

THE CAMERA HAS ITS REASONS

Tony Van Witsen

The question of Valerie Menshikov Gonzales and her brief, roman-candle career through Hollywood may never be resolved without resorting to speculation, even fantasy, where the shards of fact and rumor end. Why was she gone by 1938, banished from the industry only a few years after emerging as one of the leading cinematographers of the early sound film era? What led to the breakup of her widely known domestic liaison with the movie star Iris Valentine? Because this was Hollywood, items from the public record exist alongside tales so extreme they almost have to be true. In her *annus mirabilis* of 1936, (when a movie's gestation often ran just ninety days from initial inspiration to final release print) she even won a bet she could shoot two pictures at once, riding an English racing bike between sound stages to keep up. There were also whispers of a drunken grope in the restroom with Ambrosia Mitsotakis, wife of the buttoned-up corporate

president. Others point to the casual, almost effortless way she could rescue an impossible lighting or shooting problem with one quick, intuitive solution no one else could recognize while still finding time to party with leading literary and cultural fireflies of the day. And so a pattern emerges, perhaps even a taste for courting the forces of reaction others in the film colony escaped.

Part of this pattern (which sometimes seems less a career than a kind of reproach) might be traced not to the photographer, but to photography itself. Hints of this appeared when she accepted the American Society of Cinematographers' "New Talent" award in 1932:

There is the story. There is the cast. There is the setting. And reigning over them all is the camera, which sees things its own way, not the way the human eye sees, but as the camera sees. That is the mystery of photography. Wise moviemakers know they cannot dominate a camera, only learn from it and surrender to it. For the camera, like the heart, has its reasons, of which reason alone knows nothing.

Some of the pattern must surely be sourced to her father, the great Russian émigré cinematographer Boris Menshikov. He told one interviewer he was "part of the triad, with Vertov and Pudovkin, who laid the foundation

of Russian cinema,” and told yet another how he fled St. Petersburg for Paris with his wife and young child, “one change of trains ahead of the Tsar’s thugs” after being seen in the company of known agitators. Unmentioned, yet widely known, was his taste for French food, wine, and other French morsels, not excluding actresses.

As his personal myth grew, aided by the sheen and luster of his onscreen imagery, he evinced a secondary talent for intriguing aphorisms. In Berlin, a gathering of film luminaries murmured and nodded when he stated in polished German, “*Wir bemerken leicht die Beziehung zwischen der Fotografie und der Erinnerung. Ist es nicht der Fall, daß wir leichter vergässen, was nicht fotografiert ist?*” A coterie of visiting American movie executives melted into a puddle when he told them, in Oxonian English, “The love of the camera for actors is nothing more than the simple affinity of the kinetic medium for the kinetic object.”

This combination of talent and blague was seized on by a growing American film industry as proof that a genuine intellectual (and part of the ballet-loving Russian intelligentsia) could exist in their midst. Offers from American studios rained down, taking him to Hollywood by 1922, where he brought a high gloss to such silent classics as *Fortune’s Fool* and *Passion Is Not Enough*.

The same combination, and perhaps the resilience behind it, also seems to have equipped Valerie to survive her brief, early marriage to the Mexican director Herve Gonzales with her passion for moviemaking (and partying) unscathed. One reporter, trying to gauge her achievements, ran out of words and just compiled a list:

Last Days of The Caesars: Convinced four brawny camera operators to hoist a fully blimped and rigged Mitchell BNC onto their shoulders and walk it through the Roman orgy scene.

The Private Life of Henry VIII: Achieved painterly richness in the notoriously hard-to-control color stock. Spent all night at the lab, grabbing snatches of sleep on a cot while technicians tested new printing matrices to fine-tune the color palette and the Technicolor consultant tore his hair and screamed, “You can’t do this! The image won’t even be usable!”

The article even quoted the lordly Hungarian director Frigyes “Fred” Hvassy: “I like arguing with her...it teaches me something.” But it missed his comment over a glass of chartreuse at the Director’s Guild: “This woman is dangerous. There can be only one genius in picturemaking, and that is director!”

Not until 1960, when the married screenwriters Peggy and Harry Garth published their *Hollywood Diaries 1933-1955*, did it emerge that she celebrated the completion of *Henry VIII* with an all-night party in the home she shared with Iris. After swooning over “That house! Airy and modern, lots of cool white planes and angles, with sliding glass doors that open onto the pool and garden and a luscious view of Nichols Canyon at dusk,” the Garths (who penned the most memorable “haywire” comedies of the 30s) reported that “Ansel Adams and John Steinbeck argued over the current crop of novels in the living room, while in the den, the screenwriters Kay Baxter and Stuart Cole played a noisy game of ping-pong; much shouting and body-English. On the patio, hung with strings of Chinese lanterns, Harpo Marx turned cartwheels as a tweed-jacketed Edwin Hubble watched thoughtfully, then told the butler, ‘Whatever that man is drinking, bring me exactly the opposite.’ Iris broke up the gathering when she exclaimed, ‘What’s acting, anyhow? You show up on time, hit your marks, say your lines, then go home. That’s all acting is and don’t let anyone try to tell you different.’ Another uproarious moment when Baxter gossiped about Hank Axelrod, the studio’s results-oriented chief of production.” The Garths do not supply details, but their notes show the following:

KAY BAXTER: Well. It seems when Hank was starting out with his chain of movie theaters in Chicago, he used to invite teenage ushers to his office to look at what he called his “private art collection.”

IRIS: Hank has a taste for teenage girls?

KAY: No.

IRIS: But you just—

KAY: It wasn’t girls, Iris.

IRIS (tittering): Boys?

VALERIE: Stop giggling. Don’t tell me you’re actually shocked.

IRIS: Not shocked, exactly. (giggles again) It’s just that I thought all the fags in our industry were in the art department.

(laughs all around)

“At 11:30,” the Garths continue, “everyone drove to The Trouville Club on Central Avenue where, it was agreed, that music ‘wasn’t as good as last fall when Louis Armstrong was here.’ Then up to the crest of Mulholland Highway, laughing and passing around a bottle of rum by flashlight while Hubble set up a telescope to display the Crab Nebula and explain his theory of the expanding universe.” The stargazers broke up in the dawn chill as the smell of orange blossoms perfumed the air. Everyone headed home to bed

but Valerie, who went directly to the studio. The temperature was already starting to heat up as she entered by the side gate near the machine shop along with laborers and extras streaming in under the morning sun.

Studio publicity material leaves no doubt Valerie's employers knew what they had, imbuing her with a glamour normally reserved for producers, directors, and stars. "We are finally learning that women have as much to offer the industry behind the camera as in front of it," Hedda Hopper explained. Then she told how, on *Mask of Gold*, the crew watched in bafflement as Valerie instructed her gaffer, Pete Woods, (who had also worked with her father) to round up every Christmas tree light in town. PETE: "Christmas lights? But—holy mackerel! It's July!" VALERIE: "Can't give orders to a camera, Pete. I have full faith you'll find those lights somewhere." Everyone wisecracked as she hung the strings of lamps behind the star's head just outside of camera range, but the producer and director did not joke when they saw the rushes, with their star's face gently swaddled in glowing light.

Rival cameramen argued: was this genius or merely facility? Others didn't care; it was Hollywood after all, where the pressure of crushing production schedules often made ersatz genius as welcome as the real thing. Perhaps, too, everyone felt, beneath her informality and down-to-earthness, there was something inaccessibly alien, something too

comfortable with extremes of folly or disaster. Certainly her fluency in French, Russian, and American slang did nothing to lessen this sense, nor the shock of orange hair, nor the slight, unplaceable accent, neither Russian nor American, but somewhere in between, “mid-Atlantic,” as she put it, “about 200 miles west of the Azores.” It is known that, at a meeting of the American Society of Cinematographers, Hal Rosson bluntly asked, “Are you using some kind of special film stock?” and Gregg Toland chimed in with, “Yeah, Valerie. Formulated just for you?” The matter was not settled till everyone left the ASC mansion for the lab where she showed them what was coming out of the processor: just ordinary Eastman 1217 Type II panchromatic, the same negative stock they all used. Imagine that moment. Picture Valerie smiling in mock innocence at her perplexed colleagues amid the pleasant, vinegary smell of photo chemicals. When we imagine her, further, asking, “Any other questions?” and nothing follows but the roar and rumble of film processing machinery, it is easy to wonder if she knew perfectly the silence her inquiry would produce.

Of Iris Valentine, nothing more need be said than to repeat someone’s remark that she was not more beautiful in person than she was on screen, only harder to look away from. “A tall, cool mint julep on a summer day,” *Photoplay* gushed, “a perfect southerner, as ready to relate a naughty story as to romp through a scene before the cameras. She is simple and natural.

She is herself. Best of all, she does not care what you think of her.” In truth, Valentine, a refugee from the muck of an Arkansas farm, did nothing to discourage such stories and perhaps enhanced them with a gift for flying too close to the sun. Viz, this interview:

REPORTER: What’s your favorite drink, Miss Valentine?

IRIS: Bourbon. Wait—that wouldn’t make a good quote, would it? Well, just change it around. Make it funny.

REPORTER: Funny? Funny how?

IRIS: How should I know? You’re the one with the words, ain’t cha? How about... how about...

REPORTER: How about a martini with a dill pickle slice instead of an olive?

IRIS: That’s terrific! D for divine!

Such behavior may have been unconventional for its time, but not necessarily its place. When movies had first learned to talk (or squawk, as the screenwriter Mickey Enright put it), and the production code was not yet in force, Valerie’s affair with Iris could pass as an open secret, papered over with double entendres for insiders that sailed over the heads of the uninitiated. Walter Winchell caught the spirit: “FLASH! Iris (those lips, that chin) Valentine, whose love scenes with Vernon Lord are steaming up

screens in forty-eight states and Hawaii, needs a certain special ‘someone’ behind the camera to make her cheeks glow, her eyes shine. Cinemagician Valerie Menshikov Gonzales having lensed six Iris pics, hovers nearby when Iris emotes to hold her, uh, cheeks (but you didn’t hear that from me).” When the corporate president Lambros Mitsotakis groused about “Sapphic tendencies” in the studio’s most successful partnership, he may have been reflecting comments from exhibitors, or perhaps it was only a personal prejudice. Regardless, after the comment reached Axelrod, he was known to have said, “Sapphic, shmapphic. They’re making money for the studio, aren’t they?” Then, because he was a Civil War buff, he repeated the joke about what Lincoln said when his enemies denounced Grant’s fondness for whiskey: “Find out what brand he drinks and ship a barrel of it to each of my other generals.”

For the moment, then, the extreme behavior engendered by this pragmatic approach continued to skate past the public eye. Jimmy Brantley’s radio transcription of the premiere for *High Heels* survives:

BRANTLEY: What a night! Ladies and gentlemen, is this one fabulous, fabulous night for Hollywood’s blue-ribbon four hundred? And how! I only wish you could see them pouring in now in their satins and furs...the streets are jammed with—

Here's Marie Dressler...Ginger Rogers...might be a good time to invest in a mink ranch, ha ha! Boys and girls, girls and boys, boys and boys, girls and girls. Hello. Hello there. How about that beautiful Iris Valentine and her gal-pal? What's the good word, Iris? Everywhere you go, is Valerie sure to follow?

IRIS: Hush, now Jimmy. Valerie and I are just very, very good friends. (Laughter)

BRANTLEY: Here comes Billy Garrity...you remember Billy from all those custard-pie silent comedies, don't you? Billy left the movies when he couldn't take any more orders from bosses who knew less about comedy than he'd forgotten. It's rumored he actually walked off the set in the middle of a take and never returned! What's new, Billy?

BILLY: (To Iris and Valerie) Say, I hear you two girls have identical tattoos on your stomachs. Can we see?

BRANTLEY: Ladies and gentlemen, is that Billy a cutup or what? I can't believe it! Now he's getting down on his hands and knees and barking like a dog! (repeated barking and laughter)

Brantley never reported that Billy and his girlfriend Virginia were living in Iris and Valerie's house at the time, something he privately called a "*ménage a quatre*... which is two *ménages* in two different bedrooms."

The overall picture that emerges is of two attractive, young people successfully melding work and personal lives, though not without its cautions. There was, for example, this conversation, overheard during the performance of an experimental drama at the Pasadena Playhouse:

IRIS (whispering): I don't get this. Everything's in the wrong place.

VALERIE: Wait a while. Let's see where it goes.

IRIS: Goes? It's already gone.

VALERIE: No, this is interesting. I want to see what the writer does with it. And get your hand off my thigh, we're in public.

IRIS: Writers are cheap. One writer doesn't work out, you replace him with another. Don't you know anything?

Newspapers of the time described Iris and Valerie's evening walks along the beach, pants legs rolled up, holding tumblers of Scotch on the rocks. Sometimes they were joined by former acrobat Billy, who once impressed some passing teens by walking on his hands, cradling his drink between his

feet, then righting himself with a leap without spilling a drop. Along with these were reports of unexpected cheapness toward the help, quarrels with architects or beauticians. Rumors of late-night screening parties, running the film slowly, one frame at a time, to reveal the plasticity of a star's features in close-up, the chalk whiteness of her skin, the facial poetry of lips slowly mouthing inaudible words. Of love letters containing pornographic doggerel. When Countess Elzbieta Teodora Zamoyska visited California on a lecture tour, Valerie invited her to give a Sunday afternoon talk in their living room. She arrived looking as a Countess should, a sculptured doll of a woman with a strong beak of a nose, dressed in a sheer yellow silk blouse and a crocheted vest of dusty pink, and wearing an indescribable perfume. For an hour, the crowd of writers, actors, and directors remained pin-silent while the Countess spoke in frank words about "the growing spectre of fascism in Europe." Departing guests recall seeing the Countess and Valerie still in earnest talk while Iris chain-smoked and squirmed on the couch. The facts run out here, but it is not out of order to imagine what that conversation must have sounded like. Iris, as we have seen, was happy to be misquoted.

"I tried to see Roosevelt when I was in Washington," says the Countess. "It was no use. Even the Polish Ambassador could not arrange it for me."

"I wonder if Roosevelt cares what's happening in Germany right now," says Valerie. "The papers say they're acting like hoodlums over there."

“The German Ambassador was a perfect gentleman when he visited the studio,” Iris interjects. “He kissed my hand, even.”

Or imagine what kind of movie the same scene would have made:

INT. LIVING ROOM – DAY

59. As low-slung and moderne as the Garths described it. MED. SHOT VALERIE and COUNTESS seated across from each other, very involved in conversation. They ignore IRIS, who sits on the couch in BG, sullenly eyeing the talk.

COUNTESS

(impatient)

Gentleman—Fah! They always save those kind for the diplomatic posts.

IRIS

Well I thought—

COUNTESS

Real Germans—nothing but bullies. Smiling and drinking beer in public while the *polezei* are rounding up undesirables in the back streets.

IRIS

Sometimes you have to be nice when you’re meeting movie stars. It’s all part of getting along in this world, isn’t it?

VALERIE

Iris, shush. You have no concept of international politics.

IRIS

I just thought—

COUNTESS

Americans think they can escape history.
You cannot escape history any more than
you can escape yourself.

IRIS

I escaped that pig farm, didn't I?

VALERIE

Iris! The Countess came here at her own
expense to—

IRIS

(interrupting again)

Let's go dancing. Do you dance, Countess?
Want to see how we have fun in California
while you're here?

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. VALERIE & IRIS'S HOUSE – DAY

60. It is a geometric, white, stucco affair with lush plantings and plenty of floor-to-ceiling windows. LONG SHOT as a snappy, yellow convertible pulls into the driveway and Valerie gets out, having just returned from driving the Countess to her hotel. Without a particle of wasted motion, she walks to the front door and enters.

EXT. GARDEN – DAY

61. ANGLE SHOT on patio doors. Valerie enters, wearing the same polished cotton slacks, white dress shirt open at the throat, and

Indian-bead moccasins as before. Her step quickens as she spots Iris.

62. MOVING CAMERA follows Valerie as she approaches Iris, seated on the grass, playing with their pet beagles, WHISKEY and BARKEEP with one hand. She holds a glass of iced tea with the other. Iris has changed into shorts and a halter top.
63. CLOSE SHOT as Valerie seats herself next to Iris. The dogs are whining by now.

IRIS

Are you gonna walk ‘em or should I?

VALERIE

(rising)

I think it’s my turn. But kiss me first.

She leans over and offers her lips to Iris. They kiss tenderly and lingeringly, to a chorus of yelps from the dogs.

VALERIE

(breaking away)

Did all that political talk bore you?

IRIS

It tired me out, that’s all.

VALERIE

I’m sorry. It’s important, though. Look, Iris: somebody has to stand up to the fascists and what’s going on in Germany. If not us, then who? If not in our living room—

IRIS

Fascists! Germany! Who cares in Arkansas?

VALERIE

Arkansas? What's that got to do with—

IRIS

Well my mama says—

VALERIE

Don't start with me about your mother. As I recall, Iris, we were all set to go visit her last summer. Then who got cold feet at the last minute? Who?

IRIS

Awww—

VALERIE

Alright, we'll change the subject. How about the Countess's clothes? How did you like her clothes?

IRIS

Did you notice her nail polish? What color was that?

VALERIE

Dove's blood.

IRIS

Dove's blood! How'd you know that?

VALERIE

(matter-of-fact)

I just knew, that's all.

IRIS

(slightly amazed)

Dove's blood! Ain't that something! Don't
you love Sundays at home, though?

(glances o.s.)

64. LONG SHOT Nichols Canyon, with late, afternoon sun raking the dry, chaparral-covered walls. It is an achingly beautiful sight.
65. MED. SHOT Valerie and Iris.

IRIS

(continuing)

Don't you wish Sundays could go on
forever? And everything as beautiful as
that canyon right now?

Standing, Iris stretches her arms wide and spins around slowly a couple of times with a dreamy smile. She stops, with a startled expression, when she catches Valerie's eye.

IRIS

Val! Why you looking at me like that?

VALERIE

(slightly patronizing)

Dear, dear Iris—

IRIS

(impatient)

Yeah? What?

VALERIE

I'm sorry—

(searching pause)

I'm trying to find the words, that's all.

IRIS

If you loved Sundays as much as I do, you
wouldn't have to try.

VALERIE

Oh! Oh! You think—

IRIS

(teasing)

Cat got your tongue, Val?

VALERIE

(articulate now, but still patronizing)

Iris, do you think I don't love these
Sundays? With wonderful guests,
wonderful talk, wonderful food? It's just
that—things like this.

She glances around the garden.

VALERIE

(continuing)

These Sundays. Us, together. They go on a
long time but they always end. Then
someday, you look back and it's like a
dream. You can't believe it was ever that
good.

IRIS

No.

VALERIE

What do you mean, no? You think this
great ride we're having, making movies,
making money—You think it'll go on
forever?

IRIS

(defiant, bitter)

It better. I ain't goin' back to that farm full of animal shit. Never. Never.

VALERIE

Ah! Spoken like an American.

IRIS

What's that supposed to mean?

VALERIE

It means you weren't born in Russia. In Russia, everything ends badly.

IRIS

Yeah, well. That stuff don't happen here.

VALERIE

Maybe it's not the Russian in me. When you have to look through the finder of a camera every day, you learn certain things about circumstances. The cast is the opportunity, but the camera is the circumstance. It does what it wants to. It's like fate: you either work with it or you're a goner. Of course—

(looks down a moment, smiling)

—it helps if the face you're filming has the kind of cheekbones that take a key light well.

IRIS

You talkin' about me?

66. CLOSE SHOT Iris's leg. CAMERA RISES UP as a drop of water dribbles off the glass and lands on her bare thigh.
67. MED. SHOT Valerie and Iris.

VALERIE

You know something? It hurts. It actually hurts physically, how much I want you right now.

IRIS

(puts down glass)

Well what're we waitin' for?

VALERIE

Shouldn't we walk the dogs first?

SCENES 68-70 OMITTED.

INT. BATHROOM – EVENING

71. MED SHOT behind Valerie seated in tub behind Iris, soaping her neck.

IRIS

All I'm sayin—The Countess should keep her big Polish nose out of America's business.

VALERIE

But don't you see? It is America's—

72. LONG SHOT as a mild EARTHQUAKE hits unexpectedly. Both women scream and clutch each other as water sloshes over tub rim. A second later they start laughing hard. Water squirts out of Iris's nose.

Stop the moviola. The events, whatever they were, belong to that Sunday afternoon seventy-five years ago. They are unrecoverable.

Valerie and Iris's gatherings proved contagious as word of them spread, though it is possible not all the notables who flocked to them grasped where the capers could lead, or wished to find out. The Garths again:

The hostesses have invented a new party game: Photo Charades. Everyone hands around a 16mm Cine Kodak to shoot home movies of someone else doing pantomimes, which grow more off-color as the evening progresses. Object is to guess the meaning of the line—or dirty pun—from watching the films all spliced together from the previous week's antics. Then this week's films get shown next week. The films are cleverly sequenced so the smutty undercurrent builds as the evening progresses, becoming totally censorable in the last ten minutes. Much laughter and liquor, everyone very jolly and smoochy. No couples present who preferred the opposite sex but us. We left at eleven, as a coyote's distant howl floated through the patio doors.

If something in these escapades appears overcharged and unhealthy, that may be chalked up to the self-righteousness of hindsight. Perhaps it was the freak snow that killed the orange crop in 1936, ending the myth of California as a playground where normal rules did not apply, or perhaps that unfortunate incident, which studio publicity was powerless to suppress, in which Polly Meadows was killed and Frances Lowell maimed for life during a sex act in a moving car. The conservative pall spread through the glare and shadow of stages and conference rooms, poolside patios and psychiatrists' offices, even the sunlit gardens where Japanese groundskeepers gave the hedges that protected a star's privacy a weekly trim.

Much of this change came down on Axelrod's shoulders. What is it possible to say about Herman "Hank" Axelrod (1898-1977) that has not already been said ad nauseam? Highbrow critics, at the height of his influence, delighted in calling him "the titan of trash," or "the sultan of sleaze." Harris Abrahamson, writing in 1983, more judiciously described "a subtle and using man who slithered through the film industry for three decades, frequently conceding small matters while getting his way on the large ones." We are fortunate for the Pepys-like candor of his diaries, which have yet to be published in their entirety:

MARCH 11. Valerie sat on my couch in her usual slacks and a man's dress shirt, munching carrots and radishes from a paper sack.

Tried flattery: could she estimate the exposure on my face in the sunlight right now? That flopped when she said, Do you mean the left side of your face or the right? There's a half f-stop difference.

Suggested a vacation. Too busy, she told me.

Showed her the news clips about Hollywood orgies, love cults. It's not the 1920s, I said. Film folk need to keep their private behavior private. She gave me some blather about having to visit the camera department for tests on a new lens and left.

Just like that.

It is impossible to say why Valerie and Iris saw themselves as immune to the new reality, openly holding hands in restaurants or on the beach after others had become less public in their displays. At one such event, the premiere of *Bold Woman*, a mob of rowdies broke through the velvet rope and surrounded the couple. "Say, aren't you Iris Valentine?" one man said. Iris flashed her most luminous smile, which turned to open-mouthed shock when he continued, "The dyke movie star?" Newsreels show a startled

Louella Parsons vainly trying to push back the scrum, who by then were shouting, “Dykes! Dykes! Dykes!” Parsons screams something inaudible as the thugs descend on her. Four nightstick-wielding cops hustle in just as the lights go dark but for a pair of searchlights stabbing the sky.

The *Los Angeles Times* had the fullest account, attributing the mob to the activities of Reverend Hiram Gale Pickett, founder of the Society For the Suppression of Vice in Motion Pictures. The *Herald-Examiner’s* Cleo McCann, dropping even the pretense of fairness, shrieked about “Moral sewage on-screen and off,” adding, “God-fearing folks hear stories about the film colony’s degenerate ways and wonder why. These good people will be heard.”

By late in the decade, audiences and moviemakers seemed united in their ever-more hectic pursuit of fun and frippery as distraction from the war that appeared increasingly unavoidable. Adding to the jittery mood, the chairman of the Save America Committee, with his blue eyes and clean-cut profile, was making speeches saying no one wanted war but Churchill, Roosevelt, and “a few foreign races, barely emerged from the slums, who now, through their control of radio, newspapers, and motion pictures, seek to inflame American opinion for their own selfish ends.” Nobody in Hollywood had to ask whom he meant.

Valerie's photography seemed to acquire a new and unearthly edge in this period. Images of the most fragile, exhaling loveliness emerged side by side with images so unstable that everything seemed to be rushing out of the frame. Even Hvassy, who usually railed about "goddamn idiot actors" as he viewed the rushes, sat in the screening room muttering, "Istenem, you could lose your love of every other picture for the beauty of that one master shot."

"If I am not mistaken, there was something peculiarly Russian in this," Hvassy stated in a video interview on deposit at the American Film Institute. "The studio increased her workload, as if they were trying to break her. Sometimes they started her on a new picture even before she had completed the last. Yet the extra burden seemed only to draw her deeper into herself." The video shows Hvassy frail but lucid at ninety-six, tortoiseshell glasses having by now replaced his signature monocle.

INTERVIEWER: To forget her troubles? As therapy perhaps?

HVASSY: Simply as an expression of what she was. Toward the end, her strength and movement seemed indistinguishable from the machinery of the camera itself.

INTERVIEWER: She was risking disaster by doing that!

HVASSY: But you must remember her *velikaya Russkaya dusha*.

INTERVIEWER: Her what?

HVASSY: Her “great Russian soul.” For Russians, suffering is simply part of the natural cycle of life. In this period, I believe she took time off only to attend Russian Orthodox services. She never lost her faith.

“A phase,” everyone called this stage; “troublesome,” or worst of all, “unprofessional.” Everyone but Al Powers, a smiling reptile of a producer noted for his clairvoyant ability to connect just the right wires in the midst of chaos. “Maybe it’s a phase, maybe it’s not,” he was heard to say. “Maybe, just maybe, we can figure out how to make money off it. Of course if it is a phase, or she goes kaplooie out of her mind, we can always close out her contract, right?”

“I am weary of V. & I.,” Hank writes in his diary around this time. “Those two are becoming a serious threat to this company’s standing. They must learn there are some limits. Especially V. And the way she flaunts it!”

Alfred Hitchcock made repeated trips to Hollywood in the years before his final break with the British film industry, “to see how they do things in the States,” as he put it. On one of these visits, he told a reporter, “I want to

meet that young woman who's revolutionizing motion picture photography in your country." While a party was hastily arranged at the luxe home of the David Selznicks, the wardrobe department fitted Valerie with a flowing gown of shot-silk taffeta in cerulean blue, the better to set off her flaming hair. Senior executives from the major studios were invited along with the press and a few of the better-paid screenwriters. Publicists worked discreetly to ensure Valerie arrived with Billy and Virginia, while Iris arrived with a date.

"I talk too much," Virginia recalled. "But then, I was a real estate agent, right? What do I know how to do but talk? Anyway, on the drive to the Selznicks' I gabbed about land deals while Billy just drove. He was always the quiet one, but of course he was the pantomime artist. By the time we reached Hancock Park, I realized Valerie had just said something I'd missed. I said, 'What?' She said, 'You heard me. He called Iris into his office and told her if she didn't find a husband, the studio would find one for her.' I said, 'Hank, you mean?' She said, 'I just said Hank, didn't I?'

"The winter drizzle was beginning. I wanted to tell her 'pay the two dollars,' as the saying goes. Give the vultures what they want. Let me buy you some land in the Valley. You'll get rich—*really* rich. Before I could speak, she said, 'Billy, do you think Iris and I can love each other?' Billy lit a cigar and

watched the road while the streetlights loomed out of the mist. Finally he said, 'I don't know. And I most definitely don't care.'

"Valerie said, 'Don't get coy with me. I'm not asking if you think we're lesbians. But I've got to figure out if it's possible for us to love each other any more because at this particular moment, I can't feel a thing toward that scared, silly girl.' Billy just steered with one hand and puffed the cigar with the other. The smoke hung there till Valerie batted it away and said, 'She told me, if I don't get married, they'll take away everything —my job, my contract, everything.' I said, 'You're scared, aren't you?' She just looked at me with those frightened bunny-rabbit eyes.' I still remember Valerie's exact words in the car: 'Fear is so unsexy.'

"I hadn't realized we were at the Selznicks' till I saw uniformed staff opening the car doors. As we reached the door, Valerie folded her umbrella and said, 'Do me a favor, Billy? When we're inside, get down on the floor and bark like a dog again.' He said, 'If you want.' She said, 'Not really.'"

Newspaper accounts of the party tell how, after the obligatory screening of Valerie's current release, Hitchcock proposed a toast to "a new era of Anglo-American artistic partnership in motion pictures." To which Axelrod, his broad face as shiny as his gleaming shirt studs, grinned and said, "And we know just the studio to do it," for, in truth, the fat man was already being pursued by at least three American film companies. Other executives

bunched around him followed with smiles and applause. The clamor had built to a roar, punctuated by shouts of “Hear, hear!” when a liver paste canapé, expertly tossed across the room, whapped Axelrod squarely on his starched, linen shirt front. Turning as one to follow the arc of the missile, the party focused on Billy, looking pugnacious. They watched as he tossed another one that bounced off Axelrod’s nose.

“Sorry, Hitch,” Billy muttered. “I aimed a little high with that one.”

“What are you trying to say?” Hitchcock looked at Billy with puzzled curiosity.

“Be careful what contract your signature goes on, Hitch. You might find some of these men take your hand back along with the pen.”

“Dear me.” Hitchcock stretched his lips into a small, tight smile. “Have I started something?”

“Not at all,” Axelrod said. “You probably don’t have anyone quite like Billy in England. He’s a free soul, aren’t you, Billy?”

“A free soul,” Billy said, “who’s drunk enough to—”

“But he’s quite harmless, actually,” Axelrod interjected. “Fetch, Billy! Can you do a trick for us?”

Everyone waited for Billy’s punch line. When it did not come, when the realization settled in that he was exactly as drunk and reckless as he looked,

Hank muttered something to the Filipino butler. As soon as Billy saw the butler moving toward him, he darted for the exit.

“Iris, get the car,” Valerie said, leaving Hitchcock and the others staring at the open front door.

We can only guess what happened when the women found Billy’s Packard Phaeton around a curve, overturned. Picture the long shot of their car driving down the steep winding road in a light drizzle, forcing them to negotiate each twist and bend with painful caution. A medium shot, perhaps, of headlights making haloes in the mist, then a reverse-angle on Hank’s toppled car as they found it. Close-ups of Iris and Valerie’s faces as their car screeched to a halt; tight shot of one wheel of the Packard still spinning. Hand protruding from the crumpled metal; a trickle of blood. Silence on the sound track but for the hiss of falling rain. Then blurred close-ups of screaming and tears, a full shot of a tiny figure running up the misty hill in search of a telephone. We may imagine these things in full knowledge that the accident may have looked quite different, and this picture of it probably comes from having seen too many movies.

What is known, because the production log recorded it, is Valerie’s failure to arrive on time for the next day’s shooting. Surviving notes refer to her “thick, slurred speech,” when she finally made an appearance, an hour and ten minutes after call time, her blue gown muddied at the hem. No hint

of why she was forced off the picture and onto two weeks' suspension, though the hand of Axelrod is discernible, abetted by director Selwyn Corby, a man with a brutal commitment to the shooting schedule.

What is also known is how Valerie used her suspension to visit the beach communities south of Mines Airfield in search of a summer rental cottage. And because the newspapers reported it with horrible thoroughness, it was widely known that on Easter weekend 1938, Valerie and Iris were walking along the beach holding hands; Iris was apparently carrying a bottle of wine in violation of local laws. A group of men and women—some accounts called it a mob—approached from the other direction and as they passed, one little girl pointed to the bottle and said, “Mommy, they’re breaking the law.” Some of the adults may have recognized Iris. What is clear is that, when two or three of the adults said, “We don’t want your kind in this town,” and Iris replied, “Do you know who I am?” one woman hit her with her fist, sending her staggering into Valerie’s arms. A shoving match followed. When one of the men brandished a rifle, it accidentally went off, ricocheting off a rock and hitting the little girl in the eye.

Within twenty minutes, the beach seethed with angry locals roughing up anyone who looked suspicious or happened to be in the wrong place. According to the *Times*, “When Miss Valentine and her companion got into their car, other cars repeatedly rammed them, first from one side, then the

other, then from the front as they tried to drive off. The two terrified women climbed out a car window as the crowd rained blows on them, finally escaping via a passing Pacific Electric car. Witnesses saw no blood, but ‘...they appeared extremely shaken. Their clothes were torn.’”

Axelrod’s diary, instrumental as ever, relates what happened next day:

Actually got a call from D.W. Griffith. Himself, not his agent. The old has-been seemed less sarcastic than usual, offering one of his “brilliant ideas”: to direct a series of pictures starring Iris Valentine. Take advantage of what he calls “the current publicity.”

Unfortunately, we couldn’t bury the story about I. and V. Too bad. If the little girl hadn’t been shot we might not have had to let go of V.

The diary does not mention that an hour later Al Powers walked into the fruitwood-paneled office of the company president, angling for the same deal as Griffith. “I’ll make the pictures, and you can distribute them,” Al pleads, referring to Iris and Valerie as “the package.” Keep the budgets lean, he explains. Stock music, existing sets, no crowd scenes, no special effects. They’ll make an almost certain profit.

Lambros Mitsotakis sits with his belly pressed against his chromium desk. A man of long, hermetic silences punctuated by jabbering outbursts, his jowly face is now as blank as an empty movie screen.

“I had too much to eat last night,” he says finally.

“There’s money in that package,” Al says.

Standing, Mitsotakis turns to look out the window where the mountains are obscured by a golden haze.

“They’re a phenomenon, those two,” Al adds.

“You know, what is phenomenon?” Mitsotakis says, still gazing at the smog. “Last night I read in paper that Earth is two billion years old. *That* is phenomenon. So how we make money off that? Have cake? Two billion candles?”

“I’ll take those dames off your hands and make you a profit too,” Al says.

Mitsotakis glances at Hank, who leans against the paneling, hands in pockets, with an illegible expression.

“For how much?” says Hank.

Al writes a number on a piece of paper, gives it to Hank. Hank puffs his cheeks out a couple of times as he inspects the paper. He hands it to Mitsotakis, who glances at it, then sits at his tract-size desk. “Nah, can’t do it. War coming—we lose foreign markets.”

The secretary buzzes. “Mr. Mitsotakis? Valerie is here for her appointment.”

“Don’t you want this deal to work?” Al pleads.

“Ah! Now I got stomach ache,” says Mitsotakis. The silence that follows is too loud, and Powers too worldly, not to recognize that no deal is possible because these guys don’t want one. He turns for the door but as he sees Valerie enter, the faintest tickle of intuition stops him.

“You sent for me, Mr. Mitsotakis?” says Valerie.

“We both sent for you, Valerie,” says Hank. “Please, have a seat.”

“I think I’ll stand, thanks,” Valerie says. “Hello, Powers. What are you doing here?”

“Valerie,” Hank says. “I have the unpleasant job of telling you—”

Inspired by a quick wink from Al, or maybe it’s just the incipient migraine brought on by the sight of Hank’s criminally ugly necktie, Valerie grabs her chance. “Hold on. Before you do anything, Mr. Mitsotakis, you might want to talk to some men about Hank’s days in Chicago. Men who were teenage movie ushers.”

“What you talking about?” Mitsotakis jumps up, his blubbery midriff wobbling slightly beneath his bespoke tailoring. Hank’s face freezes into a cardiac-arrest mask, but Powers, with his showman’s instinct for a climactic

moment, just smiles. “Dramatic pause,” he says. “Dolly, in for close-up on Hank.”

“It’s nothing.” Hank’s voice is a cringing mutter. “Valerie, I want you off the lot. Now.”

“No,” Mitsotakis says. “This lady not going nowhere till she tell me what this about.”

“Not sure I want to stay,” Valerie says.

“Why the hell don’t my writers ever send me scripts this good?” Powers says to no one.

“It’s ancient history,” Hank says to his vest.

“Bah! I got gas now,” Mitsotakis says. “One thing I can tell you, Hank: we run clean operation, by God. No monkey business.”

“What do you need to know?” Valerie asks Mitsotakis. “What’s it worth to you?”

“Cut. Print it,” Powers says, and chuckles.

Reports differ on how long it took Valerie to pack, with friends and well-wishers jostling in and out, mixing sympathy and gossip with nervous chatter. “This industry! It eats its young, I swear it.” “Did Hank do this, to you? That bastard.” “You’ve been working too hard, Valerie. Now’s your chance to write that book you were talking about.” She drives off the lot

wondering how soon Hank will find another job. Not long, she guesses. Executives have a club; they take care of each other as surely as Druids, dogcatchers, any tribe. On the passenger seat sits the certified check for \$25,000 Mitsotakis cut for her after they discussed Hank. "Now we even," he said. "You good cinematograph, Valerie, but if you stay, every time I see you I know I owe you favor."

Soon a disgusted public, jolted by the news coverage, will guess the meaning of the years of innuendo and desert Iris Valentine's films as if they're toxic. Within four months, she will leave picturemaking. The prigs are in charge; married couples in films are condemned to sleep in twin beds. In westerns, the sex organs of horses are obscured with a smear of Vaseline on the lens. It is not difficult to picture Iris's rage at her fate, her tantrums and weepy accusations over the terrible loss of her career, her reputation, her mystique. By then, Valerie doubtless felt nothing except to reflect on how easily actresses can lose their self-control.

As for Valerie's near-term future, we can only guess. Easy enough to wave at the guard with your head held high as you exit the studio gate, stubbornly refusing to think of lost friends and collaborators, pictures unmade, quarrels never reconciled, all the blab and yammer of the movie colony's vast system of interchange, moving on, forgetting you. Fragments of a manuscript from this period survive (Working title: *Shadow and Light: A*

Practical Guide to Modern Cinematography) but it is not known whether it ever reached a publisher.

Newspaper accounts record that in 1941, father and daughter both accepted invitations from the Soviet State Ministry of Cinema to direct motion picture coverage of battles on the eastern front. Like her ménage with Iris, not unusual for its place and time; Soviet women were frequently in harm's way as pilots and antiaircraft gunners in the Great Patriotic War. We also know, because the poet/journalist Konstantin Simonov, recorded it, that on 12 July 1943, she stepped on a misplaced antitank mine while filming the Nazi-Soviet tank clash at Kursk. Simonov had been directing a documentary, *The Story Of One Tank*, for which Valerie was chief cinematographer. She was thirty-seven years old, one of perhaps 500,000 Soviet casualties of that battle; exact numbers are still disputed. Having nothing better to do at that moment, another cameraman idly chose to focus on Valerie as she dragged her camera and tripod up a dusty hill for a better view. It was therefore, Simonov noted, only an accident that when the mine went off, blowing Valerie to smithereens, the other cameraman caught the entire thing on film.

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