

from *Leading Ladies, Canada 1639-1967*

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### MOVING PICTURE ACTRESSES

*"The vigorous wedding of words and movement before the altar of ideas."*

(Anon)

It was poetic justice when, around 1953, *movies* suddenly found audiences depleted, because millions of people stayed home to watch the new marvel *television*. *Talking pictures* had wrought the same kind of havoc on live entertainment twenty years before. *Movies* lured patrons away from *stage performers*, inducing them to sit and watch flickering figures, listening to the pit pianist tinkle out "Hearts and Flowers," or "Horses, Horses, Horses," dependent on the scene.

Most theatres were converted into moving picture houses, stages torn out. Among pioneer moving picture projectors was a woman, Mrs. Eva Delaney, a talented musician. The Delaneys operated theatres in Pembroke, Renfrew, Smith's Falls and Picton. Moving to Gananoque, elected to City Council; in 1954 she was named *outstanding citizen*. Today several own and manage moving picture theatres, including Mrs. Helen Nesbitt, of Edmonton; Mrs. J. V. McLaughlin, Newcastle.

*Beloved "Character"*. "My red hair is my own, but it was Alexander von Koerber who bequeathed me the T.N.T. that goes with it!" Marie Dressler would exclaim, speaking of her embittered, expatriate Austrian father, whose music talent she inherited. From her beloved Irish mother she inherited courage and laughter.

When homely Marie and her pretty sister Bonita went to a party in frilly dresses, Marie realized her destiny. In playing "Spin the plate" Marie tripped. The fall was greeted with howls of laughter. She said ruefully: "I was born chairman of the entertainment committee!" At thirteen she began clerking in the underwear department of a store in Cobourg. She was fired for sending, by mistake, a suit of men's red flannel underwear to the primmest spinster in town!

She wangled the role of Cigarette in Ouida's "*Under Two Flags*." Sick with stage fright, she admonished herself: "Here are folks . . . none too happy. They want to laugh and forget. It's my job to help them!" Marie practically lived in the theatre, eagerly learning.

At twenty-three she was acclaimed for performance in "*The Robbers of the Rhine*" by Maurice Barrymore. Marie had mem-

orized the whole show, which was fortunate; as everyone else had stage fright and completely forgot their lines! She prompted. The show was a success.

In 1896 she became the star in "*Lady Slavey*". After playing the part for four years, Marie became violently ill, hurried home to New York. Abe Erlanger accused her of faking illness, and kept her off Broadway for four years. She went to London, England, and by 1907 was earning twelve hundred and fifty dollars a week. While Marie was critically ill with typhoid fever, her mother died.

Marie made "*Tillie's Nightmare*," and, "*Tillie's Punctured Romance*" for Quebec-born Mack Sennet. She persuaded him to hire a Cockney lad — Charlie Chaplin.

Marie, in Proctor's Vaudeville House, swaggered on stage, carrying a basket of onions. Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, socialite, was in the first row. Marie tossed an onion which hit Mrs. Fish's tiara! Mrs. Fish promptly invited Marie to a party — tossed a diamond bracelet at her!

In 1916, playing in "*The Century Girl on Broadway*" for Florenz Ziegfield, she started supervising rehearsals — he fired her! Marie longed to be a tragedienne. George Edwards cast her in a dramatic role — then failed! Augustin Daly cast her in a tragedy — then died! Louis Calvert similarly died.

Moon-faced Marie, six feet tall and weighing over two hundred, was so homely that when she went cycling in Central Park with Lillian Russell, both in bloomers, they were nicknamed "*Beauty and the Beastie*." But, everyone loved Marie. The tragedy of her life was, the only man she loved was married.

When "*Anna Christie*" with Greta Garbo in the title role was released in 1930, critics claimed: "A homely old woman has stolen the show from the beautiful star!" Marie was playing *Marthy*, an old waterfront soak. That movie made both actresses. During depression years, Marie helped many keep their sanity by the healing power of laughter. In four years she made twenty-four movies so successful they grossed fifty million dollars! Most memorable movies were "Min and Bill" and "Tugboat Annie".

She won an Oscar as best actress, (1931), was judged "Actress of the year" (1932). She died of cancer (1934), was buried in Wee Kirk of Heather churchyard, New York, beside Florenz Ziegfield. Marie Dressler Restaurant, (Cobourg), is a sort of shrine, visited by thousands of fans each summer.