The comeback Agnes Ayres had struggled for was just within her grasp. It was November 1936 and she’d come home to Paramount, where once, 15 years before, she’d reigned as a star. Her role in *Souls at Sea* was not a starring one, not even a supporting part. It was little more than a bit, a walk-on, but at least she was working before the camera. She was sure it was the start to her long road back to stardom.

If she had the jitters, there were those on the set who still remembered her and offered their support. Even Rudolph Valentino, her old co-star from *The Sheikh*, was on hand to offer his encouragement. Agnes had her doubts that he was actually present beside her, but she’d had that assurance from some.

Since the recent publicity that Agnes was making a comeback at Paramount, a number of mediums had contacted the studio to let her know that Valentino, who’d died suddenly 10 years before, had messages for her. One medium assured her that the great film lover would be standing by her side when her scenes were filmed. If he was there, fine! Agnes felt she needed all the support she could muster.

Richard Griffith, in *The Movie Stars*, gave Agnes Ayres the sad distinction of waging the “grimmest, most tenacious, and in the end most futile struggle to make a comeback via the quickies, the personal appearance route, and every other means she could think of.”

She’d been in films since 1915, starting at the old Essanay Company in Chicago. After years of churning out one and two reelers at Vitagraph, Agnes caught the attention of producer Jesse L. Lasky, who rescued her from the mundane and made her a star — and his mistress.

Agnes rose to stardom at Paramount with the studio’s finest leading men: Thomas Meighan, Jack Holt, Milton Sills, and Wallace Reid. But it was when Rudolph Valentino carried her into his tent in *The Sheikh* that her star rose to the heavens. She became the envy of millions of women.

Her association with Paramount ended when her relationship with Lasky soured. She signed a contract with Producer’s Distributing
Corporation (PDC), but when the company kept her idle and off the screen, allegedly because of weight gain, she sued the company, including its vice-president, the powerful director Cecil B. DeMille.

In the middle of her legal fight, Agnes put her career on hold. She married and started a family in the mid-1920s. After the marriage ended, she set out to reclaim her place in films.

Time had passed, however. It had been nearly 10 years since Valentino had gathered her up into his arms and rode off with her across the desert. She’d once stood in the spotlight, but now, the bright light illuminated someone else. Talkies were the rage and she was seen as a relic from another time.

Not to be deterred, Agnes spent the next decade traipsing around the country playing one-night stands in cheap vaudeville houses, all the while her gaze was back on Hollywood and her ambition to work in films. She was ready to drop everything and run back to Hollywood if anyone beckoned her.

Through the desert sands in her hourglass, Agnes Ayres had plenty of time to think about the days of her life.

She was born Agnes Henkel on April 4, 1892, in Carbondale, Illinois. She had a brother, Solon William, born in December 1888. It is not clear whether her father, Solon Augustus Henkel, died while Agnes was a child, or whether her parents divorced, but by 1900, Agnes’ mother, Emma Slack Henkel had married Franklin Rendleman, a farmer.

The family moved to Chicago when Agnes was a teenager. While early publicity indicates that Agnes had ambitions to study law, in 1910 at the age of 18, she was working as a bookkeeper. She often said she had no early ambitions of becoming an actress.

By all accounts, Agnes broke into the movies as Agnes Eyre at Chicago’s Essanay Film Manufacturing Company during the winter of 1914, when a girlfriend suggested they visit the studio. Agnes caught the attention of a director, who used her in a crowd scene of a Francis X. Bushman film.

She was encouraged to return to the studio and join the ranks of extras. Gloria Swanson, another Essanay extra, and Agnes shared a dressing room. They both had small roles in an early Charlie Chaplin film, His New Job (1915).

Agnes said later that her days at Essanay, where she played as many as four parts in a working day, were the most satisfying days of her film career. “Perhaps in the morning I would start as a school girl, hair down in curls and all that sort of thing; then at eleven suffragettes were the order, while
at two the call was for enthusiastic co-ed rooters at a football game; and in the late afternoon I would put on formal clothes and attend a reception.

“During every free minute we were experimenting with makeup, waiting for a chance at real parts. It was the finest experience imaginable, days and days of just fun — with an undercurrent of real seriousness. For it meant our futures.”

*Agnes in* The Blue Book of the Screen (1924).
Agnes saved what money she could from her $35 a week Essanay salary. By the winter of 1916, she had enough saved to get her and her mother to New York, where there were more opportunities for actresses. Agnes and Emma had no contacts in the big city, so work didn’t come immediately. When it looked like they might have to return to Chicago, director Frank Powell hired Agnes to appear in a number of Marjorie Rambeau films: *The Dazzling Miss Davison, The Mirror, The Debt,* and *Motherhood,* all 1917 releases.

As her career began to move forward, Agnes married Frank P. Schuker, an Army captain. The union promised to bring mother and daughter solid financial security until Agnes established herself in films. However, the two soon separated. Agnes concentrated on finding work in the movies.

It was actress Alice Joyce who, noticing a resemblance between the two, offered Agnes the role of her sister in *Richard the Brazen* (1917), a Vitagraph production. Agnes continued working for Vitagraph through 1918 and most of 1919, appearing in a series of popular shorts based on the stories of O. Henry. Agnes eventually became known around the studio and filmdom as “The O. Henry Girl.” They provided excellent training ground to the budding actress.

“I have never really enjoyed anything more than those pictures,” Agnes said later. “I used to love to study the heroines of the various stories and it was a joy to visualize each different one on the screen.”

Most of her roles at Vitagraph were wholesome heroines, with an occasional vamp part thrown in. “I was very mean, too,” she said. “I said to myself as I was portraying the role, ‘I hate her, and I’ll do anything I can do to make her unhappy.’ I always try to do that in picture acting. I try to live my part, and I find that makeup and costume really do change my personality.”

After almost two years at Vitagraph, Agnes turned her sights to Hollywood after producer Jesse L. Lasky turned his sights to her. He had seen her on the screen and, although he was married with children, he became infatuated with the actress. He brought her to Los Angeles, where he starred her in *Held by the Enemy* (1920).

In this Civil War melodrama produced by Paramount, Agnes played a Southern belle whose husband, whom she never loved, is killed in the war. Grieving only briefly, she is reacquainted with an old beau, who is now an officer in the Union Army. Her plans to marry are thwarted when the husband she thought had been killed shows up.

Agnes garnered glowing reviews for her work in the film. “Agnes Ayres gave a performance that was truly great. She looked wonderfully well and carried the role to perfection,” noted *Variety.*
Lasky placed Agnes under contract to Paramount and made it his priority to lavish his attention on her. They began a long-term affair, and he offered her the best scripts and starred her with the studio’s top directors and leading men.

She confessed to a reporter not long after she arrived in Hollywood that her secret ambition was to be a success on the stage. “I had an offer to go into musical comedy and also a play just before coming West,” Agnes said, “but I didn’t accept, because I really want to achieve my screen ambitions first. I feel as if I have the opportunity to do this now.”

Certainly with Lasky’s personal attention on her, in exchange for her attention and affections, she would have been foolish to return to New York and struggle for what meager parts came along.

Before the year was out, she had leading roles in *The Furnace*, directed by William Desmond Taylor, and *Go and Get It*, under the direction of Marshall Neilan.
As she was settling into her career at Paramount, she attended to a bit of housekeeping. She set about divorcing Frank Schucker. In court, Agnes presented herself as Agnes Schucker, forgetting to tell the judge she was Agnes Ayres of the screen. Her mother testified she had supported Agnes for over a year. The judge granted the divorce on the grounds of non-support.

Soon after, the divorce decree was rescinded when the court learned Agnes was a “high-priced” film star. In the end, the court ruled that she probably had good cause for divorce on the grounds of desertion. So, Agnes, as Agnes Ayres, returned to court and entered her plea. The divorce was granted.

Agnes’ stellar performance in *Forbidden Fruit* (1921) set her on sound footing at Paramount. Cecil B. DeMille directed her in the role of a seamstress who passes for a society lady. Agnes was stunning as Cinderella in an elaborate flashback sequence.

*Variety* took notice of her work. “Agnes Ayres, a young woman who has made marvelous strides since leaving Vitagraph, is given chief honors,
and wears them well. She is a beautiful girl, with poise and restraint, and portrays a many-shaded character excellently.”

Agnes had prominent parts with the handsome, but ill-fated, Wallace Reid in three 1921 releases: *The Love Special* (a railroad story set in the West); *Too Much Speed* (an auto racing story); and *The Affairs of Anatol*, in which Reid, under the skillful direction of DeMille, saves Agnes from drowning herself after her husband (Monte Blue) accuses her of stealing church funds.

In the summer of 1921, Agnes started work on the film for which she is remembered today: *The Sheik*. She was cast as Lady Diana Mayo, a headstrong English blonde, whom Rudolph Valentino, as Sheik Ahmed, stalks, captures, and finally seduces in his tent somewhere in the Algerian desert.

Agnes demands to know his intentions for her. He leers at her, then nods toward the inner chambers of the tent. He answers with a sneer, “Are you not woman enough to know?”

*Agnes on the set of The Affairs of Anatol (1921) with Wallace Reid, Cecil B. DeMille, Monte Blue, Raymond Hatton, and Theodore Kosloff.*
The film was a smashing success, breaking attendance records over the globe. Early critics expressed bewilderment that the script had fallen into the censors’ hands and emerged a much tamer tale than the racy book by E.M. Hull.

*Picture Play* put it this way: “His (Valentino’s) fierceness — which so delighted the gentle spinster readers — is all gone, his language and
manner are as meek as a Rollo book, and his attitude toward the kid-napped heroine is that of a considerate and platonic friend rather than the passionate, ruthless lover ‘on an Arab shod with fire.’”\textsuperscript{15}  

Valentino, \textit{Picture Play} surmised, was too young for the role. “We liked Agnes Ayres better as the obstinate beauty who shrinks from his advances, though we must say she didn’t have much to shrink from.”\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Agnes_Ayres_in_the_arms_of_Tom_Gallery_in_A_Daughter_of_Luxury_(1922).jpg}
\caption{Agnes Ayres in the arms of Tom Gallery in A Daughter of Luxury (1922).}
\end{figure}

While \textit{Photoplay} congratulated Agnes for playing her role “splendidly,”\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Variety} opined that perhaps she was the wrong actress for the role. “Agnes Ayres looks too matronly to lend much kick to the situation in which she finds herself. She has shown herself capable of much better things than this.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Variety} offered the same opinion of Agnes’ next film, \textit{The Lane that had no Turning} (1922), in which she played a French opera singer married to a hunchback. “As in her previous picture, \textit{The Sheik}, Miss Ayres is relegated to a secondary position as regards to prominence by another member of the cast. In \textit{The Sheik}, it was Valentino who outshone her, and in this release, the honors go to Theodore Kosloff as the deformed husband. Miss Ayres lends a pleasing appearance, but is not called upon to do anything out of the ordinary.”

In the spring of 1922, while the shooting of \textit{Borderland} was underway, Agnes and her co-star, Milton Sills, were asked to perform in a skit, \textit{The}
Dumb-bell Wives, for the First Annual Hollywood Follies, a musical comedy show. The two rehearsed the skit, but on the night of the performance, Agnes panicked and refused to go on, claiming she had not been properly rehearsed. Sills, who was prepared for his part, was unable to perform without Agnes.

Marion Fairfaix, the show’s chairperson, was furious. In a letter to Sills the next day, she expressed her frustration. When Agnes complained to Fairfax that she was unprepared for the skit, “I myself took her back into the wings for her entrance, and I did not know until after the show was over that she left the wings the moment my back was turned, or that this was what prevented your appearance. I am truly indignant that this should have happened, and that we lost the value that you would have added to the number. It seems outrageous, after you gave so much of your time as you did to be with us, that such a thing could have happened.”

In June, filming began on Clarence, her final film with Wallace Reid, who was critically ill from the ravaging affects of drug addiction. Agnes was stunned by his appearance. Larry Lee Holland, in his career article on Agnes for Films in Review, claims that Agnes, working on her fourth film with Reid, was secretly in love with the dying actor.

Holland writes, “He collapsed several times on the set and was sent home to recover. Agnes visited him at his home on Sunset Boulevard and would sit by his bedside for hours at a time. She claimed that she loved him and couldn’t live without him, which at first amused Dorothy Reid, his wife.

“Soon, however, Wallace began to complain about her visits and Dorothy was forced to ask Agnes not to come anymore. Agnes persisted in calling until Dorothy grew desperate and, like a scene from a bad movie, threatened to throw acid in Agnes’ face if she showed up again. That did it. Agnes did not return.”

Though she may have exhibited occasional bursts of temperament and was possibly in love with Wallace Reid, the hand guiding her career, Jesse L. Lasky, continued assigning her some of the studio’s best material.

In The Ordeal, a society drama, she parades around in a series of stunning gowns. She plays an outcast in the modern-day story in The Ten Commandments (1923), her third film under the direction of Cecil B. DeMille. In the action-paced Racing Hearts (1923), she buys a racing car and wins the race. To promote the picture, Paramount released a story alleging that Agnes was twice arrested for speeding during the filming of picture. She spent a day on location practicing an arrest for a speeding violation, only be stopped by cops on her way home that evening.
She plays another speed demon in *The Heart Raider* (1923). While *Variety* praised Agnes as “that rare type of a good-looking athletic girl who is both (good-looking and athletic), the kind of a girl everyone likes,”21 *Harrison’s Reports* thought Agnes too old for the part. “The heroine is supposed to be of unmanageable nature and of destructive disposition, making her father pay damages on account of her speed mania. Such part requires a woman of much younger age than that of Miss Ayres. It requires too great a stretch of imagination to accept her as the young woman of the story.”22

In 1924, Agnes did some of her best work. *Harrison’s Reports* called *The Story Without a Name*, “a good melodrama,”23 and *The Guilty One*, “one of the most gripping murder mysteries produced by Famous Players-Lasky in many a moon.”24

Over time, Agnes grew disillusioned over being a kept woman at Paramount. She understood that, although Lasky’s marriage was not a happy one, he had no intentions of leaving his wife for her. In October 1923, Agnes met a handsome, young Mexican at the home of her close friend, actress Kathlyn Williams. He turned out to be S. Manuel Reachi, attaché to the consulate general of Mexico at San Francisco. A romance blossomed, and in August 1924, the two announced their engagement.25

For the next month, Agnes consistently denied the two were already married. Finally, in September 1924, she told reporters the two had married in Mexico in July. She refused to explain why they had kept their nuptials secret. “We just didn’t want it known, that’s all,” she said. The bride and groom, she explained, would honeymoon in Europe after the completion of her film, *Worldly Goods*.26

That fall, Agnes completed *Tomorrow’s Love* (1925), the final film in her five-year tenure for Paramount. Almost immediately, she signed with Producers Distributing Corporation (PDC) for three pictures at $10,000 each. *Her Market Value* (1925) was her first PDC film, followed by *The Awful Truth* (1925), in which a series of misunderstandings between the flirtatious Agnes and her husband (Warner Baxter) lead to the divorce court. She later devises a scheme to win back her husband. *The New York Times* gushed that Agnes was “serenely delightful” in the picture and “is happily cast in this type of role. No one could or need do it better.”27

That summer, Agnes, between pictures, invited a reporter from *The Los Angeles Times* to her home on Martel Avenue to discuss her marriage and film career.

“It is nice to be at home,” Agnes said. “I am busy, usually, off to the studio early in the morning and not back again until very late. Now, I
have a little time to pick my roses and get acquainted with my pets,” which consisted of a parrot, a German police dog, Tino (a cat named for Rudolph Valentino), and chickens.28

After her long contract with Paramount, Agnes said she was looking for less “decorative” roles and a chance to make herself an “individual rather than a mere type of beauty.”29

The next month, in July, Agnes had apparently grown bored of pruning roses and watching chickens roost. She filed a $43,000 suit against PDC claiming they had not followed through with their bargain.30 In August, Agnes amended the suit, increasing the suit to $93,000.31 Part of her beef was with Cecil B DeMille, a partner in the firm, whom she said promised her better roles if she signed with PDC. She maintained that her absence from the screen had damaged her reputation with the public. In addition, Agnes was aggravated that in billing Three Faces
East, a film project she never made, DeMille had co-featured Agnes with an actor of less prominence, in violation of her contract which called for her to receive star billing in all her pictures.\textsuperscript{32}

In the defendant’s answer to the lawsuit, PDC claimed that excessive weight gain, a violation of her contract, was the contributing factor in not starring her in more films. Agnes was furious at the claim and was ready for a showdown in court. Perhaps the studio was not aware that Agnes was pregnant.

Two days after Agnes filed her amended suit, news surfaced that a Nora Hingley De Reachi, a resident of Hawaii, had obtained a divorce from her husband on the grounds of desertion. She asserted that she was still married to Manual Reachi when he married Agnes. Manual told reporters he was bewildered over the woman’s claim. He said he had never been to Hawaii, had never been married before marrying Agnes, and had never heard of a Nora Hingley De Reachi.\textsuperscript{33} Nothing came of the woman’s accusation.

In February 1926, Cecil B. DeMille, in a court deposition, said he tried to politely inform Agnes that she was overweight. "I did not say," he declared, 'Lady, you are fat!"

="Do you know why she has not made any more pictures," DeMille was asked.
“I remember hearing discussed the fact that the exhibitors would not take her because she had lost her appearance,” he replied.

“At the last time you had occasion to see her did you speak to her about her fatness?” the court questioned.

DeMille responded, “We discussed questions quite frankly, but whether it was because she was fat or not, I don’t remember.”

“Did you notice any difference in her facial appearance on these different interviews?”

“She has always seemed very charming to me,” DeMille answered.

Agnes and her husband stood their ground. Manual told reporters, “We have authorized statements from Miss Ayres’s physicians showing that she has not gained one pound of flesh for the last four years and also certified photographs to prove and uphold these statements.”

Agnes’s attorney, Gunther R. Lessing, said the weight issue was “merely in line with other attempts to injure Miss Ayres because she dared to stand up for her rights. Since when has a bean pole become Mr. DeMille’s standard of beauty? Everybody has noticed that like Caesar, he likes them fat.”

While the case dragged on, Agnes gave birth to a daughter, Maria Eugenia, on March 26, 1926. Pola Negri and Rudolph Valentino were named godparents.

In May 1926, Producers Distributing Corporation settled out of court in favor of Agnes. They declared, “no animosity exists toward you and we hope we may avail ourselves of your services in the future.”

Later that month, it was announced that Agnes would appear in The Son of the Sheik (1926), a sequel to The Sheik. She would reprise her role of Diana and Rudolph Valentino would play dual roles as the father (still married to Diana) and their son.

The Son of the Sheik opened in July 1926 to adoring fans. He embarked on a nation-wide tour publicize the film. Following the opening of the picture at the Strand Theater in Brooklyn, Valentino took to the stage and spoke affectionately of Agnes and her willingness to take a small role in his film and of her devotion to her infant daughter. That evening turned out to be his last public appearance.

Days later, he fell ill and died in New York of a ruptured gastric ulcer and peritonitis. He was only 31 years old. Agnes, like the rest of the world, was grief stricken.

“His death is doubly affecting to me because not only were our careers so closely linked in the struggle for picture success, but he had ever proved himself as a loyal friend,” she said in a statement.
Following her court settlement and the announcement of her work in *The Son of the Sheik*, the Reachi marriage fell apart. Manual Reachi left the Martel Avenue house and Agnes filed for divorce, claiming desertion and abuse.

On the stand, Agnes called her husband’s treatment of her austere. On occasion, she testified, his austerity reached such a degree that she came
out of struggles with fingerprints on her throat and nervous chills. Five times since their marriage, she continued, he deserted her, going away once to Europe without her.

“Judge, he would go into the most frightful tantrums over just nothing at all,” she said in court. “Half the time, I would not have the least idea what it was all about.”

The divorce was final in June 1927. The court approved a property settlement whereby each party released the other from any claim. Reachi consented to their daughter remaining in Agnes’ custody at her expense.

“I am not sorry I married because I have my daughter. And, I would marry again, because I love children,” Agnes told Photoplay. “But if I do marry again, he will be an American. Latin men are wonderful lovers, but poor husbands.”

Although Agnes had invested well in real estate, she felt the need, now that she was no longer married, to return to work. In a rather sad, yet bizarre move, Agnes was cast as foil to comedian Stan Laurel in a two-reel, slapstick comedy, Eve’s Love Letters (1927).

In 1928, she made another short and appeared in several quickies with talking sequences. From December 1928 to November 23, 1929, she appeared on the New York stage as a Gypsy Joe dancer in Whoopee!
Her final film of any consequence was as a dinner party guest in *The Donovan Affair* (1929), an early talkie directed by Frank Capra. Dorothy Revier, who appeared as Agnes’ stepdaughter in the picture, later recalled her bumpy start with the veteran actress.

Revier remembered Ayres as being “very cool and aloof in an almost vindictive manner” at the beginning of the picture. Revier believed that Agnes was having an affair with the sound technician, and as a joke, the two of them tampered with Revier’s voice test for the picture, making her voice sound distortedly high-pitched.42

“Frank Capra and I almost panicked before they told us it had all been in fun,” Revier recounted. “Surprisingly, we became friends during the rest of the picture. I was really nice to her and started flattering her, saying how great she was in *The Sheik* with Valentino. Soon after that, she began inviting me to lunch and we became friends.”43

*Variety*, in its review of the picture, noted their voices were “okay, but that Agnes Ayres seems to be putting on flesh.”44

Following her appearance in *The Donovan Affair*, Agnes’ personal and professional lives were set adrift. She lost her fortune in the stock market crash of 1929 and found herself in dire straits.

In late 1929 or early 1930, she began an affair with director Lewis Milestone, who was in the middle of shooting *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). In early April, Louella Parsons reported in her column that, “Mr. Milestone set out to win Agnes and apparently, he has succeeded, for their wedding will take place sometime in June.”

Details about Agnes’ on and off relationship with Milestone come from an unsigned draft of a letter in his personal papers at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library. The writer of the letter is a Milestone insider, perhaps an agent or accountant who handled Milestone’s affairs. Apparently, at Milestone’s request, the writer attempted to paint a realistic picture for Agnes of Milestone’s feelings for her and to bring some stability to Agnes’ life following her loss of fortune.

“*The big house*45 is rented for $250.00 a month and all of them have moved to the Orange Grove Avenue house.46 She got a wire last week asking if she would accept a New York stage engagement.47 She came to me to ask what to do and I told her that as she was making her own living to do what she thought best, but to at least get an advance from the people. Wires have been popping back and forth all week and they sent her an advance which she is leaving with the mother48 to tide her and the child over. She now has a fair income — about $350 a month — and as long as she works, it will be more. Everything that
could be done for her has been done and she is entirely satisfied with everything.”

The insider then urges Milestone to refrain from the games he has played with the emotionally fragile actress.

“For the love, let sleeping dogs lie. Don’t get into communication with her in any way whatever. Every time this matter is opened up, it becomes harder to fix and having Mischa go to her and talk romance just makes it tougher for me. If you want her, alright, go to it, but on the other hand, if you do not want to get married, just keep away and do not communicate with her in any way shape or form. If you do, and then try to get out from under, it is going to cost a hell of a lot of dough, time and trouble.”

Before the writer could mail Milestone the letter, a despondent Agnes called. “Hell broke loose again,” the Milestone acquaintance wrote in an addendum to the original letter. “Someone told Agnes about an interview that you gave out in New York saying, ‘I never had an intention of marrying. I was never engaged and have no plans for the future in that line. Whatever you have heard is just a lot of gossip.’ She was sore as hell over the phone and I told her I would be up at noon. I met her at noon and at 4 o’clock had her quieted down again and she agreed not to pay any attention to anything. I told her I would not handle her things and get them into shape if she did not behave herself and as I have been successful so far in fixing her income so that she at least has enough to live on. Don’t talk about her to anyone so that it gets back to her because each time she is told something she gets madder and madder.”


Back on the stage in October, Agnes appeared with Victor Jory in *On the Spot*, at the Westchester Theater in Mount Vernon, New York. In December, she supported Lou Tellegen in *Cortez* on the Philadelphia stage.

The next May (1933), Agnes appeared in Syracuse, New York, in a series of personal appearances in which she discussed the motion picture industry. She told the audience that silent were superior to talkies, certain studios deliberately destroy the box office value of star to avoid paying
salaries commensurate with their drawing power, movie-going audiences are inclined to forget those whose hair is graying, and there will never be another Valentino.\textsuperscript{54} Part of her stay in the city included an appearance in the children’s department of a local department store.

Later that month, she joined the cast of \textit{Hard-Boiled Angel}, starring Lenore Ulric, at the Grand Opera House in Chicago.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{center}
\textit{Advertisement for Agnes’ beauty demonstration (1934).}
\end{center}

In late 1933, Agnes worked in a Hollywood revue with Babe Kane, James Hall, and the Rose sisters. She talked about the past. Cecil B. DeMille, she said, “is a man of infinite charm who was a man’s man.” In speaking about \textit{The Sheik}, she said she was “just a youngster trying to make good.” Again, she said there would not be another Valentino. “Most assuredly, there will not. He was a charm distinctly his own. Neither Clark Gable nor George Raft can take his place.” Of her role as Diana in \textit{The Sheik}, Agnes proclaimed, “I should like to play it again and do not believe the role would be any less alive today than then.”\textsuperscript{56}

While doing beauty care demonstrations at a beauty salon in New York in October 1934, Agnes spoke with a reporter about her struggle to make her way back to Hollywood fame.

\begin{quote}
“Honestly, I haven’t grown bitter, nor disillusioned or catty, I hope, but I know my old public would still want to see me and still talk about me. It’s not the public’s fault that a person like myself wouldn’t be given a chance now.”\textsuperscript{57}

“When they’ll take an untrained peasant girl,\textsuperscript{58} spend $2,000,000 on her, and won’t dream of signing someone who once had a name and public, you can’t help but ask: Why?”
\end{quote}
In January 1935, while Agnes was scraping by with what little work she was getting, her brother, Solon, was admitted to a psychiatric ward in Los Angeles after he made threats against Cecil B DeMille, whom he blamed for “spoiling” Agnes’ career. Their mother, Emma, told reporters her son was a victim of shell shock during World War I.  

Agnes put together an all-girl dance orchestra and toured the East and mid-West in the spring and summer of 1935. The group, Agnes Ayres and her Hollywood Debs, were invited to take their show to Europe, however, Agnes nixed that idea, preferring to remain the States and reacquaint herself with her “old public.”

The long string of one-night stands began taking a toll on Agnes’ physical and emotional health. In 1936, threatened with a nervous breakdown, Agnes returned home to Hollywood. That February, her comeback to films was announced. She played a bit role in Small Town Girl (1936).

Determined in her fight against obscurity, Agnes joined scores of other former film personalities to help herself and other old-time entertainers continue working in their industry. In August, the group held its first annual “close-up” show. J. Stuart Blackton, once the head of Vitagraph, presided. Leon Janney, Leo White, and Rupert Hughes were the masters of ceremony. Agnes, along with William Farnum, Lionel Belmore, Maurice Costello, Bryant Washburn, Creighton Hale, Florence Turner, and Alice Calhoun, were named officers.

Despite her best efforts, Agnes was offered little more than bits roles in such 1937 releases as Morning Judge, Souls at Sea, Midnight Taxi, and Maid of Salem. She insisted she was not disheartened by the brevity of the parts. “I’m still young,” she told the Los Angeles Times. “I know more than I did, and I think I’m a better actress. Above all, I have my feet on the ground, which is rather unusual in this town. And, I see no reason why I can’t get to the top again.”

She also saw no reason why her daughter, Maria, now aged 10, shouldn’t be working in films. “Almost since she could talk, Maria has played at being a movie star, and so I’m going to give her an opportunity.” Agnes was able to secure a small role for her daughter in Maid of Salem.

To support herself and her family, Agnes opened a small real estate office and tried her hand at selling real estate.

She was able to keep her name in the press with the 1938 revivals of The Sheik and The Son of the Sheik. In June, it was announced that Agnes and Jean Acker, Valentino’s first wife, would embark on a 20-week public appearance tour with The Sheik.
The stress of the tour proved too much for the already fragile actress. In October 1938, Agnes suffered a nervous breakdown. After months of recovery, she spoke about her long struggle to again make a name for herself. “It cost me a half million dollars to learn the value of a nickel, but I wouldn’t trade the experience for all that money back again.

“Making a comeback has been a tough nut for me to crack, but I did it once and I’m sure I can do it again,” Agnes said. “The doctors say I’m just about fit and there are two or three grand things in the offing. I’m just keeping my fingers crossed that they’ll break, and meanwhile, everybody in Hollywood has been swell to me.”65

In November 1939, Agnes voluntarily relinquished custody of her daughter to her former husband, Manuel Reachi, for a period of 13 months.

“I have been ill during the best part of the last year and I think it best that my daughter go with her father until I recuperate,” Agnes told a commissioner in the local Domestic Relations Court. Maria soon left for Mexico City to live with her father.66

On Christmas Eve 1940, Agnes suffered a cerebral hemorrhage at her home and was taken to St. Vincent’s Hospital. She died Christmas Day without ever regaining consciousness.

In a simple service at Pierce Brothers chapel several days later, a soloist sang Agnes’ favorite song from The Sheik: The Kashmiri Song, known also as Pale Hands I Loved. Her ashes were placed in a niche at a mausoleum at Hollywood Memorial Park, just down the street from Paramount Studios, where almost 20 years earlier, she’d reigned as a star.

Hedda Hopper devoted a column to her old friend. “There’ll be many sob stories written about the passing of Agnes Ayres on Christmas Day at the age of 42.67 When I made a picture with Agnes many years ago she was on top of the heap and her success was comparable to that of Lana Turner, Ann Sheridan, and the late Jean Harlow. She had everything a woman could want, but as she said herself, it came so fast, and she’d had
no previous training for taking care of the trust and the great responsibility success imposes on one.”

“She was a sweet girl — Agnes — and her passing should make a deep impression on the stars of today. And if it does, many of them may stop, look and LISTEN.”

3. Her death certificate lists 1898 as her year of birth. The 1900 U.S. Federal Census lists April 1892 as the month and year. Early publicity suggested 1901.
4. The 1900 U.S. Federal Census indicates that Frank and Emma Rendleman had been married for five years.
8. Emma had divorced Franklin Rendleman.
10. Ibid.
11. Variety, 1 October 1920.
15. Picture Play, January 1922.
16. Ibid.
17. Photoplay, January 1922.
18. Variety, 11 November 1921.
19. Marion Fairfax Collection, Motion Picture Academy Library, 22 April 1922.
22. Harrison’s Reports, 9 June 1923.
23. Harrison’s Reports, 11 October 1924.
24. Harrison’s Reports, 21 June 1924.
29. Ibid.
33. ‘Wife in Hawaii Denied by Mate of Agnes Ayres,” Associated Press, 20 August 1925.
35. “Fat as Film Ban Up to Court,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 February 1926.
36. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. *Variety*, 1 May 1929.
45. On Martel Avenue.
46. The smaller home Agnes bought when first coming to Hollywood.
47. *Jungle Love*.
48. Agnes’ mother, Emma.
49. Mischa Auer, the actor.
51. Parsons, Louella, “Agnes Ayres Will Appear in Bryan Foy’s First Film,” 14 April 1931.
56. “Movie Stars Head Big Paramount Bill,” 22 October 1933.
58. Anna Sten was the “peasant girl” Agnes referred to.
67. She was actually 48 years old.
FILMOGRAPHY

1914


1915


1917


*The Renaissance aka The Renaissance at Charleroi (General Film Company)* d: Thomas R. Mills. J. Frank Glendon, Eleanor Lawson, Agnes Ayres, Webster Campbell, Marguerite Forrest, Ethel Northrup.

*The Bottom of the Well (Vitagraph)* d: John S. Robertson. Evart Overton, Agnes Ayres, Adele De Garde, Ned Finley, Herbert Pryor, Robert Gaillard, Alice Terry, Bigelow Cooper.


His Wife Got All the Credit (short) (Vitagraph) d: C. Graham Baker. Agnes Ayres, Edward Earle.

He Had to Camouflage (short) (Vitagraph) d: Wesley Ruggles. Edward Earle, Agnes Ayres.

His Wife’s Hero (short) (Vitagraph) d: C. Graham Baker. Edward Earle, Agnes Ayres.
1918


AGNES AYRES


**Sweets to the Sour** (short) *Vitagraph* D: C. Graham Baker. Edward Earle, Agnes Ayres.

1919


**Sacred Silence** (Fox) D: Harry Millarde. William E. Russell, Agnes Ayres, George MacQuarrie, James Morrison, Tom Brooke.


**In Honor’s Web** *Vitagraph* D: Paul Scardon. Harry T. Morey, Gladden James, George Backus, Agnes Ayres, Myrtle Stedman, George Majeroni, Bernard Siegel, Robert Gaillard.


1920


1921


1922


1923


1924


1925


1926


1927


1928


1929

*Broken Hearted* (Tiffany) d: Frank S. Mattison. Agnes Ayres, Gareth Hughes, Eddie Brownell.

*Bye, Bye, Buddy* (Tiffany) d: Frank S. Mattison. Agnes Ayres, Robert “Buddy” Shaw, Fred Shanley, Ben Wilson, John Orlando, Dave Henderson, Hall Cline.


1936

1937


