Lillian Gish is the unalloyed joy of interviewers because in real life she lives up to the promise held out in her screen characterisations.

Until I met Lillian Gish I used to clean interviewing as “the process of shattering illusions”. Not that I was always disappointed in the people I interviewed – I was just surprised. There was an exotic screen siren, for instance, who when bereft of the beads of her calling proved to be a dumpy little woman interested in child welfare. There was a hero of wild Westerns who used perfume. There was a childish ingénue in whose apartment there were as many mysterious door slamming’s an in any French farce. And drifting from the field of movies, there was an admiral of a foreign fleet who could have doubled for Ben Turpin.

But Lillian is always flower-like, fragile, and as haunting as the melody of “Salut d’amour”. In life she has that same gripping tenderness that she has on the screen. The bridge of sympathy that is established with her audience the instant she comes on the screen holds you likewise in real life. Her screen portrayals are all sharply etched highly individual characterizations, but there is the same spirituality the same illusion about all of them. And that steadfast illusion, that overtone, is Lillian’s own personality.

She is the most flattering person I know. After being abroad for seven months she returns and easily continues an argument broken off at your last meeting. She remembers quite inconsequential things – what you like for luncheon, the sort of books you read, the people you like. At first I used to marvel at her almost childlike faith in people, but now I begin to understand it. People instinctively are on their best behavior when they are with her.

When I told Dorothy that I was writing my impressions of Lillian she said: “Remember to tell about her faults. What you and I really know about her is too good to be true.”

In response to Dorothy’s challenge I really ought to tell you some sinister secret that Lillian has succeeded so far in concealing from the public. But there isn’t any. She is just an amazingly sweet and gracious young person who has worked hard and been pursued by hard luck until recently.
After she made “Way Down East” she could have signed contracts with any of several companies at a large salary. But the prospect of being made to suffer through vehicles as alike though they had been made from rubber stamps did not appeal to her.

She waited until she was offered a company over whose activities she would have control. She knows a great deal about making motion pictures – you may recall she directed Dorothy in a comedy a few years ago – and about cutting them. Curiously enough, this extraordinary technical knowledge has not made her critical of other people’s efforts. She is the perfect audience. Knowing how much hard work goes into the making of even a poor picture, she is sympathetic.

Except for the people who have played in her pictures, very few players know Lillian Gish. Mary Pickford is her one intimate friend. With every one else she is interested but a trifle aloof.

She is often called the Bernhardt of the screen.

In an industry that manufactures slogans and catch phrases and advertises quite commonplace performers as “The Girl You Can’t Forget” or “The Empress of Fiery Emotions” that title wouldn’t mean much if it weren’t for the fact that it was not bestowed by an advertising man but by the very people who would be the last to admit any artistry in the work of a motion picture actress.

That is the unique phase of Lillian’s career. She has won the highest praise from people who were supercilious toward motion pictures and at the same time endeared herself to motion picture fans. Of the two publics I am sure that she really loves the fans most, for they are the ones who supported her during the struggling years when she was just having the foundations of her career. It was they whose letters, childish ones sometimes, cheered her on to one more effort in the days when she had to get up soon after dawn and go by street car, ferry and train to the location in New Jersey, when she was working.

Whenever I hear her called the Bernhardt of the screen, I think of her account in the time when she played in Madame Bernhardt’s company. It was during a New York engagement and Lillian was borrowed from another company to appear in just one play of the Bernhardt repertoire. She says that she was quite
overawed by the grandeur of such a company – she was unused to have a maid and playing in such a clean and well-equipped theater. The luxurious surroundings in fact, made such impression on her that she hardly noticed the divine Sarah. That august personage was to her only a foreign lady who was standing in the wings.