A DECK OF CARDS AND A GOLDEN WHISTLE
GRAVE GOODS OF THE STARS

by Bess Lovejoy

The ancient Egyptians interred their dead alongside practical objects: cups, bowls, eating utensils, and little statues of servants that were said to come to life when activated by magic spells. Archaeologists call such items “grave goods.” Today, we still bury our dead with grave goods, though the objects tend to be more sentimental than practical. Even actors, whose films have granted them more immortality than most, are routinely buried with mementos meant to defy the nothingness of the beyond. Here are some of the items that Hollywood stars have taken to their tombs.

Harry Houdini (d. 1926)
Buried with his mother’s letters

In between his death-defying feats as a celebrated escapologist, Harry Houdini found time to produce and star in several films, as well as to set up a business devoted to high-speed film processing. Houdini had always worshipped his mother, and when in New York he would try to visit her grave daily, either at dawn or fifteen minutes after midnight, the time of her death. When Houdini himself died, of a ruptured appendix, he was buried in a bronze casket purchased for one of his acts, with his mother’s letters placed in a black bag and propped beneath his head as a pillow.

Rudolph Valentino (d. 1926)
Buried with his “slave bracelet”

One of Hollywood’s first heartthrobs, Rudolph Valentino was not exactly considered a “man’s man.” His smoldering gaze and slicked-back hair (some called him “Vaselino”) endeared him to millions of female fans, but male moviegoers just shrugged. According to Valentino’s former manager George Ullman, the Great Lover was buried wearing a “slave bracelet” given to him by his wife, Natacha, as a Christmas present in 1924. Valentino rarely removed the bracelet (formed of heavy, interlocking platinum links), and throughout his life the press seized on it as a symbol of his supposed effeminacy. The bracelet was even mentioned in a 1926 Chicago Tribune editorial, which held that Valentino, floppy pants, and masculine cosmetics were responsible for the decline of the American male. Enraged, Valentino wrote a letter challenging the writer of the editorial to a physical “test
of honor,” perhaps a boxing match. His sign-off included the line “Hoping I will have an opportunity to demonstrate to you that the wrist under a slave bracelet may snap a real fist into your sagging jaw.” The journalist never replied.

**Bela Lugosi**
(d. 1956)
*Buried in his Dracula outfit*

The brilliantly ghoulish Bela Lugosi was forever pigeonholed as a horror villain, and he spent his later years languishing in B-movie obscurity, addicted to morphine and alcohol. Director Ed Wood shot the very last footage of Lugosi wearing his Dracula outfit, and spliced it (rather randomly) into *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. But the last time Lugosi ever wore his vampire attire was at his funeral, and he now rests in it forever. According to one tale, the effect of Lugosi’s final outfit was so eerie that when Peter Lorre saw Lugosi in his coffin, he turned to fellow mourner Vincent Price and whispered, “Do you think we should drive a stake through his heart just in case?”

**Humphrey Bogart**
(d. 1957)
*Buried with a small gold whistle*

Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall’s relationship remains one of cinema’s most enduring love affairs. According to one biography, before he died Bogie kissed Bacall, patted her on the cheek, and said, “Good-bye, kid.” Before they married, Bogie is said to have given Bacall a golden whistle as a memento of their first film together, *To Have and Have Not*. In the film, Bacall utters the now–famous line “You know how to whistle, don’t you, Steve? You just put your lips together and... blow.” After Bogart’s body was cremated, Bacall placed the whistle in the silver urn that holds his ashes.

**Buster Keaton**
(d. 1966)
*Buried with a rosary and a deck of cards*

When the iconic silent comic passed away, his wife, Eleanor, slipped a rosary into one of his pockets and a deck of cards into the other. “That way,” she later revealed, “wherever he was going, he was ready.” Fellow funnyman George Burns, who died thirty years after Keaton, was also buried with a deck of cards, as well as cash, three cigars, and his keys.

**Tallulah Bankhead**
(d. 1968)
*Buried with a rabbit’s foot*

Though her name is no longer widely familiar, actress Tallulah Bankhead contributed to the archetype of the deadly glamorous female lead, with her gravelly voice, hooded eyes, and cigarette always at the ready. The actress could have given today’s most self-destructive starlets a run for their money: she was famous for her drug use, affairs with men and women, and pantyless public exploits. Her last words, whispered while dying at St. Luke’s hospital in New York City, were “Codeine... bourbon.” Despite, or perhaps because of, her wild ways, Bankhead was also notoriously superstitious, and carried the rabbit’s foot (a gift from her father) everywhere she went.

**Frank Sinatra**
(d. 1998)
*Buried with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s, a pack of Camel cigarettes, a Zippo cigarette lighter, cherry-flavored Life Savers, several Tootsie Rolls, stuffed animals, a dog biscuit, a roll of dimes, and a note from his daughter Tina saying, “Sleep warm, Poppa—look for me.”*

It was rumored that Sinatra paid for Bela Lugosi’s funeral. (Known for acts of extravagant generosity, he may also have paid for some of Lugosi’s hospital bills.) When Ol’ Blue Eyes himself died, his family made sure he had a full complement of comforts from this world to take to the next. The dimes are said to be a reference to the 1963 kidnapping of Sinatra’s son: the criminals had insisted that Sinatra always call them from a pay phone. Even after his son was safely released, the crooner made it a habit to always carry enough change for a phone call. ★