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all about ME

At last, one of Hollywood's greatest actresses tells the story of a spectacular, stormy career. In her own words, she was an "incorrigible rebel for 25 years . . ."

By
BETTE DAVIS
with Bill Davidson

THEY say a bullfighter faces "the moment of truth" when he enters the arena and confronts his destiny before the eyes of thousands of people. Well, I faced just such a moment last March as I stood in the wings of the Pantages Theater in Hollywood waiting to present Marlon Brando with his Academy Award for the best acting performance of 1954.

There were many reasons why this was such a difficult moment for me. It was three years since the motion-picture colony had seen me. I had been desperately ill, and the gossip columnists had spread the rumor (later retracted) that I was dying of cancer of the jaw. So I felt I just had to walk out on that stage to prove that I wasn't on crutches, and that my face—such as it is—was still all there.

A second reason for my uncertainty as I stood in the wings was my appearance. My head had been shaved so I could realistically play the bald Elizabeth I in The Virgin Queen, and to cover my bare pate, I wore a specially designed replica of Elizabeth's three-cornered nightcap. Also—let's face it—for three years I'd been a Maine housewife and I hadn't indulged in massages and face-liftings. Not that I would have anyway, for I subscribe to the theory of writer-director Dan Taradash, who says, "How many times can you have your face lifted before your eyes fall out?" But a lot of people were still in love with Margo Channing, the glamorous actress I had portrayed in All About Eve, and at this point I didn't feel anything like Margo Channing.

Third and most important, I had no idea how I'd be received by the movie bigwigs seated in the theater, and by the 40,000,000 people looking in on their TV screens. As far back as 1939—when someone hit me with a rock as I rode in a Hollywood Christmas parade—I had learned that when people dislike me they really detest me. In that theater were actors and actresses with whom I had tangled, and film executives to whom I had been an incorrigible rebel for 25 years. Now, as I faced them again—after three long years of absence—I wondered what their reaction would be.

Then, through the noise and haze, I heard master-of-ceremonies Bob Hope announce me. I stepped onto the stage and a vast wave of sound

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Her hair shaved off for the filming of the picture The Virgin Queen, Bette Davis wears an Elizabethan cap to present Marlon Brando with 1954 Academy Award as year's best actor

rolled over me. I realized it was applause; later I was told it was the biggest ovation of the evening. I felt as if I were going to burst into tears, but I held them back and I said to myself: "You're a professional. Don't break down. That's a cliché, like thanking your mother for your Academy Award."

That was one of the key experiences of my life—more important, perhaps, than the two Academy Awards I had won myself. I felt a strange kinship with Marlon as I stood up there with him. Both of us were nonconformists, battlers for realism and individuality. We had refused to allow ourselves to be cast in the artificial mold set by Hollywood. We were loyal but not craven subjects of the Absolute Monarchs who ruled the town—and yet they had come to honor us on our own terms. I was flattered the next day when my good friend, actor Paul Henreid, told me, "It was fitting for you and Marlon to share that moment together. He is what you are and were twenty years ago. People like you have helped make the American motion picture far better than it would have been."

I would like to believe that Henreid is right—that I *have* made some contribution to the improvement of the medium—because my life in Hollywood has been tempestuous, to say the least. It would have been far easier to knuckle under. If I had always been the obedient little daughter that the Great Fathers of Hollywood wanted me to be, perhaps I would have escaped the personal tragedy and unhappiness that stalked me for twenty years. Perhaps I would not have undergone long bitter periods of sitting about idly, without pay.

But on the other hand I would not have become the first and only woman to be elected president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. I would never have attained the box-office position that led people to call me "The Fourth Warner Brother" in the 1940s.

Most important, I like to feel that my stubbornness, my battles for principle, my willingness to endure punishment and unhappiness may have helped pave the way for the situation which finally is leading to a decent, more respectable relationship between Hollywood's executives and their stars.

My main battles have always been for realism and honesty in films. I suffered innumerable suspensions during my 25 years in Hollywood—mostly because I refused to do things that I felt were patently phony. At Warner Brothers, I had a friendly competition with Jimmy Cagney in this respect. We kept a box score, and when we both left the studio in the 1940s we were tied at 16 suspensions apiece.

In a picture with Paul Muni called Bordertown, for example, I was supposed to awaken suddenly in the middle of the night and rush out into the street. When it came time to do the scene, I emerged with

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'THE ONLY REAL FEUD I ever had was with Miriam Hopkins—and that was a beauty." Here are the two actresses in film, The Old Maid, in which Miss Davis was supposed to slap Miss Hopkins—and did, hard

my hair in curlers and no make-up on my face. The director, Archie Mayo, looked at me askance. "You can't appear on the screen like that," he said. "The hell I can't," I replied. "This is exactly how a woman looks when she gets up in the middle of the night." The matter finally was resolved in my favor by Hal Wallis, head of the studio. Later the cameraman on the picture complained, "Why do you persist in looking horrible, Bette? It makes *me* look bad. My cameraman friends think I'm losing my grip."

Picture after picture was like that. Even in my latest release, 20th Century-Fox's The Virgin Queen, I shocked my fellow actors by showing up with my head shaven. Even so fine an actor as Lee J. Cobb (then making The Left Hand of God with Humphrey Bogart) was having trouble on the lot because the studio wanted him to shave the few remaining fringes of hair around his naturally bald head in order to play a Chinese war lord. Perc Westmore, Hollywood's ace make-up man, was then using an electric razor on my head every morning, and I wanted to send the following message to Cobb: "Give up your five hairs. I'm sacrificing ten million every morning." But my message wasn't necessary. Lee's own sense of realism won out and he finally appeared in the picture as bald as a cue ball.

Other people have other foibles on this score. Darryl Zanuck, for one, has an obsession against hair on men's chests, and every time my husband, Gary Merrill, does a picture for 20th Century-Fox, the manly foliage below his neck must be removed.

MY CLASHES with the movie moguls began when I was signed to my very first contract by Universal Pictures in 1930. No sooner was the ink dry than they insisted on changing my name. (My full name is Ruth Elizabeth Davis, but I had been called "Betty," spelled Bette—the French way—since infancy.)

"And what name do you have in mind for me?" I asked.

"Bettina Dawes."

"Oh no you don't," I flared. "I'm not going through life being known as 'Between-the-drawers.' " And that was the end of that.

From then on I always fought for everything I thought was right. In Marked Woman, I played a clip-joint girl who was horribly beaten up by a Luciano-type mob. I not only was pummeled savagely for about five minutes but the assault ended with a kick in the face and a cross cut in my cheek. Imagine my amazement, therefore, when my make-up the next day called for a little extra eye shadow and a cute little head bandage that looked like a nun's headdress. I snorted in disgust and stalked off the lot.

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The actress as she appeared in The Virgin Queen —her first film since All About Eve, which had been made three years before

I went directly to the office of my physician. "I'm supposed to be beaten to a pulp," I told Dr. Noyes. "I'd like you to fix my face exactly as if I'd come to you in that condition." Immediately he fell into the spirit of the thing. He put plugs into my nose to make it shapeless and he puffed out my cheeks with cotton wadding. Then he bandaged my face and head in authentic emergency-ward style. "Thank you," I said. "Not at all," he replied.

As I passed the main gate of the studio I could see the guard turn white. He reached for a phone and said into it, "Bette Davis has just had a terrible accident." When I arrived at the set, the director and actors clustered around me, asking, "Can you work in your condition?"

"Of course I can," I said. "This is my make-up."

They couldn't believe it, and there are many movie executives who still don't believe in that type of realism to this very day. The result is an air of phoniness in many American films which audiences sense, rather than feel, and which, I believe, has been partly responsible for the decline in movie-going in recent years.

I don't mean to imply that I've always been infallible in my crusade for realism. In one of my early pictures (I've made 67 to date, so I don't recall exactly which one), I became furious because the make-up man used drops of glycerin on my face to simulate perspiration. "I'll show you *real* perspiration," I declared. I stormed into a room where the heat was turned on full. I exercised violently for about 20 minutes until the sweat stood out all over my forehead. Then I triumphantly returned to the set—only to find that perspiration doesn't photograph like perspiration at all. Only glycerin can give you the desired effect.

SO I'VE BEEN WRONG many times in my constant difficulties with the Kings of Hollywood—Zanuck, Goldwyn, Warner. But on the whole I've had profound respect for them. These are the world's greatest gamblers; when they make a picture they risk millions of dollars, and the fact that they are still in business is an indication that they know what they are doing. On occasion they display great courage and integrity.

Also, there are many directors and producers who feel exactly the way I do and fight for the same things. A good example is director William Wyler. Once, when a cameraman told him he couldn't shoot a certain staircase scene realistically, I heard Wyler reply, "We'll shoot it that way if we stay here all week." Another case in point is Julian Blaustein, the producer of my newest film, Storm Center. The picture, which will be released early in 1956, is about a small-town middle-aged librarian who was persecuted because she refused to remove a controversial book from the shelves.

Blaustein heads an independent company affiliated with Columbia Pictures, and he must watch

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OF HUMAN BONDAGE. "I never worked so hard preparing for a role. I hired a British wardrobe mistress to live with me just so I could study her Cockney accent. The picture turned out to be one of the best of all time"

his budget carefully. Yet he shot the film in Santa Rosa, California, because the library there provided an air of authenticity which he felt he couldn't duplicate on a set. He used local people throughout the production and I heard him bawl out a wardrobe mistress because my dowdy, oversized dress had been altered to be beautifully form-fitting and had been perfectly pressed.

Many of my hassels with the big shots of the industry have been on two scores: casting and what I call the "dad-ism" of Hollywood. The casting misfortunes arose from the evils of a contract system in which the movie makers, as businessmen, felt that they had to get their money's worth out of the people they were paying every week. One of the funniest miscastings I remember was Humphrey Bogart playing a nineteenth-century romantic lover with me in The Old Maid. In the opening scene, he appeared in a flowing black cloak, running through a railroad station trying to catch up with me. As he pursued me along the platform he looked so sinister that he seemed for all the world like a thug trying to kidnap me—rather than a hero trying to express his devotion. The entire cast became hysterical with laughter, and when we finally subsided, Bogey said to director Edmund Goulding, "I guess you'll have to get yourself another lover-boy." Goulding nodded, and that settled that. Bogey was replaced.

For a long time there was no better cocktail-party conversation than for an assistant director to show up and say, "Boy, did I have a rough time with Bette Davis today! But *I* know how to handle *her*." When I came to Warner Brothers, I heard the same stories about Paul Muni and Ruth Chatterton, but when I worked with them I found them both to be thoroughgoing professionals who were too mature to indulge in childish tantrums on a set.

I cannot, of course, pretend that I have not, on occasion, spoken up in rather loud and forceful tones. Testimony to this is borne by my three-year-old son Michael, who visited me on the set with my husband while I was making The Virgin Queen last March. I was doing a scene in which I, as Queen Elizabeth, had to rant and rave at Sir Walter Raleigh, played by Richard Todd.

After a few minutes of listening to my tirade, Mikey turned to Gary with a puzzled face and asked: "Why is Mummy yelling at that man instead of you?"

Actually, I have had only a few fracases on a set in my 25 years of movie making. Usually they happened when someone tried to deceive me and I found out about it—as, in one instance, when a director ordered two inches cut off a wig I was wear-

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FASHIONS OF 1934, with William Powell "I played a fashion model in a wig, with my mouth painted almost to my ears. Imagine *me* as a model!"

ing and then tried to convince me it was the same length as before. Although this director has been peddling lies about my temperament for years, the pay-off came at a party held at the completion of a picture we did together. The crew gave me a beautiful silver vase as a gift. Their gift to the director was to throw him into a swimming pool with all his clothes on.

It is the same smalltime tyrants of Hollywood who have created the myth that I constantly feud with other female stars. To tell the truth, I'm terrified of crossing verbal swords with some of the women I'm supposed to have tangled with. They're much too intelligent and quick-witted for me. Also, off screen, I'm the lousiest actress in the world. No deceiver I. I'm too straightforward for feminine repartee.

Typical was the case of Tallulah Bankhead, with whom I was allegedly engaged in a deadly vendetta (especially after I portrayed a Tallulah-like actress in All About Eve). The only time I came face to face with Miss Bankhead on nonamicable terms was when she sidled up to me at the bar at a party in Jack Warner's house. She leaned on her elbows on the bar and said, "Dahling, you've played almost all the parts on the screen that I've played on the stage. And dahling, I've played them all so much better."

I said: "I certainly agree with you." (And I did —and do.)

She looked at me curiously, moved away, and I never saw her again that evening.

Most of my other so-called feuds were the products of press agents or the imaginations of the rumormongers. I was reported to be in violent conflict with Constance Bennett and Ida Lupino, and I scarcely knew either woman. The only real feud I ever had was with Miriam Hopkins—and that was a beauty.

I had known her slightly when we both played in a stock company in Rochester, New York, in 1929 (she was a leading lady and I was an inexperienced young ingénue). I thought of her as a lovely person. I even wrote in my scrapbook at that time: "Very good-looking—and nice to everyone." So I was hardly prepared for what happened some years later when we played together in two pictures —The Old Maid and Old Acquaintance.

THE FIRST DAY we began shooting The Old Maid, she swept in wearing *an exact replica* of the gown I had worn in my Award-winning picture Jezebel, in the same role she had played on the stage. It was a grand entrance to end all grand entrances— weeks of planning had obviously gone into it—and it undoubtedly was calculated to make me blow my top. As fate would have it, the entire sequence was cut out of the film.

After that, nearly everything she did seemed to be designed to throw me off stride. If I had a long difficult speech, she'd break in with, "Oh, I'm so sorry. One of my buttons came unbuttoned." In one instance this tactic forced me to make 20 takes of a single scene.

There was one sequence in The Old Maid where we both were elderly ladies. The day we began shooting this sequence she was properly made up for a woman of about sixty, but every day after that she became younger and younger as she added the false eyelashes, and so on. When the director, Ed-

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Latest Davis movie is Storm Center, in which she plays a small-town librarian involved in controversy

mund Goulding, remonstrated with her, she batted her baby-blue eyes and drawled in her charming Georgia accent, "Why, what do you mean, darlin'? I haven't done anything."

But my day of reckoning arrived. There was a scene in the script where I was supposed to slap her. The whole Warner studio knew when this was coming up, and the morning we shot the scene the set was crowded to the rafters. Dozens of actors and technicians all knocked off to see the great denouement.

Finally the cameras began to grind for the fateful scene, but Miriam wasn't licked yet. The most realistic way for an actress to absorb a blow is to be as rigid as possible, but Miriam went limp. As I tried to shake her she was like an empty sack. But she couldn't escape the moment of retribution forever, and at last I got in a perfectly timed swat. I can only report that it was an extremely pleasant experience. She spent the rest of the morning weeping just beyond camera range in what I assume was one last attempt to disconcert me.

MORE TYPICAL of my relations with female stars, I think, was a series of events in which I was involved with Laura Hope Crews, one of the great ladies of the theater a few decades back. In 1928, I was a very young apprentice appearing with her in the play, Mr. Pim Passes By, at the Cape Playhouse in Dennis, Massachusetts. While we were rehearsing she informed me that "a really trained ingénue must never, never move her hands on stage." The reason for this, I suppose, was that I might distract the audience's attention and provide competition for her. I tried to heed her admonition, but at dress rehearsal I forgot myself and unconsciously let one of my hands flutter. Whereupon, without warning, Miss Crews slapped my hand back in place. I didn't count 10, I counted 30.

Years later, when I was a star and Miss Crews an elderly woman, she was signed to play a small part in one of my films, The Man Who Came to Dinner. Her slap had rankled for years, and this was my chance for revenge. I thought it over. What was the greatest revenge? I decided to go out of my way to be as kind as possible to her. I saw to it that she had a chair at all times, and so on. When the picture was finished, she gave me a little box. In it was a gift, a beautiful French watch, and a

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DANGEROUS won her an Oscar "but it's common knowledge that it was a delayed reward for 'Bondage' "

note. The note was an apology for what she had done to me 13 years before and an expression of thanks for not making her life miserable on the set, as I could have. I have never been so happy about anything I have done. For, about a year later, Miss Crews was dead.

All in all, I pride myself on being too much of a professional to engage in shenanigans on a set. We Yankees are taught from early life that a bargain's a bargain—and that's why I've always felt obligated to give everything I'm capable of, so long as my employers play square with me.

I think my early upbringing has endowed me with many other things as well. My mother, Ruth Favor (the family name was originally LeFevre), gave me the sentimentality and effusiveness of the French. My father, Harlow Morrell Davis, a patent lawyer, brought me the rebelliousness and straightforwardness of the Welsh. My parents were divorced when I was very young and I never knew my father too well. One of the few things I remember is that once he promised me a dollar if, after a year, I learned to laugh like a lady. I never collected.

I had a fairly normal New England childhood in Lowell, Massachusetts, where I was born, and in various other New England and Middle Atlantic communities where my mother later lived. In Massachusetts my younger sister, Bobby, and I went through Newton High School and Cushing Academy in Ashburnham. In our early years we were very much under the influence of our uncle, Dr. Paul Favor, an Episcopalian minister, and we attended church and Sunday school with the fidelity of Puritans. We were reared in the strict New England manner, with one eye always to God.

It was at Cushing that I first decided to become an actress. I had only been inside a theater twice in my life, but I loved it, and I managed to wangle parts for myself in all the school plays. Then, during a summer vacation in Peterborough, New Hampshire, I was taken on as a free pupil by Roshanara, the Anglo-Indian dancer, who was conducting summer classes there. My first appearance before a paying audience was on July 23, 1925, when I was seventeen. I was a Dancing Fairy in a production of Midsummer Night's Dream. The show starred Alan Mowbray, Richard Whorf and Frank Conroy.

It was Conroy who started me on the road to the theater. He told my mother, "Throughout my life I have religiously refrained from telling any mother to put her daughter on the stage. But Bette has something. She has that quality that draws an audience to her. If she works hard, I think she can become a good actress."

That was all my mother had to hear. Soon after I graduated from Cushing she arranged an appointment for me to see Eva Le Gallienne. The noted

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ALL ABOUT EVE, with Gary Merrill, now her husband. Character Miss Davis played resembled Tallulah, but reports of a Bankhead-Davis feud were untrue

actress was then running a drama school at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York, and Mother hoped she would accept me as a pupil. The interview was a disaster. Miss Le Gallienne cast a suspicious glance at my mother in the outer waiting room, then asked me to read the part of a seventy-year-old Dutch woman in a play she had on her desk. I was scared and bewildered. She ended the interview by saying, "I'm sorry. You're a frivolous little girl and you'll never make an actress."

For months after that I was crushed. Finally my mother said, "I don't care what money it takes. You're going to have a chance to study for the theater—or else." She enrolled me in John Murray Anderson's school of the drama in New York. Mother—whom I've always called Ruthie—went to work as a housemother in a private school to pay my tuition. It was at the Anderson school that I really learned my trade. We appeared in plays with improbable names like Gas, Air and Earl, and were lectured by such theater notables as George Arliss, who told me one thing I've never forgotten. He said, "Learn the right speech but never overdo it. American actresses talk the way they *think* the English speak. The important thing is to get the sectionalism out of your voice—so that people can't tell whether you're from the North, East, South, West or Brooklyn."

AFTER I GRADUATED, Frank Conroy got me a job as the ingénue with a stock company run by George Cukor in Rochester, New York, where I played with Wallace Ford, Miriam Hopkins and Frank McHugh—all of whom were destined to become movie names. But again I suffered a crushing blow. After one season I was fired. I didn't know that ingénues in stock companies were supposed to party as well as work. Instead, I would leave the theater each night with my mother.

I couldn't get an on-stage job for the summer of 1928, so I went to work as an usher at the Cape Playhouse in Dennis, Massachusetts. Before the season was over, however, I got a part in Mr. Pim Passes By, the play in which I was slapped by Laura Hope Crews. This summer also featured my falling passionately in love with leading man Henry Fonda, who didn't even know I existed. Years later, when we played in Jezebel together, I kidded him about my crush. "You blighted my life," I said. "I lost my love for you when I discovered you hated steamed clams."

That fall I got the female lead in a play called The Earth Between, which was presented at an off-Broadway theater, The Provincetown Playhouse. I got $50 a week and respectable reviews from critics Burns Mantle and Brooks Atkinson. This led to my going on tour in the spring of 1929 with Blanche Yurka in Ibsen's The Wild Duck. Here, too, I got good reviews, including one that gave me a special measure of satisfaction, considering my bitter experience with Eva Le Gallienne. Washington critic John J. Daly wrote: "A young lady who resembles very much Miss Eva Le Gallienne, and plays in the Le Gallienne manner, has the part of poor little Hedvig, and does well by it. She is Bette Davis of the soulful eyes."

I finally reached Broadway in November, 1929, when I got the ingénue lead in a play called Broken Dishes. Almost prophetically, I played the role of

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a rebellious daughter. Again the critics treated me kindly and after the play ran for 178 performances I was signed for another play, Solid South, in which the great Richard Bennett—the father of Constance and Joan—was starred. Bennett's first comment to me was, "You're just like my daughters. You've got big blue eyes and you think you can act." I answered him respectfully, and he left me alone after that.

Old Mr. Bennett was a magnificent actor, but he put on an incredible performance when the show opened. At one point, he noticed that a stagehand had neglected to put a cigar on a table on stage. He stopped in the middle of a line and roared, "Stagehand, where's my cigar?" A bit later someone in the audience coughed. He stepped down to the footlights and said, "All right, now, everyone cough at once and let's get it out of our systems."

I was having a wonderful time, but three weeks after Solid South opened, it closed. I had been offered a Hollywood contract and off to California I went.

Those were the days when the talkies had taken over from the silent films, and movie executives began a wholesale raid on the New York stage for promising young talent. It was fertile territory. In a comparatively brief period they signed Clark Gable, George Brent, Jimmy Cagney, Joan Blondell, Spencer Tracy, Ginger Rogers, Humphrey Bogart, Franchot Tone and a score of others.

While I was in Broken Dishes I had been screen-tested by Samuel Goldwyn for the feminine lead opposite Ronald Colman in Raffles. But Goldwyn turned me down. While viewing the test, he is reported to have held his head and moaned, "Where did you find that horrible-looking creature?" (I had the last laugh on *him* eleven years later when he gave me $300,000 to appear in The Little Foxes.) A few months after the Goldwyn fiasco, however, Universal Pictures signed me to a short-term contract, chiefly to play in a picture called Strictly Dishonorable. That's when I left the cast of Solid South to head West. I was twenty-two years old.

I REACHED Hollywood with my mother on December 13, 1930. The studio was supposed to have sent someone to meet us, but as we stood on the platform of the Los Angeles railroad station absolutely no one approached. We waited around for about an hour and finally took a cab to a hotel. I phoned the studio as soon as we checked in. The publicity director seemed surprised. He said, "We sent a man to the station, but he said he didn't see anyone who looked like an actress."

That was my introduction to a miserable year. Carl Laemmle, Jr., the studio's top executive, took one look at me through the door of his father's office, blinked and closed the door again. Almost immediately he canceled his plans to use me in Strictly Dishonorable and substituted a girl named Sidney Fox. Then they made a screen test featur-

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ing my legs; to which I submitted after strong New England protests. They tried to remake my face with Garbo-type make-up. In another screen test I merely had to lie on a couch while 15 men in succession came in and embraced me passionately.

Finally, they put me in a picture. It was called Bad Sister, and I played the second lead—the *good* sister to the star, Sidney Fox. The film was unbelievably bad. I was unbelievably bad. I also became the butt of an interesting studio joke during the shooting of this masterpiece. Conrad Nagel found out that in one sequence the prim little newcomer had to wash a naked infant and he saw to it that it was a *boy* baby. While he chortled off stage during the shooting of the scene, I flushed deep red. In the film, you can actually see my face turn dark gray. Later I asked for a print of Bad Sister (the only other print I have is Of Human Bondage). For years, I showed it to discouraged young actresses to demonstrate to them how hopeless *I* was in my first picture.

After Bad Sister, Laemmle, Jr., took to calling me "The Little Brown Wren" and "Slim." My agent overheard him telling a casting director that I was known as Slim because I had no more sex appeal than Slim Summerville (an angular, homely, comic actor of those days). I was pretty defeated by this for some time to come—and pretty puzzled. I had never, prior to my arrival in Hollywood, been exactly a wallflower. Later, when I visited the photographic gallery of Hollywood beauties in Warner Brothers' greenroom, I realized the reason for Laemmle's lack of enthusiasm for me. Every photograph in the room was the same face—the perfect-featured Jean Harlow type. It was impossible to tell one from another. I vowed: "They're going to accept me for what I can *do,* not for how I look." I have never regretted that resolution. Another young actress—Katharine Hepburn—took the same oath at about the same time, and we're still around, while some of those greenroom faces have been forgotten.

Despite my resolution, things went from bad to worse at Universal. They loaned me out to other studios to make pictures such as The Menace, in which all I did was pull corpses out of closets. In this movie, my New England background came to the fore once again. An electrician on the set suddenly shouted: "Get that broad out of the way!" I flared up. "He can't talk to me that way!" I screamed. I then was informed that a "broad" is the Hollywood term for a certain kind of light. A fine British actor named Murray Kinnell was working in the picture and he took pity on me at that point. At least he began to notice me. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was one of the turning points of my career.

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It soon became obvious that I was reaching the end of the trail at Universal. It therefore came as no surprise when they failed to renew my contract at the end of the first year. I was all ready to go back to New York when I got a call from George Arliss. He asked, "Can you come over to Warner Brothers to see me? Murray Kinnell tells me you might be right for the leading lady in my new picture, The Man Who Played God."

I could scarcely believe it, but I rushed over to see Arliss and got the part. I turned in my first decent Hollywood performance, and was signed to a long-term Warner Brothers contract. I got better cameramen and make-up artists then, and I was no longer called "The Little Brown Wren." But soon it was the same dreary routine as at Universal. I played in a succession of miserable pictures like Bureau of Missing Persons, Parachute Jumper, The Man in the Black Hat and so forth. By now I was rebelling in earnest. I complained bitterly about my parts and my scripts and my directors. My suspensions became more and more frequent.

Early in 1934, director John Cromwell saw me act effectively with Richard Barthelmess in a good picture called Cabin in the Cotton. I played a rural Southern charmer in that film, and it contains my favorite line: "Ah'd love to kiss ya, but Ah just washed mah hair." Cromwell, then with RKO, tried to borrow me to play the part of Mildred, the licentious Cockney waitress, in Somerset Maugham's classic, Of Human Bondage. Jack Warner refused to let me go. But I went to see him about it nearly every day, and after six months Warner gave in. "Okay. Do it," he finally said. "Just don't come in and pester me any more."

I never worked so hard preparing for a role. I hired a British wardrobe mistress from the studio to come home and live with me just so I could study her faintly Cockney accent. I called every man I knew and asked him, "Did you ever know a girl like Mildred? Tell me what she was like." By the time we started to shoot, I was ready. The all-British cast was amazed that I hadn't been born in London's East End, and the picture turned out to be one of the best of all time. I didn't get an Academy Award that year, but the following year I won with Dangerous, a far inferior film. It's common knowledge that I got this first Oscar as a sort of delayed reward for Of Human Bondage.

AT THAT POINT I thought I had finally licked the system, but went right back into the stinkers again —The Girl from Tenth Avenue, Front Page Woman, Special Agent. At length I couldn't stand it any more and I decided to take the boldest step of my life. My long-smoldering resentment flared into open revolt.

I had had seven major suspensions up to then. Some lasted as long as 10 weeks, and all the nonworking time was being added on to the end of my contract. I could see myself in bondage for years, with no choice but to work in bad pictures and with bad directors—so that soon I would have no career at all. The final blowup came when they tried to make me play a lumberjack's sweetheart in a picture titled God's Country and the Woman. I went home for three months (in those days the only way an actor could register protest was to sit home and starve).

At the end of the three months, I made one last appeal to Jack Warner. He said that if I was a good little girl and did what I was told, he had a nice part for me. "I've taken an option on a wonderful book," he said. "I want you to play the lead, a woman named Scarlett O'Hara. The book is Gone With the Wind." I was almost beside myself with rage. "What's that?" I asked—and didn't wait for an answer. A year later I found out.

Since I got nowhere in that last conference with Warner, I made my move. A British producer named Toeplitz had offered me $50,000 to work in two films in England. I decided to accept. This meant jumping my Warner contract. I knew they could get a court injunction to prevent me from leaving the country, so I had to plan a cloak-and-dagger escape. I left Hollywood by plane at 12:01 on a Sunday morning (legal papers can't be served on Sunday) and flew to Vancouver. I wore a Garbo-type hat pulled down over my eyes. Every time the plane stopped in the U.S. I felt like a con-

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FIVE YEARS OLD. Bette, left, with sister Bobby at family summer home in Ocean Park, Me. Photo and the two just below are from the film star's scrapbook

vict. Actually the Warners didn't even know I had made my escape until I landed in England after crossing Canada by train and sailing from Montreal by ship.

BUT WHEN they found out, they wasted no time. They hired Sir Patrick Hastings (one of England's most famous lawyers, now dead, who is supposed to be the inspiration for the current hit play Witness for the Prosecution). Within a few days, Sir Patrick applied to the British courts for an injunction to prevent me from working for anyone else but Warner Brothers. Then my British manager, Ernest King, provided me with equally illustrious counsel, Sir William Jowitt, who later became Britain's equivalent of the Chief Justice of the United States.

Sir William was a tall, kindly man with iron-gray hair and a furrowed, intellectual face. I had little money and I was alone, living in the cheapest inside-court room I could find at the Savoy Hotel. I was then married to my first husband, orchestra leader Harmon O. Nelson, and he had chosen just that moment to go back to America to look for work. But despite the fact that I couldn't pay Sir William his $10,000 fee in advance (the British custom), he took the case anyway.

From the opening gun, Sir Patrick's strategy became apparent. He introduced a letter I had written to Jack Warner, in which, among many other things, I had mentioned the word "money." I had contended that the Hollywood contract was a form of slavery. Sir Patrick thundered, "This slavery has a silver lining because the slave was, to say the least, well remunerated. I venture to suggest that this is the action of a rather naughty young lady who simply wants more money."

I became almost uncontrollably angry at this because money was the last thing I was fighting for. But Sir William put his hand on my arm and calmed me down. "He's deliberately *trying* to make you angry," he explained. "He wants you to blow up on the stand so he can point out to the judge that you're an unstable, irresponsible woman."

The next day Sir William unveiled his strategy. He addressed the judge. "M'Lord," he said, "I am calling no witnesses." There was stunned silence in the court, then Sir Patrick did the incredible. He took off his wig and slammed it on the floor. That's how furious he was at having me, his prey, slip through his fingers.

Sir William then began his attack to prove that the Hollywood contract was indeed a form of peonage. He got Jack Warner, under cross-examination, to admit that the standard contract requires an actress "to assist in commercial advertising, such as the use of a face cream or eating a particular kind of oatmeal for breakfast"; that he could order me to make personal appearances anywhere, even at a Republican convention, though I was a Democrat; that he could insist I could not divorce my husband for three years. Sir William showed Warner a movie poster in which I was drawn practically nude. He asked, "Would you like to see any woman

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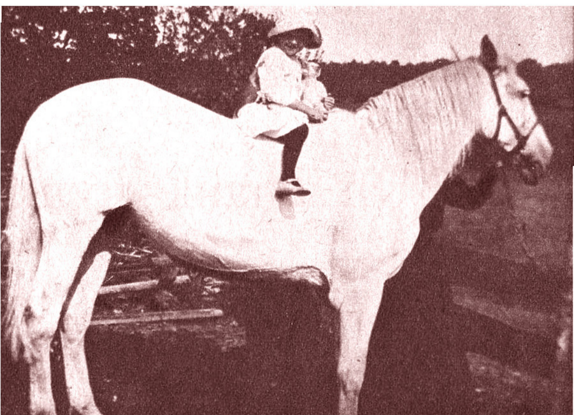

WITH ANIMAL FRIENDS at the farm of her great-grandfather in Damariscotta, Me. This is one of Bette's favorite childhood pictures

that you were fond of portrayed to the public like that?" Warner replied, "If she is a professional artist it would be part of her duty."

Sir William's summing up the next day was magnificent. He said: "She is a chattel in the hands of the producer. I suggest that the real essence of slavery is no less slavery because the bars are gilded. Even if she decides to wait until 1942 (the termination date of the contract) and not work for anyone else, there is a clause whereby the period will never have come to an end. It is, therefore, a life sentence . . .

"As the contract stands, she cannot become a waitress, an assistant in a hairdresser's shop in the wilds of Africa—if they have hairdressing establishments there—and cannot engage in any other occupation, whether for love or money.

"She cannot allow her husband to take a snapshot of her in the back garden, because that is 'an appearance' of a kind. There are penalties for absence. If she becomes a mother, the employers have the option of terminating the contract, or adding to the end of the contract the period in which she is unable to act."

At that point, we thought we had won the case. But a week later, on October 19, 1936, the court granted Warner Brothers an injunction "for three years or for the duration of the contract, whichever is shorter." It was a bitter defeat. I had to pay the Warner court costs as well as my own. All in all, my fight for principle cost me $103,000.

I didn't know what to do. I was thinking of making films in other countries where the power of injunction couldn't reach me, but then George Arliss came to see me. He said, "My advice to you, my dear, is to go back to Hollywood, and say nothing, and do your work. I somehow don't think you'll have to do anything you don't want to do."

I took my old friend's advice. I went back to New York alone. Warner Brothers had ordered that no one was to meet me, and I had to battle hordes of reporters on my own. I spent most of my time in my hotel room, crying. But in Chicago, a wonderful thing happened. A single Warner Brothers publicity man, Ted Todd, defied the studio's orders and came to the railroad station to help me. I've never forgotten Ted for that—he is now with 20th Century-Fox—and he's remained my friend all these years.

WHEN I FINALLY got back to Hollywood I realized that George Arliss was right. I never again was forced to do a picture I didn't want to do, and I began working in the long series of good films that brought me to the top of my profession. Also I soon realized that, even in defeat, I had actually won a victory. The last thing the movie moguls wanted was to have the harsh terms of their contracts revealed to the public, and my case had done just that—for the first time.

It gave heart to others to carry on the fight. In 1943, my good friend Olivia de Havilland rebelled against the long series of sweet, simpering roles she had been forced to play, and when Warner Brothers insisted on adding 25 weeks of suspension time to the end of her contract, Olivia sued in the California courts. The courts ruled in her favor saying that it was "bondage and peonage" to keep an actor on suspension for refusing a role and not count this as contract time, since by this method they could "ruin a career" by eventually forcing the

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SIXTEEN, on the beach at Ogunquit, Me. Born in Lowell Mass., she was raised in New England

actor into submission. At about the same time, Robert Cummings and Gene Autry won similar decisions. So less than ten years from the day that I started the fight, the old Hollywood "life-sentence slavery contract" went out of existence.

I have found that nothing I have done has brought me greater acclaim among my fellow professionals. The story of my battle penetrated show-business circles everywhere. I'm proud of that.

Perhaps that's why one of my most cherished possessions is a letter I received from Anna Magnani, the great Italian actress. It reads:

My dear, dear Bette,

I feel very near to you, very similar to you as a woman. As an artist, you know what you represent for me. Continue always to defend your art. Defend always your artistic freedom against everything and everybody.

I always will remember you. ANNA

ON BROADWAY for the first time: ingénue lead in 1929 play Broken Dishes. Actor is late Donald Meek

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