



The startling set of features that Hollywood designed for Merle Oberon set definite limits to a highly promising career

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When Miss Oberon insisted on playing her natural self in her later pictures, the result was an almost immediate rise to stardom

PHOTO BY HUNELL

THE first time we saw her, less than a year ago, Merle Oberon was on her way to an appointment with a horse in Central Park. She was a distinct shock—especially to one who had just come from seeing a film called *The Folies Bergère*, in which that same Miss Oberon had appeared with eyebrows going almost due north, eyes cosmetically slanted at such an angle that you debated as to how the pupils would make the grade, a mouth that looked like a rosette, and a hair-do seeming to be a Malayan lacquer piece molded by a hairdresser in an odd moment of fantasy and clamped to the actress' head. This natural young person in the riding habit was such a contrast to the current film caricature that, as herself, she was practically incognito.

Had the screen character appeared for the ride, her sensitive mount might quite easily have shied and bolted. According to Miss Oberon's own report, later on, that was precisely what she herself did when she saw the finished picture. She went away from there as fast as possible, bolted her door, and wept—not for hours but for days. She emerged in a state of nervous breakdown, enlivened by hectic arguments as to her future, wherein numerous picture executives took part—just one of those glorious free-for-alls in which everyone has something to say except the person whose fate is being decided. She spent the latter part of this period riding horseback to calm her frayed nerves.

Then the cinematic Miss Oberon made a complete about-face. The result was *The Dark Angel*, in which she went so entirely natural that the film will go down in history as the first modern-dress picture of its decade in which a feminine star has dared to appear in her own home-grown eyebrows.

Clearly she is proud of them. They are very definite, not even plucked. Instead of the due-north trend, they turn a bit south at the outer corners and balance the slight, but not exaggerated, slant with which nature has lifted her eyes. Not only did she develop eyebrows in *The Dark Angel*, but her whole personality was altered. Instead of a woman who might have a pet snake in her boudoir, the girl in the riding habit became a film fact—a natural, healthy individual who could ride, run and generally behave and look like a regular person.

When we encountered her again one recent morning, eyebrow to eyebrow, as

it were, we asked rude and direct questions about this Madam Jekyll-Miss Hyde personality. There had been rumors of bitter battle.

Miss Oberon offered no alibis. She admitted that, when she first came to Hollywood after her success in English pictures, and they started out to remake her, she was delighted. In fact, she was quite ready to do anything required and was blissfully unaware that she was meeting Hollywood at its most insane.

"I didn't seem to have anything they wanted," she explained, "and when they designed the new face for me, I thought it was fine. It's incredible—but I did."

She Acts Natural

Merle Oberon has a face that caused makeup men to leap with joy and let go for a field day. But the exotic mask they made nearly finished her in films. Now she's about-faced and going places. Even those eyebrows are her own

By Katharine Roberts

Yes, she saw the rushes, but even then, she says, she failed to see the truth. Not until that awful day when the picture appeared in full length did she realize the thing that had happened. Only an ability at comedy had prevented her from being the ultimate folly of *The Folies Bergère*. But that was not going to save a promising career that looked, at the moment, as though it were about to go back on its promise. Moreover, no one knew what to do with her next.

Then came the arguments which reverberated from Hollywood to New York to London. Sam Goldwyn electrified his confreres by stating that he wanted her for *The Dark Angel*.

"Im-possible!" they all cried at once, borrowing his two favorite words.

But he said mildly that, since she looked like a regular young English girl off the screen, there was no reason why she couldn't look like one on it. They tried to dissuade him from any such cockeyed notion.

"She is good only for exotics—maybe Hindu parts," stated one major producer, influenced by the slant of her eyes and the fact that she'd grown up in Tasmania and India.

"Sure. He's right!" chorused several others.

By this time, the blood of an Irish father and a mother of French and Dutch descent mixed in their offspring's rebellion. "I want to play a normal, natural person like myself," stated Miss Oberon from the depths of her recent misery.

"You can't do it," they explained to her in kindly wisdom, all for her own good. "You simply couldn't do it!"

Anyhow, what had she to say about it? She was under contract to an English producer and under loan to the American company. Her future was in their

hands. She just happened to be around at the time—that was all. Well-meaning gentlemen of the cinema—even those who had no active business interest—took part in the debate with vigor. They went so far as to telephone her London producer for permission to influence her “in the right direction” and to protect Mr. Goldwyn from his own folly. Practically everyone took a turn at it. Meanwhile, she sat on the side lines muttering steadily that she wanted to play that part in *Dark Angel*—she *had* to play it. But she was apparently just talking to herself.

Then the battle was over. Sam Goldwyn had won. With dire predictions raining upon her now natural coiffure and upon Mr. Goldwyn's imperturbable shoulders, they made the picture.

“Mr. Goldwyn had a great deal of foresight,” says Miss Oberon gratefully. He had the temerity to imagine her exactly as she was and let her stay that way. From now on, the Madam Jekyll-Miss Hyde performance is all off. The Thompson-O'Brien girl—she was born Estelle Merle Thompson-O'Brien—will remain as is. Well, anyhow for a while.

Under the Southern Cross

The exotic build-up was probably enhanced with the romantic statement that she was born “under the Southern Cross in Tasmania” which, she points out practically, is an island off the coast of Australia. Her mother and her father, who was a British army officer, went there on a holiday to visit his sister. Her father died three months before she was born. She and her mother stayed on there until Merle was seven. A little girl's life in Tasmania is much as it is anywhere else, she avers. She didn't play tag with kangaroos or do any other picturesque things that an embryonic film star with a background like that should have had the forethought to include in her child life. When she was seven, they moved to India.

She and her mother spent the first few months in India at the home of her godmother, Lady Montieth, in Bombay, and then went to live with her uncle in Calcutta. Most other youngsters whose families were in the British army out there were sent back to England to school, but her mother wanted to raise the child herself. So Merle grew up going to two schools a year, for when the hot season came on, they all moved into the hills. She picked up French and Hindustani along with typewriting and shorthand, which she used to help her uncle in his office occasionally. Growing up in India, she indicates, was annoyingly prosaic. The “lure of the East” doesn't lure so much when you live in it. She wanted to go to a far-away, glamorous, adventurous place like London. She wanted to learn to do something and be independent. Then she got her first undeniable hunch—or whatever you call that inner urge. It was not unique. At the age of fifteen she wanted passionately to be a film star.

Her theatrical experience consisted of dancing in the chorus of the local Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society, appropriately abbreviated to CATS. The family thought it was all right for her to want to be independent, but a screen career did not seem indicated. She was not in the habit of quoting Shakespeare, nor did she habitually dress up in the parlor draperies and do scenes from *Iphigenia*. In fact, she showed none of the temperamental adolescent home-histrionics usually reported in the stories of budding stars. They should have been warned by this. She dropped all mention of films and begged to go to London to study dancing. It was suggested that she might return to India later and teach it. Her mother understood, but her uncle, who was about to make the

trip home, refused point-blank to take her with him. She tried all her blandishments, and even in those days she was no mean blandisher, but it didn't work. She bade him a quiet goodbye and hoped he'd have a nice voyage.

When the ship had got well out to sea, he met her on deck. He did not greet her with “Fancy seeing you here!” or any of the delightful things gentlemen often say to young lady acquaintances unexpectedly met on shipboard. He said several other things. But there was nothing he could do except take her along to England. She had been earnestly saving her money, had borrowed a little extra from her mother, and had secretly bought her own ticket. She continued to talk about a course in dancing. The cinema was not mentioned.

Arriving in London, she dutifully enrolled in a dancing school and promptly went to look for a film job. When her uncle returned to India, she was still apparently enthusiastic about her dancing and the course was not quite finished. He left her with enough money to live on till it was over, and her return ticket to Calcutta. She used up the money, then sold the ticket and lived on the proceeds from that, the while she continued the trek from one casting office to another. They looked at the slight young girl with the slanting eyes and were very friendly. They all promised her a job “next week.” The chief trouble was that the jobs didn't come and the week after did.

Having written her uncle that she was being eminently successful in film work and was about to take London by the ears, she couldn't very well explain that she was stranded, with no prospects in sight. Anyhow, the hunch hung on. In spite of the screen's noted preference for thin actresses, she decided that starving might not be the ideal preparation for such a career and that she would rather dance instead, if anyone would let her.

Thereafter, she spent her evenings as hostess in a well-known, rather swanky

London supper club, and she spent her daytimes still pursuing the mythical film career. She continued to write her uncle of her triumphs, but she told her mother the truth.

Upon receipt of the letter, her frantic mother took ship for England and the rescue of her child. She put a stop to the supper-club dancing and the two of them lived on a very small sum while the determined young lady with no acting experience devoted all her time to beating on film doors.

A Speech from Fate

One day in a casting agency, someone looked at her and said, “Alf's Button—come on!”

It was a cryptic remark, but she went. She was supposed to be an extra, but Alf's Button, which turned out to be a film of sorts, had a line left over and, by accident, they gave it to her. This made her an actress. Thus Estelle Merle Thompson-O'Brien, name and all, was launched into films. From then on whenever she got an extra job, luck always gave her a line or two. Now and then she got a small part. There were disconcerting gaps between jobs, but she was on her way. Two years of this went by and she was very much annoyed at not yet being a star.

One noon when she was playing a minor role she went into the studio canteen for luncheon. Alexander Korda, who was directing on another stage in the same studio, was at a near-by table with his wife. Mrs. Korda pointed out the young girl nibbling a sandwich and said, “That's the most interesting face I've seen in a long time.” It was merely a casual observation and not intended as a speech from Fate.

That afternoon Mr. Korda went visiting—to the other set.

“He did a good piece of acting,” says Miss Oberon. “I thought he was just another producer chap come to talk to my producer. On the way out he bumped into me, said he was sorry, took a look

at me, and remarked, ‘We're starting a new company soon. Come on over and I'll give you a test.’”

The next thing she knew she was assigned to the feminine lead in *The Wedding Rehearsal*. The girl was getting on. And she was no longer entangled in her full name. Mr. Korda had shortened Estelle Merle Thompson-O'Brien to Merle Oberon without delay. You can't go places in pictures wrapped up in the entire alphabet. In *Men of Tomorrow* she also had a lead. Then she read in the newspaper—where actresses always find out what they are going to do, and sometimes what they've done—that she was to play Anne Boleyn in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. Another lead, no doubt!

She looked up Anne in a history book which had a reproduction of Holbein's portrait. She read about her in every book she could get hold of. Anne Boleyn had her head cut off—how marvelous! There's nothing like a good beheading to attract public attention. She felt a peculiar nearness to Anne. And the second hunch of her life took possession of her. This was the part, she decided, that was to be the turning point in her work! She ate, slept and breathed Anne Boleyn. Then she read the script. Anne had just *one* short page. This, after leads! But the beheading was still in the picture. The hunch held. Soon she found out that Catherine Howard was beheaded, too. This was unthinkable!

Oh, to Be Beheaded

She protested to the director. It would take all the punch out of her part if the other wife were also honored with decapitation. The gentleman regretted it, but history and the script could not be altered. She realized that one wife had been left out altogether, merely tossed off in a caption, and that, since Anne's part was very short, the same thing could easily happen to her. Moreover, she was certain they'd never leave in both beheadings. So, once more she kept still. It was up to her to work so hard on her own decapitation that they'd not dare to cut the scene. At home she put her neck on the block day after day. It was a trying time for the household. But, sure enough, just one beheading remained in the film end; fortunately for Merle Oberon, it was Anne's. Her hunch about the small part had been right. Being publicly executed brought her the chance of a lifetime.

There followed *Thunder in the East*, *Broken Melody*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, with Leslie Howard, and *The Private Life of Don Juan*, with Douglas Fairbanks, before she sailed for America and Hollywood. It was in this era that various make-up artists began planning, each in his own way, a field day with her features. Just before *Don Juan*, one of them at the mere sight of her cried: “Oh, baby! What we can do with your face!”

Concerning plans—she is about to play one of the major roles in the picture taken from the sensational Broadway success, *The Children's Hour*.

To an impersonal observer, one thing is evident. If Merle Oberon continues being herself, she will look completely changed when color pictures have their way with her. Viewed in the flesh—if one may apply the term to the one hundred and eight pounds of a five-foot-two film star—she is not the deep-dyed brunette that black-and-white photography, even in *Dark Angel*, has made her out to be. Her eyes are a light British hazel, her hair is naturally a fine-textured medium brown, and her skin is a pale ivory when unpowdered. Just one scene in color and the nearer she gets to herself, the more certain it is that the Madam Jekyll-Miss Hyde story is bound to start all over again.



“Madam still adheres to one-sixty-five. Take it or leave it!”

JOHN ELLIOTT

On Top of the World

By Richard Connell

A Short Short Story Complete on this Page

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE DE ZAYAS

I'M SITTING on top of the world," hummed young Mr. Malcolm Marrison, as he strode down Hollywood Boulevard that million-dollar morning, a dashing figure in a glowing checked suit.

He was not unaware that people stopped to stare at his passing profile. Inwardly he glowed; but outwardly, to the battery of eyes—eyes admiring, wistful, envious—he displayed that air of studied nonchalance, that not unfriendly aloofness, he had seen in older, more stare-hardened stars; for his fame was as new as his suit.

He was thinking, "Boy, oh, boy, oh, boy! Five thousand fish each and every week—and more next year! And not two years ago I was crooning for cakes and coffee in a small-time band. I'm the solid gold berries. I always knew it, and now everybody knows it. Here I am—twenty-six—and a star—but a star—what I mean. I rate where I am—the top of the heap—and that's where I'm going to stay. They ain't seen nuthin' yet. I'll show 'em plenty and I'll make 'em pay. From now on, watch my smoke. The best, and a lot of it, that's me. I got what it takes."

From his Olympic heights he smiled at two shopgirls who had goggled at him.

"POOR little things," he mused. "I make more in a week than they make in five years. Well, I'm worth it. And now that I got it, I'm going to enjoy it. Guess I'll pop down to the Super-Motor Mart and buy me that imported, custom-built, eighteen-cylinder job they phoned me about. They claim it will do a hundred an hour up a cliff, and that it's a steal at twelve grand. Say, that's a lot of syrup to sink in a buggy. I could get a mighty classy canoe for a quarter of that.

"Aw, what's chewing me? What's twelve thousand oysters to a success like me? A star can't act like a piker. He can't even think like a piker. My public expects me to live—and spend—like what I am—a star. And I'm not just a star today—I'm a star tomorrow and the day after that. Sure, I'll buy me that de luxe boiler; and I'll take that big house up on the hill in Beverly, too, even if I do rattle around in eight bedrooms. I got to learn to remember who I am and what I am. Wonder what they get for polo ponies these days? Never mind. I'll buy 'em by the dozen. I'll—"

His head abuzz with roseate plans, young Mr. Marrison marched on toward Goldblatt's Pagoda, that vast and very Chinese picture palace; for heroes, like murderers, are prone to revisit the scene of their deeds.

It was here he had attained the Hollywood accolade of immortality. Here he had been accorded the rare and signal honor of recording his hand- and footprints in one of the five-by-five concrete slabs which pave the lobby of the Pagoda. In this historic hall of film fame, only a few, and those the greatest of the great, are enshrined.

But a few days before, at the brilliant première of his first starring picture, "Love Me Always," Malcolm Marrison, in person, and in white tie, top hat and



Inwardly he glowed, but outwardly he displayed an air of studied nonchalance

tails, had appeared on the Pagoda's acre of stage and, with a multitude of eyes and a spotlight on him, had consummated the solemn rite of imprinting his hands, feet, signature and "Greeting Sol Goldblatt" in a virgin slab of fresh, receptive concrete.

By now the slab must have hardened. So, it was the new luminary's intention to saunter past the Pagoda and see if a suitably prominent place had been assigned to him in the Valhalla.

He entered the lobby, empty at that

early hour, and sought his slab. But he could not find it. He searched diligently, but among all the noted names he did not find his. He perceived then that every available inch of the lobby was filled with inscribed tablets. What was this, he asked himself, a gag? A frown darkened his face. He'd find the manager, and demand an explanation. He was about to do so, when a truck rasped to the door of the theater, and from it debouched four workmen bearing a new slab. They set it down carefully in the lobby, and Mal-

colm Marrison saw "Malcolm Marrison" etched on it in a bold, familiar flourish.

Unobserved, he leaned against a giant stone Buddha, to watch his passport to posterity put in place.

A dapper young manager appeared, gave an order, pointed to a slab close to the ticket window, and the workmen began to pry up an old slab. Malcolm Marrison's first thought was the happy one that he was to be installed in the most conspicuous spot in the lobby. He glanced at the slab that had been uprooted and shoved aside. Though a bit worn by the feet of many audiences, it bore, quite clearly, a name—Julian Kerne.

Malcolm Marrison puckered his brow reflectively. Oh, yes, he recalled, but only dimly, there had been an actor of that name; but that was fully a dozen years ago when he, Malcolm, was just a spindly kid. But he remembered that he had heard his older sisters rave about a Julian Kerne. Same chap, no doubt.

He saw the workmen set his slab in place. He knew, then, that he was "in," definitely, permanently "in"; and he was about to leave when he heard the foreman inquire: "What shall we do with the old slab?"

"TOSS it on a dump," said the manager. "What do I care?"

"I'd like to have it," said one of the workmen. Malcolm Marrison looked at him. He was a gaunt, stooped man with a grizzle of black-gray beard on him; and he had a mottled nose. His voice was a hoarse croak, and his manner was the uncertain, slow, befuddled manner of a punch-drunk fighter.

"Sure, help yourself," consented the manager.

The workman hoisted the slab to the shoulders of his sweaty, dusty dungarees, and trudged, like some great distorted tortoise, out to the truck at the curb.

"Now ain't that a grin?" remarked the manager. "What can a bozo like that want with a thing like that?"

"Dunno," replied the foreman. "Dunno nothin' 'bout that ole stew bum. The agency sent him to us. Can't figure why he'd want that bit of concrete. Ain't got a home where he could use it to make a walk. Lives in some flophouse, I guess. Can't figger it, I can't."

"Mebbe," suggested one of the workmen, a weedy youngish man with a face like an amorous ewe, "he can use it for a calling card. He's got a name like the one on that there slab."

Malcolm Marrison slipped out from the shadow of the granite Buddha. He continued on his way.

But he did not go to the Super-Motor Mart. Instead, he stopped in Pat's Place.

"Gimme a double rye," he said. "Ain't you Malcolm Marrison?" asked the bartender.

"Yeah—what about it?" said Malcolm Marrison gruffly.

"It must be wonderful to be a star," said the bartender.

"Yeah? Hurry up with that drink. I don't feel so good," said Malcolm Marrison.