

Reel two

It was Gill who finally broke the silence. “Is she – *dead?*”

“She sure as hell ain’t doing the shimmy,” I blurted, looking over to where Selig and Goldfrap were standing frozen in shock. “Is this a joke?”

Whatever they were going to say got drowned out as the reporters and photographers stampeded past them to grab the scoop of the year. Flash pans exploded like the Fourth of July and I nearly went ass over teakettle as one of the photographers elbowed me aside to get a shot of Theo’s astonished face.

Thank God for Thirsty. “*Clear the set!*” he bellowed as I clambered to my feet. “Come on! There’s nothing to see here! Everybody out!”

He gave the high sign to Selig and Goldfrap, and the three of them formed a flying wedge to back the Fourth Estate away from the body and out the door. Meanwhile, one reporter had slipped past me to buttonhole Theo and was practically backing her into the mummy case as he peppered her with questions. Milo was trying to shoo him away, but the kid was as weak as Yale’s front line.

I reached out, clamping a hand on the fellow’s shoulder. Then I twisted his arm around and gave him the bum’s rush through the door before slamming it shut.

Gill had been hollering through all of this, but it wasn’t until we’d cleared the room that I finally understood him.

“– reckless grandstanding!” he yapped. “An utter desecration of this scientific institution coupled with your abominable bastardization of history! If *any one* of my exhibits has suffered the *least* bit of damage – ”

Thirsty whirled around. “Now hang on just a minute – ”

Selig cut him off as he stomped across the room towards the Egyptologist. “Don’t you threaten *us*, you son of a – ”

Goldfrap jumped in too, and the four of them were yelling at the top of their lungs until Theo’s scream stopped us all.

“*Shut up!*”

Milo was trying to hold her back, but she broke free of his arms. “*Meshugener mamzer!*” she yelled, advancing on Gill. “There’s a dead woman here! To *hell* with your junk!”

She only swung the Yiddish like that when she was really fired up, so I vaulted over to stop her before she went off the deep end.

Gill’s eyes blazed. “You *vulgar* little – ”

“That’s enough!” I spat, grabbing his shoulder. “Not. Another. Word.”

Gill was livid, but I held on long enough to make sure he got the message.

“Johnny, go get the cops. And call Dr. Harris,” Selig ordered when I finally let go, turning back to Theo, who was kneeling on the floor next to the body.

Her face was white as I crouched down. “Toby. . .*look.*”

I brushed the hair from the girl’s face and my heart stopped.

It was Theo.

I swallowed hard and looked again. No – it wasn’t her, of course. . .but it was a damn close imitation.

She was dressed as Cleopatra, with the same style of thick black wig we used. Her makeup had been applied to make her look as much like Theo as possible, and to my shock, I found myself giving it a professional eye. Just between us, it wasn’t as good as I could do, but it was good enough to fool almost anybody else. Green eyes ringed with kohl stared up at us from a milk-white face and a light brushing of blush slashed her cheekbones like angry scars.

I knew she was dead, but I couldn’t help feeling for a pulse. My fingers touched her wrist, but there was nothing.

I leaned back on my heels and bumped into Thirsty, who was peering over my shoulder.

“Jesus,” he whispered.

My eyes met Theo's. "Thank God it's not you."
Her jaw clenched. "It would have been, if . . ."
"Later," I cut her off. "Not now." I looked over my shoulder. Gill was backed up into a corner, arms crossed over his chest again. "You got a sheet or something around here to cover her up?" I asked.

"No." He turned away.

Theo had a look on her face that was several degrees below cold storage before she stood up. She snapped the catch at her throat, then pulled off her silk gown and draped it over the girl. I stood up, too. We all looked at each other.

"Should we – say something?" Milo hiccupped.

Selig rolled his eyes, but Thirsty patted him on the shoulder. "God love you, kid."

It was the longest stage wait of my life before a sweaty, rumpled Goldfrap came back into the room. As he trotted towards us, Theo pulled a Gill and turned away from him.

"The police are on the way," he wheezed, giving Theo's stiff back a curious look. He turned to me, frowning.

"*Not now*," I mouthed, signaling him to step back.

"The police - ," Selig repeated, "we'll talk to them. You go back to the studio. You too, Milo."

"Are you sure?" Milo asked, hovering near the body. "Maybe I can do something."

"Only thing you can do is go back to the office and type up three letters of resignation." Selig looked down at the girl. "Christ on a crutch," he moaned. "Fox is gonna have our heads on a platter."

I felt Theo stiffen next to me and I knew it was time for a fadeout. "Is there a back way out of this place?" I asked.

Every head turned to Gill. "That way," he snapped, nodding his head to a side door. "Down the hall, turn right, then first left."

"Pull the car around, Milo," I ordered. His Adam's apple bobbed a couple of times as he took one last look at the girl on the floor, then he stumbled out.

I gave my arm to Theo, and as we turned to leave, Selig bent down to pick up her gown.

"No, Mr. Selig," Theo ordered, freezing the press agent in his tracks. "You wanted that girl to be Theda Bara. Now *let* her be Theda Bara."

We made our way out to the rear of the museum. I checked to make sure the coast was clear before signaling Theo to follow me. As we were coming down the stairs, the car pulled up, with Milo riding the running board.

The Eyes must have known something was up, since they were chasing after the car, too, shouting all the way.

When Milo saw us, he jumped down and opened the rear door, trying to stammer out something as I bundled Theo into the car, but I just waved him off and slammed the door shut behind me.

We pulled out into traffic. Theo and I looked at each other for a moment before she turned away from me, her face as pale as death.

"I told you," she whispered.



Now, there's a reason they call it show *business*. It takes more than a girl dropping dead to stop a Theda Bara Super Production in its tracks. So the next morning as I waited for the [Red Car] to take me to the studio, I pawed through the papers on the newsstand until the guy behind the counter yelled at me to buy something. I threw down a stack of silver and grabbed an armful of papers.

I have to admit, Selig and Goldfrap really earned their pay. They buried yesterday's little adventure deeper than an undertaker. On the ride I went through the *Examiner*, the *Herald*, the

Record and the *Times* page by page. The only mention I found of our little adventure was a tiny paragraph at the bottom of page 17 of the *Daily Citizen*:

AN EGYPTIAN CURSE?

A publicity event for the new Theda Bara film *Cleopatra* had an unfortunate conclusion yesterday. Vyrginia Dare, a young extra under contract to the Fox Film Corporation, was taken sick with heat prostration while impersonating the Queen of the Nile. At press time, her condition was unknown, but sources expect she will survive.

When I got to Theo's bungalow, I circled the story and dropped it on her dressing table. I was in the middle of cleaning my brushes when she came in, trailing her usual court of maids, hairstylists and dressers.

I watched her pick up the paper and read the story. She turned to me.

"Three guesses who the 'sources' are," I said.

She only nodded and handed the paper back.

After that, it was all business. Once I'd made her up, I grabbed a cup of coffee from the canteen, then headed over to Stage 3, settling down in my usual spot just behind first camera.

We were shooting [scene], and Gordon Edwards, our director, really put Theo through her paces. She was a little green around the gills, but hit her marks like a trouper. In between takes, I gave her quick touchups, but she never said a word about Vyrginia Dare and neither did I.

After about an hour or two, Gordon decided to try a new camera set up, so he waved Thirsty off the set while he talked with Theo. Thirsty looked around, blinking in the bright sunshine until he saw me. With a nod, he came over, dragged up a chair and flopped down.

"Rough night?"

"I've had better," he sighed. "You hear anything about that kid from yesterday?"

"Heat stroke," I said, keeping my eyes fixed on the set.

"I'm not surprised," Thirsty clucked, lighting up a cigarette. "Thermometers have been popping all over town."

We both sank into an uneasy silence, watching Theo and Gordon. I heard someone coming up behind us, but I didn't bother to look until a voice came from behind me.

"Is Miss Bara all right?"

I twisted around to look up at Milo's haggard face.

"What do *you* think?" I shrugged.

He shook his head. "I was just talking to Dr. Harris. I've – I've never seen a dead body before."

"I used to know a fellow who worked on *Perils of Pauline*," I said, turning back to watch Gordon try to get Theo into her key light. "He told me they had one shot on a racetrack where a driver ran right into a brick wall. Poor bastard never knew what hit him."

A wry grin creased Thirsty's face as he brushed the ashes off of his toga. "I can top that. I was doing a shoot with American a couple of years back in the hills up near San Berdoo. A car was supposed to come barreling down the side of a mountain and do a jump across a canyon while they did a long shot from across the valley. They'd nearly wrecked one car trying to get over, so they built a little ramp to help the jump-off."

I smiled to myself as I saw Milo's eyes widen. "What happened?"

"They called 'action,' the driver pops the clutch, flies down the hill like a bat out of hell. Problem was, with all the sagebrush around the ramp, he missed the thing and went sailing right over the side." Thirsty gave a mordant chuckle. "And the goddamn cameraman kept shooting all the way down."

"They didn't *use* that, did they?" Milo gulped.

"Damn straight they did," Thirsty answered, his mouth twisting in a sour smile. "*The Menaces of Mary*, episode seven – 'The Shooting Star Mine.' Hell of a shot, if I do say so myself."

“Welcome to Hollywood, kid,” I muttered, looking over to Theo again. Now Gordon had the cameraman fooling with Theo’s light and it didn’t look like they’d be finished any time soon. “I’m going for a walk,” I said. “Somebody come find me when D.W. over there’s ready to shoot.”

“OK,” Thirsty nodded. Milo took my chair as I strolled away. I lit up a cigar and took a long stroll around the lot, poking my head in at the other stages to see who was shooting what. They were doing something on Stage 1, but before I could pop in to take a look, I caught Selig out of the corner of my eye, hurrying along with his head so far down in his collar it was scraping his ears. As he hustled up the rickety wooden stairs leading to the press office, I trotted right behind and into the inner sanctum itself, where a glum Goldfrap slumped over a typewriter.

Selig turned around as he heard me clomping behind him. “Whatever Bara’s got to say, I’ve already heard it,” he said, holding up a hand.

“She hasn’t said anything. But take it from me, she’s going to want somebody fired.” I answered. “Your kid Milo tried to get her in that damn box, remember?”

Goldfrap put his head in his hands. “Oy. Don’t remind me.”

“Oy is right,” I snorted. “If that really *had* been her in there. . .”

Goldfrap opened his mouth, but quickly shut it as Selig interrupted. “Fox I have to listen to. You I don’t.” He jerked a thumb to the door. “Out.”

I ignored him, pulling up a chair. “So, who was this girl, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Some new kid. She came over from Balboa, I think.”

“Have you talked to her family?”

“Central Casting’s trying to find them,” Selig growled. He turned a baleful eye to Goldfrap. “Speaking of finding - you find her contract yet?”

The press agent still had his head in his hands. “In this mess? Ask Milo.”

Selig looked over his shoulder to the back of the office. “Where the hell is that kid?”

“He’s on the set,” I said.

“Dammit!” Selig spat. “Johnny, tell him to get his ass back here and find that contract! If she didn’t sign it - ” He threw up his hands. “Goodbye, Fox Studios. Even a Podunk lawyer could sue us till we turn blue.”

My chair scraped along the floor as I stood up. “I’ll send him back. Frankly, if she gets a gander at him, all three of you will be out the gate faster than you can say Ticonderoga.”

“Listen, Toby,” Selig began, a whipped-dog look in his eyes, “we’ve been friends a long time. You’ll – you’ll put in a good word for us, won’t you?”

“Sure.”

A smile of relief creased the press agent’s weathered face. “You know,” he went on, his voice almost normal again, “I’m just thinking it might be good public – a good gesture. . .for her to go to the funeral. Whenever it is.”

I bit my lip. “Maybe,” I finally managed to say as I put my hand on the doorknob. “One more thing,” I added, turning back. “You can call off your banshees now.”

Selig frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The Eye of Horus, Al,” I snapped. “I know you two are behind it.”

Goldfrap gave me a curious look. “That – that’s not us, Toby.”

“Hell, I *wish* we were paying them! Then I could shut them up!” Selig barked, grabbing a pile of letters on Milo’s desk. They were tied together with a black ribbon, making a big paper brick that landed heavily on the floor as he tossed them my way. “Every goddamn day, there’s another half dozen letters – *‘you’re a blasphemer – stop this movie – may the gods strike you down - ’*”

That got my attention. “Oh?”

“Aah, they’re just a bunch of nuts,” the press agent said, waving me off. “They wouldn’t *really* kill anybody.”

I took a long look at the letters at my feet before I spoke. “I hope you’re right.”



Back down the stairs my eye caught a little flash of color at the door of Stage 1, and I decided to poke my head inside. As I crossed over, I noticed a woman framed in the doorway, watching as the crew set up for a shot. I couldn't see her face because of the enormous Gainsborough hat she wore, but I could just catch a glimpse of peppermint green heels winking out from under the hem of her dress.

I tossed my smoldering cigar to the ground and began singing a chorus of "Oh You Dream" – you know, the bit that goes "*You're just the right size / Not too small or too fat / And I wouldn't trade you for Valeska Surratt. . .*"

Surratt's head whipped around at my tuneless croak. She met my eyes with a sour smile. "Well, if it isn't Toby Swanson, Fox's own Don Juan. Why, I hear they're falling dead at your feet these days."

I frowned. "That's not funny."

"No? But *you* are."

Surratt had been one of my teenage crushes. With a mountain of thick chestnut hair, creamy white skin and the narrowest waist on Broadway – eighteen inches, I heard – she was one of the chorus line of bedtime goddesses dancing through my dreams before I met Theo.

The fan magazines called her "Baby Vamp," because she was Fox's second-string femme fatale. Where Theo's trademark was her huge eyes, Surratt's signature was skin-tight dresses and self-designed hats, bizarre creations dripping with feathers and jewels. She wasn't a great actress by a long shot, but she was a subtle reminder that Fox could drop Theo in a heartbeat if the Champ Vamp got too big for her boots.

Surratt lifted her pointed chin, stiffly posing with her walking stick and angling her face away from me. "I expected you to be sniffing around."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She smiled maliciously. "It means that without your precious Theda Bara, you'll have as much pull around here as a water boy. So here you are." She pursed her red lips into a sarcastic pout. "Tell me, will I get the same round-the-clock treatment? The same soft kisses and cow eyes? Or will our relationship be strictly business?"

"We don't have a relationship," I said, annoyed. "You've got your movie and I've got mine."

Her laugh was as cold as a straight razor. "Ah, but you might not *have* a movie before too long."

I caught her arm before she could walk away. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Surratt turned and faced me head on. "It means some of us are grateful to Mr. Fox for his kindnesses. We don't stab him in the back just because DeMille whispers in our ears."

I grabbed her wrist. "Where did you hear that?"

She squirmed under my grip. "Let me go, you beast," she hissed.

I tightened my hold. "Who told you?"

"*Take your hands off me, Mr. Swanson!*" she shouted. People turned to look at us, and I dropped her wrist as though I'd been burned. Surratt arched an eyebrow, holding up a hand to stop a couple of burly grips who were trotting over.

"Too bad," she purred as they backed off. "You had your chance, and now it's gone. No Valeska Surratt for you." She tugged at her dress, pulling it back into shape and smoothing the emerald fabric over her voluptuous curves.

Then, very deliberately, she opened her lace-gloved hand to let her stick clatter to the ground. She stared at me with a cool gaze until I bent down to pick it up.

She took it back with a little nod. "Do you know," she said airily, "I heard two absolutely delightful rumors today. One is that I don't wear anything at all under my dresses except a corset and stockings."

Her glittering hazel eyes met mine as I tried to keep my face blank.

"And the other?" I said hoarsely.

A malicious smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "The other is that Theda Bara is only one step away from a long, long fall. Be careful, Toby, or you'll fall with her. And then -"

the coral tip of her tongue ran lazily over her parted lips, “ – you’ll never know if that first rumor is true, will you?”

She swung away, the feathers in her hat slashing me across the face. As my eyes watered, Surratt strolled away into the depths of Stage 1, a cruel giggle trailing behind her.



As it turned out, I didn’t have to do Selig’s dirty work for him. Theo insisted on going to Vyrginia’s funeral, so that meant extra days getting enough in the can that we could afford a few hours without the star on set.

We shut down just before midnight on Friday. Saturday morning, I brushed off my blue serge suit, laced up a pair of patent leathers and took the Red Car over to Theo’s place on West Adams.

Back in those days, you weren’t really a star until you got your own car. It might be a souped-up Mercer like Wally Reid’s or even a monster Fiat like Mack Sennett’s. In New York, the cut of your suit told people how much money you made. In Hollywood, your car was a better sign of your box-office pull than a dozen balance sheets.

A year or so back, the studio had given Theo a fully-loaded Hispano-Suiza – a whale of a car that handled like the *Titanic* and drank gasoline faster than W.C. Fields could swallow a bottle of hootch. Most of the time it sat in her garage collecting dust, but that day I was behind the wheel clenching my teeth as I hauled it out. For once, Theo wanted the car. It showed respect, she said.

I don’t know why I expected any respect from the Eye, but in any case, I didn’t get it. There was a little group of them waiting at the cemetery gate, marching around in a circle and waving their signs. When they caught sight of Theo’s car, they swarmed all over us, screaming insults and pounding on the hood. I couldn’t hit the gas without running them down, so all I could do was race the engine and inch forward.

“*Death is at your door!*” one of them yelled in my ear. “*Beg the gods for forgiveness!*”

Theo shrank back into her seat, pulling her veil close as a lanky, horse-faced woman holding a “STAMP THE VAMP” sign hammered at her window, the cords of her neck tight and quivering.

I juiced the car and managed to Red Sea the last few women blocking the way, but not before one practically leaped through my open window.

“*Hollywood will burn!*” she shrieked, grabbing for my collar. Something fluttered past my face as I stepped on the gas, but I slapped it to one side and kept going.

There hadn’t been any calling hours for Vyrginia, but the studio was paying for her burial. By the time I berthed the car, the service was just about over.

I pulled the brake and cut the engine just as I noticed a bit of pink out of the corner of my eye. I looked down at the seat next to me to see a flimsy little pamphlet titled *What Is the Eye of Horus?* I scooped it up, crumpling it into my pocket before Theo could notice.

The minister gave us a quick once-over as we sidled up near the mourners, but he never broke his stride, hitting his last lines like a pro.

He snapped his prayer book shut, made a quick sign of the cross and then went to shake the hand of a short, red-faced fellow as the other mourners made their goodbyes.

I leaned close to Theo. “I wonder if that’s the father?” I whispered.

The minister turned to lay a hand on the shoulder of the weeping woman standing next to Red-Face. As he did, the fellow saw us. He barely looked at me, but his jaw tightened as he locked eyes with Theo. She held his gaze for a moment, then slipped her arm through mine.

“Come on, Toby.”

We stepped to the other side of the open grave. As we did, Red-Face shifted his stance, balancing on the balls of his feet like a boxer.

I didn’t like it.

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” Theo said, lifting her veil.

Red-Face looked at her a moment, then took her hand with the loosest grip I'd ever seen. "Thank you."

"Did you know Ginny?" The weeping woman had taken Red-Face's arm as the minister left. Her face was puffy and blotchy, like Marie Dressler with the mumps, but she had the same high cheekbones and wide eyes as Vyrinia, and I guessed Mother must have been quite the Gibson Girl in her day.

"We. . . worked together," Theo said, which I guess was the best answer to give. She held out her hand again. "My name is Theda Bara."

Red-Face went white. "How dare you - "

"James, please -" Mother interrupted.

The father closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You've hurt us enough," he choked. "At least have the decency to let us say goodbye in peace."

Theo and I looked at each other in confusion. "I'm sorry, I – I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered.

"Go away!" Vyrinia's father shouted, before spinning around, pulling his wife with him to stalk off towards a battered Model T parked under a willow tree.

I tipped my hat back, watching as the Dares' Ford sputtered to life, shuddering and backfiring. "What was that all about?" I wondered as they drove away.

Theo didn't say anything. She just stood watching the car until it rounded a corner and disappeared.

"Did you hear me?" I prodded.

"I heard you." She turned away and stared down into the open grave. A gravedigger began shoveling dirt onto Vyrinia's coffin, each toss landing with the solid *thump* of a door being closed. At last, Theo lowered her veil and took my arm.

"That was a hell of a reception," I said as we walked back to her car. "The way he jumped down your throat, you'd think you told him you were Jack the Ripper."

"Hating Jack the Ripper I can understand," Theo mused. "Hating Theda Bara, though - that's a job for movie critics." She looked back over her shoulder to where the Dares had driven away. "Mr. Dare doesn't strike me as a critic."



The sky was a little overcast the next morning, but I decided to chance it and hopped on my motorcycle anyway. By the time I got to the studio, the sun had come out and all around me was brilliant, clear blue. I was at the gate waiting for the guard to wave me through when I backed up, goosed the throttle and roared away down Western, looping around the lot a couple of times to get the cobwebs out of my brain. When I got back to the gate, I was tempted to blow through, grab Theo and take off for the day, but before I knew it, I found myself pulling up in front of her bungalow and taking my kit out of the sidecar.

I popped into the little kitchen for a cup of coffee before I knocked on the dressing room door. "It's me, Theo."

"Toby!" she crowed, reaching to me as I came in. "Have I got something for you?"

I looked at her little white feet peeping out from under the hem of her dressing gown. "Is that an offer or a threat?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she grinned. "Listen to this." She had the latest issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* in her hand and her eyes sparkled as she flipped it open to the review pages.

"*The Victim*," she read. "*One of the worst pictures that the bizarre Valeska has ever done. The story is weak and melodramatic – one can almost hear the clink as one piece of the story fits into another.*" She smiled like the cat that ate the canary as she pulled herself up to her full height. "*It's a pity that such pictures have to be released!*"

She slapped the magazine down and rubbed her hands together in glee. "How do you like *that*? It ought to knock the little bitch down a few pegs."

“Doesn’t take much to make you happy, does it?” I deadpanned.

“Damn right. If Surratt thinks funny hats and no drawers are all it takes to beat me, she’s got another think coming.”

“Oh, you heard about that, too?” I asked. “Give you any fashion ideas?”

“Down, boy,” she laughed, slapping my hand.

“Some day -” I chuckled, waving a finger at her.

“- you’ll get a private showing. I promise.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips against mine.

I sighed as I caught the scent of crushed lilacs in the hollow of her throat. “I’m going to hold you to that, you know.”

“I know,” she whispered. “That’s what makes it so much fun.” She put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me back. “Now let’s get to work.”

I fixed her up. Then the dressers came in to suit her up and we all trooped off to the set. We weren’t doing anything too big that morning – just a few insert shots and reaction close ups. Grunt work, but the kind of stuff it took hours to shoot.

Theo was a pro when the cameras were rolling, but between takes she sat alone, her chin in her hand, staring out at nothing. When we broke for lunch, I slipped my arm into hers as we walked to the canteen.

“Still thinking about yesterday?” I asked.

“It really bothers me, Toby.”

“Don’t kick yourself, Theo. The fellow lost his daughter. I’m sure he didn’t know what he was saying.”

She shook her head, her golden sphinx earrings tinkling like chimes. “No, he knew what he was saying.” She ground her teeth, growling. “The trouble is, I don’t!”

“It’s all water under the bridge,” I soothed. “There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

Theo shook her head again, her mouth a tight line. “No. Remember what he said? He said I’d hurt them enough.” She let the words hang between us for a long moment before looking back over my shoulder to the set, where Gordon was fiddling with a camera eyepiece. “We can’t do anything now. But why don’t we go for a drive this weekend?”

“Where?”

“Wherever Vyrinia called home.” She pressed my hand. “I don’t mind if people hate me. But I do like to know the reason why.”



4,882 words