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A scene from *Stella Maris*, showing Mary Pickford, playing two roles.

# The Life of Mary Pickford

By Arthur Stringer

## III.—The Power of Mary Pickford

**I** AM afraid," I said at the beginning of my last talk with Mary Pickford, "that we haven't been getting on any too well with this story of your life."

"We seem to wander off on side-issues, don't we?" commented Little Mary. Then she laughed. "But after all it's only natural that the specimen should squirm a little when you try to pin her down on paper! Life, you see, isn't like a bolt of ribbon. You can't unroll it and calmly inspect it from end to end. It's really a terribly tangled up skein of things, movements and emotions and accidents and cross-currents and aims and disappointments, so hopelessly snarled up that I couldn't unravel them into the straight threads of history if I wanted to. People can't come and turn you and your career inside out as though it

were a silk stocking. In the first place, if I thought I was going to be inspected that way I'd very promptly get goose-flesh and you'd proudly announce that the stocking wasn't silk, after all, but merely mercerized, with several runs in her character!"

"Then," I protested, "the run is in the character of the interviewer, for a good one should surely first anesthetize his subject before operating."

"Well, I'm very wide-awake, and the thought of dissection sends me promptly into my shell.

In this business of ours, you know, there are faces which we describe as 'not screening well,' and you naturally want to find out if your thoughts are going to screen well before you parade them to the world."

"Then let's swing around to something more comfortable," I suggested with what was merely a mock pretence at desperation, "and talk about motor cars or clothes — or something like that."

"You have mentioned my only two relaxations," retorted Miss Pickford, "if you leave out books."

I already knew that the star confronting me was

*"Don't you love a real Canadian winter day?" demanded Mary Pickford, "with the snow crunching under your feet like dry charcoal, the way it does when the thermometer is somewhere about twenty below?"*

*"I should think you would prefer this," suggested her interviewer. It was eighty-eight in the shade, with the mid-winter sun of Southern California shimmering on the glass roof of the studio and making Stage Number Three very much like a hot-house. There was a smell of orange blossoms on the sultry breeze and the lazy song of birds in the air.*

*"I love them both," ruminated Little Mary aloud. "I love Canada and I love the States, and I've always wanted to see them brought closer together. The work we've been doing here, in fact, has been bringing the two countries closer together, for when you laugh and cry over the same pictures and the same characters and sympathize with the same ideals you are no longer strangers to one another. And now that we are not only sympathizing with the same ideals, but standing side by side and fighting for the same ideals, we are really one people!"*

not given to social frivolities. She mixed little, in her hours of ease, with that somewhat strident film colony which adds so many high-lights to the life of Hollywood. Nor did she mingle with that daily congregation of screen-celebrities who after noon by afternoon convert the tea-room of *The Alexandria*, in Los Angeles, into a noisy and colorful if somewhat thirsty aviary. The big Bogardus home on Western Avenue, in fact, had the habit of swallowing her up and keeping her hidden. When the solemnity of that house was disturbed it was usually by the dark and vivacious Lottie, or her daughter, the toddling and irrepressible Mary Pickford Rupp—for in private life, of course, Lottie is Mrs. Rupp—or by the high-spirited and movement-loving Jack who has found married life with Olive Thomas by no means subjugating.

Not, as I have already tried to make plain, that Mary is by any stretch of the word dolorous. The keynote of her nature might even be sounded in the word "sunny," but it seems more the rarified and softly-illuminating sunlight of her native Northland than the riotous and over-assertive glow of her adopted state. And I have been able to catch a sidelight on that oddly reserved character from a playmate of her earliest years. "My first picture of Gladys Mary," said this playmate of other days, "is of a very attractive, very thin and very serious-eyed little girl who sat on the upturned cover of a sewing-machine and watched her mother making clothes for the children of parents who were much more prosperous than hers. She was always a rather grown-up child. She was never riotous, never romped and got into scrapes, as sister Lottie did and brother Jack was later to do. She was not a sickly child, but, as I remember it, she 'took' about everything that happened along in the way of juvenile indisposition, mumps and measles and scarlatina, among the rest. Once, too, she fell dangerously ill of black diphtheria. The doctor who attended her had given her up, in fact, but Little Gladys Mary's frenzied mother took the situation in her own hands and herself extracted from the child's throat the accumulations that were threatening to choke her to death. Mary's strain of wistfulness, her habit of gravity, may have been the result in part of these repeated illnesses, or of the straightened circumstances in which the earliest part of her youth was spent, or of the solemnizing duties of a breadwinner which de-

volved so early upon her shoulders. But I am inclined to believe that it was something born in her, just as she was born with that wonderful golden hair without a touch of red in it. And in this gentle melancholy lay the germ of much of her future power."

But instead of talking about Mary's character and Mary's soul, I had flipantly suggested that we talk about her cars and her clothes. For, only that day, a more or less exalted lady, betraying her sex's adherence to type, had demanded of me a prompt and comprehensive description of how Mary Pickford dressed in private life. My descriptions, obviously, were not altogether satisfactory. They were, in fact, as nebulous as they were self-contradictory. For on one occasion

when I talked with Miss Pickford she wore a sedate little black-and-white tailored dress and a brand-new Hudson seal coat (it was Mary herself who told me it was brand-new) and another time she wore dirty moccasins and a ragged petticoat and an old blue denim shirt open at the throat, since on this occasion Mary was "working" on that wild-west story of Bret Harte's known as "M'liss." And during still another seminar I encountered the star in the high-topped kid shoes and the gay festive plaids of "Amarilly of Clothesline Alley."

So my description of Mary's apparel, I'm afraid, was a bit of a muddle. I hadn't been trained to observe such things. But I did succeed in registering the fact that Miss Pickford wore no jewelry, not even a wedding-ring,—though on Western Avenue I had just passed a rival screen-star in a peacock-blue limousine, a star of about twice Mary's age, decked out in enough glimmering junk to make the Queen of Sheba look like a Quakeress. I had already absorbed the purely mental impression, however, that Mary herself would not sit up nights worrying over her bodily accoutrements, any more than she would ask of her interpreters that the question of attire should be unduly accentuated. Her clothing, in fact, impressed me as being a good deal like her voice, that of the well-bred American girl who tends to shun what Franklin Adams once called the "consciousness of conspicuity." The striking thing about Miss Pickford, in fact, is the lack of accent on the physical note, the absence of that voluptuousness which in some circles appears to constitute the supreme equipment of

the screen-favorite. What you notice is an almost boy-like straightness of line, the adolescent absence of contours, a clean-limbed, small-boned, agile young figure with its plentitude of nervous energy touched with asceticism. The hands and feet, too, are much smaller than they look on the screen, the camera having a most uncharitable tendency to make the most of such members.

II  
"WHY do you want to talk about clothes?" Miss Pickford was demanding.

"I don't. But I know you would."

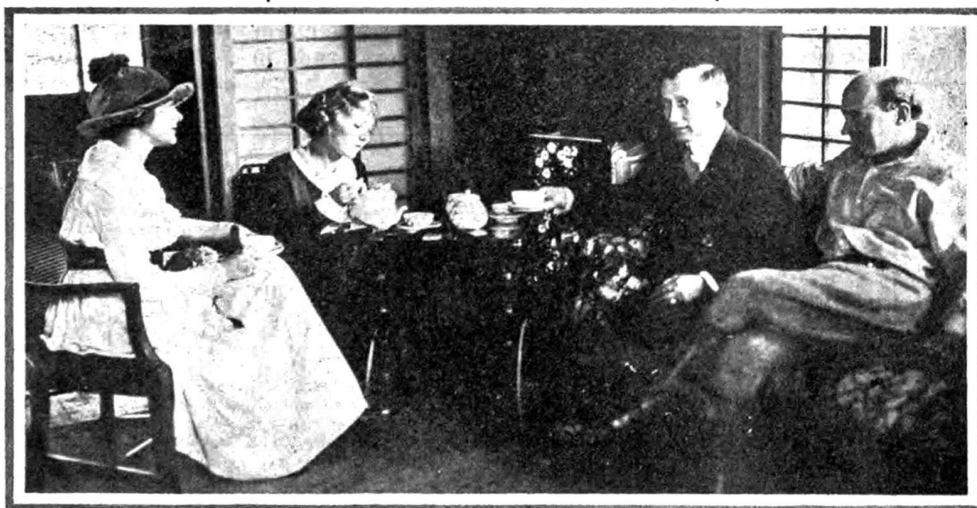
"Why?"

"Because all screen stars do. I suppose they have to."

And Mary acknowledged that I was right. I also learned that she had a special dressmaker to design them, although a certain amount of her apparel is fashioned in New

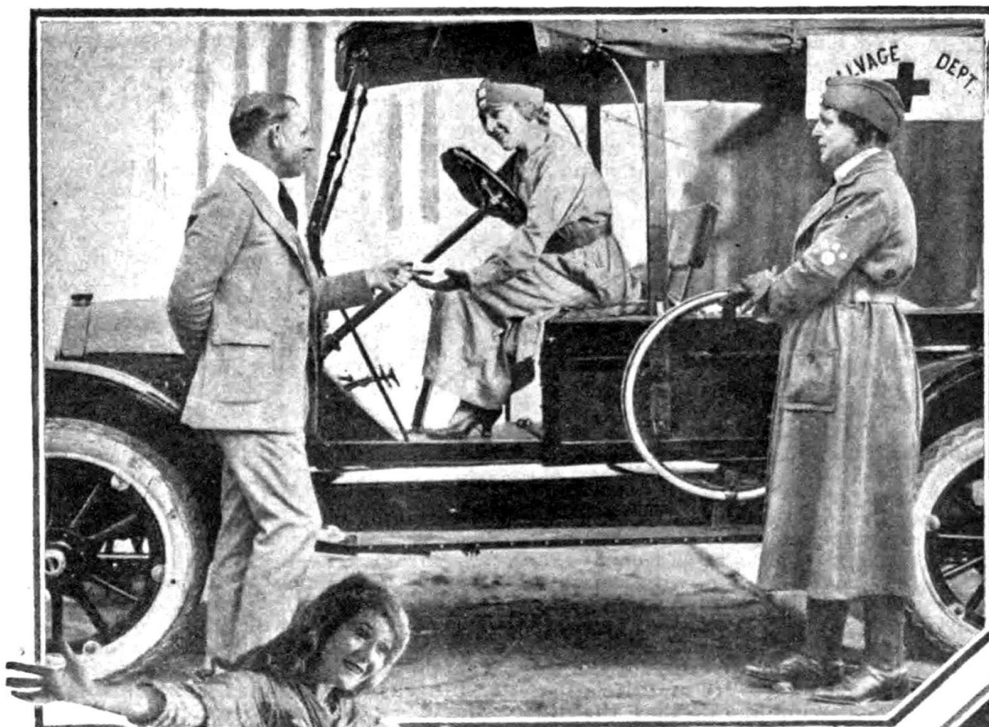


On reading Mr. Stringer's story, the publicity manager for Miss Pickford wired to MACLEAN'S: "Best story ever written of Mary."



Tea in Miss Pickford's dressing room, between scenes. Miss Frances Marion (scenario writer), Miss Pickford, Adolph Zukor (President of Famous Players) and Cecil B. de Mille (producer).





Above: She likes to drive a car, especially in any war work.  
Right: A pose snapped while in costume for "M'liss."



home, so long as it really is a home. If you're born to it, of course, you never quite understand. But I have been poor much longer than I have been the other way. And being poor taught me to appreciate the things that I've been able to get. Now, don't imagine that I'm going to moralize over the virtues of poverty. I've no intention of doing that. I'm merely stating a fact

which I've bumped into in the course of my own life. If you're born

with everything you want you've missed the fun of the biggest game there is, the elemental old joy of accomplishment, the human satisfaction of going after a thing and roping it down. When you get it, of course, it's not going to be what you expected, and it's not going to make you any happier than you were before you got it. I suppose it's only the going on that counts."

"But is it a case of going on?" I asked. "I mean, do you look for continuous progress in the matter of motion-picture work?"

"There has been a steady advance in motion-pictures," explained Miss Pickford, "from about the time I first went into them. And that advance gives every promise of continuing. When I did my first work in the movies, back in the old Biograph days, I swung into that field

just about the time of the birth of the silent drama. It was about the time, I mean, when the first serious attempts were being made to do something better than merely portray human beings in action, with no definite story-interest to unify that action."

THIS was new to me. But little did I dream, when I asked for explanations, of the mass of technical information stowed so carefully away behind Mary's dissembling blonde curls.

"Edison's early kinetoscope and Paul's animatograph, as it has been called, had been improved by this time," began the reigning sovereign of this newly-founded empire of celluloid. "The Lumiere kinematograph, you may remember, had been introduced into vaudeville, where it was admired by the public as a technical wonder. It was a novelty, and the theatre-going crowds were interested, though their interest did not extend beyond the mechanics of the thing. But that couldn't last, of course. Along with the demand for more pictures came also a demand for more ambitious productions. At first



Miss Pickford emerging from her dressing room.



people were satisfied to see a short reel, a reel of only one minute, showing a baby being bathed or a boy turning the hose on a fat man or some movement equally trivial. They were, in fact, merely abbreviated little slap-stick comedies. But the growth had started. The settings and products became more elaborate. The story or drama side was gradually developed, until one of the big milestones was passed when The Passion Play was shown as a picture at the Eden Musee, in New York. It was pretty crude, of course, from our present-day standards. But even ten and twelve years ago the motion-picture business was attracting the better minds of the country. One of the biggest creative artists in the bus-

only now and then keeping one with some richer association as a souvenir. Mary Pickford, in fact, gives a great deal away. It is true that Mrs. Pickford, Mary's mother, looks after the star's financial affairs and investments. But it is Mary's own hand that is forever active in charitable efforts, and I knew, without asking her, of how entirely at her own expense she maintains a Los Angeles orphanage and of how under that sheltering roof almost two hundred little tots find a safe and comfortable home.

"It's a wonderful thing," Mary Pickford had just been telling me, "to have all the clothes you want. And every woman seems to want them."

My thoughts went back to the child seated on the sewing-machine cover watching the mother of a house on whom ill-fortune had suddenly fallen determinedly keeping the wolf from the door by fashioning dresses for happier and wealthier little girls. And Mary's thoughts perhaps traveled back in the same direction, for her face became grave.

"I'm not going to deny that it isn't equally wonderful to have a beautiful



iness then, as he is now, was Mr. Griffith, D. W. Griffith, the man who, as you probably know, is responsible for 'The Birth Of A Nation' and 'Hearts Of The World.' Under Mr. Griffith I played in quite a number of the earlier one and two real dramas. Then I came out to California in 1910 and did a one-reel version of 'Ramona,' with Henry Walthall playing opposite me. This was the first actual dramatization of a novel, though Mr. Griffith had already done a screen-version of Browning's poem, 'Pippa Passes,' and another company had attempted a screen reproduction of the play-form of 'Monte Cristo.'"

"These reminiscences led my mind back to the days of the nickelodeon, the smelly and ill-ventilated little cellar on the off-color street, with the screen-pictures still giving every evidence of suffering from *paralysis agitans* and the films so scratched they looked like a rain of tin-ware viewed through an eight-foot square of cheese-cloth. But the wonder of the new invention was still in the heart of man. It was another case of Johnson's walking dog, the marvel being not that the dog walked well, but that he walked at all. I was equally reminded that Mary Pickford had been the early bird, the early bird who caught the first worm of recognition. It was not the fashion, in those days, to make public announcement of the name of a player, and the face of Mary Pickford became familiar to a somewhat circumscribed world long before her name was known. Her popularity, even in those anonymous and creaky productions, extended to Canada and England.

"Times have changed since then," I observed, more to throw a pontoon across the silence than to proffer a pearl of wisdom.

"It's a habit time has," agreed Miss Pickford, apparently still intent on her transit through the tombs of the past.

"But it was about this time, wasn't it, that you deserted the pictures for the stage?" I inquired.

**I** DID not need to ask why. Halfway successes would never have satisfied the ardent and ever-critical spirit of Mary Pickford. The picture possibilities were still too limited, the field was too restricted. And like the true strategist she was, finding her advance blocked in one direction, she essayed her next thrust in an altogether different direction.

"Yes; David Belasco was putting on 'The Warrens of Virginia,' which we've already spoken about. He had seen me in the movies. When he wants either a personality or a 'prop' for one of his productions he wants it. I knew what it meant to be on Broadway, and under Belasco. So I accepted his offer. That was the beginning of a very close friendship between our foremost stage-producer and myself. Later on I played in Mr. Belasco's production of Lavedon's 'Good Little Devil,' as you very well know."

"And then you went back to the movies? I reminded Little Mary, in a tone of gentle reproof.

"And then I went back to the movies," repeated the cool-eyed young lady whom I had once delegated to fill the shoes of Maude Adams. "I went under the management of Adolph Zukor and we did a screen-version of 'In The Bishop's Carriage.' It was unexpectedly successful; it was, in fact, amazingly successful. It was so much of a hit in its own way that Mr. Zukor has the habit of proclaiming it the corner-stone of his success. Up to

that time, you see, he was practically unknown—and I don't need to explain that to-day he's one of the most successful producers in the profession, or the business, if you insist on the older way of describing it."

"And you are still under the management of the Zukor interests?" I asked.

"Yes. We're just arranging for our next half-yearly programme."

"I was told the new Pathe company recently offered you twenty-five thousand dollars a week, on a long-term contract," I suggested.

"I did not accept that offer. And I never make long-term contracts. I never, in fact, sign a contract for more than six months at a time."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, because everything about the photoplay world is in such a state of change. Tastes change; the public changes, conditions and methods change. I've always felt it wouldn't be fair to my management to tie them up for more than six months at a time." The little star looked at me with laughter hovering about the over-wistful eyes. They were not the eyes of a light-hearted and care-free girl. They were the questioning and shadowed eyes of the woman who has sounded life and life's temporalities. "Who knows that the tide isn't going to turn to-morrow, or the day after to-morrow?"

"What tide?" I demanded.

"The tide of public opinion, or whatever you want to call it."

"And what could that do to you?"

"It could leave me as high and dry as a mussel-shell on the sandflats of neglect."

**M**ARY PICKFORD joined in my laugh of derision, but in the laughter of the lady I thought I detected an undertone of that apprehension which is the step-daughter of over-active imagination. It's the haunted feeling, I suppose, which the stateliest queens of stage-popularity feel in even their fullest hour of fame, knowing as they do the instability of that sovereignty beside which the throne of a Romanoff is a Plymouth Rock of endurance.

But I felt no shadow of that black wing, for only a few nights before I had beheld a singularly impressive queen in front of a Los Angeles "first-run" motion-picture palace. It was the opening night of a Mary Pickford film, and that line of waiting "fans"—there seems to be no word fit quite so well as that shorthand slang epithet—stretched off in the Hoover-ized light as far as the eye could see, with policemen to break the line at side-street crossings, to let the traffic pass through. It impressed me, in my mood of impersonal observation, as a sort of slow and solemn "march past," an unofficered parade by an unorganized public, silently yet significantly attesting to one woman's popularity, the popularity which later caused twenty thousand dollars to be bid and paid for one tiny ringlet-end from Our Mary's sacrosanct head at a Victory Bond drive in Chicago, and prompted every member of the Coast Artillery Corps of California, every man and officer of that duly adopted Pickford battalion to carry off to war with him a portrait of their state queen in a little leather case. Nothing but straws in the wind, of course, gentle reader, but straws which after all show which way the wind is blowing.

"Then it was fear of change which took you from Belasco back to the movies?" I asked.

"No," was Miss Pickford's reply. "It was the changes themselves. There had been quite a number, I found, during my

absence. The mechanics of the thing had improved, and the methods had also improved. It's only during the last five or six years, you must remember, that the names of the screen players have been announced to the public, that the actual workers have been given a recognition and personality of their own. Before this time, too, exhibitors were opposed to the five-reel picture. They lasted too long and meant that houses couldn't be filled so often. And there were other improvements in pictures, besides the photography and the general improvement in taste and intelligence. The use of the sub-title, the interpolated explanation in type, increased the possibility of the screen-story. And there were better and bigger audiences to appreciate these advances, and an increasing demand among those audiences for this or that personality on the screen, a tendency which really gave birth to what we call the star system."

"So you saw your chance and became a star?" I none too intelligently interrogated. Whereupon Miss Pickford studied me with that level and lucid stare of hers. And I know nothing more devastating than being subjected to even the tempered contempt of a beautiful woman!

"It wasn't quite that," explained Little Mary. "You don't exactly jump into stardom, you know, the same as you jump into a feather-bed. It's not a jump at all. It's a climb!"

"Was it for you?" I demanded.

"It is for everybody, except the meteors, the ones who seem to flash out for a production or two and then pass away. I wonder," added Miss Pickford with a more thoughtful frown on her broad young brow, "if you realize just how competitive this business we are talking about has grown to be?"

**I** HAD an inkling of the extent to which organization had invaded the once gypsified and devil-may-care domain of the mummer. And I will here acknowledge and confess to you auburn-curled damsels who so enviously peruse the screen-world periodicals of the hour, that in so far as I have been able to observe and judge, this business of being a motion-picture star is about the most competitive business on the face of this essentially competitive earth of ours! Since the regime of the efficiency expert in every large studio each star is charted and watched and kept under record. Day by day and week by week elaborate ledgers are kept of every high-salaried actress, to make sure that the actress in question is returning value for value. House reports are assembled and tabulated, the figures from the distributing agencies are recorded and considered, and the fluctuating barometer of that star's popularity is scrutinized by expert eyes and rendered into easily comprehensible form on the duly prepared blanks of expert accountants. This calmly mathematical and continuous appraisal has its natural enough effect on the star, if she hopes and intends to remain a star. The consciousness of any such Recording Angel always at your elbow, if you are a real artist, means a never-ending strain to "make good," as your manager is apt to put it, to keep up to record, to show the cold-eyed gentleman in control that you are shining with greater and still greater brightness. And when you are not an ordinary star, but a star of the first magnitude, sufficiently radiant to be recognized even as a dictator of your own contracts, there devolves on your shoulders

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## The Life of Mary Pickford

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not alone the need for sustaining past records for "keeping up your batting average" as Miss Pickford so aptly phrased it, but the necessity for finding fit vehicles, and the assembling of casts and costumes and properties, and the employment of adequate directors and assistants, and, above and beyond the studious guardianship of name and personality, the somewhat forlorn treasuring of that bodily strength which is the basis of your camera-value, of your pictorial appeal to the eye.

It all tends, of course, to convert your work into a bloodhound, forever baying at your heels, for you must read books and script for new material, and plumb history to know when you are off the track of accuracy and eradicate incompetency from the forces about you, and scrutinize contract-renewals which may be death-warrants in disguise, and be discreetly yet assiduously press-agented, and watch for the fugitive chance, and foretell changes in taste, and retain some saving sense of humor and cling to a fit and proper idea as to the proportion of things. This means you must have the pose of the dove and at the same time the alertness of the eagle. And small wonder it will be if it makes your cheek slightly hollow and your brow slightly puckered and your interesting pallor of skin an accidental by-product of over-tapped vitality and over-crowded days. For your work is something strangely akin to that blood-sucking vampire of the Amazon which folds you affectionately enough within its wings, but quietly and ceaselessly and relentlessly feeds on your youth and your god-given joy in life.

### III.

AS I looked at the slender-bodied girl in front of me, remembering as I did how even the great Griffith had proclaimed that if he was ever in doubt about a motion-picture production he would rather have the opinion of Mary Pickford than of any man in the business, I was tempted to answer the question which she had put to me by side-stepping to still another.

"Why couldn't any decent-looking girl make a hit in a picture?" I demanded.

"She could," was Little Mary's prompt and somewhat unlooked for reply.

"You mean to say," I insisted, "that any respectably attractive girl, any girl without a hump or a squint, could become a screen star?"

"Any such girl could become a star," explained Miss Pickford. "But that is very far from saying she could remain a star. A shrewd director can always tell such a girl what to do. There is no particular training needed for the ordinary picture. There are even cases where the stupider you are the more satisfactory you prove. Women are taken from all walks of life for such work. But the final test in such things, it seems to me, is not being skyrocketed into fame by some one spectacular production, but in sustaining your average, in doing as well to-morrow what you did to-day, in carrying on, as the English put it. That, I think, proves whether you're an accident or an artist. It also persuades your audiences to have faith in your judgment. That is how



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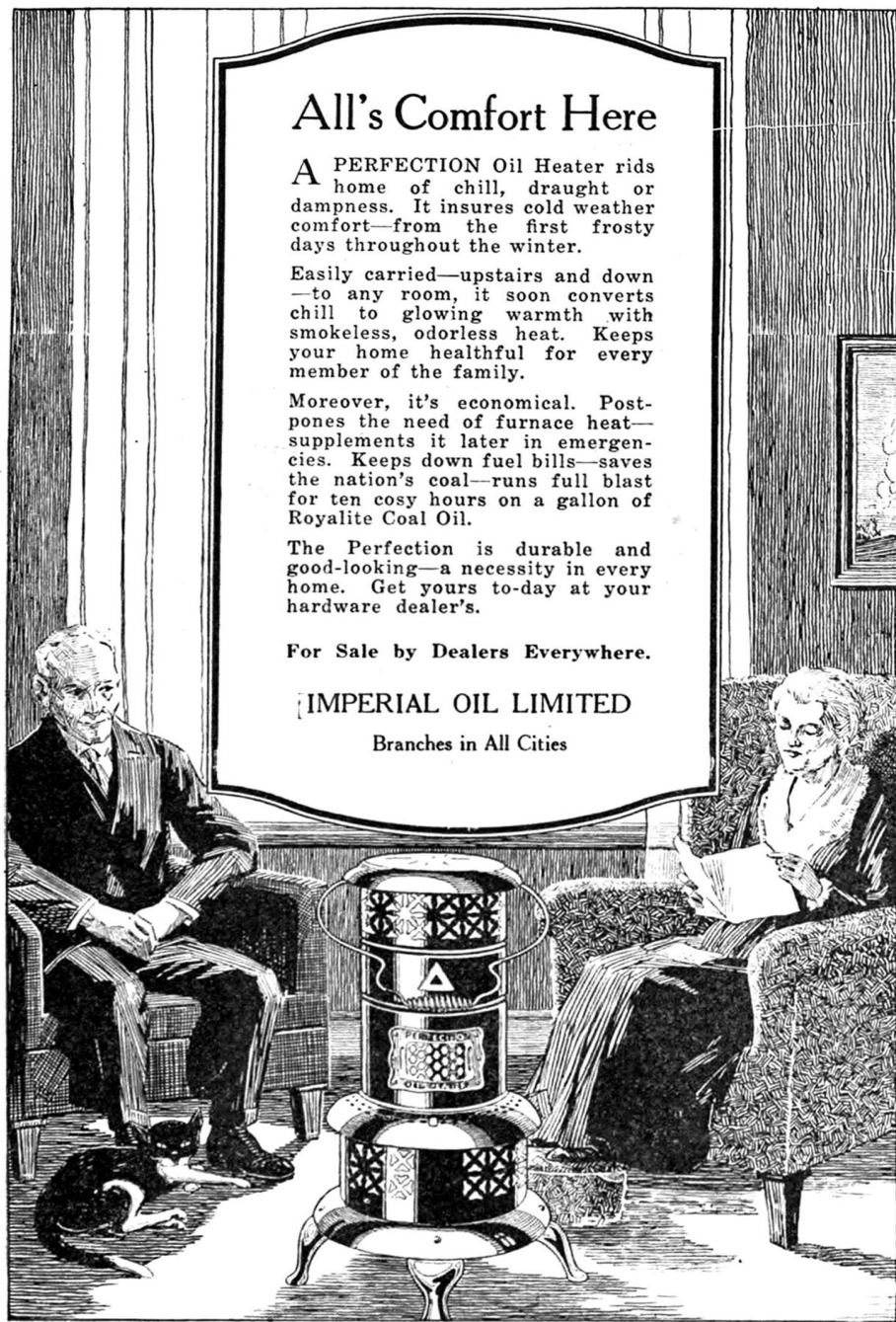
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stars, real stars, come about. They are born of the public's desire to see on the screen, or on the stage, a man or woman in whom they have learned to have faith—a sort of aesthetic faith, I suppose you'd call it. It seems to satisfy a double-edged appetite, the craving for a story, and the craving to re-meet an old friend."

"But," I began—

"I'm coming to that," calmly proceeded Miss Pickford. "As you were about to say, this exhibition of a recognized personality quite often becomes more important, apparently, than the vehicle through which that personality is revealed to the public. But that condition takes care of itself. When you have a double-edged appetite and get only one side of it satisfied you're apt to go somewhere else for your movie meals. What I'm trying to get at is that a star can't shine without stories, although the star-system, in a nutshell, is the desire to see not so much a play as a personality already known and approved of. It has already its dangers and drawbacks, of course, for there is a natural tendency to drive stars who have won fame and a following into one line of work, to repeat the particular recipe through which they first reached success, to repeat it until it becomes monotonous."

"But doesn't Tourneur claim that three bad productions will swamp any star?" I reminded my *vis-a-vis*.

"That, I think, is more a matter of opinion than a matter of history. Big names, of course, will sometimes carry a mediocre photoplay to financial success, but exhibitors soon get to know when the peak-load the star has to carry is beginning to totter. And in the pictures, as I've already said, both public taste and conditions change very quickly. Personally, I think the production that is most likely to succeed is the one where the recognized star is equipped with a recognizable piece of good work, prepared by an author who knows he or she will receive recognition for it. In the earlier days, when the cast was anonymous, conditions not only failed to demand what was best in an actress, but also failed to attract the more intelligent type of girl to the pictures. When the actress knew she was getting direct and personal recognition for what she was doing, that knowledge prompted her to give her audiences the best that was in her. She evolved from a machine into an *artiste*—for art is only work you've taken a joy in doing. Her acting became more inspirational. She was working for more than money: she was working for fame. She knew she was building up a following, a following to whom she owed the very best she could do, for whom she could sometimes even do a little better than her best, since the more emotional tie with her people gave her a chance for that extra tug which so often lifts the merely excellent into the inspired."

"And wouldn't you say the same held good with the scenario writer?" I asked.

"Of course," was Miss Pickford's response. "And also of the director. Men and women of talent are now willing to give their brains to both callings. They are no longer nameless hacks, working behind closed doors, without identity, without standing of their own. They are ambitious men and women anxious for recognition, for success. They are developing a new art and a new technique. And naturally it can't be done in a day."

"Am I to understand, then, that you agree with Munsterberg in maintaining that the photoplay should not be accepted as an offshoot of the stage, but as actually

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a new art, with a technique entirely its own?"

MISS PICKFORD, sitting back in her big chair, considered this equally big question.

"Yes, I consider it a new art. It strikes me as being an art as different from the art of the theatre as that of the painter is different from the art of the sculptor. It has resources, too, unknown to the spoken drama, such as the 'close-up' and the 'cut-back,' which duplicate in a mechanical manner those movements of our minds which we call concentration and memory. Instead of having painted canvas for a background, too, it has all the wide world, the actual world, with all its beauty of valley and river and prairie—slope and city streets."

"But do you think, Miss Pickford, that even these new assets make up for the loss of the human voice?"

Again Mary Pickford cogitated the question before her.

"No," she acknowledged. "Candidly, I don't. Nothing can make up for that loss. The spoken drama gives you a wider scope and makes greater demands on intelligence. It yields you results you can never ask for from the photoplay."

"And having worked in both, which do you prefer?"

"I love the stage best," acknowledged Miss Pickford, with the audacity of a queen who was quite conscious of the fact that she was talking treason.

"And does this imply you hope to return to the speaking stage?" I asked.

"Yes, some day I should like to return to it," declared the queen of the movies whose picture-earnings were some twenty-five thousand dollars a week. It took me a considerable length of time to digest this, for it came to me distinctly as a shock.

"But won't the technique of one art rather conflict with the technique of the other?" I asked.

"Yes, that's the great difficulty," acknowledged Miss Pickford. "In each one you obtain your results by somewhat different methods. And until you'd worked in both fields I don't believe you'd entirely understand this. Take the case of Mrs. Fiske, for instance. She is the cleverest actress, the most absolutely finished actress, on the American stage. At least, I think so. She is a woman who is so intellectual you'd feel that by sheer force of mind she'd be able to overcome almost any technical problem in the matter of acting. But when Mrs. Fiske attempted to do motion-pictures she was not a success. And her failure was due not to the fact that she wasn't clever enough for screen work, but to the fact that, in a way, she was too clever. She carried into the studio, I mean, a colossal burden of technicalities and resources which were of no earthly use to her there, which were really an embarrassment, an impediment, to her. Her one great asset in the spoken drama, of course, had been her voice, the organ of speech to which every pose and gesture and expression of face had been made complementary. And when speech was taken away from her, as it is on the screen, all those secondary values in her art were left floating in the air, unattached to anything, like—well, like the ribs of a boat with its keel knocked out."

"And that failure struck me as odd," I ventured, once more impressed by the reverence with which all fellow-artists—being the first to detect and honor technical skill—mentioned the name of Mrs.

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Fiske, "for I know of no one on the stage, not even excepting Duse, who can make her silences more eloquent, who can achieve the same tremendous dramatic force through the very suspension of gesture and movement."

I could see Miss Pickford turning this over with a chipmunk sort of nervous quickness.

"It is equally odd," she went on, "in this connection, that some of the faults of the speaking stage are actually advantages on the screen. But you mustn't jump to the conclusion that the road of the photoplayer is any too easy, when it comes to the portrayal of genuine emotion. You know, of course, how the older-fashioned screen actors did it, by pumping the diaphragm up and down, and using the fingers as a depilatory, and clawing about the neighborhood of the breast-bone! The newer methods are slightly more refined, just as the newer characterizations are. But what people call screen exaggeration isn't so much due to the fact that the physical signs of feeling aren't always under voluntary control as it's due to the fact that so many screen actors don't feel what they are trying to register. And a voice is always missed, in times like that. It's missed by the actor as well as by the audience. That's why you have music as you sit and look at the picture. And that's why we too have music when we're making the picture."

"What kind of music?"

"It's usually a violinist who stands close by, out of reach of the camera, of course, and plays the music to which we're most susceptible. It's almost a necessity. For example, when I was doing 'Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm' there was a picture where I stand over the death-bed of my aunt. Max Fisher, our official tear-producer, tried playing Massenet's *Elegie*, while the stage-hands went about on tip-toe and nobody spoke above a whisper. It was a good deal like a funeral. But for some reason or other, this time the *Elegie* wouldn't work. Perhaps some inner self kept whispering it was too highfalutin' for that rustic New England atmosphere we were working for. At any rate I had to have Mr. Fisher switch to 'Dear Old Girl' before I could get keyed up for the desired effect. But you get the point, don't you, that we were really canning emotion, so that it could be uncanned again before the audience?"

**I** SIGNIFIED my comprehension, with my thoughts still harping back to Mrs. Fiske, who had once told me that she knew her field so well she felt sure she would never have another failure.

"But if the methods of the moving-picture are becoming more refined, as you say, why shouldn't there be a place in it for an artist of Mrs. Fiske's equipment?" I asked.

"There *will* be," asserted Miss Pickford. "But it will be a matter of evolution, and time. And even a great actress can't make the clocks go backward!"

"Is that a Chesterfieldian way of saying that youth, after all, is essential for a movie star?"

"It's much harder, with our present audiences, for an actress who is no longer young to succeed on the stage," was the most that the self-barricading Miss Pickford would acknowledge.

#### IV.

**B**Y the time I had come back to Sunset Boulevard and Miss Pickford again, the latter had gently, but firmly piloted our conversation back to the question of



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the star system in the photo-play, Little Mary, in fact, contended that this system was really a heritage from the speaking stage.

"Do you ever feel," I accordingly asked as I swung into line, "that the motion-picture is going to drive the spoken drama out of existence?"

"No; never!" was the altogether decisive reply. "They are not even rivals. The motion-picture is really a corrective of the drama proper. It is making the stage behave itself, so to speak, making it keep good, on the threat of taking away its following if it falls too low. You have seen, haven't you, how it has driven the inferior type of drama out of existence? The old cheap thrillers we mustn't say too many unkind words about? And the photo-play is making the struggle to survive so much sterner that the plays which do survive are apt to be the plays of real merit."

"And the motion-picture itself will change, you've already implied, will evolve into something better?" I suggested.

"It's evolving all the time. We are only beginning to understand its possibilities. You see, you can't work at a thing as long as I have without reaching certain opinions about it and having certain feelings about it. As I said before, the bigger men have come into the game, the men who really count, who are making their mark. And the mechanical part of the thing is being improved. Then, too, the public is not only being educated up to the better type of productions, but is making its demand for them felt. It is impossible, always, to work ahead of your public. With these shadows that moved on a white sheet we gave them something new, something absolutely new. They were satisfied at first with the mere novelty of the thing, just as when you begin to drive a car you are satisfied merely to see the machinery working and know you're keeping to the road. But later on you forget about the steering and the engine. You want something more than the earlier childish delight in motion as motion. You begin to take an aesthetic pleasure out of the panorama of hills and valleys and fields and woods and streams along which you are passing. The mere invention of the machinery which provides this, of course, is quite wonderful. I sometimes feel that the discovery of the motion-picture was almost as important as the invention of printing. When a California photographer—his name was Muybridge, wasn't it?—put those twenty-four cameras in a long shed and tied strings to their lenses so that a galloping horse broke the strings and gave twenty-four exposures of its movements, he laid the foundation for something as great, I think, as when Johann Gutenberg carved letters out of birch-bark and noticed before he gave them to his children that the bark-sap had made prints of the letters on what they'd been wrapped in. Pictures, to my way of thinking, are really a new kind of printing, a printing in images which makes the brain work faster than it used to work. It can crowd the eye with impression after impression so quickly that the product is too high-powered for the medium. It's over-engined, so to speak; like a twin-six motor mounted on a little runabout chassis. That's something the scenario-writers and the directors are beginning to understand. They are growing into a bowing acquaintance with the newer technique and the newer tradition. For as I said before, it's all something new, something as new



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in the world of art as the discovery of painting in oil-colors on canvas must have been. People still complain that the motion-picture has no depth, that it is flat. But it is no flatter than a painted canvas. And audiences, in learning to accept the screen picture, are catching the trick of seeing there the depth they wish, of investing it with something from their own minds, about the same as the lover of painted canvases long ago learned to accept the brush-artist's technical efforts after illusions."

"In a number of your later pictures I have noticed how the camera has been successfully operated *against the sun*, with the shadows coming towards me," I remarked.

"Yes," acknowledged Miss Pickford, "that is quite often done and as you have probably noticed, it results in a delicacy of shadow and a beauty of contour which you never saw in the earlier pictures. And you would be surprised how audiences are beginning to appreciate points like that, even to demand them."

"Then we must always remember these audiences?"

"Yes; it's all really a good deal like invention of printing which we spoke of a minute or so ago. It wasn't the printing alone that was so important. Equally important was the discovery of how to make paper easily and cheaply. Our public is the paper: the screen-workers are the type. Each one is necessary to the other. And one can't advance without the other advancing."

This statement not unnaturally caused my thoughts to veer about to Mary Pickford's relation with her audience and to ricochet back again to what she had so recently explained about the star system.

"I hope to heaven Mary always does kid stuff," I had heard an otherwise intelligent Californian hostess proclaim. "She means to modern life what cut flowers do. She belongs to the people. There are plenty of others to vamp and rage. To ask Mary to be worse than asking Barrie to write like Henry James. All we ask is to see Mary *rollick*. It makes us over. It keeps us young!"

THERE are a few million, I imagine, who in some form or another have re-echoed these words, clamoring for a row of close-ups, protesting their indifference as to the thread of story along which these same close-ups might be strung. And in so doing they have succeeded in imposing upon Mary Pickford a type of screen-producing which, though not fixed, has betrayed a tendency to adhere to certain established lines. Mary Pickford, I remembered, enjoyed both the distinction and the advantage of being the conspicuous first-comer in the garden of screen achievement. She was still without ponderable rivals when she caught and carried off her first worm of triumph there. She was the first to make a success of the portrayal of child parts, being little more than a child herself at the time. So unqualified has that early success proved that the world has insisted on the repetition of the tried and tested note of juvenility until what was once a matter of triumph has devolved into something approaching strangely close to a matter of martyrdom. For what the unthinking general public still demands of Mary Pickford is *ingenue*, charm, the "Little Eva" of the nineteenth century transposed into the "Little American" of the twentieth century. Of this amazingly intel-

winsome boydenishness, in her Puck-like true artistry, of soul-stirring tragedy, at her elbow, they are apt to ask only a rollick in Peggy-Janes. In other words, they compel her to suffer the calamity of satisfying them with her second best. That she is captivating enough in her winsome hoydenishness, is her Puck-like skylarking, in her sedately modulated high jinks, cannot be denied. The call for their perpetuation is proof enough of that. Take, for example, "The Poor Little Rich Girl," which was, after all is said and done, merely babified charm frisking lamb-like across the meadows of sentimentality. Take "Such A Little Queen," with its essentially second-hand and derivative story ("Prince Otto," who sired "The Prisoner Of Zenda" is plainly identified as the grandfather of all that macaronic horde of Balkan romances) with its absurd exploitation of preconceived and jealousy nursed misconceptions of European royalty and established court procedure. Take still again "The Little Princess," and you behold the producing powers still conventionalizing and perpetuating their star's earlier triumphs and tricks and aspects. They succeed, of course, because of that "damned charm" which Barrie once so engagingly discoursed about. But they compel me to the conclusion that no scenario-writer—and the scenario, like the camel, must still carry everything on its back—has yet plumbed Mary Pickford's possibilities to higher demands.

V.

I SAY this, not alone, because I have caught at first-hand persuasive enough evidences of that star's exceptional mental equipment, but because in one or two of her productions, perhaps more by accident than by managerial intent, she has betrayed possibilities for deeper things. An inkling of them emerged even from the wooden types and the threadbare situation of her "Romance Of The Redwoods." In that production Miss Pickford rose to an apparently unexpected test for at least momentarily sincere and sophisticated acting, giving us a disturbing glimpse of dramatic feeling without bathos and essential human values without the preservative syrups of sentimentality. But this latent and scarcely tapped genius reappeared much more conspicuously and much more recently in the screen-production of a none too brilliant novel by an author who as a rule aspires none too rigorously for the austere heights of human emotion. I refer to William J. Locke's "Stella Maris." This photoplay came and went, without, so far as I have been able to judge, creating anything more than its momentary ripple in the somewhat jaded world of movie-lovers. What attention it did attract from the general public was due more to the fact that Miss Pickford played dual roles in the production, and by some extremely clever film manipulation was shown on the screen in one role actually talking to her *alter ego* in the other role. The two characters which she represented, as is customary in such cases, were sharply contrasting characters, that of a petted and flower-like and innocent-minded invalid girl, and that of an ill-used and ill-nourished workhouse drudge. The story is not important, nor is Miss Pickford's interpretation of the sweet-minded little invalid, the sequestered daughter of wealth always so carefully guarded from the ugliness of life, worthy



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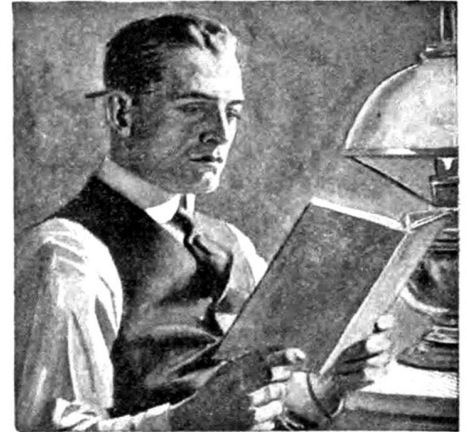
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of any unusual comment. It was a part which she has long since learned to do, and do to perfection.

BUT when in the same photo-drama she assumed the second role, that of "Unity," the stooping and cringing and work-bowed slavey, she rose to the supreme height of her career as an actress. There are persons who believe, and still insist on believing, that it was not *Their Mary* who played that flat-flanked creature with the timorous, one-sided smile and the sullenly brooding brow and the almost half-witted awkwardness of manner, so keenly differentiated were the two characters upon the one screen. It was an unusual role for Mary Pickford and there were those of her followers who resented seeing her transformed into any such ugly duckling, a lowlife type with the once auburn curls plastered flat against the deep-lined brow, and the mouth of the golden smile hardened and thinned, and the girlish body twisted into uncouth lines of an orphanage defective. But with Miss Pickford it was something more than a mere triumph of make-up. It was a distinct achievement in characterization, a clear-cut *tour de force* of impersonation, rounded out without one mistaken move and sustained without one questionable note. The use of the hands alone, miraculously transformed into the lean and hardened claws of toil, was evidence enough of the genius behind the effort. And when this workhouse slavey with the stunted and slow-working mind, so subtly suggested, rises to her supreme moment and takes what she conceives to be final justice in her own hands, Miss Pickford reached a tragic power which Irving at his best scarcely exceeded.

IT WAS not, as I have already intimated, a transcendent story. But it did one transcendently important thing. It showed, to those who had the wit or the wish to discern it, Mary Pickford's genius as an actress. It showed this obliquely and accidentally, perhaps, but showed it so conclusively that the lady shown as Little Mary need never again lament the passing of her girlhood. There are bigger and better things awaiting her. It almost prompts one to hope that this gifted girl might lose her prettiness, that Time might clip the dove-white wings of personality which carry her so easily across the uplands of public favor.

But even that is out of the question, for Mary Pickford's beauty, defying even an indisputable irregularity of feature, is a beauty that is rooted in brains and does not pass away. That face, I'm afraid, will always retain its pictorial appeal, its indecipherable allurements, even when Time has turned the furrows which Time must turn. At any rate, I concluded as a courier announced to Miss Pickford that her car was waiting, there is a tremendously interesting experiment in human psychology awaiting the world during the next decade or so. It will tell whether or not those loyal and long-reaching queues are to lose their old-time idol. For even now, we must remember, *their Mary* is no longer Little Mary. She is a woman facing the complexities and profundities of life, waiting to clarify them through art, as art itself is clarified through life. And unless the powers behind her awaken to this fact, unless they take advantage of this fact, a great field will remain untilld and a vein of the brightest metal will remain uncovered—or for the second time I stand a humbler Moses confounded by my own prophecies.



# The Life of Mary Pickford

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