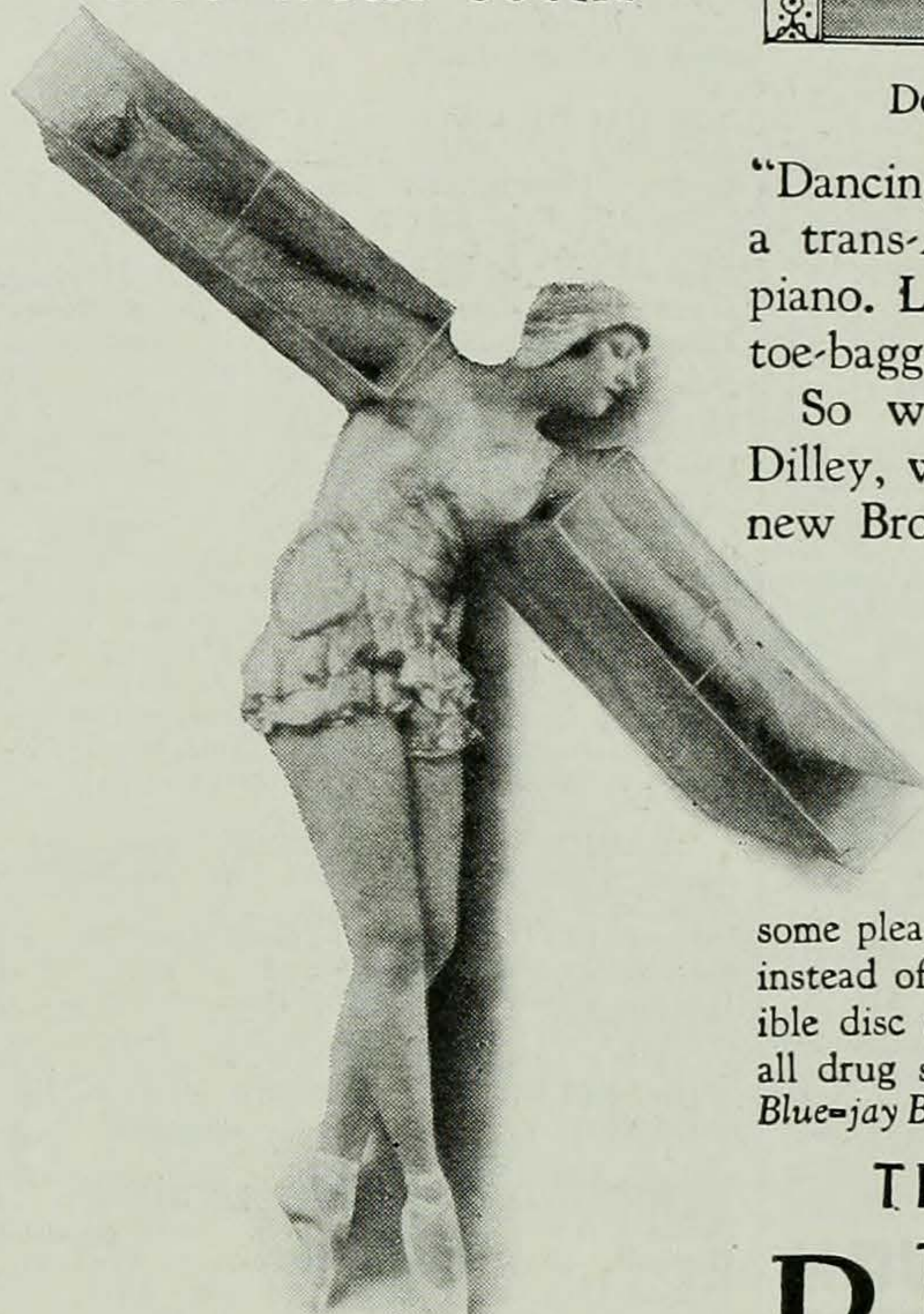


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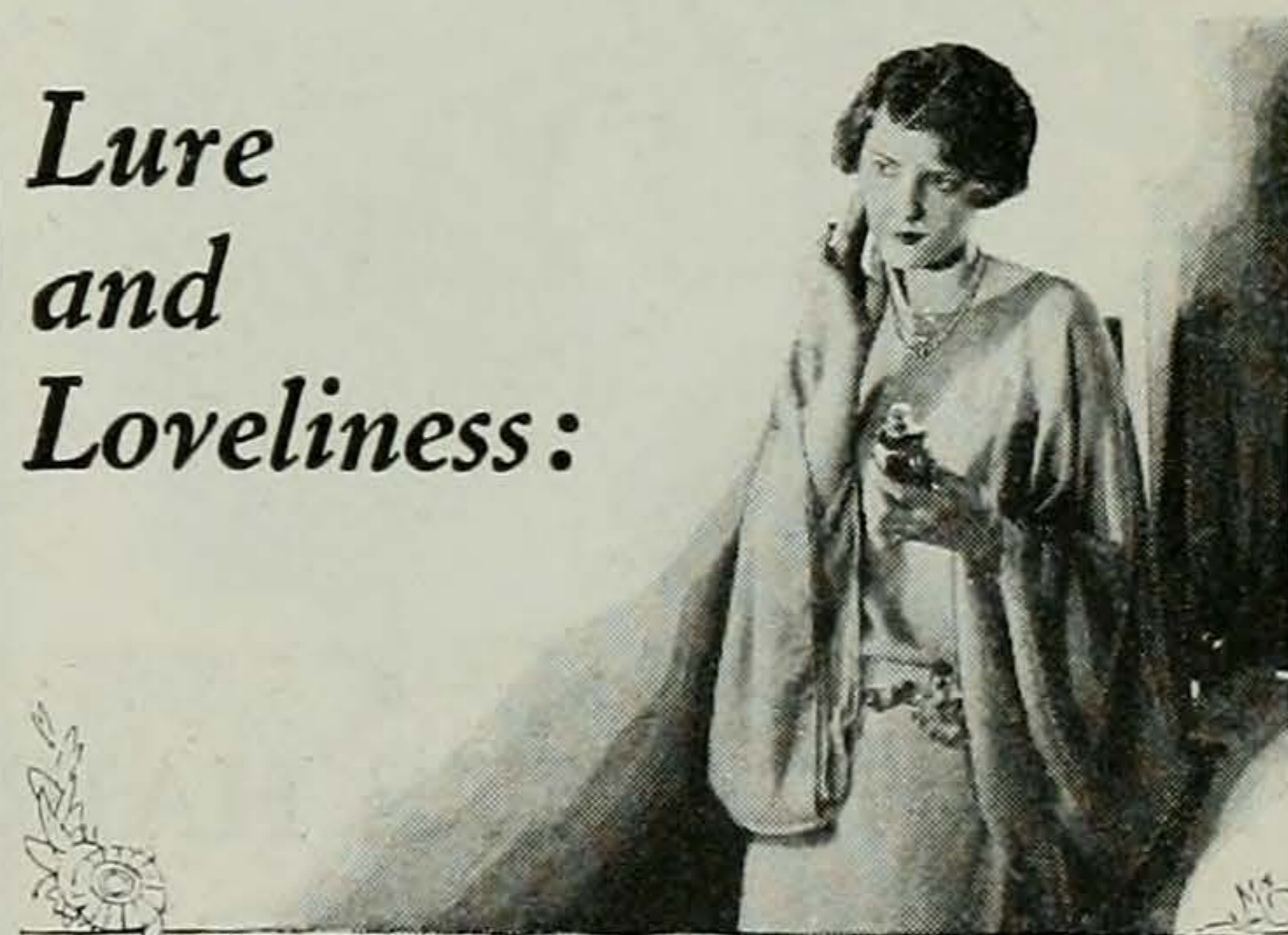
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