

THE LYRICAL LILLIAN

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LILLIAN GISH is the damozel of Arthurian legend, tendered in terms of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Her heroines perpetually hover in filtered half-lights, linger in attitudes of romantic despair. They forever drift farther from reality than the dream, and no matter how humble their actual origins, the actress invariably weaves them of the dusk-blues, the dawn-golds of medieval tapestries.

Lillian Gish was the dream princess of silent films. She dwelt in a remote ivory tower, and when she intermittently emerged on the screen as the hapless *Anna Moore*, the tragic *Lucy of Limehouse*, a cloistered *Mimi* of the Left Bank, the mundane garments she assumed were but fragile masquerade, through which it was simple to detect the lambent aristocracy of soul which soared the characters far above the environment in which Lottie Blair Parker, Thomas Burke, and Henri Murger had conceived them. Treading in vague reverie, as to muted Debussy music, Lillian was the quintessence of all the fair women who have wandered the wakeless nights of adolescents since the beginnings of Time.

The poetic pattern of Lillian Gish was set on the idyllic celluloid looms of David Wark Griffith, at the old Biograph studios in New York. In 1912, Griffith, a disciple of the Victorian axioms of dramaturgy, was occupied in evolving the shuttle of the cinema. His histrionic world was patterned with symbols: Virtue endlessly battled Vice, and always with ultimate triumph. As counterpoint to the exigencies of male lust, the Griffith formula was a gossamer heroine.

Various girls essayed this role and totally without variation. Of the many who rose to fame under D. W.'s dictates, only Mary Pickford managed to project a definite individuality. Viewing the early films today, Mary is the one actress who did not surrender to the director's standard set of tricks. Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Mae Marsh, Miriam Cooper, Mary Hay, Carol Dempster, Clarine Seymour, Blanche Sweet—all seem as similar as facets of a single jewel, and the Griffith lapidary work is unmistakable.

Lillian Gish, however, responded in measure beyond measure. Although she

twittered her feet, moued at doves, frantically shredded her handkerchief in times of emotional stress—as did all the others—Miss Gish managed to make such mannerisms her own. While the others were opaque, Gish was translucent, and her performance, technically no different, glowed with argent flame.

"The Birth of a Nation" carried Miss Gish and Griffith to the pinnacle of cinematic prestige in 1915. With the exception of D. W.'s next enterprise, "Intolerance," in which the actress appeared in a minor, but pivotal role, Griffith spent the following six years concentrating upon great motion pictures constructed about a great tragedienne. This era was the director's Golden Age: one has only to remember "Broken Blossoms" with Lillian's smile-device, the tender love passages with Richard Barthelmess, the amazing sequences of hysteria which climax the film; "Hearts of the World," and *Marie*, deranged by the horrors of war wandering about the streets of the French village, bearing her wedding gown in her arms; "Way Down East," and *Anna Moore* christening her dying baby, the romantic episodes with Barthelmess by the river, and that most exciting of all finales, the ice-break.

In 1920, Griffith and Miss Gish parted professional company. D. W. made a few unimportant program efforts with Clarine Seymour and Carol Dempster, while Lillian joined a new company, which because of financial difficulties, never completed the work started under the guidance of Jerome Storm. In 1921 Griffith and Gish again became a combination, and while "Orphans of the Storm" lacked the stature of their earlier collaborations, it was practically the director's last important contribution to the art on which he had bestowed so much.

Miss Gish, however, went on to further honors. As *Angela Chiaromonte* in "The White Sister," the *Hester Prynne* of "The Scarlet Letter," she was equally moving, and considerably more secure in her hush-technique of inferential acting. Hailed as "The Duse of the Screen," the actress was drawn into the circle of the intelligentsia by George Jean Nathan, Mencken, Cabell, Dreiser and Hergesheimer, and pelted with literate adjectives.

Upon the advent of the talking film, Miss Gish made a version of Molnar's "The Swan" ("One Romantic

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Night"), a mediocre endeavor. The actress, rarely a beacon at the box-office without Griffith, failed to draw, and she turned her attention to the stage.

In 1930, at the Cort Theater, New York, Miss Gish appeared as *Helena* in "Uncle Vanya," and the notices were more like sonnets than reviews. The strange luminosity, which many believed to be the product of the photography of Billy Bitzer and Hendrik Sartov, was equally potent from behind footlights. Miss Gish returned to the screen briefly, in an adaptation of Arnold Bennett's, "Buried Alive" (archly renamed "His Double Life"), but for the following decade she devoted herself to the stage. *Ophelia*, opposite Gielgud's *Hamlet*, a curious *Lizzie Borden*, in "9 Pine Street," a still more curious *Marguerite Gautier* in "Camille," "Within the Gates," "The Star Wagon" and a cursory appearance in Glasgow, Scotland, in "The Old Maid" are things connoisseurs of the art of acting remember and cherish. Recently, Miss Gish concluded a most successful run with "Life with Father," in which she played *Mrs. Day* for some seventy-seven weeks.

Miss Gish has been the enthusiasm of the more distinguished men of this generation, but she has not married. Rumored engaged to George Jean Nathan, the Los Angeles *Examiner*, on October 4, 1930, carried a story that they would wed, and that Miss Gish had received a ring with an intaglio-stone bearing the drama critic's profile for her third finger, left hand. Whether Miss Gish wearied of the gentleman's vanity, attested by his gift, or the series of books he wrote with the regularity of the seasons, (each bearing numerous portraits of himself, and these grew more flagrantly youthful with the passing years) is not known. However, the wedding never took place.

Currently, the actress returns to motion pictures in Columbia's "The Commandos Strike at Dawn." Time has not touched her beauty, her grace, her fragility. The years have not dimmed her luminous loveliness, and there is little doubt that her reappearance on the country's screens will again cause all young-in-heart males to sigh for a lance, a charger, a coat-of-mail, for Lillian Gish quite miraculously remains "Elaine the fair, Elaine the lovable, Elaine the lily maid of Astolat."