

A Virtuous Vamp

By Jennifer Ann Redmond

“Film Daily” called it a “humdinger.” They crowed “[j]ust get ‘em in. That’s all. Constance Talmadge and the picture will do all the rest . . .”¹

For a lot of other pictures this would be typical hyperbole, but not “A Virtuous Vamp.” This film had it all: women in the workplace, youth culture, racy night-clubs, flirtatious flappers . . . in short, a time capsule of a world on the verge of the Jazz Age, filled with everything for which the era would forever be remembered.

Based on the 1909 play “The Bachelor” by popular playwright Clyde Fitch, it offered Constance Talmadge as Gwendolyn Armitage, the lovely daughter of one of the finest families out of England. Unfortunately, after the San Francisco disaster of 1906, they lost everything . . . and so, as soon as she’s grown, she sets out for work to support her family, under the name Nellie Jones. The charming secretary with the irresistible smile unwittingly leaves a trail of lovesick men in her wake, all except for one: Mr. Crowninshield, her boss, for whom she carries a torch. The two wind up painting the town together, but all in the name of business, of course: they must investigate a shimmy dancer who wants to insure her shoulders. Will Nellie prevail over coworkers’ suspicious wives, her boss’ disapproving sisters, and her almost-suitor’s abject cluelessness? I don’t think it’s a spoiler to say her true aristocratic background comes out, Crowninshield – thanks to a little noble prodding by her brother – discovers he’s loved her all along, and the film ends with him dictating a very poignant proposal letter to Gwen/Nellie.

The Talmadge sisters were cinema royalty. If Norma, with her fine bearing and dramatic propensity, was the queen, then jovial, capricious Constance – called “Dutch” – was the jester. She shone as a light comedienne in films like “Dulcy” (1923) and “Her Night of Romance” (1924). “A Virtuous Vamp” was only her second film for First National, but it was no exception: in an era of slapstick, her humor was subtle, with understated movements and facial expressions. Talmadge was the prototype for Carole Lombard or Thelma Todd, gorgeous women who brought confidence and sex appeal along with laughs. She was sexy – author Lea Jacobs compares her to Clara Bow² – but where Bow was S-E-X in neon lights, Talmadge was gentler. A de-



This advertisement appeared in the December 1919 edition of Exhibitors Herald. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

venomed vamp, safer and more audience-friendly than the kohl-rimmed likes of Theda Bara or Louise Glaum. Both sisters were huge box-office draws through the 1920s and perpetually scored high in movie magazine popularity contests. Both sisters also had their own production companies. While Norma dipped a toe into talkies, Dutch stayed out of the pool altogether and retired in 1929, living comfortably until her death in 1973.

Conway Tearle was Mr. Crowninshield, Gwen/Nellie’s boss and the only one impervious to her charms...at first. Tearle was a distinguished stage actor known for the lead role in two touring productions of “Ben-Hur” and originating the role of Larry Renault on Broadway in “Dinner at Eight” (played memorably by John Barrymore in the 1933 film version). He took to the screen starting in 1914, and became the highest-paid actor in America for a time. Tearle made over ninety films, primarily romantic comedies and love stories, before a fatal heart attack in 1938 ended his career at age 60.

The true costar of the film wasn’t Tearle, however – it was Anita Loos’ intertitles. Loos already wrote scripts

for Biograph, Lubin, and Triangle, where D.W. Griffith installed her as staff writer. Her first big titles breakthrough was her work on the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle "His Picture in the Papers" (1916). Her further work for Fairbanks was pivotal in his stardom, and Griffith himself called her "the most brilliant young woman in the world."³ Loos, who along with director (and future husband) John Emerson wrote eleven of Talmadge's first fifteen films at First National, was observant, acerbic, witty, and just plain fun. Her titles were tight and often included a wink at the public. For instance, when Gwen/Nellie tells her mother she was fired on account of a suspicious wife, Mother responds with:

"YOU BETTER GET A JOB IN THE
MARTHA WASHINGTON HOTEL."

Audiences of the time knew it was a Manhattan hotel built in 1903 for "professional women," e.g. teachers and typists, in which men were not allowed above the ground floor. (Connotation noted.)

Loos was lifelong friends with the Talmadges, including other sister Natalie and their mother, the "indomitable Peg," stage mother par excellence whose well-sharpened tongue inspired some of the passages in her tour de force novel "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes."

Some cast lists erroneously include Gilda Gray, likely a mix-up due to Bee Palmer's cameo. Palmer, like Gray, was a dancer who asserted she invented and popularized the "shimmy". She first appeared in the Ziegfeld Follies in 1918, and is the performer looking to insure her all-important shoulders. Although a jazz singer with a number of extant recordings, she is best remembered today for a scandalous 1921 affair with boxer Jack Dempsey. Also in the cast but devoid of his signature voice is Ned Sparks, acidic character actor featured so prominently in 1930s favorites like "Gold Diggers of 1933" and "42nd Street." "A Virtuous Vamp" was his fourth onscreen role.

Behind the camera, "Vamp" was produced by the Constance Talmadge Film Co., and presented by industry titan (and Norma's husband) Joseph Schenck. David Kirkland took directorial honors, and assistant director Sidney Franklin later became Irving Thalberg's protégé and the legendary producer of classics like "Random Harvest" and "Mrs. Miniver" (both 1942). Franklin had already directed Talmadge in "Intolerance" (1916) and would direct her in nine more films. An interesting aside: the cameraman was future award-winning MGM cinematographer Oliver Marsh, brother to actresses Mae and Marguerite Marsh.

"A Virtuous Vamp" is currently held at the Museum of Modern Art. It exists in its complete form, but with Finnish/Danish intertitles. Loos luckily included a working script in the appendix of her labor of love, 1978's "The Talmadge Girls," and it is one marvelous little comedy that deserves to be seen again.

¹ *Film Daily*, November 30, 1919.

² Petro, Patrice, ed. (2010) *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s*. Rutgers University Press.

³ Ruvoli, JoAnne. "Anita Loos." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. Center for Digital Research and Scholarship. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013. Web. September 27, 2013. <<https://wfpp.cdrcs.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-anita-loos/>>

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Jennifer Ann Redmond's passion for writing is rivaled only by her love of the 1920s and 1930s. Silent and pre-Code (1929-1934) films are a particular favorite, and she counts Clara Bow, Louise Brooks, and Jean Harlow among her muses. Her work has been featured in Classic Images, Vintage Life, ZELDA, DIRGE, and Atlas Obscura. Her book "Reels & Rivals: Sisters in Silent Film" was published in May 2016 by BearManor Media, and her forthcoming book about starlet Corliss Palmer is due in 2018.