

DARK ADVENTURE RADIO THEATRE:

THE BLOOD RED SPHINX

Written by

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Read-along Script
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SFX: static, radio tuning, snippet of '30s song, more tuning, static dissolves to:

Dark Adventure Radio THEME MUSIC.

ANNOUNCER

Tales of intrigue, adventure, and
the mysterious occult that will
stir your imagination and make your
very blood run cold.

MUSIC CRESCENDO.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

This is Dark Adventure Radio
Theatre, featuring your host,
Lester Mayhew. Today's episode:
"The Blood Red Sphinx", an original
thrill-o-riffic Dark Adventure
tale.

MUSIC.

LESTER MAYHEW

In the heart of the Great
Depression, the nation's morale is
at its lowest ebb. Millions turn to
the glamor and glory of motion
pictures to brighten their lives
through the magic of movies. But
the real streets of Hollywood are
gritty, and a world-weary detective
confronts dark forces lurking
behind the silver screen. Can one
man make a stand against a web of
intrigues, or is the world doomed
by rising shadows?

(brightly)

But first, a word from our sponsor.

MUSIC TRANSITION

ANNOUNCER

I have to say, you sound awfully
chipper today, Mr. Mayhew.

LESTER MAYHEW

Thanks, Everett. I'm ready to take
on the world because I'm feeling my
best.

ANNOUNCER

You don't say! How's that?

LESTER MAYHEW

The missus purchased Sani-Luxe
bathroom tissue for our household.

ANNOUNCER

Sani-Luxe?

LESTER MAYHEW

That's right, Sani-Luxe. I tell you
Everett, this premium tissue is the
best thing since indoor plumbing!
Other tissue brands can be harsh,
glazed, or have irritating slivers,
but not Sani-Luxe. Its patented
"thirsty fibers" are guaranteed to
be soft, absorbent, and pure as the
driven snow. Here, let me tear you
off a sheet. It's easy, because
each square is perforated!

PAPER TEARING.

ANNOUNCER

Perforated squares? Well, I'll be!
Say, this IS soft!

LESTER MAYHEW

And absorbent! There's a reason why
fine hotels like the Waldorf and
Copley Plaza insist on Sani-Luxe
for their guests.

ANNOUNCER

(sotto voce)

But does it cost more than those
other brands?

LESTER MAYHEW

You'd think so, but NO! Sani-Luxe
costs the same as those inferior
tissues: two rolls are just twenty
five cents.

ANNOUNCER

I'm going to pick some up on the
way home!

LESTER MAYHEW

You'll be glad you did. Put a spring in your step with a premium tissue. Get Sani-Luxe for your family today.

ANNOUNCER

Sani-Luxe: absorbent enough for a man, yet delicate enough for a lady.

LESTER MAYHEW

And now, Dark Adventure Radio Theatre presents: The Blood Red Sphinx.

2

OMNISCIENCE

2

Moody MUSIC sets the tone for a Hollywood noir story. Once an idealistic soldier in the Great War, Los Angeles (and drink) have taken their toll on the middle-aged detective.

NEVILLE

I felt like a slice of overdone toast. The whole city did in this damned heat wave. This was "change your undershirt twice a day" hot. I was in my office. Frankly, it's kind of a dump. But my clients, usually they fit right in. On the upside, Prohibition had finally been lifted, and the ice man was working overtime.

3

THE DICK'S OFFICE

3

It is late June of 1934. We hear the RUCKUS in the outer office of private eye Al Neville. It's bedlam on a hot summer afternoon. His secretary and gal Friday, Frances "Frankie" Grimaldi, is on the phone. She's ten years younger than Al. A COCKATOO SQUAWKS from a cage in the corner. Men are ARGUING in a nearby office. Outside, HORNS HONK. The whole world sounds irritated.

CANTANKEROUS CLIENT

Hey toots, how much longer is he gonna be?

FRANKIE

One sec...
(into the phone)
(MORE)

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

... I told you, he'll call you when the photos are developed.

BOSCO

(a voice coming from
Neville's office)

You expect me to pay for this? Go to hell, Neville!

FRANKIE

(to Mr. Cantankerous)

It sounds like they're wrapping up.

WESTERN UNION

(impatient)

Western Union - I need you to sign. Right here.

FRANKIE

Yeah, hold on.

(on phone)

No, not you, sir. We'll call you.

(signing)

Here's a nickel for your trouble.

(to phone)

No, not you sir. We'll call you.

WESTERN UNION

Thank you, miss.

A burly construction foreman BURSTS OUT of Neville's office and STORMS OUT THE DOOR.

BOSCO

...hell with you, Neville. You're a loser! A loser and a drunk!

He SLAMS the door behind him as he leaves. The room falls into a sudden silence. A fan WHIRRS. SQUAWK!

FRANKIE

Mr. Neville can see you now, ma'am. Follow me.

TWO WOMEN'S FOOTSTEPS to the door of Neville's office. MUSIC.

NEVILLE

She stood there, framed by the doorway. This dame was a cut above.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

She had it all: looks, legs, locks,
and a shade of lipstick that
smacked of good taste. And best of
all she smelled like money. With a
hint of lilacs.

5

PRIVATE EYE MEETS DAME

5

FRANKIE

Sir, your four o'clock is--

NEVILLE

I got it, Frankie.

FRANKIE

I'll bet.

The DOOR CLOSES.

NEVILLE

Al Neville. How do you do, Miss--

DIERDRE

Mrs. Wallace. Dierdre Wallace.

NEVILLE

Have a seat. Can I offer you a
cool--

She SITS.

DIERDRE

Thank you, no. I never.

NEVILLE

Never?

DIERDRE

Almost never.

NEVILLE

How about that? Tell me, what can I
do for you, Mrs. Wallace?

DIERDRE

Do you handle cases where you
locate someone?

NEVILLE

All the time. Who are you looking
for?

DIERDRE
My daughter. Vivienne.

NEVILLE
(jotting it down)
Okay, Vivienne. How long's she been missing?

DIERDRE
Mm, she's not missing. She's....
fallen in with the wrong crowd.

NEVILLE
I see. How old is she?

DIERDRE
Old enough to know better.
Twenty-six.

NEVILLE
Okay, I'm getting the picture.
Fallen in with booze hounds? Dope
fiends?

DIERDRE
Worse. She wants to be an actress.

NEVILLE
Oof. Story as old as time. So,
you're hoping I can talk her out--

DIERDRE
We want you to bring her back home
to us.

NEVILLE
Us?

DIERDRE
My husband, August.

NEVILLE
Hm, back home. Are we talking
physically?

DIERDRE
Exactly.

NEVILLE
Okay. Is she going to come
willingly once I find her?
(pause)
I see... So this is kind of a
kidnapping?

DIERDRE

(after a pause)

We just want our daughter back, Mr. Neville.

NEVILLE

Sure, of course. Do you know where she is?

DIERDRE

We understand she's involved in a motion picture. "The Blood Red Sphinx". Have you heard of it?

NEVILLE

Yeah, it's been on the front page of the Hollywood Reporter for weeks. Atlas Pictures. A real big-budget kind of thing, all swords and sandals and what-not.

DIERDRE

She shouldn't be involved.

NEVILLE

Okay. You got a photo of her?

The RUSTLE OF PAPER.

DIERDRE

The most recent one I have is... what do they call it, a headshot?

NEVILLE

(from the headshot)

Her agent's Dicky Wheeler?

DIERDRE

You know him?

NEVILLE

Only by reputation. Gotta say, she's quite a looker. Runs in the family.

DIERDRE

(hard to tell if she's
offended or flattered)

Mr. Neville... may I assume that you're taking the case?

NEVILLE

We haven't discussed my fees.

DIERDRE
I'm sure they're reasonable, are
they not?

NEVILLE
A Jackson a day, plus expenses.

MORE PAPER RUSTLING.

DIERDRE
Well. Let's call this a retainer.
You'll start immediately?

Neville RIFFLES through the stack of cash.

NEVILLE
Sure, sure. I'm on it. I'll bring
your daughter back to you, come
hell or high water.

CHAIR SCRAPE and FOOTSTEPS.

DIERDRE
Hopefully neither will be
necessary, Mr. Neville.

CHAIR SCRAPE.

NEVILLE
One last question. Why me? I mean,
clearly you've got... resources.
Surely you could afford someone...
I don't know... better?

DIERDRE
We wanted someone to whom no one is
paying attention. And your
reputation suggests you're a man
unlikely to have any moral or legal
scruples about doing what needs to
be done.

NEVILLE
(stung)
Well, that's... the nicest thing a
client has said about me in weeks.
Say, leave your information with my
gal Frankie at the desk out front.

DIERDRE
I'll be sure to do that.

She GOES. MUSIC.

6 OMNISCIENCE

6

NEVILLE

What did I do to deserve this? Easy money grabbing up some rich girl off a Hollywood movie set? Working for a classy dame whose doling out cash like gumballs? Of course, I'd been at this job long enough to know that there's no bigger chump than the private eye who thinks a case is gonna be a breeze.

7 ESKIMO PIE

7

The CLOSING DOOR startles Al out of his reverie as Frankie WALKS IN.

FRANKIE

Close your mouth, Al - you're drooling.

NEVILLE

Ah, lay off, Frankie. Get a load of this!

He TOSSES her the envelope of cash. She also RIFFLES through it.

FRANKIE

Cash up front? Hallelujah. Just in time. We've got bills, Al. We've got--

NEVILLE

I know.

FRANKIE

The shoes on that woman - like she's walking on money. Did you see her handbag? What's her case? Her husband have a piece on the side?

NEVILLE

Nah, slightly missing person. Call over to Atlas Pictures and get me a meeting with Louie Mayfield. First thing tomorrow.

FRANKIE

Louie Mayfield? The studio chief? He'll never--

NEVILLE

Tell him its about the completion
bond on Blood Red Sphinx. He'll
take the meeting. Oh, and see what
you can dig up on the Wallaces. She
was Dierdre and said the husband
was August, and their daughter,
Vivienne.

FRANKIE

Whatever you say, chief.

NEVILLE

The circus cleared out, huh?

FRANKIE

Yeah, they threw in the towel.
Couldn't take the heat. We gotta
get that ceiling fan fixed.

NEVILLE

Take a fiver off the stack and call
the guy.

(grabbing his hat)

I'm heading out.

FRANKIE

It's awfully hot. I thought you
might buy me an Eskimo Pie.

NEVILLE

Yeah, sure. Take another fin and
treat yourself. On me.

FRANKIE

(hurt)

Gee, Al, I kind of thought we could
go together. You know--

NEVILLE

Sorry kid, I'm gonna take the rest
of this dough to the bank before it
burns a hole in my pocket. Lock up
when you go, will ya?

MUSIC.

NEVILLE

So, how does a guy like me get a
sit-down with the head of a movie
studio?

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

I knew talk of the completion bond would do the trick. Nothing makes a Hollywood executive take notice like the threat of an unhappy investor. If you don't understand how a completion bond works, don't worry. Neither does anybody else. But a little birdie at the bank who owed me a favor let me know that the bond for The Blood Red Sphinx was held by none other than Jack Dragna, the chief of the gangsters here in Tinseltown. Since booze got legal again he set his sights on moving pictures. Gave me an even better "in" with Mayfield than I was expecting. Dragna's known to be tough but fair. Even so, it was best he didn't know I was taking his name in vain....

9

THE STUDIO SYSTEM

9

A large and well-upholstered office at Atlas Pictures.

MAYFIELD

So, Mister... Nevalle, is it? My secretary says your employer is...

NEVILLE

Oh, we don't need to name names. We'll say he's a mutual friend. An Italian gentleman.

MAYFIELD

Say no more. It's just he usually sends the Bompensiero brothers. No offense, you don't look like... family.

NEVILLE

Yeah, well, ever since Joe Ardizzone "disappeared", there's been a little shake up in the staffing. This gonna be a problem? I can have your gal out front get him on the horn.

MAYFIELD

No. No, that won't be necessary. What's his concern?

NEVILLE
The Blood Red Sphinx.

MAYFIELD
(protesting too much)
What? No, no, no... are you kidding me? It's gonna do boffo business, nobody doubts that.

NEVILLE
We're hearing things. Like maybe it won't get finished. That makes our friend nervous. Our friend doesn't like feeling nervous.

MAYFIELD
Sure, well, I mean... there's been a few hiccups. But this is one of the biggest pictures of all time. The director, Egon Pierce, he's a visionary. Spectacle like you wouldn't believe. He's gonna make us all a mint.

NEVILLE
Yeah, even if he blows the budget with this middle eastern stuff?

MAYFIELD
(misunderstanding)
What? The Fakirism? God no - that's just those blowhards at Variety trying to squeeze a story out of a whole lotta nothing.

NEVILLE
Yeah? Still, our friend wants to see a full list of the cast and crew. Names and addresses - everyone on the payroll.

MAYFIELD
Sure, sure.

The CLICK of an intercom button.

MAYFIELD (CONT'D)
Dottie. Have one of the girls type up a list of the cast and crew of the Sphinx for Mr. Nanvelle.

DOTTIE
(through intercom)
Of course, sir.

MAYFIELD
(to Al)
You want a scotch?

NEVILLE
Why not?

MAYFIELD
(to Dottie)
And two scotches. Oh, and send
Fritz in.

DOTTIE
Right away, sir.

NEVILLE
Fritz?

MAYFIELD
Eugene Fritz, one of my guys. He'll
show you around, let you meet some
of the stars... you know, so you
can put your boss's mind at rest.
You need anything at the studio, he
should be your first call.

FRITZ ENTERS. He's a yes-man in his early 30s who long ago
sold his soul to the studio.

FRITZ
You wanted me, sir?

MAYFIELD
Ah, Fritzzy! Al here's keeping an
eye on Blood Red Sphinx for a key
investor. Roll out the red carpet
for him, will ya? Maybe you can
grab lunch with Landis or Myrna.
And if he has any money questions
after that, take him round to meet
Older.

NEVILLE
Older?

FRITZ
Line Producer. He knows where every
last dollar's going on Blood Red
Sphinx.

MAYFIELD
Let's not get lost in accounting
jargon though, eh? Show Al here a
good time.

(MORE)

MAYFIELD (CONT'D)

(toasting)
Bottoms up!

NEVILLE

Cheers!

MAYFIELD

This is showbiz after all! It's
meant to be fun! Right?

FRITZ

Of course, sir.
(to Al)
If you'll follow me, Mr.
Granville...

They GO. MUSIC TRANSITION.

10

OMNISCIENCE

10

NEVILLE

I didn't know where this guy Fritz
was taking me, but if it could lead
to Vivienne Wallace, I'd go along.
A minute later we were on the Atlas
back lot, heading into sound stage
22A, a vast space with an entire
Egyptian throne room inside.

11

ON SET

11

Fritz OPENS THE DOOR to a sound stage.

FRITZ

Come on, in here.
(whispering)
Shhh. They're shooting.

NEVILLE

Which one's Pierce?

FRITZ

Egon? That's him with the mustache
and the megaphone.

EGON PIERCE

(off, through megaphone)
Okay folks, back to one. Let's do
one more.

LANDIS KING

Again? Oh for the love of--

EGON PIERCE
Actors ready? Roll camera.

ROBERT DAVIDSON
(off)
Speed.

EGON PIERCE
Roll sound.

SOUND GUY
Rolling.

EGON PIERCE
Mark it! And action.

The camera WHIRRS and the CLAPPER CLACKS. The wrought performances do not make the movie sound promising.

DAY PLAYER
(playing Old Khendu)
My lord, the queen comes and her
fury is mighty.

LANDIS KING
(overplaying the Pharaoh
Menkaure)
Let her come. I answer not to her!
I answer to the gods.

MYRNA MULDOON
(playing Queen Nebtiti)
Oh, a pretty answer. Some day you
will answer to Amun-Ra, but today
you answer to me! I am--

LANDIS KING
(stepping on her line)
Silence, woman!

MYRNA MULDOON
I'll give you silence, you son of
a--

A VASE shatters.

LANDIS KING
(as himself)
Holy hell! That almost hit me!

EGON PIERCE
(frustrated)
Cut!
(off megaphone)
(MORE)

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

Damn it. Tell Props we need another canopic jar. Send them all on break. I'll be in my bungalow.

Pierce WALKS OFF.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Ok, folks, let's break for lunch!

LANDIS KING

Egon! It's not my fault! She nearly killed me that time!

MYRNA MULDOON

You're so drunk, you wouldn't have felt a thing.

FOOTSTEPS and WALLA as cast and crew depart.

LANDIS KING

Get her out of here. She's a lunatic!

FRITZ

(calling to him)

Landis, a word...

LANDIS KING

Hey, Fritz. Did you see that? She should be locked up, the dizzy dame.

FRITZ

Landis, I want you to meet someone...

NEVILLE

Al Neville, Mr. King. It's a real--

LANDIS KING

Yeah, sure...

FRITZ

He's with the money guys.

MUSIC indicates a change in tone.

LANDIS KING

(huge tone shift)

Ah, executive producer, huh? It's a pleasure, Al. Say, while we're on a break, what do you say we grab a drink over at the canteen?

12 OMNISCIENCE

12

NEVILLE

Not ten minutes later, Fritz ushered me to a private table with one of Hollywood's biggest celebrities. Sure, I was pretending to be someone else, but so were half the people in the room. Still, it seemed like a good chance to find out what was going on with this picture. I've seen my share of movie stars, from a distance, but this was something else....

13 THE CANTEEN

13

The canteen buzzes with showbiz WALLA, cast and crew EATING and DRINKING.

JEAN HARLOW

Landis, come round my place tonight. Clark will be there. Zeppo too. We'll have a drink and a laugh.

LANDIS KING

Yeah, yeah, I'll see what I can do, doll. That rat Gable still owes me money from the poker game.

JEAN HARLOW

Don't be a tease, Landis. Come.
(to the guys)
Boys.

She flits off.

NEVILLE

(gobsmacked)

Was that... that was Jean Harlow?

LANDIS KING

She's one hot number, eh? And a lovely person.

(a waiter approaches with drinks)

Ah, the appetizers! Double martinis all around! You sure you fellas don't want a club sandwich? Long day - we've got two more scenes to shoot this afternoon.

FRITZ

Not for me, Landis, I'm on that new diet. Nothing but grapefruit. But you go ahead.

NEVILLE

Yeah, thanks anyway.

LANDIS KING

Suit yourselves. Gents, here's to being single, drinking doubles, and seeing triple.

LAUGH.

FRITZ

Thanks, Landis.

LANDIS KING

Enjoy!

NEVILLE

Have things always been that testy on the set?

LANDIS KING

(laughing)

This must be your first time making a picture with Myrna Muldoon.

NEVILLE

You two sure have... chemistry.

LANDIS KING

Yeah, like nitro and glycerin.

LAUGH. CLINK. DRINK.

FRITZ

I was telling Al on the way over, there's no reason his people should worry about a few sparks on set.

LANDIS KING

Those sparks, they're pure magic on screen. No, no... I'll tell you the secret to the Sphinx's success. It's Egon Pierce. Myrna's a hopeless has-been, but Egon, he's the future. A real artist.

NEVILLE

Oh, yeah? How so?

LANDIS KING

I think it's this whole mystical thing of his. He's tuned into the east, ancient wisdom and all that. He's working wonders.

NEVILLE

I don't know, he did kind of storm off just now.

LANDIS KING

Oh, that's nothing! He's maintaining his inner peace.

(getting conspiratorial)

Listen, I've been on a string of flops. I can admit it. You see "My Gal Betty"? Yeah, me neither. Even that show with the dog... sure, the dog was good, but I tell you, the show went nowhere. But Egon, nah, he's the real deal. I count my lucky stars to be on this show, even if it means working with Myrna. You saw it! She threw that mummy jar thing right at me. He stepped away, and voila: inner peace.

NEVILLE

(unconvinced)

Okay.

APPROACHING FOOTSTEPS as a waiter delivers a sandwich.

LANDIS KING

Ah, my sandwich. Hey, look at that, my glass has a hole in it.

(to the waiter)

Teddy, bring me and my friends here another round!

FRITZ

Love to Landis, but I've got to ease Mr. Neville's concerns.

LANDIS KING

Say, you got a card on you, Neville? I've got script I'd like to show you.

FRITZ

No time, Landis--

LANDIS KING

Wait, listen. My three word pitch:
Sexy. Alexander. Hamilton. Nice,
huh? Think it over.

NEVILLE

Will do. Thanks for the drink.

FRITZ

See you soon, Landis.

FOOTSTEPS as they depart.

LANDIS KING

(shouting after them)

There's singing. And dancing!
Kids'll love it.

FRITZ

(sotto)

Too many martinis...

They leave, working their way out of the canteen.

FRITZ (CONT'D)

I swear everyone in this town has a
script to pitch. C'mon, we might
have time to find Myrna.

NEVILLE

So what's the skinny with this
middle eastern religion everyone's
going on about?

FRITZ

Huh? Oh, yeah... I'm not really
sure. C'mon, if we hurry we may
catch John Older over there...

MUSIC.

NEVILLE

Five minutes later I found myself
face to face with one of
Hollywood's leading ladies. A star,
a legend: Myrna Muldoon. Her
dressing bungalow was on wheels,
like some kind of private railway
car. She was willing to talk to me,
but clearly had no patience for my
handler, Mr. Fritz.

15

THE LEADING LADY

15

FRITZ

...Mr. Neville here is representing
our esteemed Italian financier, and
Mr. Mayfield wanted--

MYRNA MULDOON

Get out of my caravan, you
miserable son of a--

FRITZ

Hey, hey, no need for that Myrna.
I'll leave you to--

She SLAMS THE DOOR on him.

NEVILLE

Not a fan, eh?

MYRNA MULDOON

A miserable little weasel. He's
Mayfield's spy on set. Careful what
you say around that one.

(shifting gears)

But enough about him. What can I do
for you, Mr. Neville? How about a
drink?

NEVILLE

I only drink when I'm on duty, so
sure.

MYRNA MULDOON

To your good health.

CLINK.

NEVILLE

Say, it's cozy in here, isn't it?

MYRNA MULDOON

Yes, they built it for me on the
location for "The Smiling Sinner",
so I wouldn't have to walk through
the muddy streets. It's my little
home away from home.

NEVILLE

You might be onto something here,
Miss Muldoon. This might catch on
with other movie stars.

The FLICK of a cigarette lighter. A DEEP INHALE.

MYRNA MULDOON

(smoking)

Yeah, yeah. Is Blood Red Sphinx
going to fold?

NEVILLE

What makes you ask that?

MYRNA MULDOON

One hears things. Murmurings. Tell
me, Mr. Neville, what have you
heard?

NEVILLE

Please, call me Al.

MYRNA MULDOON

(leaning in closer,
sultry)

So tell me, Al, how's my friend
Jack Dragna?

NEVILLE

Uh, he's... um...

MYRNA MULDOON

I understand it's his stake that's
keeping the Sphinx afloat. We were
quite close once. Did you know
that? Oh, we had some good times.
If you see the Bompensiero
brothers, tell them I said "hi".

NEVILLE

I'll do that.

MYRNA MULDOON

Poor Nicky... he had the worst
crush on me. A gorilla of a man,
but he followed me around like a
puppy dog. Men.

(pivoting)

Jack sent you here because he's
worried about his investment?

NEVILLE

You know how it is... it's a family
business. He's got a lot tied up in
this film. And what with...

MYRNA MULDOON

Oh, he's a maniac alright.

NEVILLE
(no idea who she's talking
about)
Sure, sure. And now he's...

MYRNA MULDOON
Completely in his sway. He can't
make a decision without consulting
him.

NEVILLE
Right. Wait, who?

MYRNA MULDOON
Tahra Bey, of course.

NEVILLE
Oh. He's some kind of swami, or...?

MYRNA MULDOON
"Fakir" is the official term.
Faker, if you ask me.

NEVILLE
So you're not buying it?

MYRNA MULDOON
Do I look like I was born
yesterday? Careful, don't answer
that.

NEVILLE
Your gaze seems... penetrating.

MYRNA MULDOON
Mm, you are a charmer, aren't you?
But I pegged this guy for a
huckster from a mile off.

NEVILLE
Is he that bad?

MYRNA MULDOON
I was on the Orpheum circuit with
Harry Houdini, God rest his soul. I
wish we still had him around to
show these phonies for what they
are.

NEVILLE
This guy causing any problems for
the production?

MYRNA MULDOON

Hell's bells, that's right, you're following the money. No, we'll finish if Landis can stay upright through shooting the grand finale out in the desert.

NEVILLE

Worried about that?

MYRNA MULDOON

Have you ever tried delivering a monologue from atop a camel?

NEVILLE

Can't say I have...

MYRNA MULDOON

We're all worried. We should be. The scene's a monster. But it'll be fine. Somehow.

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

NEVILLE

You sure about that?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

(outside)

They're ready for you on set, Miss Muldoon.

MYRNA MULDOON

No. Good day, Mr. Neville.

MUSIC.

NEVILLE

As suddenly as she started, Myrna was done with me. And Fritz, the studio spy, whisked me over to John Older's office. Now, a Line Producer works his own weird kind of magic. Give him a script that calls for camels, dancing girls, Pharaoh's armies and the wrath of the gods, and he'll tell you how much money and time you'll need to shoot it. If anyone might know what was up with Vivienne Wallace, it would be him.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Older was taking a meeting with the production's publicist, Marilyn Knowles, and Fritz was only too happy to throw me into the middle of it.

17

THE LINE PRODUCER

17

KNOWLES

Can I pour you one, Mr. Neville?
John here's having a double and I'm not sure that's going to be enough.

OLDER

(stressed and exhausted)
I can tell you, it's not.

NEVILLE

When in Rome, as they say...

Ice CLINKS into tumblers.

OLDER

So Fritz says your investor has questions? Like...?

NEVILLE

Is The Sphinx gonna wrap up on time and under budget?

OLDER

Ha!
(his laugh turns to sobs)

NEVILLE

I'm thinking that means no.

KNOWLES

Don't mind him. We've had a couple of last minute changes from the director. We're sure the Sphinx will be one of the greatest spectacles in cinematic history! Cecil DeMille will eat his hat!

NEVILLE

Spoken like a publicist.

KNOWLES

I'm telling you, people are going to line up around the block to see this.

(MORE)

KNOWLES (CONT'D)

Hollywood's biggest stars in a big-budget historical extravaganza. Who wouldn't want to spend a few extra dollars to make that happen? The biggest winnings come when you increase the amount of your bet.

OLDER

(laughing/sobbing)

KNOWLES

Don't mind him.

NEVILLE

So what exactly is the problem, Mr. Older?

OLDER

We were so close to being done. Sure we were over budget - we're always over budget. But Pierce, he's gone mad--

NEVILLE

Wait, "mad"?

KNOWLES

I'd describe him as enthusiastic.

OLDER

He's doubled the number of soldiers! They're rebuilding the sphinx set out in the desert so it's twice as big, and now it shoots pillars of flame. Flame! And he insists on more camels! Do you know what it costs to get a dozen extra camels with five days' notice? Sixteen extra Nubian dancers!

KNOWLES

Okay... that one may be a problem.

NEVILLE

Dancing girls cost more than camels?

KNOWLES

Oh, definitely not. No, it's their dance. And their costumes. The LPD are going blow their lids.

NEVILLE

LPD?

OLDER

The League of Public Decency.

KNOWLES

Exactly. They think every moving picture is indecent.

NEVILLE

What's their objection here?

OLDER

What isn't? If they could, they'd shut the whole picture down.

KNOWLES

Their last memo lists them, let me see...

(reading)

"We hereby demand the elimination of the outrageous and appalling elements: the grotesque concupiscence of the pharaoh character, the implicit sexual perversion of the vizier character, the blatant perversion of the maid-servant, the intolerable miscegenation in the marriage of the Nubian princess and the Egyptian general, the wantonly vile and immoral bathing scene, plus extensive blasphemy, profanity, and idolatry incompatible with American Christian values. Oh, AND the proposed costumes for the Nubian dancers are unacceptably translucent and prone to inspire epithumetic thoughts." I had to look that one up!

NEVILLE

Wow.

OLDER

They're puritans. They should be back in Salem hunting witches.

NEVILLE

But it's not like they're official regulators, are they? Can't you tell 'em to take a cold shower?

KNOWLES

(chuckling at the thought)
Not these days. These people hold real power, and are gunning for even more. I told Pierce we should put Moses or some other Bible guys into the script but he said no.

NEVILLE

What about free speech?

KNOWLES

Ha! The Supreme Court nixed that back in 1915. They said free speech doesn't apply to moving pictures.

OLDER

Nothing in Hollywood is "free". Between August Wallace and the damn money men--
(catching himself)
No offense.

NEVILLE

Yeah, no. You said August Wallace? He's one of these prigs?

KNOWLES

One of the worst. Right up there with the Postmaster General. I swear, Hays would like to shut down the film business completely.

OLDER

Or take it over, like Mussolini. It'll be newspapers next. Mark my words. These people...

KNOWLES

At least the audience is on our side. In an economy like this, the public always craves spectacle. Something exotic, novel and steeped in the mysticism of the East.

NEVILLE

Hmm, something like Fakirism?

KNOWLES

Thank you. Yes. That's it exactly!

OLDER

Pierce is friends with him, you know.

KNOWLES

You bet he is.

NEVILLE

You don't mean Tahrri--

KNOWLES

Tahra Bey! Oh yeah, They're friends. I mean, at least half of the cast of the picture have joined up with this Fakir thing.

NEVILLE

You don't say.

KNOWLES

Sure. Pierce likes to know he's working with people who are on the same page. Who share a spiritual alignment.

NEVILLE

(treading lightly)

You two on board with this Fakirism?

KNOWLES

It's transformational.

OLDER

I'm still kinda new to it. But it seems there's really something to it. Have you seen Tahra Bey?

NEVILLE

No, I...

OLDER

What? How can that be?

KNOWLES

I'll fix that! Egon's having a party tonight. I'll make a call, get you on the guest list.

OLDER

Everyone from the production will be there.

MUSIC PUNCTUATION STARTS UNDERSCORE.

NEVILLE

(intrigued)

Everyone?

OLDER

Pretty much. And word is Tahra Bey himself might make an appearance.

18 OMNISCIENCE

18

NEVILLE

My visit to the studio was certainly interesting, but didn't get me much closer to my target. I figured I'd head over and drink my fill of Egon Pierce's gin, and see if I could learn anything else. But for the moment it was back to my own dismal, sweaty office and its dying ceiling fan.

19 PAYDIRT

19

That fan WHIRS and the bird SQUAWKS.

FRANKIE

How'd it go over at Atlas Pictures?

NEVILLE

They sure rolled out the red carpet for me, but I didn't get much on this kid, Vivienne. Well, the cast list has her address.

The RUSTLE OF PAPER as he hands it to her.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

I figure tomorrow I can--

FRANKIE

You know that address, Al?

NEVILLE

Should I? That'd be up by the reservoir.

FRANKIE

It's the old monastery.

NEVILLE

The old Dominican place? I thought that joint was abandoned.

FRANKIE

No, some eastern guru bought it and fixed it up.

(MORE)

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

Lots of his followers live there. I think they do classes and--

NEVILLE

Something about yogurt...

FRANKIE

Yoga, Al. It's like exercise but mystical.

NEVILLE

An eastern guru, eh? Lemme guess, Tahra Bey?

FRANKIE

Yeah, that's him.

NEVILLE

Hmmm. What did you get on the Wallaces?

FRANKIE

They're loaded. August Wallace made his fortune in parts for automobiles. Wife's into a lot of charities, but only Christian ones. Very churchy. Two daughters. The younger sister, Stella, goes to St. Anne's high school in Pasadena. Vivienne was at Loyola Marymount University, then went off to school in France. Came back last year and took a sudden turn for showbiz.

NEVILLE

Hmm. I wonder if that's what got her father so worked up about the movies?

MUSIC.

NEVILLE

They call this town a "dream factory", and it's always been a mecca for flakes and kooks. But what is a guy like Egon Pierce doing hitching his cart to some fly-by-night swami? Pierce is respected and rolling in dough. Made some big movies - a regular Howard Hughes. What's he need with a guru?

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

And how does the daughter of America's wannabe Censor-in-Chief end up living at the guru's place and landing a role in the production? Something's up, but with any luck I can swing by the party, pick up Vivienne, and run her back to mommy and daddy's before midnight.

I threw on my best suit and headed to Pierce's mansion up by Griffith Park. Luckily there was a break in the heat, and a cool breeze from Glendale Peak. The house was a big joint, not far from where the new observatory's going in. It was already jumping when I arrived....

21

THE PARTY - THE GATEKEEPERS

21

A LOS ANGELES EVENING. An OWL HOOTS and palm trees RUSTLE. Expensive CARS PULL UP, DOORS OPEN, etc. Off to the left, LIVE DANCE MUSIC wafts on the breeze.

BOUNCER

Your name, sir?

NEVILLE

Neville. Al Neville.

BOUNCER

Yes, sir. You're on the list. Enjoy yourself, Mr. Neville.

Dicky Wheeler muscles in right behind Al.

WHEELER

Hey there, Dicky Wheeler - I'm on the list, I know I am.

BOUNCER

Yes, sir, Mr. Wheeler. Welcome.

A teenager sidles right in behind them.

FORREST

Me too. The name's--

BOUNCER

Scram, kid. This party's for grownups.

FORREST

But I'm--

NEVILLE

It's okay. He's with us.

BOUNCER

Oh. Are you sure, sir?

NEVILLE

Absolutely.

WHEELER

Yeah, sure. Here's for your trouble.

The CRINKLE of a dollar bill.

BOUNCER

Very good, sir.

NEVILLE

Come on.

FOOTSTEPS as they enter. WALLA, LAUGHTER, DRINKING ramp up.
The SWING BAND QUARTET plays "All I Do Is Dream of You".

FORREST

(hushed)

Geez, thanks a lot, mister.

NEVILLE

Don't mention it.

WHEELER

Seriously.

FORREST

You got it. Mum's the word.

WHEELER

You owe me a buck, kid.

FORREST

Sure, Mr. Wheeler. I'm Forrey.

WHEELER

Forrey? What the hell kind of name is Forrey?

FORREST

Short for Forrest. Forrest J Ackerman.

WHEELER
Hell's bells, how old are you?

FORREST
Old enough! Seventeen.

WHEELER
What are you--

FORREST
I'm Egon Pierce's biggest fan! His movie "The Devil in the Belfry" changed my life!

WHEELER
All right, keep your pants dry.

NEVILLE
You're Dicky Wheeler, the agent?

WHEELER
(loving recognition)
That's right. Mr...?

NEVILLE
Al Neville. I was hoping to have a word with you about one of your clients.

WHEELER
Well I'm not doing that without a drink. What do you say we get us some giggle water and get this party started. Forrey... Al and I need to wet our whistles. Run over to the bar and grab a pair of Gin Rickeys.

FORREST
I'll make it three!

WHEELER
Yeah, what the hell. Go crazy, kid.

FORREST
Will do!

FOOTSTEPS as Forrest leaves.

WHEELER
That kid'll have a night to remember.

NEVILLE
Or try like hell to forget.

WHEELER
Oh, damn, pretend like you're
talking to me.

NEVILLE
(confused)
I am talking to you.

WHEELER
No, I mean pretend that you're
somebody. There's a guy coming over
here I don't want to talk to.

NEVILLE
Who?

WHEELER
A punk actor, Marion Morrison. When
he was my client, I told him he had
to ditch that name, and he dumped
me. Then changed it anyway. Jerk.
He just did a comedy for
Screencraft. He's terrible.

NEVILLE
Okay, what should I--

APPROACHING FOOTSTEPS

JOHN WAYNE
Hey there Jinksy. It's been a
while.

WHEELER
(instantly charming)
Yeah, yeah. Congrats on "His
Private Secretary". Terrific!

JOHN WAYNE
Thanks.
(to Al)
John Wayne, good to meet you.

NEVILLE
Yeah, you too. I'm--

JOHN WAYNE
See you around!

DEPARTING FOOTSTEPS

NEVILLE

Yeah, I see what you mean.

WHEELER

"John Wayne"... two first names. He should only act with horses.

(sighs)

So, Neville, who was it you wanted to--

NEVILLE

Vivienne Wallace.

WHEELER

Ah-ha! Hot little number, isn't she? She's got "it". I'm booking her on shows left and right. You got a picture you want her for?

NEVILLE

I'm mulling that over. She here tonight?

WHEELER

Oh-ho, you sly dog! You bet she is. You looking for a little tête-à-tête?

NEVILLE

If it's not inconvenient.

WHEELER

If I can pry her away from Egon, she's all yours.

NEVILLE

Oh yeah, she tight with Pierce? And here I thought she was new in town.

WHEELER

She is - but once he gave her a screen test - bingo! They were thick as thieves. He's even introducing her to the man himself.

NEVILLE

Sorry, to...?

WHEELER

Ha! Good one, Neville. I hear he's going to be here tonight. He can work miracles. I seen him do it.

RETURNING FOOTSTEPS.

NEVILLE
Of course, Tahra Bey!

FORREST
Hey fellas, I got our drinks.

WHEELER
Forrey, Al, here's to high winds
and mermaids.

NEVILLE
Cheers.

They DRINK. PARTY WALLA continues and LIVE BAND transitions
to MUSIC under:

22 OMNISCIENCE

22

NEVILLE
While I waited for my introduction
to Vivienne, I schmoozed with
inebriated actors, writers,
starstruck hopefuls and other
unfortunates. Saw a constellation
of movie stars, but mostly the
crowd smelled of eau de cologne and
desperation. Best conversation I
could find was with three young
fellas. One was an aspiring writer
named Elron Hunter who wrote
something he called
"scientifiction". He was chatting
up this fascinating guy with slick
hair named Jack Parsons who was
some kind of engineer, and the
Sphinx's cinematographer, Robert
Davidson.

23 THE PARTY - THE REVELERS

23

WALLA intensifies. We hear FAMOUS VOICES in the crowd like
BORIS KARLOFF, PETER LORRE, and MAE WEST. **The BAND strikes up
"Moonglow".**

ROBERT DAVIDSON
I tell you, when the sun hits those
camels - it'll be amazing. The new
pyramid set will look stunning.

ELRON HUNTER
Robert, is Pierce the genius
everyone says he is?

ROBERT DAVIDSON

Honestly, first time I read his script I said, "That ain't never gonna work!" Still, the crazy bastard's figured it out. But the cinematography, that's where the real genius is.

ELRON HUNTER

I've got a script. It's a take on Romeo & Juliet, but on Mars.

ROBERT DAVIDSON

(dryly)

The planet?

ELRON HUNTER

Yes! Do you think you could show it to him?

ROBERT DAVIDSON

No.

JACK PARSONS

I've been giving a lot of thought to Mars lately.

NEVILLE

What? Why?

JACK PARSONS

I've been experimenting with rocket fuels.

ROBERT DAVIDSON

Rockets? Like fireworks?

JACK PARSONS

Not quite. My pals and I have been making bigger rockets. Imagine a rocket so powerful it could make it to the moon or to...

ELRON HUNTER

Mars!

JACK PARSONS

I'm going do a little test out near Pasadena tomorrow. Come along, I'll show you.

NEVILLE

Maybe I'll do that. What do you say, Robert?

ROBERT DAVIDSON

Yeah, sure. Put Romeo & Juliet on
it and send it to Mars. Sounds like
it's all a lot of smoke and
mirrors.

JACK PARSONS

Smoke I can guarantee.

ROBERT DAVIDSON

Besides, I'm booked solid tomorrow
on the setup for the grand--

The WALLA SWELLS nearby. **The DANCE BAND plays a little
ORIENTAL FANFARE.**

ELRON HUNTER

(very giddy)

There he is - it's Pierce and I
think... yes, he's there with him!

Fanfare transitions to MUSIC.

24

OMNISCIENCE

24

NEVILLE

A hush fell over the crowd as the
great Egon Pierce made a carefully
staged appearance. Admirers pushed
forward hoping for a better glimpse
of the mystic of Hollywood. It's a
miracle no one fell into the
swimming pool. Dicky Wheeler
elbowed his way to the front of the
crowd, and I joined him there.

25

THE PARTY - THE SHOW 1

25

RHUBARB as the anxious crowd packs itself together. The
band's drummer plays a quiet DRUM ROLL.

WHEELER

Make room, let me see.

NEVILLE

(quietly to Wheeler)

Say, Dicky, that girl up on the
stage by Egon, is that...

WHEELER

(quietly)

Yeah, that's Vivienne.

(MORE)

WHEELER (CONT'D)

Told you she was a looker...
(he growls lasciviously)

A GONG sounds. Egon Pierce steps forth stereo right.

EGON PIERCE

My friends - thank you for coming.
On Monday we shoot our big finale!

APPLAUSE and CHEERS from the crowd.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

I know some of you are just here
for the cocktails...

A nervous LAUGH from the crowd.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

Some of you are here to further
your careers.

Hushed MURMURS OF ASSENT ripple through the guests. A
slightly larger CHUCKLE.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

But some of you have come for
something more.

A hush falls - then CRICKETS.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

(theatrically)

A man has come to us from the East
with the gift of wisdom. It is
incumbent upon me to tell the
audient void...

The BAND plays quietly. Perhaps the clarinet and cymbals, an
oud, or even a Hammond organ. Whatever it is, it's creepy.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

What has become of our world? Since
the crash of '29, what has become
of us? Upheaval. Unemployment.
Apprehension. A fear of some
unknown, but looming, danger. A
Great Depression has fallen over
the land. My friends have gone
about with pale, worried faces, and
whispered warnings. Does this sound
familiar to you?

A MURMUR of assent.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

Our foundations no longer hold. Our old values no longer give meaning to our lives. The western world has lost its way and led us into darkness.

(brightening)

But my friends, all is not lost. A light has come to us, a light from the East. A light which can guide us to richer, more meaningful, more fulfilling lives. It is my pleasure to present the astounding Fakir of the Orient: Tahra Bey!

With a CYMBAL CRASH, Bey steps up.

TAHRA BEY

(murmuring)

Vi ankoraŭ nenion vidis.

NEVILLE

(quietly)

Is he saying something? I can't hear.

WHEELER

He doesn't speak English. But Egon, he translates for him.

NEVILLE

What language does he speak?

WHEELER

Who knows? Egyptian or Hindoo or something... one of those mystical languages.

EGON PIERCE

(again commanding the room)

Tahra Bey says while he is known to many of you, for the rest he wishes to display the ability of the tranquil mind to master the physical body.

DRUM ROLL transitions to MUSIC.

NEVILLE

I like to think I'm not easily impressed, but I have to admit there was something about this Tahra Bey that commanded attention. Normally I can spot the things that people try to keep hidden, but I didn't even notice the big fella in a robe standing next to Bey until he held out a couple of huge steel needles. The whole crowd held its breath. Bey took one of the needles and stretched out his arm.

GASP from the crowd. The BAND punctuates the act with a CYMBAL ROLL or the like.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

He drove that needle in one side of the arm and right out the other. He bled a little, but never batted an eye.

The band plays a FANFARE. The crowd OOHS and AAHS.

TAHRA BEY

(whispering to Egon)

Se nur vi sciis kiel facile ĝi estis!

EGON PIERCE

Tahra Bey says all of us have the ability to master our pain by focusing our minds and our wills.

ELRON HUNTER

It's a miracle!

ROBERT DAVIDSON

(louder than intended)

Absurd! Lugosi did that in *Chandu*! It's some kind of trick.

A MURMUR of doubt/unhappiness passes through the crowd. Some KERFUFFLE as bouncers close in on Davidson.

BOUNCER

Sir, come with me.

ROBERT DAVIDSON
 (being dragged away)
 Hey, wait a minute, I...

EGON PIERCE
 Yes, many of you know the tricks of
 our cinematic trade only too well.
 We are in the business of creating
 illusions, and sometimes this life
 makes us blind to genuine wonders.
 But what you are about to witness
 is not movie magic, my friends!
 Tahra Bey shows us truth.

We hear the RING of a knife being unsheathed.

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)
 Behold! Tahra Bey presents this
 ceremonial dagger, the khanjal,
 made of solid silver. Razor sharp!

ELRON HUNTER
 No, don't!

NEVILLE
 (quietly to Wheeler)
 He's not going to shove that in--

WHEELER
 (quietly)
 Watch!

A FLOURISH from the musicians.

TAHRA BEY
 (in an apparently mystical
 eastern language)
 Kaj nun, jen!

The crowd GASPS louder. A few of them SWOON.

EGON PIERCE
 You see!

NEVILLE
 Yikes! Right through his own
 tongue! No faking that!

Another MUSICAL FLOURISH as the blade comes back out.

TAHRA BEY
 (calmly with pierced and
 bloody tongue)
 La paca menso konas neniun doloron.

EGON PIERCE
 (theatrically)
 "The peaceful mind knows no pain!"

A ROAR OF APPLAUSE from the crowd.

WHEELER
 Didn't I tell you? Boy, if I could
 sign him as a client - we'd make a
 mint.

EGON PIERCE
 Tahra Bey invites all those who
 wish to free themselves from the
 shackles of western thinking, to
 open their eyes to new truth and
 achieve their full potential, to
 visit the Fakir Institute, just up
 the road in the old monastery. Dare
 to be your greatest self!

A RIPPLE of APPLAUSE. **The BAND strikes up "Syria"**. Crowd
 HUBBUB.

28 OMNISCIENCE

28

NEVILLE
 And in a moment, Bey was whisked
 away by Pierce. The guests drank up
 his mystical feats faster than the
 free booze. He was clearly the man
 of the hour - but my sights were
 set on my target: Vivienne Wallace.
 And that meant shaking off my new
 teenage admirer.

29 THE PARTY - THE TARGET

29

The BAND continues to play "Syria" and the crowd continues to
 CHATTER.

FORREST
 Mr. Neville, did you see that?
 Wasn't that something?

NEVILLE
 Yeah, Forrey, but listen--

FORREST
 I could see the knife right in his
 tongue. And I could hear--

NEVILLE
Yeah, great. Listen, I'm working,
so--

FORREST
(motoring on)
I've never heard a real person
speaking Esperanto!

NEVILLE
(suddenly very interested)
What? What's that?

FORREST
Esperanto. It's a constructed
language for international people.
It's one of my hobbies! But this is
the first time I've heard it out in
the wild.

NEVILLE
(gobsmacked)
You don't say.

FOOTSTEPS approach.

FORREST
Oh yeah.
(getting conspiratorial)
But it was weird, I heard him
talking to Mr. Pierce as they were
leaving, and he said that everyone--

BOUNCER
Excuse me, Mr. Neville?

NEVILLE
(wary)
Yeah?

BOUNCER
I have a message for you.

The RUSTLE of paper.

FORREST
What's it say?

NEVILLE
It says "none of your business,
Forrest".

FORREST

C'mon, be a pal. Is it from Mr. Pierce?

NEVILLE

No, it's from Vivienne Wallace. "Dicky told me you'd like to have a word. Please join me in Egon's private wine cellar."

FORREST

Holy cow! Come on, let's go!

NEVILLE

Forrest, buddy... do I have to explain what's going on here?

FORREST

Sure, she wants... No! You mean she... and you...

NEVILLE

Now you're getting it. Why don't you have another cocktail and wait by the pool. Keep an eye on things. See if Tahra Bey comes back. Listen for more of that Ess... potato.

FORREST

Esperanto! Sure thing, Mr. Neville.

BOUNCER

I'll show you the way, sir.

NEVILLE

Thanks.

FOOTSTEPS as they depart.

FORREST

Grownup parties are awesome!

DANCE BAND transitions to MUSIC.

NEVILLE

The bouncer ushered me to a basement room more ritzy than any hotel I'd ever been in. A few fat-cats were down there, smoking cigars and downing glasses of Chateau-God-Knows-What.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

I looked around and saw what had to be Pierce's personal office. Then I saw her. Up close. Whatever looks her mother had, Vivienne had them times ten.

31

THE WINE CELLAR

31

Vivienne comes across as a wide-eyed ingenue. At first.

NEVILLE

Miss Wallace, I presume?

VIVIENNE

You must be Mr. Neville. Dicky said you wanted to meet me? It's such a thrill to meet the men of finance who make these pictures happen. I mean, I'm just an actress, but you, why...

NEVILLE

Oh, no, really, I'm nothing.

VIVIENNE

I find that hard to believe. Here.
(handing him a glass of wine)
Egon's decanting some of his favorites. I don't know what it is, but I like how it makes me feel.

NEVILLE

Here's to a strong box office.

VIVIENNE

(laughing)
You're funny.

NEVILLE

I don't mean to pry, but you and Egon... are you two...

VIVIENNE

Me and Egon! Heavens, no! He's like the father I never had. He's a dear, but, well, he's not my type.

NEVILLE

I see. Say, I see what you mean about the wine.

VIVIENNE

So Dicky thought you might have a role for me that you wanted to discuss?

NEVILLE

Well, yeah, I guess you'd call it a role. I was thinking though, maybe we could talk somewhere a little more private?

VIVIENNE

Oh, is it that kind of role?
(she laughs again)
No, no, I'm just teasing.

NEVILLE

(his speech starting to slur a little)
What do you say I give you a lift home. Fill you in on the whole...

VIVIENNE

Golly, that sounds wonderful. Because what I really need is a lift to my parents' house from some low-rent private dick.

NEVILLE

(growing very woozy)
I've got to sit down. I don't feel so great. And I'm not low-rent. Most of my clients can... barely... afford me.

VIVIENNE

(derisive)
My father's plan to rescue me. Look at him. Low. Rent.

NEVILLE

(fighting to stay conscious)
Did you... You slipped me a Mickey. I...

VIVIENNE

Sweet dreams, Mr. Neville.
(across the room)
Egon!

FOOTSTEPS and MUSIC as Neville succumbs.

EGON PIERCE
 (growing unintelligible)
 Should we take him to the....

32 OMNISCIENCE

32

NEVILLE
 I'll admit it: it's not the first time I've woken up facedown in an alley in Chinatown. This kid, Vivienne, played the hell out of me. Hardly some dewy-eyed schoolgirl in the clutches of Hollywood creeps. I could only remember bits and pieces of what happened to me after that wine cellar. It didn't add up. I needed to find out just who she was and how she ended up as one of Pierce's cronies. Or were they both in thrall to this fakir - Tahra Bey? I had to figure his role in all this. I needed to make it over to the monastery. But first I needed some coffee. Or whiskey. Preferably both.

33 CHINATOWN

33

Busy MORNING CHINATOWN STREET WALLA. A RICKETY OLD FORD comes to a stop and IDLES. The HORN honks.

NEVILLE
 Thanks for the lift, sweetheart.

FRANKIE
 Isn't that how it always goes? You whistle and I-- holy hell, what happened to you?

NEVILLE
 Couple of bozos decided to use me as a punching bag. My memory's hazy, it might have been more than a couple.

FRANKIE
 Here, let me--

NEVILLE
 I'm fine! Leave it.

FRANKIE

You don't look fine. You don't
smell--

NEVILLE

Just take me back to the office.
I'll put on a fresh shirt. Do I
have fresh shirts there?

FRANKIE

Fresher than this one.

The CAR DOOR opens and closes. It PULLS INTO TRAFFIC.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

So what's the dope?

NEVILLE

I don't know yet. But I think
Vivienne Wallace is right where she
wants to be.

FRANKIE

That's going to make taking her
home awkward.

NEVILLE

Sure is.

FRANKIE

How'd you end up in Chinatown,
anyway?

NEVILLE

Vivienne, she slipped me a mickey.
I... there were tunnels, I think.
Under Pierce's house. They went on
and on. There were people... like
serpents...

FRANKIE

What?

NEVILLE

I... I don't know. Might have been
the chloral hydrate talking.

FRANKIE

I told you I should have gone with
you last night.

NEVILLE

I came through it alright.

FRANKIE

Sure, leave me on my own while you go have your fun. Then you drag me across town to scoop up whatever's left of you in the morning.

NEVILLE

Quite a pair, you and me.

MUSIC STARTS.

FRANKIE

(wistful)

Yeah. Al--

NEVILLE

Pull over, I think I'm gonna be sick.

34

OMNISCIENCE

34

NEVILLE

Back at the office, a fresh shirt and lot of coffee brought me half way back to the world of the living. Frankie seemed a little more than usually annoyed with me, so I thought it might be easier on both of us to work separately for the day. I was going to have a look at Tahra Bey's compound. I asked Frankie to track down Vivienne's sister, Stella. Figured she might help us grasp just what was going on with the Wallace family, and for getting into a Catholic girls' boarding school Frankie was obviously the man for the job. I didn't ask how she pulled it off, but she managed to have a private chat with Stella on the lawn of St. Anne's.

35

TWISTED SISTER

35

We can hear PARROTS and PEACOCKS from nearby Busch Gardens. A LAWN SPRINKLER.

FRANKIE

What do you mean when you say she changed?

STELLA

Well Vivienne was always kind of a black sheep. She used to argue a lot with daddy. Mama called her our "rain cloud". And after she went to college she was more distant. But once she went off to France... well, forget it.

FRANKIE

France? That's impressive.

STELLA

One of her professors suggested it. She was supposed to be studying art and things at the Louvre museum, and Notre Dame. Daddy didn't like the idea but Mama thought it would be good for her. She went to the Sorbonne. She was supposed to get enlightened, but came back darker and moodier than ever.

FRANKIE

(gently leading)

Hmmm. I wonder why...

STELLA

I don't know. She had some archeology class that went with a professor and a bunch of other students to a dig site in Arabia or someplace. While they were out there, the professor died. It wasn't too long after that she came back. Different. More different.

FRANKIE

Any specific ways?

STELLA

She said she wouldn't go to church with us any more. My parents didn't like that a bit. Then she announced she was going to become an actress. Daddy hated the idea and they argued like crazy.

FRANKIE

That must have made life tough in your house.

STELLA

Oh, she never lived at home again after France. But it was awful. Daddy was appalled by the idea. He's still mad at her about all of it.

FRANKIE

What do you think? It sounds pretty glamorous: your sister making motion pictures--

STELLA

It's shameful. Those Hollywood types peddle filth and immorality. Especially in the movies. And even the ones that don't still tell lies for a living. I don't know my sister anymore.

Very awkward pause.

FRANKIE

Stella, would you know the names of any of the professors Vivienne studied with?

STELLA

I know it was Dr. Pratt who encouraged her to go to France. I don't know the name of the teacher who died...

(Stella's breath catches
in her throat.)

FRANKIE

Are you okay, Stella? What's wrong?

STELLA

Sorry, I'm alright... It's just... Before Vivienne went overseas, she was... I don't know. Just kind of odd. But since she came back she's... scary. She was always defiant but now.... There's a darkness. Evil. I'm a good Christian. My whole family is. But Vivienne... I... pray for her, but I don't know what else to do.

MUSIC.

NEVILLE

Meanwhile, I went up by the Hollywood Reservoir to stake out Tahra Bey's compound. It's a beautiful old building, but since the crash I guess even monks need dough, and they sold it on. High walls surround the whole place, with an imposing iron gate. I didn't see any sign of Vivienne or Tahra Bey. Just that big guy in the robe from the party who held out those steel needles, guarding the gate. I was still feeling last night's abuse, and wasn't up for getting a dagger through my tongue.

I bailed on the compound and went to meet my new pal, Jack Parsons, the rocket guy.

BREEZE and BIRDS around a dry river bed. As they chat, we hear TOOLS and TAPE and WHATNOT as Parsons assembles a rocket.

JACK PARSONS

Okay, carefully now, hand me that jar there with the gray powder. Gently!

NEVILLE

Gently? What is it?

JACK PARSONS

Dioxycyanomercury. Also known as mercury fulminate.

NEVILLE

What's it do?

JACK PARSONS

In this case, it's an accelerant. Helps get the other fuels in the motor burning. But if you drop that jar...

(He makes a GRIMACING SOUND.)

NEVILLE

Yikes.

WORKING SOUNDS.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Jack, if you don't mind my asking, what were you doing at that party last night? I didn't think you were in the movie business.

JACK PARSONS

Oh I'm not - just a gig I picked up on the side to make a few bucks. They're planning some kind of fireworks for the big finale of Pierce's Sphinx picture, and one of the effects guys asked me to consult on explosives for the big blast. They want something impressive but that won't kill anybody. He got me on the guest list. Hand me that ratchet, will you?

NEVILLE

Here.

RATCHETING.

JACK PARSONS

And it was a chance to get a look at Tahra Bey. Everybody in town's talking about him.

NEVILLE

Yeah? What's the verdict? Is he for real?

JACK PARSONS

I'm still not sure. He's pretty secretive. Hand me that tape? Some of what he says is pretty anodyne, but I have friends in the metaphysical community who think he's part of something more sinister.

NEVILLE

Yeah? I was thinking that myself, but all this metaphysical stuff, it just seems...

JACK PARSONS

What?

NEVILLE

I don't know. Kooky. But you're into it, and you're clearly very smart.

JACK PARSONS

Listen, Al, the universe is big, and complicated. We humans have a couple of senses and a little imagination and every now and again we connect the dots and come to understand something. Someday though, we're gonna make a big leap. The stuff we write off as "magic" or "metaphysics" - we're gonna connect it to science and mathematics, and I tell you it's going to blow our minds. A quantum jump forward for mankind.

NEVILLE

Okay.

JACK PARSONS

You know what's kooky to me? Willful ignorance. Close-mindedness. There's so much out there to know, and I for one ain't afraid to mess around in weird ways to try and figure it out.

NEVILLE

Yeah, I got a taste of that last night.

JACK PARSONS

Did you? Anything I can help with?

NEVILLE

Oh... maybe later. Thanks.

JACK PARSONS

Well, let me know. Now hand me the jar with the amber liquid.
(panicked)
Careful! Don't spill it.

NEVILLE

Oh god, what's this?

JACK PARSONS

It's all the bourbon we've got out here. Here's to the great unknown.

He DRINKS and passes the jar to Al. MUSIC.

38

OMNISCIENCE

38

NEVILLE

Parsons was one of those guys it'd be easy to write off as an utter nut-job were it not for the fact that he was a damned genius. He gave me a lot to think about, but it was time to head back to my office to compare notes with Frankie. She told me about her conversation with Vivienne's sister, and she must have felt she was really onto something, because she'd made an appointment with some professor at Loyola-Marymount to see if she could learn more about what happened to Vivienne overseas. She told me that there were a couple of weirdos waiting to see me in my office, and she was out the door before I had a chance to say thanks.

The weirdos turned out to be my young friend Forrey, and a rumpled looking man who could have been his grandfather. I couldn't deny the kid's enthusiasm....

39

FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

39

The FAN and COCKATOO at Al's office.

FORREST

(gushing)

"...it is a shame so many beautiful people had to die" but he said it in Esperanto. And once you didn't come back, I figured, "Mr. Neville wouldn't go home without saying goodbye" - right?

(MORE)

FORREST (CONT'D)

— so I staked out the front door of Mr. Pierce's house and when you never came out, I knew something was up 'cause you went to talk to that girl and you seem kinda old to have a sleep-over at Mr. Pierce's. So I sneaked around a little, and I heard that big bouncer guy say something about "serpent tunnels" and then I was like "Holy cow!" 'cause I've read about the tunnels under Los Angeles! I read all about them in "Captain Courage and the Subterranean Serpents" 'cause he fought against an army of lizard men down there. It made perfect sense. You must have gotten lost in the serpent tunnels and that's why you didn't come back! So then--

NEVILLE

Wait, wait, hold on. This thing, that you overheard the bouncer guy say. Was it in English? Or was it in that--

FORREST

Oh, it was English.
(unsure)
I'm completely sure. So I brought someone who knows all about the tunnels so we could rescue you!
(a little disappointed)
But your secretary told us you're already back so--

NEVILLE

Sorry, who is this?

SHUFELT

(dry and deadpan)
G. Warren Shufelt.

FORREST

Mr. Shufelt's a mining engineer from CalTech. He plays bridge with my mom. I told him what happened to you and he said he knows all about the tunnels.

NEVILLE

Okay, okay... Are you really an engineer at CalTech?

SHUFELT

Yes. No. Well, formerly I was.

NEVILLE

God help me.

(to Forrest)

Look, Forrest, I appreciate the thought, but if you didn't--

SHUFELT

Did you enter a subterranean passage in the Hollywood Hills west of Griffith Park?

NEVILLE

Yeah, but--

SHUFELT

Did you find yourself near an alley in Chinatown?

NEVILLE

Yeah.

SHUFELT

Shoes wet?

NEVILLE

How'd you know that?

SHUFELT

I've explored the tunnels, Mr. Neville. Extensively. I've mapped them. I know them better than anyone.

NEVILLE

So they're real? I didn't imagine--

SHUFELT

They're very real, sir. You didn't imagine anything.

NEVILLE

Well... damn. Where'd they come from?

SHUFELT

Are you prepared for the truth, Mr. Neville?

NEVILLE

I don't know. Yes?

SHUFELT

No matter how shocking it may be?
No matter how it might shake the
foundations of your understanding
of the history of the world?

NEVILLE

Today's been all about trying to
keep an open mind.

SHUFELT

The tunnels were dug by a race of
serpent people three thousand years
ago.

NEVILLE

(after a pause)

I will try to keep an open mind.

SHUFELT

I assure you, my data is all based
on hard science. The lizard people
were related to the Mayans but a
meteorite struck three thousand
years ago and these people survived
by going underground and migrating
to the north where they built a
vast underground city which still
exists. Right here.

NEVILLE

Okay. So how come no one knows
about your "lizard people"?

SHUFELT

They were very adept in covering
their tracks.

NEVILLE

Sure. But you learned about
them...?

SHUFELT

At CalTech I developed a ground
penetrating x-ray radio. It can map
the irregularities created by
tunnels underground. It sees
through the earth like x-rays see
through flesh.

NEVILLE

Uh huh...

SHUFELT

Once I connected my first maps of the tunnels to some obscure Hopi folklore, I knew I was really onto something.

NEVILLE

Hopi?

SHUFELT

Yes, you know, in Arizona. One of their chieftains, Little Chief Greenleaf, told the whole tale of the exodus of the lizard people beneath the deserts to the coastal lands of this region.

NEVILLE

And it was the chief who told you this?

SHUFELT

Yes. I warned you my revelations would be shocking to your world view.

NEVILLE

Yeah. Thanks for that.

(rising)

Mr. Shufelt, Forrest, I think I've taken enough of your time. Thanks for stopping by. The door's right over--

SHUFELT

I can take you back. To Pierce's house. Underground.

FORREST

See? Didn't I tell you?

NEVILLE

No offense, I think I'd do better on my own.

SHUFELT

No offense taken. But I really think you'd do better with me. And my map.

The UNFURLING OF A LARGE PIECE OF PAPER.

NEVILLE

Good god... this is all of Los Angeles?

SHUFELT

It is surprising.

NEVILLE

You could really take me back there?

SHUFELT

I really can. And I can show you where the gold is.

NEVILLE

Gold?

FORREST

Heck, yeah!

SHUFELT

My ground penetrating x-ray machine reveals much.

NEVILLE

This is insane. Let's do it. How much?

SHUFELT

How much?

NEVILLE

Yeah, what's your fee for guiding me down there?

SHUFELT

(indignant)

Mr. Neville, I'm not some cheap tour guide. I'm a man of science!

FORREST

We'll do it for ten bucks.

NEVILLE

You're not going anywhere, Forrest.

FORREST

But I brought Mr. Shufelt here. I'm his agent.

(pause)

C'mon, be a pal.

SHUFELT

(quietly)

The X-ray radio does require
batteries, and you'll find they're
quite heavy.

Adventure MUSIC.

40

OMNISCIENCE

40

NEVILLE

We started out in the basement of
an abandoned speakeasy near
downtown, but an hour or so later,
we were hundreds of feet beneath
Los Angeles, moving north somewhere
between Silver Lake and Hollywood.
Shufelt was right about everything,
which, given his bizarre theories
about lizard people, was more than
a little disturbing. Guided by his
x-ray machine, we crossed
underground streams, deep below the
city's water table. Shufelt
suddenly stopped.

41

A LAND DOWN UNDER

41

Feet SPLASH through water and sounds ECHO EERILY in the
tunnel.

SHUFELT

Stop.

NEVILLE

What is it?

SHUFELT

Look, up there. Near the ceiling.

FORREST

Whoa, petroglyphs! Do you think
they were made by the lizard men?

SHUFELT

I know they were.

FORREST

What do they say?

SHUFELT

I don't know. But you see the tall thin forms and the other glyphs. Those are the marks of the creators of these tunnels.

FORREST

Wow.

SHUFELT

Now, Mr. Neville, you see where this corner juts out? What if I were to tell you that hardly more than ten feet within that rock wall is a gold deposit that I calculate to be eight to twelve tons?

NEVILLE

My mind would be open to that idea.

A weird SNAKISH NOISE echoes from down the tunnel. MUSIC.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Quiet! Oh no.

FORREST

What was THAT?

SHUFELT

I... I'm not certain. Sometimes I've heard it down in these lower levels.

FORREST

(quietly, awestruck)
Is it... serpent people?

NEVILLE

Gentlemen, let's put a pin in the gold and the noises and keep moving.

NEVILLE

Shufelt was an oddball, but he sure knew his way underground. Before long, we were at what he claimed was a door to the lower levels of Egon Pierce's mansion. I picked the lock and once again found myself in Pierce's wine cellar. Fortunately, this time it was empty.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

I persuaded Shufelt to wait by the door, but the only way to keep Forrest quiet was to let him come with me towards the office I had seen last time I was here....

43

THE BEST LAID PLANS

43

FORREST

(quietly)

So what are we looking for, Mr. Neville?

NEVILLE

(ditto)

Anything we can find about Vivienne Wallace, Tahra Bey, or the Blood Red Sphinx.

The RUSTLE OF PAPERS.

FORREST

Wow! Look at this! It's Egon Pierce's actual production script. It's got his notes all over it!

NEVILLE

Yeah? What's it say about the big finale?

FORREST

Lemme see...

(thumbing through)

This might be it:

(quoting)

"Exterior - Day - The Plateau of Gizeh. The sun shimmers across hot desert stone as a column of soldiers marches into place. Opposite them, a huge group of Nubian dancing girls undulate lasciviously to the music of sistrums and drums. Haptoomet stands atop the sphinx basking in the frightened adoration of the people."

44

THE BLOOD RED SCRIPT

44

Forrest's narration comes to life as we hear the movie he's reading. SISTRUM and DRUMS fade up. DANCING GIRLS. CAMELS!

FORREST

"Closeup on Captain Hopni as something catches his eye near the pyramid. Khantari stops her dance as she looks at the pyramid. Soon the courtiers, the tradesmen, even the camels stop as a lone figure climbs atop the great pyramid! It is the Pharaoh Menkaure - still alive!"

The movie has now fully come to life with THRILLING SOUND EFFECTS and a rousing MAX STEINER ORCHESTRAL SCORE!

FORREST (CONT'D)

Closeup on Menkaure as he casts his gaze down at his people, stopping upon his betrayer, Haptoomet! Her lip trembles as she fights to maintain her composure.

MENKAURE

(played by Landis King,
but better)

My people - though you thought me slain and buried, by the power of the gods I yet live!

QUEEN NEBTITI

(Myrna Muldoon)

'Tis true - the king - the pharaoh yet lives!

An awed MURMUR ripples across the extras.

MENKAURE

This sorceress, Haptoomet, has betrayed me--

HAPTOOMET

(Vivienne Wallace)

Guards, seize this impostor!

The court's wise old man pipes up.

OLD KHENDU

(Day Player)

Nay, he speaks true. It IS the one true Pharaoh! He is returned to us!

The extras are very impressed now.

MENKAURE

And I, a living god, call upon my
brothers and sisters to avenge me
and destroy this she-witch once and
for all.

HAPTOOMET

Nooooo!

MENKAURE

Come Osiris! Come Isis, Anubis,
Horus and Set. By the power of Amun-
Ra, smite her.

FORREST

"We see massive forms of the gods,
huge and monstrous, looming above
the sphinx. They cast forth
lightning bolts that join as one to
strike Haptoomet in a mighty
explosion. The camera pushes in to
follow a scarlet rivulet of blood
flowing down the sphinx's neck."

MENKAURE

The tyrant is gone - this age of
darkness is ended!

The Egyptians/extras CHEER WILDLY and the MUSIC SWELLS to a
resolve.

45

THE BEST LAID PLANS 2

45

NEVILLE

Huh.

FORREST

(slowly, thunderstruck)
This is going to be the best movie
EVER!

NEVILLE

Nothing about Vivienne though, or
Bey?

FLIPPING PAGES.

FORREST

Um, wait a minute. There's call
sheets in here. That's what they
use on movie sets for--

NEVILLE

We don't have time for the technical details, Forrest. Does it say anything about Vivienne Wallace or not?

FORREST

Looks like she was originally cast as the lead dancing girl, but now she's playing Haptoomet, the sorceress.

NEVILLE

Alright. We should get out of here, while the getting's good.

MUSIC.

46

OMNISCIENCE

46

NEVILLE

I had Shufelt show me the way to the old monastery on his tunnel map, then asked him to take Forrest back home. The kid didn't want to go, but I promised him I'd make it up to him later. Now that I had a possible underground entrance, I wanted to take another stab at confronting Tahra Bey. Meanwhile, Frankie was keeping her appointment with that Loyola professor, Daniel Pratt....

47

INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

47

PRATT

...she and the other students were working with Dr. Baranger in Paris. Preparing for field work.

FRANKIE

What exactly were they studying?

PRATT

Ah, well, François had this rather unorthodox theory about a so-called "nameless city" in the Arabian Peninsula. He took his students there and then tragically he suffered a stroke.

FRANKIE

What was so unorthodox about his theory?

PRATT

Science is intended to test theories, not to embrace them. But François had very much embraced a legend about the city's destruction. It was something to the effect that the city had become overrun with pious frauds. A priest, a follower of the old "true" religion, then called upon the gods who brought down a rain of fire on the city, leaving it an uninhabited ruin.

FRANKIE

That's very Old Testament.

PRATT

Quite. Baranger was sure he could find archeological proof that would confirm the lore.

FRANKIE

Did he?

PRATT

He passed before excavations could commence. For now, the question remains unanswered.

FRANKIE

But didn't you say this was just an old legend? I mean, like a story out of the bible?

PRATT

Yes, but of course many people believe those stories are true.

FRANKIE

Okay, but a rain of fire destroying a city?

(pause)

So he believed it?

PRATT

I couldn't say... Maybe. Do you know the work of the German archeologist, Schliemann?

(MORE)

PRATT (CONT'D)

For thousands of years we believed the story of the Trojan war to be just such a legend. But then Dr. Schliemann found Troy and the legend became fact.

FRANKIE

I take your point. Now would Professor Baranger have taught these legends to his students?

PRATT

I presume so. They formed the justification for the work.

FRANKIE

Sure. Did you ever talk to Vivienne Wallace, after she returned?

PRATT

No. I'd heard she'd dropped out of school - set her sights on Hollywood. She might do well there. I remember her as having a lot of charisma.

MUSIC transition.

48

OMNISCIENCE

48

NEVILLE

It turns out the monastery made extensive use of the tunnels. I don't know if the monks had communed with the lizard people, or if Tahra Bey's mystics were trying to find the gold. But this time I was able to get right into the heart of the compound from underneath. The monastery's old locks were easier for me to pick than Egon Pierce's, and best of all, no guards. I managed to sneak my way to a room that, from the looks of the fine decor, I took to be Tahra Bey's.

49

MONASTERY BY NIGHT

49

CRICKETS. FOOTSTEPS. Silence. Bey's speech is a little odd owing to the hole in his tongue, but he speaks English.

TAHRA BEY

Is someone there?

(pause)

I heard you. You can come out. I mean you no harm.

(pause)

Hello?

NEVILLE

Tahra Bey.

TAHRA BEY

(alarmed)

Who are you?

NEVILLE

Let's just say I'm someone seeking enlightenment. They said you don't speak English. Just Esperanto and hot air.

TAHRA BEY

(his dialect thickening)

Ah. Well... I do. Little bit. From the purple sands of Badgad--

NEVILLE

Yeah, save it. I've already seen your act.

TAHRA BEY

I... I could call for my guards.

NEVILLE

And I can bust your jaw. What do you say we make this easy? You answer a couple of questions, nobody gets hurt.

TAHRA BEY

I prefer the path of peace and understanding.

NEVILLE

Straight up though - none of this mystic malarky. You got me?

TAHRA BEY

I got you.

NEVILLE

Take a seat. So what's your story here?

TAHRA BEY

I have come from the East to
bring...

(Al menaces him)

Hey, ow, let go!

NEVILLE

Now what did I say?

TAHRA BEY

Okay. I... I'm just putting on a
show. I say things that people like
to hear. They... they pay me to do
it. I am from the East though.
Anatolia.

NEVILLE

Uh-huh. And the knives in the
tongue?

TAHRA BEY

Taught to me by--

(Al moves in)

No, really, my father taught me. He
was a fakir. He taught me some gags
that impress the rubes. See?

(sticks out his tongue)

I have these holes in my tongue. A
surgical modification. Even better
than my father.

NEVILLE

And Egon Pierce, he's one of these
rubes?

TAHRA BEY

What? Egon? No, he's the boss. I
work for him.

NEVILLE

So he's calling the shots?

TAHRA BEY

Well, he was. Until she came along.

NEVILLE

Vivienne Wallace?

TAHRA BEY

That girl... she's terrifying.

NEVILLE

What do you mean?

TAHRA BEY

She's consumed by some kind of dark mysticism. Dark magic. Ancient gods - gods of madness and destruction. A very big chip on her shoulder.

NEVILLE

And you're helping her how?

TAHRA BEY

Helping? No! She's trying to call down the wrath of her elder gods. I'm just trying to put on a good show and get out alive. This woman - she is dangerous.

NEVILLE

Is she here?

TAHRA BEY

Just down the hall.

NEVILLE

Take me to her. Let's go.

TAHRA BEY

Sir, no, we must not go.

NEVILLE

I'm not here to protect you.

TAHRA BEY

You misunderstand. It is I who am trying to protect you.

NEVILLE

Let's go.

MUSIC. They WALK.

NEVILLE

He led me to the monastery's inner sanctum, where I opened an unlocked door. There was hardly a thing in the room, but its walls were covered with a crazy scrawl of drawings and formulas. It looked to me like astronomy or something, but I don't know what it meant. Sitting crosslegged on the floor was the woman who did.

51 THE SORCERESS

51

FOOTSTEPS.

VIVIENNE

Al Neville.

NEVILLE

Miss Wallace, we meet again...

VIVIENNE

Can I make you another drink?

NEVILLE

I've gotta say, you pour a pretty mean cocktail.

VIVIENNE

You lived. Sadder, maybe, but apparently no wiser. What can I do for you, Mr. Neville? I think you've picked up on the fact I'm not going home.

NEVILLE

Yeah.

VIVIENNE

So, why are you here?

NEVILLE

Hey, I don't want to force you to go home--

VIVIENNE

As if you could. You have no idea the kind of people my parents are.

NEVILLE

I know your father's a powerful man.

VIVIENNE

He knows nothing about real power.

NEVILLE

And you do?

(pause)

The occult studies. These symbols on the walls. The trip to Arabia. They're your way to fix all that? Give you power over him?

VIVIENNE

That would be a way of looking at it, if one needed to be reductive.

NEVILLE

That's not how you see it?

VIVIENNE

There's far more going on here than you realize. You're out of your league.

NEVILLE

I thought that the first day I met your mother. But here I am. What do you say we go over to your folks house, talk things over?

VIVIENNE

(barking out a laugh)

I'm part of something much bigger than my family now. Now get out before I have you thrown out again.

NEVILLE

Tahra Bey isn't going to--

VIVIENNE

Tahra Bey is a clown. His antics provide cover, and soften minds. Yog-Sothoth is the Gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key! They shall quake before Tawil et Umr.

NEVILLE

I... I don't know what that is.

VIVIENNE

You will. Bey, show this man out.

TAHRA BEY

Yes mistress.

Ominous MUSIC.

NEVILLE

The doll was chilling, all right. Nothing to do but leave, but at least this time I could go on my own two feet.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

I guess I could have tried to smack her upside the head and carry her home, kicking and screaming, but what good was going to come of that? Her folks are some kind of religious zealots - turns out the daughter's one too, just a whole other kind of religion. Nothing left to do but head back to Mrs. Wallace and break the news that her little girl wasn't going to be coming home. With any luck maybe she'd let me keep a little of her cash advance. First thing in the morning, I went to the Wallace estate. Turns out Mr. Wallace and Stella had already gone to church. Mrs. Wallace seemed like she'd gotten a head start on the communion wine.

53

SUNDAY MORNING

53

DIERDRE

Mr. Neville. I see Vivienne isn't with you.

NEVILLE

No.

DIERDRE

Have you seen her?

NEVILLE

I have. Twice now. She's... She's not coming home.

DIERDRE

(with a sigh of genuine pain)

That is a disappointment.

NEVILLE

Look, I could stage a kidnapping, but... she's an adult. And she's surrounded by friends. It wouldn't go well. She doesn't want to be here.

DIERDRE

She should be there? In that... that den of iniquity?

NEVILLE

I think she's exactly where she wants to be.

DIERDRE

You don't know my husband. And she doesn't know what's coming.

NEVILLE

I know he's allied with the League of Public Decency, with Postmaster Hays.

DIERDRE

A war is coming, Mr. Neville. A war which we are going to win.

NEVILLE

Sorry, what?

DIERDRE

A war against vice. A war against sin. A war against the profane and godless. A war for a new America. And the next battle will be waged on that movie set.

NEVILLE

I'm not--

DIERDRE

The godly will strike against Hollywood - the world's symbol of sin and corruption. Oh we know all about the film's grand finale. My husband and his people will see to it that it all goes up in holy fire. They'll create a permanent stain on Hollywood and his allies in Washington will swoop in and stop the depravity for good.

NEVILLE

You make this sound like a literal war. Are people going to--

DIERDRE

They'll BURN, Mr. Neville. When they go to shoot their grand finale, the whole thing will go up in carefully engineered flames.

NEVILLE

But, there's people... innocent people...

DIERDRE

Innocent? Every war has victims, Mr. Neville.

NEVILLE

But your daughter...

DIERDRE

You've made it clear she's chosen her side. She's already lost to me. She'll do better in the next life.

NEVILLE

Boy, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. You're insane.

DIERDRE

And you're fired. The only thing we have left to talk about is your severance.

(pause)

How much, Mr. Neville?

NEVILLE

For what? You think I'll turn and walk away?

DIERDRE

And never look back. I'll double your price.

NEVILLE

Do you really think I'm so easily bought and sold?

DIERDRE

Please. Think about it, Mr. Neville. Are you up for a fight against our side? Hm? We have congress, we have judges... we have everything we need. All you need is to keep your mouth shut.

NEVILLE

You do this in the name of, what, morality?

DIERDRE

I don't need your judgement, Mr. Neville, just your answer.

(MORE)

DIERDRE (CONT'D)

(pause)

Where were we? Double your fee?
Let's say triple. I have it right
here. In cash.

NEVILLE

You think just because you have
money, you can...

DIERDRE

I know we can. Last chance, Mr.
Neville...

NEVILLE

(awash in self-loathing)

You... You have yourself a deal.

MUSIC of self-loathing and bitter recrimination.

54

OMNISCIENCE

54

NEVILLE

Nobody wants to face the
possibility that they're not a good
person. I've always tried to think
of myself as at least being so-so.
You know, better than the worst.
And believe me, I've met some of
the worst. But Frankie likes me, or
puts up with me anyway, so I
couldn't be all bad. But Mrs.
Wallace confirmed that when push
came to shove... well... The only
thing for me now was to duck by the
office, grab a fresh shirt, and get
out of Dodge before the Blood Red
Sphinx went up in flames.

55

MORAL FAILING

55

The DYING CEILING FAN at Al's office as he GRABS STUFF out of
his desk. His door CREAKS OPEN.

FRANKIE

Al?

NEVILLE

Ah, Frankie. You gotta go home
sometimes, kid.

FRANKIE

I think we've got a real problem on the Wallace case. Vivienne got involved with some kind of black magic when she was overseas. She's going to try and do some kind of rite while they're shooting. People might be in real danger, the actors, the crew...

NEVILLE

(dead inside)

I know.

FRANKIE

You do? Well, we've got to stop them from shooting the scene.

RUMMAGING through desk drawers.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

Al? Are you listening?

NEVILLE

We're off the case, kid. Not our problem.

FRANKIE

What?

NEVILLE

You heard me. We're done. We can't stop her. We can't stop any of this. It's out of our league.

FRANKIE

Then go to the police!

NEVILLE

(snapping)

With what, Frankie? Black magic and a plot by the League of Public Decency? Yeah, that'll fly! Maybe they'll give me a medal! What do you think?

FRANKIE

(taken aback)

We've got to do something.

NEVILLE

Not me. I'm walking away.

FRANKIE
You can't do that.

NEVILLE
The hell I can't.

FRANKIE
But people - innocent people may
get hurt.

NEVILLE
Oh, they will absolutely get hurt.
It's worse than you know.

FRANKIE
And you're just going to let it
happen?

NEVILLE
I'm done here. You are too.

The RUSTLE OF BILLS being counted.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)
Here - take this - it's a bonus.
Get out of town. Go see your sister
in San Berdoo.

She SLAPS him.

FRANKIE
How dare you? I'm not one of your
girls you can just pay off once
you're done.

NEVILLE
It's too big, kid. We've got to let
this one go.

FRANKIE
(crushed)
Al... What happened to you? She's
just a girl!

NEVILLE
I've wised up about the world.

FRANKIE
Someone's paid you off, haven't
they? To look the other way. Suit
yourself. And keep your damned
money.

NEVILLE
Aw, c'mon, Frankie--

FRANKIE
Go to hell, Al!

She STORMS OUT! MUSIC.

56 OMNISCIENCE

56

NEVILLE
Saving Vivienne Wallace was no longer my job. But Frankie's idealism got under my skin. I knew it was useless to try to stop Vivienne, or her father. And I knew calling the cops would be a complete waste of time. But maybe I could get around them all if I went back to Louie Mayfield and convinced him to not shoot the big finale in the first place. It was a real Hail Mary: they were supposed to roll the cameras the very next day. But I called my fixer at Atlas Pictures, Eugene Fritz. If anyone could get me a last-minute audience with the big boss, it was him.

57 I DON'T WANNA HEAR IT

57

MAYFIELD
Cancel it?

NEVILLE
Or at least postpone it until--

MAYFIELD
The biggest scene of the most expensive motion picture shoot of all time? Are you off your nut?

NEVILLE
I know it sounds--

MAYFIELD
You're warning me about saboteurs, crazed censors, and devil worshippers? It sounds like a picture they'd make over at Universal!

NEVILLE

Sir, people are in danger. They may-

MAYFIELD

(flexing)

Look, Manville, we've got security and we've got insurance. And we also have Hollywood's biggest stars, nine hundred and eighteen extras, and sixty-four damned camels we paid to have shipped over from Arabia, and they're all on a set of the damned pyramids! Postponing would cost a fortune! I've bet the whole studio on this picture! I don't care if it burns like Krakatoa, we keep filming. We're shooting tomorrow!

NEVILLE

But what if--

MAYFIELD

(meaning it)

There's no such thing as bad publicity. And here at Atlas Pictures, we take care of our investors. Speaking of whom, I'd like to make an introduction. Fritz, show my guest in!

FRITZ

Yes sir.

The DOOR OPENS. MUSIC.

MAYFIELD

But then, you already know Mr. Jack Dragna. Right?

FOOTSTEPS as Dragna enters.

NEVILLE

(stunned)

I... I do not know anybody, or anything.

Mayfield GETS UP from his desk.

MAYFIELD

Putz. I read detective scripts; what do they always say? "The jig is up"? I'll leave you to it. My office is yours, Mr. Dragna.

DRAGNA

Yeah, I know.

DEPARTING FOOTSTEPS. The DOOR CLOSES.

DRAGNA (CONT'D)

You got a real pair of *coglioni*,
Mister...

(overpronouncing the name)
Neville.

NEVILLE

(gulping)
Sir, listen, I never actually--

DRAGNA

I ought to have you killed.

NEVILLE

Well, now--

DRAGNA

Slowly. Painfully. But you have
moxie, trying to warn Mayfield here
about this plot against my movie.
And even if it's all a scam, it's
not bad. You have potential.

NEVILLE

That's... nice to hear.

DRAGNA

I don't have a clue what you're on
about with the devil girl - or the
swami for that matter - but these
censors, them I don't like. We
gotta do something about them.

NEVILLE

Well, sir, if you were to cancel
the filming they won't have
anything to complain about.

DRAGNA

Meh, I wouldn't go that far.
Mayfield's a *zuccone*, but he knows
publicity. I've always found a
little mayhem is good for business.
And this movie's my business now.

NEVILLE

(wary)
Okay.

DRAGNA

And so it's yours too. Since you've been telling people that you work for **me**, you're gonna **work** for me. You're gonna be on that movie set for the finale tomorrow, and you're gonna help my men make sure that everything goes the way I want it to go. Everything. You hear me?

NEVILLE

Sure. Yes, sir.

DRAGNA

Nicky Bompensiero will show you what to do.

MUSIC.

DRAGNA (CONT'D)

Do not let me down.

58

OMNISCIENCE

58

NEVILLE

Turns out they start shooting movies pretty damned early in the morning, so I didn't have much time to get organized. I tried to reach Frankie, but she wasn't ready to talk to me. I rallied the rest of my troops and set out.

The production had turned a dry lake bed out in the desert into the Gizeh Plateau. Dawn broke over replicas of the pyramids and the sphinx - mind boggling in their size and detail. I'd never imagined so many extras. Soldiers, dancers, courtiers and camel herders. I couldn't have imagined a crazier scene if I tried.

We hear AD LIBS of Egon, Older and other production people, running around, setting up their shots.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Pierce was there, coordinating five different cameras to capture what was about to unfold.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

And Vivienne was poised near the sphinx, apparently ready to spout her lines and then call upon her unholy allies.

Her father, August Wallace, huddled with fellow do-gooders in a tent off to one side, furtively watching and waiting to enact their plan.

There were tents behind the cameras, and catering tables with food for the cast and crew. I saw Nicky Bompensiero and some of Dragna's other men there, filling their pockets with crullers. Soaking it all in, I thought my protégé Forrey was going to lose his mind.

59

QUIET ON THE SET

59

It's NOISY, complicated and WINDY. CAMELS! TEAMSTERS!

FORREST

Oh my god, Al, there's Myrna Muldoon! See her? And that's Landis King up on the pyramid. Wait 'til I tell the guys at Clifton's Cafeteria about this. Thanks for bringing me, Mr. Neville.

NEVILLE

Sure, sure, but you remember what I told you?

FORREST

Eyes peeled at all times. If you holler my name, I go for cover. And whatever happens, I don't go near the sphinx.

NEVILLE

There's Jack.
(shouting)
Jack, over here!

EGON PIERCE

(distant, through a megaphone)

Listen up everyone. We're shooting this in one. That means whatever happens, we keep rolling.

(MORE)

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)

Don't look at the cameras, just do
what we've rehearsed.

Jack jogs up to Al. They speak in hurried, hushed tones.

NEVILLE

What's the story, Jack?

JACK PARSONS

You were right. Somebody tampered
with the fireworks we rigged on the
sphinx. They planted TNT in the
mortars. It would have gone off
like a damned bomb.

NEVILLE

Were you able to fix it?

JACK PARSONS

Yeah, I defused it. Still, I'd like
to know what kind of crazed maniac--

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

(distant, on megaphone)

Everyone to your places! And quiet
please! Stand by for action!

BOMPENSIERO

What did I just hear?

NEVILLE

Mr. Bompensiero! No, nothing, it
was--

EGON PIERCE

(through megaphone)

Roll cameras!

ROBERT DAVIDSON

Speed!

EGON PIERCE

Roll sound!

SOUND GUY

Rolling.

EGON PIERCE

Mark it!

CLACK

And action! Go musicians!

SISTRUM and DRUMS PLAY

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)
Go dancers!

A THOUSAND BELLS JINGLE

EGON PIERCE (CONT'D)
Go soldiers!

MARCHING FEET

BOMPENSIERO
Ain't nothing been defused. Our own
charges are all ready to go.

JACK PARSONS
What charges?

EGON PIERCE
(megaphone)
And go camel herders! No, slower!

BOMPENSIERO
We moved some of 'em to the
censors' tent. August Wallace is
going up one way or another. You're
here to make sure it gets done.

JACK PARSONS
What's he talking about?

BOMPENSIERO
Mr. Dragna says you take this gat,
Neville, and when the fireworks
start going off, you're going to
make sure Wallace is taken out.

APPROACHING RUNNING FOOTSTEPS.

BOMPENSIERO (CONT'D)
Mr. Dragna says this is on you.
Hey, who's the kid?

FORREST
Mr. Neville! Mr. Neville, look!
Isn't that your secretary?

NEVILLE
(alarmed)
What? Where?

FORREST
There, with the dancing girls. You
didn't tell me she was in the
movie!

NEVILLE

Frankie! Oh, hell, she's gonna try
and stop Vivienne. She's gonna get
herself killed!

Starts to leave.

EGON PIERCE

(still through megaphone)
Good, eyes on Haptoomet up on the
sphinx...

(sudden)
Everyone, look up at Menkaure!
You're shocked!

BOMPENSIERO

Where in hell do you think you're
going, Neville?

NEVILLE

(a desperate ploy)
Wait, is that Myrna? My god, she's
in trouble!

BOMPENSIERO

What? Myrna? My Myrna?

Nicky RUNS toward her. Neville RUNS in the opposite
direction.

NEVILLE

(shouting over the din)
Frankie - get out of there!

EGON PIERCE

(megaphone)
Good! Landis, hold that position!
And go with the dialogue!

LANDIS KING

(emoting hard as Menkaure)
My people - though you thought me
slain and buried, by the power of
the gods I yet live.

An awed MURMUR ripples across the extras.

LANDIS KING (CONT'D)

This sorceress, Haptoomet, has
betrayed me--

VIVIENNE
 (passionately, as
 Haptoomet)
 Guards, seize this impostor!

LANDIS KING
 And I, a living god, call upon my
 brothers and sisters to avenge me
 and destroy this she-witch--

VIVIENNE
 Noooo! It is I who call upon the
 gods. The old gods. The true gods.
 (invoking them)
 Ong dacta linka, niblod zin....

OLDER
 Wait, what? Egon, that's not in the
 script.

EGON PIERCE
 (roaring)
 Fix it in post! Keep rolling!

VIVIENNE
 Come Nyarlathotep! By Yog-Sothoth,
 who is both gate and key - I call
 down Tawil et Umr!

THUNDER shakes the set. WEIRD WHOOSHING as a supernatural
 upheaval begins. MUSIC!

LANDIS KING
 What the... um, The tyrant is gone -
 this age of darkness is ended!

VIVIENNE
 No, it has just begun!

NEVILLE
 Frankie!

FRANKIE
 Al!

All HELL BREAKS LOOSE. Pillars of FIRE. BOMBS. GUNSHOTS.
 Terrified CENSORS. SCREAMING dancing girls. Frightened
 CAMELS. Disconcerted best boys!

Supernatural WOOSHING and the sound of menacing cosmic WOE.

NEVILLE

I'd explain what happened, if I could. Jack told me that Vivienne actually conjured up... something. Creatures, gods, I don't know what. He saw them in the clouds above the set. So did a lot of people, softened up by Tahra Bey's mystic nonsense.

BOMBS. SHOUTING. A CONFLAGRATION!

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Wallace's men detonated their explosives and managed mostly to blow themselves up, thanks to Dragna's men repositioning the charges. But the movie sphinx was just made of straw and plaster, and it caught fire anyway. Poor Vivienne was trapped on top of it. She was dead before she hit the ground.

SCREAMS amidst the chaos. RUNNING FEET!

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

(almost lost in the chaos -
not narrated)

Frankie!

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

I never saw any of it myself. I only had eyes for Frankie. I got to her just in time. I'd like to say I saved her, but really she yanked me aside. Or maybe it was one of the other dancing girls. I like to think she might have saved my life.

A WHOOSH OF FLAMING DEBRIS. FORREST SCREAMS.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Forrest got hit by a burning piece of the pyramids, giving him a scar on his chin. He was thrilled.

An EXPLOSION segues into NEWSPAPER PRESSES, politicians' WALLA, and the POUNDING GAVELS of legislated morality.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

In some ways August Wallace got just what he wanted.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

His death was front page news and his cronies in Washington took full advantage, putting a new "code" in place to protect the American family from immoral Hollywood. Poor Stella Wallace lost her father and her sister in one go.

Quiet MONASTIC CHANTING as WAVES CRASH in Big Sur.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Egon Pierce - he was ruined. Last I heard, he'd joined some monastic order up in Monterey.

We hear the LAUNCH OF A ROCKET followed the LAUGHTER of delighted rocket scientists.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

My pal Jack Parsons kept experimenting with his rockets until he and his buddies made something called the Jet Propulsion Laboratory - just up the hill from the gully where he opened my mind.

The POP of FLASHBULBS on a red carpet. APPLAUSE.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

Dragna - he made his move, ousting Louie Mayfield and taking over Atlas Pictures. Poor John Older got blamed for the explosion. Someone had to be the patsy. The Blood Red Sphinx ended up a being tax write-off. I told you, nobody understands how completion bonds work. Dragna's next picture was some goofy thing about underground Lizard Men. He made a fortune off it. Fritz and Knowles, they're both on his payroll now.

MUSIC SWELLS to the RICKETY CEILING FAN of Neville's office.

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

As for me, Dragna very magnanimously cut me loose. I'd like to say it's because I explained to him my feelings for Frankie. More likely it was because I tipped him off about Warren Shufelt's gold.

(MORE)

NEVILLE (CONT'D)

He still had Nicky Bompensiero beat the ever-loving tar outta me. It cost me a tooth, but it could have been worse. Actually, it was worse.

(with genuine pain)

Frankie herself wasn't so forgiving. The one gal who really understood me, and I haven't seen her since. Don't suspect I ever will.

I guess if anyone actually walked away unscathed, it was the fakir, Tahra Bey. Dicky Wheeler's his agent now. Last I heard he was wowing crowds outside Toronto - still appealing for peace and understanding.

61 CONCLUSION

61

LESTER MAYHEW

You've been listening to "The Blood Red Sphinx", brought to you by our sponsor, Sani-Luxe.

ANNOUNCER

Absorbent. Splinter-free. And now with perforated squares. Bring home a few rolls of Sani-Luxe bathroom tissue today and let the good times roll!

LESTER MAYHEW

Why not feel your best with Sani-Luxe? Thank you for joining me, Lester Mayhew. Until next week, this is Dark Adventure Radio Theatre reminding you to never go anywhere alone; if it looks bad, don't look; and save the last bullet for yourself.

DARK ADVENTURE THEME.

ANNOUNCER

"The Blood Red Sphinx" was written for radio and produced by Sean Branney and Andrew Leman. Original music by Reber Clark.

(MORE)

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

The Dark Adventure Ensemble
featured Annie Abrams, Yeni
Alvarez, Leslie Baldwin, Sean
Branney, Kacey Camp, Ken Clement,
Dan Conroy, Matt Foyer, Larissa
Gallagher, Daniel Kaemon, Ophelia
Larsen, Andrew Leman, Dick
Lizzardo, Yuri Lowenthal, John A.
McKenna, Grinnell Morris, David
Pavao, Ray Porter, Kevin Stidham,
Josh Thoemke, Sarah van der Pol,
Johnno Wilson and Time Winters.
Tune in next week for "The Creeping
Wombats!" a morbid mystery of
marsupial mayhem.

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Radio STATIC and fade out.

*