



The Girl Nobody Knows

By Dick Mook

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Why lovely Virginia Grey, who's been in pictures for 15 active years, is hardly known at all

She has graced forty films and decorated an equal number. There is a distinction. She graced them with her acting ability. An old set trotter of some twelve years standing, I consider Virginia Grey one of the greatest potential stars in Hollywood and in any film in which she appears, so far as this humble reporter is concerned, is graced. She has decorated them because she is one of the few natural beauties in films. There is little that make-up men can do to enhance the loos Providence so plentifully bestowed upon her.

Audiences recognize her, but never know her name. Not long ago I went to see a re-un of "The Women." You may recall Virginia as the salesgirl who kept heckling Joan Crawford as she carried on a telephone conversation with the husband of Norma Shearer. Two women sat near me.

"Isn't she cute—so young and pretty and fresh," one of them remarked to her companion. "Who is she?"

"I don't know," confessed the other. "I see her in a lot of pictures, but have never found out who she is."

And that's Virginia—The Girl Nobody Knows.

Asked about her reaction to her lack of stardom after fifteen years in pictures, she was as frank about her feelings as she is about everything else.

“In the first place,” she said, “the studio has never put on a publicity campaign for me and I have never gone out for any freak or sensational publicity—like sweaters, or mannish attire or romances or night-clubbing with a different fellow every evening or creating scenes in the places I do patronize. So, without the studio telling everybody they are going to ‘do things’ with me, on the strength of the bits I play there isn’t much for gossip writers and columnists to say about me.

In the second place, when I’ve had a chance to do a good part at another studio, the borrowing studio either wants to buy my contract or halve it or, at least, be assured they can have me for a couple of pictures a year. My own studio always says, ‘No Soap.’ I lose the part because the would-be borrower doesn’t want to create a star for another studio without being assured of some returns. One of the executives at my studio tells me at every opportunity that I don’t mean a nickel to anyone off this lot. But they always take up my option and they’ll never sell or share my contract.

In the third place, I can’t be ‘discovered’. My face is too well-known to the public on the strength of the bits I’ve played in a lot of big pictures and my name is too well-known in Hollywood. Everyone out here, who has any say in casting a picture, knows me and they all figure if I was any good I’d have been given a good part long ago.

I tried until I was blue in the face for the lead in ‘The Getaway’, but I didn’t get it. Donna Reed, who had done amateur dramatics at Los Angeles City College, got it.”

“Didn’t you resent her?” I broke in curiously.

“Of course not!” she snapped. “This is business. I wanted the part, but I didn’t get it. Why should I resent her because *she* got it? One contractor doesn’t resent another because he underbid him. If I couldn’t have the part I was honestly glad Donna got it. She’s a swell girl.

What I was trying to bring out is that studios will take a chance on an unknown, but they won’t give an established actress a break. Either they want a ‘discovery’ or they want a ‘name’. I’m neither.”

There is more truth than poetry in what Virginia says. She was borrowed by Universal for the feminine lead in “Youth Takes a Fling” opposite Joel McCrea. There was talk at the time of his doing the lead in “When the Daltons Rode.” He asked to have Virginia for his *vis-à-vis* in that too. Universal refused to consider her unless they could buy or share her contract. The answer was “No” to both propositions.

She returned to her home lot from a success like that to be cast in a short!

There are good grounds for her disgruntlement. If any young actress in Hollywood is qualified to handle any assignment that comes her way it is Virginia. She is endowed by nature for playing sympathetic ingénue leads, as witness her work in “Youth Takes a Fling”, “Ladies in Distress”, “Keeping Company”, “Blonde Inspiration” and “Thunder Afloat”. She is a good enough actress to make her work as a “heavy” convincing, as witness her performance in “The Golden Fleecing”, “Rich Man, Poor Girl”, “Rosalie”, “Shopworn Angel” and “Bad Guy.”

“Nor is mine an isolated case,” she resumed. “Ann Sothern kicked around Hollywood for years before she finally got ‘Maisie’. I don’t know how long Ruth Hussey was on this lot before she finally got a couple of breaks in ‘Susan and God’ and ‘Philadelphia Story’. And it’s the same at other studios. They tell me to be patient, that their policy is to spend a long time grooming their players, and they point to Kathryn Grayson whom they had under contract for two years before she ever got a part. Two years! *I’ve* spent *fifteen* years learning how to be an actress. What consolation is it to have them tell you to be patient when you’re young and anxious to get somewhere?”

Virginia came up the hard way. Her father was a two-reel comedy director for Mack Sennett in the old days. Following his sudden demise it became necessary for Mrs. Grey to support herself and three daughters. She secured a job as a film cutter. It was when Virginia, aged nine, was visiting her one day at Universal that Paul Kohner saw her, overrode Mrs. Grey’s vehement protests, and cast her as the first celluloid Little Eva in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

The picture was two years in the making. When it was finished there was a hiatus of two more years before she secured another job. She worked fairly steadily for the next couple of years—then nothing. She turned to dancing, became an instructress at the Meglin School for Kiddies and finally landed a job in the chorus of the prologues at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in the days when that temple ran pictures on a two-a-day basis.

The woman who staged the dances had been a member of the original Tiller Girls from London. She was determined then new group should be no less perfect than the company of which she had been a member. She drove the girls with a relentlessness that might well have been called a fanatical zeal. For three months they rehearsed every day, including Sundays, from 9:00am until 10:00pm. Finally they opened.

Routines that seemed passable to the director in rehearsal seemed impossible in public. She called more rehearsals—before the first matinee even. They rehearsed between shows and after the night performance. Then they moved to the United Artists Theater in downtown Los Angeles for a week. The grind was the same, except that then they played four shows a day instead of two, rehearsing between each. After the

last performance at night they were dragged eight miles back to the Chinese because the stage was better. The rehearsal there lasted until 2:00am.

And always between rehearsals were the performances that meant that fixed smile on lips that must have ached sometimes with the effort of keeping it there. I think it must have been those months of constant smiling when she was ready to drop in her tracks that gives her such a wistful look today and makes you think, when she smiles, of heartbreak.

Virginia pooh-poohs the idea of hardships. "I don't regret anything I have ever gone through. Everything is grist that comes to the mill. When you go into any kind of business you expect to work your way up. Rich men's sons who start at the top seldom are successes. You have to work for what you get. The length of time it takes you to get anywhere depends partly on ability and partly on breaks. I feel I have served on honest apprenticeship and know my business. Now, I have to wait for a break."

"The toughest part of all this," she went on, "is that you work like a mule trying to get somewhere. Perhaps you manage to make a fairly decent living, as I have done, but that isn't any solace when you have to mark time instead of marching toward your goal.

If a fellow is a shoe clerk and just does his job day after day he'll always be a shoe clerk, and maybe he'll be satisfied with that. On the other hand, if he is trying to get to the top, works as hard as he can, *knows* he knows his business and then sees other fellows come in and get pushed ahead of him it takes the heart out of him. It's when customers come into the store and begin asking for him, demanding that he wait on him, that he knows he's beginning to arrive. But if he doesn't have good shoes or stylish shoes to sell he's not going to get any customers at all.

It's the same in pictures and that's the boat I'm in. I've worked hard. It isn't only the money. I want to be *known*--known as a good actress. It would be wonderful to have customers at the box office insisting on seeing me in pictures. But how can I hope to develop a following if I don't get good parts? It's exactly the same as the shoe salesman who has ability but inferior shoes to sell.

The only difference is that if he feels he isn't getting anywhere on account of the line of shoes he is handling he can quit his job and go to some concern who has a good line. An actress can't do that. A studio places you under contract for seven years. *They* have the privilege of letting you go if they don't feel you are delivering the goods, but the actress can't quit if she feels the studio isn't coming across with the parts.

It's fine for the salesman to walk down the street and hear a woman say to her companion, 'If you ever want shoes go to him. He certainly knows how to fit you and fit

you with shoes that look well on your feet.’ But how do you think an actress feels when she hears someone say in a darkened theater, ‘Oh, I like her. She always gives a good performance. What’s her name?’

And that’s the way it is with Virginia—more looks and more ability, really, than anyone needs to be a success and yet she remains The Girl Nobody Knows.

Are you going to do anything about it? If you are, watch for her in “Whistling in the Dark” and “The Big Store” with the Marx Brothers, and then, if you agree with me, write in to MGM and DEMAND that she be given a break.

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