

An Easter “Lily” (1914)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Vitagraph Co. of America. DIRECTOR: Tefft Johnson. AUTHOR: Elaine Sterne. CAST: Tefft Johnson (Daddy Jim), Robert Connelly (Sonny Jim), Ada Utley (Lily), Dorothy Kelly (“Mother Dear”), Rose Tapley (Aunt Kate), Charles Kent (“General-Uncle”). RUNNING TIME: 10 minutes.

Released on April 10, 1914, in advance of the Easter holiday, the Vitagraph Company of America’s *An Easter “Lily”* was the third short comedy of 20 in the studio’s family-oriented “Sonny Jim” series. All of the “Sonny Jim” films were single-reel productions, placing them midway between Vitagraph’s shorts and its headlining dramas in length and weightiness, and owing to significant business expansion during the previous decade, the company was able to produce these films at an extremely rapid pace.¹ Well received by critics, *An Easter “Lily”* was advertised in North Side Chicago theaters as “the kind of a comedy-drama that will be enjoyed by young and old,” and “an appropriate Easter Story, and a Good Comedy.”² Although Tefft Johnson directed and acted in each of the films, the focal point of the series was child star Robert “Bobby” Connelly. Connelly joined the Vitagraph players in July 1913 at age five and played the character of Sonny Jim in all 20 films between February 1914 and December 1915.³

The domestic scenario of *An Easter “Lily”* is typical of films in the series, several of which were written by Elaine Sterne Carrington. Carrington was known particularly for her radio soap operas of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as for magazine stories, plays, a novel, and a collection of short stories. She pursued a successful career as a writer but also held conservative views of marriage and family life, and the “Sonny Jim” series, which focuses on the daily

1. Jon Gartenberg, “Vitagraph Before Griffith: Forging Ahead in the Nickelodeon Era,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 10, no. 4 (1984): 8.

2. “Special Programs for Today, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday at High-Class Moving Picture Theaters,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 11, 1914, 10.

3. “Notes Written on the Screen,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1914; Anthony Slide, *The Big V: A History of the Vitagraph Company* (Metuchen, NJ, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1987), 243, 246–72, 250, 254, 256, 258–59, 264, 266, 268, 271, 274–75.

travails of white, upper-middle-class character Sonny Jim and his parents, Daddy Jim and Mother Dear, often reflected stories from her own life.⁴

In each “Sonny Jim” film the hero, through a combination of childish mischief and naiveté, incites a domestic drama whose resolution leads Sonny Jim to learn a valuable life lesson and often to save the day. The drama of *An Easter “Lily”* centers on Sonny Jim’s friendship with Lily, an African American girl he meets as she follows one of his family’s African American maids to the laundry building. After introducing Lily to his teddy bear, the two walk hand in hand as the camera shifts to the interior of Sonny Jim’s home. There, a second African American maid brings Mother Dear a letter, and an insert allows viewers to read along with her: “You and Jim may expect the five kiddies and myself the day before Easter. Your loving sister, Kate.” Rushing outdoors to share the good news with her son, Mother Dear finds Sonny Jim and Lily at play. With a hug and a wagged finger, Mother Dear sends Lily to find the maid before she is missed.

The combination of the new friendship and the letter sets the drama in motion, for when Sonny Jim learns that Lily does not have new clothes for Easter, he gallantly, if misguidedly, gives her one of his cousins’ Easter clothes. “Lily, you come to Church tomorrow,” he tells her in one of the intertitles, “‘n n’en you can sit a-way up front with my ‘General-Uncle’ and me!” Lily dutifully, though nervously, follows his directive, and after the other parishioners are seated, Sonny Jim leads her into the church. A critic at the *Chicago Daily Tribune* recalls what transpires:

4. Biographical Note, Elaine Carrington Papers, 1903–1959, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library, digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/ead/rose/thecarringt/@Generic__BookTextView/153;pt=125 (accessed February 11, 2012); and “Elaine Carrington Is Dead at 66; Originator of Radio Soap Opera,” *New York Times* (May 5, 1958): 29.

This “Easter Lily” Sonny Jim escorted proudly down the church aisle, the observed of the great congregation, and drew her to a place beside him in their family pew. The family, surviving the shock, took Lily home with them in the car, where a trim little gingham gown was substituted for the lace confection, and she was given a whole pie that simply crowned her day with unmeasured happiness.⁵

Because of the deterioration of the 35mm nitrate film on which *An Easter “Lily”* was printed, preservationists were forced to remove these final scenes, thus halting the visual narrative at its climax. With the exception of the hyperbolic description of Lily’s feelings, however, the conclusion offered by the reviewer rings true given the family-oriented nature of the series and the spirit of the holiday celebrated in the film.

Although *An Easter “Lily”* focuses on the relationship between a white boy and a black girl, the film’s representation of white and black actors and their respective accreditation reflects the pervasive, institutionalized racism of the early 20th century and suggests that Vitagraph’s intended audience was primarily white. All of the “Sonny Jim” films include the three members of the main character’s immediate family, played by Bobby Connelly, Tefft Johnson, and Dorothy Kelly.⁶ Connelly was one of many child stars but garnered particular acclaim from at least two critics. Kitty Kelly, in her reviews of *The Heart of Sonny Jim* and *The Knight Before Christmas*, considered Connelly “the universal child,” and a *New York Times* critic wrote, “Little Bobby is the marvel of the Vitagraph Company because of his phenomenal self-possession and extraordinary memory.”⁷ Connelly died in 1922 at age 13, but between the Kalem Motion

5. “Today’s Best Photoplay Series,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 10, 1914, 11.

6. Mabel Kelly took over the role of Mother Dear from Dorothy Kelly in *The “Bear” Facts*, released on June 24, 1914.

7. Kitty Kelly, “Flickerings from Filmland: ‘The Night Before Christmas,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 25, 1914, 14; Kitty Kelly, “Flickerings from Film Land: ‘The Heart of Sonny Jim,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 29, 1914, 8; and “Notes Written on the Screen,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1914.

Picture Company and Vitagraph, he left future viewers and historians a significant body of work in spite of his short career.⁸

Johnson, who directed the film and played Daddy Jim, had pursued a stage career before joining the Edison Company and moved to Vitagraph in 1911, acting and directing with the company until the mid-1920s. Kelly likewise joined Vitagraph in 1911, but after marrying in 1916, retired from acting.⁹ The film's other white actors, like Johnson and Kelly, also hailed from Vitagraph's "family" of players, and with the exception of the five young cousins who come to visit, all are identified in the credits. The actors who play the two African American maids, however, are uncredited, even though each character has narrative agency.

Among the African American actors in *An Easter "Lily,"* only Ada Utley (Lily) is identified in the credits. Vitagraph brought back Utley and her character three times during the series, in *A Cause for Thanksgiving* (November 1914), *Sonny Jim at the Mardi Gras* (May 1915), and *The White and Black Snowball* (July 1915).¹⁰ These appearances, in addition to Lily's presentation as a positive character, if not a heroine, might suggest an unusually tolerant racial perspective from Vitagraph at a time when the NAACP was less than five years old. Race films were just beginning to emerge, and the de jure segregation of Jim Crow legislation often extended to film. That Lily not only appears in the same shots as the white characters but is also the recipient of physical affection from Sonny Jim and Mother Dear is surprising given the climate of racial tension during the 1910s and the censorship that was emerging during this transitional period between the primitive and classical styles of cinema. Hollywood's slow progress regarding race relations is exemplified by a 1914 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which

8. Slide, *The Big V*, 137–38.

9. Ibid., 143–44.

10. Casts and national release dates for these films are available at IMDb.com.

marked the first instance in which an African American actor played a title role in a film on an African American theme.¹¹

Nevertheless, Vitagraph's portrayal of Lily and the two maids is still highly stereotypical: Lily, with her hair standing on end and her willingness to abet Sonny Jim's mischief, is a classic pickaninny character, and without any prompting from the film, a critic at the *Chicago Daily Tribune* referred to the laundry maid, whose errand is interrupted by Sonny Jim and Lily's antics, as "Mammy Jackson."¹² Although caricatures of the immigrant and the rural hick had begun to give way to characters with more psychological depth before World War I, African Americans remained subject to highly offensive portrayals, as D.W. Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* made clear in 1915. Thus, although *An Easter "Lily"* offers a sympathetic portrayal of African Americans, Vitagraph still relegates them to subordinate social positions and frames Lily as the fortunate recipient of the white family's kindness.¹³

An Easter "Lily" presents modern viewers with a glimpse into the idealized life of an upper-middle-class white family during the 1910s. While the Vitagraph Company did not break technical or narrative ground in the short comedy, *An Easter "Lily"* has much to tell viewers in the 21st century about silent film production, early holiday blockbusters, the presentation of racial difference on film during the 1910s, and more broadly, American life on the eve of World War I.

— Leah Weinberg

11. Gary Null, *Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1975), 9.

12. "Today's Best Photoplay Series," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 10, 1914, 11; and Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1973; repr., New York: Continuum, 1995), 7–9.

13. Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1975), 20–21.

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