"Weren't the Germans dumb not to attack England at tea-time?"

Lillian Gish

Life with Mother
“Let me take your coat,” said Jim Frasher, Lillian Gish’s personal secretary, “can I get you something? Would you like a cup of tea?”

The apartment, situated in a small precious building way east on 57 St., is almost but not quite just plain rich. There is the subtlest overabundance of tasty knickknacks and framed old photographs — too many chairs, the odor of (maybe) lavender. This is without doubt the apartment of a woman of advanced years.

I was shown to my seat and seconds later Miss Lillian made her entrance. She waltzed in, and she is beautiful. Her hair is a strangely probable shade of reddish-brown, her skin is like paper that’s been crumpled and then smoothed out.

She sat and smiled inquiringly. “What may I do for you?” Jim appeared with the tea-tray and left. Lillian poured my tea. “My hands are clean,” she assured me. Her hands shook a tiny bit. “Try some biscuits, dear, I think you’ll like them.” The china was fine and translucent, the paper napkins said Cunard.

“Is the tea too strong for you? I’m a tea snob. I have my tea sent over from England. Jackson’s. Earl Grey? Earl Grey was different before the war. Afterwards they couldn’t find something to put into it and it was never the same. The best tea, Madame Chiang Kai-shek sent it to Mary Pickford, it made me realize I’d never drunk tea before.” She smacked her lips. “Weren’t the Germans dumb not to attack England at tea-time?” An imposing woman with iron-gray hair stared at us from a huge oil painting above the mantelpiece.
No Rehearsals

Lillian Gish has just completed her hundredth role in movies. She plays the matriarch of the family in Robert Altman’s A Wedding, who dies about 15 minutes into the film, and we see her lying, placidly expired, at regular intervals throughout the film. She is almost 78, born ten weeks before the turn of the century. “I like best the age they gave me in Seattle,” said Lillian, “they had me born in 1842. I’m always in my eighties. I’m wondering when I’ll be in my nineties . . . but I think we should talk about this film I just finished.

“Robert Altman is a charming man. Charming. It was a new experience for me, because most of my years were spent rehearsing. I’ve done 50 plays. But we never rehearsed this one.

“It’s very funny, very amusing. Much of it is satire. They don’t really appreciate satire in America. In Europe they understand satire.

“No, no rehearsal. He came up here one day, sat in that very chair where you’re sitting. He told me the story. ‘You die,’ he said, but it’s going to be with humor.

“Now I’ve died I don’t know how many times, but ever with humor. That intrigued me.”

Lillian Gish was once a little girl. When she and her sister Dorothy were four and five years old, they went on the road. She doesn’t remember much, except that “Jenny had a baby and we could play with it.” Their first play was called Her First False Step. Lillian’s first curtain call was on the shoulders of Walter Huston. That’s where she got her taste, she says.

Taste. “I’ve lived so many years in Europe. Their theater is much more art-oriented. I never went towards the money. I went towards the finest actors and directors. And I’m glad. I’m glad I accumulated happiness instead of money.”

She said all this calmly, without histrionics, but she seemed to be reading a script. She went on.

“Mother gave me the gift of curiosity. I’m still going to school.”
Mother, the gray-haired woman above the mantel, was a "saint." Her name was Mary Robinson McConnell, her people came over in 1632. The Gishes didn’t come over until 1733, Mary Robinson McConnell’s family called Lillian’s father an upstart. "We’ve seen it change, the world, haven’t we?" said Lillian.

Maybe he was. He left his family when the girls were very little. "My father," said Lillian, "was dead by the time he was 30. I vaguely remember him. He called me ‘pet.’ I know I loved him. We never had bad feelings about our father. Mother just told us he was too young for the responsibility."

**At the Front**

Mother devoted her life to her girls. The first time they went on the road, "another lady" went with them, but after that it was mother all the way. Later, when the girls would come home exhausted after a day of filming, they would collapse and mother would bring them dinner in bed.

During the first war, mother went to the front with Dorothy and Lillian.

"Mother wouldn’t let us go without her. So we went to France and made a film — propaganda to make up America’s mind to go to war for them — we were there seven months. No trained nurses — they were valuable and actors were a dime a dozen."
Mother got shell-shock. She was never really the same, so Dorothy and Lillian took care of her. They had to hold mother's tea-cup to her mouth, her hands shook so. They hired nurses for their mother, an invalid for 25 years. In 1929 mother lived on Park Av. with a nurse, but she had to move because it wasn't safe, people kept jumping out of windows. Mother was kept awake by the commotion.

After mother had a stroke, Lillian said she did the worst thing she could have done. "Mother wanted to let the nurse go. But I wouldn't let her. If I had let her make the effort to walk and take care of herself, she might have recovered."

"You see, honey, you do things out of love that are worse than doing things out of hate. With the kindest heart in the world you do the wrong thing."

Her hand swept around the apartment. "Everything in here I bought for Mother. Everything in here is hers. Except the books. The books are mine."

Mother died on Sept. 16, 1948. The apartment is like a shrine. Nothing is changed.

Lillian Gish never married, although at one point she said she almost married a Jew. No romance, no social life, no marriage.

Romance and social life: "I didn't have the time. We worked 12 hours a day seven days a week. I never went dancing. Never went to dinner."

Marriage: "I never wanted to get married. You know the expression, children should be seen and not heard? I was very quiet and I listened to all the actors and theater people talk about their problems. It always had to do with a 'wife' and a 'husband.' All these troubles came from these two words! I never knew what the words meant, I just knew I shouldn't have anything to do with them."
Jim the private secretary made an appearance. "Perhaps you should be talking about the film," he said. He is an immaculately dressed, good-looking middle-aged man. The fantasy I had about him was that he had been devoted to Lillian Gish even as a boy and when he actually met her it was the biggest day of his life, and now she is all the world to him. Of course he never said anything like that. But he takes care of her so very gently.

"Carol Burnett," said Lillian, "Did you ever see a woman with a thousand faces like hers?"

She then launched into a confusing story about Geraldine Chaplin, Oona and Eugene O’Neill. Decipher at your own risk: "Geraldine learned more from me than she ever knew about the family. Some men have no paternal instincts. I don’t think Gene did. Or Carlotta. Maternal instincts, that is; and Eugene O’Neill committed suicide. Of the three, I think only Oona had a happy life. They had a house by the sea, a summer house, and Dorothy said to me, ‘I can’t stay in there and talk to Gene, he’s too erudite for me.’ A great melancholia went through that O’Neill family . . . I hope I was a good daughter to my mother.

"Have another biscuit honey," said Lillian.

"Thanks, it’s my breakfast," I said.

**Dreams of Breakfast in Bed**

It was 2:30 p.m. and Lillian looked bemused.

"I get up at 7:30 a.m. Then I exercise for an hour, an hour and a half. I’m so proud of the fact that I get my own breakfast! I take it back to bed with me on a tray."
"For 17 years I got up at 4:30 in the morning in order to be at the studio and made up by eight. I rented a house by the sea at Santa Monica. I had a big police dog, and every morning I would go for a swim with my dog at 4:30 in the morning. Fell out of bed, into a bathing suit, and drank a glass of hot water, went for a swim. I dreamed of having breakfast in bed."

We took a tour of the apartment, I looked at endless pictures of ancestors (President Zachary Taylor, for one) and Mother’s bed, which is now Lillian’s. Lillian doesn’t use Mother’s bedspreads anymore, it costs $84 to clean them.

We looked at the Oscar, which Lillian received in 1971 — an "honorary" award. The gold plating was wearing off. "That’s your handling it so much Jim," she said. "He likes it better than I do."

The star of Orphans of the Storm and Birth of a Nation doesn’t think that much of anything exciting happened after the Twenties. The Twenties were the fabulous decade. Then there were the dreadful wars, during which "not a pebble was thrown at us."

"Griffith gave us 4200 years of history going from way back to Babylon up to the present. Now why don’t they do that now?"

And the theaters. The theaters which used to be big palaces. Now they’ve gone. Places like the Commodore, which was Lillian Gish’s meat market, is now a movie house.

"My meat market," she said. "It’s now the . . . oh! It’s called the D.W. Griffith Theater!"