



Theda Bara and one of her "victims" in "The Blue Flame," her first stage production.

White



# The Confessions of Theda Bara

And all the time she didn't believe her own press agent.

By AGNES SMITH

**H**ERE is the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx. Here is also the answer to the question propounded by Delight Evans several months ago in *PHOTOPLAY MAGAZINE*.

Theda Bara did not believe her press agent.

The story of Theda Bara, as told me by herself, the story of her success in motion pictures, her strange notoriety, is the weirdest—and funniest—tale I have ever heard. It beats Barnum and Doctor Cook.

Frankly, I was afraid to meet Theda Bara. Delight Evan's story weighed on my mind. I had heard of other interviewers who had found her a woman smothered in incense and black velvet, who prattled orientalism and hocus pocus, who maintained a remarkable and ridiculous pose and who defied any sort of human understanding. I remembered all the Theda Bara legends about the strange woman who had been born within the shadow of the Sphinx. I didn't believe them, but I was afraid Miss Bara still did.

Then, too, the day set for the interview was only a few days after the opening of "The Blue Flame" in New York. The audience that had assembled to greet Theda Bara was divided into two factions,—her friends and those who had come in the same spirit that sends people to bull fights. It was a terrible opening and a terrible play. It was considerably worse than anything Theda Bara attempted in motion pictures. It looked like a stage burlesque of one of her films.

"You know how it is," said *The New York Times*, the day after the play opened, "when you have visitors from out of town who are possessed to go on a perfectly delightful slumming party down on the Bowery or somewhere to see one of those killing melodramas—Oh, come on, won't it be fun?—and you take them, and, after all, the melodrama is not bad enough to be funny and you come home disappointed. Well, 'The Blue Flame' is the kind of play you always expect the cheap theaters to show, and they never do."

In the face of all that I wondered if Theda would still burn incense.

She didn't. About her apartment were the floral tributes of the opening night. The windows were up and open. There was no incense.

Miss Bara lives up on West End Avenue where she shares an apartment with her father, mother and sister. It reminded me of a chapter in "Jurgen." A nice, respectable girl has the serious misfortune to die. On her way to the cemetery a black cat jumps over her coffin. That, of course, makes her a vampire. So she goes to Hell, venturing forth to practice her sinister calling. But she has no real taste for her work, so she fits up a little corner in Hell to look

like her old home. When she isn't vamping, she enjoys the comforts of respectable home surroundings.

Theda Bara has fitted up her corner. It isn't luxurious and no interior decorator had a hand in it. Most of the furniture belonged to father and mother. The only traces of Theda's fame are a statue of Buddha on the table and large pictures of Theda on the walls. However, the record on the phonograph is John McCormick singing "I hear you calling me."

Miss Bara herself came in. She was wearing the sort of frock that social workers recommend to working girls—plain, serviceable and neat. She looks younger off the screen than on. She wears her hair becomingly. She has a charming voice and speaks with an accent that has just a touch of the middle west about it. I was embarrassed. Only a few nights before I had heard her pronounce in a hideously strained voice these immortal—and immoral—lines: "Let's get married. All I need is a legal pretext and then I will show you how cold I am. Kiss Me, dearie."

And here was a pleasant young person who had just ordered tea, who had a dog named Petey—"known as a bull terrier because he is part bull"—and who wished she had time to go out and buy herself some new clothes.

**W**HO made her a vampire? It wasn't Miss Bara's own doing. It wasn't William Fox. It wasn't even the press agent. It was the public—or rather it was the public's imagination. A vampire is a national superstition. Miss Bara capitalized the superstition.

"Of course, there is no such thing as a vampire," she told me. "No women are like that. That is why you can't get good stories for vampire pictures. They aren't real. As for 'The Blue Flame,' it is only meant to be a melodrama. I chose it because it gave me an opportunity to play the sort of part the public wants to see me play."

It was with shrewdness and humor—yes, she has humor—that Theda Bara traced the story of her five years in motion pictures. She talked about it casually. She had no particular motive in making up stories about herself. There wasn't a press agent in the apartment. She spoke as an impersonal and disinterested spectator of her own career.

The best authorities give Theda Bara's birthplace as Cincinnati, Ohio, and her name as Theodosia Goodman. She came to New York about seven or eight years ago because she believed she could act. She played small parts on the stage as Theodosia de Coppet. Her parents had some money and so they allowed Theda to try her luck at finding fame and fortune.

## What the New York Dramatic Critics Said about "The Blue Flame."

At the end of the third act Miss Bara said that God had been very kind to her. Probably she referred to the fact that at no time during the evening did the earth open and swallow up the authors, the star and all the company. However, it has often been remarked that the patience of Heaven is infinite. Still, as we remember it, Jonah was eaten by a whale for much less.  
—Heywood Brown, *New York Tribune*.

Miss Theda played her part of it seriously and with average competence. But despite all anybody could do, "The Blue Flame" was plainly edged with yellow.  
—Burns Mantle, *New York Evening Mail*.

"Did you bring the cocaine?" demanded Miss Theda Bara, as the heroine of "The Blue Flame," in the Shubert Theater, last night.

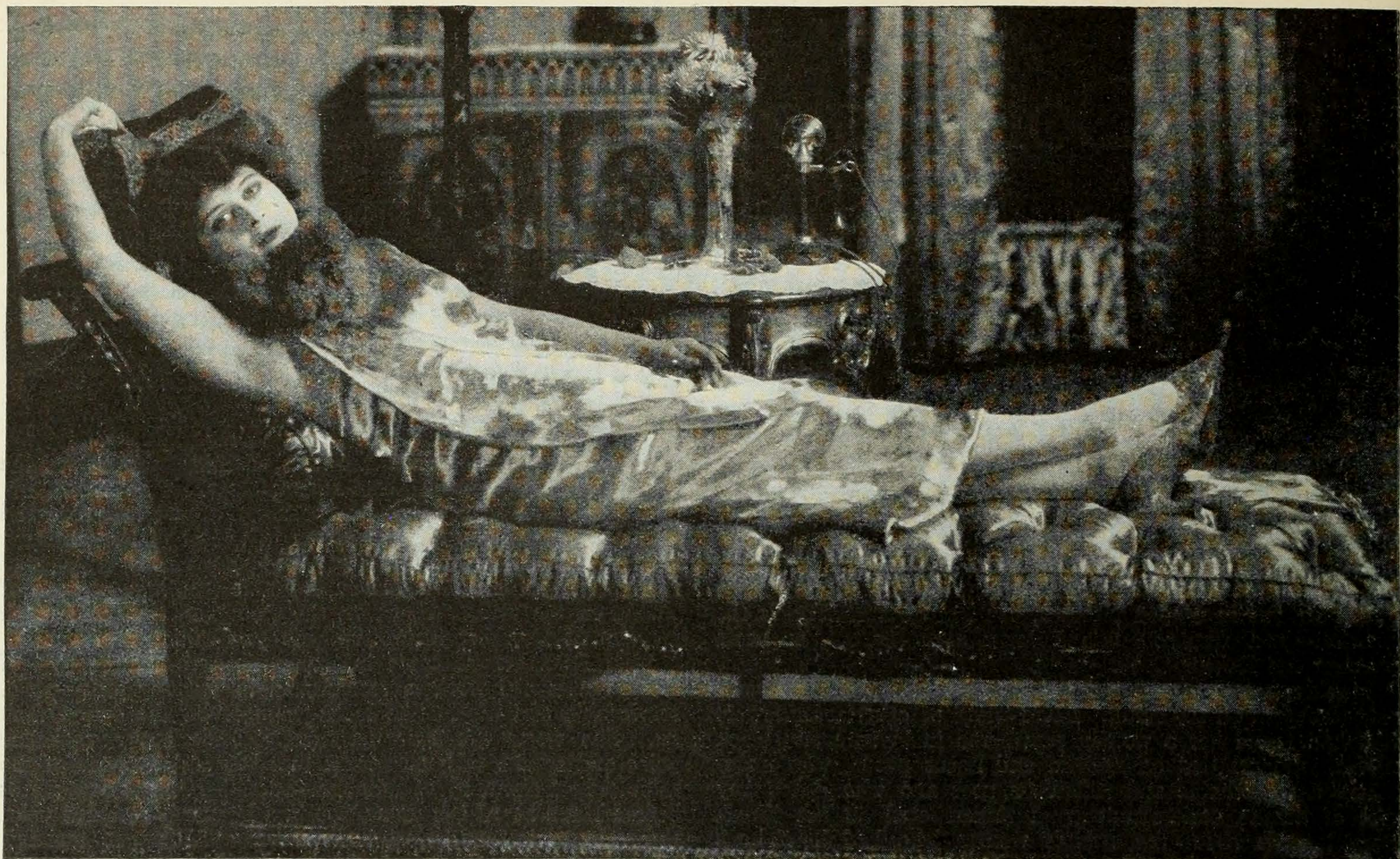
It was such a determined, bold-faced intention of being an immediate and unmistakable vampire that the audience fairly shouted in gleeful recognition that the vampire of vampires on the screen was going to be just as devilish on the boards in the spoken drama.  
—*New York Evening Telegram*.

"The thing is not indecent, it is only offensive in its silliness.

"The most encouraging feature of the evening's exhibition was that it was received with derisive laughter by the curious audience which packed every corner of the large theater."  
—*New York Evening Post*.

Perhaps "The Blue Flame" is not a perfect title for Miss Bara's play. Why not: "Tenting on the Old Vamp Ground"?  
—F. P. A., *New York Tribune*.





"To be good is to be forgotten. I'm going to be so bad I'll always be remembered."

White

Like thousands of other young girls, Theda Bara camped in the offices of agents and managers. And like thousands of other young girls, she went to the motion picture studio to make a little extra money in the dull season. There, in the studio, like the girl in "Jurgen," the cat jumped over her and she became a vampire.

She was discovered. The picture was "A Fool There Was." At a time when most pictures were pretty crude, it wasn't conspicuously bad. And it was conspicuously successful. A few weeks after its release, Thedabarism was causing considerable havoc among the young and impressionable.

According to Miss Bara, it was the original intention of the company to star William Shea, but when the picture was completed it was obviously Miss Bara's picture.

Miss Bara was properly excited because she had landed so quickly and so completely in the golden realm of the movies. In those days, she confesses, she felt a little "set up." Consequently she was a bit irritated when she was told that she wasn't to star in her next picture. Instead she was given a part in Nance O'Neil's film, "The Kreutzer Sonata." She protested, but, being still a newcomer and having no particular influence, it didn't do her any good. So she played in "The Kreutzer Sonata." She repeated her first success. The company didn't star her, but the exhibitors did.

Then the press clippings began to come in. Theda Bara learned a lot of things about herself that she didn't know before. She had been born in Egypt. She had a long line of ancestors. She had played at the Theatre Antoine in Paris. She was "that strange, wild woman," as the side-show barkers say. She worshipped slant-eyed gods.

She used to read her clippings at breakfast, over her coffee and sausages. She says she loves sausages. She and her sister would laugh over the "stories of her life." When the clippings denounced her as a terrible influence on the youth of the country and when the critics waxed vicious, she didn't laugh. She wondered then, as she does now, why people who do not know her could hate her so.

When she was offered a contract, she had to make her choice. This was the choice:

On one side she might have money and notoriety; she might have all the chances she wanted to act; she might have the position of star and the deference that comes to a celebrity. In return for this she must allow herself to be exploited as the strangest sort of freak.

On the other hand, if she gave up the opportunity to take advantage of her first success, she would be obliged to go back into oblivion, to go back to looking for parts, to go back to living on the bounty of her parents.

As they say in sub-titles, a soul hung in the balance. Theda Bara took the contract and lived up to it for five years. She stirred up considerable excitement. She started a school of acting. Every company looked for a rival vamp. She got herself thoroughly denounced. At times it seemed as if there would have to be another amendment in the constitution to check vamping.

All that time Theda Bara "lived her own life." She went on eating sausages for breakfast, instead of live snakes. She had the option of reading her own press stories before they went out, but she says that sometimes she got around to them too late.

"Anyway," she told me, "some of them were so wild that we didn't think they would be printed or that, if they were printed, they wouldn't be believed. But they were printed, all right, and they were believed, too, I suppose. The wildest press stories are the most successful ones. A lot of young newspaper men wrote them. I think for a while I kept a whole publicity staff working nights.

"And then the interviews. They were staged. It took me hours to get ready for them. I had a special dress made that I never wore at other times. I remember one interview out in Chicago. My dress was black velvet and was made high at the throat. It was a terribly hot day and all the windows were down. When the interview was over, I tore off that dress and my sister and I sat down and laughed about it."

**L**AUGHTER was what made those vamping years fairly pleasant ones. For instance, there was an interview out in Kansas. A young reporter came down to the train to meet Theda Bara and was admitted to her stateroom.

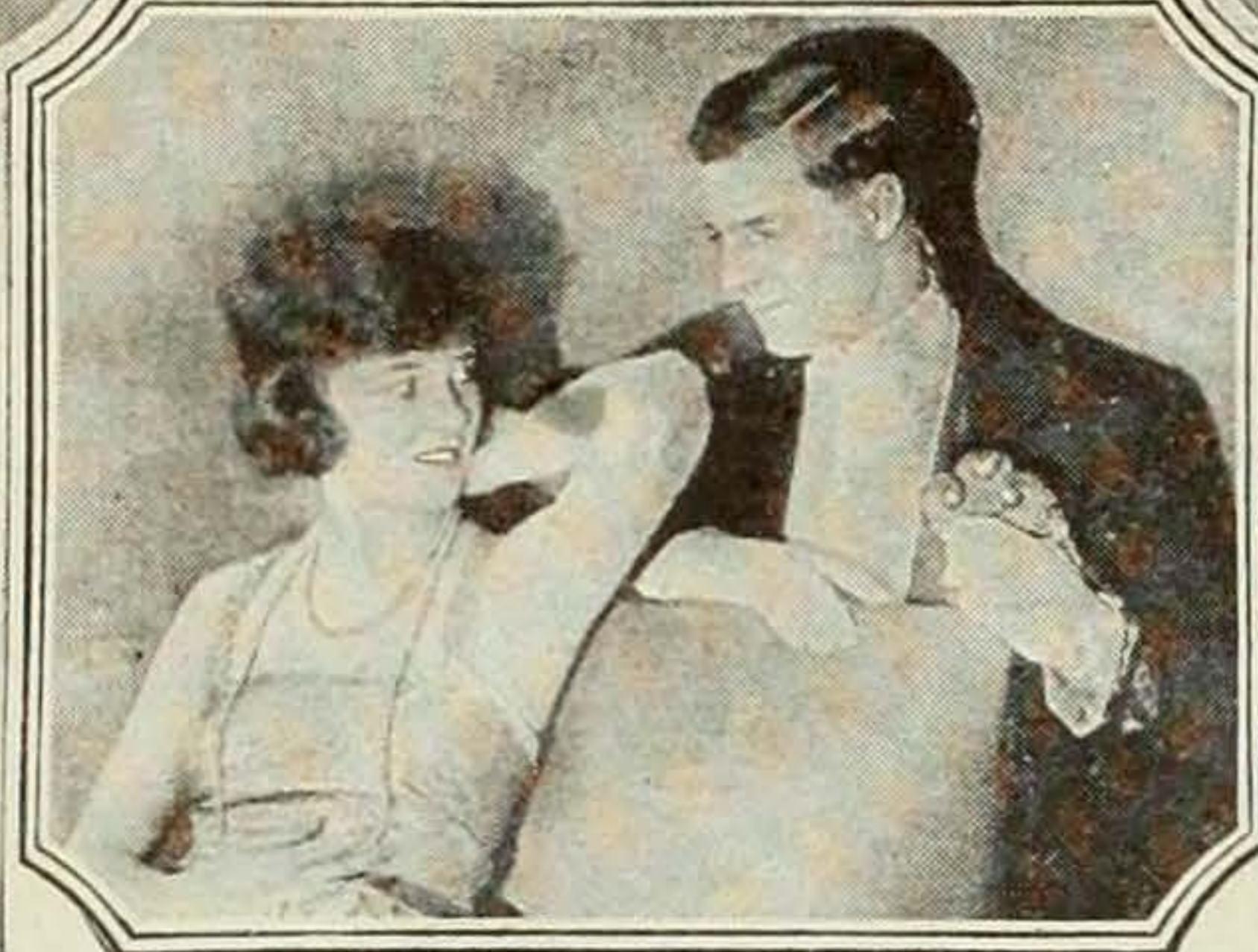
"Naturally, I held out my hand, but he refused to shake hands with me—dropped my hand as though it had been a snake. After he had gone I made a little bet with the press agent. 'That reporter,' I said, 'thought I was going to kiss him.' I was right. When the interview came out, the man told how I had put out my hand. 'But I didn't take it,' the story went on. 'Because when I met Anna Held, she kissed me. And if Anna Held kissed me, what would Theda Bara do?'"

(Continued on page 110)



## The Confessions of Theda Bara

Continued from page 58



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On her short tour with "The Blue Flame" before the play burst upon Broadway, Miss Bara had many opportunities to test the deep-rooted conviction of the vampire superstition. In Washington, she and her sister got into an elevator. In the car were a man and his wife. The wife looked around and saw Theda Bara. She ordered the elevator to stop at the next floor, seized her husband and gave him a terrified shove, out of the elevator and harm's way.

Esther Bara, the sister, asked Theda exactly how she would go about vamping the man in the elevator. Theda didn't know, but she was interested in the attitude of the wife.

"In the first place," she said, "what could I have done to him? I would have had to work fast. And in the second place, why do women always think that every woman is after their husbands. I have seen plenty of husbands belonging to other women that I wouldn't even look at."

I had seen the pretty, young Esther Bara and I was sorry I didn't meet her. She was evidently a loyal and cheerful companion to her vamping sister. The criticisms of her work sometimes hurt Theda Bara. But she had her mother and father to tell her not to mind them. She didn't read the reviews of her play. A. H. Woods told her in advance what the critics would say. She likes Mr. Woods for his friendliness and for his faith in her.

"Not all my screen work was bad," she told me. "I can look over some of the old films and find scenes that were good. I know when I have done good work. There is a little bell inside of me that rings when I hit the mark. In 'Cleopatra' I was criticized for showing my legs. The reviewers said the costumes were all wrong. But I studied with Mr. Lithgow, the expert on Egyptology at the Metropolitan Art Museum, for several weeks in order to get the costumes and settings correct. Liberties were taken with the story, but not with the settings. And if you will look back on my pictures, you will remember that I did not go in for undress parts.

"A funny thing happened in the opening night of 'The Blue Flame.' In the first act, I am killed by an electric shock and my fiance puts me on a couch that brings me back to life without a soul. Allen Dinehart, my leading man, picked me up and threw me down on the couch so that my skirts went up to my knees. My first impulse was to sit up and pull them down. Fortunately, I remembered that I was dead. And so I lay there and said to myself, 'Now everyone is saying that I want to show my legs.'

"After the performance, I told Mr. Dinehart to be careful about pulling down my skirts, that I am supposed still to be a good girl with a soul. Now, he is so conscientious that he nearly rips my skirt off.

"The first night was a terrible ordeal. I had a cold and I was so nervous that my voice went back on me. I thought I wouldn't live through some of the long speeches. My throat was tight and I felt as though I couldn't make a sound. Some one told me to go out and apologize for my voice. But I wouldn't. I suppose my fighting blood was up. Many of those in the audience were people who hated me. I don't know why they hate me, but they do. They do not know me personally and I haven't done anything to them, but they hate me. And I wouldn't go out and apologize to them.

"I am going to stay on the stage and I am going to make pictures, too. In two years—well, you will see. After all I have

been through, do you think that I would give up now?"

When Theda Bara left the screen there were plenty of rumors about her. She was going to be married. She had fallen in love with a minister and had "reformed." She was temperamental. She had lost her hold on the public.

This is what Miss Bara says:

"My health was bad and I needed a rest. I had been getting wretched stories. Studio life was beginning to get on my nerves. The inefficiency is appalling. I stopped reporting for work in the morning. Nothing was ever ready. We would wait for hours and hours until some carpenter had corrected a mistake in the setting. And all about you there is a grinding and a pounding. The mechanical staff have a way of blaming all the delays on the star. The star has no come-back because she cannot go and tell tales on men who need their day's wages. Mr. Fox seldom came to the studio: he was busy at the home office. I only saw him a few times a year. Directors spend a great deal of money on unimportant things and then they economize in small ways that prove expensive in the end. It used to hurt me to see money wasted.

"J. Gordon Edwards was the nicest director I ever had. He was kind and considerate. Some of the directors are wonderful. They give you such funny advice on manners and deportment. One time I asked my director about a certain scene. 'Do I repulse the advances of this man or do I lead him on?' I asked. The director was stumped. He hadn't any idea of what to do. Finally he hit upon a lively answer. 'Oh, just keep the audience guessing,' he said."

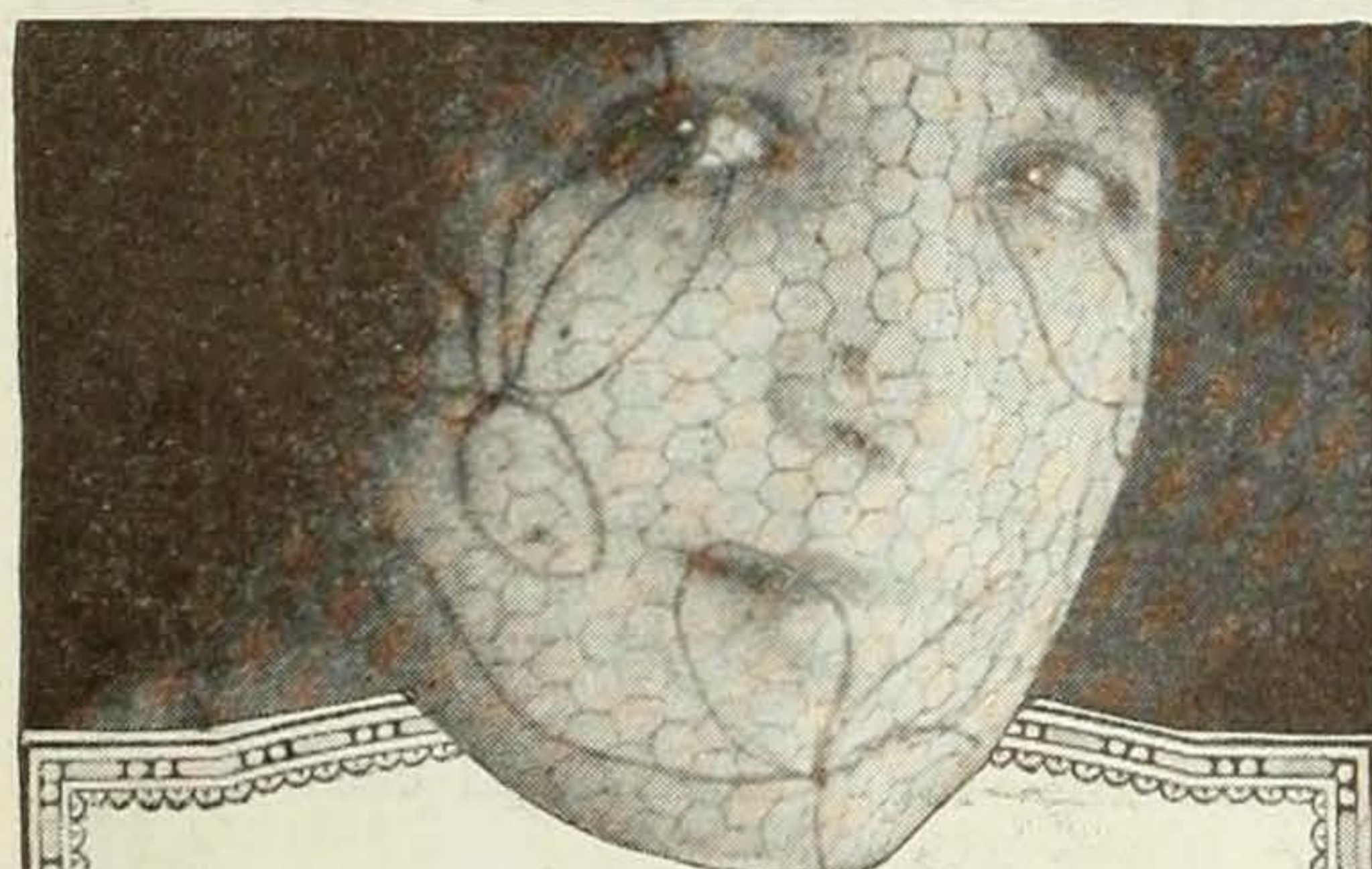
Like Susie Jones, star of the plays in the Zanesville High School, Miss Bara wishes that she had worked under D. W. Griffith.

**T**HERE is no use claiming a sensitive soul for Theda Bara. If she had possessed one, she couldn't have done what she has done. Her manufactured personality seems to have had no effect on her real self. The criticisms hurt her only when they touched upon some bit of sincerity that came through the fantastic pose. Personally, she is not insincere. She is the sort of girl who is "good to her folks." I suspect her of being an excellent business woman.

For five long years she appeared in nothing but the most blatant sort of sex stories, and yet you cannot get a sex interview from Theda Bara. She won't talk about love, marriage or any of those delightful subjects that make such spicy yet refined reading on the magazine pages of evening newspapers. Neither will she talk about anything occult. In fact, I think she is heartily sick of sex and the orient as subjects for publication.

Theda Bara's artistic sins have been many. In "The Blue Flame," she hasn't reformed, artistically. She still blames it on the public. That is her greatest sin—this taking for granted that the public likes the cheap, the impossible and the vulgar. It is her biggest failing. When she lives it down, she won't have to wonder why people who do not know her, hate her.

One of the curious things about the first night audience was that those who knew Theda Bara defended her. The many friends of her family proclaimed her goodness, her charity, her desire to be kind to her motion picture public and her pleasant home life. Somehow, when you meet her personally at a press-agent-less interview, you find yourself being shocked at the enormity of the hoax on the public and yet



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# The Confessions of Theda Bara

(Concluded)

condoning the woman who, almost in spite of herself, permitted it.

In shedding the snake skin of the vampire and telling the story of five years of organized deceit, Theda Bara did not pretend to emerge as a lamb. She says nothing is so restful after a day of hard work. Moreover, she didn't say she had the dearest mother in the world. She didn't say it hurt her to be misjudged because she is really so good and pure. She didn't say she wanted to get married and be the sainted mother of six children.

Her sense of humor is her saving grace. Perhaps it was cruel of her to laugh during all those years, but if she hadn't she would have emerged an impossible person—much worse than a vampire. After all, she was ridiculous—a sacrifice to the Great God Bunk on the altar of publicity. And I am glad she laughed.

## Allah Il Allah

I

THEY were sisters in the movies. Priscilla, the elder, and Patsy, the younger.

Priscilla played in pictures in which she wore cambric frocks, black velvet sashes, sandals with ankle ties, baby-blue hair-ribbons and always and always the director threw in a lot of animal stuff; you know, puppies and kittens and ducks and chickens (not the Mack Sennett kind) and old Dobbin in the one-hoss chaise. And there were close-ups of Priscilla in Reel V kissing the Hero in a nice chaste way.

Now Patsy, the younger, has orange-flame hair and her pictures are *that* kind. Studio stuff, you know; Greenwich Village fluff and iris-in and iris-out on Patsy posing for Venus-at-the-Bath; and sometimes a wronged wife in the background and always and always the pistol in the top right-hand drawer of the dressing-table.

And yet, Priscilla and Patsy smoke the same brand of cigarettes.

Allah il Allah!

II

Saidee was born in Manitowoc, Wis., and just adored Mary Pickford and Mary Miles Minter and Marguerite Clark and all the pretty and proper posies in the pitchers.

When they had a Saturday matinee at I. O. O. F. Hall with any of Saidee's favourites on tap she was always on hand and sat through both shows.

Finally Saidee's great-aunt died and left her a thousand dollars and Saidee hastened to the great city and bought herself some swell raiment and fared forth to the studios.

But Saidee forgot that she had black hair and eyes that somehow could not behave, for they put her in a Custard Comedy and now she has a Jelly-Rolls car and a Pekinese and wears those shimmie shoes 'neverything!

Allah il Allah!

III

Once upon a time a kind-hearted Director saw a good-looking little minx among the Extras who was doing soup-and-fish in an Uncle Tom show.

"I will her into stardom," he muttered.

And so he worked and worked and worked, and presently the little minx was indeed a screen star of the uttermost importance. Ah! Then she quit the kind-hearted Director, huh?

No, she kept right on feeding out of his hand and doing just like what he told her. (Yes she did!)

Allah il Allah!

—Justin Fair.

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