

Reel one

It was a gorgeous California summer morning when I strolled on to the lot of the Fox Film Corporation, took a last drag off my cigar and peeked into the dressing room of a little bungalow to watch Cleopatra making faces at herself in the mirror.

She pursed her mouth. She arched her eyebrows. Then it was time for a sultry look over the shoulder, showing off her dark, hypnotic eyes. Her moist lips parted and she flashed a seductive smile.

From behind a wall of dressers and hairstylists, I cleared my throat. “Is this a private love affair, or can anyone join in?”

Half a dozen heads turned my way and the Queen of the Nile waved to me. “Toby! Just the man I want.” She fluttered her hands. “Everybody else – shoo.”

Her silk dressing gown billowed around her as she hustled the crowd out. When they were gone, she turned back to me, her fingers undoing the clasp at her throat. “Now, take a good look and tell me the truth – am I irresistible?”

She shrugged her shoulders. As her gown puddled to the floor, she gave me a wide grin while I gaped at an outfit that would have made Little Egypt blush.

“If you were any more irresistible, I’d have to shower under Niagara Falls,” I choked, my eyes glued to the sheer panel of white silk between her legs that dropped from the jeweled belt at her waist down to her pretty little feet wrapped up in golden sandals. Heading back up towards her face, I took a moment to pause at her firm, round breasts, each one circled by a brass snake with a *very* naughty ruby glinting back at me.

“Sweet Mother Hubbard,” I whistled. “What the hell is keeping that top on?”

She cupped her breasts and grimaced. “A lot of sticky spirit gum.” A wicked smile crossed her face and the tip of her tongue poked out from between her teeth. “Bet you wish it were winter.”

My eyes lit up as I reached for her waist. “You little minx - ”

She laughed, stepping back just out of reach and touching a finger to my mouth. “Work first, fun later. I want every man who sees this movie to have that look of yours on his face.”



Whoops - wait a minute. I dropped you right into the middle of things without even running the credits. Let’s turn up the lights for a second and start over.

She’s Theda Bara – “Theo” to me. Now that everybody’s crazy about the talkies, she’s a joke to most people, one of those swivel-hipped, slinky vamps who used to put a snap in grandpa’s garters. But back in my day, in that hot summer of 1917, she was box-office gold. No joke.



She picked up her gown and did a little twirl in front of the mirror, shooting me a coquettish pout over her shoulder. “So. . .you like?”



I’m Toby Swanson – “Toby” to everybody. We met back in New York just before the war when I was an out of work makeup man and she was a down on her luck actress making one last grab for the brass ring. We got thrown together on a cheap movie.

She didn’t want cheap.

Neither did I. So I wiped the thick greasepaint off her face and gave her a look fit for a star. A *movie* star.

Any other time, that would have been it. Hello and goodbye. Except. . .that cheap movie swept the country. Then the world. And a month after going to bed in a coldwater flat in Greenwich Village, little Theo Goodman from Cincinnati was *Theda Bara*, lounging in a luxury Upper East Side apartment and sharing drinks with Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin.

Her career took off like a rocket, and she took me with her. Through three years and twenty-three pictures, I'd never left her side. We'd been young and hungry together, and we were the only ones who could count on each other no matter what. She was my inspiration and I was her best friend.

Actually, I was a little more than a best friend, if you listened to the gossip around the lot. It wasn't true. Scout's honor. Oh, I won't lie to you and say the thought hadn't crossed both our minds - but business always came first.

For now.



"I like very much," I grinned as I laid out my brushes. "But the censors won't. How are you planning to get away with it?"

"There's nothing wrong with this," she said, settling down into a chair next to her dressing table. "It's an authentic Egyptian costume."

"Sure it is," I snorted. "And the fact that you look like a *Police Gazette* cover girl has nothing to do with it." I wrapped a cloth around her neck. "They'd shove you out in front of the camera stark naked if they thought they could get away with it."

Theo stuck her tongue out at me. "Prude."

I stuck my tongue right back out at her. "You know, I remember when Helen Gardner did Cleopatra a couple of years back," I teased, spreading a little cold cream over her face. "Now *there* was an actress. She didn't need to do the bathing beauty bit."

Theo's eyes glittered. "Helen Gardner was an old frump with cardboard sets and dime store costumes and I'm going to blow her off the screen."

"It's been a long time coming," I smiled.

She matched my smile. "You bet your *tuchas* it has. But it's worth it. This is the one they're going to remember me for."

"Well, I wouldn't say the *only* one," I corrected. "It's not like we've been making junk for the last three years."

She arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. "What would you call *Destruction*?"

"OK. One," I shrugged.

"And *The Tiger Woman*?"

I frowned. "Fine. Two."

"And -"

"All right, all right, you made your point," I said, throwing up my hands. "But that 'junk' made a big pile of money for you. And the studio. That's why Fox gave you *Cleopatra*."

She shot me a peevish look at that, her forehead puckering in a frown. "I earned this movie, Toby. You of all people ought to know that."

I shrugged. "I never said you didn't."

She settled into a moody silence while I wiped away the cream so I could put on her base.

"I'm not a freak," she suddenly snapped.

"What?"

"*I'm not a freak!*" she repeated.

I capped my makeup stick, crossed over to lock the dressing room door and sat down again.

"All right, Theo," I frowned, crossing my arms. "Spit it out."

She drummed her fingers on the arms of her chair a moment before reaching out to snatch the new issue of *Photoplay* off the table. She flipped through it, going back and forth a few times until she found what she was looking for. “Read that,” she ordered, dropping it in my lap.

I followed her long white finger to the page. To my surprise, it wasn’t about her at all – it was a review of a new movie starring Valeska Surratt, one of a half dozen ‘baby vamps’ Fox had on the payroll riding Theo’s coattails.

I looked up at her curiously.

“The last paragraph.”

I traced down the page. “*Miss Surratt’s Broadway training shows,*” the end of the review read, “*and her subtle performance is a welcome relief from the freakish Theda Bara school of goggle-eyed pouts passing for dramatic art. We don’t doubt that after Bara’s overstuffed Queen of the Nile has vanished back to the pyramids and sands of the mystic land of Ohio, Valeska Surratt will still be entertaining us.*”

I clucked my tongue. “I guess they won’t be joining your fan club.”

Theo snatched the magazine out of my hands and threw it across the room. “I ought to jam every word of that down her throat!”

I caught her by the arm. “Hey, hey, slow down – you lost me about half a mile back.” She tried to twist out of my grip, but I held on. “Five minutes ago, we were talking about how irresistible you are – and, by the way, you *are* - ”

She still squirmed, but she gave me a quick smile. “Thank you.”

“ – now you’re ready to kill Surratt because she got a good review?” I let her go and leaned back. “Why don’t we go back to the beginning and you tell your old pal Toby what’s *really* bothering you?”

She nodded over to the magazine crumpled in the corner. “A year ago, the studio wouldn’t have let a slap like that see the light of day. Not and puff up some flouncing nobody at the same time.” She shook her head. “It’s all been downhill since *Romeo and Juliet*. Remember?”

I nodded. *R&J* had barely made back its negative cost, and Bill Fox had called Theo on the carpet when the first returns came in.



“Thirty thousand dollars!” he’d snorted. “Sennett *craps* more than that in a day!”

“It just needs to find an audience - ” Theo began.

“Audience? Yes, good. And while it’s out there searching, maybe it’ll find me an actress!”

Theo seethed in silence, but I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. “Now, wait a minute, sir - ”

“One more word and I’ll throw you off the lot, Swanson!” The studio chief’s cigar shook in his hand as he pointed a stumpy finger at me. “If you weren’t her pet, I’d have fired you years ago!”

Theo grabbed my arm before I could take a swing at him. Her beautiful pale face was a mottled hash of red and white as she swallowed her anger. “I’m sorry, Mr. Fox,” she said, her voice tight. “How can I help? Perhaps a publicity tour?”

Fox dropped back down into his chair. “God Himself couldn’t save this piece of shit. But help? Oh, you will.” Clamping down on his cigar, he dug through a pile of papers on the corner of his desk until he closed his hand around a sheaf of powder blue pages.

He threw the screenplay across the desk. “If we turn this around fast enough, we might just break even. Gordon will direct and we can shoot most of it on the *Romeo* set. Might as well make *some* money off it.”

It was called *The Vixen*. It was the old Theda Bara formula – bad girl ruins good man. The critics loved it. Her fans loved it.

She hated it.

Oh, she kept her mouth shut and worked like a trouper, but everything had changed. Until then, she had thought the front office respected her as an artist. Fox had shoved the truth in her face. To him, she was nothing but a dollar sign.



“*Overstuffed*,” Theo growled, shaking me back to attention. “*Goggle-eyed. Broadway training.* That’s not the first bad review I’ve ever had, Toby, but it’s the last straw. I know who’s been feeding them that *dreck*.” She pointed in the direction of the executive offices.

I rolled my eyes.

“You don’t believe me?” she challenged. “Give me a reason.”

“A reason? I’ll give you five hundred thousand reasons,” I snorted, quoting our budget.

Her mouth tightened at that, and I reached out to take her hand. “Calm down, Theo. You’re wound up like a clock. I don’t blame you. Things have been rough, I know. This hasn’t been the easiest shoot. But it’s going to be a great movie. *It is a great movie.*” I nodded to the magazine in the corner. “And you’re a great actress, no matter what Surratt’s people say.”

She bit her lip. “Thank you.”

“So she can eat your dust,” I said, picking up the makeup stick again. “And if *Cleopatra* flops. . .well, we’ve had flops before. We’ll get ‘em next time.”

Theo’s head snapped up. “It damn well better not flop.” She took my hand. “I need this, Toby. *Cleopatra* is my last chance to get it right. To show them all that I’m better than Helen Gardner. Better than Surratt or Nazimova or any of those *klaftes* yapping at my heels. And when I do. . .” She gave me a thin smile. “Then I’ll start over again. And get it right this time.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I won’t be blinded by fancy talk and klieg lights. I won’t sign some hundred dollar a week contract from hunger. I won’t be the same *farkatke* vamp in every goddamned movie.”

I took out my watch. “You’ve got to be at the museum in thirty minutes. And if you’re not there in thirty-*one* minutes, Selig and Goldfrap are going to be on the horn yelling at me to drag you over. So why don’t you stop beating around the bush and tell me what you’re talking about.”

She shot a look to the door. “I’m talking about leaving.”

“On a trip?”

“For good. No more Fox, no more vamp, no more cranking out a movie every two months.”

I laughed. “And what do you plan to do with all that free time, Grandma?” I pulled up my pant leg. “I’ve got some socks that need darning - ”

She laughed too. “What makes you think I’ll have any free time?”

“OK, then,” I said. “What will you be doing, Miss Bara?”

She leaned back in her chair, crossing one leg over the other, and swinging it casually back and forth. “Oh, nothing important. Just working with my new director. Mister DeMille.”

“Mister DeMille?” I repeated. “As in Lasky Studios? *That* DeMille?”

She placed a hand across my mouth to shush me. “Yes. And it’s as good as done. I’ll tell you later.”

I shook my head. “Not a chance.”

She gave me a wide-eyed Lillian Gish look. “But the press is waiting.”

“They can wait until hell freezes over,” I snapped. “Anyway, I haven’t finished your face yet. You don’t get out of that chair until you spill the beans.”

Theo settled back as I began applying a layer of number 2 1/2 base. “It was right after *Romeo* - after the first reviews were in, he sent me a telegram. Nothing much, just a ‘keep your chin up’ note, but it meant a lot.” Her eyes narrowed. “Especially after Fox.”

I frowned. “You had bad reviews before and never got a note. What was so special about *Romeo*?”

“Perhaps Mr. DeMille appreciates a good performance when he sees one,” Theo sniffed. She ran her hands through her long, thick hair. “Anyway, I didn’t think much of it. I sent him a thank-you and forgot about it. But then. . .”

“But then?”

“He kept sending notes. Suggestions for stories. Comments about my acting. Good, solid criticism. And a few sweet nothings.”

I gave her the fish eye. “Oh, yes?”

“Jealous boy,” she laughed, giving me a playful slap. “It’s strictly business.”

I switched brushes and gave her a light touch of rouge. “A few sweet nothings and you’re ready to jump? He’s just snowing you, Theo. And even if they did sign you – then what?” I waved a hand around the dressing room. “What makes you think you’ll be any happier there than you are here?”

“Because they’ll give me everything Fox won’t.”

“Like what?”

Her dark eyes blazed. “Like my choice of scripts, for one.” She began poking me in the chest with a long slim finger. “Like five thousand dollars a week, a hundred thousand to sign *and* a percentage of the gross. My own unit, so I can work with anybody I want. Like DeMille. Or Raoul Walsh. Or Chaplin. Or –”

“– or Toby Swanson?” I interrupted.

She was about to poke me again, but reached out a soft hand to caress my cheek. “*Especially* Toby Swanson.”

I put my hand over hers for a moment, closing my eyes.

“Back to work,” I finally sighed. She leaned back, saying nothing while I brushed kohl around her eyes and penciled in her lipstick. When I was done I took a quick peek at my watch. “We’d better get going.”

She stood up and I slipped the dressing gown over her shoulders. While she fiddled with the clasp, I packed up my kit. Then we walked outside to the waiting studio car.

I shook my head as I settled back in the plush maroon leather seat next to Theo. Things were going too fast for me. As the car started up, I leaned in close to her ear.

“If DeMille’s ready to give you everything you want, you mind telling me why you’re still here?”

“Pride.” She stuck out her chin. “I’m never going begging to anyone again. When I walk out of here, I’m going to be on top of the world.”

She put her hand on my arm. “A big movie – a new contract – maybe even my own studio!” Her eyes were knockout drops as her grip tightened. “Toby, I just know it - this is going to be the year all my dreams come true.”

Famous last words.



Whenever you hear anybody talk about ‘the art of the motion picture,’ you can bet your hat they’re not in the business. In Hollywood, the only art anybody cares about are little green pictures of George Washington.

There were other big movies that year – *Joan the Woman*, *Easy Street*, *A Tale of Two Cities* – but theaters were booking tickets for *Cleopatra* months in advance. Everywhere you looked, in the papers or fan magazines or the trades, you heard nothing but a steady drumbeat about us. We were the biggest, most expensive, most supreme ‘Theda Bara Super Production’ ever to hit the screen. Call it hokum or ballyhoo or puffery or whatever you want, but our publicity boys were working around the clock making the whole country *Cleopatra*-crazy.

Speaking of *Cleopatra* crazy. . . as we drew up to the Hollywood Museum of Antiquities, I saw that mixed in with the usual crowd of fans there was a small knot of women in long red and white silk robes, their hair all loose, waiting for us. Each one of them had a rattle or sign in her hands and they were shaking and wailing to beat the band.

“Oh, not again,” I sighed. They belonged to some outfit called “The Eye of Horus,” one of those religious cults that seem to grow like weeds out here. From what I understood, they worshiped Cleopatra as a goddess and had been bombarding the studio with letters demanding our blasphemous movie be stopped. Frankly, I half suspected our publicity department was behind the whole thing.

I say ‘department,’ but really it was just Al Selig and Johnny Goldfrap, a couple of hard-boiled New York reporters who’d hooked up with Fox right before Theo’s first movie. Over the years, the two press agents had come up with dozens of wacky stunts to puff her movies, but today’s took the cake. About a month ago, they’d started planting stories in the national papers about ‘the lost tomb of Cleopatra.’ And wouldn’t you know it, when the tomb was finally opened up, the Queen of the Nile just happened to be a dead ringer for the Queen of the Lot!

So that’s why we were headed to the museum. Theo would stand next to her double, the papers would take her picture, Fox would sell a few more tickets and everybody would go home happy.

As our car pulled up to the curb, a young, gangly kid in a straw boater and T.R. specs came galloping down the stairs through the crowd, just dodging a ‘THEDA BARA = ARAB DEATH!’ sign and offering his arm as Theo stepped out.

“Good - good morning, Miss Bara,” he stammered.

“Good morning. . .”

“Milo,” the kid prompted.

“Milo. Of course,” Theo smiled, lacing her arm through his. “I’m sorry.” The two of them went up the stairs while I grabbed my kit and elbowed a couple of Eyes to one side.

I’d forgotten about Milo Chotek. He was a gofer for Selig and Goldfrap, spending most of his time weeding through the bags of fan mail that poured into the studio and faking autographs on publicity photos going back out to the fans in Podunk. Nice enough kid, but star-struck as all get out, so when he suggested Theo make an appearance here, it was more so he could get up close and personal than anything else. Selig and Goldfrap saw promise in him, though, so they’d let him arrange this morning’s shindig.

He took her to the top of the stairs, where a little army of reporters and photographers swallowed her up for a round of the old grip and grin. I squeezed past them into the main lobby, squinting from bursts of flash powder.

Spots were dancing in front of my eyes, and I walked right into a sour-faced fellow standing just inside the doorway.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized, trying to get my balance. “I didn’t see you.” A pair of slate-grey eyes raked over me as I stuck out my hand. “Toby Swanson,” I said. “You here for the show?”

“Unfortunately.” He glowered at my hand, then gave me a limp paw, pulling it back almost before I shook it. “Gill. Professor David Gill. Are you part of this travesty?”

“Makeup. For her,” I added, nodding to Theo, who was doing her best to look mysterious and exotic between the two grinning press agents.

“She’s all wrong.”

I looked at him curiously. “I’m sorry?”

Gill waved his hand at Theo. “Her face. All wrong. Unless she’s meant to look like a hootchie-cootchie dancer.”

“She’s meant to look like Theda Bara,” I snapped. “You don’t like it, shoot your own movie.”

“Not on a bet,” Gill huffed. “The sooner you’re finished, the better.” He crossed his arms across his chest and turned away.

I shrugged to myself and went back to watching Theo. After a few minutes, Selig and Goldfrap waved everybody inside, and I fell in line at the back of the crowd as we walked through the lobby into a side room. As I came in, I saw the two press agents preening by a mummy case, the photographers and reporters crowding around. Gill was perched on the corner of a desk on the far side of the room, arms crossed over his chest.

Theo caught my eye and I stepped to her side. Somebody in the set decoration department had painted a pretty good double of her face on the lid, even if it looked a little cross-eyed.

“There’s still time to change your mind,” I whispered, nodding to the case. Milo had wanted her to actually get inside the thing and step out when it was opened. She was pretty game for most stunts, but about a week back, she’d gotten spooked.

Why? Well, I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Whenever there was a Theda Bara photo shoot, the press office usually had hokey ‘mystical’ junk cluttering the frame. Crystal balls, incense burners, tarot cards – the usual Hollywood ballyhoo, right?

Except. . . only a very few people knew that she really believed in the tarot. I’d seen her use it on more than one occasion when she was trying to make a choice or ‘see’ the future. And for whatever reason, the cards told her *don’t get into the mummy case*. So she told Selig and Goldfrap that her answer was a definite no and they’d have to find somebody else.

“I said no, and I meant no,” she whispered back.

“For me?” I pressed, teasing her.

“No.”

“You’d do it for DeMille.”

“DeMille’s got five thousand,” she winked. “Do you have five thousand?”

I chuckled. “I would if you didn’t keep drawing to an inside straight every Friday night.”

She gave my hand a last squeeze. “Nobody likes a poor sport.” She plastered a big smile on her face, then walked over to stand with Selig and Goldfrap.

I watched the first wave of photographers pull back to let the next batch through. As they did, a burly man in a grey herringbone suit ambled by them, giving Theo’s hand a quick kiss as he passed by.

I caught his eye. “Hail, Antony!” I grinned.

The noblest Roman of them all extended his arm in salute. “Hail, Tobias!” He crushed my hand in an iron grip. “Any chance of a game soon? I need a few shekels to gas up my chariot.”

I nodded to Theo. “Ask the lady of the house. Maybe she’ll take pity on you for a hand or two.”

“Hell, she’s the only reason my wallet’s got anything in it at all.” The actor clapped a hand on my shoulder, a grin creasing his pudgy face. “Thank God for Theda Bara.”

Thurston Hall was a contract player who’d been knocking around Fox for the last couple of years doing bit parts and supporting roles to some of our second-string leads. I’d met him when he was an extra on one of Theo’s movies, and we killed time playing poker between takes. Pretty soon he was a regular at our weekly card games. Then pretty soon after *that*, he started getting juicier parts. I never heard Theo tell the brass that she wanted him to get cast in anything. Not in so many words. But it didn’t hurt his career that he had an open invitation to her house.

“I’ll tell her you said that, Thirsty,” I laughed. “She likes to be appreciated.”

“Who doesn’t?” he smiled. We watched in silence as Theo, Selig, Goldfrap and Milo took turns posing with the mummy case. Over their chatter, you could just hear the Eye of Horus girls outside chanting their gobbledegook.

“Speaking of being appreciated. . .” Thirsty began.

“You’re a credit to the silver screen, my friend,” I quipped.

“Thanks. You’re tops yourself.” We shook hands. “But seriously, Toby - I was having dinner with Val Surratt last night.”

My eyebrows went up. “Oh, yes?”

The actor gave me a weak grin, running a hand through his curly hair. “She tells me this is Theda’s last movie.”

“What?”

“She said that as soon as we wrap, Theda’s gone. Is it true?”

I bit my lip. “Did she tell you where she heard that?”

Thirsty shook his head. “No. She was too busy dancing on Theda’s grave.”

I looked around to make sure nobody was listening. “Well, just between you and me and gorgeous over there. . . DeMille’s been sniffing around.”

Thirsty’s eyes widened. “And?”

“And nothing. Don’t start bailing yet.”

“I don’t know, Toby,” Thirsty grimaced. “Val thinks it’s a done deal. She’s planning her next movie already.”

I gave him a sidelong look. “Starring Thurston Hall?”

“I didn’t say that. Theda’s been good to me, Toby, and I appreciate it. But let’s face it – she’s not bringing in the money she used to. So if the wind’s changing - ”

“What are you, a weatherman now?” I snorted, cutting him off. “The wind’s not changing. She’s not going anywhere.” I slipped out my wallet. “Five bucks says once the box office for *Cleopatra* comes in, you won’t hear a word about her leaving.”

Thirsty shook his head. “I think you’d better hold on to that, Toby.”

“Why? You don’t think this is going to be a smash?”

The actor looked over at Theo. “It better be,” he muttered after a long moment. “Or she won’t be the only one standing on the bread line.”



Selig and Goldfrap stepped aside after a while, and Thirsty posed for a few shots with Theo. When he was finished, I went to give her a quick touch-up.

“Ready for the grand unveiling?” she smiled, fingering the clasp at her throat.

“I am,” I said. “Don’t think he is, though.”

“Who?”

“Smilin’ Jack over there,” I said, nodding to the fuming Gill.

“Oh, dear,” Theo sighed.

“You know him?”

She sighed. “I know him.”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Selig brayed, stepping in front of the mummy case, “thank you once again for your kind attention. We hope that when you return to your papers, you’ll tell your readers that not only will *Cleopatra* be another jewel in the Fox Film Corporation crown, but a fitting triumph for the premier actress of our time – Miss Theda Bara!”

There was a smattering of applause as the press agent paused to wipe his sweaty face with a gaudy polka-dot handkerchief.

Goldfrap took over, crooking a finger at Gill. “Professor?”

Gill unfolded his arms and walked over, glowering as Goldfrap put a hand on his shoulder.

“Allow me to present Professor David Gill, the distinguished Egyptologist who’s responsible for bringing this magnificent find here today.”

There was a little more applause. Gill looked as though he were about to be shot. “Thank you, Mr. – Mr. Goldfrap,” he growled. “Yes, a magnificent artifact. One might even say magnificent *artifice*.”

He gave us a grim little smile. Selig and Goldfrap looked confused.

“He means it’s a fake,” Theo whispered to me.

Of course it was a fake. Our boys in the carpentry shop had built it, put a gaudy lock on it and then Decoration had covered the whole thing with all those birds and eyes and animals the Egyptians called an alphabet. It was phony as a three dollar bill. It was *Hollywood*. But Gill didn’t need to spoil the party.

Finally, Goldfrap managed a weak smile. “Well, Professor, would you tell us a bit about this case?”

“An example of Ptolemaic funerary,” Gill mumbled. “The age of Cleopatra.”

“*The age of Cleopatra!*” Selig boomed, his grin so wide you’d think he’d won a date with Gaby Deslys. Next to him, Gill looked absolutely miserable.

Selig sensed he was going to have to goose the whole show along. “Now, Miss Bara is not only an accomplished actress, she is a perfectionist,” he went on, his handkerchief fluttering in his fist. “Every detail in her movies must be as authentic as possible.”

Gill snorted. Selig shot him a nasty look before rushing on.

“It was Miss Bara’s wish that the costumes and sets for *Cleopatra* be faithful to the highest historical standards, and we are pleased to have hired Professor Gill as our expert consultant.”

There was a smattering of applause again. Gill’s face was beet-red, but he nodded stiffly.

“So the Professor has, with Miss Bara’s advice, helped to design this authentic Egyptian costume – the centerpiece of our movie. Miss Bara?”

Theo tilted her head up, giving us a look of regal disdain. She released the clasp at her throat and her dressing gown dropped to the ground.

The flashes of a dozen cameras exploded in a white wave as we all got an eyeful of Theo’s luscious shape. The photographers frantically scrambled to refill their flash pans while the reporters shoved each other aside to get a better look at her.

Thirsty’s eyes lit up. “Hello, mother!” he whistled. “Now *that’s* why I got into this business.”

I glanced over to Gill, who’d very deliberately turned his back on Theo the minute she’d unveiled herself. He was flipping through a pocket notebook, his stiff back a brick wall between himself and the ruckus around her.

Finally, Theo had enough. She nodded to Milo, who picked up the dressing gown and draped it across her shoulders while Selig pulled Gill back to center stage.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, ladies and gentlemen!” he cried. “We’ve saved the best for last. Professor, you were about to translate the writing on this mummy case for us, weren’t you?”

Gill squirmed under the press agent’s arm, burying his head in his notebook. “Yes – um - Rhames, a - a priest of Set, the Egyptian god of evil, foretold the advent of the emotional actress who would lead men to destruction by her wiles.” His voice was so low we could barely hear it, and as he rushed his way along, it was obvious he was reading a press release.

“A recently opened tomb has disclosed to scientists new writings which give the startling prophecy to the world.” He gestured stiffly to the case. “While the hieroglyphics are, in large part, obliterated by the action of the twenty-five hundred years which have passed since the words were lettered, there are still enough of them legible to form the amazing forecast.”

“Louder!” someone called out.

Gill seemed to shrink into his suit, and I actually felt sorry for him. Selig and Goldfrap could be pretty ripe when they got going.

“This – this is the translation,” he coughed. “*I, Rhames, priest of Set, tell you this: she shall seem a snake to most men; she shall lead them to sin and to their destruction. Yet she shall not be so. She shall be good and virtuous, and kind of heart; but she shall not seem so to most men. For she shall not be that which she appears. She shall be called -*”

Gill paused for a moment, his shoulders sagging. “*She shall be called Theta,*” he croaked.

There was some groaning over the hokey payoff, but the reporters took it all down anyway. Gill snapped his notebook shut and jammed it into his pocket. He glared at Theo standing next to me. She lowered her eyes and stared at the ground.

Selig waved to Goldfrap, and the two of them flanked the mummy case.

“She shall be called Theda!” Selig cried as he put a key into the lock.

It wouldn’t turn.

Selig frowned at the key in his hand and rammed it into the lock again. It still didn’t turn. Goldfrap came around to try his luck, but he couldn’t get the key to work, either.

“Shit,” I heard Selig mutter. The two press agents tried to fit their fingers under the lid and pry it open, but they couldn’t.

I glanced over at Milo, who was biting his lip. “*Poor kid,*” I whispered to Theo.

Sweating again, Selig looked around, then ordered Milo to get something to open the case. The kid hesitated a moment, but then he rushed off, coming back a couple of minutes later with a jack handle. His hands shook as he jammed the flat end of the handle right under the lid of the case while Goldfrap kept the thing steady. I don't know if it was my imagination or not, but I could have sworn the chanting from outside got louder as the two of them struggled to open the case.

“She shall be called Theda!” Selig shouted again, as Milo threw all his weight on to the jack handle. With a *snap!* the lock popped and the mummy inside the case fell at our feet as the lid flew open.

But it wasn't a mummy that hit the ground. It was a woman.

A very *dead* woman.

