
LOS ANGELES IN 1924 was still coming in to its own. It had been Spanish territory when, a century and a half earlier, Franciscan friars cut a swath through the native villages and built the mission and plaza that soon formed the nucleus of the pueblo of Los Angeles. There was a brief Mexican reign before California was “proclaimed for America” in 1846, but while the gold rush that stimulated statehood in 1850 made a huge impact on northern California, turning San Francisco into a major cosmopolitan city, Los Angeles remained a “tough cow town.”

It wasn't until the land boom of the late 1800s that major changes grew visible, followed by an economic downturn, and soon Midwestern families were joining together to buy hundreds of acres, moving en masse to the area to create their own communities infused with their own values. The discovery and exploitation of oil quickly accelerated the changes, spurring the development of the port and interspersing lean-to refineries and wells away among the orange groves, the churches, a few hotels, and clusters of houses and shops. By the beginning of the new century, the southland was a series of three dozen incorporated towns and it was close to impossible to know where one began and another ended. The region was tied together by the Red Cars, electric trains running from San Fernando down to Newport Beach and from Riverside out to the Pacific Ocean, providing cheap, easy access from one town to the next for tourists and commuters alike.

The sun, the dry air, and the ocean all factored into slowly but surely

bringing the new phenomenon of movie making to the area. Los Angeles had first been introduced to “flickers” in 1896 when the lights dimmed at the Orpheum Theater and, on a large white sheet, the image of a life-sized Anna Belle Sun danced for a few precious moments. It would be another decade before the filmmakers themselves arrived in earnest.

It was a young business initially driven by immigrants, Jews, and women — talented, ambitious, and creative souls unwelcome in more respectable professions. If moviemaking was looked down upon as less than reputable, and it was, individuals on the fringes of that community were the ones who first came to Los Angeles. They were seeking refuge from the Trust, the name commonly given to the Motion Picture Patents Company controlled by Thomas Edison, which mandated license fees to use its patented cameras and projectors. While the rising demand for movies and the corresponding increase in theaters made enforcement a challenge, renegade companies fled to Florida and California to dodge the vigilantes hired by the Trust attempting to maintain its lucrative control.

By 1915 the Trust was beaten, and by then Los Angeles was the burgeoning center of filmmaking. Movies were no longer an idea one week, in front of the cameras the next, and in theaters within a month, but the locals were none too thrilled to see women walking the streets in heavy makeup, cameras using parades as a backdrop, and men sitting under trees in Biblical costumes. Yet what initially was greeted with shock and disdain actually turned to civic pride as moviemaking became the city’s largest source of jobs. The ripple effect on the hotels, restaurants, and tourism was not only now appreciated but, by 1920, depended upon.

Working out of barns and filming on empty lots had given way to more permanent locations, and by 1924 seriously large studios were a part of the landscape. Along Melrose Avenue and Gower Street, the huge United Studios abutted the much smaller FBO. The Warner Brothers

were up on Sunset Boulevard and Universal City had been flourishing in the San Fernando Valley since 1915. Metro Goldwyn Mayer had just opened its gates in Culver City that spring of 1924, and the following year Cecil B. DeMille took over the Ince Studio down the street on Washington Boulevard.

Roads that had been loose dirt and gravel only a few years before were now smoothly paved and the hills above all this activity were graced with the huge HOLLYWOOD LAND sign, recently constructed to promote yet another housing development.

Three hundred thousand people were calling Los Angeles home in 1910; when Valeria Belletti arrived in 1924, she was just one of the one hundred thousand who poured into the city in that year alone, bringing the population to almost one million. Like Valeria, they came to seek their fortune or at least a new life and, for many, that meant the movies. The hopefuls who were arriving that year were the first to have grown up collecting photographs of the stars from fan magazines; Mary Pickford and her fellow luminaries of the previous decade had risen to fame without any path to follow. It had all changed very quickly.

Valeria Belletti was born in New Jersey on October 11, 1898, the only child of parents who had emigrated from Italy several years before. Her father, Giuseppe (which became Joseph when he came to America), was in construction and did well enough to buy a house in West New York, New Jersey, but he didn't adjust well to his new home. The family visited Italy together when Valeria was two, and shortly thereafter Giuseppe returned alone and stayed there. When Valeria was ten, she and her mother, Giuseppina, visited him in Italy but returned to New Jersey after a few months.

Valeria and her mother both suffered in the cold weather but, as Valeria

later reflected, "even though it was within our means to make a change, we just stayed because we didn't have the courage of making a change." Yet they had enough courage to make their home without the constant presence of a husband or father and instead lived with Giuseppina's sister and her children.

When Valeria was almost sixteen, she left school and went to work in Manhattan for Lawrence and Herbert Langner, who were opening their own international patent practice. Lawrence Langner was soon dividing his time between his professional work and his first love, the theater and, as the founder of the Theater Guild, would be a prime mover behind Broadway in the twenties, thirties, and forties.

In 1914 Valeria was the Langner brothers' one and only secretary, but during the ten years she worked for them, their business grew to include half a dozen partners and offices in Chicago, Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin. Langner described Valeria as "unusually bright" in his autobiography, *The Magic Lantern*, and while she rose to be put in charge of their annuity department, it was still little more than a glorified secretarial position. For most professions the glass ceiling was still in the future; there was a steel ceiling that limited women to little beyond a secretarial role.

Yet Valeria enjoyed her work; she "hero worshipped" her boss, who was polite and considerate and communicative, all qualities she would find lacking in her later employers, especially Sam Goldwyn. At the Langners', she was grateful for the opportunity to work in the city and to take advantage of all the theater New York had to offer, often through free tickets provided by her boss. It was the era of the royal "we"; she felt she was an integral part of their business even though the Langners were making a fortune and she was taking home \$25 a week.

For a while her life in New York was enough for her, with the culture it offered, her interesting job, theater tickets, and friends to share it all with.

Valeria proudly marched in suffragette parades supporting the vote for women before the Nineteenth Amendment became law in 1920. She was always on the lookout for a good time — within the bounds of propriety of course — and for a man to enjoy it all with. She was very much a young woman of her times, proper but curious, taking her work seriously and ambitious to a point, but always wondering if the next man she met was husband material.

By the early 1920s the Great War had been over for several years and the Jazz Age was in full swing. Valeria was the first to say she was “conventional” and “prim,” even “a little too narrow,” but she was glad of it because she also saw herself as adventurous, certainly in relation to some of her friends who were content to live their lives without going to see the newest stage show or latest club or traveling outside of their own little worlds. As Valeria entered her midtwenties without finding a man she was seriously interested in, she shared confidences with several close girl friends. One of the best was Irma Prima, who also worked in Manhattan at the office of her family’s grain business. The girls had known each other since childhood.

In early 1923 Valeria’s mother died, at the age of fifty-one. Valeria stayed on with her aunt and cousins in New Jersey, but she began to reevaluate her situation. She and Irma had been talking for some time about taking a trip to California; Irma had relatives in Berkeley, near San Francisco, and if not now, when? As they began planning in earnest, Valeria realized she had little to hold her in New York; her mother was dead, her father was in Italy. Everyone said the West was good for your health and she had long suffered from asthma. Valeria decided she would stay on in California if she liked it.

She shared her thinking with Lawrence Langner, who said he hated to see her go but wrote her a glowing letter of recommendation and several

letters of introduction to friends in California. He assured her if she changed her mind, he would welcome her back, but the more Valeria thought about it, the more sure she was that she was ready for a new adventure. After all, at twenty-five she wasn't getting any younger and if she was ever going to make a change, now was the time.

Valeria and Irma took the train West and shared a fabulous summer, visiting San Francisco and the Bay Area and then on to Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and San Diego. They looked like Mutt and Jeff, with Irma at five feet nine inches and tiny Valeria who didn't hit five feet. But together they were downright daring for two women traveling alone—they took a boat to Catalina and flew in a plane over Coronado in San Diego. In September they returned north to Berkeley, where they stayed with Irma's aunt and where Mr. Langner had contacts. Valeria considered staying there, but she had been enchanted by the weather and the palm trees of Los Angeles. She and Irma parted company in Berkeley, with Irma packing to return East as Valeria headed south again. She checked into the Los Angeles YWCA and, armed with a hundred dollars and her letters from Langner, set out to make a new life.

Our story begins with Valeria's first letter to Irma that fall.

OCT. 12, 1924

SUNDAY MORNING

Dear Irma,

Well, I'm back in Los Angeles and am rooming for the time being with 2 other girls in the Y.W.[C.A.] as they had no private rooms. These girls seem to be very nice and in a way it's better that I'm not alone. Although I feel much better, my cold is loosened up and of course I

have to cough quite a bit, and you know how you feel in public when your cold is in that stage. These girls in my room are awfully considerate and have offered everything they have to help me get over it.

I slept until 11:30 this morning and the girls have just gone out for breakfast. They told me not to bother to get dressed but just stay in bed and they are bringing me toast and coffee. You see Irma, one is not always out of luck, you usually find people who are willing to lend you a hand.

It's quite warm here today so that in the afternoon I'll sit in the sun on the porch and then go to bed early.

On the train from Barstow I met a fellow who was awfully nice to me, even though he saw that I was not so well and quite unsociable. He carried my suitcase for me and he saw me to the Y.W. He wanted to take me out today but I told him I couldn't because I wanted to doctor myself and get well as soon as possible. This fellow's name is Jack Purcell and is a chef for the Fred Harvey people. He said that if I wanted to he would speak to one of the head men to get me a position so that I could travel from place to place and in that way see all the resorts. This fellow seems awfully good hearted, but as usual I don't like him very much so that I hope he doesn't call me up.

How is everything in West Berkeley? I'd like to hear from you and if you'll write me care of the YWCA at 200 S. Vermont Street I'll get your mail because I think I'll stay here for at least a week.

With kind regards to your aunt and uncle, I am

*Yours,
Valeria*



OCTOBER 12, 1924—SUNDAY NIGHT

Dear Irma,

Tonight is so beautiful. The moon is so big and yellow and looks like a picture through the trees in front of my window. I'm beginning to get romantic again in this warm climate.

The two girls in my room are out—one with a boy friend and the other has to work nights as she is telegraph operator.

I didn't mind staying here by myself today because there is an auditorium right next to my window and the opera singers here in Los Angeles are practicing for 2 weeks. They tell me that they practice here every day during their stay so that I expect to be entertained for nothing for the rest of the week.

If I see Catherine I'll tell her about your leaving the 20th and of course I'll write you as soon as I see her. With kind regard to all, I am,

*Yours,
Valeria*



OCTOBER 31, 1924

Dear Irma,

I suppose your trip to California is now a thing of the past and you are down to business again. How does West New York look after beautiful California?

I'm still here at the Y and feel splendid. I've gotten a job working only half day, that is, from 1 to 5 in the afternoon and off all day Saturday. I'm assistant to a big doctor (one of those nature and drugless doctors) here in Los Angeles. He writes articles called "Care of the Body" in the Los Angeles Times and he's also writing books.

He's quite clever and has an immune practice. My job is a cinch; all I have to do is write a few letters in reply to letters from people asking what to do in regard to their ailments; write out the dietary lists for the patients; escort them into their treating rooms; collect fees and make appointments.

The doctor has left the management of the business end of the office entirely in my hands because he says he knows nothing about business. He told me that what was the most important thing was that I should be pleasant to all the patients who come in and talk to them. I have to wear a nurse's outfit and he's also given me a book on Hydro-Therapy that he wants me to study.

I'm getting \$50 a month for just sitting around being pleasant, etc. and if I'm the girl he wants, I'll work all day. By the 1st of the year he'll give me \$150 and after I've learned enough about diets, etc. that I can answer the mail myself, he said he'd give me \$300. Of course, you can't believe all they tell you, but I'll stick to it for the time being because I have all morning to myself and the weekends and I make enough to pay my room and board. I'm also learning a lot about what to eat and how to live.

I'm writing this letter while I'm eating my breakfast, squatted on the bed. My breakfast consists of 3 bran muffins, a half pound of grapes and one apple and 4 glasses of water. The doctor says if I follow his instructions, I'll be real strong in about 3 months. I also have to do some exercises and walk as much as possible. It almost seems like fate or whatever it is that I should get into a place like that when I really came out to California to learn how to live and get real strong.

Today is simply gorgeous, the sun has been out since six this morning and everything looks so fresh and green because we had rain

during the night. The Y is situated about 3 blocks from Hollywood and is partially surrounded by hills. It's quite pretty and it's out of the heart of the city. Do you remember where the University of California Southern Branch was located? Well, the Y is on the same street only a few blocks down.

How is your niece Patricia? You were so anxious to hear about her when you were here, remember? Please write to me soon and let me know how everything is.

I haven't forgotten to send you some orange blossoms, but I have yet to find out when they bloom. Please remember me to all your folks and hoping to hear from you soon, I remain,

Your Western Chum, Valeria



DECEMBER 1, 1924

Dear Irma,

Your awfully nice letter received and hungrily devoured for all the news of home you gave me. You don't say anything about your trip back East, but I presume you met with no misadventure.

Well, my job is no more. I was fired this morning. I don't know just why. It's simply a mystery and I haven't bothered to ask for an explanation. Dr. Losell's secretary called me up this morning and just said "Oh, you need not come in any more, we've decided that I can manage the office alone, without additional help. Do you want to come down for your check or shall we mail it?"

I flippantly replied "Oh, all right, mail it. I don't feel like coming downtown for it." And that ended it. I have my suspicions as to why I was fired and that's due to Dr. Losell's secretary. I noticed

lately that it quite annoyed her when the doctor preferred to give me dictation and showed some interest in me. I suppose she was afraid I might eventually succeed her so she found some way of getting me ousted. I know that I did my work well, because all the articles the doctor dictates to me I got out without a mistake and further more, so far as I could see, he was quite pleased with the way I handled matters and let me have full sway of the business end of the office. That's one more experience added to my life—that of being fired. I often had wondered how it felt—now I know.

I believe I have another job, but won't say definitely until I'm working. I'm to start a week from today, and it's only a temporary position for 3 months. One of the men whom I was introduced to, Mr. Joseph P. Loeb, by Lawrence Langner, called me up last week and wanted to know if I could be his secretary for 3 months as his secretary is leaving on a 3 month vacation. I told him at the time that I couldn't as I already had a job. This morning when I was notified that I was fired, I call up Mr. Loeb and asked him if the position was still open. He said it was and that I should see him tomorrow for an interview and then start work next Monday. Mr. Loeb is a member of the firm of Loeb, Walker and Loeb, corporation lawyers who represent all the big movie companies. They have wonderful offices and so far as I can see I believe the change will be for the better, even if temporary.

I certainly did learn an awful lot at Dr. Losell's office. He took such pains with me to see that I learned all about the body and whenever he could he would tell me the cause of various illnesses and their cure. He also gave me information concerning matters which I had been entirely ignorant of, and in fact taught me how to live right. In a way, I'm sorry that I had to leave him, but on the other hand, I also had some disagreeable tasks. He was just breaking

me in to assist him in examinations and while some were alright, there were some examinations that I didn't quite like to witness. He told me beforehand that I'd have to forget all my prudery in doing this work, but you know Irma, it's hard to do it when you've been brought up the way we girls have.

I suppose you all had a wonderful time Thanksgiving. I did too. A woman I met some time ago in a restaurant invited me to her home for Thanksgiving and I must say that I enjoyed myself.

I don't know if I already told you, but Eva (a girl I met in the Y and whom I have now made a friend and chum of) and I have a lovely apartment in Hollywood. It's much nicer than the one in the Buckingham Apartments because everything is clean and new. We had quite a lot of company yesterday and had a wonderful time preparing dinner. Eva's mother came down from the ranch to spend the week end in the City and Eva's sister and husband were here too and one of Eva's beaux. Tomorrow night two friends of Eva's are coming to the home and we're going to make candy and play cards. Next weekend I believe I'm going to get a real thrill. We've made up a party of six and we're going to hike to the Sierra Madre Mountains. We're going to leave early Saturday afternoon and stay overnight at one of the mountain lodges. I'll write and tell you all about it.

I'm sorry you're not here to see the Calla lilies. They're in full bloom and so are the poinsettias. The nights here are now cooler, but the days are just the same as in September when you were here. If you ever saw my apartment and the wonderful weather, I bet you'd hate to go back to New York now. I just adore it. I look around and hardly believe it can be me in this beautiful place. We pay \$50 a month for it which includes gas, electricity and private phone. We have real silverware and all aluminum pots and pans. Our

sitting room is gray and old rose. Gray rug, old rose draperies (silk) floor lamp, mahogany furniture and a refectory table and big settee. All I need is a few fancy pillows and I'll get those later.

Eva's brother has a vegetable market and we get all our vegetables wholesale. Not only that, but when I go there and shop, his partner, Fred, who has a Cleveland sedan, takes me home so I don't have to carry the parcels. Eva's mother and sister have brought us about 5 jars of preserved fruit and 3 jars of jelly. We also have walnuts left from the other weekend when we went to the ranch and picked about 10 pounds. Since we're vegetarians you see that it costs us very little so far to live.

We have quite an illustrious neighbor, Ben Turpin.* I saw him sitting on the porch this morning with his son, but I wouldn't have known it was him had I not known that he lived in that house. We live near the big Fox studios and you run into some funny characters on the street. They come off the lot in their make up and outfits so that you see cowboys, old gents with long hair, looking like the 49'ers; men in society clothes and in fact all kinds of rig-outs. This sure is a queer burg, but I like it better than Los Angeles. It's nearer the mountains and is higher so that the air seems better than in L.A. It takes me about 40 minutes to get into Los Angeles and the fare is only 5 cents.

I passed in front of Grauman's Egyptian Theater† this morning and it's being fixed over for the opening of "Romola" on December

*Ben Turpin was a popular vaudeville and silent screen comedian who worked with Charlie Chaplin and Mack Sennett. Turpin was known for his slapstick and ludicrous impressions, enhanced by the fact he was cross-eyed.

†The success of theatrical impresario Sid Grauman's Egyptian Theater led him to open his Chinese theater down the block on Hollywood Boulevard in 1927.

6. It's going to be a gala affair and wish that I could go, but I guess I have a small chance of getting in on opening night.

Have you been to any shows lately? Tell me about them if you have. Give my love to all and write soon.

Valeria



JANUARY 20, 1925

Dear Irma,

I received your letter and want to thank you especially for the clipping showing the new Theater Guild building which of course interested me exceedingly.

Well, Irma, I'm sure having the time of my life. I feel as if I were truly living. The weather just now is glorious. It's neither too warm nor too cold and the sun is so bright that I just want to be out all the time.

I'm working for Mr. Loeb as his secretary. We are the legal advisors of all the big movie concerns for the stars so of course I'm getting to know all the ins and outs of the movie industry as well as the scandals, etc.

I get \$27.50 a week and that goes a long way here. The apartment I had with Eva is no more as Eva left me for a man. However, I've found 2 other girls—one works in my office and the other is an art teacher. The 3 of us have one of those Spanish type bungalows—we pay \$65 a month and it's furnished beautifully. We have a back and front door entrance and French windows in our sitting room. I'm going to learn how to ride a horse because both girls go riding every Sunday.

There's a beautiful natural park (about 4,000 acres) in the Hollywood hills where the girls go. The riding club they belong to is very reasonable (\$10 a month entitles you to a 2 hour lesson every Sunday). The girls also play golf so that I've got to learn that too. We also go swimming one night a week so you see I'm becoming an all around athlete.

Now for some real news. Whom do you suppose I met in Hollywood 3 weeks ago? None other than Miss Franklin. We have become very chummy and I've spent many evenings at her apartment. She's an entirely different girl than she was when we first met her. In fact she's almost like a fairy god mother to me. She says she likes me an awful lot and proceeds to shower me with all sorts of attentions—takes me to dinner and shows and absolutely insists on paying for everything. She isn't working and hasn't a profession, but she must have quite a large income because I wish you'd see the clothes she has bought since she's been in Los Angeles. Not only that, but she pays \$65 for an apartment for herself. I spent New Years with her and stayed over night at their apartment and went on an all day trip to Santa Ana. The truth is I seem to spend more time in her apartment than in my own. Miss Franklin used to be an actress; played in a number of musical comedies on the Orpheum circuit and finally in stock in Denver. However, due to a fall from a horse six years ago, she was confined for almost a year; that caused her to get fat and so ended her career.

I have run out of paper so am forced to conclude my letter abruptly. I hope you are all well and happy and that you won't forget to write to me soon.

Love, Valeria



FEB 19, 1925

Dear Irma,

I just had to write to you to tell you of my good fortune. I'm in the movies—of course, not an actress. I'm private and social secretary to Mr. Samuel Goldwyn. Can you imagine it! The odds were about 50 to 1 against me, but through Mr. Loeb's influence, the position was given to me. So far as I can see, it's the sort of job that I've always dreamed about, but that I never, by any stretch of imagination, hoped to get.

As Mr. Goldwyn's secretary, I come in contact with every phase of the movie industry; looking for new material; keeping in touch with the producers in New York; reading new books; turning over possible material to the scenario writer who happens to be Frances Marion; hiring actors and actresses, directors, camera men; keeping in touch with the art director, publicity man, the projection and cutting rooms and ever so many other things. Everything is so new and interesting that I just love to work. Of course, I am not busy just now, because Mr. Goldwyn is in Europe and we've just finished a picture called "His Supreme Moment" with Ronald Colman and we don't start another production until the first of May, which will be "Stella Dallas." We're only starting to look for a cast suitable for the characters of the play and things won't be ready for actual shooting until May. I'm working in Hollywood of course, and it's too bad you can't come out to the coast now, because I could get you in the studios to see everything.

I met Mr. George Fitzmaurice today. He does all our society pictures. I also met Ronald Colman who is a very charming young

man. Have you seen him in pictures yet? His latest was "A Thief in Paradise."

I wish you could see the studios inside. They are a town in themselves. We have named streets and different shops, such as barber shops, beauty parlors and cafes. Yesterday I didn't have much to do, so I walked around the lot and watched different pictures being taken. Did you know that a regular three piece string orchestra is on each set in order to produce the necessary emotions in the stars? I enjoyed listening to the music more than watching the acting.

Mr. Lehr, who is the general manager, told me that as Mr. Goldwyn's secretary I would have to look very smart and dress well. He told me that if I needed any money for this purpose he would be glad to give it to me and pay him back when I could. Mr. Loeb told me the same thing. Really, it is astounding how free people are with their money here. He gave me the afternoon off to do whatever shopping I needed to do and I certainly did go to it. I bought so much that I feel as if I'm a different person entirely. For once in my life I bought real stylish clothes and they do make a difference. Of course, I have to keep my hair marcelled, but in view of the salary I am being paid, I can easily do it.

My salary to start with is \$40.00 a week and when we go in production on May 1st, my salary will be \$50 because I'll be much busier. The girl who had my job was getting \$65 and she had been with Mr. Goldwyn only 9 months. She left because she was ordered to go away for a long rest cure due to a lung infection.

I'm just reading a book called "Ann's an Idiot." It's not one of the very latest, but it is fairly modern. That's part of my job, but as I've been reading for about an hour, I thought I'd quit a while

to write you this letter because on account of it being a rainy day, there's little going on and the general manager has left for the day.

I don't know how long my job will last—it all depends on whether or not Mr. Goldwyn likes me. I'm told that he is very temperamental and rather difficult to get along with. However, I'm rather accustomed to temperamental people so that will be nothing new to me. Even if I do get fired when he gets back, I will have enjoyed my short stay and will have gotten a slight knowledge of the movie industry.

I have become very friendly with a Miss Manee who is Mr. Maurice Tourneur's secretary and reader. She is very intellectual and has read so much that I feel positively stupid in her presence. However, she seems to like me because she keeps inviting me to lunch with her.

By the way, I wish you'd see the little cafe we eat in. It is so picturesque. You see people (mostly men) in all kinds of make up and costumes and of course there are no outsiders at all. Just movie folks. It is surprising how few girls there are on a studio lot. I just can't seem to get used to all the men. None of them are very interesting; and most of them are just types that I couldn't possibly make an effort to be friendly with. I did meet one chap who seemed awfully nice—he was Dr. Gardner's chauffeur. As I was leaving the studio yesterday afternoon, a car came out of the gate and stopped and this fellow asked me if I was going to Los Angeles; I said I was so he invited me ride with him, which of course I accepted. The car he was driving was a new Rolls Royce and believe me I felt big driving though Los Angeles in it. I hope I meet him again.

I'm still living with Florence and Nancy in our Bungalow. We have rented a piano and we have some real nice times at home.

Florence brings over some of the men teachers in her school and Nancy has some of her boyfriends come over. When they come they always bring some good stuff to drink and we make cocktails and dance or play bridge. The boys are really nice fellows, that is, good morally, so that you need not worry that I have left the straight and narrow. We all go out together and we've been to a number of real wild bohemian cafes in Hollywood. It's fun watching and I'm also gaining quite some experience in the way of mankind.

I'm feeling perfectly splendid and am all enthused and pepped up. You have no idea how glad I am I left New York. Now I realize what a rut I was in when I was home. Here I've been meeting all kinds of interesting people and although I miss Mr. Langner and all my friends in Jersey, I feel that I'm enjoying life more here. Another thing, I don't know whether it is the sunshine or just what it is, but I feel much more carefree and lighthearted. After all, I believe it is one's duty to seek and if possible find happiness and that is my aim.

Give my regards to your folks and let me hear from you real soon.

Love, Valeria

Sam Goldwyn was unique among Hollywood studio moguls in the 1920s. Louis B. Mayer ran MGM with his production chief, Irving Thalberg, and turned out over thirty films a year; Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky made a similar number of films at Paramount. They, along with the likes of William Fox at his own studio and Carl Laemmle at Universal, were creating moviemaking factories. Goldwyn alone was at the other end of the continuum, producing films one at a time and using the profits from the last film to pay

for the next one. As his biographer, A. Scott Berg, describes Goldwyn's reality, "He was eating caviar but living hand to mouth."

Sam Goldwyn had been born Schmuel Gelbfisz in Warsaw in 1879 and began his immigration westward by walking from Poland to Hamburg. From there, it was to London (where he became Samuel Goldfish) and then to America at the age of twenty. He found work as a glove maker in upstate New York, where he and Abe Lehr, the son of the factory owner, were benchmates. By 1924, Abe Lehr was Sam's studio manager, not for his film expertise, but because Sam trusted him completely.

Sam rapidly rose from glove maker to salesman, even returning to visit Europe in his capacity as one of the company's leading salesmen. He was in the process of moving to Manhattan when he met and married Blanche Lasky there in 1910. Blanche and her brother, Jesse, had been vaudevillians, and soon Sam and Jesse joined together to form the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company and began making movies. Their first, *The Squaw Man*, was directed by the inexperienced but enthusiastic Cecil B. DeMille in 1913 and was the first feature film shot entirely in Los Angeles. When they ran out of money before it was finished, Sam stepped in and showed the bluff and bluster that would make him a great in the industry: he "pre-sold" *The Squaw Man* as the first of twelve films from their company to various distributors and exhibitors and, in the process, raised enough money to finish the movie. It was also Sam who saved the day when the first reels were screened and the film jumped all over the place. Goldwyn found the film laboratory that could solve the problem by fixing the sprocket holes on the cheap stock they had purchased, which were not correctly punched for the standard projector.

Adolph Zukor merged with Sam and Jesse to create Famous Players-Lasky in 1916 but Sam, already resentful of Lasky and DeMille's getting most of the publicity, soon resented Zukor as well. Even though Sam was

chairman of the new company, he didn't get along with Zukor or his leading lady, Mary Pickford, and they responded in kind. When Sam went to his brother-in-law and said, "It's Zukor or me," Jesse chose Zukor. Sam never forgave him and left the whole Lasky family behind; Blanche divorced him in 1916 on the grounds of adultery, three years after the birth of their daughter, Ruth, whom Sam literally ignored for the next two decades.

Sam's next move was to partner with the Selwyn brothers and, combining portions of their surnames, they formed Goldwyn Productions (as it was pointed out at the time, the other alternative was "Selfish Productions"). Soon after, *Photoplay* ran a black-bordered picture of Sam Goldfish, explaining "Not dead, but legally annihilated," as the New York courts had granted his request to use the company name as his own new last name. The Goldwyn Company expanded to buy the Triangle Studios in Culver City, but the investors insisted on new management and, once again, Sam was out. He had burned so many bridges that there was simply no one left to partner with. As Irene Selznick, daughter of Louis B. Mayer and wife of producer David O. Selznick, said about Sam: "Even those fondest of him agreed he was impossible."

If Goldwyn wanted to keep making films, he had to go it alone. His old friend Cecil B. DeMille and his new friend Joe Schenck helped Sam get financing from the Bank of Italy, where both men were on the board of advisors. Next, Goldwyn needed a director and he signed a profit-sharing agreement with Paris-born George Fitzmaurice, still in his late twenties but already an experienced director. After graduating from art school, Fitzmaurice entered the film business through Pathé, writing such serials as *The Perils of Pauline*. He had organized the London studios for Famous Players-Lasky before coming to work for Sam, where he directed the new company's first film, the ethnic comedy *Potash and Perlmutter*, in 1923.

Goldwyn made a deal to distribute his films through First National, a

consortium of various theater circuits that also produced its own films at the United Studios on Melrose. Goldwyn's company made its films there as well until the studio was sold to Paramount in 1926 (Paramount still operates out of the same studio today).

Goldwyn added Henry King, thirty-seven, as his second contracted director just before Valeria came to the studio. Born and raised in Virginia, King had joined a touring stock company as a teenager and traveled the country as an actor in a variety of productions. Like so many others, he entered filmmaking through a fluke encounter; escorting a friend to a meeting at Lubin Studios in New York in 1912, he was recruited on the spot to appear before the camera. King appeared in dozens of films, but by 1917 he had switched over to directing. After two years with Thomas Ince, King formed his own production company and hit gold with *Tol'able David* in 1921; such acclaimed films as *Sonny* and *The White Sister* followed.

According to King, Goldwyn had first approached him about working together back in 1919, but Goldwyn's patronizing attitude so appalled King that he announced, "I wouldn't work for this man under any circumstances." Yet six years later, King and Goldwyn both employed the attorney Nathan Burkan, and the three men met together at the Ambassador Hotel to see if they could come to an agreement. Burkan turned to King and said, "Henry, this man will carry out to the letter every word there is in a contract he signs, but don't believe anything he tells you or promises you that isn't written." Goldwyn protested, but Burkan calmly said he was simply telling the truth. King was convinced, made sure the contract spelled out everything he cared about, and signed a combination salary and percentage deal.

King brought with him one of the few actors Goldwyn put under contract, Ronald Colman. The English-born Colman had attended Cambridge, served in World War I, and acted in school and on the British stage before

heading to America in 1922 at the age of twenty-eight. He was acting on Broadway when he was seen by Henry King, who cast Colman in his first American film, *The White Sister*, opposite Lillian Gish. Shortly thereafter, both King and Colman joined Goldwyn.

Sam's only contracted writer was Frances Marion, who had been Hollywood's highest paid screenwriter since 1915. She had risen to fame and fortune as Mary Pickford's exclusive screenwriter, turning out such hits as *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and *The Little Princess*. Since 1919, Frances had preferred the freedom of working from assignment to assignment and, in the process, had written scripts for the likes of Marion Davies, Norma and Constance Talmadge, Douglas Fairbanks, and Colleen Moore. Frances Marion had over one hundred filmed scripts to her credit by 1923 and could handle just about anyone, but friends cautioned her about Sam Goldwyn. They said he was a ridiculous taskmaster with no taste, and she had better study voice projection in preparation for what they warned would be daily shouting matches.

Intrigued by a good challenge and lured by Sam's willingness to pay her asking price of \$2,000 a week and his agreement that she wouldn't be exclusively tied to him, Frances said she went to work for him with "her mental boxing gloves" at the ready. Instead, she found that while he was exhausting to work with, both physically and mentally, her respect for Goldwyn grew over time. "There was never any pretense about him. He always worked harder than anyone he ever hired and his appreciation for a job well done [was] always immense and completely genuine."

Still, Frances Marion had a seasoned career behind her, other choices ahead of her, and a multitude of friends to support her. For Valeria, it was the only job she had. While a few people had dropped hints about what Goldwyn was like to work for, she had to learn it herself on a day-by-day basis. The one thing Valeria had going for her at the moment was that

Goldwyn was gone from the studio for another few months and she could learn all about the place and get to know all the other players before actually meeting her new boss.

FEBRUARY 27, 1925

1520 3/5 REID ST., LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

Dear Irma,

I just received your letter and as I have nothing to do this afternoon but read a book ("Women and Wives" by Ferguson) I thought I'd drop you a letter before I go on with the next chapter. The book is rather dull so far, but it may turn out interesting before I get through with it. I just finished "Ann's an Idiot." This book started very well, but ended like usual novels. Impossible situations and types not true to life. Ann is a very charming character and about the only reason for which the book was evidently written. (Do I sound like a real critic? I don't like to use the usual phraseology that critics use because I'd like to be original if I can. However, it's hard after having read all the criticisms I have.)

Yesterday and today have been gorgeous and as I'm sitting here typing, there's a little cricket chirping away as fast as he can. I wonder if he's trying to keep up with the clattering of my typewriter. I've just climbed out of my window to see if I can find him, but can't.

Nancy, Florence and I spent the weekend at Mount Lowe. It's too bad you didn't take that trip because it is really is beautiful and I think you missed something. Perhaps the next time you come (which I hope will be real soon) we can take it together. We went

on horses to the top of the mountain, and I was terribly frightened. The trail is only about 3 feet wide, perhaps less, and is on the very edge of the mountain. I had to keep my eyes closed for a time because I just couldn't look. I was dizzy from the altitude and wished for nothing more than to be on level ground. After riding about 2 hours, this sensation left me and I became more brave, and then began to enjoy the scenery. We had regular western saddles on our horses and I had a funny khaki skirt, split in the middle, so that I felt like a cowgirl. We slept in a log cabin which was cold as could be. We had a funny little stove (an antique I think) and kept putting wood in it during the night. We had to get our water outside and as you can imagine, we had no other conveniences. In spite of everything, we enjoyed it.

Listen here, where do you get that stuff about being old? Do you know what you need? You need to come to live in California. It will make you feel young. Since I've been here, I've lost ten years. I feel so wonderful, carefree and perhaps a little romantic. Your friend is right about the climate. Of course I'm not sure whether it's the sunshine or the beautiful moonlight nights, but it does have an effect.

I've seen a lot of Miss Franklin and we still are friendly although we parted for about a week. She came back however. It was like this. The three of us girls gave a little dinner party one evening to our three best fellows (ones we wanted to impress). Of course the boys brought some booze and after dinner, we prepared the cocktails. Just as we were doing this, who drops in on us without warning, but Miss Franklin. We offered her a drink, and she positively refused, and as much as said that we were not ladies because we drank a cocktail. Then to make matters worse, we started to smoke. That finished it. She was horribly surprised and asked to be taken

home—which we did with pleasure. I didn't hear from her for about a week and concluded that she didn't want to have anything more to do with me. However, she evidently changed her mind and we are again friendly. She told me she was rather old fashioned in her ideas on account of having associated with older people, but after thinking it over, she saw that we were all right so now everything is O.K. and she thinks I'm still a lady, even though once in a while I have a cocktail and sometimes I smoke.

That's awfully kind of you to offer to send me papers. I haven't been getting the New York papers until I got my present job. Now I get the Sunday Telegram which I have to scan very carefully for theatrical news. The only paper I really cared for was the Morning World in order to read Heywood Broun's column and F.P.A.'s column. Of course, I know that you don't get this paper, so I wouldn't want you to get it expressly for me. However, if you see anything of interest in the papers you read, I shall appreciate your sending me clippings.

Well, I've been hob-nobbing with stars for the last week and if it doesn't bore you to hear about them, I'll be glad to tell you who I saw. I've met Blanche Sweet. She was in the office a few days ago and our general manager gave her a call down for spending too much money on clothes in the last picture she was in. I don't like her much. She's rather flippant and doesn't seem to have any personality whatsoever. Was introduced to Conway Tearle, who seems to be quite a nice chap, but wasn't with him long enough to find out anything further about him. Ran into Thomas Meighan on the lot, who is really good looking. Beautiful blue-black wavy hair, sunburned, twinkling eyes, etc. Saw Conrad Nagel in the tea room. He was seated at the next table and seems to be quite a personality,

although not so good looking. Has beautiful table manners. That's all I can say about him.

Saw Claire Windsor in the tea room also.* Very good looking, but is a bleached blonde. Saw Lewis Stone today. He's adorable with his make up on. I don't now how he looks without it. No doubt like any ordinary middle aged man.

As for Ronald Colman—well—he's what I call a sheik. By the way, you know I'm his secretary too. I have to look at all his fan letters and when there are any particularly funny, I show them to him. Try to see him if you can in "A Thief in Paradise." His next picture will be "His Supreme Moment" and that will come out in the latter part of April. Mr. Colman is in New York just now. No one is supposed to know this, because he is there for a rest and doesn't want to be annoyed, however I don't see any harm in telling you. He's an Englishman, and his wife is suing him for divorce on the grounds of desertion.

Miss Frances Marion was in today. She is our scenario and continuity writer. Mr. George Fitzmaurice has his office next to mine and I see quite a lot of him. He's just finished directing *His Supreme Moment* and is going to Europe in about two weeks for a rest.

Yesterday I had to type all the titles to this picture and enjoyed doing it because it was fun. Such awful titles "If I really loved him, I'd make any sacrifice for him"; "Carla, it's you I love, dear"; "Your indifference is killing me, just love me a little." Such rot. Mr. Fitzmaurice and I laughed so at them. Today they all have gone to the projection room to see the picture fully assembled and titled and

*Because Goldwyn worked out of the huge United Studios lot, Valeria ran into stars working for other companies there.

they've all just come back ranting. The titles are impossible so they have to hire someone to write new ones.

Mr. Fitzmaurice is keen on Florence Vidor and they go out quite a lot to parties together. (Miss Vidor is divorced from her husband King Vidor).

As for my boss, Mr. Samuel Goldwyn, I've heard so much about him that there is little I can say that is nice. I'm told he's a terrible chaser. You can imagine how bad he is when his divorce decree forbids him to marry again, although the privilege was given to his ex-wife. (I have charge of all Mr. Goldwyn's personal papers, so I know whereof I speak).* I suppose as his secretary, I should not say anything more about his personal affairs, so I'll tell you about all the other scandals but his.

The gossip in Hollywood just now centers around Charlie Chaplin. You know of course about his marrying that 16 year old child.† Well, he was compelled to. You see he wronged her and she threatened to advise the police and since she was under age, why it was either marry her or go to jail. So he married her in order to save his reputation and career. When he came back to Hollywood, he brought his wife to his home and he has never gone into it since. She is there alone with the servants and is expecting a child very soon.

*Valeria was obviously unaware of a fairly standard clause in divorces at the time in New York, making it unlawful for the spouse accused of adultery to remarry in that state. Valeria's remarks in this instance seem to reveal more about her own curiosity and willingness to go through her boss's papers than about Sam's character.

†Chaplin had married his Gold Rush "find," the pregnant Lita Gray, in Mexico on November 26, 1924. He was so enthusiastic that he reportedly put Lita and her mother in the bridal suite and he stayed elsewhere. Though all of Hollywood appears to have known the facts, the baby's birth on May 5, 1925, was kept quiet and his birthday announced as June 28, the date of *The Gold Rush* premiere, to publicly hedge the necessity of the marriage.

He's been going around with Marion Davies and I think Mr. Hearst will soon cause some trouble. At least so it is rumored.

I guess that's about all I know just now, but will let you know if I hear anything more of interest.

I'm having a suit made of dark blue twill—very tailor made. Short coat, double breasted with four buttons—two in a row. I thought this would look nice for office wear. You see our offices are on the shady side, and inside it is a bit too cool to wear thin dresses. I'm also having another tailored dress made of some light colored material. I think it's tan. That's one draw back about this job. I have to look nice, and that's so hard for me because I hate to shop and worry about clothes. I told the general manager about this and he said that it would be to my advantage to look as best I could because in this work clothes mean so much. I also explained to him that I didn't like the idea of spending my whole salary on clothes and he said that perhaps for a few months I would, but after that my salary would be increased and then I could dress well and also have enough left over to save. I've never been so extravagant in my life and do you know it just seems sinful to me to spend so much on myself. I just can't do it happily.

I just must stop, because if I keep going, I'll begin to bore you (Ain't I a terrible typist—I make so many mistakes—it must be that d—— cricket. He's still chirping away and evidently his family has joined him because I hear about 4 or 5 different kinds of chirps.)

Oh, I just must tell you one more thing. Our art director, Mr. Grot, is awfully nice. He has his studio right above my room and I visit him occasionally and watch him sketch. Sometimes he won't let me in because he's sketching something he doesn't want me to see. I suppose he's afraid I'll be shocked. It's amusing to find anyone

like that around a movie studio, but I rather like him. Evidently I must convey the impression to him of being a very unsophisticated, innocent young girl. Well, I'll let him think that.

How is your sister Mary? Is she feeling better? Do you think she will ever come out here? I'm glad to hear that Ida's baby is getting along so well and I presume Ida too.

Do you know, Irma, I'm so glad I came to California. Life seems more interesting to me since I've been here. I haven't been lonesome once since I've been out here and, strange to say, I have no desire to come back east.

Love, Valeria

Remember me to your mother and Isabel and the other members of your family.



MARCH 1925

Dear Irma,

I received the two packages of newspapers from you, for which I thank you a thousand times. It gave me no end of pleasure to read dear old Broun and F.P.A. again. You are indeed thoughtful, and some day you'll be rewarded.

I've just finished reading "The Keys to This City," and while I agree with Broun that it would make a good movie, we have rejected it because the lead is not quite suitable to our star, Ronald Colman. No doubt some other company will buy it—personally I think it would be a splendid part for Richard Dix—don't you?

I like my work very much, but not the people for whom I work. It's almost intolerable working for Mr. Lehr, (Mr. Goldwyn's gen-

eral manager) and no doubt it will be worse when I have work both for Mr. Goldwyn and Mr. Lehr. Everybody is so temperamental and childish in this business, that in order to get on I suppose I shall have to adopt an attitude of complete indifference and develop a tough hide so that all their words will roll off and leave me entirely unaffected.

Have you seen “The Dark Angel” in New York? We have just bought the play for Colman and I’ve just finished typing it. I think it’s splendid and am very enthused about it. If you ever see it, will you let me know what you think about it?

Everything is hustling and bustling on the lot. Frank Lloyd’s new picture “Winds of Chance” is in production and the stage is set right outside my office. The scenes are supposed to be in Alaska, so it is rather funny to see the extras in big heavy fur coats and hats in this climate. There are big, sinister looking men with long beards and girls in old fashioned clothes—bright colors and just now they are staging the interior of a typical Alaska dance hall and everybody is shouting and having a hilarious time.

On the other stage there is a society drama going on and a big interior of a society dance. Nita Naldi has just come off the set—she is wearing a flame colored evening gown, cut V to the waist in the back. She is gorgeous. Her beauty just takes your breath away—but what an awakening when she talks—so vulgar and loud. Corrine Griffith is working on the same set and she is very haughty and disdainful. She looks at no one but her dogs and is generally disliked by all. It’s rather queer to see so many people mingling together in totally different costumes—men in evening clothes, canes, spats, high silk hats with grizzly bearded men in plaid shirts, boots and sombreros.

I haven't time to write more to you just now but will in a few days. Remember me to all the folks.

As ever, Valeria



APRIL 8, 1925

Dear Irma,

I've been receiving more papers from you, but no letter. Of course, I appreciate the papers, but I'd like a little letter from you too.

Haven't been fired yet, but bawled out a number of times, but I don't mind it because I'm tremendously enthusiastic about my work.

Frances Marion has just finished the Stella Dallas script and to my mind it's going to be one of the biggest pictures of the year, especially considering that Henry King is going to direct it. I'm quite friendly with Mr. King's assistant director, Jimmy Dugan. He likes Italians very much and wants me to teach him how to speak Italian because King may do a picture in Italy again. I'm trying to work in so that if they do go, I may have a chance of going too.

I'm enclosing a print from our last picture "His Supreme Moment" because I want to call your attention to the fact that the background in this film is not natural, but a painted one. Don't you think it's good? "His Supreme Moment" opens at the Strand around April 12th and if you can see it, I wish you would and then let me have your opinion.

I'm also enclosing some "stills" of Lewis Stone that I thought you might like to see and a picture of Ronald Colman.

A friend of mine, Ruth Trolander, who worked in Mr. Loeb's office, is now working on the lot with me as Joseph Schenck's sec-