

FAREWELL, GREAT

The other day I saw in the theater section of my favorite newspaper a headline—THE SHEIK RIDES AGAIN!—over a story about the recent revival of interest in the late Rudolph Valentino. The story reminded me of my embarrassing embroilment in the riots which followed the movie idol's sudden death in 1926. In fact, I was arrested at Valentino's wake, after a brisk running battle with the New York mounted police. Finally collared and jailed, I was haled into court to face charges of I knew not what misdemeanors and felonies.

It is a true story; yet it occurs to me that its details may seem to verge on the implausible. The death of the handsome young movie star was surely a sad event. And his wake—when his body lay in state in Campbell's Funeral Church, so that his admirers might file by and pay their last respects to their hero—should have been a solemn occasion. Why then the riots and the clanging ambulances and the mounted police charging in at the gallop? Why should I, a reasonably respectable and peaceable young man, with no special interest in the late sheik of the silent screen, have become so entangled in his obsequies? And why should the mourners have ceased their keening to cheer my defiance of law and order? Obviously, if I am to emerge from this recital with my reputation for veracity intact, some explanation is in order.

Note that my mishaps occurred during what Westbrook Pegler has termed the Era of Wonderful Nonsense. In the mid-'20's Coolidge Prosperity was well under way. Another world war was inconceivable; serious depressions, according to eminent authorities, were a thing of the past. The public, having no major crises to worry about, concentrated its attention on what Frederick Lewis Allen called "a series of tremendous trifles."

Millions worked up a head of emotional steam about whether Floyd Collins would escape from the cave where he was trapped, whether Gertrude Ederle would swim the English Channel, whether there would be acquittal or conviction in the gaudy Hall-Mills murder case. It was a time of contagious mass excitements. Crowds flocked to the Scopes trial in Tennessee to hear William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow debate whether men were descended from monkeys. Others thronged to watch couples in a dance marathon totter toward exhaustion, or to see how long Shipwreck Kelly could perch atop his flagpole.

Among these excitements, and longer lasting than most, was the Valentino craze. The nation's more susceptible womenfolk, from flappers to grandmothers, were under the spell of the young Italian-American star who had brought a new torridity to cinematic amour.

The mania began with the first showing of a silent film called *The Sheik* in 1921. Valentino played the lead: a romantic Arab chieftain, passionate, masterful, irresistible. He snatched Agnes Ayres from her steed. "Stop struggling, you little fool," flashed the subtitle. Hot stuff. Overnight he became a star. Millions of women began to idolize him.

The adoration increased with each succeeding film of the great lover. With the appearance of *The Son of the Sheik* in the summer of 1926, the Valentino worship became feverish.

On the morning of August sixteenth came the shocking news, on the front page of even the staid *New York Times*, that the handsome thirty-one-year-old star had been rushed to a hospital in New York for critical surgery—appendix and ulcers. In the next few days the bulletins were reassuring. Then, front page again: PERITONITIS FEARED, CONDITION ALARMING. On Monday, August twenty-third, huge headlines: VALENTINO DEAD! THOUSANDS OUTSIDE HOSPITAL WEEP AND PRAY. The stories from Hollywood said that Pola Negri, who recently had announced her engagement to Valentino, was prostrated by grief, with two physicians trying to control her hysteria.

Valentino's manager said the body would lie in state for several days so that mourners could have a final look at their hero. This announcement set off a saturnalia of sentimentality that lasted for two weeks, quieting down only after poor Valentino was at last laid to rest in an elaborate Hollywood Mausoleum.

Many of the strange, typical celebrities of the day got into the act with lavish manifestations of grief. Among them were Mrs. Frances (Peaches) Browning, whose marital adventures with "Daddy" Browning had provided a field day for the artists of the *Daily Graphic*. Also Mrs. Richard R. Whittemore, still in mourning for her husband, the bandit hanged for murder after a sensational trial.

Strangest of all was a small, earnest-looking man who, introducing himself as Dr. Sterling Wyman, Miss Negri's New York physician, bustled into the headlines as impresario of the complex funeral arrangements. He was gracious and accessible to the press. He discoursed learnedly on the details of Valentino's fatal illness. The authoritative *Times* identified him as "the author of *Wyman on Medico-Legal Jurisprudence*." A few days later he was exposed as a notorious impostor and fraud, with a long record of arrests and convictions, and fancy aliases such as Ethan Allen Weinberg and Royal St. Cyr. His proudest coup had been engineered in 1921 when, posing as an officer of the U.S. Navy, he had escorted the Princess Fatima of Afghanistan to Washington and introduced her to President Harding. (He drew eighteen months for that one.)

I have sketched in this unlikely but authentic background of events with the hope that today's readers, thus inured to the improbable doings of the 1920's, will give credence to my own peculiar part in the proceedings.

In that summer of 1926 I had paid only casual attention to the Valentino headlines. I was not one of his fans. Besides, I was preoccupied with my own concerns, which had reached a turning point. For nearly four years I had been practicing corporation law in Wall Street, with a pleasantly rising income but growing dissatisfaction. I suffered from a yearning to write, and the drafting of 200-page

corporate mortgages was not my idea of vibrant prose.

Early that spring I had met Grace Cutler. With a rare flash of good sense I fell in love with her immediately and permanently. She was a young newspaper reporter, doing modestly paid night assignments for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. The only way I could pursue my courting was to accompany Grace on her assignments. This was a new and fascinating world to me. Why couldn't I, too, be a reporter? Grace approved of the idea.

After we were married on May twenty-first, I became more cautious. Now I had a husband's responsibilities. A cub reporter in those days got only twenty or twenty-five dollars a week to start. Had I not better delay my plunge into journalism until we had saved up \$10,000 or so from my legal earnings?

My bride was brave and wiser than I. She argued that if I really wanted to make the change, the sooner the better. We were young and could stand a spell of living on a shoestring. Each year we put it off the decision would be harder, with new excuses for prudent delay.

By the end of July she had so bucked up my courage that I applied for a job with the *New York Herald Tribune*. The city editor, after warning me of my folly, agreed to give me a try as a reporter at twenty-four dollars a week, beginning at the end of August.

Thus, when the news of Valentino's death hit the headlines on Monday, August 23, 1926, I was serving my last week with the law firm of Chadbourne, Hunt, Jaekel and Brown. It was still my custom to accompany Grace on her evening assignments, not only for pleasure but to learn something more of my new trade.

On that Tuesday evening Grace and I met for dinner in a small Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village. We had scaloppine, washed down with what was called "red ink." This was supposed to be a wine of the Chianti family, but the kinship was not close.

Cheered by the wine, I looked forward to an entertaining and instructive evening. "Well, Grace," I said, "what's the journalism lesson for tonight?"

"I'm afraid it's pretty gruesome," she said. "They've got poor Valentino laid out for public view in the Gold Room at Campbell's Funeral Church—Broadway and 66th. They've rigged him up in full evening dress in a fancy silver casket. My city editor says the fans are putting on a regular mob scene outside, scuffling to get in. The pressure of the crowd pushed in one of Campbell's big plate-glass windows. Three cops, a photographer and some of the women were cut so badly by the glass that they had to be taken to the hospital. It sounds kind of ghastly—I don't want to drag you into this."

It also sounded kind of dangerous, I said. A girl could get hurt in a mob like that. This was the very time she needed a man's strength and judgment. "I will protect you," I said.

On our way to the subway I remembered that the Allens and the Fowlers were coming to our apartment for dinner the next evening. "They like rum swiz-

zles," I reminded Grace. "Let's drop by Henry's joint and buy a couple of pints of his fine, five-day-old Bleecker Street rum." We did, and I tucked a pint bottle of the potent stuff into each of my hip pockets. While we walked on toward the subway it began to rain, and I was glad I had brought my umbrella. We took the Interborough Line to Broadway and 72nd Street.

As we came up from the subway, we saw a dense column of people, mostly women, shuffling southward along the east side of Broadway toward the funeral parlor six blocks away. Police kept them in line. From the other side of the street an even larger crowd, straining against the police lines, was struggling to dash across and break into the column which was approaching the Mecca of mourning. Every now and then a group of frantic women would elude the foot patrolmen and make a wild rush, only to be turned back by mounted police.

With Grace holding aloft her reporter's police card as a passport, we made our way southward down the cleared space. The rain had stopped, but the paving gleamed wet under the arc lights. It was 8:30 P.M. As we neared Campbell's, the thwarted crowds on the west side of Broadway grew more turbulent. The cops were having a hard time. Here and there the street was littered with women's shoes, trampled hats, bits of torn clothing—evidence of forays which had failed.

Now a veteran sergeant of foot police intercepted us. "Where you think you're going?" he demanded. Grace showed him her reporter's card. He softened. "The *Brooklyn Eagle*, huh? I was born and raised in Flatbush. Whole family used to read the *Eagle*. What can I do for you?"

"The editors want me to go into the Gold Room where the casket is," Grace said apologetically. "You know—get the atmosphere."

"It's awful in there, miss," said the sergeant gloomily. "Women screeching and fainting. No place for a nice young lady like you. But—well, seeing you're from the *Eagle*, I guess I can slip you in. How about this guy—er—this gent'man with you. He a reporter?"

"Not yet," Grace said. "He's my husband."

"Then he can't go in—sorry—not unless he goes back about ten blocks and stands in line three or four hours. Then you might not find him again all night, not in this mob. Tell you what, mister," he said, turning to me. "You stand on the northeast corner over there, in that space we've cleared by the lamppost. You got my permission. Stay right there until your wife gets back."

I took my place as directed, and the sergeant escorted Grace toward the maelstrom around the entrance. That was the last I saw of the kindly sergeant.

Alone on the corner I was in an exposed position, a sort of no-man's land. On one side, ten feet away, trudged the south-bound column, silent now except for a subdued moaning as it approached its grim goal. Across the street the mob was bigger and noisier than ever. The

BY BEVERLY SMITH JR.

LOVER

An innocent bystander's account of the wild day he paid his respects to the most romantic star the movies ever had.

weeping and wailing were mingled with shrill imprecations directed at the mounted cops. Hysterical women, foiled in every rush by the hard-working horsemen, regarded them as personal enemies. "Cowards!" they screamed. "Cossacks!"

For ten minutes or so I stood on my corner, leaning on my umbrella and trying to look inconspicuous. Then the mounted patrolman guarding my sector, cantering back after helping repel another feminine charge a half block to the south, spotted me. He reined in his horse and glared. "Hey, you!" he shouted. "How'd you sneak over there? Get back across the street."

"I'm waiting here for my wife," I yelled back, standing firm.

The ridiculous excuse seemed to exasperate him. He touched the flank of his horse and rode straight at me. I dodged instinctively and dashed out into the street. The cop wheeled his horse and followed. I flourished my umbrella, fainted to the left, dodged to the right, and made an end run back to my corner.

The cop rode at me again. "I got permission to stand here!" I yelled. "From the sergeant." I'm not sure he heard me above the tumult. If he did, he paid no heed. Again I dodged, ran, fainted, ducked. As a former track man I was still fast on my feet, and the horse was more handicapped than I by the wet, slippery asphalt.

As I once more sprinted safely back to my post, I heard a louder roar from the crowd. They were cheering me. There were cries of "'Ray! . . . Attaboy! . . . That's showing 'em, Mister!" They were all for me; I was the first person successfully to defy the hated "Cossacks."

There is something stimulating in the cheers of the multitude, however irrational. I caught my second wind and went on with the game. My triumph did not last long. As I dodged and weaved, I heard the ominous clop-clop of hoofs converging from north and south—reinforcements coming up. For perhaps another ten seconds I managed to outmaneuver them all. Then just as I darted back to my corner, I felt the tap of a night stick across my brow. It didn't hurt me, but it splintered the right lens of my horn-rimmed glasses and threw me off stride. A hand reached down and grabbed my coat collar, tearing the fabric halfway down the back.

My original pursuer, whom I shall call Patrolman John Jackson of Troop B, vaulted down from his saddle and handed the reins of his foam-lathered charger to one of the fellow troopers who had helped in the roundup. He seized my arm. "You're under arrest," he growled. As he led me away, the crowd booed.

At this moment Grace reappeared, justifiably concerned. "Oh, dear, are you hurt?" she cried.

"Not a bit," I reassured her. "Just ruffled. I feel fine."

Actually I did not feel fine at all. With the excitement of the chase over, I realized I was in a bad spot. I remembered now those two infernal pints of rum in my hip pockets. They would be discovered when I was frisked at the West 68th



Rodolpho Alfonzo Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi Di Valentina d'Antonguolla (Rudolph Valentino). Above, as the smoldering Son of the Sheik.



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Screen siren Pola Negri (center), probably the most sensational of Valentino's mourners. She was "prostrated by grief."

GREAT LOVER

Street Police Station. "Possession and transportation of intoxicating liquors..."

The New York police were usually lenient toward liquor violations, but I had heard that if they were angry enough they would sometimes throw the book at a defendant. And the hand gripping my arm was trembling with rage.

Fortunately the paddy wagon had not been summoned. Maybe on the walk to the station house I could talk my way out—or part way out—of the hole I was in. I began by politely asking the officer his name, which I jotted down. Then I handed him my legal card, showing me as an associate of the imposing firm of Chadbourne, Hunt, Jaekel and Brown. Covertly mopping my brow, I began:

"Mr. Jackson," I said gravely, "I'm afraid you've got yourself in real trouble..."

"Trouble!" he snorted. "How about you? Disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, fugitive from justice, dangerous weapon—the spike of your umbrella might have put my horse's eye out."

"Nobody hurt your horse," I retorted. "I'm the one who's been injured. I am a member of the bar in good standing. I was present on proper business, escorting my wife, who is an accredited newspaper reporter. A sergeant, your superior officer, gave me specific permission to stand on that corner until my wife returned. I told you that, but you tried to ride me down. Then you and your mounted pals took out after me, cornered me, tore my coat, clubbed me, smashed my glasses. It's a blessing I still have my eyesight. All this—and the terrible humiliation of public arrest—before thousands of people."

"I never heard you about the sergeant," Jackson said in a low voice.

"So you say now. You know what false arrest means? It means the arrest, without proper inquiry, of a citizen who has done no wrong. It means I can sue you for damages and probably the Police Department besides. This was false arrest with bells on, and the damages, from what I know of juries, will be heavy."

As I held forth further in this vein I almost convinced myself that the arrest had been a travesty of justice, a blot on the proud escutcheon of New York's Finest. Orating thus, I felt Jackson's grip slackening. I looked at him as he strode beside me, his eyes fixed on the ground. He was a sandy-haired, well-built, nice-looking man. But now he seemed dead tired, bewildered, uneasy. He was sweat-

ing. I felt a twinge of sympathy. Maybe I was carrying my bombast too far.

Grace, trotting along beside us, had also noticed Jackson's dejection. Speaking purely out of kindness, she struck what turned out to be the right note.

"Now, Beverly," she said, "Officer Jackson was only trying to do his duty. With all that mob of women screeching at him, anybody could make a mistake."

"That's right, ma'am," said Jackson eagerly. "It was enough to drive a man nuts. I was bucking those crazy women from nine o'clock this morning—twelve hours without a letup. It was the worst day I ever had on the force. Those women were clear out of their heads. All ages, schoolgirls to real old tough biddies about seventy."

"I saw some men there too," said Grace, defending her sex.

"All the less excuse for them," said Jackson, "unless maybe their wives drug 'em there."

"That's why my husband was there," Grace said. "I got him into this. He came along to protect me."

"Protect you, huh?" Jackson started to grin. Then his face clouded as he remembered the serious situation. "Oh, my! If I'd only of known. Why did I have to stick my fool nose into this?"

Sensing the friendlier atmosphere, I hastened to help it along.

"Listen, Mr. Jackson," I said. "I was just hot under the collar when I talked about suing you. I wouldn't do that. You were doing the best you could under tough conditions. Forget it."

"You really mean that, Mr. Smith?" Jackson asked. "That's what I call decent. I didn't mean any harm. You didn't mean any harm." He paused for a minute in thought. "Honest, I'd turn you loose now if I could. But my buddies helped me make the arrest. I turned in my horse. If I show up empty-handed at the station, there will be hell to pay. I got to take you in. But I'll go easy on you, and you go easy on me, and we'll both come through O.K. Don't you and the Missus worry."

All three of us had been more tense than we realized. Now, with surging relief, we became as chummy as old friends. I complimented Jackson on his horsemanship. He told Grace her husband was the slipperiest eel he ever tried to catch, then improved the doubtful compliment by saying I was "a regular Red Grange for broken-field running."

"Red Grange with an umbrella," Grace said. She and Jackson laughed.

I didn't join in because just then the green lamps of the police station came



"The crowds grew more turbulent. The weeping and wailing were mingled with imprecations directed at the mounted cops."

into sight. The incriminating pints grew heavy in my pockets. Time was running out. I decided to entrust my fate to our new friend. "Mr. Jackson," I said, "I've got a little problem. We're expecting guests, so I stopped off in the Village and bought a couple of little pints of rum to take home. I've got them in my hip pockets now. When they search me. . . ."

Patrolman Jackson stopped, frowned and pondered. "Well, now," he said judicially, "I don't see anything so bad in taking a little alcoholic beverage home, for consumption strictly on the premises of your own domicile. Personally, that is. But some bluenose sour-puss—we got a few of that kind on the force—is liable to get technical on you. That could be bad. Tell you what. Right now—I'm not looking, see—if you was to slip those two pints to the little lady here, she can put them in that big handbag of hers. . . ."

No sooner said than done.

At the police station I was booked and put through the routine. Patrolman Jackson hemmed and hawed and said he guessed there had been some disorderly conduct, but it was kind of complicated and maybe there was some sort of misunderstanding and — The desk officer cut him short.

"Never mind that now, Jackson," he said. "Captain Hammill called up about this case ten minutes ago, from the scene of the disturbance. Says you should take your prisoner down to Night Court."

Uneasy again, Jackson, Grace and I caught a taxi to Night Court on West 54th Street. Grace waited in the courtroom for my case to be called. I was turned over to attendants who locked me in a room among a lot of other prisoners. They were the dregs of the city's night life: pickpockets, panhandlers, canned-heat derelicts, petty thieves.

In this depressing atmosphere my apprehensions returned. Were Jackson's superiors preparing to make a fuss about the case? Would they sway Jackson's testimony? Within an hour, though it seemed much longer, I was led into the courtroom. Grace waved and smiled encouragement.

Jackson, solemn under questioning by the magistrate, gave as accurate an account as possible of the evening's confused events. He emphasized that he had not learned, until we were on the way to the station, that I had the sergeant's permission to wait on the corner.

With my broken glasses now in my pocket, I could not see His Honor's face clearly, but imagined I could discern the hint of a smile on the judicial features. In my testimony I confirmed all that Jack-

son had said, adding that he had had a trying day, and that the screaming of the mourners had evidently kept him from hearing my shouts about "permission."

"How did your coat get torn, sir?" asked the magistrate. (I was cheered by the "sir.")

"Just an incident of the general rioting, Your Honor," I said.

He thought for a moment, evidently puzzled but amused. "An unusual case," he said. "I don't quite see how it reached this court. Apparently there was an honest misunderstanding. Charges dismissed, with no reflection on Mr. Smith or Patrolman Jackson."

Jackson, Grace and I left the courtroom and strolled down 54th Street, walking on air. "Some day!" exclaimed Jackson. "Now I better get home to the family. But first, Mr. Smith, you got to let me pay for the broken glasses and the tailor repairs for your coat." Grace and I joined in assuring him this was impossible; we would just charge it off to experience. On this cordial note, and with warm handshakes all around, we parted.

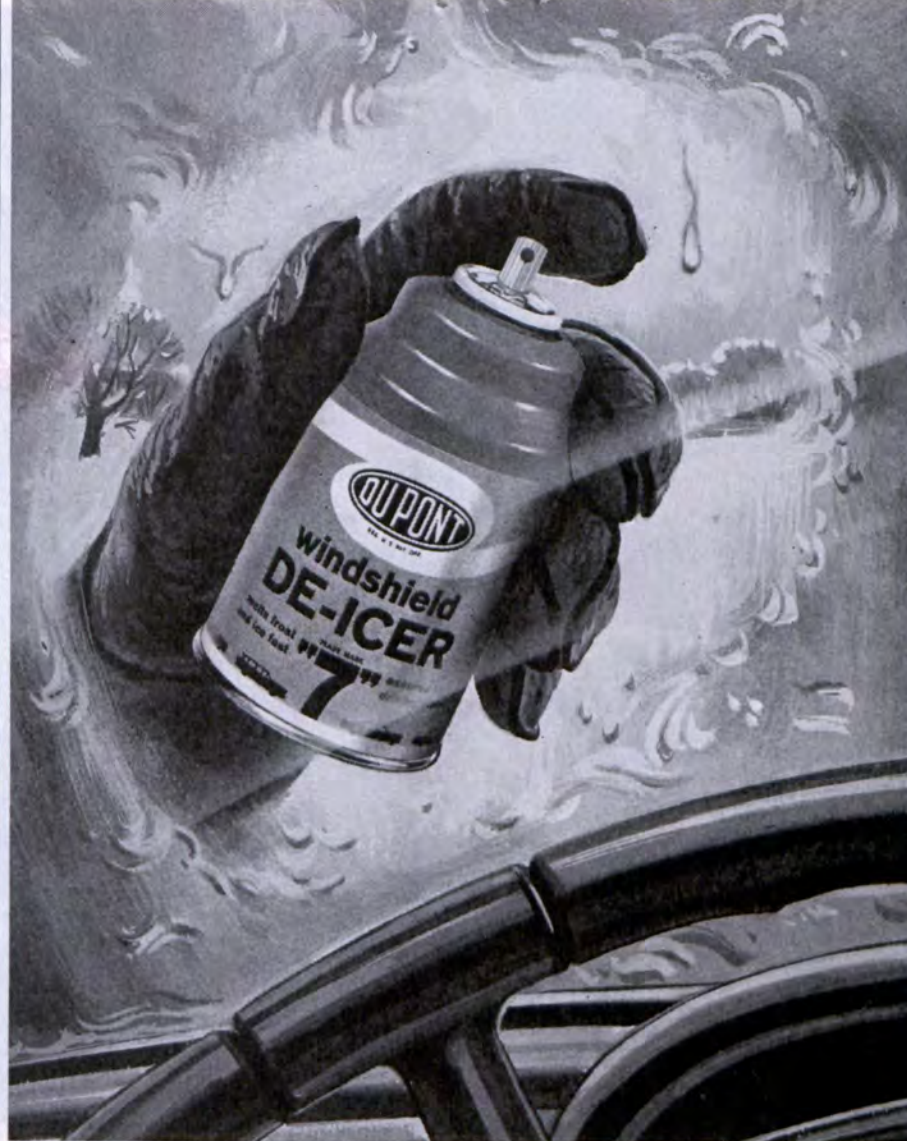
Grace and I took the subway to Brooklyn and went into the *Eagle*; she still had her story to write. After a general lead about the riotous wake, she concocted an ingenious story. It told of a henpecked young husband—anonymous—who had been dragged into the rumpus by his foolish wife, a rabid Valentino fan. Determined to see the body, she parked her spouse on a corner and fought her way into Campbell's. On her return she found her husband being led away by the police. And so forth.

Grace wrote the story discreetly. There was no mention of the Demon Rum, and there was a special tribute to the skill and patience of the mounted officer who had made the arrest. Evidently the editors found it amusing: they gave it a big two-column play under a fine photograph of the police struggling with the mob.

The next day Grace got a call from the city editor of the *New York Daily News*. He had been delighted with her story (which was exclusive) and offered her a job at twice her pay on the *Eagle*. She took it. This eased the financial strain of my first eighteen months on the *Trib*. By that time my raises were catching up on the cost of groceries. And so we lived happily ever after.

I'm not sure what the moral of this true story is. But it may serve one useful purpose. If I ever apply for a job with the Federal Government and must answer the question: "Have you ever been arrested?" I can simply say, "Yes. For details see attached article." THE END

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