

The Ex-Vampire

Turning to the Right in the Moving Pictures

By

THEDA BARA



AS any newspaper that you may happen to pick up will gladly point out to you, these are times of change and unrest. Revolution, the national pastime of Russia, is spreading rapidly over all points west. Even here in New York, in our own quiet home town, we can't conscientiously feel that we have made the most of a day unless there has been at least one strike about something. The spirit of unrest is no respecter of professions; it attacks motormen and stars of the stage alike. Everyone seems imbued with the spirit of striking while the iron is hot.

Fired with the scarlet spirit of the times, I have been emboldened to organize and carry out a little private strike of my own,—a strike which has resulted in a complete victory for the striking party. I have walked out, definitely and permanently, on my job as a moving picture vampire. Once and for all, I am through. To put it in the approved soap-box manner too long had I submitted to the shackles of oppression, and at last I have thrown them off. I have asserted my rights as an American citizen and a free-born moving picture actress. No longer do the dark reels of my movie past throw their gloom over my life. Cinematographically speaking, I am a new woman.

I don't mean to seem ungrateful about the thing. I realize that vamping is honest toil, and I have a sincere respect for it as such. I know that vampire characterizations gave me my start in the films, and I am duly obliged. But the trouble is that it went too far; ever since my first appearance on the screen, in "A Fool There Was," I was classified as a vampire and doomed forevermore to play vampire rôles. It had to come to the point where, so far as I was concerned, there were no other characters in the movies.

The vampire's curse lay heavy upon me. It was not only that I was fated to play nothing but a long succession of rags, bones, and hanks of hair, though that was bad enough. It was that "vampire" and "Theda Bara" had come to be synonyms in the bright lexicon of movie audiences. Everything I touched was there-



Miss Bara at a vital moment in one of her famous vampire characterizations. After bringing the science of vamping to the place it holds in world history to-day, Miss Bara has refused, voluntarily and without a struggle, to be longer identified with vampire rôles

after branded with the mark of the vampire. No matter what heroine I portrayed on the screen, it was taken for granted that, just because I played her, she was one of those women. No one had ever thought of Carmen or Camille as vampires; but as soon as I played them, their reputations were ruined. Even Juliet wasn't safe from the tongue of gossip when I played the rôle.

In fact, so identified had I become with vampire parts on the screen that it got so people thought I was that way in my private life. Judging from the letters I have received, the popular idea of my home life was indeed a lurid one. I was generally visualized as spending Sundays and holidays undulating snakily about my apartment, or whiling away my free time stretched sinuously out on a tiger skin, gazing inscrutably through the smoke of my heavily scented cigarette. Even the most commonplace household tasks I was popularly supposed to perform in the most extreme vampire manner; I am sure that they imagined me writhing (*Continued on page 120*) into the butcher shop, gazing languorously into the butcher's eyes, and purring insidious words into his ears as he weighed the chops, thus yamping him into giving me two or three more than the scales demanded.

It really was a bitter blow to people to learn otherwise. When I went any place where I could be recognized—a theatre, or a shop, or a hotel dining-room,—my conservative gown received many disappointed glances. I was fully expected to appear in a modish little creation composed principally of a leopard skin, a dagger, and two or three blood-red roses. The public was actually annoyed that I hadn't lived up to the legends they had woven about me. To me, there is nothing so quaintly naïve as this inability of the moving picture public to disassociate the screen personality of a star from his or her own personality. I wonder what they think a Mack Sennett bathing girl must be like around the house?

So it finally came to the point where the sight or sound of the word vampire was enough to drive me into hysteria. It was not the moral side that repelled me. I have never felt that the morality or the immorality of a character had any bearing upon the acting of the part, or the artistry of the drama. I submerge myself in each rôle that I play, losing my own identity utterly, living the part for the time, putting all that I can into it. That is all an actor can do for a production. The rest must be left on the lap of the National Board of Censorship.

No, it was not a question of morality that drove me to rebellion. It was that I was just simply sick and tired of the thing. No matter where I went, no matter what film I appeared in, I never escaped from that hideous stigma of the vampire. It seemed to be quietly taken for granted that I was to play the vampire, and nothing but the vampire, from now on. So I organized a one-member union, and struck for my rights.

You can't imagine what a grand and glorious feeling it was to emerge from vamping to play in "Kathleen Mavourneen." After years of clinging black gowns, of long sinister earrings, and slender evil-looking cigarettes, I fairly reveled in the ingenuous peasant costumes, the childish curls, the innocently bare feet. Those sunshiny days at Ithaca, where many scenes were taken, are among the happiest of my life.

But there are trials even in the career of one who portrays a moving picture innocent—I found that out, in the course of "Kathleen." There were tasks that my vampire training had never prepared me for. In one scene, for instance, I had to milk a cow—I have been murdered and tortured in countless ingenious ways, in my vampire pictures, but never have I gone through any experience so excruciating as that of milking that cow. They tell me she was a particularly calm and docile beast she may have been—I am no judge—but to me she had a wild eye, a nervous tail, and an entirely too restless set of hoofs. Hereafter, I am going to have to expressly stipulated in my contract that only condensed milk shall be used in my pictures. Then, too, there were some tense moments in connection with the old gray horse, resembling an intricate example of the scaffolder's art, who has a prominent part in the picture. But even with these hair-raising adventures, "Kathleen" was a delightful experience, and one I shall always remember, for it marked the turning-point in my career.

Just because I have made my new start in "Kathleen Mavourneen," it doesn't follow that, forever after, I am going in for sweet young thing parts, in the films. Always playing those wide eyed child rôles would be every bit as bad, in its way, as constantly acting in vampire parts. That is just what I want to get away from; I am striving to break away from any one character part, and any one sort of play. That I think, is one of the great faults of the moving pictures. Each star has become identified with a certain type of character in a certain style of moving picture play, and never appears in anything else. The star does not fit his personality to the play; the play is fitted to his personality. Each play is in its essentials—and usually even in its details—exactly like the predicting one in which that particular star appeared. When a star's name appears over a movie theatre, one knows, with-

out ever entering, exactly what the story of the photoplay will be. Given the leading player's name, you can practically write the scenario yourself. One doesn't go to see the star in his or her new play; one sees the star in the same old play, with a different—though not too different—title.

AND that is just what I'm trying to avoid. I have learned, from bitter experience, the dreary monotony of a one-rôle career. I am striving to broaden out, to create all types of heroine to keep from identifying myself with any definite character. I am going to try to play all sorts of rôles in all sorts of pictures—although, for years to come anyway, I absolutely refuse to admit any vampire parts into my repertory.



Miss Bara in "A Fool There Was," her first moving picture, the screen version of Kipling's poem. It was this picture which gave the vampire one of the most prominent places in the gallery of famous screen characters, and made the verb "to vamp" a household word