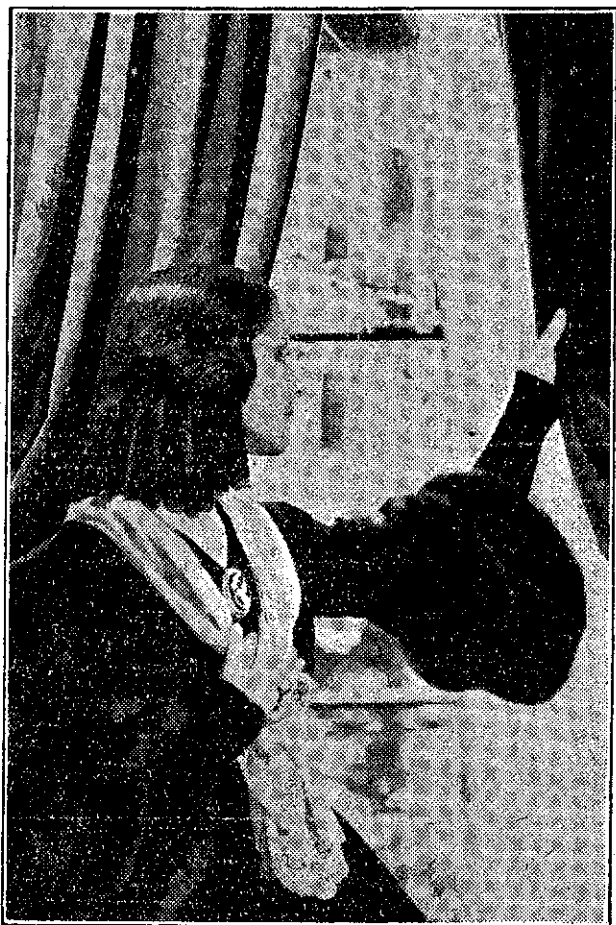


A Hollywood Star at Last

The Life Story of Norma Shearer

(Special to the "Radio Record.")



In the part of Elizabeth Barrett in "The Barretts of Wimpole Street," Norma Shearer is said to play the greatest role of her career. Above she is seen at the window of the stuffy Victorian sitting room in which the greater part of the action of the play takes place.

"I HAD given up the idea of ever becoming a star," Norma admitted. "I thought that if I could just earn a fairly comfortable living, I would be content. I was making a comfortable salary working for the commercial artists, and I enjoyed it. At the end of our third year in New York I was resigned to jogging along. And then, out of the blue, came two offers—one from the Roach studios and a little later one from the L. B. Mayer studios in Hollywood."

Irving Thalberg had left Universal and gone first with Hal Roach, and later with Louis B. Mayer. He had not forgotten the girl who had attracted his attention in "The Stealers," and from both studios he sent offers to her agent in New York. Thalberg still keeps the letters which Norma wrote him at the time she rejected his Universal offer—a letter full of appreciation and apologies for not accepting it.

When the offer of a contract, containing a four-weeks' guarantee and an option for five years with railroad fare for herself and her mother, came from the L. B. Mayer studios, Norma accepted it immediately. She and her mother packed their trunks and left for Hollywood, leaving Athole married in New York.

"I thought I was somebody," Norma laughed, "and when no one met the train in Los Angeles I was heart-sick with disappointment. Mother and I knew nothing about the town, and finally found our way to the Hollywood Hotel. The next day I started for the studio.

A man who lived at the hotel offered to drive me there, otherwise I don't know how I should ever have found it."

That day Norma met Irving Thalberg for the first time. She was sent to his office and, thinking that he was an office boy, asked him if she could see Mr. Thalberg.

"When he told me that he was Mr. Thalberg, I was speechless with surprise," Norma laughed. "Somehow I had always imagined that the Irving Thalberg who had signed the contract was a much older and dignified sort of person. And it wasn't until months later that I discovered that he was responsible for the other two offers which I had received from Hollywood. One day I was in his office arguing about getting better parts; I said, 'You know, Mr. Thalberg, I didn't have to come to this studio. I had two other offers.' He burst out laughing, and suddenly I realised that the name Thalberg had been signed to all three offers. That squelched me."

For the first three or four years Norma worked hard and long. She was determined to succeed. She and her mother lived in a small rented bungalow in Hollywood, and, after a few months, they bought a little car, which Norma drove gaily back and forth to the studio.

"I'll never forget the agony of the first weeks," Norma smiled. "The studio mailed my first two salary cheques to me, and, somehow, they were lost in the mail. When they didn't appear, I thought that the studio was displeased with me and that they weren't going to pay me, and I was afraid to ask them about the cheques. You'll never know the terrific relief when they finally arrived."

Except for a casual business association, Norma and Irving Thalberg saw nothing of each other during those first years. It was only after Norma had been made a star that Thalberg invited her to go out with him. And then he had his secretary telephone her to ask her to go to a premiere with him.

"I know now that I was probably in love with Irving from the very first meeting," Norma confessed. "At that time I didn't realise the feeling. I only knew that his utter indifference and his business-like attitude piqued me. My tears and pleadings didn't do any good when it came to influencing his decisions about parts which I wanted to play. I learned to respect his judgment and to feel that he was right. Even to-day, as his wife, I call him Mr. Thalberg in his office or on a sound stage, and I never walk into his office without consulting his secretary first. We both have tried—and I think we've succeeded—to keep our business and personal lives entirely separate."

Norma's first two pictures were "The Wanters" and "The Pleasure Man." Then followed a long series of pictures in which she advanced from small parts to featured roles, and, finally, to stardom.

Norma and Irving Thalberg were married in the