

I

Woodland Hills

The Queen of the Nile is having a rough night. Or maybe it's the Queen of Sheba—these things get confused. But she's been up for a while, and no one's getting any sleep. First she tried summoning her advisor Pharon, the Priest of Amon, then a slave girl, the one with the basket—the famous basket with the figs and the snake—but no one came. Then she switched her tack and wailed forlornly for Charmian, though if I remember right it was Charmian with the basket in the first place. But Charmian died a few years back, up in Beverly Hills, where she'd been wrapped up and boxed away like a china doll too delicate to play with. Somebody who should have been watching looked away for a moment and she took a tumble on the stairs and broke her hip. It was in the papers and all of us here at Silent Rest passed around a card for her, but though she came through the surgery all right, that was the end of her. All it takes for some of us these days is a stumble in the wrong direction. I don't know if she ever got the card, which is a shame, since it might have been nice to know we'd all heard the news and thought about her. But she passed away a week or so later, so she's late for her entrance now and it's spoiling the scene. That's a royal inconvenience, since the Lady of the Sedge and the Bee, Daughter of the Ptolemies, Queen of Egypt—I can see the title card in my mind as clear as the day I shot it—is waiting and the camera's rolling, so Her Majesty's had to improvise. She's set about issuing orders to an empty room for the past few minutes now, long enough to get me wondering about the

hour, which means I've had to sit up and find my glasses and squint at the clock on the wall in the hallway. A quarter after three in the morning. In the meantime Theo, who played Pharon and made the ladies swoon—and a few of the men, if the truth be told—turns over in his bed and mutters, “What’s the trouble?”

“Mabel. Anna. It’s nothing. Go back to sleep. I’ll handle it.” Lately, it’s gotten so this happens twice a week or so—we can count off half an hour in the dark before Joel, the dumb unshaven kid on the night watch, wakes from his own slumbers at the end of the hall and decides to see what the trouble is about. He’s always the last one to catch on. But he’s late for his entrance, too, so there’s nothing else for it. I’m now the unlikely hero of this piece, and it’s my time to act. I throw the covers back and poke around with one foot on the floor, finding my slippers. Then, one hand on the bedrail and one on the nightstand, I slide myself off the bed and stand up slowly. No broken hip for me. Theo’s already asleep again. He was always a good sleeper—out like a rock, no matter what or where. But not me, never me. I’m the worrier, the one awake half the night. I touch the switch beside the door, but don’t flip it. “Lights!” I whisper, hearing the old command out of habit. Cue the camera—I give my wrist a few spins in the air before me at eye-level, just for old time’s sake—and Action: the moment for my entrance has arrived. Introducing Frank Potter, erstwhile cameraman, in his ongoing dramatic role—always a walk-on, and always a star—this time as Solomon, Son of David, King in Jerusalem. (Different picture, I know, but I can remember that title, and that title card, too.) But first a little exposition, which serves the purpose of explaining how Her Majesty and I are about to have our audience. Even so:

SCENE: Flashback, late that afternoon.

INTERIOR: The Silent Picture Rest Home, cafeteria; waning daylight.

FADE IN

MEDIUM CLOSE VIEW, IRIS IN: A Formica tabletop, set with six plates filled with unappetizing and mostly-uneaten food: fish-sticks and tartar sauce, small bowls of stewed tomatoes, and something that looks remarkably—but not quite—like steamed spinach.

IRIS OUT. Three women, one in a wheelchair, and three men, all in their declining years, seated around the table.

VOICE-OVER.

We could see it coming on at dinner when she shoved her plate away with the gesture of a woman born to rule—or a star of the silent screen, which amounts, for all practical purposes, to much the same thing. Maybe she'd even muttered something to herself: "Begone! And take this from me! It pleases me not!" I saw her mouth move, but it was hard to tell. These days, when the fit's on her, she doesn't always get the words out as easily as she used to, back when she had a voice wasted on the flickers. But there was no mistaking the meaning though, and we all looked up, Carl patiently dabbing a splash of tomato juice from the side of his face, then settled back into our seats to watch the scene. It's not every evening that the dinner-time entertainment features the performance of a legendary actress temporarily restored to her prime. Theo, seated beside me, tried first to break the spell. "Oh, look now—you've spilled tomatoes on your fish sticks."

Sometimes that works, but Mabel Joan Butts, once the gangling daughter of a Topeka, Kansas insurance salesman and since known to her millions of adoring fans (or the few dozen left who can remember her screen name) as the lithe and long-limbed Anna

Randall, star of the long-running serial *The Adventures of Anna*, threw her head back, eyes wide, her arm extended and her open hand palm down above the table but still high enough to catch the light. Another of her specialties.

“Don’t,” I whisper to Theo. “She’s miles away—and she’s enjoying it. Let her have the scene.” I stood and pushed my chair in, then quietly took up my old spot above and behind the others, unobstructed, and planted my feet apart. I gave my wrist a few spins in the air ahead of me at eye-level. Carl muttered “*Action*,” and Little Lulu, considering the spilled tomatoes analytically, cracked wise.

“Who knows, maybe it’ll improve the flavor.”

Clora looked over at her and chuckled, then reached out and pressed her napkin into the spill.

Mabel registered the cue and tilted her head proudly. She fixed us all—each one, and one at a time—with a baleful stare, then sat back in her seat, her hands clutching the arms of her chair so that her shoulders tensed for dramatic effect. She held the pose for a moment, coiled like a viper set to strike. Then she took a solid thirty seconds by the clock, pulling herself to her full height—a good four and a half feet, anymore—and rose commandingly before us.

Carl shook out his napkin before folding it beside his plate. “Couldn’t hurt it. It’s the second time we’ve had them this week.”

Clora raised an eyebrow. “Fish sticks in general, or these particular ones?”

“I have trouble remembering.”

Theo lifted his fork. “Now that you bring it up, I have my questions, too.” He speared a fish stick and turned it over for examination. “It’s the week in review, again.”

“It’s just leftovers—what’re you going to do?” I said to one side, my eyes fixed on Anna and my camera-hand still working. She stood back, regarding the five of us, her squabbling failed retainers, with haughty contempt. She was taking her time with the scene, or maybe she’d lost her place for a moment and was finding it again. Either way, I kept on filming. That’s my job.

“But are they *my* leftovers?” Theo looked up at me. “That’s the thing here, buddy. When we had our own place, I knew I was the one who’d had the food before. I could live with that. I knew where it came from.”

“We have our own place now,” I reminded him.

“Lucky dogs,” Carl smiled.

Lulu dropped her fork on her plate, uninterested. “You say you can’t live with this? Like you have a choice.”

“Try scratching your initials and the date on one of them, then check if they come back,” Clora suggested. “And how many times, speaking of leftovers, are we going to shoot this take?”

“Just once more,” I told her. “Once more to get it right.”

“You always say that.”

I kept my voice low but firm, my eyes fixed on Anna. “And I always will.”

Anna had recovered herself. She clutched at the cardigan Clora had tucked around her shoulders when we’d all sat down, then drew it across her chest like a spangled cloak. It slipped from her opposite shoulder and bunched up to one side, but she didn’t care, or she didn’t notice. Or maybe she remembered that the accidental details were all that was needed, often enough, to make the shot a classic. She turned and threw out an arm ahead

of her to part an imaginary crowd of attendants bowing and trembling before her, then adjusted her usual trudge to give it a little more dignity and carry her off in a dramatic exit. A few of our fellow inmates, used to the performance, halted to let her pass. Nice of them.

Lulu pushed her plate away. "She was always good at exits."

"No kidding." I squinted through the nothing I was cranking in front of me. I could act, too, if I needed to. "The first time I saw was in the yard of the house I grew up in."

"That little farmhouse?" Theo turned to me and smiled. "I remember that like it was yesterday."

"It was, in a manner of speaking."

"It always has been," Carl agreed.

I kept rolling, following Her Majesty as she made her way out of the cafeteria. If it was a long departure, it made up for its length in concentration. Her chin was lifted and her eyes—those eyes that could telegraph an emotion fifty yards—burned like headlights. The close shot became a medium shot as I turned from the waist, keeping my shoulders square to the camera as I tracked her out. I reached around to adjust the lens and keep the frame in focus—and why? Some habits die hard, I guess. She halted for a moment in the doorway, as if she was recalling her direction, then turned and picked up two of the houseplants left out on a cart beyond the door. The management, in the person of a pompous and longwinded idiot named Stewart, had recently had the bright idea to bring in a few dozen umbrella trees and elephant ears and a couple of other varietals, and place them in our rooms—to keep things fresh, I suppose. That lasted as long as it took to make it clear, even to him, that changes in the environment were apt to confuse some of the residents. Anna, one evening, had pulled apart an acanthus plant and scattered it across

her rug. Then she'd taken the stalks of flowers in both fists and done Ophelia—from her stage days, since I was sure I didn't remember it from the studio—all the way down the corridor and into the shower, where she might have imagined she was drowning herself for love. In the end, the fistfuls of petals blocked the drain and flooded the hallway, and the plants, at least in our rooms, had been withdrawn and repositioned. Now she was walking slowly, holding the two clay pots out before her like an offering as she made her retreat. She was back in character and the image reminded me of something, though I couldn't say what it was. Maybe she'd missed having them and was taking them back. Good for her.

I was just about done with the shot when Joel, dogfaced and with his dark hair slicked back like some five-and-dime Romeo, cut across the scene, trudging straight through the frame like a wandering prop-boy, and I lost sight of Anna a few doors before her room. I let my arm drop. Lulu was watching and had seen what he did. "Well, that spoiled the shot, didn't it?" she said.

Clora sighed. "He shouldn't be allowed on the set."

Carl stared after Anna. "She'll be all right," he decided. I thought so, too. In her room the familiar surroundings would reshape the scene and she'd come back to herself, figuring that she had just dreamed it all up: fish sticks and a bowl of stewed tomatoes, prop food long ago sloshed out incongruously before the last of the Ptolemies. She'd have to talk to Cyril about that prop boy, though. No—Cyril's long since gone. It must have been a dream. And here were two new plants.

Theo picked up one last fish stick with his fingers and snapped off the end. He popped it into his mouth and chewed it slowly as I straightened up and my camera vanished into the air. "When did you sell that place, finally?"

I looked back at him, lost for a moment. “The farm,” Clora prompted. “I remember: it was a beautiful place.”

I resumed my seat. “Never did—not completely. Never got around to it.”

Carl looked up, surprised. “Really?”

“Not the house, at least—though we used it as if I had, and I never minded. I sold the land the day I left. And the bunkhouse and the barn. Property of New World Moving Pictures—just like you and me. But not the house. That was leased to the studio, last I knew.”

“We shot interiors there, though,” Lulu insisted.

“Why was that?” Clora asked. “Why hang on to it?”

“I don’t remember. Something at the time. But that was the deal.” I sighed as I took a last look down the hallway. Anna was gone. “For all I know, it’s still there.”

“If it hasn’t fallen in on itself and been condemned,” Lulu said. “They take a bulldozer to them, these days. Like they did the Chaplin Studio.”

“That’s not true,” Theo sat up, a little indignantly. “It’s still there—North La Brea and Sunset Boulevard—it just converted to television.”

“Didn’t we all—or at least didn’t we try to.”

“Some of us did and some of us didn’t,” Carl said.

“Those of us that are still alive.” I winked at Lulu. She scowled back at me. I can keep a secret.

“And here we all are,” Carl declared, smiling. “Those of us that are still alive. Or most of us.”

Lulu snorted. “After that scene? Maybe most of the most of us—or some of the most of us. But you can hear the bulldozers here, too. Listen closely—you can hear them coming.”

“There’s a metaphor for you,” Clora muttered.

“You ever miss it?” Carl tilted his head my way. “Where you grew up?”

“From this perspective? All eight-hundred acres. Every rock and tree of it. And the willow tree beside the pond. It was quite a spread back then—peaches and almonds.”

“So... every time we have peaches?” Theo grinned.

“*Canned* peaches. That’s what we get here,” I pointed out. “And they’re nothing like home. We had them all year ‘round.”

“You were lucky.”

I nodded. “But still I got sick of them. They never ended. When my stepmother passed, she hadn’t finished putting up the last of them, so the neighbor-ladies took over and finished for her when she couldn’t.”

Lulu chuckled to herself. “And I’ll bet *they’re* still there. How long has it been?”

“The house was thick with the smell of them. They even baked some into pies for the wake.” For a moment I could see the scene as if I were framing it in the camera: the house crowded, the air sweet and sweltering—and a long cream-yellow car coming down the drive, sparkling through the parlor windows. “That’s fifty years ago. And you were all invited in, as I recall.”

“We finished off the leftovers.”

“Most kind of you,” Theo nodded graciously and wiped the corners of his mouth. “But as I recall, you weren’t counting on receiving visitors.”

“Two wakes in two days,” I agreed. “And by then I couldn’t get away fast enough.”

“Best hire I ever made.” Carl held his hand up, giving his blessing. He pushed his chair back and crossed his legs. “You’re welcome.”

“But the canning jars,” Lulu says. “All this time. I wonder if they’ve kept.”

“And thank *you*, sir.” I responded. “You rescued a young man in distress.” I turned to Lulu. “We had a root cellar. If it’s still there, they’re still there, if nobody’s gotten into them in the meantime—stored in a cool dry place.”

“Fifty years later—preserved like the rest of us.” Lulu reached for her napkin to mask her face and delicately picked something from between her teeth. They’re all original and she’s proud of the fact. “Much like *much* of the rest of us.”

Theo was intrigued. “If they haven’t exploded from the heat. That can happen, too. Or maybe they’ve fermented—maybe they’re *brandied* peaches by now!”

“I always just assumed it went with New World, or with the crash.”

“Imagine,” Lulu mused. “The value in pure real estate! You could be a rich man, Frank.”

“You kidding? I *am* a rich man. I have a whole staff in white livery here at my beck and call—around the clock.”

She glanced over at Joel who had slouched back to his desk behind the window. He’d pulled the sliding glass shut and was reading a comic book folded back on his knee, his feet up. “If they’re awake through the night, you mean.”

“I don’t mind it much, most nights.”

Carl heaved a sigh, uncrossed his legs and stood, one hand on the edge of the table. Dinner was over. “Well then. I’ll see you all at tonight’s entertainment.”

“Saturday. Then it’s a movie, isn’t it?”

“Do you know what they’re showing?”

“I checked,” Carl smiled wryly. “A picture of particular interest to us all, in fact—*Purity*, vintage 1919, and starring Nova Romanov.”

“Really?” Lulu’s sharp and it’s hard to catch her off guard, but she looked up at him, eyes wide. I’d lost my breath for a moment and sat gulping like an idiot, memories crowding the lens.

“All eight reels.”

“Isn’t that the one we were working on when—”

“Odd coincidence,” I cut her off.

Carl glanced at me, then back at Lulu. “And *scene*,” he said, and he picked up his cane from the back of his chair and strode off.

Lulu took a deep breath as we all stood, shrugging off the surprise. Theo pushed in Clora’s chair for her then started off, after Carl. “Don’t leave me stranded here,” she called after him.

“We’re all stranded here,” I told her. “But I can always show a lady to her room.”

FADE OUT

SCENE: Flashback again, but later that day—after dinner by some hours, though still before the Judgement of Solomon in the Hallway.

INTERIOR: The Silent Picture Rest Home; what was grandly called the Screening Room, but more factually a social hall set up as a makeshift theater; lights gradually dimming.

FADE IN

TRACKING SHOT over FRANK'S shoulder as he trudges down the aisle, pushing LITTLE LULU in her wheelchair.

MEDIUM SHOT as he situates LULU to one side of the aisle, then stands for a moment staring back at a hapless young man in a white coat wheeling a projector on a cart into place behind them. He takes his place a few seats in.

MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT of the four of them, with LITTLE LULU in her chair to one side of the frame, then CARL, FRANK and THEO, and CLORA at right.

Theo had saved a seat for me beside him. “We thought you weren’t going to make it.”

I gestured toward Lulu. “The lady kept me waiting.”

“I had to prepare for my entrance.”

“But it was worth it,” Carl said. He’d brought along the day’s paper to catch up on what he hadn’t read that afternoon. He turned a page now and shook it out to fold it back as Lulu set the brake on her chair.

“And the Lady of the Nile? How’s she doing?”

“You know, I think that was Sheba, actually—or maybe Lucrezia Borgia. Hard to tell. Anyway, she’s fine—sitting up asleep in a chair, last I checked.” Joel was down in front now, squinting into the beam of the projector as he struggled with a folding screen.

“Cleopatra meets Caesar, Sheba meets Solomon. Different stories, same scenes,” Clora sighed. She’d gotten herself dolled up for the evening with lipstick and several strands of iridescent beads. They glittered as she shrugged. “The parts are interchangeable.”

“And whose fault is that?” Lulu prodded.

“Nobody’s. It’s just a fact. There are only so many stories—and we were always in a hurry and they worked just fine the first time for somebody else. So just change around the details and set it down in a different location. It all amounted to the same thing.”

Carl leaned forward in his seat. “Here’s the news for you, then.” He held up the paper. A headline read *SILENT FILM STAR NOVARRO BEATEN TO DEATH*. “It says the funeral’s tomorrow.”

“I saw that earlier,” she said. “Poor guy. I asked at the front desk and they told me there’ll be a bus for us. Then someone had to walk me back to the day room as if I’d gotten lost! How the hell did they think I’d gotten there in the first place?”

Carl sighed. “I wonder if Anna will be able to make it.”

“You know she knew him? She mentioned it a while back.”

“We all did, one time or another,” I said. “You forget how small a town it was.” I took a look out over the group in the room. There were only about fifty of us. “And it’s getting smaller all the time.” A woman in the row ahead threw me a disapproving glance.

“I get a little concerned when she loses herself like that.”

“Normally she sleeps it off,” I said. Joel was back at the projector now, fumbling with the reel. He hadn’t realized yet that he was holding it backwards.

Clora turned to me as I took my seat. “Did you get my sweater back? I’ll need it on the bus, if we’re going.”

“Of course we’re going. Did you have any other plans?” Lulu asked.

“I’ll bring it to breakfast tomorrow,” I assured her. “I left it with Anna on the way back, but I’ll want to look in on her tonight, anyway.”

The room went dark. “Finally,” Theo said. “Pass the popcorn.”

“There isn’t any. Regulations, remember?”

“I miss the smell of it.”

“Regulations,” Lulu grumbled. This was an innovation the management had posted the week before on the bulletin board in the day room, starting off as Stewart always did with a grand pronouncement and finishing up a few hundred words later with references to medical research: *“It is the first responsibility of The Silent Picture Rest Home to provide for the health and safety of its clientele.”* He actually talked—and he talked a lot—like that. Silent Rest had a popcorn machine, which they had previously rolled out for show now and again, and always for Saturday night screenings, but apparently it hadn’t been in our best interests. “Who’d have known that stuff can shorten your life,” Clora had jibed, and we’d all laughed at the time, but here we were. “As if junk food at our age—” Lulu said, “and considering what they do feed us....” She let the thought trail off.

Carl carefully folded the paper into quarters and dropped it under his chair. “All the vigor of youth, and righteous indignation at the world’s injustice!”

“I wrote that line, thank you very much,” Clora huffed. It was a title card once, as I remembered.

So the picture begins. A leader ticks off the seconds, a few cards introduce the grand title—*PURITY*, in white letters over the scene of a willow tree beside a pond—then it cuts to a list of the featured players, Anna and Theo and Little Lulu (as she used to known professionally) among them, then a scroll of the production crew with Cyril MacKenzie directing and Carl Schultz as his Assistant. “See there? I was somebody once,” Carl whispers. Clora Cormorant is listed there, too, quaintly described as the scenarist—the

word we employed before everything was written up as a regular script—and then there I am at last, near the end: Frank Potter, Second Assistant Cameraman. It was my first credit, though it was only a happy accident at the time. Finally, we fade to black and fade in again on a preliminary card, with the willow tree to one side and the moral of our story: “*To the Pure, all Things are Pure.*” The projector is clicking away behind us but there’s no music anywhere—they’ve all but forgotten that, now—so it’s just the image flecked with dust and lint, scored top to bottom with trailing scratches, and faded spots rising like clouds of steam, all of it within a lousy twenty square feet. Not like the old glories of the Fox Theater in Riverside, with its ushers in uniform and its matinee orchestra under an expanse big enough to entertain a young man’s imagination. I wondered if it was still there.

“The damage,” Lulu mutters. “Look at it. Did we film this picture in the rain?”

Carl takes her hand in his. “So it would appear.”

We certainly did not, but now we fade in on the poet Thorton Darcy (played by Theo, with his dark hair long as we supposed all poets wore it, and looking a lot like an Indian I spent a memorable night in a tent with, once). He’s seated at his desk, getting himself all worked up over an allegorical poem he’s titled *Virtue*. (Title card: *All the vigor of youth, and righteous indignation at injustice!* “I told you,” Clora says quietly, more to herself than to Carl.) As poetry goes, *Virtue* was probably no more interesting than it sounds—not that it ever existed—but it’s an allegory and he’s an idealist (the long hair tells us that, somehow—and an allegory, as I understood it at the time, is a poem with women running around with names like Purity and Art, and all the Greek Muses in it, half naked—but that’s coming up). We get a shot of the first page of the poem, penned out in neat script, before it cross-fades into a misty picture of the world in its earliest days, when Virtue ruled over

creation, wearing in a costume covering no more than it should and fooling exactly nobody. Virtue is played by Nova Romanov, and I sigh at the sight of her, because she sits there on the Throne of Loving Kindness (as the title card tells us, leaving nothing to chance) and she glows, serene as the force of moral conviction, and everything is right with the world as she places one white hand to her cheek then lets her fingers trail languidly down her neck before the shot narrows in a slow iris before it cuts to a close up of her face. I didn't shoot that scene, but I can remember when it was shown in the rushes, the first time anyone ever saw it, and you can't tell me that sunlight didn't consider itself lucky to shine down on her through the glass of a studio roof. I glance over at Carl and he's staring with his lips parted, rapt at the sight as she smiles softly back at me, doubled on the lenses of his glasses. "Gorgeous," Lulu whispers, and she's not being flip for once.

The second part of the poem is the story of Pandora—played by Anna in her prime—who lets herself be tempted and sets Evil loose in the world. Evil is represented by a whole lot of the company got up like gargoyles fresh off a cathedral—even Lulu as an imp with the wings of a bat—and the scene fleshed out, quite literally, by a few young ladies not known at the time for their modesty: Naked Ambition, Naked Greed—nothing very subtle. That was a lot of fun to film and it's not half bad to watch again now. Evil capers around and causes no particular mischief—at least in the picture, which judders in its frame now and again and looks as if someone had been taking flashbulb photos of the action—but it's clear the world has changed, and the Throne of Loving Kindness is seen now occupied by a child carrying a pitchfork, and we all laugh because we recognize Lulu. "Go on," she says, "I wore that for Halloween that year, too," which earns another pointed glance back from the woman ahead of us, who maybe doesn't know that Evil herself is seated in the aisle behind

her. But now we finish up the poem and arrive at the present, as Darcy decides to knock off for the day and take a break from his labors in the allegory trade. Close-up on the back of Theo's hand laying his quill aside (and why a quill? I wonder—because it's poetry, of course), and the camera cuts back as he stands and stretches. He's all in white, and taller than I remember, and we can see the muscles of his chest through that pressed white shirt. He nudges me and leans over to whisper: "Quite a figure I cut back then, hey?"

"I was taken in," I tell him, and for a moment the focus blurs a little and I have to blink hard a few times. That happens now and again, these days.

Darcy goes for a walk in the country where he's greeted by a scene bright in my memory, though I observed it from a different angle. From a distance, he espies our heroine, a simple country girl in a home-made dress, unconcerned about her appearance unlike any girl I grew up with in the country at the time, loitering under a willow tree beside a pond. The camera, closer up, follows his line of sight. She casts off her clothing in the heat of the afternoon and wades out, in all her naked loveliness, to the middle of the water. There she ties up her hair, lifting her arms so the entire length of her unblemished back shines through the willow branches and reflects in the pond between, then she plunges in and swims across to the other side of the frame, rising like Venus on the shore before parting the fronds and, after pausing a moment for effect, dressing herself again. There's poetry for you. She is also, not coincidentally, played by Nova Romanov.

Confronted with this vision from his own imagination, Darcy approaches her and introduces himself, finds her amenable to poetry, and they settle in most comfortably beneath the branches of the willow to read his poem, which he conveniently happens to have brought along—because he's a poet, after all, and she's a simple country girl and, well,

that's our story. We learn in passing that before she was invited to take up literary appreciation, the young lady—whose name is Purity Worth, if you can stand it—has been gathering flowers, as all simple country girls do, and she lives in a humble home in a forest that wasn't anywhere nearby in my youthful experience. She listens to Darcy as he reads, finds herself suitably impressed, and smooths back a lock of his hair when he's done to crown him with a wreath of flowers. He falls in love with her on the spot, as any young man would, I suppose. I certainly did. Purity returns his affections and they agree to meet again the next day.

In the dark around us a few of the residents had muttered under their breath, surprised at the nude shots, but that was the way we did it—and the way it played across the country. Of course, theaters in some towns cut the scene, but there were always some that did when editing the flickers was as easy as reaching for a pair of scissors and a bottle of rubber cement. Griffiths had wrangled a whole herd of topless slave girls into a pool in *Intolerance* and got away with it because they were sinful Babylonians—as Babylonians always are—and I can remember a picture, even if I can't remember its name, with a character called The Naked Truth—as truthfully, she was. That was how it worked for *Purity*, an allegory in the service of public uplift, when no one the wiser was about say otherwise. We had ourselves a few good laughs over the reviews: every writer was eager to comment on the lady's "great refinement of mind," and "sensitivity of purpose" and that sort of thing. You can get away with a lot when you're named Purity.

Darcy has no immediate prospects, of course—that's the way with poets—so he tries to get his poems published, but the publisher (Hal Hamilton, once on Broadway and long since of the Vaudeville circuit, our company heavy in either sense of the word) wants

\$500 up front for the privilege. So our hero has a dilemma, and he tells Purity that he would marry her if not for his poverty. As he explains the situation, the camera draws in on her face, soft and soulful and genuinely sorry. All she does is glance down in thought, then wistfully back up at him—she’s just a simple country girl, after all—but that look has a promise in it, and even if he doesn’t see it, we do. “Just gorgeous,” Lulu says again. She leans forward, eyes wide. “God almighty,” she whispers. “What she had back then!”

“We all had it,” Carl whispers back. “it’s called youth.”

She shakes her head firmly. “Not like that. She was something else entirely.”

The women in front of us are taking this seriously, and one of them glances over her shoulder and holds up a finger to her lips.

Carl ignores them. “It was wasted on us.”

“It always is,” I say.

Purity, as it turns out, has a habit of regular hygiene. The next time she shucks it all off to swim in the pond (this time we didn’t risk anything: the camera records her arrival, then fades in on her dress on the grass and her well-washed hand reaching down for it before it pulls back and we find her fully dressed—and that shot was the start of my career) she is observed again. It just so happens that a painter, Claude Lamarque, played by Anthony Adams, the former Arrow Shirt Man who was also something to look at back then and whose character must be an artist because his name is in French, has also seen her from a distance and, overcome by the beauty of the scene, now seats himself on a not-too-distant rock and sketches it all out. There follows a montage of shots as he works, line by line, gradually pulling back in a series of cross-fades to show the finished picture. It’s good filming, and it was edited well. Carl sits forward and whispers to me, “Nice job.”

“It holds up,” I concede. “But I got lucky.”

Lulu stirs in her aisle-seat. “I’m starting to suspect she only hung around that tree to meet artists.”

“It seems to be working,” Theo nods.

“I used to swim in that pond,” I tell him. “I used to catch frogs there, too. It was nice.”

“You weren’t quite so fetching,” Lulu shoots back. This time the woman in front of us makes a show of her displeasure, turning around to stare. I smile contritely. We’re not exactly well-behaved.

So once Purity’s decent again, Lamarque introduces himself and invites her to pose for him. He shows her his drawing and she’s taken aback, but she’s also impressed. Leaving aside the fact that she realizes he’s been watching her swimming naked all this while, it dawns on Purity that there’s money to be made for her, too, in this allegory business. So she goes to the painter’s studio and undrapes herself for him. Here, I have to admit it, I rose to my calling: iris out on Purity’s foot, soft and lovely in a shaft of light. The camera pans up her bare leg until it can’t go much higher without offense when it encounters a fold of drapery—fine stuff, lit from below and just delicate enough to reveal what it conceals—and then it follows the arc of her torso upward and along an outstretched arm ending in a hand holding a quill in its fingertips. I squint and think I can just make out a drop of ink seeping from its tip, but maybe that’s all in my imagination: the film’s worn out, but the past can also get cloudy and scratched up. Finally, as if there’s any doubt who we’re looking at, the shot pans back, close-up along that arm at the bottom of the frame, then draws back a careful quarter-turn of the lens to bring into focus Purity’s

face, in profile. Actors had profiles then, and we took advantage of the fact. As I recall, John Barrymore made a whole career out of that angle—at least in his early days, when he gave up the stage and came west for the money. And the shot was good enough, but it would have been nothing without her: Nova Romanov as the Muse of Poetry—an inspiration, which I mean sincerely: she was. She absolutely was.

Speaking of money, Purity gives the payment she got for modeling to Darcy's publisher and the poem gets into print and it's all a great success. Apparently, our poet friend doesn't think to ask about how that came about—and why didn't any of us consider that at the time? We were artists ourselves—or we make a point of saying so often enough—and we knew nothing got done for free. I glance over at Clora and she's frowning at the screen. Something's missing here, I realize: someone's cut something out. But now we're into the third act, and there's a twist, since no man resists Purity for long—and Claude the Painter has fallen in love with his model. That's a lot easier to believe. We can see it in his face, in the way he looks at her—and the guy had a profile of his own. When Darcy goes to the studio, for no good reason I can make out, except there has to be some footage gone missing here, too, he interrupts the artist in the very act of seducing his—and that means *our*—Purity, or at least he's trying to, while she's resisting. The two suitors fall to it and a lot of good art gets ruined in the process, but also a curtain comes loose and drops from in front of Lamarque's latest masterpiece, a work he's been laboring over in private, revealing Purity in all her naked purity and, just like before, we take it all in—a montage of the painting, following the earlier shots of Nova bit by allegorical bit, ending on her innocent face.

“It’s a good piece of work,” Carl murmurs, he means the painting, probably remembering that same picture over the mantel at Cyril’s place. He looks over at me.

“What happened to it?”

“Auctioned off,” I say as softly as possible. “After.” And the lens clouds up again. Theo puts his arm around me: he’s missing her too. Damned rotten, the whole thing.

Well, the rest of it is easily told: Darcy walks out in a huff, Purity runs after him and we have a few minutes of suspense before he barges in on his publisher, having put two and two together, finally. Title card: *Publication must be halted at once! I refuse to have the purity of my work sullied by—* And there’s the crux of it: enter Purity, in whose presence the grateful publisher, none the wiser about her exploits in the visual arts, resolves the whole dilemma by congratulating the young woman on the success her generosity has made possible. Her *poetic* success, he stresses. It dawns on Darcy that his innocent love has always acted on his behalf, and he sees Purity for her true worth. As the news settles in, Purity digs deep into her handbag and pulls out a stack of bills thick enough to choke Hal Hamilton, and hands it over to her Darcy. Title card: *“These are all of my earnings—and I give them to you with all of the purity of my heart.”*

Clora claps a hand over her mouth as she leans forward. Now I know something’s wrong: this isn’t the way she remembers it, either. “No!” she whispers. “I *never* wrote that—what a stinker!”

“Where the hell’d she get all that?” Theo asks.

“Maybe you should’ve asked her at the time.” Lulu says sourly. She hasn’t noticed what’s wrong with the story, but then she was still grade school when we shot it.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Theo says. “Wouldn’t he have known? How could we all have missed that?”

The woman in front of us sits forward in her seat, draws herself up straight, and turns around. “Please be quiet!” she hisses.

“You’re spoiling her silent movie, buddy,” I whisper to Theo, but my eyes are on Clora beside him. She’s shaking her head at the screen in dismay.

“It was my scene in the first place,” he says to the woman ahead.

“It was *my* scene first,” Clora snaps, “and somebody’s tampered with it.”

But on the screen, the picture is wrapping itself up. Made rich as no poet ever was, Darcy can now make Purity his wife, and his muse, for happily ever after and all that. Iris in on the two of them as they kiss. Once again, the motto on a title card: “*To the Pure, all Things are Pure.*” And fade out. But Carl had also been restless throughout the last scene, and he stands up now and stares back at the projector. “You’ll block the credits,” I tell him. “There are some people here who only came to see their name roll up the screen.”

“Something’s missing,” he said. He stares at the projector as if it owes him an answer, then back at the screen, where the credits are repeating themselves, then down at the rest of us. His eyes pan across the row and settle on Clora. “Have they left out a reel?”

Lulu tugs on his sleeve. “What are you talking about? They don’t have reels like that anymore—it’s all on one reel. One big reel.” This is true: in the old days the projectionists, who were men with a job that took real skill, had to time the parts of a picture so that two cameras alternated showing several short reels of film. They finished one, they started another, and then they rewound the first and took it off before putting a third reel on when the first projector was free. So they worked back and forth through a feature. But the

wagon-wheel Joel had finally pegged onto the machine behind us was six or eight times the size of those old ones. On the other hand, Carl was also right. He and Clora would have discussed a story, during the shooting and editing, in just that way: what had to happen in first reel, the second and third—and up to the climax at the end of the seventh or the start of the eighth. And I had been trained to note it all down carefully with each change of film in the camera. Only the weekly serials peaked at the end of their last reel, but they were two-reelers anyway, and that provided the hook to keep the audience wanting more. *Purity* had been eight reels long—feature-length at the time. Now there was information missing—the resolution was too simple and we’d come to the end much too fast. I checked my watch; we hadn’t been sitting there much more than an hour.

The crowd in the screening room was waking up again, in some cases literally, and a few were already on their feet and picking their way to the aisles, but Carl wasn’t having it. “Where was the party scene—the works of art?” He looked at us blankly for a moment. “Remember Aphrodite? The Muses?”

“Not personally,” Theo jibed. “But I don’t go back quite as far as you, old man.”

Then I realized what had first alerted Clora. “No, he’s right: there’s a whole scene, a whole sequence, gone. The salon party, remember? With Anna? Nova was in the middle of it—and the others did all the works of art, the paintings and statues!” It was the whole seventh reel and I remembered shooting it—and boy, did I remember shooting it.

“*Descending Night!*” Carl agreed with me,” and *Musidora*, and there were others. “Where did they go?”

“The party the rich lady throws!” Theo exclaimed. “There was a picture called *Spring* with about a half-dozen of the girls.” He frowned. “God almighty, I couldn’t look any

of them in the eye for a week after all that—even on the street—everywhere I looked there was somebody’s breasts!” The woman in front of us had been on her way out, but she stopped in her tracks and gave him the fish-eye. I ignored her. “One of them even winked and told me right there in the studio that she wouldn’t mind giving me a better look.”

Lulu snorted. “Did you take her up on the offer?”

“I was no fool then, either.”

That was debatable, but he wasn’t wrong otherwise. In the picture as we shot it, a wealthy woman from high society, a patron of the artist, had paid a call to the studio while Purity was posing, took a good look at her perfect figure, and invited her on the spot to perform in a pantomime for her guests at a party she was planning to throw. It made sense at the time, as I recall, though I was never invited to any such a party. It was something else that passed for Art at the time—*tableaux*, they called it, since that sounded more cultured than saying a bunch of bare-chested girls hired for ogling, though that was the attraction. The orchestra would strike up a fanfare and the curtain would rise on a perfect recreation of a famous painting, posed just as if you were looking at it in a museum. Applause came and went, and maybe the orchestra played a short selection appropriate to the view—but the girls held their breath and stood motionless, lest they be accused of performing in the nude—then the curtain came down to more applause, and we were all that much more cultured. So Purity did, and she was well-paid for it—and that was what the title card and the whole money business at the end had been all about. The rich lady’s party had capped itself off with a presentation of the Greek Muses, all nine artfully topless. Nova had stood in the center as Inspiration, while Anna played the hostess in a high-necked gown—the only

neckline in sight. It took forever to get it all right. The studio was lousy with inspiration for a few days and every healthy male in the place was red-faced and itchy.

“That’s right!” Lulu chimed in. “I’d never seen a full-grown woman naked before.” She clapped her hands and laughed. “I was eight years old, almost—it was quite an education.”

Theo looked at her in shock. “You were there?”

“My mother got the schedule mixed up and dropped me off for the wrong scene. I never told her.”

“Wise child,” I said.

“I was eight, but I was no fool, either. And what, I was as curious as the rest of—well, I was curious. Leave it at that.” The reel had now run out and the tail-end of the film flapped against the projector a few times as the screen went bright white in front of us. Lulu gave me a knowing look. “I grew up in the pictures, remember.”

The lights overhead came back on. Joel snapped the projector light off, started rewinding the reel, and we were all back to normal. Theo heaved a sigh and made to stand up. “Well, that was just lovely.”

“Maybe some parts better than others.” I made my way past Carl and around Lulu, to get her out and up the aisle. “Undo the parking brake on that thing, would you?”

She pulled a lever and I could feel her weight in my hands on the handles again. “Nothing ages well,” she said. I turned her around.

“You sure about that, Little Lulu?” Carl chucked her under her chin, a gesture that went back to the old days when she was a child. “How about wine?”

She jerked her head away. “Cut that out already. Wine is spoiled grapes.”

“Sour grapes,” Carl teased her back. There’s nothing they could say to hurt each other, after all. Too much celluloid off the reel.

“Raisins, by the sight of us.” She looked up over her shoulder at me: that was my cue to start back to her room. “It comes from *your* old stomping grounds, Frank.”

“Stomping grounds.” I had to chuckle at the thought. “Good one. But you got that wrong: we never grew grapes.” I push her up the aisle and out of the room.

“You maybe missed the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Maybe. All to work with you.”

FADE OUT

SCENE: The present, later that day—so much later, in fact that it’s now the following morning.

INTERIOR: The Silent Picture Rest Home; not quite half-past three in the goddamn morning. Interior—which is to say fluorescent-light.

FADE IN

MEDIUM CLOSE VIEW as an old man in his pajamas emerges from his room and approaches an old woman in her nightgown, standing as proudly as if she were the Queen of Sheba—because, after all, she is—between two plants on chairs in what looks like a retirement-home hallway—because, after all, it is.

VOICE OVER—but you know that, already.

Sometimes the scripts get confused, like the way she tears things up and mixes them around when she’s nervous, but never much the roles, I notice, so by the time I make it out into the hall, she’s still a queen—there’s no mistaking that—but she’s left off Cleopatra and

gone back to being Sheba. She stands imperiously between the potted plants, which she had managed to arrange on two chairs in the middle of the hallway before the night nurse put her to bed for the night. That must have taken some effort, but I hadn't paid much attention to them when I'd looked in after the picture and found her in bed. Now, however, she's prepared for her scene. She nods her head, then tilts her chin up as before, and looks down at me as much as her height allows.

"Solomon!" she calls, her voice low, with some of the old thrill back in it. "Son of David! King in Jerusalem, fabled for your wisdom!

I play along—it's the best way to see this through without a struggle, I've found. "Your Majesty." I nod my head sagely.

"I place before you a test of your discernment." She spreads her arms wide, over the houseplants. "Behold my gifts to you."

"Flowers? You shouldn't have, really." I can hear someone in a room nearby saying, "What? What is it?"

"But only one is real—and fresh as the dawn on the dew!" She keeps one arm out, then draws the other hand down in a slow arc, indicating first one plant, then the other. "The second is a cunning facsimile, the most perfect imitation all the wealth of Sheba and the acme of the jeweler's art can produce! An exact copy—" her hand reverses its path, back to the other plant again—"but in precious jade and gemstones!"

"Really?" No doubt about it, now: she's found her voice again. "Seriously, your Majesty, how shall I ever tell them apart?" And I remember the scene as we shot it: quick cuts between Solomon's face, then a wilted leaf on the plant he supposes is real—then back to his face—but then a wilted leaf on the other; a bud about to break into bloom, then the

same bud, supposedly on the other, but just the same one I shot from a different angle and no one was the wiser—one plant is fake, but which? Cut back to a close-up of Solomon's face, eyebrows drawn together and forehead furrowed. "They're the same exact plant—downright identical."

"Are you not renowned for your wisdom?"

I shrug. "I made it this far, I have to admit. Of course, if I'd been wiser—"

"Then surely your fabled wit will enable you to tell them apart—the false from the true! That is the demand of the Queen of Sheba!" She raises her outstretched arm high, fingers spread wide and takes a step back. She then executes a slow turn, paces back down the hallway, and turns back again. The effect at the time was magic: the gown she wore, trimmed in beads and sequins, first trailed behind her, linking her to Solomon as he stood between the two plants, then twisted back around her, to draw away and wrap her up in a glittering column that I caught in soft-focus from a good ten feet away. It made quite an impression, and clearly she's remembered it. So the famous Anna Randall stands there, under the fluorescent light, barefoot in a cotton nightgown but as regal a figure as her current circumstances allow. Down the hall, I can hear a few others stirring, and somebody croaks, "She's at it again." I have to get this over with.

I drop to my knees. "Certainly, your Majesty! But one moment more to inspect the goods."

She stands there like a statue, then cocks her head and hisses, "Decide, oh Solomon!"

In the story—in the picture—it is at this precise moment that a honeybee interposes itself between the rulers, their waiting attendants gathered breathlessly around them. Cut to a panning shot of their faces, all staring down at the Jewish King in his spangled robes

and golden manacles and a beard that had taken two mortal hours to glue on, strand by strand, to Theo's face—truly an impressive achievement, especially when I consider it had to be done all over again every morning for two weeks. I got sick of the smell of spirit-gum on him and he nearly scrubbed himself raw with washing it all off at the end of the day. But the scene did its work all right. Cut to a close-up of Solomon. Cut to another pan across the faces of the attendants, a shot that slows to a halt as it reaches the Queen of Sheba, her expression rising into exultation as she realizes that maybe, just maybe, she's caught out the old guy, finally thrown a test his way that not even the Wisdom of Solomon can see through. The moment, prospectively speaking, is hers.

Then her expression changes, her eyes shift to one side. She's been distracted by that bee, and we see it in medium-close range: a fuzzy, bumbling thing, swung invisibly along by Carl using a fishing rod strung with a spool of black silk thread. He worked his way behind the crowd, holding the rod steady and keeping the bee at eye-level. The camera followed, adjusting its focus and drawing in on the insect as it looms into the space between the two monarchs, then, decisively, drops onto one of the plants. Cut back to Sheba: a look of triumph as all seems lost for Solomon: it's on the fake one, you see—the bee has landed on the wrong plant, and even the insect, the agent of Jehovah himself, or whatever they called Him back then, has been fooled. Then a close-up of a real bee—which took a good three days to get, and get just right, at the time—turning around on a glossy leaf before taking to the air again.

Back to Sheba: she watches in sinking dismay as the bee loops along between the two plants—and I swear her eyes are following its path now, in the hallway—and settles on the real one, satisfied in its buggy mind that this is really where it ought to be. Close up on

Solomon as the realization dawns on him—*this* is the real one, the bee has told him. He leaps to his feet—I get up a little slower, I confess—and points to the real plant. Medium shot of Solomon, Sheba and the two plants, surrounded by the crowd in all their royal-court finery. “Here,” I say proudly. “This is the true plant as the Lord, my God, has made it. Behold the handiwork of the Greatest Artisan—the Most High!” And it would have been at this point—first in a close-up of Sheba’s face melting into abject wonder and humility, her eyes filling with real tears in what I always considered the loveliest picture in the whole damned film, followed by a shot of the Queen over the heads of the crowd, then back to a close-up as she succumbs to wonder and joy, then to a medium-close shot of her sinking to her knees before Solomon the Wise, Son of David, King in Jerusalem and so on and so forth with the rest of that—that the scene would have reached its climax.

Had it continued, Sheba would herself have fallen before Solomon—which I was not at all keen for Anna to attempt in her current condition—where she would have clutched at my pajama trousers, taking them for Solomon’s robes and likely unpantsing me in the process of her conversion. Fortunately, we were then interrupted. Maybe Joel had heard. Or maybe someone had complained loudly enough to wake him at his desk, so that finally he had to get up and look into the well-being of his charges down the hall. But no matter the cause, that was the cue for Joel the Night Kid, perfect stranger to the Court of Solomon, Lord of the Israelites, Son of David and so on and so forth, to appear. He made his entrance directly behind Sheba as I was still occupied with getting to my feet, so I didn’t see him coming.

He stops about six feet behind Anna and clears his throat. “The health and safety of those in our care are our first priority.” The kid’s an idiot, but you can’t fault his attention

to policy—especially when he’s at a loss for words and the policy applies to someone else. “Patients are to remain in their rooms throughout the night.”

She’s heard him and is about to turn around, but I recapture her attention—I can’t let him startle her out of character now. She’ll get angry—it happens. “It’s the one on the left, Mabel, Anna—Your Majesty. Notice where the bee landed?” The title card comes to mind and I read it out aloud, from memory: “The Lord is not mocked!” Maybe that’s not the exact right line, but it’s close enough to save the scene. I look around her and speak to Joel, who’s standing there with his hands at his sides. “I got this, kid. Just watch to make sure I do it right.”

Anna’s been knocked off her game, which is a shame because it was real quality stuff until we were interrupted, so I can see in her eyes that the scene isn’t right, somehow. Joel doesn’t fit in, and he’s confusing her, but that gives me room to improvise. “If I may approach Your Highness,” I say in my best subservient tone. I put my arm around her and turn her toward the door of her room. “The Queen of Sheba has laid a worthy test before me. And now, my honored, royal guest, I offer you rest and refreshment.”

“The Great Solomon is indeed wise,” she murmurs, but she frowns as she lets me lead her. When we get to the doorway, I turn back to Joel. He has to go.

“You give her pills for this sort of thing, don’t you? Something to help her sleep?”

He snaps to it and heads back down the hallway. “I’ll get the nurse,” he says over his shoulder. Maybe we’re not so concerned about health and safety after all. In the meantime, Sheba’s gotten away from me and has picked up one of the plants.

“I’m taking this with me,” she whispers aside, her chin low and her mouth away from the camera.

“Whatever Your Highness desires she shall have,” I assure her, pushing the door open and feeling for the light switch. It takes me a few minutes to get Anna back to bed and tucked in, so she’s still sitting up when the nurse arrives. She stands in the doorway, and Sheba’s eyes drift her way as I fluff a pillow behind her.

“Enter!” she orders.

“No trouble,” I direct myself to the nurse. “I can handle things from here. We’re old friends—from the silent days.” I’ve seen this girl before. She’s a sweet kid, really—not twenty-five to look at her, all starched and fresh with her white linen hat pinned neatly in place. There’s a gold nursing pin on her chest with a white cross on it. I give her a smile like we’re sharing a secret. “You have water?”

She smiles back and hands me a paper cup and two blue capsules, then whispers: “She can swallow these all right?”

“Like a champ,” I assure her, and Joel, arriving in the doorway behind her, scowls like I stole the scene from him. Well, he’s not the only one who’s been awakened tonight.

“You really shouldn’t be in her room after lights out,” the nurse reminds me.

“Why not? She’s not going to hurt me.” I wink and she laughs quietly to herself. She backs out of the doorway and looks on for a moment before she turns and follows Joel down the hall. It’s all a fairytale to her: she grew up with Technicolor and Panavision and music piped in over electric speakers. Studio orchestras and autofocus and special effects. She’s never had to wait for an inattentive projectionist to change a reel. But once upon a time there were movies that had no sound or color, just endless satiny gradations of gray and the limitless depth of shadow, and we made them that way on purpose and people still came to see them. And they laughed and, sometimes, they even cried. Can you believe that,

miss? Oh, have no doubt about it—I could tell you stories. I cross the room to the bed, where I am greeted with a regal nod of the head. “I bring libation,” I pronounce, and fall to one knee—an operation that’s more difficult the second time tonight. Noisier, too. She takes the cup from me and holds it out between us as I open the drawer of her bedside table and drop the capsules in with the others we’ve accumulated, in a tin box that used to hold breath-mints. She doesn’t need them and they’ll only knock her out all the next day, and we have things to do. When I look back, she’s still holding up the cup, staring at me imperiously over its rim.

This was the art we practiced—and it was an art, make no mistake: not quite acting, really, but something more subtle, and more direct. Call it pantomime. In her day, the glamorous Anna Randall was one of the greats. She still is, for the moment. She brings the cup to her mouth and throws it back in one hard gesture that would have carried all the way to the back of the house—they’d have known in the cheap seats that she’d drunk that cup to its dregs. Then she holds it out at arm’s length and crumples it into a ball before letting it drop to the floor beside her bed. Like a champ.

Luckily, I’m still on one knee. “I shall clear this away for you, Your Queenliness,” I tell her, and pick up the cup as I get back to my feet. But now the scene is over. She’s already lying down and turning her back to me. She closes her eyes and sighs. I take a moment for both of us. “You were wonderful just now,” I whisper. “Think how it’ll play back in Topeka. They’ll tell stories about when they all knew you. Some of them might even be true.” I drop the damp wad into the wastebasket and leave the door a careful two inches ajar behind me.

As I get back into bed Theo turns over and lifts his head. “Scene?”

“Scene, buddy. One of your old ones, by the way—*Solomon and Sheba*, the one with the plants and Carl with the bee on a reel like a fishing lure. Remember that?”

“So much makeup,” he sighs. “I aged fifty years in that picture.” Then he props himself up on one elbow. “What, you stole my part?”

“I think I made some improvements. But don’t worry. You’re the actor. I’m just the boy behind the camera.”

“We’ll see about that.” He turns back. “I’d complain to the director if he was still with us.”

“You’ll see it in the rushes. Now let’s get some sleep. We’ve got a funeral to go to, tomorrow.”