

Illustrated

Valentino



*Sincerely,
Rudolph Valentino*

An intimate biography of The Great Lover
Brad Steiger & Chaw Mank



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THE GREAT LOVER

Born Rodolfo Alfonzo Rafaelo Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentino d'Antonguolla on 6 May 1895, he was to become one of the greatest film stars in the history of the cinema. A figure in the mould of Monroe, Bogart, Gable, Garbo and other magical, legendary giants of the silver screen. On his death in August 1926 it seemed that the world, for a while, stopped still, stunned by the tragic news. Mourning was universal. What manner of man was he to inspire such devotion from his legions of admirers? What was the truth behind the film studio myth-making? These and other questions are answered with perception and insight by Brad Steiger and Chaw Mank in this fascinating, warts-and-all biography.

The photographs in this book are from Chaw Mank's personal collection

Brad Steiger and
Chaw Mank

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PREFACE

IN the early twenties, Chaw Mank was assigned the task of aiding and abetting the Valentino myth by the organization of official Rudolph Valentino fan clubs. Mank had begun an intimate correspondence with the actor early in his career, and Valentino regarded Mank as his first sincere fan. 'I guess that was why he chose to confide in me about so many different things and wanted to share so many personal experiences with me,' Mank says. The idea of a 'fan club' was a new concept in 1922, and Mank's bimonthly publication, *Movie Fan's News*, soon became an extremely important factor in molding the Valentino image.

Mank, himself, got into show business at an early age. His father died when he was a youngster, and Mank supported the family by playing the organ in the local theater. In 1923, he was asked to come to the film capital for a screen test. Mank, as a young man, bore a marked resemblance to Wallace Reid and studio magnates were eager to groom a successor to the All-American-Boy throne left vacant by the tragic death of Reid. But Mank was already touring with his successful Blue Ribbon dance band and looked dubiously upon a career in the films. He refused studio offers for a contract and elected to remain with his band. In the thirties, Mank became a close friend of Jean Harlow and she asked him to become her personal secretary. Mank once again turned down this enviable position to continue touring with his popular dance group. He later refused a similar proposition from Dick Powell, who made Mank the offer on two different occasions.

When Valentino died in August of 1926, it fell to Mank to head the Rudolph Valentino Memorial Fund. For his part in

the fund raising campaign and the perpetuation of the Valentino legend, S. George Ullman, Valentino's agent, presented Mank with Valentino's personal scrapbook and other memorabilia. From that time to the present, Mank has continued to correspond with those who knew, lived and worked with Valentino. It is Mank's voluminous correspondence and his many screenland contacts that have made this book possible. Without Mank's many letters and notes providing a running commentary on the early life of Valentino, the author would never have been able to learn facts that have been kept secret and out of the public domain. It was Mank's intimate association with the Great Lover that makes possible this portrait of a Valentino that the public never knew.

Valentino

CHAPTER ONE

ON 24th August, 1926, the New York City police were confronted with the worst display of mass hysteria and unrestrained anarchy since the bloody draft riots of 1863. The cataclysmic event which had precipitated this violent group catharsis and set loose unruly mobs in the heart of metropolitan New York was the death of Rudolph Valentino, America's love god, who had succumbed at the age of thirty-one to blood poisoning after the perforation of a gastric ulcer. An estimated 80,000 persons were caught up in the emotional frenzy of mourning the Great Lover, hundreds of whom were trampled under foot by maniacal legions or were lacerated by fragments from broken windows and had to be carried to emergency hospitals set up on Broadway and 66th Street. A task force of nearly 200 policemen struggled wearily to keep the crowd under control during nightmarish 12-hour shifts. Mounties were hissed as 'Cossacks' when they charged hysterical mourners who broke from the shuffling throngs that had come to pay their last respects at the bier of the Sheik. The mob would have its due. A people who had relished murder trials, gawked at flag-pole sitters, laughed at Prohibition and worshipped the superficial and the phony, demanded a *danse macabre* around the funeral pyre of the idol who had given them their greatest emotional jolts.

Valentino had come to New York to première his latest motion picture, *The Son of the Sheik*, and gossip columnists had confided that he was eager to get back to the arms of his latest love, Pola Negri, 'the most sizzling siren on the Hollywood lots'. Assured of celluloid immortality, financial security, the adulation of countless fans and the love of a beautiful woman, Rudolph Valentino, the newspapers eulogized in

tear-stained ink, had been tragically snatched from life at the very height of his career.

The common conception of Valentino's tragic death at the peak of popularity, physical prowess and personal accomplishment is not an accurate one. As a film star he was already fading, and he left an estate saddled with a half-million dollars in debts. He had been temperamental and ill for a long time before his death; and, when he should have been resting in New York, he had chosen to spend the evenings drinking and carousing until dawn. On the silent screen, Valentino was the twenties' sleek personification of sex – the kind of self-assured lover that shopgirls dreamed about and frustrated married women compared with their unimaginative husbands. In life, Valentino was sexually confused and socially unsure – a 'property' that had been man-handled by everyone, reporters, publicity men, producers and two wives with whom he had lived through two unconsummated marriages of convenience. Although reticent and always afraid of being misunderstood, he was capable of flying into screaming rages over imagined wrongs. To his chagrin, he was rarely popular with male fans, who considered his Continental mannerisms as effeminate and the sex menace and hypnotic powers which he exercised over his heroines as more ridiculous than convincing.

Just a few weeks before his death, an editorial had appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* which Valentino felt epitomized the resentment that the jealous American male harbored toward him. The waspish editorialist had expressed disgust with a powder vending machine that had been installed in the men's room of a new Chicago ballroom and went on to vent his spleen by indicting Valentino as the single force most responsible for the effeminization and corruption of the American male. 'Homo Americanus!' the anonymous journalist had sneered in print. 'Why didn't someone quietly drown Rudolph Guglielmi, alias Valentino, years ago? Better a rule by masculine women than by effeminate men. How does one reconcile masculine cos-

metics, sheiks, floppy pants and slave bracelets with a disregard for law and an aptitude for crime more in keeping with the frontier of a half century ago than a twentieth-century metropolis? Down with Decatur; up with Elinor Glyn. Hollywood is the national school of masculinity. Rudy, the beautiful gardener's boy, is the prototype of the American male. Hell's bells. Oh, Sugar.'

Valentino and his manager, S. George Ullman, had been ambushed between trains in Chicago by reporters who had been sent to learn Rudy's reaction to the personal attack in the *Tribune*. As Ullman read the editorial aloud, Rudy fell into an hysterical rage. It was the one slur that had always haunted him ('Rudy, the beautiful gardener's boy'). It was the one deviation from conventional morality that he had desperately sought to hide from the prying pencils of reporters ('Hell, all those dancers are queer. Did you hear about the guy who had an oral sex incident with Rudy?'). For Valentino, the *Fifth Horseman* of the Apocalypse was the stigma of homosexuality ('... the pretty little fairy'). In a pathetic attempt to combat the persistent insinuations, he had given hundreds of interviews, most of them as silly as interviews could be, with pictures which displayed his biceps and the hirsute adornment on his chest. His advisers urged him to laugh the whole Chicago thing off, but Rudy challenged the anonymous editorial writer to a 'test of honor', to meet him in either the boxing or the wrestling arena 'to prove, in typically American fashion (for I am an American citizen), which of us is more of a man'.

Although no reply came from the 'Pink Powder Puff' editorialist, Rudy couldn't let it alone.

Jimmie Quirk, a friend and public relations adviser, told Valentino he was making too much of it.

'I have not the hide of a rhinoceros,' Rudy had shrieked at him.

The need to prove his manliness became an obsession with Valentino during those last few weeks. Increasingly irritable with his personal friends, he presented a smiling façade to

the public as he went from theater to theater promoting his latest cinematic *tour de force*. He accepted every invitation to attend late dinners and night club parties and picked up every gauntlet flung at his feet by the corps of newsmen who took special delight in goading the thin-skinned movie star. In spite of the fact that he had already begun to vomit blood from the stomach ulcers, he stripped to boxing trunks to put on exhibition after sweaty exhibition in gymnasiums in Chicago and New York, culminating in the fistic fiasco with Frank O'Neil, boxing expert on the New York *Evening Journal*, on the roof of the Ambassador Hotel. S. George Ullman was later to claim that the aspersions cast on Valentino's manhood had so upset the Great Lover that they had caused a severe psychic drain of his emotional powers and had even blunted his will to live. 'Had his last hours been more free from anxiety,' Ullman said, 'his power to cope with the inroads of the septic poisoning might have been increased, and possibly his life spared.' The New York *Evening Post* duly noted that Valentino's first words upon coming out of the anesthetic were: 'Well, did I behave like a pink powder puff or like a man?'

But now it made little difference whether he had behaved as a coward or as a hero; the actor who had personified tropical love at its fiercest lay dead in New York Polyclinic Hospital. It remained for S. George Ullman to transmute the earthly shell into a shining spirit — a great soul for whom the masses would stand in line for 111 blocks to pay their last respects — a saint to which strangely upset humans would pray. Programmed with almost ghoulish skill, the funeral became the most spectacular and romanticized interment in the memory of man. The newspapers, eager to break the summer doldrums, played their role to the hilt and accepted the photographs, distributed in advance, of the chamber where the actor's body would lie in state. In a journalistic *faux pas*, a posed photograph of the funeral cortege was on the streets in one newspaper before the actual procession started. The result of such macabre machinations was that the posthumous films of Valentino took in box office receipts

that transformed the half-million dollars in obligations into a \$600,000 balance to the credit of Valentino's estate.

The evening editions of the 24th August papers were heavy with sober eulogies and maudlin memorials from the leading figures of the film world and other celebrities in all walks of life. In Hollywood, Pola Negri had conveniently and publicly thrown a couple of hysterics where they would do the most good. She sobbed uncontrollably as she told of her engagement to Valentino, and studio press agents reported that the passionate actress had had to be restrained by two doctors.

Valentino's body had been removed to the Campbell funeral parlors at Broadway and 66th Street. Even before Ullman got the directors to agree to a period of lying in state, the funeral parlor's telephones had been ringing continually with requests to view the body. Many had prefabricated elaborate ruses in their attempt to gain premature entrance into the hallowed inner sanctum where their love god lay in state. Many brought funeral offerings of flowers and crucifixes. One distraught woman begged private audience with the corpse on the grounds that she had given him his first kiss. Never before in his short-lived career had Rudolph Valentino been the center of such drama – and such a carefully cued production.

Twelve thousand people had gathered in a summer downpour to view the earthly remains of the Great Lover when Campbell's Funeral Church opened its doors at four o'clock. The body lay in a bronze coffin under unbreakable glass in the Gold Room. All bric-a-brac, statuary and anything else that might appeal to the crass souvenir-seeker had been removed from the room. The only ornamentation consisted of the gold cloth draperies which gave the room its name, four candles and the statue of a woman shrouded in a black veil which stood at the head of the bier.

Gum-chewing schoolgirls, mascaraed flappers, shabbily shawled women and expensively dressed dowagers filed past the coffin for a two-second look at the emaciated features of

their idol. Young men and boys, 'sheiks' and collegians, were also in evidence. Those of all ages, all colors and all classes had come to bid farewell to 'Rudy'.

The crowd swelled to over 60,000 mourners standing four abreast in a line which extended for four blocks. The police made threats, arrests and mounted charges in an effort to keep the weeping, shrieking, fainting pilgrims under control. In return, the officers received a multitude of maledictions and imprecations. At the pressure of the crowd, the windows in the funeral parlor gave way and spewed fragments of glass at the screaming mourners. Ten persons were severely lacerated and a room in the mortuary had to be appropriated as an emergency hospital to treat the victims.

Rumors had begun circulating which charged that Valentino's death had been the result of foul play. The story that Rudy had been poisoned by a jealous rival for the affections of a showgirl raised enough static to cause an assistant district attorney to issue a statement protesting that he could not take action on the basis of gossip alone.

Walter Winchell worried about the 'perforations' mentioned in the actor's death certificate and published a facsimile of the official document in his column. Show business folk were quick to snatch up the implication. Valentino had been shot in the stomach by one of the 'high society babes' he had been romancing.

Another version of the shooting had Rudy picking up a showgirl for a night on the town. After hitting a few hot spots, Valentino and his date for the night stopped at the apartment of a married ladyfriend for some drinks.

In the midst of their innocent *tête-à-tête*, the woman's husband returned home and proceeded to fly into a rage. Unknown to Rudy, the woman had been conducting extramarital lesbian affairs which had quite understandably undermined the stability of her marriage. The enraged husband, jumping to the worst conclusions, interpreted Rudy's appearance with the lovely showgirl in the light of sexual perversion. Cursing Valentino as the worst kind of pimp and

procurer, the man ordered Rudy to 'take his lesbian whore and go'.

Valentino, realizing that the man was beyond reach of reason, turned to usher his date from the apartment.

It was then that the violently disturbed husband went berserk, pulled a revolver from his pocket and shot Valentino in the back. Deserted by the frightened showgirl, Rudy staggered into the street, hailed a cab and gave the address of his hotel.

This story gained rapid acceptance among show folk, and a night club chanteuse even spoke of knowing the nurse who had donated blood for the fatally wounded Valentino. Others reminded reporters of the delay in operating on Rudy (he was taken to the hospital early Sunday morning but was not admitted to surgery until six o'clock that evening) and attributed it to the fact that he had lost too much blood to make an operation feasible until he had received a number of transfusions.

From Paris came the theory that a jealous movie actress and a film producer had hired assassins who had killed Valentino by putting ground glass in his food. The actress, said the story, was madly in love with Rudy but had been rebuffed. The magnate was angry because Valentino had refused to sign a contract with him. The two had then hired thugs who put ground glass in food eaten by the actor. The glass penetrated the intestines and caused death.

Dr. Meeker, the surgeon who had operated on Valentino, and his two assisting physicians, A. A. Jaller and Golden Rhind Battey, issued statements to the press denying the rumors and once more reiterated their official diagnosis as 'a perforated gastric ulcer and inflamed appendix with resultant peritonitis'.

Dr. Meeker went on to inform the bereaved public that their robust, healthy hero 'simply had not taken good care of himself. He must have suffered from a chronic stomach disorder. There were holes in the lining of his stomach as big as your finger.'

Profiting from their combat experience after the first day of controlling the restive fans who had felt compelled to help their love god cross the bar, police authorities assigned 183 officers to active duty on the Broadway front.

The directors of Campbell's saw to their fortifications as well. Heavy planking was ordered mounted across the front of the building to protect the remaining windows. The corpse was moved from the Gold Room on the third floor to the Rose Room on the first. The morticians reasoned that they would in this way avoid the delay involved when the mourners took the elevator from first to third.

When the lamenting throngs began shuffling by the bier on the second day, many of them were startled to see two black-shirted Fascisti standing at either end of the coffin. Challenged by militant anti-Fascists, the Fascisti stated that they had been sent by personal command of Benito Mussolini to serve as honor guard over the corpse of their fallen countryman. When the angered anti-Fascists insisted that the black shirts withdraw immediately on the grounds that Valentino had been anti-Fascist and that Mussolini had banned his pictures in Italy for that reason, the Fascisti lapsed into silence. Later that same day they were confronted by a rival honor guard supplied by the Italian Artists Association.

The incident and its resultant controversy made front-page newspaper stories, but reporters were ignorant of certain facts that would have made even better reading. Harry C. Klemfuss, Campbell Funeral Church's press agent, had hired actors to pose as the 'Fascisti' and had then encouraged the I.A.A. to protest. If the journalists had pried a bit deeper, they would have learned that it was Klemfuss who made certain that there were always plenty of 'shriekers' and 'fainters' in the crowd.

Klemfuss also met with Ullman to work out the details of the funeral procession. Klemfuss said that Mr. Campbell favored a procession of a hundred cars and suggested the hiring of an airplane to hover overhead and strew red roses on the crowds of mourners. The funeral directors had also

made a number of discreet inquiries and had determined that a large number of civic groups might be called upon to march in the procession. All in all, the press agent said, Mr. Campbell felt that the funeral arrangements should be 'as simple as possible'.

Ullman vetoed a state funeral. He had not been at all satisfied with the behaviour of a large number of the bereaved who had appeared to pay their final respects at the bier. He had even heard some young flappers giggling as they passed the flower-bedecked corpse. Ullman was also anxious to avoid additional riots which might result in negative publicity. If the funeral was to accomplish its true purpose of salvaging the estate of Valentino, there simply must be no more trampling of mourners or battling of police. It was Campbell's theory that the riots had been provoked by the rain and he tried unsuccessfully to convince the actor's manager to accept this point of view. Ullman, however, remained immovable and the funeral director reluctantly agreed to close his parlors on the following day.

A bulletin from Hollywood reassured moist-eyed romantics that true love's unifying power could indeed transcend the grave: Pola Negri's managers announced that the grief-stricken actress would be present at the funeral services. Studio representatives had previously stated that the actress, too exhausted by her sorrow, would not attend the services but would resume work on her current movie and thus try to lose herself in her art. It was obvious to the more cynical that the studio heads had finally decided that the value of publicity would outweigh the loss of production time, and the obliging Pola had gone shopping for suitable widow's weeds.

In Tin Pan Alley, some instant-inspiration tunesmith had composed a dirge for the deceased idol. Entitled 'There's a New Star in Heaven Tonight', the song was advertised as 'being so simple that anyone can render it on a piano by using only two fingers'. The lament told of God calling Rudy to take his place in 'starry space'.

While Pola Negri boarded a train for New York appropriately garbed in funereal black, other claimants for the title of

Valentino's last love were making their suits public on the front pages of newspapers. Miss Marian Kay Brenda, a showgirl in the Ziegfeld Follies, told reporters that Valentino had been completely infatuated with her and had even proposed marriage. According to Miss Brenda, she had dated Valentino for three weeks, ever since Ali Ben Haggin introduced them at a party. She was shocked by his sudden death for they had attended parties at the Lido and at Texas Guinan's the night before Valentino went into the hospital. 'What about Pola?' a reporter asked. Miss Brenda answered demurely: 'He told me that Pola Negri was a very charming person, but he had no intention of marrying her.'

Certain figures in the movie colony, who claimed to 'know Valentino well', said that at the time of his death, Rudy was engaged to marry a Park Avenue girl who was sojourning abroad. Despite the fact that the weeping Pola 'faints and faints', another girl, they said, nursed her silent grief in an apartment in Paris.

Then, too, it was no secret that Valentino had been seeing a great deal of his first wife, Jean Acker, during his stay in New York. She had been in his party at the première of *The Son of the Sheik* and had accompanied him to many night club parties. Their frequent dating offered generous grist to the gossip mills which had ground out rumors of reconciliation. In retrospect, it seemed that Valentino had tried to cram a lot of living into those last frenetic days and nights in New York City.

When the funeral home announced that its doors would be closed on the 27th and 28th, the metropolitan police began to prepare for another riot. Such precautions proved to be unnecessary. Small groups of mourners periodically arrived to bang on the door and demand entrance, but admission was granted only to those to whom Ullman had issued tickets. Once the crowd tried to take advantage of the diversion created by the delivery of an eight-foot wreath from United Artists and storm the entrance, but they were driven back easily. By midday, the masses had deserted the

shrine of the Great Lover for the homecoming of Gertrude Ederle, a young lady who had flexed muscles which an earlier generation had not known, a woman possessed and had conquered the English Channel. Hysteria was still the order of the day, however, and a near riot had to be dispersed by the harried police when the youthful swimmer returned to her home in New York.

S. George Ullman had not yet given the morticians the official word to order the funeral procession. Valentino's brother, Alberto, had sailed from Italy immediately upon learning of Rudy's death and demanded that the burial service not take place until he had arrived to pay his younger brother his last respects. It was necessary to pack the corpse in ice and obtain special permission from the Department of Health to postpone interment.

On 29th August, Pola Negri arrived in New York and the ashes of the initial hysteria were once again fanned into holocaustic proportions. Crowds gathered at the funeral parlor to chant their condolences and to vicariously savor the 'acute personal sorrow of Miss Negri'. The casket was opened by an attendant from the Health Department and Pola was immediately overcome by the 'awful sight of her lover'. When she had sufficiently recovered her faculties, she granted audience to reporters in her hotel suite and one of the newsmen made so bold as to question the validity of her engagement to the Great Lover. 'My love for Valentino was the greatest love in my life,' Miss Negri told the assembled reporters. 'I shall never forget him.' Then, to clarify the fact that theirs was not a platonic affair, she asserted: 'I loved him not as one artist loves another, but as a woman loves a man.' But where was her engagement ring? What about tangible evidence of their betrothal? 'We had entered into a four months' trial engagement at the end of which we planned to marry if our love endured. Surely we would have been wed within the year.'

Although the newspapers and their readers had scarcely noticed, Charles William Eliot, 40 years president and 17

years president emeritus of Harvard University, had died the same day as Rudolph Valentino. What, after all, were the accomplishments of a 90-year-old educator, who had 'turned American education over like a flapjack', raised the level of American culture with his famous selected 'five-foot shelf' of the *Harvard Classics* and served as envoy of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, when compared with a handsome young man who had cinematized millions with the spirit of youth and romance?

By the 31st, Alberto Guglielmi had arrived from Italy. The brother of Valentino was met at the pier by Pola Negri and a vast Italian delegation, waving crepe beribboned flags.

The next day the long awaited funeral took place. Solid walls of wailing humanity, one hundred thousand strong, lined the route of the procession. At regular intervals hysterical women broke through the cordon of police and delayed the funeral march. Reporters were on hand to duly note the sobs of the Hollywood stars who marched in the cortege and to weigh the sincerity of every tear that fell from each professional eye.

Pola Negri maintained her control throughout the solemn high requiem mass, although newsmen later reported that she seemed on the verge of collapse several times during the ceremony. Jean Acker, Rudy's first wife, was overcome and carried swiftly to the emergency first-aid station that had been set up in the rear of the church. At the end of the service, Miss Negri managed to have her collapse.

Afterwards, she emerged from the church with a smile of triumph on her full lips. Mary Pickford had given her a letter written by Dr. Meeker, Valentino's surgeon, that would establish her engagement to the departed sheik once and for all. Dr. Meeker quoted words of 'her dear one' that 'absolutely proved' that she had been betrothed to Rudy.

I am asking Miss Pickford, an old friend and patient of mine, to deliver this message to you, as I am going to Maine. About 4 o'clock Monday morning, he stretched out his hands and said, 'I'm afraid we won't go fishing

together. Perhaps we will meet again. Who knows?' His mind was very clear and this was the first time he seemed to realize that he would not get well. Then he said: 'Pola - if she does not come in time, tell her I think of her!'

I feel this obligation to get his message to you immediately.

Pola's interpretation of the letter convinced few reporters that Valentino had plighted his troth. The press continued to belittle Pola Negri's claim to romantic immortality as Valentino's fiancée and persisted in assigning her theatrics at the funeral to the category marked 'cheap publicity tricks'.

On 3rd September, Rudy at long last entrained for Hollywood on the round trip return ticket which he had not been able to use in life. All the way from New York to Los Angeles throngs assembled for a glimpse of the funeral train.

By the way of contrast, the funeral services conducted in Hollywood took on a much more quiet aspect. Possibly the superabundance of publicity in the East had brought a subdued reaction in the film colony. The church in Beverly Hills in which the requiem mass was offered was not entirely filled during the services. The movie folk themselves were fairly well represented and many personal friends of Valentino who were not in motion pictures attended, as did a number of people from the Italian colony.

The stars in attendance included Pola Negri, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Mildred Davis, Jack Gilbert, Mabel Normand, George O'Brien, William S. Hart, Jean Hersholt, Patsy Ruth Miller, Pat O'Malley and Helen Ferguson. Nearly all the men in this group were identified with the services as either pall-bearers or ushers.

The funeral procession itself was over a mile long, and the route was lined with people. The crowd never became unruly at any time as it had in New York. A blanket of red roses from Pola Negri was spread over Rudy's casket as the dead idol was lowered into the place that had been

prepared for him by the woman who had discovered him, June Mathis. It was she who said the last farewells to the love god whom she had helped deify.

June Mathis may have said the last official adieu to Rudolph Valentino, but the world was not ready to relinquish its claim upon him. Like an earthbound wraith, the tormented spirit of Valentino was not allowed to ascend to a higher plane. A rumor circulated that the actor was not dead but lived hidden away in an asylum, his features horribly disfigured by acid which a jealous husband had thrown in his face. The body in the casket, the rumor went on, was an image of Rudy which his manager had had made of wax. Valentino himself had ordered that the ruse be carried out, vowing never to reveal the grotesquely scarred face to his adoring masses. It was better that they think of him as dead.

Open letters began appearing in newspapers begging Valentino to show himself, reassuring the Great Lover that his true fans would always love him and remember him as he once was. This particular rumor was unintentionally reinforced by that redoubtable chronicler of Hollywood, Adela Rogers St. Johns, who claimed that thousands of mourners who had filed past the open coffin of Valentino had, in reality, paid their last respects to a waxen figure of their idol. According to Miss St. Johns: '... after that long week's agony, Valentino looked pitifully thin, like a very tired boy, his face was so worn . . . there was nothing left of the 'Sheik'. It was Jimmie Quirk, in charge until Rudy's brother should arrive from Italy, who did a wise and sane thing. A sculptor was called and from the camera's 1,000 images a wax figure was molded.' From this charge of deception at the actor's lying in state, many credulous fans found it a short jump to the asylum where Valentino chose to suffer in seclusion rather than expose his worshipful throngs to the shock of his disfigurement.

Rumors of foul play began anew, coupled with charges of incompetency on the part of the doctors who had attended

Valentino. Dr. Marco Porzio, an eminent Roman physician, denounced the surgeons for 'permitting' Rudolph Valentino to die after a 'mere appendicitis operation'.

Bernarr Macfadden's *Evening Graphic* provided its readers with libidinous headlines and full-page accounts of Valentino's poisoning by a jealous female, his pummeling by an outraged husband and his assassination in a supper club.

Surgeon Charles Horace Mayo of Rochester, Minnesota, who felt himself eminent beyond all criticism, sought to squelch the rumors by once more declaring that Valentino had died of septicaemia (blood poisoning) after the perforation of a gastric ulcer. The Polyclinic Hospital officials said that they had not realized that many people were as interested in the movie star's disease as they were in his personality.

Krishnamurti, 'living vehicle of the Great Teacher', Hindu teacher of Theosophy, viewed this Western phenomenon of hysterical mourning with bewilderment. 'Rudolph Valentino is not dead,' he told reporters. 'His soul is alive and can be reached on the proper spiritual plane. Valentino will come back to this earth, perhaps at once, in another physical cast, so why all this mourning?' Then the Hindu teacher added sagely: 'Next to the chase for money, the Western world magnifies its sex life far out of proportion.'

CHAPTER TWO

HE had always been beautiful. Born Rodolfo Alfonso Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentino d'Antonguolla on 6th May, 1895, the cherubic infant bore no trace of the horns of Pan which he would later wear as a symbol of unrestrained sensuality. Donna Gabriella Barbin Guglielmi's only wish for her pretty baby was that he would grow up to become a surgeon so that he might doctor humans instead of animals as did his father, Giovanni Guglielmi, the village veterinarian.

Dr. Guglielmi, the son of a famous civil engineer who had built some of the most difficult railroad bridges in south Italy, had chucked his army commission and disgraced the family name by running away to join a travelling circus. It was while the show was playing in the village of Castellaneta that Giovanni had met and fallen in love with Donna Gabriella Barbin, a schoolteacher of French extraction, and settled down in the small village to take up his veterinarian's trade. Although Donna Gabriella fussed that her husband's profession was not worthy of a man of his background, Giovanni Guglielmi only laughed at his wife's veneration of alleged aristocratic forebears. He was not, however, able to prevent the mother from filling her younger son's head with romantic tales of a glorious past. Later, Valentino was able to recite his full name and its various origins with such facility that even the most skeptical reporters were referring to him in print as an 'aristocratic Italian'. The 'Pierre Filibert', he would tell them, came from his mother's side. She was the daughter of a famous French surgeon. To his father's house belonged 'Rodolfo Alfonso Raffaello'. The 'di Valentino' was a papal title, and the 'd'Antonguolla'

indicated an obscure right to forgotten royal property that had been lost to the family during 'one of the later Crusades'.

Donna Gabriella lavished attention upon the handsome child. There was already Alberto, just a few years older, and soon there would be Maria and the sister, Bice, who would die in infancy, but Rodolfo was her favorite.

'This one is not meant to give pills to pigs and serve as midwife to cattle,' she chided her husband. 'Does he not even now have the look of an aristocrat about him?'

'We shall see,' said Giovanni Guglielmi. 'He soils his napkin just like any other baby.'

Shortly after the death of Valentino, Hiram Kelly Moderwell, a representative of a leading Chicago newspaper in Rome, Italy, spent several weeks investigating and checking the early days of the Great Lover. Moderwell talked with boyhood friends, the family doctor, Valentino's nurse and others who knew Valentino intimately. Chaw Mank supplemented Moderwell's research with personal correspondence with several Italian friends. Mank maintained steady communication with some individuals for many years and continues to hear from those who wish to share remembrances even today.

'From the very beginning Donna Gabriella was too protective with the boy,' the village doctor, Cavalier Michele Converso, recalled years later. 'She always pampered Rodolfo and let him have his way. Perhaps that is why he became such a cruel boy. He would display a violent temper whenever anyone opposed him or frustrated him. If Donna Gabriella would have spent more time teaching him manners and less time filling his head with romantic stories, everyone would have been much better off.'

Although the Guglielmis' white corner house near the village square was hardly the 'ancestral palace' that press agents later designated as Valentino's birthplace, it was a comfortable home and Giovanni was able to provide quite well for his family. In recompense for his being a good provider, the veterinarian demanded complete obedience and brooked no insubordination or signs of rebellion. As might

be expected there was a perpetual clash of wills between him and his younger son. Giovanni may even have recognized the same defiant spirit in Rodolfo that had once fired his own veins for it seemed as though he were resolved to purge it from the boy's soul. He punished with unyielding severity. For even the most minor infractions of the household code, young Rodolfo was locked without supper in a dark closet. Giovanni would linger over his meal unmoved by the frightened and impassioned beating on the closet door. When the boy was at last released and ordered to go to bed, the lovely Donna Gabriella would be there to comfort and cuddle her 'poor naughty baby', and there would always be a sandwich hidden in his bedclothes. To Rodolfo's childish mind, it became quite apparent that his father was a wicked man who hated him. It also occurred to him that Giovanni must in reality be his stepfather – no real blood relative at all. Donna Gabriella, on the other hand, was his true mother, a warm and loving saint. No matter what he might do, no matter how severely he might be punished, his mother would always be there to love him and comfort him.

By the time that he was 11, Rodolfo was the town bully, the incorrigible bad boy, the prince of mischief-makers. When he had been a baby, Donna Gabriella had delighted in dressing him in his most expensive smocks for display in the market place. How she had loved to hear the other mothers fussing over him: 'Such a beautiful baby.' 'He should have been a girl.' 'How pretty he is!' Now as she gathered fresh vegetables and eggs in the market, she was forced to close her ears to the harsh whispers that distressed mothers fully intended her to hear: 'Why doesn't she do something about her pretty brat?' 'What he needs is a sound thrashing. I'll give it to him myself if he bothers my Pietro once more.' 'I should think that Dr. Guglielmi would be able to control him.' What everyone in the village knew, of course, was that the stern veterinarian punished his errant son with the wrath of an Old Testament patriarch. They also knew that the father's unceasing campaign for discipline was undermined at every step by the indulgent Donna Gabriella.

Rodolfo organized a club of 'bandits' with headquarters in the many caves of the gorge of Castellaneta. Here, in a world controlled by his own romantic dictates, he was Musolino, the legendary Robin Hood of Calabria. His friends, Alfonso Patarino, Giuseppe Tamburrino and Giacomo De Bellis, served as his eager and obedient henchmen. Their crew of brigands was composed of every smaller village boy that they could press into service. With wooden swords in hand, Rodolfo and his bandits would leap from rock to rock, confront the king's soldiers, then flee in triumphant withdrawal to the safety of their cave hideaway. The younger village boys were completely under the spell of Rodolfo's vivid imagination. As he strutted before them and demanded that they rally against the tyrant, it seemed to them as if Rodolfo had rolled back the centuries and had actually transformed them into men of Musolino. Rodolfo was the undisputed leader. To follow him was to enter a captivating world of fantasy – a world in which scolding adults, household chores and the stern teachers at the village school had no place.

But then there were the bad days. The boys always knew when Rodolfo had been punished by his father and locked in the closet without supper. They knew because they were the ones who would pay for the 'injustice'.

'Who is the most beautiful woman in Castellaneta?' he would ask a group of small boys, his fists clenched and ready for anyone who would not supply the correct answer. If none of them felt like challenging the bully that morning, they would chorus: 'Donna Gabriella is the most beautiful woman in Castellaneta!' If the punishment the night before had been unusually severe, however, Rodolfo would beat one of them anyway on the pretext that he had heard the boy profess his loyalty to another.

One of Rodolfo's stunts which was best remembered in the village was the way he taught the smaller boys to be 'brave'. He would get them up on the balcony of his house and hold them out over the railing, fully fifteen feet above the street. Then he would let them drop, catching them by

the arms the instant they thought they were about to be dashed to death on the pavement below.

His passionate refusal to acknowledge anyone's superiority over him made him a problem student in school. Once a teacher who had persistently tried to make a tractable pupil of him punished the boy by placing him in a barrel with only his head protruding through a hole in the top. The other students were then instructed to gather around their pilloried classmate and shame him for his several infractions of classroom procedure. That night, Signor Parroni, the headmaster, called at the Guglielmi home. Rodolfo was quick enough at learning, Signor Parroni told the veterinarian and his wife, but he absolutely refused to submit to the routine of schooling. The teachers simply could not tolerate such rebellion. It was imperative that Rodolfo be made to understand how difficult he made the situation for everyone concerned, his teachers, his classmates and himself.

After the headmaster had delivered the thinly veiled ultimatum, Giovanni Guglielmi seized Rodolfo and administered a severe beating with his belt.

'What do you think of your pretty baby now?' he thundered at his wife. 'What do you think of your little aristocrat?'

He dumped Rodolfo on the floor, then grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and set him in a corner. Desperately Rodolfo sought his mother's face. Surely she would come to him and comfort him. But her eyes were filled with tears and she avoided looking at him when she spoke. 'Rodolfo, you have been a very bad boy. You have made me very sad.'

Then, for the first time, Rodolfo let loose the hurt that had been stinging in the corners of his eyes. In painful bewilderment he watched his mother go to his father's arms to be consoled for the sorrow which Rodolfo had inflicted upon her. His father was, after all, the favored one of his mother.

The next day Rodolfo nearly drowned a younger boy in the town fountain. When the village doctor, Cavalier Michele Converso, intervened, the enraged Rodolfo was holding

the smaller lad under the surface. 'He said his sister was more beautiful than my mother,' was the explanation he gave Dr. Converso for his actions. The doctor, who was a close family friend of the Guglielmis, gave the boy a violent tongue lashing and delivered him to his mother.

After Dr. Converso had left them alone, Rodolfo threw himself on his mother's breast and embraced her fiercely. Father was not at home. The two of them were alone and she would not have to pretend for Father. She would tell him that she understood, that she knew how much he loved her. But her arms were strong and they pushed him away.

'You are not my pretty angel any more, Rodolfo,' she told him. 'You have grown into a devil. You cause your mother much heartache and sorrow. If you want me to love you, you must be kind to your friends and to your brother and sister. You must behave in school. You must obey your father. You must do as he tells you!'

Rodolfo's eyes blinked back the tears. She had betrayed him; she had sided with Father.

'What is it that burns inside you?' she asked him. 'What makes you behave the way you do?'

He would listen to no more. He ignored his mother's cries and ran from the house. There was another who would comfort him, another who loved him as dearly as his mother once had. He would go to see Rosa.

Rosa had been his babyhood nurse. A simple, unmarried woman in her middle 20's, Rosa tended a small vegetable garden when she was not in the employ of some solicitous mother. She had nursed the infant, Rodolfo with special care. He was like a young god, she had told Donna Gabriella in the impassioned moment when she first held the child in her arms. What a beautiful boy he was! Rodolfo could still remember being bathed by the devoted Rosa. 'You are such a pretty baby,' she would chant over and over again as she rubbed him briskly with the thick towel. The first time that the gentle irritation had stimulated his tiny member into an erection, Rosa had laughed and tweaked it with her fingers.

'Someday that little thing will grow into a tool of pleasure that will make the ladies happy.' After that, it had become something of a ritual with them to make an elaborate inspection of his penis. 'Are you growing?' Rosa would ask it in mock seriousness. 'You get busy and grow now.' The boy was quick to notice that there was no member inspection if his mother were in the room, and because it was something that his mother never did, he knew that it was a secret to be shared only by him and Rosa.

Although Rosa had not bathed him since he was six years old, they had continued to share their secret ritual. Often Rodolfo would bring her bright colored ribbons which he had stolen; sometimes he would offer her candy, and even though Rosa did not have a sweet tooth, he would insist that she eat it. After he had presented his gift, there would always be the tender caresses and kisses and the gentle fingers measuring how much the 'little fellow had grown'. As Rodolfo grew older, the intimate probings had begun to take on a much different meaning. He had begun to hear heretofore unimagined details of the man-woman relationship from more sophisticated members of his gang, and what had once been merely a highly pleasurable sensation had now become a daring prelude to sexual conquest. But since that time when, after delicious paroxysms of pain, Rosa's hand had held glandular proof of his impending manhood, she had refused to perform the secret ritual any more.

'Rodolfo,' Rosa smiled. 'How nice to see you.'

'I have nothing to give you,' Rodolfo said from the open doorway.

'Foolish one,' Rosa frowned. 'How many times must I tell you that you need not bring me gifts. Why must you feel that love must be bought?'

She walked to the boy and kissed him gently on the forehead. Rodolfo embraced her stout figure and began rubbing himself against her leg. He needed more than her kisses. He needed the secret, strokings that proved he was a man.

'No,' Rosa said, pulling away. 'I told you no more of that.'

What we have been doing has been – has not been good. Some would call it sin. If your father ever found out . . .’

‘My father!’ Rodolfo shrieked, clenching his fists. ‘Why must my father stand in the way of all my pleasure, all my love?’

With a sob he reached for his old nurse, but she, too, like his mother, pushed him away. ‘Forgive me, Rodolfo, for what I have done to you, and for what I will no longer do to you,’ she said, her jaw set firmly. ‘Things have changed. You are no longer a baby. What you want from me is no longer innocent. What you want from me is wrong for me to give you.’

‘You no longer love me,’ Rodolfo accused her.

‘I shall always love you,’ Rosa protested. ‘Oh, God,’ she sighed. ‘I wish I had the brains to explain it better.’

‘You do not love me!’ Rodolfo screamed. ‘Well, you pig, I do not love you, either!’ Seizing a copper kettle from the table, Rodolfo struck Rosa on the chin and ran sobbing from her cottage.

The boy returned home to fierce punishment. After a sound beating from his enraged father, who had received a report of the dunking incident from Dr. Converso, Rodolfo was once more thrown into the dark closet and deprived of another supper.

‘In addition, my fine bully,’ his father shouted at him through the closed door, ‘you shall receive no spending money for a month!’

The next day, smarting with a sense of his father’s injustice, Rodolfo went into the village square fully prepared with a plan whereby he would still be able to obtain the candy which he craved and continue to make his father pay for it. He went to the stationery store where Giovanni Guglielmi had a charge account, bought a number of items on credit, then sold them to friends for whatever he could get in cash. With the money, he filled his pockets with candy. He was curious to see just how long he could get away with this new mischief, yet at the same time he was almost eager to have his father learn of his cleverness and his defiance.

It turned out to be one bit of his son's devilment that Giovanni Guglielmi never discovered. He had contracted a disease that moved swiftly and suddenly toward mortality. As he lay dying, Giovanni propped himself up on an elbow and addressed himself to his sons. 'My boys, love your mother and above all your country!' He died that night in his sleep.

When he was approaching 30, Valentino was able to appraise the relationship of his parents with much more maturity. In a letter to Chaw Mank, in which Valentino discussed his father and his parents' marriage, he wrote: 'I remember today with a sharply etched distinction the time of my father's death. There was something very close and beautiful, very dear and intimate between my mother and my father. I think it was one of those true loves of the world . . . one of the dearest married loves it has ever been my privilege to see. In fact, I owe this idealism I have concerning marriage to that early example of the existence of such a thing. There are few marriages like that of those two individuals.'

Donna Gabriella decided to leave the village of Castellaneta and move to the larger city of Taranto in south Italy where both she and her husband had relatives. Although Dr. Guglielmi had been held in high esteem by the villagers and Donna Gabriella had served the community as a schoolteacher before her marriage, Castellaneta was not at all unhappy to see Rodolfo move away. Alberto and Maria were quiet enough and well-behaved, but no one was willing to predict anything but disgrace to the family name as Rodolfo's contribution to the Guglielmis' future.

For a biographer, who is given the advantage of being able to observe his subject's life in its entirety, there is the most exquisite irony to be found in comparing the black cloud under which young Rodolfo left his home village with the fervent tribute which Castellaneta paid their native son within 24 hours of his death. Distributed to the villagers on a handbill, printed in enormous letters and deeply bordered in black, the proclamation read, in part:

Fellow Citizens:

The efforts of science were unavailing to rescue from the claws of death that son of ours who, in faraway America, was able to evoke all the ardors of our land and was proclaimed the sovereign of the cinematographic art.

Rodolfo Guglielmi had died, invoking the sweet name of mother.

Sublime interpreter of earthly passions, he fascinated people by his great gifts of mind and in varied, living expression he was unique, a majestic master of mimicry . . .

No one was able to excel him and his magnetic expression entranced masses of spectators, who everywhere fervently adored him.

He was the genuine expression of our countryside and of our spirit.

He was the son of the veterinary surgeon, Dr. Giovanni Guglielmi, who did so much good in our town, and of his gifted wife, whose noble qualities of heart everyone knew. Rodolfo Valentino, as he called himself in art, was born in this land of sun . . . he belongs to us . . .

The sincere expression of our sorrow goes to his memory, the sorrowful greeting of all our citizens, who will forever immortalize his genius.

Everywhere great honor is being rendered to Valentino such as few in the world have received, and Castellaneta remembering him sorrowfully offers him the last and best tribute of affection.

Time, which heals all wounds (especially if a small-town boy makes good), had enabled the stolid villagers of Castellaneta to view Rodolfo's boyhood hell-raising as the playfulness of a genius rather than the manifestation of malignant evil as they had once declared it.

The move from Castellaneta to Taranto did not affect an immediate metamorphosis on the personality of twelve-year-old Rodolfo. He was enrolled in the Dante Alighieri College for two years, then, in despair, sent to a military

academy. Although both Valentino and his press agents made much of his 'college education', the level of work at Dante Allighieri corresponded to that of an American grammar school. He was a complete dunce at school, badly behaved, impossible to control. He did exhibit a certain flare for languages and could possibly have become an able linguist if he had made even the slightest attempt to apply himself to his studies. Young Rodolfo chose rather to spend his study time reading books of adventure and mentally projecting himself as the dashing young bandit, gypsy or torreador who swashbuckled his way to bloody glory. The strict discipline of the military academy could do no more to squelch his penchant for romance than had the schoolmasters at Castellaneta.

One day a holiday was called at the academy to allow the boys to line the streets for a glimpse of King Vittorio Emanuele who was to pass through the city. Rodolfo, however, was left in a dormitory, stripped to his underwear as a punishment for yet another act of insubordination. He lay weeping for several minutes on his cot. To be denied saluting the king was the most severe blow his romantic nature had ever been forced to endure. As he heard the excited babble of the assembling crowds, he sat up and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. Setting his jaw in a determined jut, he resolved that he would not be denied his opportunity to hail the king. He broke into the locker where his clothes had been placed, dressed in his red and blue cadet's uniform and dashed madly down to the street.

Wild cheering broke out. The king was coming. Tears of frustration stung the boy's eyes as he tried to squirm through the crowd that lined the parade route. Broad, unconcerned backs blocked both his passage and his view. The crowd shifted as if in a pre-planned mass manoeuvre, and Rodolfo found himself squeezed against a lamp post. He gripped the post, pulled himself above the crowd in a desperate movement that was inspired as much by self-preservation as by his desire to see the king; but suddenly he found himself with the best of all possible vantage points. Clamping his knees

about the metal post he shinned higher and higher above the cheering throng. As King Vittorio rode by on his black charger, he smiled and directed a special salute at the young cadet who waved his cap with one hand and gripped the lamp post with the other.

After the parade, the commandant of the academy had another special salute to tender the disobedient cadet – the salute of dismissal – and Rodolfo was packed home the next day.

Donna Gabriella next enrolled her reluctant scholar in the Collegio della Sapienze where she hopefully prayed the study of medicine would attract her restless son and enable him to fulfill her early dream of his carrying on the family tradition as a surgeon. Rodolfo bitterly disappointed his mother by dropping out of the medical school after only a few weeks and announcing his decision to become a cavalry officer because ‘they were such long long, glorious blue capes’.

The Guglielmi estate was not well enough endowed to support an officer candidate, however, and Rodolfo was forced to compromise by making application to the Royal Naval Academy. Always proud of his wiry physique and his strength, the boy submitted to the physical examination required of prospective cadets with his customary arrogance and rudeness. As the doctor passed the tape around Rodolfo’s chest, the boy was shocked to hear the examiner cluck his tongue and tell him: ‘Sorry, my boy. You’re in sound enough physical shape, but your chest lacks an inch in expansion.’

Rodolfo was humiliated. The daring young Musolino, the powerful young bully, the dashing young bandit, had been rejected because of a deficiency in his physique. He immediately set forth on a campaign of rigorous calisthenics that successfully expanded and built up his chest, and he was later to use this anecdote of his physical humiliation as a springboard into the kind of interview that would culminate in the revealing of his famous physique. He would confess to his adolescent shame without prompting and would delight in the disbelief of women reporters, who found a rejection of

the Great Lover on physical grounds completely incomprehensible. Nearly every one of Valentino's films featured at least one aphrodisiacal dressing or undressing sequence which exposed his bared torso to hungry-eyed female fans.

At the age of 15, Rodolfo entered the Royal Academy of Agriculture and for the first time managed to see a course of study to its completion. Press agents later promoted him to 'the head of his class, graduating with honors', but Hollywood has always been notorious for awarding Phi Beta Kappa keys, valedictory honors and astonishing intelligence quotients to its stars and starlets. At any rate, Rodolfo Guglielmi did graduate with a certificate that fully entitled him to practice the profession of scientific farmer. Studio biographies also made much of Rudy's desire to 'get off by himself and have a few acres of soil to till'. The 'Sheik' originally had no intention of achieving film stardom or even of entering the movies, they would have had the fans believe. Valentino had come to California with the express purpose of practicing his profession of 'scientific farming' in the rich and fertile soil.

The truth of the matter was, of course, that Rodolfo was too full of romance ever to contemplate seriously an agricultural career. At 18, he had reached his full height of five feet eleven inches and had built a lean, muscular physique with a chest that could expand several inches beyond the once deficit one inch. His face was much rounder than it would be when he achieved fame, and he wore a mustache to appear older. No longer the swaggering bully, he had developed a charming manner that adequately concealed the nagging self-doubts he had acquired after his long series of adolescent failures. No longer the obnoxious rebel, he had reinstated himself with his mother, and it no longer embarrassed Alberto and Maria to be known as his brother and sister. Genuinely filled with a sense of personal accomplishment after having successfully completed his course at the Royal Academy of Agriculture, Rodolfo had nearly forgotten the pangs of the early rivalry with his father. The humiliation in

Rosa's cottage had been pushed away into a dark and seldom used corner of his subconscious.

It was this new-blooming Rodolfo who successfully obtained his mother's permission to go to Paris. It was in the City of Lights that the young man was introduced to the kind of life that would grant his romantic yearnings their most complete fulfillment. It was also in Paris that Rodolfo underwent his initiation into the subterranean sex life of the homosexual and learned for the first time that youth and manly good looks could buy success.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM the very first, Rodolfo was attracted to the night life of Paris. Although he had promised his mother that he would look for some type of respectable work, he spent all of his time in the bistros, sipping wine and watching the professional dancers. He was completely enthralled by the graceful men and women who swirled about the cramped stages of the smoky dives. He was especially captivated by the apache dancers, who performed their savage mating ritual accompanied by pulsating music. In Rodolfo's romantic mind, the apache dance effectively dramatized the erotic mastery of woman by a dominant and completely self-assured male. The almost contemptuous manner in which the man seized his woman and flung her roughly about the dance platform, the cringing servility of the tight-skirted female, the suggestive, thrusting movements as their bodies met, all fired the young Italian's soul.

It was not long before the religious attendance of the handsome, mustachioed Italian was duly noted by a number of dancers and their women, who were quick to pass the word that the young devotee was more than willing to buy wine for all who would join him at his table.

One evening while he sat engrossed in the performance of Jean Martin and Coco, an attractive couple whose skill he especially admired, he was joined at his table by a handsome man who appeared to be in his middle 40's.

'I hope you do not mind if I share your table,' the man said with an easy smile.

Rodolfo shook his head, returning his attention to the passion of Jean Martin and Coco.

They sat in silence until the dancers had completed

their routine, then they both applauded enthusiastically.

'Aren't they magnificent?' Rodolfo asked his table companion in heavily accented French.

'Superb,' the man agreed. He signaled a waiter, ordered a bottle of wine and two glasses.

'That was not necessary, monsieur,' Rodolfo protested. 'I have money of my own.'

The man shrugged, easing his handsome features into a pleasant smile. 'I feel it is my obligation, as a native Parisian, to demonstrate our famous French hospitality to a guest in our city. Your accent, is it not Italian?'

Rodolfo nodded. 'I am Rodolfo Guglielmi from Taranto.'

His impromptu host smiled again. 'My name is Claude Rambeau. Tell me, are you alone? Can one so young be on his own in such a large city?'

Rodolfo frowned, unconsciously stroking a side of his mustache. 'I am eighteen,' he said sharply. 'In Italy, one is a man at eighteen.'

Claude nodded in solemn agreement. 'I meant no offense. Tell me, do you enjoy the dancers?'

'I come here nearly every night,' Rodolfo said. 'Jean Martin is like a great sinewy jungle cat, and Coco must surely be the most beautiful woman in Paris.'

Claude laughed. 'How generous you are with your praises. You should declare such sentiments in the presence of those whom you admire.'

At that moment, the waiter brought the wine and the glasses and Claude rose to whisper into the man's ear.

'What did you say to him?' Rodolfo wondered when Claude had resumed his seat.

Claude merely smiled at him over the rim of his wine-glass and kept a bemused silence. Within a few moments, however, Rodolfo had his answer. His idol, Jean Martin, was approaching their table.

'Good evening, Claude,' Martin said around a cigarette. His dark eyes were narrowed and his hands rested easily on his lean hips. After the dancer had acknowledged Claude, he turned to regard Rodolfo, his eyes squinting through the

smoke from the cigarette in his lips. When he spoke, tiny ashes scattered on Rodolfo's coat. 'Is this one of your new little friends?'

'This is Rodolfo Guglielmi from Taranto, Italy,' Claude told him. 'We have just met this evening. He is a great admirer of yours.'

Jean Martin grunted. Or perhaps cleared his throat. Rodolfo could not tell which.

'I consider your act to be among the finest in all of Paris,' Rodolfo said.

Martin remained dispassionate. He had at last removed the cigarette stub from his lips and allowed two tendrils of smoke to issue from his nostrils. 'Ah, but then you have never seen the great Claude dance,' he said curtly. 'Or will he see you perform later, Claude?'

'Do not be rude, Jean,' Claude said. 'This young man is sincere in his admiration of you.'

'Then I thank you, young signor from Italy!' The dancer made a stiff bow to Rodolfo, then turned on his heel and walked away from the table.

'You shouldn't have called him to our table,' Rodolfo said. 'Now he thinks I'm an ass. Something in my manner offended him.'

'It has nothing to do with you, Rodolfo,' Claude said softly.

'And what did he mean about seeing you dance? Are you a dancer, Claude?'

Claude refilled his glass. 'I was once with the Paris Ballet company. I was really quite good, but that was some time ago.'

'But he said something about my seeing you perform.'

'That was only his way of being amusing,' Claude said. 'He makes poor jokes. Well,' he smiled wryly, 'now that you have seen what an ill-mannered oaf your idol is, how about allowing me to show you the real Paris?'

Rodolfo felt suddenly uncomfortable under the handsome man's ingratiating smile. The young adventurer had been moved by Claude's friendliness and generosity, but at the

same time, there was something in the man's manner that vaguely disturbed him.

'No, thank you, Claude,' he said. 'You are most kind, but I wish to watch Jean and Coco perform once again this evening.'

Claude smiled sadly. 'Has the snake charmed the little bird?'

'I know that he does not seem to welcome my admiration,' Rodolfo admitted, 'but that does not matter. I can still learn much by watching him. You see, I think that I should like to become a dancer.'

Claude arched an eyebrow. 'I see. Well, then, good night, Rodolfo. I am certain that we shall meet again.'

Rodolfo had only a few minutes to sip at his wine and wonder about the man who had shared his table when the small orchestra once again shrilled the blatantly sensual notes that heralded another performance by Jean Martin and Coco. Once more the young Italian observed every sinuous movement of the dancers as they enacted their tableau of sensuality. At the completion of the dance, Rodolfo finished the last of his wine and rose to leave. He would be back the next night.

'Wait a minute, young signor,' a voice behind him called.

To his astonishment, it was Jean Martin. The dancer had run up to him at the conclusion of his performance. He was somewhat out of breath from the exertions of the frenzied dance, and sweat coursed over his cheeks and down his neck, into the bright red scarf at his throat. 'You did not go with the old pederast,' Martin smiled, then paused a moment to catch a bit more of his breath. 'Perhaps I misjudged you. Perhaps you are not really a new toy of Claude's.'

Rodolfo realized that his mouth was hanging open and that he must look very ridiculous. 'What do you mean?' he managed at last.

Jean Martin laughed, then, imitating the mincing walk of the former ballet dancer, the virile apache told Rodolfo that he had just shared a table with one of the most notorious

homosexuals in Paris. The apache, seeming to take pleasure in Rodolfo's confusion, at last slapped him roughly on a shoulder.

'I owe you an apology,' the dancer admitted. 'I behaved badly. But I dislike that old queer coming in here with his little boy friends, and I falsely assumed that you were the newest of his young lovers.'

Rodolfo wanted to say something that would appropriately express indignation, yet at the same time indicate his willingness to forgive and forget the whole misunderstanding, but his vocal chords seemed to have been paralyzed by the presence of the volatile apache dancer.

'Tell me,' Jean Martin asked him, 'have you really been coming here often to watch Coco and me dance?'

Rodolfo nodded. 'You are superb. If I could dance as well as you, I should consider myself the most fortunate of men.'

Jean Martin made a distasteful face, but it was obvious that the young Italian's words had pleased him. He led Rodolfo to a table and snapped his fingers for wine. 'Are you, too, a dancer?' he asked Rodolfo.

'I would give my left ear to learn how to dance,' Rodolfo said, embarrassed by his own frankness.

The apache smiled. 'You have much too pretty a face to ruin it by sawing off an ear.' Then he laughed. 'Damn me! I sounded like an old queer myself, didn't I?'

Rodolfo giggled a bit too loudly and nearby patrons stopped their chatter to stare. There had been too much wine for him.

'What I meant to say,' Jean Martin explained, 'is that there is no need to disfigure yourself in order to learn how to dance. If you come around in the early afternoons, I shall teach you myself.'

Rodolfo felt as if his ears had joined in a conspiracy against him. Jean Martin had offered to teach him to dance! It was beyond belief. But it was true, and the powerfully built dancer assured him that it was so. He would expect Rodolfo the next afternoon.

In later years, Valentino often remarked that that summer of 1913 had been the happiest of his life. He had abandoned the idea of getting a job and lived on the money which his mother had given him from his father's estate. His mornings were spent in leisurely walks about the city, 'soaking up culture and the beauty of the city and its people'. Under his mother's early tutelage, he had long since become an apostle of beauty, and Paris offered a veritable feast to the senses. Rodolfo had developed a sensitivity that permitted him to appreciate equally as well the beautiful, undraped nudes of the follies or the lined features of a beggar woman in the Flea Market.

'Nudity is the most beautiful thing in the world,' Valentino once wrote in a letter to Chaw Mank. Then, going on to detail his position on beauty, Valentino said, 'Perhaps I should say more humbly that I hope that I see beauty when and where beauty is to be found. And certainly I know that when and where beauty is to be found, I worship it - whether it be the beauty of nature, or the beauty of mind and soul. I'm not a sentimentalist. Just because a sunset is a sunset, I do not always find it beautiful. I do not always go into raptures and rhapsodies over it. Just because a poem is a poem or a song a song, I do not constantly fold my hands over my chest and sigh, "How marvelous," and just because a woman is a woman, I do not acclaim her with beating heart as a masterpiece from God, a divine acolyte of Venus, a lotus of love. When a woman is beautiful, she is a miracle. When she is not beautiful - she is a woman I pity and respect.'

In the 'glorious afternoons' of that summer in 1913, Rodolfo would arrive at the bistro where his friends performed and receive instructions in various dance steps. While the apaches rehearsed and Rodolfo executed his lessons, the bistro would become crowded with its Left Bank habitués who would talk in serious tones about dancing, poetry and music. They were all show people, artists or writers who scoffed at convention and openly mocked traditional morality. It had at first startled the young Italian idealist to

learn that several of the couples, including his instructors, lived together without benefit of clergy. But when he saw how happy his friends were and how seldom they quarreled or bickered, he became almost convinced that this Bohemian alliance was preferable to holy matrimony. He was, however, far more concerned with mastering the dance steps of the apache than he was with the love lives of his several mentors. From the beginning, they had applauded his natural grace. His movements and general attitude were unsophisticated, they had told him, but his natural raw vitality declared a great potential. Each afternoon, Rodolfo arrived to participate in the dancers' rehearsal. Each evening, he observed their performances with the complete absorption of a prize student taking notes on his professors' classroom demonstrations.

Within a few weeks, he was dancing with Coco. 'It will not be long before the student will be teaching his master a thing or two,' the lovely dark-haired dancer teased Jean Martin. 'When Rodolfo dances like an apache, he *is* an apache.'

It was true. When Rodolfo was seized by the music, he became completely enraptured. He was a virile apache making violent love to his woman. The enchantment of the music and the dance was not merely in being allowed to assume a role for the duration of the number; the true magic lay in actually becoming the personality involved in the passion, just as he had become Musolino and the toreador and the pirate when he was a boy.

Quite often Claude Rambeau would come to watch Rodolfo receive instruction from Jean Martin and his friends. Although a number of the dancers seemed to openly despise the homosexual, he was never asked to leave. Many times he would arrive with a thin, pale-faced young man who sat nervously at the handsome dancer's side. Rodolfo always felt disgusted whenever Claude flaunted his perversion in such a manner, and once he became nauseated when he allowed his mind to dwell on the subject.

There were several evenings when Claude joined Rodolfo at his table during the performances of Jean Martin and Coco. Although Rodolfo never invited the graying dancer, neither did he order him away. He merely slouched over the wine that Claude would inevitably order for him and answered the man's questions in curt monosyllables. As the evening progressed, he would become increasingly annoyed by the man's melancholy and, it seemed, patient smiles.

One night after the last performance, Claude leaned forward and whispered an open invitation. Rodolfo paled and tears of embarrassment and anger formed at the corners of his eyes. The older man shrugged, left a bill on the table for the wine and bade Rodolfo a good evening.

Jean Martin, who had seen the whole thing, came over to his young friend's table. 'That old pederast has been bothering you all summer,' he said sharply. 'Why don't you tell him to go to hell?'

Rodolfo avoided the narrowed eyes of his mentor and fingered the stem of his wineglass.

'Or aren't you certain whether or not you want him to leave you alone?'

Rodolfo looked up, startled.

'Tell me,' Jean asked, 'you are a virgin, aren't you?'

The young Italian felt his cheeks warm. His mouth was very dry.

'I suspected as much,' Jean Martin sighed. 'Rodolfo, my friend, it is time you choose.'

'Choose?' Rodolfo echoed, completely incapable of original speech.

The apache brought his face next to Rodolfo's. 'You must decide whether you are going to make love with men or with women, for surely you can't be an adequate performer if you are not making love at all.'

Rodolfo's hands were trembling as he brought the wineglass to his lips.

'Oh, there are those who like it either way,' Jean Martin was going on. 'Roger and Paul, for example - you have met

them. They will take man, woman or each other, just so they are making love. Personally, I loathe pederasty, but I am forced to admit that it is better than making no love at all.'

Rodolfo poured himself more wine from the bottle that Claude had left. 'Can one not love spiritually, that is from the soul, until he has truly found his one pure love?' he asked softly.

Jean laughed and Rodolfo at once felt the complete fool. 'Fine and noble sentiments, but the words of a boy and not of a man.' He leaned even closer to Rodolfo's face and whispered, 'You are not to be mocked for your lack of experience, Rodolfo. You have never known the pleasure of mounting a woman and feeling truly a man. See there, Coco standing waiting for me. Is she not a magnificent creature? Listen to me: You go with her to the apartment. I will stop off for a drink. Once you have made love to one such as Coco, you will spit in the eye of Claude or any other queer.'

Rodolfo stared at Jean Martin. 'You are telling me to go home with Coco, your woman, and make love to her?'

'But of course,' Jean said, clapping a hand on Rudolfo's shoulder.

'I can't!'

'Can't?'

'I mean, Coco belongs to you. She loves you. You are my friend.'

Jean Martin smiled. 'Isn't that what friends are for? To help one in time of need? And, my friend, you have a very great need. You must conquer this storm that rages within you. Wait here. I will tell Coco. She is fond of you. Don't worry - she will help you.'

Rodolfo's senses began to swim. To deny that Coco was desirable was to commit perjury in the court of Venus. To deny that he had more than once projected himself into her bed would be to lie in the face of Eros. But this was beyond his comprehension. If Jean Martin truly loved her, how could he offer to share her with another man?

Then Coco was at his side, her long black hair tumbling over her shoulders, her full lips freshly painted and smiling. 'Come, Rodolfo.'

He could later remember little of the walk to the apartment. He had been there once before, but that night, without Coco to guide him, he would never have found it. He sought brief sanctuary in the bathroom; and, when he came out, Coco sat naked on the edge of the bed. 'Come,' she beckoned. 'Don't be ashamed. Some say that the first time is the best time. I am honored to be your first, Rodolfo.'

He slipped out of his trousers, hung them carefully over the back of a chair. 'Need I undress completely?' he asked.

'You have a fine young body,' Coco smiled. 'Don't be ashamed of it.'

He removed his underclothes and Coco, sighting the unerect penis, said in a bemused manner, 'Well, we are going to have to make the little fellow grow, aren't we?'

At once Rudolfo felt himself back in Rosa's cottage – and once again he experienced the intense pain of that early humiliation.

'The little fellow mustn't be bashful,' Coco said, standing and rubbing her nakedness against him. 'I'll help him along.'

Here was Woman, not Madonna. Here was beauty that demanded physical tribute, not spiritual homage. Coco's playful efforts to arouse his quiescent penis only served to remind him of Rosa's clumsy attempts to 'make the little fellow grow'. It seemed to him too much to bear if the tender caresses would once again be replaced by rejection, accusation and conviction of sin.

'I'm sorry,' Rodolfo sobbed, reaching for his trousers. 'I can't. I know you want to be kind, but I can't – I'm sorry.'

Coco shouted something after him as he ran down the stairs to the street. He did not hear what she said, but later he realized that it was because he had not wanted to. He had refused the favors of a beautiful woman, and she, in turn, had cursed him with that most hated epithet: 'Goddamned queer!'

He ran through the narrow streets unmindful of the light rain that had begun to glisten on the cobblestones. The terrible depression that accompanied the knowledge of sexual failure sent Rodolfo coursing aimlessly through the city streets. Again and again Jean Martin's words echoed and re-echoed in his brain. 'You can't be an adequate performer unless you are making love . . . you must choose . . . make your decision . . . pederasty is better than making no love at all . . . choose . . . Coco will help you.'

But Coco had not helped. He had failed to respond. He had insulted her womanhood by not being able to make love to her. Leaning against a street lamp, he gave vent to bitter tears of frustration. Was he doomed to be a sexual incompetent? Once more, he heard the words of Jean Martin: 'Personally, I loathe pederasty, but I am forced to admit that it is better than making no love at all.' At first the thought was distasteful to him, but, after further consideration, he began to walk the streets once more. He had not yet been condemned to sexual isolation. There was the other side of the coin which he had not yet experienced, and he knew that there would be those who would be eager to initiate him into this form of erotic expression.

At last he recognized the name of a bistro which Claude had once mentioned. Jean Martin had told him that the place catered openly to homosexuals. Before this night of terrible failure, Rodolfo would have avoided the place as if it were a leper colony, but now, in his agony of self-condemnation, his distaste had been temporarily replaced by desperation.

As Rodolfo opened the door, his attitude was that of one debasing himself for sins of inadequacy. Distasteful as the ordeal might be, he must know for himself which side of the sexual coin had fallen face up for him. Inside the place, all eyes seemed to swing toward him like iron filings toward a magnet. He was relieved to see Claude seated at a table, playing cards with three young men. The man blinked his surprise at seeing Rodolfo in the bistro, but he rose to his feet with an expansive smile of welcome.

'Good evening once again,' Claude said. 'Are you lost or seeking answers to questions?'

'I have come,' Rodolfo told him, 'About a matter which you mentioned earlier in the evening.'

Claude nodded his head, pursing his lips thoughtfully. It was obvious that he was quite pleased with himself. 'Won't you please join us for some wine?'

As if a perverse puppetmaster were pulling the strings to his body, Rodolfo found himself accepting the handsome man's invitation and seating himself with the other young men, who looked at one another with knowing winks.

'Don't fight it,' a pimply boy of about his own age whispered. 'A woman is not a goddess because she has a hole between her legs.'

After several glasses of wine, Rodolfo accompanied Claude to his apartment. He excused himself to vomit. When he emerged from the bathroom, Claude was already naked and in an obvious condition of readiness.

'Let me help you,' Claude said, his fingers loosening Rodolfo's belt, moving down to undo his fly. His breath was warm against Rodolfo's cheek, and he had scented it to make it sweet. 'Don't be afraid, dear one,' Claude said. 'I will be gentle with you.'

The next noon, Rodolfo awoke with a terrible hangover. He had kept drinking all night, because once he had found out that it did not hurt as much as he had feared, he had become bored with it all. Claude had been at him until nearly dawn, and if it had not been for the wine, he would surely have gone mad. Back in his apartment, he had spent several minutes in front of the mirror accusing himself of unnatural acts, obscenities and eternal persecution, but he had failed to make himself feel humiliated or cheapened, and he had failed to awaken any feelings of remorse or guilt. Neither had he, however, found a sexual nirvana. The whole experience had been a crashing disappointment to the romantic apostle of love.

He left Paris the next evening with two Italian friends.

Gripped by some feverish compulsion, he and his countrymen drove to Monte Carlo and gambled away every cent of the remainder of the money that his mother had given him.

His mother had wept when he returned. Rodolfo confessed that he had indeed been a wastrel of the worst order and that he could offer no explanation for his actions. He almost found himself hoping that once again he would be beaten and locked in a closet. He was the same naughty child. He had brought shame to the Guglielmi name and embarrassment to Alberto and Maria. Donna Gabriella lectured her errant son severely and threatened to turn him over to his uncle for proper punishment.

Life back in Taranto seemed sufficient torment to Rodolfo, and as he later told the whole story to Mae Murray, who had become an early confidante in America, the harsh restrictions imposed upon him by his family only increased his restlessness. While he was supposed to be doing penance for his sins of prodigality, he slipped away and made friends with an actor in a traveling show that had arrived in the city. The actor introduced him to a pretty young actress, who easily persuaded Rodolfo to join their company and keep house with her on the road. The dual proposition seemed to Rodolfo like a marvelous opportunity to reassert his independence and re-evaluate his manhood.

Uncle Guglielmi came down on Rodolfo like a large storm on a small ship when he learned of his nephew's announcement of intent to Donna Gabriella. While his mother cried, the priest prayed and his uncle cursed, Rodolfo sat quietly with his hands folded.

'Your father resigned his commission to join a traveling circus,' Uncle Guglielmi fulminated, smacking his closed fist into an open palm. 'One vagabond on the family tree is enough. Have some respect for the family name!'

'Have some respect for your mother's feelings,' implored the priest.

After several hours of pleas, prayers and withering pronouncements, Rodolfo's uncle, who was in charge of the

bulk of the family estate, dropped his arms to his sides and decreed, 'It is obvious that Rodolfo is fit only to be a hoodlum. If he is going to bring disgrace to the Guglielmi name, let him do it in America where his shame cannot touch us.'

Rodolfo was given an inheritance of \$4,000 and his passage was booked on the Hamburg-American liner, *Cleveland*.

'With the exception of my mother, my family hoped that they had heard the last of me,' Valentino told a friend a few years later.

CHAPTER FOUR

RODOLFO had his first view of New York through a cold December fog two days before Christmas, 1913.

'The skyscrapers,' someone said as a shaft of light suddenly struck through the mist.

Rodolfo asked an Italian to translate the word. When he was told the meaning, he thought it very beautiful. To the young romantic, New York was a white, towering city seated on clouds, the houses rising one above the other with their campaniles and old battlements.

After passing through customs, Rodolfo started for New York. On the boat, he had met an Italian who had been in New York before. The man had given his young countryman some instructions about finding his way around and had taught him a few necessary words, for Rodolfo knew no English. He took the 39th Street ferry across to the docks at the Battery and went directly to Brown Brothers in Wall Street to cash a draft that was drawn on them by the *Credito Italiano*. He had been lured into a card game on the *Cleveland* and had lost all his money, so that he was unable to settle his accounts with the purser and was forced to leave his luggage aboard the ship.

He had been advised of an Italian place, Giolitto's, on West 49th Street where he could probably obtain rooms. Following this suggestion, he took the subway to Grand Central Station. There he got out and walked up Fifth Avenue, which he had been told was the dividing street of the city. At Giolitto's, Rodolfo engaged a bedroom, parlor and bath in the front of the house. The \$4,000 his family had given him seemed an inexhaustible sum, nothing was too elegant for him. He also carried a letter to the Commissioner

of Immigration explaining that he had been graduated from the Royal Academy of Agriculture and that he could be of value as a landscape gardener. His brother, Alberto, had admonished him to deliver the letter immediately and obtain gainful employment as soon as possible. Rodolfo put the letter into a drawer of his bureau. There would be time for work later; first he would enjoy the city.

When he left Rector's, after devouring a complete three-course lunch, it had begun to rain. Rodolfo knew that it was imperative that he claim his trunks from the passenger ship that same day and, with a grim sense of foreboding, he realized that once again he would be compelled to ride the subway.

He approached a traffic policeman and recited the English words 'End of Broadway. Steamship *Cleveland*. End of Broadway.'

As that was the extent of his prepared phraseology for this situation, Rodolfo repeated the words over and over. Occasionally, the officer would seem to be listening to the young Italian, but then he would start blowing his whistle and begin shouting furiously at some errant motorist. At last, in sign language that needed no translation, he told Rodolfo to get lost.

Rodolfo had become drenched from the steady rain. He was accomplishing nothing by standing in the middle of the street absorbing moisture. With a prayer to any attendant saint who might not be preoccupied, he plunged into a subway entrance and leaped aboard the first train that came along. At the first stop he went up to the guard and asked eagerly, 'End of Broadway?'

'Naw,' the guard said, eyeing him coldly, 'Hoboken.'

He had taken the Hudson tube instead of the subway that led to Battery place. In desperation, he began confronting people with his 'End of Broadway' until someone at last seemed to understand the young immigrant's plight. He was directed to the Hamburg-American docks in Hoboken. From there he was directed to take a ferry back to Brooklyn. He

boarded the ferry and found himself back in New York at 25th Street.

Once a smiling lady directed him to Pennsylvania Station when his 'Steamship *Cleveland*' was interpreted as a desire to visit the city of Cleveland, Ohio. The young Italian was shuttled back and forth, from Hoboken to New York, until he had crossed the Hudson River five times his first day in New York.

At last he found a man who could understand enough Italian to point out the correct street car, and Rodolfo arrived at the ship in Brooklyn at eight that evening. When he had paid his bills and arranged for his luggage to be sent to his rooms, he decided to start back by elevated train so he could at least see where he was going. He arrived at his room wet, cold and totally disheartened. He stripped himself of his damp clothing, put his shoes in front of the fireplace, lay down on the bed and began to cry.

Rodolfo was suddenly overcome with a nameless dread and a sense of deep regret for his past actions. He thought of his stern, unsmiling brother, so much like his father; his quiet, reserved sister, who had tried to love and understand him; and most of all he thought of the mother whom he had so bitterly disappointed. Filled with sudden resolve, he sat at a table in his underclothes and began to write a letter to his mother. He vowed to make something of himself, to rectify all past wrongs and bring honor to the family name. After he had finished the letter and lay in his bed listening to the December drizzle pelt his windows, he began weeping once again. New York would not be an easy city in which to accomplish his glorious goals.

Later, Valentino wrote: 'The day before Christmas . . . for me just one terrible loneliness. I had a friendless dinner in a little deserted restaurant. I walked the streets all day, alone. New Year's Eve was different. The streets were crowded with sweeping mobs of people. As I was carried along, I had a peculiar sinking feeling as I imagine a man might have in the middle of the ocean - waves upon waves of strange faces uttering strange sounds.'

Rodolfo realized that it was useless to seek employment until he had achieved a more complete mastery of the language. Besides, he reasoned, he still had an inheritance which should last him for nearly a year. To lessen his feelings of loneliness and depression, the young Italian would go into Bustanoby's cafe where he could converse in French with the waiters.

One day, as Rodolfo sat alone, he was asked to join three young men who had been noisily enjoying themselves at a nearby table. Rodolfo hesitated, carefully regarding the man who had proffered the invitation. His thoughts were suddenly of Claude and the Paris bistro and the smiling 'play-things' who had surrounded the handsome homosexual. At first appearance, these young men seemed very much like the dandified 'nances' of Paris. If he accepted their invitation, he wondered, would he soon find himself once again involved in a liaison which he considered distressing and distasteful? But at this point, Rodolfo's loneliness was so acute that his elation in receiving an invitation to join a group (and it had even been delivered in French!) squelched further ruminations of reluctance. With a warm smile, he shook the hands of George Ragni, Count Alex Salm and his brother, Count Otto, of Austria. Rodolfo would, he had decided, accept whatever fate elected to deal to him. Ragni's father was the agent of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in France, and the Counts Salm were ultra-gregarious members of the intercontinental set. All three young men were gay *bon vivants* who were completely dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure. If Rodolfo had been wise, he would have engaged the trio in polite conversation, enjoyed their hospitality, then bade farewell to them forever. But he was 18, not at all wise, and they were his kind of people. They would be responsible for making the young Italian embark upon a satisfactory adjustment to his adopted land, but they would also be responsible for making him deplete his inheritance in the space of just a few months.

From that night on, Rodolfo would accompany his three wealthy friends to cafes and theaters where they would in-

roduce him to girls. This was the era of ballroom dancing and Irene and Vernon Castle were America's popular royal family. All the girls wanted to dance, and Rodolfo felt woefully inadequate. He had enough sense to realize that an American girl would slap his face if he were to seize her in the rough embrace of an apache dance. The tango and the one-step were then in vogue, but Rodolfo knew only the waltz, mazurka and lancers.

'I must have ruined a million dollars' worth of satin slippers,' Valentino once wrote. 'When it was generally known that I specialized in dancing on other people's feet, I became one of the outstanding wallflowers of the best cafes.'

One Sunday morning as Rodolfo and Alex Salm were walking through the Bronx Zoo, the determined Italian halted squarely in front of a monkey cage. 'Alex,' he told his friend, 'I'm desperate. I insist that, here and now you teach me to tango!'

Count Alex laughed. 'Right here in front of the monkeys? Why, they'll put you in the cage along with them.'

Friends of Valentino often commented that the Great Lover had little sense of humor, seldom smiled and could not tolerate a joke on himself. Count Alex realized, as he noted the grim set to Rodolfo's jaw, that his friend meant to be taken seriously. And so, while the monkeys bounded about in their cage and squealed noisily as if in shrill applause, the Austrian count patiently taught Rodolfo the tango, with special emphasis on the *cortes*, which is the basic step of the dance.

'From then on,' Valentino said, 'I practiced until I could do a tango with some distinction – even to originating some new steps.'

It was, of course, the dance that Rodolfo would make his own. When he danced the Argentine tango as Julio in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the tango became another synonym for the name Valentino.

But now it was time to remove from the bureau drawer the letter of introduction to the Commissioner of Immigration. Rodolfo was nearly out of money. He had fool-

ishly tried to match the spending habits of his wealthy friends at New York night spots. Temporarily, he told them, he was forced to seek gainful employment as a gardener. He would have to practice his tango steps among bushes and shrubs.

Although he was not very hopeful of securing a good job until spring, Rodolfo knew that he must at least make the effort. He had managed to go through nearly all of his \$4,000 in three months. A bit of temperance on his part could have salvaged the situation and gained him a comfortable position until he managed to get back on his feet financially. Cornelius Bliss Jr. had just built a country place in Jericho, Long Island, and had decided that he wanted the grounds laid out in Italian gardens. Bliss, after examining Rodolfo's diploma from the Italian Academy of Agriculture, felt extremely fortunate in locating a young man who was so admirably suited to add authentic Old World atmosphere to his gardens. He offered Rodolfo the position of superintendent on the estate, provided him with the necessary equipment and assigned him an attractive apartment over the garage. It was a position which Rodolfo should have appreciated, and it was a task that he should have been able to accomplish with a minimum of effort. He did neither.

Because he could not begin work until the snow had disappeared, Rodolfo spent his time at the stables, helping to train the horses rather than studying the grounds and sketching the landscape designs. Although he had a serious manner and the appearance of maturity, Rodolfo was still very much the carefree boy bounding in and out of the caves of Castellaneta. It was not long before his irresponsibility would be brought to the attention of his employer.

One day, as Rodolfo was hanging around the stables, he noticed a motorcycle which a carpenter had left unattended. At about the same time, his attention was directed toward a group of young girls who seemed willing to be impressed by some dramatic action on the part of the handsome Italian. With a brief salute of acknowledgment, Rodolfo jumped on the motorcycle and rode it to the top of a hill. He paused to

light a cigarette. The girls were waving at him. He could hear their excited voices. They were counting on him to amuse and amaze them with some daring stunt. He filled his chest with the crisp air of late March. Once again he was the fearless Rodolfo, walking the railing of the high balcony above Castellaneta streets. He threw himself on the motorcycle, his stomach on the seat and his arms stretched out horizontally to the bars. In this unsteady position he accelerated the motorcycle and roared down the hill – into a telegraph pole.

The collision only stunned Rodolfo, but it mangled the fender of the cycle. Worse, the angry curses of the burly carpenter scattered his solicitous admirers. The classic profile of the Great Lover may never have excited female theater patrons if Rodolfo had not had the presence of mind to get quickly to his feet, brush himself off, bow to the carpenter and say those four magic words: 'Send me the bill.'

A few days later, Rodolfo was summoned to the study of Mr. Bliss and informed that his patron had changed his mind about Italian gardens, 'I've decided that a golf course would be much more enjoyable in the long run,' he told the young immigrant.

Rodolfo bowed himself out of the room, realizing full well that the real cause for his dismissal was his irresponsible attitude.

The Commissioner of Immigration secured another position for Rodolfo at the New Jersey estate of a millionaire. In spite of his vow to apply himself and evolve a more workmanlike attitude, Rodolfo's term of employment was even briefer than it had been at Bliss' country place. Supposing that he had once again been engaged as superintendent, Rodolfo was outraged when a gardener handed him a pair of overalls, took him to the greenhouse and instructed him to pick bugs off the leaves.

He demanded an immediate audience with his employer. 'I will not submit to the indignity of bug-picking,' Rodolfo raged at the millionaire. 'I am a graduate of the Italian Academy of Agriculture.'

Unimpressed, his new employer curtly informed him that he intended to pay him \$15 a month with room and board. Rodolfo endured two weeks of such manual labor before he collected his \$7.50 and walked out on his proprietor.

Within a few weeks, the haughty young Italian would have gladly submitted to the 'indignity' of bug-picking for room and board alone. He was now reduced to sweeping saloon floors, washing dishes and sleeping on park benches.

'Those were the hard times,' he once told friends. 'I would surely have starved to death if Giolitto's had not taken me back. This time as a busboy, though, and not as a paying guest.'

CHAPTER FIVE

MAUREEN ENGLIN first met Rudy when he was a busboy at Giolitto's Italian restaurant. A native of Illinois, Maureen had affected a Parisian accent and tugged American hearts with her renditions of such World War I songs as 'Little French Mother', 'Say a Prayer for the Boys Over There', and 'Goodbye Broadway, Hello France'. Miss Englin was later to introduce the standards 'Sweet Georgia Brown' and 'Way Down Yonder in New Orleans'.

The young Italian was at this time going by two of his eight names and was known as Rodolfo Guglielmi. 'Rudy was shy and reserved,' Miss Englin remembers. 'He would think carefully of how everything should be said before he would utter a word. He was embarrassed because of his accent. I told him not to be. America is just one big batch of immigrants, I used to tell him. My father was born in Sweden, and here I am affecting a French accent. What does it matter if you speak with an Italian accent? It's nice. I like it!'

The year after Valentino's death, the 'talkies' were born. There has been much speculation as to whether the Great Lover could have conquered the microphone. Detractors have said that Valentino's voice was high-pitched and unpleasant, but those who knew Rudy recall that his tone was soft and mellifluous. Certainly his speaking voice should not be judged by the poorly produced record of his singing which he had privately cut. It is improbable that Valentino would have suffered the embarrassment of squeaky pipes as did John Gilbert, another daemon lover of the silent screen. Although an actor with a pronounced accent was placed in a difficult position by the advent of sound, it is likely that

Valentino would have studied voice and waited until the perfect vehicle came his way before he made the precarious plunge into talking pictures.

As a busboy, Rodolfo found himself in a unique position to observe the various show business luminaries of the day. Friendship with such up-and-coming stars as Maureen Englin gave him great encouragement, but with the advent of war in Europe, Valentino found that his meager wages were drastically cut. He could not write home to Taranto for more money; in fact, his mother had begun to write to *him* asking if he couldn't spare a few dollars. He had learned in Paris that a handsome young man need never go hungry, but Rodolfo had little desire to serve as any man's kept boy. Instead, he went to Maxim's and applied for a job as a waiter. The manager remembered Rodolfo from the days when he lived a carefree existence on his inheritance. He especially recalled the young Italian's prowess as a dancer. Rodolfo was offered a room above the restaurant, free meals, and all the tips he could earn if he would serve as a dancing partner for the wealthy women who regularly attended Maxim's *thés dansants*.

Much has been made of Valentino's early career as a 'gigolo'. Never popular with the bulk of American men who called him a 'lounge lizard', a 'pretty boy', and several much more vulgar epithets, certain elements of the press were quick to seize upon Valentino's days as a professional escort and to make the worst of them. It has been said that he was 'kept' by a number of social register matrons as an afternoon lover. In his biography of the star, S. George Ullman, his long-time agent, never even mentions Valentino's days as an escort - the omission seeming to indicate to those who read with an eye for sensationalism that this was indeed a chapter of Valentino's career that must never be made known. The evidence offered by those who claim that Valentino cuddled in clandestine love nests with ladies of the Four Hundred is not very substantial.

Once again it must be stated that for a particular type of man, it is entirely possible to flirt, to pay homage to woman

and to love her for her 'spirit' without taking cognizance of her as a creature of warm blood and earthy desires. For this sort of cavalier, sex may be only a distasteful concession to the Old Adam that may destroy 'true love'. It is possible to see elements of the courtly love tradition in Valentino's peculiar credo of the European cavalier. Love was to be a matter of the worship of an earthly Madonna, a spiritual harmony that transcended physical indulgence.

'I like the Madonna in women,' Valentino wrote to Chaw Mank. 'The most beautiful women in Italy are the Madonna type . . . serene faces, calm, soft eyes, overlying something deeper and stronger.'

Rodolfo's early experiments with physical love had bewildered him and caused him to be an unsatisfactory lover of either sex. His confusion was driving him more and more to spiritual love, to the search for an object of 'pure' adoration.

By the same token, it is easy to see why the role of a 'professional host' would have definitely appealed to Rodolfo. He was able to dance with lovely women and to play the coquette, impartially flirting with all women, not showing the least bit more attention to one than to another - after all, if Don Juan falls in love, he is no longer Don Juan. He was handsome, and he knew it. His fellow hosts often caught him admiring himself in the full-length mirrors in the dressing rooms.

'Look at the way he preens himself,' someone teased one day. 'He's just like a peacock.'

'Rudy the peacock!' another dancer echoed. 'What a perfect nickname for our beautiful Rudy.'

Rodolfo listened to the good-natured banter without cracking a smile. 'It is better to be a colorful peacock,' he told his colleagues, 'than a drab sparrow.'

Valentino enjoyed dressing in fine clothes and receiving the adulation of women. Then, too, his work as a host enabled him to indulge constantly in the diversion which he had come to love most of all, dancing.

It should be explained just exactly what was meant by a

'professional host'. In pre-Prohibition days, famous restaurants such as Maxim's, the Moulin Rouge, Churchill's, Shanley's and Rector's provided *thés dansants* in the late afternoons. These 'tea dances', as they came to be known, became as popular in these restaurants as their late evening floor shows. Presented at tea time (the cocktail hour), the *dansants* offered an opportunity for dancing, chatting and the arranging of evening liaisons. To entice the unescorted female guests, the restaurants engaged a dozen or more young men to dance with them in the role of a 'host'. To identify themselves, they wore small white buttons on their coat lapels.

Valentino cut quite a figure on the dance floor. He wore his coat long, tightly fitted, lean over the hips, and affected a long, twisted loop of chain that swung against his leg. His hair was worn in the patent-leather style of the day, and the one flaw in his face was a thin, white scar on his right cheek — a souvenir of his rowdy boyhood. He was described as being like 'a sensuous animal stalking the jazz jungle'.

'I could only dance the tango with Rudy,' Maureen Englin recalled. 'With everyone else, I had two left feet. All the women wanted to dance with him. And when he danced with you, he never got fresh.'

Maureen was a big hit at the Moulin Rouge (now the Latin Quarter) when Rudy was a professional host at Rector's, directly across the street. The singers used to drop into the restaurant for a bite to eat and a few whirls around the dance floor while en route to work.

'Rudy had retained the Continental habit of kissing the lady's hand and I told him not to stop it,' Maureen said. 'It was very effective. The women he danced with loved it. He had now adapted two of his many names to English and was known as Rudolph Valentino.'

Valentino resented the charge of gigolo even at this point in his career.

'Once I told him that someday a rich woman would snatch him up and take him out of circulation,' Maureen Englin remembered. "'No, 'Frenchy,'" he answered me.

“That isn’t what I want. I never want to attain any kind of success while living off a woman like some gigolo.”

Mae Murray, the Ziegfeld Follies girl who went on to become one of Hollywood’s brightest stars, was another of the singers and dancers who frequently stopped by the restaurants in which Rudolph worked to take a few spins around the floor before curtain time. Mae, although never at a loss for wealthy suitors, often refused dates from her well-heeled stage door Johnnies so that she might go for a ‘platonically walk with Rudy’. Their friendship extended to swimming dates on Long Beach, and Mae became one of Rudolph’s most trusted confidantes. Jealous males began to tease Mae about her ‘gigolo’ when she began spending a great deal of time with Valentino. She once told a chiding suitor that Valentino was anything but a gigolo. ‘Nothing ever happens with Rudy,’ she said. ‘He might as well be a priest.’

Rudolph was gaining a reputation as a sensitive young man who would not, or who could not, love. He was as open as a child. Pleased by the little things – a swim on a warm day, a sunset, playful dogs, a sandpiper on the beach – Valentino seemed always enveloped in some mystical aura. For all the women who wanted to share his bed, Valentino had the same polite refusal. For all the dowagers who thrilled at his touch, he had the same enigmatic smile. It seems that Valentino was beginning to hold himself more and more aloof from matters of the flesh.

‘All the girls were hot to crawl into bed with Rudy,’ recalled a chanteuse who had been faithful in stopping by Maxim’s for an afternoon dance with the handsome Italian. ‘But I never heard of him trying to get into anyone’s panties. I would have been damned envious if I had!’

Whisper about him though they may, none could deny that Rudolph Valentino could dance. When he danced the tango that had become his speciality, it was the real street dance, heels kneading the floor. When he tangoed, he did not speak. He gave himself up to the dance as if it were his sole pleasure.

One night, while hosting at Rector's, Valentino confided to Maureen Englin that he had theatrical aspirations. 'It would be my greatest desire to form a dance act with a partner,' he told the popular 'Frenchy' from Moulin Rouge. 'How wonderful it must be to be a headliner like Irene and Vernon Castle and the Waltons.'

The role of the dance in Valentino's rise to fame cannot be minimized. Without his prowess on the dance floor and his ability to perform the tango like no other, the handsome Rudolph would probably have remained a white-button host until he found suitable employment as a landscape gardener. It was the tango that lifted Rudolph Valentino from obscurity, but it is interesting to note just how the tango became transformed in its immigration from a Latin American to a North American culture. Much, indeed, was lost in the translation. In New York's gay society, the tango was a heavily rhythmed mating ritual – a dance of passion and romance. The true tango was born in an environment of misery; it was the dance of poor people, the inhabitants of the slums of Buenos Aires.

'The tango is a sad thought that is danced,' Valentino once remarked.

The tango – the real one – is a song that does not have any magnetic effect on the crowds, but it does upon the individual. It is the melody of the introvert. Someone once noted that Valentino seemed to take the melody of the tango into the innermost recesses of his own being and there enjoyed an intimate dialogue with profound sentimentality.

The tango – a dance of individual affirmation of manly strength – was Valentino's dance. Its image of a man in a defensive position with regard to life was the essence of Rudolph Valentino.

It was while Valentino worked as a professional host that he met his 'Madonna'. Her name was Blanca deSaulles, the wife of socialite Jack deSaulles. Inadvertently, Mae Murray had brought them together when she suggested that Blanca begin visiting *thés dansants* in an attempt to raise her spirits. Blanca usually dressed in black, which offered sharp

contrast to her ivory complexion. Her eyes were large and sad, and she wore her dark hair parted in the middle, smoothed back into a chignon. Her husband was a chaser. He had met Blanca when she was sixteen, traveling for the first time to New York with her father, a Chilean diplomat. The former Yale quarterback had pursued her from New York to Paris to Madrid, and finally to her home in La Serena Coquimbo. At last Blanca had given in to his entreaties and had married him. That had been her mistake. Jack deSaulles was no courtly cavalier — he was a satyr. Once Blanca was his, the joy of the pursuit soon soured and he quickly went back to chorus girls and leggy Follies hoofers. Blanca was left with a son, a mansion full of servants and a heart full of sorrow and regret. She was the ideal woman for Valentino's courtly sense of romanticism. She would soon become his Beatrice, a symbol of heavenly light which he would always keep before him as he wound his way deeper in the Inferno of show business, success and public adulation. The fact that she was married and therefore unobtainable only intensified the beauty of their affair. Unrequited love was much more delicious than that which became sullied by the tyranny of the flesh.

Eventually though, in spite of himself, Rudolph found himself quite possessive toward the delicate ivory figurine whom he held in his arms during the afternoon tea dances.

'I want to marry her,' he confided to Mae Murray. 'I worship her.'

Valentino was certain that the thick-shouldered Wall Streeter was completely unaware of his existence. It occurred to him that he might help Blanca get enough evidence on deSaulles to win a divorce. The social lion's nocturnal prowlings in the Broadway jungles had long become the subject for common gossip. There would be little difficulty in catching deSaulles in another lioness' lair.

Valentino knew the chorus girl who was currently getting the deSaulles rush. He told Mae Murray that he had resolved to follow the two, convince himself that the proper evidence would be easily obtainable for a divorce court, then

return with a photographer and a private detective and burst in on the lovers in an amorous entanglement.

Valentino stood in the shadows and watched Jack deSaulles joking with the other men who waited outside the stage door. The socialite made no effort to disguise his extracurricular activities. These men all knew that he had a wife at home; but, then, so did most of them. Rudolph hoped that deSaulles would not take the girl to a round of night spots but would get right to the business of the evening. According to show business gossip, deSaulles put his girls into two categories: those he wine and dined, and those he took right home to bed. If his informants were correct, this girl had been placed in the latter category. He had also been told that the girl had an apartment within easy walking distance of the theater in which she danced.

At last the stage door opened, releasing its treasure of brightly garbed chorus girls.

'The gates of paradise have finally opened,' Valentino heard a top-hatted man shout.

An excited babble of approval went up from the waiting men as each of them went to select his chorine for the evening. Valentino was pleased to see deSaulles claim his girl and walk off with her into the warm spring night. He followed at a discreet distance.

He had not listened at the door to the girl's apartment long when he heard the harsh rip of clothing. There was a protesting whimper and deSaulles mumbled angrily that he would buy her a new one. Valentino pressed his ear to the door in triumph. Now it was time to call his photographer and his private detective, but he stayed to savor his victory. Like a common voyeur, he listened to the hoarse, guttural curses of the big man as he belabored the girl. Sweat began to bead Valentino's forehead and upper lip. His triumph became tortured as he realized with renewed impact the sort of brute that his Blanca was forced to live with. In an anguished mental picture, he could see the delicate Blanca being pawed and manhandled by her husband as he prepared to vent his lust upon her. Then, from within, he heard

the protesting squeaks of a bed begin the unmistakable rhythm.

A bubble of nausea began to swell in Valentino's stomach. His throat began to constrict. He felt the blood leave his face and cold sweat course down his body. He knew that he was about to faint, that he had to have fresh air. His legs had turned to rubber bands and he knew that they would never carry him down three flights of stairs. His vision was blurred, but he suddenly made out the word 'Janitor' lettered on a door. In desperation he opened the door, found a small room filled with mops, buckets and, fortunately, a sink. Gripping the edge of the sink, he bent and let the vomit spray up from his insides.

Later, as he slumped weakly against the wall and dabbed at his features with a wet handkerchief, he realized with wry humor that he did not have the 'stomach' for this divorce business. Besides, he thought, rationalizing his cowardice, the resultant trial could become quite messy and bring much unpleasantness into the open. If deSaulles were set upon in this manner, he might become vicious and make things uncomfortable for Blanca. For the time being, it was best that things continue as they were. He would, however, continue to counsel Blanca to discuss the possibility of a divorce with her husband.

Valentino realized just how much of a nobody that he really was. How could he ask Blanca to marry him when he was nothing but a glorified dance instructor? When one has found his Madonna, he must prove himself worthy of her love. He began to think seriously of making a name in show business. He was a good enough ballroom dancer, he told himself; if he could find the right partner, he knew that he could make a success of their act. He also began to consider the movies. Certainly the movie industry would welcome a handsome young man such as he.

One day, while dining in Maxim's, Valentino noticed Mary Pickford and her mother at a table opposite him. Without hesitation he rose, walked to their table, and ignoring 'The Girl with the Curls', he addressed himself solely to Mrs. Pickford.

'My name is Rudolph Valentino, Mrs. Pickford,' he said. 'Please forgive me for taking the liberty of speaking to you without a formal introduction, but I would very much like your advice on how I might get into motion pictures.'

Mrs. Pickford eyed the handsome, foreign-looking man coldly, then gave him the advice that soon became standard: 'Get plenty of good pictures of yourself – profile, full face, bust and full figure. Don't spare the cost. Be certain that they are good pictures. On the back of each give your age, your height, your complexion and your experience. Send copies of them to every studio and be patient.'

Valentino took Mrs. Pickford's advice – about the pictures. Patience was a virtue that he had never possessed.

CHAPTER SIX

It was becoming increasingly obvious to Valentino that Hollywood would soon be acclaimed the new mecca, the propagandizer of the New Sophistication that would blanket the entire nation in the near future. In the years immediately following World War I, Hollywood was rapidly establishing itself as the great American dictator and its stars were beginning to send out decrees concerning hair style, hem lengths and techniques of heterosexual love.

Before World War I, Valentino learned, the church, not the movie theater, had been the center of social life in America. God was in his heaven; the fire was in the hearth; man was in his field and shop, and woman was in her place. The time was not ripe for a cult of Eros with all the attendant minor deities.

This was the time when the dean of a small Eastern women's college raised fiery hell with her daring survey of the sexual knowledge of 34 students, aged 16 to 19. Twenty confided that they knew nothing of the physical process of procreation. One ventured that her husband would 'put a seed in a glass of water for me to drink when we want to have a baby'. Several 'knew' that kissing caused pregnancy. Eight of the young women refused to answer the 'horrid questions' and one or two of them fainted.

This was the time when Margaret Sanger's publication, *The Woman Rebel*, crusaded for birth control and feminine hygiene. Mrs. Sanger was sent to jail while 'good' women jeered her.

This was that terrible time when masturbation caused in-

sanity, shrinkage of the sex organ, softening of the brain, baldness and a ghastly gamut of diseases.

Havelock Ellis was compiling case studies in England which he hoped would cast a few rays of light into shadowed corners, and Sigmund Freud was lecturing in Austria about a new philosophy of the sex function.

These two masters of the New Enlightenment would soon be equipping whole armies of torchbearers to illumine a world which groped in sexual darkness, but neither of them would accomplish more toward bringing about a new 'awakening' than the slim, daring and graceful dancing figure of Irene Castle, who accomplished more for female emancipation than a whole squadron of marching suffragettes. With her husband, Vernon, she introduced the era of ball-room dancing into American culture. Taking a cue from the response the glimpse of Mrs. Castle's ankle provoked from the gentlemen in the audience, Mack Sennett introduced undress into comedy and churned out a number of bathing girl two-reelers, which showed the nation just how good the female form could look with its arms and legs exposed and its curves properly accentuated.

In 1915, the automobile industry reached a new high of 900,000 automobiles manufactured; and it was soon bantered about that 'Henry Ford was responsible for the undressing and seduction of more women than any man in history.'

The movie theater was on its way to becoming the popular temple of the people with its new Olympus of attractive deities, the white legs and full bosoms of its vestal virgins and its promise of instant escape.

During the course of America's brief involvement in World War I, two million doughboys were scattered to various parts of the globe. They never did go back to the farm after they'd seen 'Paree'. The soldiers had learned about condoms, cognac and pliable mademoiselles and had returned to the States seething with rebellion against the drab rationale and sterile restraint of their elders. In their absence, women had begun to work in factories and offices

and had nibbled their first *hors d'oeuvre* of social freedom. They listened to their men's tales of European escapades with grim amusement. Maybe the American male had had a little romance forcefully injected into his unimaginative veins, but he still lacked finesse in his love-making and he still believed in the 'double standard'.

At the dawn of the twenties, sophisticated sex was beginning to matter. The day of male and female coming together in a hasty, obligatory rutting to fulfill the biological obligation had gone. The movies were showing women how a proper love affair should be conducted; *Bernarr Macfadden's* confession magazines were instructing them in how they, too, could sin, repent, snare a man and live happily ever after. The United States government had even done its share to increase sexual tension by passing Prohibition in order to create the night club, introduce women to booze, collegians to hip flasks, and the tradition of the alcoholic orgy to American culture.

Young flappers seemed to be caught up in the wild frenzy of a national puberty rite. They flattened their breasts for 'boyish figures', then shortened their skirts to prove that they were definitely girls. They discovered the douche and used it, or insisted that the men to whom they submitted 'looked after their interests' with a condom. The freewheeling flapper swore, told dirty jokes, discussed Freud and went to the movies for a laboratory course in the Art of Love. One simply watched the able instructors on the screen demonstrate proper technique, then carefully applied the intricacies of the maneuver – improvising minor variations – with one's partner in the cushioned back row of a darkened theater.

It was only natural that the young romantic should have designs on Hollywood.

Occasionally, Rudolph was given time off from his chores as a professional host to dance an exhibition tango with a chorus girl he knew, Bess Dudley. As always, he made no secret of the fact that he desired to move on to better things,

that he would like to form a permanent duo with some female partner and become established as a dance act. To Rudolph, it was the most obvious way to showcase his talent and attract the attention of a director or producer. Bess introduced him to Bonnie Glass, a professional ballroom dancer. Bonnie was searching for a new partner to replace Clifton Webb, who had already begun his move toward stardom.

Miss Glass was very much impressed by the young Italian and invited him to her hotel to try out. When Rudolph arrived, his eyes blinked in wonder. It appeared at first glance that he had been invited to try out for a seduction. The lights were low, the music soft and Bonnie behaved as though dancing was the farthest thing from her mind. But Valentino, in his shy, courtly way, bowed low, extended his arm and led the lovely dancer to the small dance floor.

'Bonnie had set up a test for Rudy,' said a friend of Valentino's dancing years. 'She didn't relish romantic entanglements with her partners and was careful to pick men who were "safe". If he had started to tangle instead of tango, Bonnie would have had nothing more to do with him. But Rudy was never that kind of guy. He was never fresh and he never forced himself on a woman. He just seemed to be above that kind of thing.'

Valentino accepted Bonnie Glass' offer of \$50 a week and they began rehearsals at once. The team of Glass and Valentino played the Winter Garden, the Colonial and the Orpheum in Brooklyn. They played several Keith houses and went on tour with their repertory of waltzes, cakewalks and fox trots. The evening always ended with a tango. In Washington, D.C., they danced a charity benefit and received 16 curtain calls for a waltz which they had originated. President Woodrow Wilson attended the performance and led the applause of approval for the two young dancers. Valentino was pleased with both the success of the tour and the fact that the time apart from Blanca deSaulles gave him an opportunity to reflect upon their relationship with much more objectivity. Certainly their 'affair' had been conducted on

the proper spiritual plane, but Valentino had been too hasty in urging an immediate campaign for Blanca's divorce. He was making good money now, with the promise of a raise. In time, he would be better prepared to pay proper suit and earnestly endeavor to free Blanca so that she might become his own.

When Bonnie Glass opened her Montmartre Club in the basement of the old Boulevard Café, Rudolph's salary was raised to \$100 a week. Shortly thereafter, Miss Glass opened the fashionable Chez-Fisher on 55th Street. The dance team played the Palace and made an extended tour of the East.

Valentino continued as Bonnie Glass' dancing partner until she retired from show business to marry Ben Ali Haggin. At that time, he teamed with Joan Sawyer for a brief vaudeville tour that ended with a successful engagement at the Woodmanstern Inn.

But in spite of his chain of ever-growing personal accomplishments, the East had suddenly become too small for Valentino. Jack deSaulles had learned of his meetings with Blanca. One night after Valentino had returned from a dancing engagement, he was startled by heavy knocking at his door. He threw on a dressing gown and hurried to answer.

A heavy-set man pushed his way into the room and looked at Valentino over the stub of a cigar. His heavy jowls quivered with the effort of a contemptuous sneer.

'What is the meaning of this?' Valentino demanded, his entire body shaking with anger. The intruder was solidly built and looked about as easy to knock over as a truck.

The big man reached inside a coat pocket and produced a private investigator's badge. 'Mr. deSaulles wants you should leave his wife alone,' the detective said. 'Mr. deSaulles is very much unhappy that some two-bit gigolo is bothering his wife.'

'How dare you burst in here with such infamous charges?' Valentino asked, his voice quavering with emotion.

The detective placed a heavy palm on Valentino's chest and pushed him down on the bed. 'You listen to me, pretty

boy; Mr. deSaulles is going to have you thrown in jail if you don't leave his wife alone. The authorities in this state don't care for pansies like you who leech off women.'

'I'm a professional dancer!' Valentino shouted. 'How dare you accuse me of being some parasite, you scum!'

The big detective drew back an open hand as if he intended to strike Valentino. Rudolph flinched, but the blow never came. Instead, the detective looked down at him and laughed. 'Whatsa matter, pretty boy? 'Fraid of getting your beautiful face mussed up?'

'Get out!' Valentino shrieked, rolling over to bury his face in a pillow.

'Sure, pretty boy, I'm leaving. But you mind what I told you!'

Valentino was furious at the man's allegations, and he erupted into bitter tears at the thought of leaving his Madonna in the hands of a vulgar man like Jack deSaulles – a man who would have him followed by a private detective as if he were some kind of criminal. And he would always remember the night he had listened outside the hotel room while deSaulles rutted with the chorus girl in the most crude and vile way imaginable. He realized, however, that there would be little he could do to aid the cause of Blanca if he were sent to jail on a trumped-up charge. He also realized that he was, at the time, completely powerless to do anything at all to prevent deSaulles from carrying out his threats. It took money to fight money, and he didn't have enough capital to engage in a brief skirmish. Seizing an opportunity to retreat so that he might fight another day, Valentino stepped down from his status as a featured ball-room dancer to accept a small chorus-boy part in the touring company of *The Masked Model*.

He withdrew his savings and left New York secure in the knowledge that at least the musical would take him to Hollywood. The show folded in Ogden, Utah.

CHAPTER SEVEN

VALENTINO had managed to save enough money to get to San Francisco. He landed a job as a chorus boy in a Richard Carl show, *Nobody Home*, which kept him in eating money for three weeks. When the show folded, Rudy tried to support himself by selling bonds. The ladies may have thought his accent charming at the tea dances, but when he appeared as a shabbily dressed foreigner rapping at their front doors, he immediately became suspect. Down to his last dollars, he sought out the San Francisco office of the Royal Flying Corps. Here again he faced rejection because of defective vision in his left eye.

In desperation, he went to the Italian Agricultural Society. He had heard from other Italian immigrants in San Francisco that the society, financed by the Bank of Italy, was set up in order to aid Italians in acquiring California farmland. Hopefully he presented his credentials, explaining that he would like to obtain a temporary job as a landscape gardener on a farm. Once again his plans were brought crashing headlong into reality. There were no such jobs available, he was told. An American farmer had no need of a landscape gardener. Besides, these men were poor and struggling. Most of them couldn't afford the luxury of a 'hired hand'. However, if Valentino had a thousand-dollar down payment, the Society would be happy to help him obtain a farm of his own.

The world seemed composed of a vast conspiracy which had as its sole objective the complete destruction of Rudolph Valentino. He did not even have enough money to buy the cigarettes that he had begun to chain-smoke.

It was then that he learned that Mary Pickford's company

of *The Little American* was shooting location scenes in San Francisco. Valentino resolved to make a direct appeal to Mary Pickford herself. With a little bit of luck, she might remember him from Maxim's, or maybe she had even seen him dance with Bonnie Glass or Joan Sawyer. The golden-haired sweetheart of America was nowhere to be seen, but Valentino's luck took a dramatic turn for the better when he met an old friend on the lot named Norman Kaiser – now rechristened Norman Kerry. Kerry greeted Valentino with great enthusiasm. Back in New York, Rudy had once confided to Norman that he would someday like to break into pictures.

'So you've decided to make the move, eh?' Kerry asked his friend. 'Going to hang up the ballroom slippers for the silver screen?'

Valentino smiled feebly. 'I would gladly pawn my slippers for a good meal.'

Kerry, sobered, became instantly solicitous and urged Valentino to tell him the whole story of how he had come to San Francisco.

'You leave everything to me,' Kerry told him after Rudy had finished detailing his woeful wanderings. 'You can at least earn five dollars a day as an extra until we can get you a good part. I'll take you around, introduce you to everyone and help you get started.'

Valentino agreed that this was indeed a wonderful suggestion. But how, he wondered, would he get to Los Angeles in the first place?

Kerry wasn't stumped, not yet. 'You remember Marilyn Miller's husband, Frank Carter? He's here in 'Frisco handling arrangements for Al Jolson's touring company of *The Passing Show*. In a day or so they leave for Los Angeles. Frank's all right. He'll work you into the show for a one-night stand and see that you get to L.A.'

Somehow, it all worked out just the way Norman Kerry said it would. Rudy even got to meet the great Jolson and have his spirits lifted when Jolie prophesied that he 'would make it big in Hollywood'.

Kerry was there to meet him at the train station and, against the unemployed dancer's protestations, insisted that he stay with him in the Alexandria Hotel until Rudy could afford accommodations of his own.

'It won't be long, Rudy,' Kerry promised him. 'These directors are smart fellows. They'll soon see that you have what it takes.'

Valentino walked to the studio to have lunch with Kerry each noon. He seldom accepted a ride, claiming that walking helped to keep him 'in shape'. Each night in their room, Valentino would perform a rigorous program of calisthenics. Sometimes he would get Norman Kerry to participate in the nightly routine of exercises, but Kerry would soon collapse on the bed, puffing loudly and laughing at the energy of his roommate.

Norman Kerry kept his word that he would introduce Valentino to everyone, but he was not able to make good his promise that the directors would soon be falling all over themselves in bidding for his services. This was 1917, the year of the All American Boy, and the objects of matinee idolatry were such stars as Charles Ray, the small-town boy who always made good by the end of the last reel; Wallace Reid, the clean-cut youth, and Milton Sills, the gentlemanly swashbuckler. The directors were unanimous in deciding that Valentino had what it took - to be a swarthy heavy in opposition to their light-complexioned 'regular fellas'. The mythos of the Latin Lover had not yet been conceived of by the movie moguls, nor dreamed of by their studio bards.

Emmett Flynn gave Valentino his first part in a film he was directing at First National called *Alimony*, which starred Josephine Whittel, wife of stage and film star Robert Warwick. Valentino was only an extra in his screen debut, a dancer in a ballroom scene. Charitably, all that can be said about the film is that Valentino lent a certain verisimilitude to the atmosphere.

Valentino, now 22 years old, was quite disheartened by Hollywood's slow acceptance of his talent. Always idealistic and overly enthusiastic, Valentino had expected nothing less

than a starring vehicle for his debut. He had envisioned enacting a romantic hero in a part that would make full use of his supple grace and his muscular physique. Well, at least it had been a dancing part, and if he looked carefully, he could catch a good profile of himself over Josephine Whittel's left shoulder.

Hayden Talbot, the author of *Alimony*, hailed Valentino one day on the First National lot. 'You're going to have a bad time of it in Hollywood, you know,' he said. 'You look more like a seducer than a clean-cut hero. Maybe the women will like you, but the men won't.'

'It doesn't seem as though anyone likes me,' Valentino shrugged. 'I haven't been able to get another part since *Alimony*.'

'Your type works against you,' Talbot said. 'You're just too damned slinky and too damned pretty.'

Valentino narrowed his eyes and regarded Talbot suspiciously. He had been the target for homosexuals ever since he had arrived in Hollywood. Had Talbot stopped him only to tell him what a pretty young man he was and suggest that they arrange a rendezvous to further discuss his 'career'?

The writer laughed as if he had read the young actor's thoughts. 'Don't worry,' he assured Valentino. 'I'm not propositioning you. But you sure did react when I said that you were pretty. Have the fairies been fluttering around you?'

Valentino nodded his head. 'I have received a few proposals.'

'You don't like that sort of thing?' Talbot pursued.

Valentino took a deep breath. 'No.'

'No offense intended,' Talbot said frankly, 'but you do look the type, you know. In fact I'm a bit surprised to learn that you're not a queer. So many of you too-handsome fellows seem to be.' Then the writer laughed again. 'If you were, you know, you might be getting parts a great deal easier.'

Talbot's words had the effect of a stinging slap of the glove across Valentino's cheeks. The young actor drew himself up to his full height, flared his nostrils, widened his eyes

and walked quickly away from the writer before he would strike him. Later, after Valentino had walked for several minutes, the violent anger had burned away to ashes of despondency. So this was how he was evaluated by everyone from casting director to scenarist – as one of the ‘boys’, a homosexual. Once again the terrible conflict had returned to plague him. Once again the spectre of his unresolved sexuality had come back to haunt him.

Later that afternoon, a solution seemed to present itself in the personages of two male extras whom he had met on the First National lot. ‘It’s boys’ night at the Torch,’ one of them winked when they asked Valentino if he wouldn’t like to join them for a night of relaxation.

Valentino had heard of the Torch, a strangely secret private club that catered to members of the motion picture industry and offered them the means of indulging any type of sexual expression which they might desire.

‘You have access to the club?’ Valentino asked them. They were extras just as he, and he wondered how they had managed to obtain membership in the bizarre club that served as a safety valve for the passions of the dream merchants.

The taller of the two, a husky blond named Bob, nodded. ‘Yes. We both lost our cherries there long ago. A visit to the Torch is a prerequisite to any kind of success in Hollywood.’

Once again Valentino was being presented with what had come to be an obligatory confrontation scene that seemed to demand a constant replaying. He hesitated.

‘We’ve heard that you’ve been playing hard to get,’ Bob said. ‘How much longer are you going to walk the tightrope? It’s either one way or the other – or both. But no actor can play his scenes alone in this town.’

Valentino had been fascinated by the rumors that he had heard about the Torch Club. He looked at Bob, and for a moment, the sad, patient, handsome features of Claude Rameau became superimposed over his rugged blondness. Perhaps this time would be different, Valentino sighed re-

signedly. Perhaps this time some marvelous kind of sexual alchemy would take place.

'I'll go with you,' he said softly.

Today a large supermarket stands where the Torch Club once occupied a huge old mansion and served as a reservoir of erotic wish-fulfillment for Hollywood. Admittance to the club was possible only by passing through heavily guarded gates. The guards were said to have been furnished by the studios themselves. The Torch Club could scarcely have existed without the full knowledge of the studio executives, nor could it have flourished without the greasing of several official palms. Actually, the club had no official name. It came to be known as 'the Torch', it is believed, because of the many 'fiery' romances which were originated and terminated there.

Although the mansion welcomed sexual dilettantes of any erotic persuasion, the Torch was essentially a homosexual's idea of paradise. Its interior had been designed by a well-known male star of the period. Its proprietor, a monocled director, was not a homosexual, but a strange man who simply got his kicks out of watching the sexual couplings and cavortings of his colleagues. A family man with a robust wife and healthy, strapping children, the director had dreamed up the club as a way of supplementing his already substantial income.

Valentino was awed by the mansion from the moment he entered its imposing portals and stood in the apricot-colored reception area.

'My God, how beautiful,' he whispered reverently, nervously reaching for a cigarette.

'Careful where you throw that match, my dear,' the husky blond told him. 'Those draperies are of purest silk.'

'They were woven especially for this room,' commented Valentino's other companion, Charles, who nudged himself in between the two men. A dark-complexioned man, just a bit shorter than Rudy, he seemed noticeably annoyed by the attention Bob was paying to Valentino.

Valentino looked around the reception area, recognizing several men from First National and other studios.

'How about cocktails?' suggested Bob, taking Valentino gently by the elbow. 'Let's take the bar in the red room. I couldn't help noticing that red seems to be your favorite color.'

'How many cocktail bars are there?' Valentino asked, trying to shake his elbow free of the grasp that had become increasingly firmer.

'Ten,' Charles answered, then added with a pout, 'I much prefer the green room.'

They seated themselves at a marble-topped table and a handsome young barhop arrived to take their orders. As they waited for their drinks to be delivered, Valentino learned that the Torch had taken a great deal of its inspiration from the Roman baths. There were four pools where, on mixed nights, the sexes could mingle freely and nudely. 'No pretensions at the Torch,' he was jokingly told. 'Everyone sees everyone else for what he really is.' There were over 40 bedroom apartments where couples (or threesomes or foursomes, depending on personal taste) could further explore one another's depth of personality. Membership in the Torch came high. One's monthly accounting could amount to as much as a thousand dollars, depending upon one's use of the various facilities and the size of his bar tab. Certain well-heeled homosexuals were said to spend every available hour in the Torch, making full use of its elegant areas of seduction.

'How can you afford this on extras' pay?' Valentino asked.

'We can't,' Bob told him, 'but Charles' man can.'

Charles had become busy with his drink. 'By the way,' Bob asked him, 'shouldn't you be meeting the old man pretty soon? He doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

'Oh, shut up,' Charles snapped, dunking the olive below the surface of his martini. Then, narrowing his eyes, he asked, 'Why are you so eager to get rid of me tonight?'

'You know how jealous your old man gets if he sees us

together,' Bob reminded him. 'Get him mad at you and we stand to lose all this.'

Charles nodded grimly, finished his drink. 'I suppose the old queer is in the jasmine pool,' he said, getting to his feet. 'I'll see you later, Bob,' he said with emphasis. 'So long, Rudy.'

'See you in room 23,' Bob called after him.

Charles spun on a heel, made an obscene gesture.

'What did you mean?' Valentino asked. 'What is so special about room 23?'

Bob chuckled. 'The room has a special mirror on the ceiling above the bed, so people can watch the performance from the room above. Nearly everyone is on to it by now, but whenever new stuff comes to the club, the manager tries to put them in room 23 so that everyone can have a peek. Sometimes it is very educational.'

Valentino felt a wave of revulsion sweep through him. He studied the confident strength of the husky blond and knew how Bob expected the evening to end for them. Valentino swallowed the last of his drink. Perhaps tonight some kind of sexual lightning would strike, and things would happen as they were meant to.

'Shall we go in for a swim, dear?' Bob asked him. 'As I said, tonight is boys' night. No girls to clutter things up. The pools are all bareback tonight.'

Valentino followed his escort to twin pools that had been scented with jasmine, orange blossom, rosewood and sandalwood. He breathed in the heady fragrance of the warm waters. Surely not even the Roman heroes of antiquity could have enjoyed such elegance. He stripped and hung his clothing over a bench as directed by Bob. Valentino was proud of his body and pleased by the attention his 'new blood' was eliciting from several swimmers in the pool.

'You have a lovely body, Rudy,' Bob told him.

'You, too, have a splendid physique,' Valentino returned the compliment. He did find the man's rugged features and husky frame to be quite attractive. Perhaps, under these conditions, the experience might be more satisfactory. At any

rate, he resolved to accept whatever cards Fate might choose to deal him.

As they stroked through the scented waters of the pool, Valentino continued to be amazed by whom he saw there. One star, who was getting the build-up as an All-American he-man type, was kissing a slim young extra as the two locked bodies in water up to their necks. Bob told Valentino that the studio had recently called the star on the carpet because he had begun to swish on camera.

'Would you like me to give you a rubdown, dear?' Bob asked Valentino as the two of them lay taking a breather at the pool's edge.

There it was. The overt proposition. Valentino's stomach fluttered and he unconsciously clenched and unclenched his fists. 'Very well,' he said.

'There's a magnificent locker room just a short way from here,' Bob said. 'There's a nice table for you to stretch out on, and there are all sorts of marvelously scented liniments for me to rub on you. I'm really quite good with my hands.'

The two men got to their feet, Bob grinning excitedly, throwing an arm across Valentino's shoulders and ushering him to a small room just off the pool area. 'In here,' he said, holding open the door.

Valentino's eyes narrowed to slits of disgust as the door slammed shut behind him. Seated before him on a mound of velvet pillows was one of the leading directors of a major studio. The man was naked and his thin, hairless legs were folded beneath a large paunch and a sunken chest. 'Well, well,' chuckled the obscene Buddha around the stub of a cigar, 'so Bob delivered my pretty boy to me just as he promised.'

Valentino felt cold sweat bead his forehead and upper lip. He had only a small towel with which to cover his own nakedness. He looked around the room for Bob, heard the lock click. 'Enjoy yourself, dear,' he heard Bob chuckle from the other side of the door.

Valentino's attention swung back to the director, who had risen unsteadily to his feet. The cigar had been stabbed out

in an ash tray. A half-empty whiskey bottle had been kicked aside. The man's eyes widened with lust, and his tongue extended itself to sponge dry lips, sweep back into a grinning mouth. His thin shanks began to quiver in anticipation.

'Pretty boy,' the director said, daubs of saliva flecking his lips, 'get yourself down on your knees.'

Nausea churned in Valentino's stomach. He was revolted by the grossness of the man. This was sexual degradation, not sexual expression. He had come seeking a means of elevation to a nirvana: instead, he had received relegation to a lower ring of hell. He threw himself upon the locked door and began beating at it with all his strength. When someone at last came to unlock the door, Valentino was whimpering like a small child and mumbling unintelligible words in Italian.

It was only a few days later when he once again met Hayden Talbot on a studio lot. Valentino returned his greeting and sought to avoid conversation with the writer. He assumed that he, like nearly all of Hollywood, had learned of Valentino's humiliation at the Torch Club.

If Talbot was aware of the incident, he gave no indication as he inquired about Valentino's well-being with what seemed to be genuine interest.

'You know,' Talbot said, 'I'm working on a story idea right now which could have a good part in it for you if you're interested.'

'Of course I'm interested!' Valentino shouted, instantly enthusiastic. 'I've just accepted a dancing job, but I can cancel out!'

'Take it easy, man,' Talbot laughed, waving Valentino silent. 'I'm not nearly finished with it. And you may not like the part, anyway. You'd have to play a shifty-eyed villain.'

'But at least I would be more than just a piece of the scenery,' Valentino said. 'Please don't forget me. I'll be appearing at Baron Long's tavern.'

Talbot's promise to use him in his next film made Valentino's return to exhibition dancing a bit easier. For thirty-five

dollars a week, Valentino danced in Baron Long's Watts Tavern on the outskirts of Los Angeles. His partner was the pretty Marjorie Tain, who would soon become a popular star of the Christie Comedies. Within a few weeks, Valentino had managed to build up his bankroll to the extent where he could afford to send a few dollars back to his mother in war-battered Taranto.

One night after Valentino finished his routine with Miss Tain, Emmett Flynn met him backstage with the news that Hayden Talbot had finished the scenario and the part was Rudy's if he wanted it. Valentino did a brief victory jig and shouted his 'yases' before he bothered to ask what role he would be playing.

'You'll be a heavy,' the director told him. 'An evil Italian count who menaces the hell out of Vera Sisson.'

Valentino was ecstatic. He was given a salary of fifty dollars a week and the part, although not exactly pro-Italian, was big enough so that he might be seen and be rewarded with juicier roles. It seemed as though he was on his way after only two movies.

The film, however, acquired a jinx somewhere along the way. An independent production, its release was held up by angry cameramen who had not received their wages and had obtained a lien on the picture. The film was finally released two years later, in 1920, by Fidelity under the title, *The Married Virgin*. Reissued as *Fivolous Wives* in 1922, after Valentino had achieved star status in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and *The Sheik*, the film served only to embarrass him.

Because of the litigation preventing the release of *The Married Virgin*, Valentino's bargaining position had not changed. Emmett Flynn offered him \$7.50 a day to play an Italian Bowery tough, and Valentino took it. At least, he reasoned, he could learn something about movie-making by observing from the side lines.

Milton Sills became friendly with Valentino and tried to give him a boost by taking him daily to the Goldwyn commissary. Sills introduced Rudy to his leading lady, Geraldine

Farrar, and she later remarked to a friend: 'Wouldn't you think somebody'd be interested in trying out that young man to see what he could do, what he had?'

Valentino had once again gone back to dancing, this time at Pasadena's fashionable Hotel Maryland with Katherine Phelps as his partner. Henry Otto, a director at Fox, made his acquaintance. Otto was impressed by Valentino's charm, but apologetically told the young Italian that he simply could not interest his company in taking a chance on a Latin. 'It's your type that works against you,' Otto said, repeating that monotonous refrain.

At last, Paul Powell, a director at Universal used Valentino as a leading man to Carmel Meyers in two pictures, *A Society Sensation* and *All Night*. He was given a salary of \$125 a week and, more important to Rudy, Powell's encouragement. 'Stick to it, Rudy,' Powell told him. 'You've got it, boy, and if the film climate ever changes, you're going to make a big name for yourself in Hollywood.'

With customary enthusiasm, Valentino took the bulk of his savings and bought a used Mercer for \$750. The new 'star' did not keep his status symbol for very long, however. He was once again without work when he was rescued by his old friend, Mae Murray, and her husband Bob Z. Leonard.

'Why, Rudy would be just right for the part of Jimmie Calhoun, wouldn't he, honey?'

Leonard frowned. He had always found it a bit hard to believe that his wife's friendship with the handsome dancer had been 'purely platonic'. But the temperamental blonde star was at the peak of her career, and her director husband, although fiercely jealous of her leading men, always acquiesced to her choice of co-star. 'But Mae,' he asked softly, 'do you really think the audiences will believe Rudy as the son of a millionaire Irishman?'

'Of course they will,' Mae smiled. 'Rudy can do it.'

And Rudy did it. Or at least he went through the paces as the scion who falls in love with the pretty night club dancer in *The Delicious Little Devil*. Mae, of course, was the 'delicious' one of the title, a Miss Gloria de Moin, who had

entered into a tempestuous affair with the notorious underworld figure, Duke de Sauterne. The shy 'Jimmie' was shocked at seeing 'Gloria' dance about in skin-colored tights, and he nearly swooned in horror in the scene where she appeared to be nude in her dressing-room pool. True to the course of pre-twenties drama, the notorious 'Gloria' turns out to be little Mary McGuire, daughter of a brick-laying buddy of Jimmie's rich old daddy. Together they foil the wicked Duke and snatch Mary free from his clutches forever — and in time for the last reel clinch.

Leonard winced through all of Mae's love scenes with Valentino but maintained his professional detachment until the film was nearly completed. Then one day he returned from lunch to find Mae and Rudy engaged in a passionate tango on the set. The volatile Mae, as did so many superstars of her era, kept an orchestra on the set at all times to provide her with the proper mood music for her scenes. On this particular day, she had been teasing Rudy about his days as a professional host and had instructed the orchestra to play a tango so that she might show the extras and the cameramen just what a terrific dancer her co-star was.

'This is a film set, not a dance hall,' Leonard said tersely. He tried to make it seem like a joke. The extras gossiped enough without giving them a cause. But that night he and Mae had the first big quarrel of their marriage, and Rudy was not invited to join them for dinner after that afternoon.

Shortly after the completion of this film, Valentino was stricken with Spanish influenza. For days he lay burning with fever, refusing to call a doctor or to accept any type of medication.

'I do not believe in doctors,' he gasped to Norman Kerry, his oldest friend in Hollywood. 'Nor do I believe in pills. My body is strong enough to drive out the invader.'

Valentino's refusal to submit to the ministrations of a physician was but another manifestation of that strange brand of romanticism which was peculiarly his own.

In *A Rogue's Romance*, Valentino managed to turn a bit part into a minor triumph. Hired to serve as background in

the Earle Williams starrer for Vitagraph, Rudy was to flit across the screen in a brief bit as an apache dancer in a Paris bistro. James Young, the director, watched Rudy rehearsing and was very much impressed with the bit player.

'Why not let this fellow have a few minutes on screen,' Young suggested to Williams. 'He does an apache dance to perfection. It would lend authenticity to the film.'

Williams agreed and called Rudy over to their impromptu conference. 'Where did you learn to do an apache dance?'

'In Paris,' Rudy said.

Shrugging, Williams turned to the director. 'Can't get much more authentic than that.'

Young let Valentino stage the dance as he pleased, and even though it was only a brief sequence in the picture, it met with great success. 'Someday,' Rudy said to friends, 'I shall star in a film about an apache. Only I know how much I owe to these people.'

Valentino next appeared in *The Homebreaker* for Thomas Ince. What had begun as a fairly decent role in the Dorothy Dalton vehicle was suddenly attacked by the scissors, and most of Valentino's part ended up on the cutting room floor. Norman Kerry worked him into his *Virtuous Sinners*, but Rudy scarcely managed to be glimpsed in the background. Mae Murray came to his rescue once more and cast him opposite her in *The Big Little Person*.

Dorothy Gish had become a Valentino supporter and insisted that D. W. Griffith give him the lead of the Spanish hero in *Scarlet Days*.

Griffith remained impassive. 'Look,' he told his star, 'I gave him a part in *Out of Luck* because you threw a temper tantrum. You got something going with this boy?'

Dorothy colored slightly, stamping her foot in frustration.

'Now don't throw another fit,' Griffith cautioned her. 'So you think the fellow has something. All right, I'm going to tell you why I won't use him. He's too damned foreign-looking to make it in Hollywood; it's his type that works against him.'

'But,' Miss Gish protested, 'that's my point. The hero of

this film is a Spaniard. That must certainly be Valentino's type!

Griffith sighed, weary of the debate. 'Save your breath, Dorothy,' he told her. 'I've already hired Richard Barthelmess for the part.'

The stubborn Griffith was impressed by the young Italian's dancing, however, and he engaged Valentino as Carol Dempster's partner in the stage prologue to *The Greatest Thing in Life* when it opened at the auditorium in Los Angeles. The director generously paid Valentino a hundred dollars a week and advised him to 'do an extra-special job'. Griffith had an interest in the lovely Miss Dempster that was even more active off-camera than on. It was important to Griffith's status that his new protégé be made to look good to the critical eyes of Hollywood. The team of Dempster and Valentino was highly successful in the stage prologue, and Griffiths commissioned them to dance for *Scarlet Days* when it opened at a downtown Grauman theater. Valentino was too greatly in need of employment to fume at the ironic turn of events that had him dancing the prologue to the film in which Dorothy Gish had meant him to star.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHORTLY after Valentino completed *Eyes of Youth*, the Clara Kimball Young starrer based upon the Max Marcin-Charles Guernon play, he filled out a studio biography form for Universal, taking care to embellish fact with strategic fiction in an effort to obtain meatier film roles. It is interesting to note the young actor's responses to certain of the questions.

What is your 'Home' City or Town? Taranto, Italy. A family palace.

Where did you go to Grade School? Perugia Military Academy.

What is your greatest ambition? To be a scientific farmer.

What unusual, thrilling or amusing incidents have happened to you either before you entered motion pictures or after? Drove my own Fiat (120 H.P.) in race between Rome and Naples. Came in second. Took up aviation in 1915 in U.S. preparatory to going to Italy. Discharged from Italian Army by Italian Counsel in N.Y. because of defective vision. Gave tango lesson to Nijinsky, famous Russian ballet dancer.

Were your parents or relatives theatrical people? No - father doctor of bacteriology after retiring from army.

Why did you take up a motion picture career? Tired of ballroom dancing. Came to L. A. to enter movies. Waited six months for chance. Used because was type.

If you have written any plays or scenarios, name them:
Wrote one, but not yet produced.

One never knows when a harmless bit of exaggeration may someday return to require the substantiation of an outright lie. Valentino needed work. He reasoned that he should try to sound as much the grand gentleman as possible. When he began to rise in popularity after *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, he found himself in the sometimes embarrassing situation of having to remember just what he had said in that studio biography. Perhaps because of the fact that in Valentino's mind the romance of his screen life and the more serious business of reality had become indistinguishably mixed, he was generally able to carry off his ruse with suave arrogance. The press was quick to discover that Rudy was actually born in Castellaneta, a small village near the larger city of Taranto. Naming a larger city as a birthplace was certainly common practice and only made for a clearer idea of the area in which a person was born. But only Valentino's close friends and the more persistent skeptics ever knew that he was expelled from the military academy as an incorrigible discipline problem, that he never had any intention of becoming a 'scientific farmer', that his experience with a Fiat before he had become famous consisted primarily of looking longingly at one through a showroom window, or that the scenario which he had 'not yet produced' probably got no farther than the 'thinking stage' while he filled out the application form. The 'family palace' he referred to was, of course, the white brick corner house near the square in Castellaneta where his father had his veterinary office.

Perhaps the most bizarre film in which Valentino appeared was *An Adventuress* opposite Julian Eltinge, famed female impersonator. Julian resembled Sophie Tucker more than he did Elizabeth Taylor, but he wore gowns that were priced beyond the dreams of most of the 'real' girls in Hollywood. His wigs alone cost more than the entire wardrobes of some stars. It has been said that Eltinge was not necessarily a

homosexual; he had just found a pleasurable and unique way to make a good living.

The role did nothing to aid Valentino's cause in Hollywood. At the time, it made him the subject of some rather unsavory gossip, and later, when it was reissued in 1922 as *The Isle of Love*, it served as another queasy reminder of his past. Virginia Rappe was a starlet in the film; but, by 1922, she could no longer be embarrassed by her appearance in the picture. By then she was dead, the victim of Fatty Arbuckle's rape-orgy that dumped Hollywood on its *derrière* and brought 'Old Mister Scissors' Will Hays out from Washington to set the rowdy house in order.

Shortly after Valentino finished *An Adventuress*, a director who had become a personal friend called Rudy into his office and asked him to seriously consider the advantages of a marriage – in name only. 'If you really want to make it as a leading man,' Rudy was told, 'you are going to have to show people that you can be a lover. Up to now, your sex life has been neuter. If you've got a problem, there are a lot of nice-looking gals around who have, well, similar problems. Hell, you can pretend that your marriage is just one long love scene and act it out just like you would in front of a camera. Then you wouldn't have to prove anything to the girls on the set, you could tell the fairies to go to hell, and your wife wouldn't bother you at home.'

Valentino left the director's office flushed and angry. His friend's words had reminded him so much of the advice that the apache dancer had given him during that summer of 1913. Was it really so important to the world that he love 'their' way? Could no one understand him? Was he really so strange?

Valentino did have to admit that his friend did have a point in belaboring him for remaining aloof from personal relationships on the sets. His only great passion had been for clothing, and he now owned a well-tailored Continental wardrobe. Bryan Foy, son of the dancing Eddie Foy, once remarked that Valentino would starve himself in order to buy a new suit that struck his fancy.

Then, too, he had been saving his money in order that he might obtain a bank loan and bring his mother to California. It was while he was completing the necessary arrangements to accomplish his mother's immigration that he received word of her death.

For days he grieved, refusing to see any one. He fitted cigarette after cigarette to his ebony holder and paced the room, giving vent to his sorrow. The most beautiful woman in Castellaneta was dead. The woman who had loved him, indulged him and molded him into an apostle of love and beauty would never again offer solace to her Rodolfo. Valentino rested his forehead against a window pane made cool by a gentle rain. If only she had not died before he had proved himself. He was still the black sheep, still the naughty Rodolfo whose acts of recklessness and insubordination brought shame to the Guglielmis. Why, dear God, had she passed away before he had had enough time to achieve some type of eminence which would have made her proud of him?

He had had such wonderful dreams of her coming to America. He had planned to get a nice apartment somewhere in a quiet part of Los Angeles. They would have gone for long walks on Sunday afternoons and visited friends in the Italian colony. But now Donna Gabriella was gone and none of this would come to pass. Valentino had never felt so small and so alone.

Douglas Gerrard, a film 'heavy' who had graduated to director status, insisted that Valentino accompany him to some parties and be introduced to 'the right kind of girls'. Against Valentino's protestations, Gerrard dragged him to one of Pauline Frederick's Sunday parties at her big Sunset Boulevard home.

Valentino remained at the edge of the party, unable to join in the unrestrained gaiety of the movie people at play. He felt as though he did not belong where there was laughter and sunshine, but rather where there was melancholy and somberness. His mother's death weighed heavily on his mind, and it would have seemed disrespectful to indulge in frivolity while he was still in mourning.

'Won't you have a drink?' a petite brunette asked him. She carried two cocktails balanced on a silver tray and with a nod of her head, motioned to Valentino to take one.

'No, thank you,' he said.

'But you must,' the girl insisted. 'I was told to help pass out drinks, and I can't sit down to finish mine until all these cocktails have been taken. Do take one. Please?'

Valentino smiled at the brunette's exaggerated pout as she finished her plea.

'Very well,' he gave in, taking a drink from the tray. 'But I much prefer wine.'

'When in America, drink as the Americans,' she teased him. 'There now,' she said, sipping from the last glass on the tray. 'I have done my duty and can enjoy one of my own.'

'I thought you said you had a drink somewhere to finish,' Valentino chuckled.

'That was it,' the attractive girl told him, winking impishly. 'You're Rudy Valentino, aren't you?'

'At your service,' he admitted, making a courtly bow. He reached for a hand to kiss, but the girl drew away with a giggle.

'When in America, kiss as the Americans,' she laughed.

Valentino straightened. 'And don't these marvelous Americans complete introductions?'

Once again there was the music of laughter. 'I'm Jean Acker.'

For the first time in several days, Valentino once again felt as though the world could be made into a brighter place in which to live. Here was a woman who seemed genuine and relatively free of the pseudo-sophistication of her peers. She was a woman whom he wanted very much to know a great deal better. But, as usual, he found himself woefully inadequate at small talk. He started to bow, then caught himself with a smile.

'Would you care to dance?' he asked her. It was while Valentino was dancing that he could truly communicate

with women, and it was the only time that he ever seemed to be at ease in their company.

During the next few days, Valentino found it increasingly easy to be himself in the company of Jean Acker. A number of his friends, who thought that they knew Miss Acker much better than they really did, encouraged Valentino to continue to spend time with her. On 5th November, 1919, Valentino and Jean Acker were married at the Hollywood Hotel. Just a month later on 6th December, the Los Angeles papers carried the official announcement of their separation.

From that time on, Jean Acker's name seldom has been seen in print without being prefixed by either of the adjectives 'poor' or 'little'. 'Poor little Jean Acker' seems to have become an epithet like 'Little Orphan Annie'. Indeed, her involvement with Rudolph Valentino can best be described as tragic. She was, in a word, a mistake. The fact was that Jean Acker expected more from her marriage than a handsome escort. Her experiences may have been considered a bit off-beat before her nuptials with Valentino, but now she looked to Rudy to help her find herself. It became a classic case of the blind being appointed to lead the blind.

Rudy and Jean were both registered guests at the Hollywood Hotel, as were many of the stellar inhabitants of the celluloid city. On their wedding night, Valentino had made a big production in the lobby of demanding the key to Miss Acker's suite. The desk clerk, a proper gentleman who was unaware of their having tied the matrimonial bonds, refused to surrender the key to Valentino. After all, they had had enough hanky-panky going on at the hotel. The manager had even ordered cactus planted in front of all the ground floor apartments in order to keep those lustful actors from jumping into the rooms of their leading ladies.

While half the lobby giggled and Jean blushed, Valentino made an elaborate show of displaying their marriage license and triumphing over the doubting desk clerk. Male patrons winked knowingly over their cigars as Valentino led his bride into the connubial bower, and ladies sighed enviously as the happy young couple walked arm-in-arm from the

lobby. Within a few days, however, it would become a popular Hollywood rumor that, for all practical purposes, the newlyweds might just as well have spent the night in separate apartments. Bebe Daniels reportedly said that Jean left Rudy before morning.

There can be little doubt that Jean Acker made a sincere effort to understand Valentino and to help him make some sort of adjustment to a normal marriage. But while Valentino might have entered into the marriage fully prepared to make of Jean an object of 'pure' love, he became repelled by her demand for conventional sex. In a matter of less than a month, Valentino was losing himself in his work on the set of *Once to Every Woman*, and it was common studio gossip that a darkroom technician was helping Jean work out the frustrations of her marriage of convenience.

It must be pointed out that, in spite of the *faux pas* of their marriage, Valentino may have felt a greater affection for Jean Acker than he ever did for any other woman. She had at least made an attempt to understand him. It was Jean Acker with whom Valentino spent his last days in August of 1926, and she was the only woman at his bedside just before he died. And, contrary to accepted opinion, it was Jean Acker's slave bracelet which he wore about his wrist when he was buried, not Natacha Rambova's or Pola Negri's.

Much was made of Valentino's affectation of wearing a silver slave bracelet when he achieved fame. Male reporters tended to regard his disposition toward jewelry as yet another proof of the Sheik's effeminate nature. The ladies, however, were more interested in who had given the bracelet to the Great Lover of the screens. S. George Ullman, Valentino's agent, told reporters that the bracelet had been a gift from Natacha Rambova, Rudy's second wife. The agent once went on to detail the elaborate plans the two of them had made in order to surprise Rudy with the gift.

Valentino was always more enigmatic when queried about the wrist piece. 'It was given to me by someone whom I truly love,' became his standard answer during interviews.

'The slave bracelet was a gift to him from Jean Acker,'

said Maureen Englin, who had been Valentino's friend since his days as a busboy and host. 'Jean told me so while we were performing together on the old B. F. Keith vaudeville circuit.'

CHAPTER NINE

THE small woman sat in the projection room watching the same strip of film being shown over and over again.

'Once more!' she shouted at the projectionist when the strip had flickered out on the screen.

The projectionist sighed wearily, muttered something under his breath about 'nutty writers' and once again fitted the scene from *The Eyes of Youth* to the projector.

The woman cleaned her spectacles on a handkerchief and fitted them on the bridge of her nose. The handsome Latin face reappeared on the screen. He had only a small role as a divorce co-respondent, but he was as good and flashy. The way he moved, the way he carried himself, the beautiful arrogance in his manner – he would be a perfect Julio Desnoyers in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

The woman had fought long and hard for this film. War pictures, she had been told, were a glut on the market. But, she had reasoned, if this were true, why not an anti-war film? For additional ammunition she informed Richard A. Rowland, head of Metro, that the Ibanez novel had run into more than one hundred editions since its publication in the United States in 1919.

The woman gathered her notes and left the projection room as the film once again completed its odyssey through the projector. She went to her office, picked up the phone, asked for Rex Ingram, the director of the project. 'Rex,' she said, 'this is June Mathis. I've made up my mind. Valentino will play Julio.'

The voice at the other end of the line was silent, then suddenly brittle. 'You're making a big mistake, casting an unknown in this picture. The whole thing is too risky

as it is. What we need is a big name to carry the picture.'

'There is no "big name" in Hollywood right for Julio,' Miss Mathis said. 'Besides,' she added, 'just how big is Alice Taaffe?'

'The name is Alice Terry now,' Ingram chuckled. June Mathis was a good in-fighter. The director was a persistent suitor of the beautiful Alice. At his recommendation, June had okayed her for the role of the heroine, Marguerite Laurier. 'If he's the man you want,' Ingram conceded, 'I know that there's little use in trying to convince you differently.'

June Mathis knew that Valentino was with Selznick in New York, playing a thug in a Eugene O'Brien film, *The Wonderful Chance*. She called the Metro office there and soon had the excited Rudy on the phone.

'You are Julio!' she told him.

Valentino wept unashamedly. He had talked to the eastern casting office as soon as he learned that Metro had acquired the rights to the Ibanez novel. Once again he had heard the familiar frustrating refrain. He was not the type. He was a heavy, a thug, nothing more. He was told to forget about heroic parts. Within two days Rudy was on a west-bound train, a script of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* spread open in his lap.

The tremendous success of *The Four Horsemen* prevented Metro from folding. The film not only gave Rex Ingram a foremost position as a director, but it set Metro along the path of 'big' pictures. And, of course, the role of Julio Desnoyers made a star of Rudolph Valentino.

Valentino applied himself to the role with a frenzy that won the respect of his co-workers and the confidence of his director. 'The boy is all right,' Ingram told June Mathis. 'I've never seen an actor with such dedication.'

Rudy was hardly acting at all. For the romantic who had spent his childhood playing the parts of brigands and pirates and gypsies, the role of hero was the easiest of all to interpret. Then, too, the part seemed tailor-made for Valentino. Julio was the grandson of a great landholder of the

Argentine, who had been encouraged to lead the life of a profligate by an indulgent grandfather.

'Project yourself into the story,' June Mathis coached Rudy one day during a script conference. 'The old man dies without a will and the land is divided between his two daughters, one of whom had married a German, the other, a Frenchman.'

Valentino nodded his head. In his imagination he was already picturing the conflict.

'You, Julio, and your lovely sister, Chichi, accompany your parents to France,' June Mathis went on, her hands swooping up and down like small birds as she spoke. 'Immediately Papa Desnoyers buys a flashy house in Paris and an extravagant chateau in the Marne Valley.'

'He is free with his wife's money,' Valentino smiled.

June Mathis laughed. 'But what of his son? Julio is lost in the city. He misses his beloved pampas to ride hell-bent-for-leather on his magnificent horses. First, he becomes bored; then he becomes increasingly restless with the inactivity. He nearly goes mad.'

'I don't blame him,' Rudolph sighed. 'The poor fellow.'

'So,' Miss Mathis shrugged, 'he decides to become a painter.'

'Why not?' Valentino agreed, rubbing his chin with a forefinger.

'The young devil paints nudes by day and Paris red by night.' June Mathis laughed at her joke, winking broadly at Valentino. 'Then,' she said, raising a palm for emphasis, 'Paris society finds out that he can tango.'

'Ah,' Valentino said, arching an eyebrow. 'Very good.'

Miss Mathis nodded her head slowly, knowing that the young actor would be pleased with the opportunity to display his prowess at the dance. 'At a party, he meets Marguerite Laurier, who has been trapped in a loveless marriage.'

Valentino sat silently as if he were a small boy at his mother's knee while June Mathis continued her summary of

the scenario. The corners of his mouth trembled as she told of the ill-fated love of Julio and Marguerite, who were discovered in the young man's studio by the enraged husband. His back seemed almost to snap to attention as she detailed Julio's enlistment in the army of his father's country and told how his dashing disregard for danger won him the *Croix de Guerre*. Then, at the climax of the story, tears glistened at the corners of his eyes when she told of Julio and his German cousin confronting one another on the battlefield and of the high-explosive shell that puffed out both their lives.

After June Mathis had completed the telling of the story, Valentino approached her and took her hand in his. Lightly his lips brushed the back of her hand and when he spoke, his voice quavered with intense emotion. 'I shall not disappoint you, Miss Mathis,' he said softly. 'I shall be your Julio as no other could ever be Julio.'

Throughout Hollywood's first 'million dollar production', Valentino and Alice Terry justified the faith of each of their respective benefactors. It also satisfied Valentino's sense of destiny that he and Alice had been extras together in *Alimony*, his first film.

'Listen to whatever Rex tells you,' June Mathis advised him. 'He will make a star out of you in this picture.'

Valentino knew at once that Ingram was sympathetic toward him. Later their temperaments were to clash and result in an irreparable break, but in the *Four Horsemen* Valentino allowed the personable director to become his sole mentor. Although it was obvious that Ingram was predominantly concerned with molding the career of the actress who would soon become his wife, Valentino had complete confidence in Ingram's directorial skill. He was a meticulous taskmaster. He refused to rush through pictures and paid absolutely no attention to budgets or dicta issued by the front office. Ingram was a dreamer with a strong tendency toward mysticism. To his credit, it must be noted that he never held anyone but himself responsible if his dreams did not always come true. As handsome as most of the male stars



1. Valentino as **The Sheik**, the role which won him world-wide fame



2. The only known boyhood photo of Rudolph Valentino shows him posing with a friend from the military academy



3. Valentino in characteristic pose



4. Actress Jean Acker, Valentino's first wife



5. Valentino and his second wife, Natacha Rambova



6. Joseph M. Schenck and Valentino hold a sidewalk conference in Los Angeles



7. Valentino with two pet dogs



8. Valentino as he appeared in his last film, **The Son of the Sheik**

of the day, Ingram could have become a popular leading man if his predilection had been toward acting rather than directing.

Valentino was under contract of \$350 a week. He was ecstatic at the incredible sum of money which he received, and jubilant that in this film he would be dancing as well as acting. There were two scenes in the picture which had Valentino doing the tango — once as the Argentine profligate, romantically garbed in gaucho costume, the other as the Parisian playboy-artist, perfectly tailored in suit and vest.

The Four Horsemen opened first as a road show in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago where it was received enthusiastically by press and public as a smash success. And singled out by the critics for stardom was Rudolph Valentino. It was not that the handsome young Italian lacked for competition in the film. The names of Joseph Swickward, John Sainpolis, Alan Hale, Wallace Beery, Stuart Holmes and Jean Hersholt certainly comprised a formidable list of scene stealers; and Hale, Beery and Hersholt would become three of Hollywood's finest character actors. Alice Terry never achieved the star status of her leading man since she chose to work mainly in her husband's pictures and was often forced to endure popularity-sapping periods of unemployment.

Metro quickly assigned Valentino to a dreary picture entitled *Uncharted Seas*.

'But where,' Rudolph demanded, 'is my raise? I was promised a raise in salary after *The Four Horsemen*.'

An emissary from the front office was sent to attempt to pacify the raging actor. 'You were very happy with \$350 a week when you signed your contract,' Valentino was told.

Valentino's nostrils flared. 'But now when all I hear and read is how Valentino saved the studio, it seems very paltry and inconsequential. I demand more! I saved this studio from bankruptcy. Without me, you would all be begging in the streets!'

Valentino could not be placated and even cameramen and

grips assembled to hear the verbal barrage the two men fired back and forth at each other.

'Besides, Alice Lake doesn't like me,' Valentino claimed of his co-star in *Uncharted Seas*. 'I am psychic about such things and very sensitive. How can I work with a woman who doesn't respect me?'

Director Wesley Ruggles, who had heard glowing reports from Rex Ingram of the young actor's congenial nature and devotion to acting, was completely puzzled by the man's behavior on the set.

'I was told he was an angel,' Ruggles complained to an assistant director, 'and I get a fire-eating, temperamental Italian!'

But Valentino was at his best on the day when one of Metro's biggest stars, Alla Nazimova, stopped by to watch him at work. The Russian actress had become an awesome goddess of Hollywood by appearing in a number of propaganda films during World War I. In these cinematic diatribes, Nazimova portrayed the chaste maiden, a symbol of an embattled Europe staving off the lustful Hun. After the war, Nazimova proved to be much more than the living personification of threatened innocence. The actress had some definite ideas about the art of the cinema, and they were most often bizarre and grotesque concepts which appealed to special interest groups with unconventional tastes. In 1922, Nazimova produced her *Salome* with, it is reported, an all homosexual cast in tribute to the playwright, Oscar Wilde. This independently financed film lost Nazimova her resources and her popular support, but at the time of her first meeting with Valentino, she was winning critical acclaim with her surrealistic approach to the making of movies. The role in which she envisioned Valentino was, however, a bit more conventional. She needed an Armand to play opposite her Marguerite Gauthier in *Camille*.

At last, as it had in *The Four Horsemen*, Valentino's 'type' was beginning to work for him instead of against him. Nazimova would settle only for a slim, dark, 'passionate type', and there was no other male lead available on the Metro

lots who could fit that description as well as Valentino.

He was overjoyed at the prospect of appearing opposite the Russian actress. Yes, he told her, he was familiar with the role of Armand. He had seen it onstage and had heard it sung in the operatic version, *La Traviata*.

The actress laughed at his eagerness. He was dressed in heavy winter clothing for his role in *Uncharted Seas* and artificial snow flecked his eyebrows. 'There is one obstacle which you have yet to surmount,' she told him. 'Natacha.'

'Natacha?' Rudolph echoed. 'Who is Natacha?'

'Natacha Rambova is my art director and costumer,' Nazimova explained. 'She is a young woman of great genius. I could not accept you if she did not approve of you.'

'Then let her see me and approve or disapprove of me right now,' Valentino said excitedly. 'I want the part desperately, and I won't be able to concentrate on this miserable picture unless I know one way or the other if I am to be Armand.'

Nazimova frowned. 'You want to go now? In those clothes?'

'Now!' Rudy said emphatically.

Natacha was in the actress' dressing room, already at work designing the elaborate costumes Nazimova would wear in *Camille*. At the sound of Nazimova's voice, the tall young woman jumped to her feet and turned with arms outstretched, as if prepared to offer an embrace of welcome. The smile vanished from the lips of the dark-eyed artist when she noticed Valentino and her arms dropped limply to her sides.

'Natacha, darling,' Nazimova laughed, 'we have company. Now tuck away your drawings and tell me what you think of *Signor Valentino as Armand*.'

Valentino stood shifting his feet, waiting for a formal introduction that never came. He was becoming unbearably warm in the heavy clothing. 'My name is Rudolph Valentino,' he offered.

'Of course, of course,' Nazimova silenced him. 'She knows who you are. Quiet now. She's thinking.'

Natacha walked slowly around him, surveying him carefully. Her dark eyes were cold and expressionless, and she studied him as if he might be an art object she intended to purchase.

'Perhaps it would help if I took off my coat,' Rudy whispered, not daring to speak too loudly in the face of such intense concentration.

'Only if you're becoming uncomfortable,' Nazimova said sharply. Valentino wondered if the other woman were incapable of speech.

'What do you think?' Nazimova asked her art director. 'Does he know how to make love?'

'How should I know?' Natacha answered. Rudy was stung by the harshness of her voice and the expression on her face that told him she couldn't possibly care about his prowess as a lover – physical or spiritual. Color rushed to his face. Was this human icicle to have the last say about whether or not he would play Armand?

'But why not give him a try?' Natacha suddenly said. 'He looks as if he might do just fine.'

Rudy emitted a deep sigh of relief. He began to offer his thanks to the quiet woman who had just approved him for an important part, but she had already returned to her sketching. She seemed as detached from it all as an ancient Roman emperor who, on the whim of a moment, had decided to 'turn thumbs up' and save the life of an unfortunate gladiator.

'It is done,' Nazimova nodded. 'You are Armand.'

'I shall play the part as it has never been played before,' Valentino promised.

'Indeed you shall,' Nazimova told him. '*Camille* has never been played like this before. Wait until you see the script and the costumes. Natacha has designed.'

Although Rudy had no idea of the ultra-modern and bizarre version of the classic story of the tragic *demi-mondaine* that Nazimova had prepared, it could not, at the time, have mattered less to him. Certainly his stock as an actor would rise now that he was playing opposite the fiery Russian actress.

'You're separated from Jean Acker, aren't you?' Nazimova asked, startling Valentino from his moment of inner elation. The question turned out to be completely rhetorical as she went on, 'I know Jean quite well. She's done some things for me from time to time.'

Natacha glanced up from her drawing board, betraying her pose of indifference.

'It occurs to me,' Nazimova went on, 'that you are perhaps without a companion for the Los Angeles opening of your triumph in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. I'm sure that Natacha would be delighted to accompany you, if you have no other plans, wouldn't you, dear?'

Natacha frowned as if bewildered at Nazimova's assuming the role of cupid. Her smile could do little to soften the tone of annoyance that colored her voice when she answered: 'If *Signor* Valentino has no other companion, I would be most pleased to accompany him.'

After Valentino had left the two women and changed into his street clothes, he called immediately on June Mathis. Miss Mathis had become Rudy's mother image. Throughout his career, Valentino would continue to be controlled by forceful and domineering women, and he would never be without an older woman who would serve as his 'mother' at times of stress and confusion.

Rudy told June of the prize role he had just landed in Nazimova's next picture, then he told her of the strange young woman he had met.

'Ah, yes,' June Mathis nodded. 'Natacha Rambova. She is both beautiful and rich.'

'Rich?' Valentino asked.

'Yes,' June told him. 'Her real name is Winifred Hudnut, and she is the stepdaughter of Richard Hudnut, king of all the cosmetic world.'

'Rich and beautiful,' Valentino smiled. 'That is an unusual combination.'

'And she is intelligent and talented,' June continued. 'She's studied ballet in Europe and toured with Theodore Kosloff as his dancing partner.'

'But why the name "Natacha Rambova"?' Valentino wondered.

'Why "Rudolph Valentino"?' June teased him. Then Miss Mathis sobered; it was time to be 'mother'. She told Valentino that this girl was not for him. She warned him to stay clear of Natacha and to be wary of Nazimova.

When Valentino left June Mathis, he was even more confused than when he had come. It is interesting to speculate how Valentino's career might have prospered or declined if he had taken heed of June Mathis' warning. However, Valentino did ask Natacha Rambova to the Los Angeles opening of *The Four Horsemen*. At first he had felt very much as he had when he had disobeyed Donna Gabriella as a boy. After all, his 'soul mother' had advised him not to become involved with either Rambova or Nazimova. But Nazimova was also a woman who commanded respect, and she had suggested that he and Natacha would make a lovely couple. It was extremely difficult to say 'no' to a woman like Nazimova. It also occurred to him that June Mathis might be jealous of relinquishing the hold that she had had on him since *The Four Horsemen*. In addition, there was his role in *Camille* to consider. He certainly did not want to do anything which might jeopardize his retaining the part of Armand.

To his delight, Natacha Rambova proved to be such a charming companion at the Los Angeles première that he soon began to escort her to several parties and Hollywood night spots. What Valentino would never know was that Alla Nazimova had convinced her young protégé that the handsome Italian could become the hottest male property in pictures if his career were properly handled. All Valentino needed was someone to make the right decisions for him. Natacha, she had decided, would be superb in the role of a guiding light.

Valentino had another film to finish before he started work on *Camille*. What should have been a most enjoyable project turned out to be a war of nerves. June Mathis had

adapted the scenario from Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*. Rudy's co-star was once again to be Alice Terry and Rex Ingram had resumed his position at the helm. The magic crew of *The Four Horsemen* was assembled again. And, as icing for the cake, Metro had come across with a 50-dollar raise for Valentino.

The trouble began with the minor increase in salary for which Rudy had cajoled the front office for so long.

'You've made the studio what it is,' Natacha told him. 'You merely debase yourself by working for \$400 a week. Demand more!'

Valentino made a fruitless attempt to have the salary increased, then decided to report for work in spite of Natacha's clucks of disapproval. Her pointed remarks about choosing the dishonorable course had their desired effect on Valentino, however. He arrived on the set each morning as if he had done everyone a supreme favor by getting out of bed. Ingram could not believe what he was witnessing at firsthand. The eager, conscientious Valentino of *The Four Horsemen* was developing into a first-class prima donna. At last the meticulous director could no longer tolerate Valentino's arrogance, and the two strong personalities clashed in a screaming quarrel that ended with Rudy walking off the set, spewing profanities. June Mathis scolded both of them and demanded that they make up, but tempers continued to be rigged with short fuses. Valentino turned in a sensitive performance in spite of the interset warfare that constantly brewed about him. When the picture was in the cans, Ingram vowed that he would never work with Rudolph Valentino again.

'I can take any good-looking extra and make a star out of him just like I did with Valentino,' he told June Mathis.

To prove his point, Ingram chose a young man who had been an extra on the set of *The Four Horsemen*. His name was Ramon Samaniegos, but the determined director changed his surname to Novarro, and put him opposite Alice Terry in *The Prisoner of Zenda*. The picture brought

Ramon Novarro overnight fame, and the young Mexican-born actor soon found himself being billed as 'a second Valentino'. Although Novarro's position in the Hollywood galaxy is not quite as legendary as that of Valentino's, his status as one of the silent screen's immortals is secure. In 1927, shortly after Valentino's death, the ironic little drama came full circle when Ramon Novarro played the part of Ben Hur, a role which Rudy had long lusted after.

Valentino entered into his characterization of Armand with great enthusiasm. Natacha was there to fuss over him and to help him with the arrangement of his hair and his costumes. Rudy learned about Natacha's love of the dance, and he was fascinated by her interest in the occult. Since early childhood, Valentino had felt himself drawn toward subjects of a mystical nature. Natacha had studied a great deal in the area of the 'supernatural' and had strong convictions concerning life in the world unseen. She was a firm believer in reincarnation. 'We come back without memory to see if our lessons have been thoroughly learned,' she once told Rudy. 'Now and then we have faint, dim catches of previous existences.' Rudy avowed that surely they must have known each other in another life. Natacha soberly agreed that it was probably so. She also confided in Rudy and told him about Meselope, the spirit of an old Egyptian that guided her through the medium of automatic writing.

But most of all, Valentino was interested in Natacha's view of marriage. A sincere union, Natacha told him, was a spiritual one. A mating of the flesh was, at best, fleeting and temporal. True love was spiritual love, unsullied by the demands and desires of the body.

'What does Meselope say of Rudy?' Nazimova asked one day as the cast gathered around Natacha and her planchette between takes on *Camille*. Natacha, cloaked in the Oriental robes that she often affected, picked up the cue. Closing her eyes as if in a light trance, she allowed her hand to move the planchette lightly over a sheet of paper, rapidly scratching the words of a message.

One of the extras looked over Natacha's shoulder and giggled.

'Well, girl,' Nazimova scolded the young extra, 'now that you've peeked, tell the rest of us.'

'Valentino can be great,' the girl read, 'if the proper woman guides him.'

Nita Naldi, who was one of the few friends that Natacha Rambova ever acknowledged and the only one of her Rudolph's leading ladies that she had ever approved, often remarked about the Valentinos' dependence upon 'some dead Egyptian'. As 'Nitzie' used to tell it: 'Whenever something was troubling them, out would come Natacha's planchette and she would start writing advice and messages from old Meselope. He was supposed to be their contact in the spirit world. They really believed in all that ghost business. It was a good thing for them that they had *spiritual* intercourse, because I doubt if they ever had any other kind. Neither one of them liked that sort of thing - at least in a normal way. Rudy was a funny guy. Whenever I did a close-up with him, he liked to feel me up. He'd rub my breasts like crazy and chew at my ear - but that's as far as it ever went. Nothing off camera. Fred Niblo, our director in *Blood and Sand*, caught him at it once and gave him hell. He asked Rudy how he expected our love scenes to get by the censors with him giving me the feel. Rudy apologized and said that the bright lights behind the camera made it difficult for him to see me, so he just had to grope around until he found me. I always figured that the minute Rudy died and got to the spirit world himself, he would ask the head spook to leave him alone with some pretty little ghost for a good normal lay.'

With Natacha offering spiritism as well as spiritual love, Rudy found it impossible to resist her. Then, too, with her constantly giving him advice on how to further his career, it was obvious that she understood his driving ambition. Jean Acker had never been able to appreciate either his conception of marriage or his philosophy of achieving stardom at all costs. He was completely open to Nazimova's suggestion that Natacha would make a much better marriage part-

ner than Jean. After all, the Russian actress pointed out, he and Natacha had so many interests in common.

Ever since Rudy had begun filming *Camille*, the studios had been buzzing with gossip of the love affair between Valentino and Nazimova's art director. 'Poor little Jean' had remained aloof from the rumor mongers. She and Valentino had maintained a friendship in spite of their legal separation, and she believed that Valentino had enough respect for her to inform her in person should he decide to institute divorce proceedings.

Valentino confided to a friend that he had decided to ask Jean for a divorce, but that same friendship and the fondness which he felt for Jean prevented him from confronting her with his request. He did not want to hurt her, and he certainly did not want any unsavory publicity to damage her career or her reputation.

'It is the gentleman's obligation to assume all responsibility in such matters,' he said. 'I will not slur Jean's name.'

It was then that Valentino's friend, a photographer, suggested a means whereby the actor could spare himself the pain of personal confrontation and the risk of injuring Jean Acker's reputation.

Jean Acker was shocked when an envelope containing pictures of Valentino and Natacha in very compromising attitudes was delivered to her suite at the Hollywood Hotel. It was obvious that Valentino had had full knowledge of the pictures being taken; the poses were as stylized as if they had been directed by Nazimova herself. How bitterly disappointed she was that Valentino had chosen the weakling's way of anonymously delivered evidence rather than presenting her with his desires in person. There was nothing that she could do but to carry out the sexual charade and sue for divorce.

CHAPTER TEN

It was at Natacha's insistence that Valentino visited the Famous Players-Lasky (now Paramount) studio and met with studio boss Jesse L. Lasky. Rudy had told his forceful fiancée that he considered Famous Players to be the finest studio in Hollywood and that he would very much like to work for them. To Natacha, the time seemed ripe for a move. Metro had nothing for him after *The Conquering Power*, and Valentino's work on *Camille* would be finished in a matter of days.

'You must begin to get more important parts,' Natacha told him. 'You must begin to get parts that plumb your dramatic depths. You cannot be the romantic lover forever.'

Valentino was cordially received at Famous Players, and Jesse Lasky was encouraging. 'We're sure to find something for you in the future,' Lasky told him, 'but we just don't have anything at the present that's right for you.'

What happened next has become one of the great legends of Hollywood, firmly entrenched in the mythology connected with its stellar Olympians.

Jeane Cohen, Lasky's story counselor and secretary, had been trying to gain audience with her boss for weeks, to discuss a novel which she had read and which she felt could be transformed into a sure thing at the box office. Miss Cohen was a quiet, unassuming young woman who had learned her trade on Broadway working with David Belasco. When Lasky kept telling her that he was 'just too busy', she patiently put her summary aside and went about other studio chores. It was after Valentino had visited Famous Players that she finally began to push the matter.

'All right, Jeane,' Lasky said, 'so I'm taking the time to

hear about this box office hit you've got. Make it snappy, okay?"

'Well, Mr. Lasky,' she began, 'it's a novel that has been selling out edition after edition in England. It was written by an Englishwoman, E. M. Hull, and it's called *The Sheik*.'

Lasky folded his hands on his lap and sat back to give a few moments of attention to his story counselor's analysis of the novel. Essentially, it was a sand dunes rehash of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. A proud English girl is snatched away from her caravan by a daring young sheik of the desert; abduction leads to seduction in his tent, where he tames her and teaches her the techniques of desert passion. By story's end, of course, she has learned to love him and he has been forced to fight for her. It was a hackneyed plot, drenched in overripe romanticism. Still, with the right male star . . .

'But we don't have anyone for the lead,' Lasky complained after Miss Cohen had completed her presentation.

'Not yet we don't,' Jeane Cohen smiled. 'But he sat chatting with you in your office just the other day.'

'Of course,' Lasky agreed, slamming a palm against the top of his desk. 'Rudolph Valentino! He's dark enough to look like an Arab, and he's popular right now because of *The Four Horsemen*. But,' Lasky protested, making a face of distaste, 'he's under contract to Metro.'

'I took the liberty of checking,' Miss Cohen told her boss. 'Metro no longer has him under contract after *The Conquering Power*, the film he's just finished.'

Lasky smiled at his efficient secretary and reached for one of the telephones on his desk.

'It's pure, unmitigated rubbish!' Natacha said, throwing down the script that Rudy had brought her to read. 'And you said you'd do it?'

'But I thought that you would be pleased,' Valentino protested. 'They're giving me a salary of \$500 a week.'

'Are you a whore who can be bought?' Natacha accused. 'This script is trash!'

Valentino avoided meeting her eyes. 'I thought it a rather good script. And it is a very dramatic role,' he said, trying to rekindle his own enthusiasm and light at least a spark of pleasure in Natacha. 'Think of the costumes I'll get to wear - burnouses and plumed headbands and jeweled sword belts.'

Natacha snorted and sadly shook her head. 'That is the sort of romantic garbage that appeals to shopgirls, widows, spinsters, abused housewives and fumbling office boys. You'll never get any kind of critical acclaim if you appeal to that kind of an audience. But, as long as you signed that stupid contract, you'll have to go through with it.'

Natacha was correct. Critical acclaim would be slow in coming to a 'sheik', but when Valentino told the haughty Agnes Ayres, the kidnapped 'English girl', to stop struggling and to 'Lie still, you little fool!' women of all ages would squeal in ecstasy at the subtitle and swoon as if mesmerized by the sheik's sex menace. The critics be damned; Valentino had created a popular romantic hero who would become a synonym in the contemporary vocabulary for a passionate male, along with the distaff's Theda Bara-inspired 'vamp'. More, he had established himself as the Great Lover of the twenties.

Attempts at analyzing the multi-sensual ingredients which go into the making of a sex symbol usually end in a stagnant pool of psychological guesswork. Who can ever accurately foretell which attractive face is capable of projecting 'It', 'That', 'Sex Appeal' in lethal enough psychic waves to paralyze and mesmerize an entire nation? And who could ever devise a cultural barometer which would enable one to determine just when a generation is ready to receive a new cult of Bacchus into its midst?

Certainly the recent emancipation of women had much to do with Valentino's deification as love god. America had undergone a dramatic revolution in manners and morals after World War I. Women had been freed from the restricting corsets of convention and social restraint and were zealously pummeling the Puritan ethic that had forbidden

them to smoke, drink, drive automobiles and think about sex. Blithe young flappers uttered 'hells' and 'damns' through bee-stung lips and never even stopped to look for the greased chute which was supposed to zip them down to the fiery pits of Hades. Women were free and ready for romance, but their boy friends and husbands remained, for the most part, sexual sluggards. The quest for love trapped the majority of women in essentially the same dull routine of drudgery that their mothers had had to endure. It was Valentino who appeared on the scene to answer the throbbing need of twenty million frustrated females. Perhaps women had not yet acquired sufficient courage to cope with individual freedom but could continue to find strength *en masse* as votaries in the cult of an Adonis. Perhaps women had not yet acquired sufficient bravado to tell their men that they were tired of dull, methodic love-making but could find vicarious satisfaction and release in the arms of their virile phantom love of the flickering screen. The 'greatest lover of them all' became the focal point for all the damned-up emotion that had nowhere else to spend itself. Valentino was everything that their boy friends and husbands were not; he was romance.

The movies offered a heady aphrodisiac to an already sexually primed nation. According to the cinematic credo, however, love was the exclusive property of the young and unmated. Married couples were portrayed as drab, gray figures in the shadowy background. Love came to the impetuous, those who were unafraid to seize the moment. A slicked-down Latin lover or an Arab aristocrat would have caused the women of the previous generation to have shrunk back in exaggerated terror of the lustful beasts. Not so the new sophisticate of the twenties. She was willing to surrender to either Continental charm or barbaric savagery. She was ready for Rudolph Valentino.

The Latin lovers before World War I had all been villains - sneering, greasy, back-stabbing cads who mauled virginal heroines whom virginal heroes claimed at the end of the film. Wallace Reid or Milton Sills or one of the other All

American Boy types would soundly trounce the oily Latin snake and end his nefarious career. Then came Valentino as Julio in *The Four Horsemen*, and something most unusual and contrary to the existing cinematic laws occurred. The same character who had once been the villain was now the romantic Apollo; the same pomaded, olive-skinned libertine who had once elicited hisses from the female patrons was now provoking feral whimpers. While it was true that there was an undeniable charm about the well-scrubbed manliness of a Charlie Ray, a Thomas Meighan or a Wallace Reid, the lads were still heavy-handed and awkward in their approach to love-making. Now there was Valentino, and when he appeared as the young Arab aristocrat in *The Sheik* in 1921, there wasn't a female in the audience who didn't swoon with envy when he swept Agnes Ayres off to his tent in the desert.

Valentino's acting, according to Adolph Zukor, one of his producers, 'was largely confined to protruding his large, almost occult, eyes until the vast areas of white were visible, drawing back the lips of his wide, sensuous mouth to bare his gleaming teeth, and flaring his nostrils.' The magic lure of the tropics seemed capable of compensating for any lack of subtlety in Valentino's acting skill. The romanticism of the Arab sheik seemed to offer the ultimate in escapist sex to the female theater patron. The setting was far away in place, far removed from the world of immediate reality. If a woman's imagination wanted to sin a little, she knew that it would be done among the sand dunes, far away from the prying eyes of neighborhood gossips. The reputation of the Arab aristocrat as a lusty, virile lover had been perpetuated for centuries. An old Arab medical book prescribes: 'Breaking a maiden's seal is one of the best antidotes for one's ills. Cudgeling her unceasingly, until she swoons away, is a mighty remedy for man's depression.' The fact that the sheik has a harem and therefore cannot belong to *one* woman offered an added measure of freedom to the woman who wanted no entanglements involved in her vicarious affair. On the other hand, the polygamy of the desert lover pre-

sented a challenge to a certain type of female to become The One who could fulfill and satisfy the lusty chieftain by exercising the full powers of her womanhood.

Within a year, Valentino had revolutionized all existing techniques of love-making, boosted sales of vaseline and brilliantine, introduced the bell-bottom trouser to male fashion and the word 'sheik' into the vernacular.

By 1922, Valentino's influence on American culture had been felt to such an extent that Senator Henry L. Meyers, for the Congressional Record, 29th June, 1922, listed 'the sheik' among the reasons why censorship of the movies should be immediately enforced. '... The pictures are largely furnished by such characters as ... one Valentino, now figuring as the star character in rape and divorce sensations ... At Hollywood, California, is a colony of these people, where debauchery, riotous living, drunkenness, ribaldry, dissipation, free love seem to be conspicuous. Many of these "stars", it is reported, were formerly bartenders, butcher boys, soapers, swampers, variety actors and actresses, who may have earned \$10 or \$20 a week, and some of them are now paid, it is said, salaries of something like \$5,000 a month or more, and they do not know what to do with their wealth, extracted from poor people, in large part, in 25- or 50-cent admission fees, except to spend it in riotous living, dissipation and "high rolling". These are some of the characters from whom the young people of today are deriving a large part of their education, views of life and character-forming habits. From these sources our young people gain much of their views of life, inspiration and education. Rather a poor source, is it not? Looks like there is some need for censorship, does it not?'

Studio magnates were less interested in the 'need for censorship' than they were in gobbling up more of those '25- or 50-cent admission fees' from the 'poor people'. Working on the popular mass entertainment premise that nothing breeds success like success – or a good imitation thereof – other studios were quick to bedeck their leading male stars in the accouterments of the sheik. John Gilbert donned bur-

noose and pantaloons for *Arabian Love* in 1922. Metro's Latin lover, Ramon Novarro, pursued Valentino's co-star of *The Four Horsemen*, Alice Terry, across the burning sands in *Arab*, 1924. In the same year, Arthur Edmund Carewe sex-menaced Norma Talmadge in *Song of Love*. Ricardo Cortez and Antonio Moreno were also called upon to pit their profiles against that of Valentino's. Although each of the 'imitation sheiks' were popular lovers with an already established following, none of them was able to steal any of the desert thunder from the man who had come to personify the very essence of animal magnetism and tropical allure.

It was one of Hollywood's most sardonic jokes that the off-camera love life of its leading Adonis was as ludicrous as his filmed romance was passionate.

Marcello Mastroianni, known as the last of the great Latin lovers, told *Playboy's* interviewer for its July, 1965, issue: 'The success of a type like Valentino or Marilyn Monroe is inevitably dramatic, tragic, grotesque – because the private lives of these people are almost always impoverished. Imagine the effort it must have taken for Valentino to convince himself that he was really like his myth – or, even worse, *not* like his myth. I'm sure he made very little love. That makes you laugh? It makes me cry.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN spite of the fantastic success of *The Sheik*, Natacha continued to berate Valentino for appearing in 'such a shoddy production'. When he announced his next picture for Famous Players, *Moran of the Lady Letty*, it is said that Natacha screamed at Valentino like a frustrated mother scolding an incorrigibly naughty child.

'If you do this picture,' she groaned, 'you have sunk to new depths of bad taste.'

Valentino disagreed. 'Mr. Lasky says that the men think that I looked too sissy in *The Sheik*. This script is based on a novel by Frank Norris, who writes tough, realistic stuff. Famous Players wants me to play this rugged action role to show the men that I can be a rough customer.'

Natacha laughed. 'You'd better stick to parts with perfumed pillows and silk curtains if you want to show off that **damned body of yours.**'

Valentino's hands were trembling as he fitted a fresh cigarette to his holder. 'I feel quite confident that I can play a two fisted adventurer as well as a desert abductor of screaming females.'

Natacha sighed resignedly. 'If it means so much to you to play the he-man, go ahead and do the film. But remember this, you only move back another rung on the ladder that leads to critical success.'

Valentino's sense of the dramatic was fulfilled when he learned that his leading lady would be Dorothy Dalton. In 1919, he had appeared in a minor role in Miss Dalton's film, *The Homebreaker*, and had seen nearly all his role end up on the cutting room floor. Now his role had been beefed up to almost completely overshadow that of Miss Dalton's.

But even the \$700-a-week salary did little to appease the exasperated Natacha, who pronounced the picture 'completely unworthy of Valentino'. *Beyond the Rocks*, Rudy's third film for Famous Players, elicited another diatribe from his hard-to-please fiancée, who said that the 'rocks' must be in his head if he consented to perform in such trash. The fact that Gloria Swanson would be his co-star appeased Natacha somewhat, but she considered Miss Swanson as basically a comedienne who had graduated from Sennett-Keystone comedies to flamboyant fables of flaming youth. Natacha's presence on the set did little to smooth the working relationship of Miss Swanson and Valentino, who, after a few days, decided that they liked neither the script nor each other. The scenario, written by the High Priestess of 'It', Elinor Glyn, was really nothing more than another cinematic cream puff on which the emancipated women of the twenties might stuff themselves.

At last Natacha shared Rudy's elation when he informed her that he would star in another Ibanez adaptation, *Blood and Sand*, and be directed by George Fitzmaurice.

'Fitzmaurice will understand the Latin temperament,' Valentino told Natacha. 'He will be able to get a performance out of me like no one has ever done before.'

Rudy cursed everyone in sight the day he was told that Fitzmaurice would be unable to fulfill his commitment as director of *Blood and Sand*. Although Valentino 'minded his tongue' when there were ladies present, he could turn the air blue with profanity when his temper was aroused. Jesse Lasky clapped a palm to his forehead in agony when he was told of Valentino's tantrum on the set. He had obtained the services of Fred Niblo, one of the top directors in Hollywood. Other actors would have been honored to have worked with Niblo; Valentino was squealing like a stuck pig.

Natacha had just managed to calm Rudy when she learned that Bebe Daniels would not be playing the role of the temptress, Dona Sol, as the studio had announced.

'Nita Naldi!' she screamed at Jesse Lasky. 'Who is she? She's a nobody. And besides, she's too fat!'

Lasky had nearly come to his wits' end in trying to deal with the fiery pair. 'Look,' he offered, 'for this picture Valentino gets his name above the title and \$1000 a week. Can't you two overlook some of your grievances?'

'But this Naldi,' Natacha objected, 'she has breasts like a cow.'

From this unlikely beginning, Fred Niblo managed to elicit one of Valentino's most sensitive performances as the gallant toreador Juan Gallardo; Natacha and Nita Naldi became good friends, and the film became an immediate box office success.

Nita Naldi ('Nitzie' as she was known to her friends) lived out her last days in New York and never tired of reminiscing about the old days in Hollywood and her friendship with Rudolph Valentino and Natacha Rambova. In addition to *Blood and Sand*, 'Nitzie' co-starred in two other pictures with Valentino, *A Sainted Devil* and *Cobra*. Proud of her ample bustline until the end, 'Nitzie' would invite interviewers to feel her breasts so that they might attest to their firmness and report that her bosom had not yet begun to sag.

'Natacha had already begun to run Rudy's life,' 'Nitzie' remembered. 'She was hated by everyone on the set - from grip to cameraman. There wasn't anything that she didn't have an opinion on when it came to movie-making, and never hesitated in making her opinions known. We became friends, but I never liked the way she always had to be boss - and I never liked what she did to Rudy.'

Valentino's films usually included either a dressing or an undressing scene so that his votaries might become temporary voyeurs and obtain a glimpse of their love god's bared anatomy. In *Blood and Sand*, the camera coyly lingered on the parts of Valentino which extended from a screen while he disrobed. Stan Laurel was quick to satirize the females' fetish for the Great Lover's epidermis in his *Mud and Sand*, which had the camera reveal all of matador Laurel in a long shot that had him poking out from behind the screen from so many angles that he became an anatomical monstrosity.

Jean Acker Valentino was given her interlocutory decree

on 4th March, 1922, while Rudy was in the midst of filming *Blood and Sand*. In anticipation of their wedding date, which could legally take place in a year, Valentino and Natacha bought a large home on Wedgwood Drive in the Whitley Heights section of Hollywood.

'Pretty soon they started this crazy talk about not waiting until the divorce became final,' Nita Naldi recalled. 'They said they had known many couples who had gone "south of the border" and got a Mexican marriage. I never could figure out just why they were in such a hurry. It wasn't for any of the usual reasons.'

'Nitzie' insisted that the two lovers get an attorney's opinion of their contemplated elopement. To appease their friend, Natacha and Rudy heard a lawyer sternly advise against such action, then drove to Mexicali by way of Palm Springs and were married on 13th May in the home of the mayor. It was the type of romantic gesture that Valentino gloried in – a gauntlet thrown in the face of convention. Douglas Gerrard and a Dr. White rode along as witnesses, but neither of them seemed interested in letting a cooler head inject an element of reason into Valentino's irrational act. Surely the two 'honeymooners' had not seriously believed that they could have got away with it. They were not just another John and Jane Doe who had skipped below the border for a quickie marriage. They were instantly recognized wherever they went, and the mayor was on the telephone before their automobile had pulled away from his drive.

The police were waiting for the newlyweds when they returned to their Whitley Heights home on Saturday morning. Valentino was arrested on bigamy charges and escorted to jail. Bail was set at \$10,000.

Gerrard did his best to calm the howling, cursing Natacha. 'Someone who hated us did this,' she told Gerrard. 'It must have been Jean Acker! She must have told the police.'

'It could have been any one of a dozen people who tipped them off,' Gerrard said, 'or they may have picked up the information on their own. The important thing now is to get

Rudy out of jail. Who do you know with a ready \$10,000?'

Gerrard tried a number of phone calls and ended up with a big zero. Then he thought of his friend, Dan O'Brien, chief of San Francisco police, who was visiting his actor son George in Los Angeles. 'I need some advice, Dan,' he told the police officer over the phone. 'They've got Valentino in jail on a bigamy charge and bail is set at \$10,000.'

O'Brien gasped into the receiver. 'Ten thousand! He is in a spot of trouble, isn't he? Is he guilty?'

'Well,' Gerrard hesitated, 'yes. That is, he married Natacha Rambova before the decree of Jean's divorce became final.'

'Got over-eager, huh?' O'Brien chuckled. 'When does her divorce become final?'

'Next March.'

'Next March!' O'Brien echoed. 'Why, that's nearly a year! He's fixed himself good. He'll sit in jail until you get bail. That's the only advice I can give you: Pay the bail.'

Gerrard was about to hang up when O'Brien said 'Wait a minute. Tommy Meighan is here at George's. He's overheard us and wants to talk to you.'

Gerrard quickly told the actor about Valentino's plight, and Meighan came through as Hollywood's Good Samaritan of the year. 'The banks close at noon, Doug,' Meighan said. 'I'll meet you at my bank in half an hour. I'll stand bail for Rudy. I know that he'd do the same for me.'

Out of jail, Valentino took the advice of his attorney and sent Natacha to her parents' Foxlair estate in the Adirondacks. Their one hope of getting him off, Rudy was told, lay in convincing the judge that the marriage had not yet been consummated. They had Douglas Gerrard and Dr. White to swear that they had not been out of sight for even a second on the drive back to Hollywood. As a last resort - humiliating as it might be, it would at least be preferable to going to jail - Valentino could testify as to the nature of the marriage contract that he and Natacha had agreed upon.

Valentino's attorney began his argument for innocence on the grounds of nonconsummation, but Rudy was spared

further embarrassment when Judge Summerfield held the Mexican marriage to be invalid under United States law. The judge did, however, caution strongly against any plans of a remarriage until the divorce decree became final. The fact that Natacha had already been sent out of sight and out of grasp undoubtedly helped to convince Judge Summerfield of the actor's full intent of abiding by the court's admonition.

Famous Players had at first been fearful that the local gossip and rumors about 'the Great Lover who couldn't even make it with his wife on their wedding night' would spread across the nation and down the box office potential of *Blood and Sand*. In addition, they fretted that the very suggestion that the love god had selected a mate would rob him of the particular allure he offered to the fantasizing female, who nurtured the hope that someday the Sheik would be hers alone. Neither fear was realized as *Blood and Sand* opened to skyrocketing receipts at every box office. The press' coverage of their idol's off-screen love life had only stoked the fevers of his public's imagination.

Shortly after *Blood and Sand* opened, Mae Murray was hard at work on the Metro lots of playing a dual part in her *Fashion Row*. One night, slightly limping from the painful built-up shoes she had to wear as the taller of twin sisters, she entered her dressing room to find Valentino waiting for her.

'What's this?' she chuckled to cover her surprise. 'A spy from Famous Players?'

Valentino was in no mood for jokes. Mae could see that he had been crying. He was wearing an Oriental costume for *The Young Rajah*, which consisted of a brocaded loincloth and loops of beads falling across his chest, arms and legs. He had thrown a topcoat over his shoulders and had come to her directly from the set of his new film. It was obvious that Rudy was sorely troubled about something.

'Look at this,' he said, his voice breaking with emotion as he handed her an early edition of the *Examiner*. The eyes of a sorrowful Madonna looked out at Mae from the front page. The caption beneath the picture read: 'He would not

give me my child!' A quick glance at the headlines told her the rest of the story. Blanca deSaulles had shot and killed her philandering husband, Jack.

Valentino told Mae that he had tried to call Blanca, but she had refused to speak with him. He had wanted to offer his help, to see if there was anything that he might do for her. He was willing to entrain at once and give any type of testimony that might help Blanca earn an acquittal. For ten days Valentino told Philip Rosen, the director on *The Young Rajah*, that he was ill and that they would have to shoot around him. Rosen, although used to working with temperamental and skittish stars, would probably have thrown a tantrum of his own if he had known that Valentino spent his 'convalescence' burning candles and praying for Blanca deSaulles. Later, after a sensational trial that attracted nationwide attention, Blanca was found 'not guilty'. The judge who freed her was quoted as saying, 'Mother love is not to be trifled with. It is the strongest of all emotions.' It was just the sort of sentimental rationale that appealed to a decade that had gorged itself on vicarious passions.

Meanwhile, on the set of *The Young Rajah*, Valentino was exhibiting other strong emotions. He was dissatisfied with the picture. 'It's a cheater,' he complained to the studio bosses. 'An inferior film that simply capitalizes on my past successes and my magnetic personality.'

Nearly every day, Valentino pushed himself into the office of Jesse Lasky with new demands.

'There is a conspiracy against me at this studio,' Valentino insisted.

'How can you say that?' Lasky asked. 'That's ridiculous.'

'Then where is my new dressing room?' Valentino stormed. 'The one which I was promised before this film began?'

'I've tried to explain that we were not able to complete work on the new quarters, but just as soon as . . .'

'Always there are excuses!' Valentino interrupted. 'You make excuses and provide me with miserable scripts and poor facilities with which to perform.'

'We have the latest motion picture equipment available,' Lasky said by way of defense.

'And the poorest scripts!' Valentino snapped. 'In the future, I must insist upon full approval of every script in which you intend to star me.'

'That's impractical,' Lasky told the distraught actor.

'That is art!' Valentino shouted. 'No one knows so well as the star himself in what sort of story he can best shine.'

'Perhaps we will see to it that you can sit in on story conferences,' Lasky conceded.

Valentino remained adamant. 'That is not enough. I insist upon full script approval and a large raise in salary.'

Lasky straightened in his chair. 'An increase in salary? Since when have you been dissatisfied?'

'You hired me on a long-term contract before I became world famous,' Valentino said, 'and now you try to keep me on the same salary. I am responsible for the great success of my films. I am responsible for making your studio rich!'

Lasky narrowed his eyes. 'May I point out, Mr. Valentino, that Famous Players has a great many stars in its stable. We don't butter our bread on your earnings alone. You are important - agreed. We are proud to have you as a star. But you have no right to insist that your temperamental demands be carried out.'

'So now I'm temperamental!' Valentino shouted, his face coloring in anger. 'Whenever a star insists upon receiving fair treatment in this slave galley, he is marked down as being temperamental.'

Valentino strode defiantly from the studio boss' office as if a white stallion were waiting for him, leaving Jesse Lasky to roll weary eyes ceilingward.

'I intend to keep faith with my public,' Valentino told reporters in interviews that made the studio executives burn with fury. 'The public wants to see me in only the best films. I will not, therefore, be exploited in inferior films for the benefit of the studio.'

Because Famous Players would grant Valentino neither

an increase in salary nor the right to approve his scripts, Rudy looked upon their action as a breach of contract. He would, he announced on 30th August, 1922, look for a better deal elsewhere.

If Valentino had hoped that Famous Players would yield to his demands, he had greatly underestimated the brick wall attitude of its bosses. On 14th September, Famous Players obtained an injunction restraining Valentino from entering into any contract with any other producing company. In the resultant lawsuit, Valentino's attorney, Arthur Butler Graham, emphasized the actor's claim that Famous Players had not treated him well, had not provided him with a new dressing room and had placed him under a handicap by denying him the proper facilities for the fruition of his art. The attorneys for Famous Players-Lasky countered by playing up Valentino's temperamental nature and his hysterical demands. Again, Valentino had been ill-advised by Natacha and sympathetic friends. The judge quickly decided that the studio was right in its contention that it had not breached its contract, and that Valentino must refrain from rendering his services to anyone else during the contract period. On 8th December, the Appellate Division in New York affirmed the decision against him. Valentino was again told that he must complete his contract with Famous Players-Lasky or not appear publicly until 1st February, 1924.

The principle of law upon which this case was decided is well-established. The law practically compels an employee to render his services to an employer during the contract period, even though the employee might achieve great renown and distinction during this time. In fact, the more famous and sought-after the employee becomes, the more readily the injunction will be granted. The law can not directly compel the employee to work for that employer, but it accomplishes that object by preventing him from working for any other employer.

Valentino was left with two choices, either go back to work for Famous Players or be prepared to wait out the two-

year period of the injunction. While he was being stubbornly encouraged to defy the studio by Natacha Rambova, Valentino faced further financial anguish when his attorney brought a suit against him for \$48,000 for services and money advanced during the unsuccessful court battle.

Valentino was not alone in his troubles. 1922 was the worst year of the 'Terrible Twenties' for Hollywood's Olympians. Gold City, U.S.A., had become synonymous with scandal and perversion as well as dreams and glamor. The God-fearing movie patrons had no sooner unclenched their fists over Fatty Arbuckle's rape-murder of starlet Virginia Rappe when Famous Players-Lasky's leading director William Desmond Taylor was murdered. The tabloids went beserk when it was discovered that Taylor had been conducting simultaneous affairs with Mabel Normand, Mack Sennett's star and sometimes mistress, and Mary Miles Minter - as well as Minter's own mother. The enthusiastic press also implied that the torrid Taylor had been the cause of the recent suicide of Zelda Crosby, a screen-writer for Famous Players. When it was learned that the director kept a locked room filled with lingerie and panties - each one labeled with initials and date of conquest as a tangible reminder of sexual union - the tabloids spewed out all the lurid details in a veritable orgasmic frenzy.

Shortly after the Arbuckle bacchanal had called down the wrath of box office revenge on Hollywood, a committee of producers and distributors approached Postmaster General Will H. Hays to become, in the words of Joseph Schenck, 'a traffic cop and an umpire' for filmdom. The committee knew that a Federal Censorship bill had been introduced in the House of Representatives in October, and that unless they acted quickly, Federal control of films might become a reality. On 8th December, 1921, Hays left for Hollywood to make it 'an ideal industrial center'. According to Hays, every new industry had its problems, and those problems were best solved by the men directly involved in the industry and not by outsiders.

'The American public, of course, is the real censor for the

motion picture,' he told the newly formed Association of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors. 'The people of this country are against censorship fundamentally . . . but just as certainly, my friends, is this country against wrong doing, and the demand for censorship will fail when the reason for the demand is removed . . . There is one place and one place only where any evils in motion pictures can be eliminated . . . and that is at the point where, and the time when, the pictures are made, by the men who make them.'

President Harding, on 14th January, 1922, issued a statement to the press stating that, 'this is too great an opportunity for a helpful public service for him [Hays] to refuse. I shall be more than sorry to have him retire from the Cabinet where he has already made so fine a record, but we have agreed to look upon the situation from the broadest viewpoint and to seek the highest public good.'

Hays had less than a month to sponge up the Arbuckle mess and begin to put the house in order before the Taylor-Normand-Minter scandal hit the fans. The golden people of Hollywood, it was being discovered, had feet of clay, and movie patrons were at once shocked and titillated.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHILE in the midst of his court battles and in the depths of his despondency, Valentino had met Sid George Ullman, sales manager for the Mineralava Company, manufacturers of ladies' toiletries. Ullman, who later became Valentino's personal manager, had dreamed up the sales gimmick of having his company present the dancing Valentinos on a cross-country tour to ballyhoo the many advantages of their products for women. Valentino pointed out that he and Natasha were not yet legally united and that Famous Players had secured an injunction against him which prevented him from performing anywhere or extolling the merits of anything except one's duty to one's employer.

Ullman had not arranged an introduction to Valentino to have his plans stymied so easily. 'There's nothing in your original contract with Famous Players that prohibits you from appearing as a dancer,' he told the actor. 'Legally, there is no way that they can prevent you from making this tour.'

Valentino was impressed with the shrewdness of the man. And, of course, he was flattered by Ullman's insistence that the women would turn out in droves to get a glimpse of the Sheik. Although Rudy had begun to profess his weariness with the whole desert lover business, the sight of shrieking female fans would indeed be reassuring after the series of courtroom defeats.

Apparently Ullman was also impressed with Valentino, for, in his biography of the Great Lover, *Valentino as I Knew Him*, he records impressions of his first meeting with Rudy in glowing words. 'Naturally, I was familiar with his pictures and thought of him as a handsome boy. I had no

idea of his magnetism nor of the fine quality of his manhood. To say that I was enveloped by his personality with the first clasp of his sinewy hand and my first glance into his inscrutable eyes, is to state it mildly. I was literally engulfed, swept off my feet, which is unusual between two men. Had he been a beautiful woman and I a bachelor, it would not have been so surprising. I am not an emotional man. I have, in fact, often been referred to as cool-headed; but, in this instance, meeting a real he-man, I found myself moved by the most powerful personality I had ever encountered in man or woman.'

On 19th January, 1923, Valentino managed to get the injunction modified so that he was permitted to enter the vaudeville field and thereby was able to accept the Mineralava proposal. On 14th March, within days after word came that the divorce decree was final, Valentino and Natacha Rambova were married at Crown Point, Indiana. Ullman and Natacha's aunt, Mrs. Theresa Werner, served as witnesses.

The seventeen-week tour began at once. Natacha had, at first, expressed her disapproval of the promotional tour.

'I consider it quite debasing for a star of your caliber to parade around the country like a performing monkey,' she told Valentino. 'And why involve your wife in such a shoddy display?'

'But Natacha,' Valentino argued, 'you have received extensive training in the dance. Can't you look upon this as an opportunity for you to share with me the experience of a performance?'

'But, dear boy,' Natacha sighed, 'it's all so unnecessary.'

Valentino's lips became thin, firm lines. 'Natacha, I will not live off my wife's money. I said years ago that I would never live off any woman. Some reporters have called me a gigolo. This I never was. I was paid to dance with women, to chat pleasantly with them. No woman has ever bought me, and no woman shall ever provide for me. Think of the gay time the newspapers would have of it if Valentino lived off his wife's money.'

Natacha remained silent. For one of the few times in their marriage, she seemed actually to be listening to her husband.

'I'm over \$50,000 in debt,' Valentino went on. 'The Mineralava company will pay us \$7,000 a week, the highest sum that has ever been paid to a dance team. I must make this tour, Natacha. Think what it would do to me to sit idle until the injunction is lifted. I must perform – and I can't let the public forget me!'

'This was the only argument that Rudy ever won with Natacha,' Nita Naldi recalled. 'Money was important to Natacha. It was one argument that she could understand.'

The tour was enormously successful. Although Ullman later wrote about his being 'moved by the most powerful personality I had ever encountered in man or woman', he really had no clear conception at the time of just how powerful a hold Valentino had on the female public.

Their first stop had been Omaha, Nebraska, and they were welcomed by a raging blizzard. While the Valentinos practiced in the hotel's honeymoon suite (throughout the tour, they always engaged the suite designated for honeymooners to help maintain their lovebirds' image), Ullman spent a lot of time pacing the floor in his own room, wondering what kind of a report he would file with the big bosses. He need not have wasted all the time building up anxiety. Hundreds were turned away from the box office in spite of the blizzard. In Wichita, Kansas, schools were dismissed when Valentino arrived so that bundled-up schoolchildren might line the streets and cheer the visiting Hollywood royalty.

The format for the performances never varied. The Valentinos would dance a number of waltzes, then Rudy would give the 'commercial' for Mineralava beauty clay, attributing his wife's lovely complexion to its marvelous ingredients. This he would usually bungle and often mumble unintelligibly. Next would follow a selection of Oriental and Russian dances, including an original Oriental dance choreographed by Natacha. Another pause in the performance would find Valentino conducting a local beauty contest with

the standard promise of a movie contract in the offing for the right girl. At first Valentino himself had made the choice of the lucky beauty, but too many grumbles resulted from the Great Lover's predilection toward girls of a certain type. To prevent hard feelings in the audience, Ullman suggested that they rely upon applause to determine the 'Mineralava Girl'. The climax of each evening's performance was always the dancing of the Argentine tango as Valentino had performed it in *The Four Horsemen*. To increase the emotional charge of the audience's vicarious experience while observing the tango, it was announced that Rudy and Natacha wore the original costumes from the film.

Although no new Valentino films were being made while Rudy was under the injunction levied by the courts in favor of Famous Players, movies starring 'the greatest lover of them all' were as popular at the box office as ever. It was during Valentino's enforced abstinence from picture-making that several of the old films in which he had bit parts were resurrected with flamboyant titles and Valentino's name featured at the top of the credits.

One day while on tour, Ullman showed Valentino the results of a movie-goers' poll that listed the nation's favorite actors as Rudolph Valentino, Wallace Reid, Douglas Fairbanks, Constance Talmadge, Harold Lloyd, Mary Pickford, Norma Talmadge, Tom Mix and Charlie Chaplin. Ullman commented that it was wonderful that the public had not forgotten Valentino in spite of the injunction.

'They know that I fought for them,' Rudy told the promoter. 'The public realized how Famous Players was trying to cheat them with inferior pictures. I made a stand for the public and the public won't desert me.'

It wasn't long before Ullman noticed the Valentinos' obsession with spirit writing and their complete reliance on 'Meselope' to guide and direct them. 'They never made a move without consulting this power,' he later wrote. 'They were never surprised at the unexpected.'

Ullman was surprised, however, when Rudy approached him in San Antonio, Texas, and asked him to become his

personal manager. Valentino was well over \$50,000 in debt and had a court injunction against him that prevented his appearing in films until his differences were settled with Famous Players-Lasky. Shortly before the couple had begun rehearsals for the tour, Joseph M. Schenck had tried to get Valentino as a co-star for Norma Talmadge in his proposed film project of *Romeo and Juliet*. Famous Players had asked one million dollars for Valentino's release before his contract expired. It seemed as though one would risk a 'kiss of death' by associating with Valentino on a personal basis. It didn't take Ullman long to refuse the offer in spite of Valentino's 'magnetism' and 'powerful personality'.

Valentino merely smiled and mumbled something that sounded very much like, 'We'll see about that.' Ullman had begun to feel that he had assigned himself to seventeen weeks of chaperoning a very odd couple. He knew that they spent every spare moment at Natacha's planchette seeking advice from that 'old Egyptian', and he thought it downright weird that the two attended seances in every city they played where an obliging spiritualist would provide communication with the spooks.

According to the remembrances of those who knew the Valentinos well during this period, Natacha had become convinced that Valentino could become a great medium. Valentino had, of course, confessed that he considered himself mildly psychic. His wife had now become excited with the prospect of developing Rudy's latent extrasensory gifts and had entered into the project of tutoring him in the occult with great gusto.

It was during the Mineralava tour that Valentino met Kitab, a medium who had gained a reputation and a small following. Natacha refused to discuss the incident with anyone, but once 'Nitzie' managed to get the story out of Valentino.

Valentino had attended the seance alone. Kitab had been highly recommended as a producer of genuine materializations and authentic communications from the 'other side', but Natacha did not ascribe to his particular school of

mediumship. Kitab conducted his seances in a fashionable section of a large Midwestern city, and judging from the lavish decor of the spacious home, conducted a profitable traffic in relaying messages between spheres of existence.

Valentino was ushered into a heavily-draped, thickly-carpeted room by an attractive Negro girl dressed in a beautiful silk *sari*. The seance room seemed designed to shut out all sight and sound of the physical world. Kitab, in turban and flowing robes, sat by himself in the classic pose of concentrated thought, ostensibly readying himself for the psychic ordeal which lay ahead. Valentino was invited to join other pilgrims, who sat on rough wooden chairs which had been arranged in the traditional seance circle. He heard a sharp intake of breath from a middle-aged woman and knew that he had been recognized. Others turned heads to acknowledge his presence, but no one broke the silence that had been imposed on them by the will of Kitab. When at last the medium joined them in the circle, a slight widening of the spiritist's slitted eyes told Valentino that he, too, had recognized the Sheik in their midst.

'Join hands,' Kitab said in a voice that was at once sepulchral and peaceful, like sunlight breaking on a tombstone. He wedged himself between Valentino and a thin, esthetic man. The medium moved a warm, moist hand over one of Valentino's and turned to smile at him. Valentino returned the facial amenity, felt himself drawn to the dark-complexioned man with the gentle, knowing eyes.

Then the lights were lowered into a dusky twilight.

'I know,' Kitab said, his voice soothing and restful, 'that many of you have come here today burdened with cares and sorrow, seeking communication with loved ones who have passed beyond the veil. If the atmosphere of faith is proper, you shall receive healing balm for your troubled souls.'

The medium seemed to go into a light trance, softly chanting in what sounded to Valentino like Arabic. Kitab began to sweat profusely as his chant increased in tempo. His eyes closed themselves so tightly that it seemed as if he were trying to withdraw them into his skull.

After several moments, he gasped: 'Dear ones, the spirits tell me that they are having utmost difficulty in appearing to this circle. It seems as though too many of you are too encumbered with material thoughts. Too many of you are concerned with the temporal rather than the eternal.'

A woman began to weep. 'There need be no tears,' Kitab said. 'There are ways of prompting the spirits. Lotus Flower,' he called to the Negress who stood near the door, 'give us darkness.'

'Now,' Kitab said as the girl pressed a switch, 'please remove all items of clothing, watches, rings and personal possessions and place them under your chairs. You must make yourselves as devoid of material things as you were when you crouched in your mother's womb. Come, come,' he remonstrated at their hesitation. 'We are in complete darkness so you need not feel ill at ease. Nor need we fear thoughts of lust interfering with our reception of the spirits. What man cannot see, he cannot desire.'

Slowly the circle got to its feet, members bumping into one another in the darkness. There was the rustle of clothing and the thud of shoes. Within a few moments, the circle was once again seated.

Once more the eerie wailing of the medium became the only sound in the darkened room. Valentino felt himself being caught up in the chant as the medium's hand spasmodically opened and closed about his own. Suddenly Valentino felt Kitab's hand grow quite cool, as if his temperature had dropped several degrees.

'Ah,' Kitab sighed, 'they are here.'

A chill puckered the flesh of Valentino's naked body. Would he at last be able to contact his parents, his sister, Bice? Would they make themselves known to him?

'No!' Kitab shouted, his voice becoming an anguished sob. 'They are leaving!'

'Don't leave, Papa!' a woman screamed hysterically. 'I want you!'

There was a shuffling movement, a brief stab of light into the darkness, and Valentino realized that the distraught

woman had been ushered out of the room by the Negress.

'It seems,' Kitab sighed, when silence was again restored, that there are those among us who harbor such strong materialistic vibrations that the spirits cannot break through the barrier. Examine yourselves. If you harbor these thoughts, please leave so that others might attain contact.'

Valentino chewed at his lower lip. He had been so beset with money problems, perhaps it were he who was preventing contact. He rose to leave, but he felt Kitab's hand on his thigh, restraining him.

'Mr. Morgan,' the medium's voice accused, 'do you still worry about that business deal? Mrs. Hanson, do you still quarrel with your neighbor?'

Valentino was dimly aware of the spiritist's intoning, of the door rapidly opening and closing at certain intervals. From somewhere a phonograph had filled the room with a weird, ethereal music that seemed to lull the brain. He felt the hand on his thigh begin to knead his flesh in a most pleasurable way. He had a strange sensation of gently floating through the air. He shook his head; it was the darkness, the music, the heady scent that had suddenly permeated the room, the rhythmic contractions of the hand as it moved about his body. His heart began to thud in his chest as an exquisite spasm of commingled pain and pleasure speared his body. He was floating higher and higher. He would surely touch the ceiling.

Then sudden light seared his eyes and he squeezed his eyelids tightly to avoid the hurt. From faraway he heard the shrill giggle of a woman and the harsh cursing of an angry man. He looked up from the floor to stare into the bemused face of the Negress, who stood laughing down at them.

About ten weeks after Valentino's initial proposal, Ullman told him that he had changed his mind and that he had decided to become his manager.

Valentino grinned broadly. 'Meselope is never wrong. He told us long ago that we would make this trip, that we would

take on a new business manager and that we would change our attorney.'

It was J. D. Williams rather than Meselope who made Ullman reconsider Valentino's offer. The independent producer had approached the actor earlier and had made clear his desire to get Rudy's name on a contract. The fact that another studio (the newly formed Ritz-Carlton) would concede to his demands that he choose his own pictures reinforced Valentino's contention that he had chosen the proper course of action and made the correct stand in defying Famous Players. In his mind, Ritz-Carlton had been formed just for him, with the express purpose of allowing him to select the vehicles that would please the critics, himself – and most of all, Natacha. With his future now being ordered in precisely the manner he desired, Valentino felt sufficiently buoyed up to swallow enough crow and fulfill the remainder of his contractual commitment with Famous Players.

On 18th July, J. D. Williams announced Valentino as the first star of Ritz-Carlton Pictures, adding that the arrangement became effective when the actor's contract with Famous Players expired.

Famous Players proved amenable to opening negotiations with Valentino and his new manager. They again repeated their offer of releasing Valentino at once for a million dollars. Ullman suggested that the studio begin to look for proper vehicles in which Rudy might work out the terms of his contract. Williams was in no position to rush the issue as he was still gathering working capital for Ritz-Carlton and had no desire of going in hock before the studio produced its first picture. On 8th December a settlement was reached between Valentino and Famous Players. Rudy would make two films for the studio during the following year. Both would be elaborate costume pieces and both would be directed by Sydney Olcott.

J. D. Williams was quick to begin blowing the ballyhoo bugle and issued the following statement to the press: 'The outstanding event of importance to the exhibitors of the

United States and Canada, especially, and to the whole world besides, is the final adjustment of all difficulties and differences which have kept Rudolph Valentino from the screen. No happening of the year 1923 is of more practical importance, because this great star's drawing power will be exerted on behalf of the box offices that need this added revenue.'

Valentino felt that he had won a complete victory over the Famous Players-Lasky studio. His salary was to be \$7,500 a week, and he would have complete authority concerning choice of the two scripts. The pictures would be filmed at the Famous Players' Astoria lot on Long Island, and the best photographic techniques were to be employed in the production of his films.

Shooting on the first of the pictures, *Monsieur Beaucaire*, would not begin until the following fall, so the Valentinos chose to celebrate their triumph by taking a belated honeymoon trip to visit Natacha's parents in France at their Chateau in Juan les Pins, overlooking the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

VALENTINO'S correspondence with friends while he and Natacha were in Europe seemed to indicate that he considered the time they spent leisurely touring the capitals of the Continent as a sojourn in Paradise. He sent a photograph to several friends which had captured the likeness of Valentino in a beard, romping with a mountain goat. 'I'm the one without the horns,' he had gaily scribbled on the back of each picture. If Rudy's acclamations of joy were sincere, then the European idyl would prove to be his last sustained period of pleasure on earth.

Back in New York in November, the Valentinos selected an expensive suite at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and Natacha began prompting her husband concerning his approach to *Monsieur Beaucaire*. The screenplay had been adapted from Booth Tarkington's popular romance of the French court, and Valentino would have Bebe Daniels as a co-star. Unfortunately, Natacha would not content herself with the mere controlling of her husband's career. Production had scarcely begun and already Natacha had nosed into nearly everyone's business. She insisted on applying her husband's make-up and on designing his costumes. Cameramen dreaded her scathing lectures on how they had failed to capture Valentino at his best. Each day after shooting, Natacha would bring out her critique of the day's performances and berate everyone from Bebe Daniels to bit player who had not done his part to her criteria. Valentino, of course, always received the brunt of her critical attack and always maintained an attitude of respectful subservience to her opinions.

Throughout the production, Natacha constantly accused

director Sydney Olcott of deliberately slowing the pace to put Valentino in a bad light.

One day Natacha was remonstrating with Olcott between takes in a particularly virulent and obnoxious manner. 'Speed it up, Olcott,' Natacha told him. 'Speed it up. Are you trying to make Valentino look bad?'

Olcott fixed her with a steady eye and, reportedly, said: 'I should never do that, Madame Valentino, as that seems to be your job.'

Monsieur Beaucaire managed to finish shooting on schedule and opened to an enthusiastic reception at the box office and to favorable notices from the critics. Natacha may have been correct in her criticism that the film was a bit slow-moving, but *Monsieur Beaucaire* remains one of Valentino's best pictures and certainly the most exquisitely produced movie that he ever made.

Famous Players moved Valentino immediately into production on *A Sainted Devil*, a South American adventure story adapted from Rex Beach's novel *Rope's End*. Joseph Henaberry replaced the Natacha-weary Olcott as director. 'I cannot work well when an actor takes direction from his wife instead of me,' Olcott told the studio executives when he asked to be relieved from his commitment on the film.

Natacha did not mourn the passing of Olcott from his directorial position. And she soon wished that Jetta Goudal would begin to get the message that she was not needed as Valentino's leading lady. Something very strange had come over Rudy. For the first time since he had come to Hollywood, he had begun to conduct what seemed to be an on-set flirtation.

'It was almost as if he wanted to be the center of gossip,' Nita Naldi once remarked. 'He had begun to get a lot of crank mail accusing him of being a queer and a pansy after he had appeared in all those lacy costumes in *Monsieur Beaucaire*. Natacha told me that he had even got some obscene telephone calls until they instructed the switchboard operators to insist upon an identification before they put a call through to their suite. Anyway, it was as if Rudy was trying

to prove he was a real he-man by carrying on a mild affair with his leading lady.'

Natacha had little patience with Valentino's sudden decision to enact the role of the on-set Lothario. 'What will you do,' she demanded of him one day in front of several extras, 'if she decides to take you up on all your little whisperings?'

Valentino had just lighted a cigarette. He took a deep drag, removed the cigarette from its holder, ground it out beneath a toe and stalked sullenly from the set. *What would he do?* Natacha believed him incapable of action with a woman. He would show her how wrong she was.

It had not been difficult to get her telephone number. Adele was very popular among the assistant directors and junior executives on the lots. She was a beautiful whore who took pride in her work.

But now, as Valentino lay naked beside her, he could only think about all the other men who had had her.

'You,' Adele sighed. 'Rudolph Valentino! I never dreamed that you would ever come to see me. I mean with all the women you must have. Besides your wife, I mean. You know, I'm not going to accept another date all week, just so I can lie and dream about this.'

Her body moved next to his, and he put his arms around her, feeling the smoothness of her back. His blood quickened. Adele would make him feel truly a man. Her lips pressed against his – but he did not complete the kiss. He recalled the hymns he had heard sung to Adele's amatory prowess, and he was suddenly repulsed by the visions that flooded his mind.

She had noticed his lack of response. 'Is something wrong?' she asked, her eyes worried. Had she done something to offend the Sheik?

'Nothing,' Valentino said. He took her in his arms, her complete subservience prompting him to a show of passion.

She sighed, her imagination filled with visions of white stallions and desert tents. 'Don't be gentle.'

He opened his mouth and his tongue slid against her own. Her hand moved downward to stroke him.

'Nothing?' she frowned, glancing at his eyes.

'Let us not rush it,' he said. 'I want to savor the magnificence of your body.'

So impressed was she with the physical presence of the Great Lover in her boudoir that his feeble delaying tactics sent her into renewed rapture. But damn! Where was his virility? He propped himself up on an elbow, put a hand under one of Adele's dark-ringed breasts. Why didn't it come now? His body trembled for this woman. How desperately he wanted to use her softness and her nakedness. She moved her breasts against his chest. Again, her fingers traced lightly down over his stomach and still lower.

'What's wrong?' she asked. 'Don't you want to make love to me?'

Valentino felt rising blood burn his cheeks. He must retain his command. 'Of course I do, Adele.'

'It's because I'm a whore, isn't it?'

'All women are to be loved,' Valentino said, hoping the sentiment would pacify her.

'Maybe you want me to do things to you, first?'

'No,' he told her, his hands moving across her hips.

Adele smiled. 'I bet it's because you've been getting too much, right?'

He grinned, thankful that she had supplied him with an honorable 'excuse' for his lack of response to her womanhood.

'Sure,' Adele said with an exaggerated wink. 'All those pretty starlets around you all day, and your wife, and God knows how many other women. Well, don't you worry. You just let me take care of things.'

He stared at the prostitute's lovely body as she pushed back the silken sheets of her bed and bent over him. It wasn't long before his fingers wanted to tear at her in passion; he knew the time had come for him to assume mastery and show her that he was equal to her challenge. But this he did

not dare attempt. It was enough to let her guide him into the moment of fulfillment.

Then the cheapness of the tableau struck him with full force. Where was love? What did he really feel for this woman – a complete stranger? This most intimate act of personal involvement was made dirty by lack of love. Slowly he felt all his newly-aroused passion seeping away. He knew, with an inner pain of desperation, that he was failing her.

Endless minutes later she finally sank to the bed and lay beside him, her eyes closed. 'That was wonderful, Rudy,' she breathed.

He had turned his face from her. He knew that she lied.

It didn't take long for the story of Valentino's visit to Adele's apartment to become popular studio gossip. The woman had convinced herself that any lack of response on Valentino's part was due to some ineptness in her own performance, so she whispered about a glorious session of love-making with the Sheik that had given her unequalled ecstasy. Maybe he had done something to build up his image among the starlets, but he had only added another hurt to his own self-respect. And he had all but driven Natacha to violence.

'You can't fire Jetta for such a flimsy reason,' Valentino was overheard saying to Natacha on the set during a heated argument.

'I simply do not want her around,' Natacha said, 'so she must go!'

Valentino became so angry that he struck his cigarette holder against a camera with such force that the ebony mouthpiece shattered.

As usual, his show of temper had little effect on his shrewish wife. The next day, S. George Ullman announced that Miss Goudal would be leaving the cast because she had taken too long in selecting her costumes and had refused to submit to discipline. Nita Naldi, Ullman said, would replace Miss Goudal as Valentino's leading lady.

'I felt more sorry for Rudy during the filming of *A Sainted*

Devil than I ever had before,' 'Nitzie' recalled. 'He acted so foolish — like a high school boy trying to prove himself in front of the girls. I had never seen him act so ridiculous. I knew that the newspapers were starting to pick on him, and there had been a lot of talk about his being a fairy. Once Rudy heard a stagehand refer to him as "the Great Lubber", and Rudy wanted to fight him on the spot. It was all so sad.'

Natacha offered no sympathy to Valentino in his fight with certain elements of the press and certainly offered no encouragement in his efforts to assert his masculinity. She totally ignored the gossip that indicated that the Great Lover was at last beginning to sow a few wild oats and answered any such allegations with scornful laughter. If, perhaps, she had shown more affection toward Valentino in public and upon the set, gossip that the Great Lover could only love on the screen might not have been so prevalent.

'It was always inexplicable to me,' Ullman wrote later in *Valentino as I Knew Him*, 'why Natacha Rambova felt the charm of her husband's personality so little . . . Natacha was conspicuously self-centered; in my opinion, she was congenitally unable to feel much enthusiasm for any individuality but herself. At first, she appeared fond of her husband; soon she became a great deal more interested in the making of his motion pictures, in being the power-behind-the-throne of the unparalleled Valentino, than being a wife to Rudy.'

Natacha had begun her power play. It became obvious to the most casual observer that she cared little for her husband. To her, Rudolph Valentino was the means by which she might achieve her own ends of writing, producing and directing her own motion pictures. It was to the endless amazement of everyone from extra to studio executive that Valentino continued to throw his influence on Natacha's side in everything that she did. It seemed to matter little to Rudy whether his wife was scolding a bit player or haranguing a studio boss, he was always there to agree with her and see that her demands were met.

'She treated him like a "thing",' a friend recalled. 'Rudy would help her into chairs, hold doors open for her and battle studio executives for her, but never once did I ever hear Natacha say, "thank you".'

Rumors of how henpecked the Sheik was by his 'missus' only served to fortify the American male's contention that the bold lover of the silent screen was a 'sissy boy'. Rudy was not so naive that he did not realize how Natacha was using him. He expressed his disillusionment with her version of spiritual love to close friends on numerous occasions. The great mystery, however, remains: Why did he endure it?

Shortly after Valentino had completed *Monsieur Beaucaire* Maureen Englin, the well-known 'Frenchy' from *Moulin Rouge*, was en route to New York from St. Louis, where she had just finished a vaudeville engagement.

'As the porter placed my baggage in a lower berth on the train, a door opened in the drawing room at the end of the car and there he stood - Valentino in his elaborate dressing gown,' Miss Englin remembers. 'I waited to see if he would recognize me.'

'I know you!' he said, pointing his long cigarette holder in my direction. 'You're "Frenchy" from the *Moulin Rouge*!'

'I'll never forget those few hours I spent with him. We adjourned to his private compartment and talked and laughed about the old days on Broadway. I'll always remember how excited he was about a script he had with him - a story in which he was to play the part of an American Indian chief.

'After we'd eaten a few chicken sandwiches and finished a bottle of wine that he'd brought with him, he began to make love to me.

'"Wow!" I gasped. "No one will ever believe it!"

'"What do you mean?" he frowned.

'"That the Great Lover of the screen is making love to me!"

'Rudy laughed: "But you remember me when I was a bus-boy at *Giolitto's*."

'"What would Natacha think about this?" I asked him.

‘“I’m afraid Natacha wouldn’t really care,” he told me. “She is much more interested in my career than she is in me.”’

Although Rudy was able to relax in a brief necking bout with an old friend, he was unable to completely escape the specter of his loveless marriage of convenience.

To Chaw Mank, with whom he had been corresponding since his dancing tour for Mineralava, Valentino wrote a letter of advice which contained a thinly-veiled description of his own wife. ‘Women who cannot be tender are women to avoid. They may be kind to you in the flush of success or while they care about you, but once the emotional afflatus has died down, they will turn snarling and requite you, for tenderness is lacking. The fire is built on no sheltering hearth of protectiveness.’

Certain friends of Valentino believe that Natacha threatened Rudy with a kind of sexual blackmail in order to keep him from obtaining a divorce. They contend that Natacha threatened to expose the nature of their marriage and thereby destroy Valentino’s reputation as the Great Lover. Later, they allege, Natacha used the same threat to free herself when she sought a severing of the matrimonial bonds with a Paris divorce.

Whether held to her by blackmail or some incredible sort of animal magnetism, Valentino continued to indulge Natacha’s penchant for playing boss. When Rudy’s obligation at Famous Players had been completed and he prepared to report at Ritz-Carlton studio, Natacha informed J. D. Williams that she would write the book for Valentino’s first starring vehicle for the new studio. None could know better than she the proper film which would utilize all of Valentino’s talents. The story was *The Scarlet Power*, which she later titled *The Hooded Falcon*, and had been written under her pseudonym of Justice Layne. She had already instructed Rudy to contact his friend, June Mathis, and use his influence on her to write the scenario.

‘I’m certain that a story of Spain during the time of the Moors would indeed be a fascinating film, Mrs. Valentino,’

J. D. Williams admitted one afternoon when Natacha had cornered him in his office and presented him with an itemized production sheet. 'But your production estimate indicates a venture of \$850,000 to one million dollars. I feel I must advise you that the backers of Ritz-Carlton have agreed to limit each production to a minimum of \$500,000.'

'Nonsense,' Natacha said coldly. 'How can they hope to produce a film worthy of Valentino for that amount?'

'Perhaps Madame doesn't quite understand the many ramifications of film production,' Williams said. 'Perhaps it would be best to leave such matters to us men.'

Williams' words were like drops of gasoline sprinkled on a smoldering bonfire. Natacha erupted in such a volcanic fury that the man's office was left singed with the fire of her temper and littered with the ashes of her profanity. She returned a few minutes later with Rudy in tow. Like a well-trained performing monkey, Valentino added one of his famous temper tantrums to the chaos that his wife had already begun to compose in a maddening symphony of discord. At last the studio boss gave in, and with his approval and heartfelt plea that they attempt to hold the expenses down, the Valentinos sailed for Spain to purchase authentic costumes and props.

Their expedition was more like the Huns sacking the art treasures of ancient Rome than an actor and 'writer' selecting necessary properties for their next film. Natacha selected \$10,000 worth of shawls, \$10,000 in ivories and \$20,000 for Moorish costumes, period jewelry and miscellaneous items. Madame Valentino reveled in the glory of her position as manipulator of important men. Ritz-Carlton may have been formed essentially to capitalize on the fame of Rudolph Valentino, but she intended to capitalize on both her husband and the studio. With Rudy to support her on cue, she would be director as well as writer of his next film. Then the world would really be able to see what Valentino could do. For the first time, a firm and unyielding hand would be holding the reins and cracking the whip.

When the Valentinos returned from Europe, Natacha decreed that they should host a party with a guest list that would include all the most glittering stars of Hollywood. Friends of Rudy's, such as Adela Rogers St. Johns, felt that Natacha had organized the party for the sole purpose of leading Valentino about by a ring in his nose for all the eyes of Hollywood to see. It was as if the party would serve as a formal announcement of her complete mastery over the Great Lover.

The rooms of the Ambassador Hotel were strewn with orchids and decorated in a manner that betrayed Natacha's fascination with things Oriental. Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, Bebe Daniels, the Tom Mixes, the new flapper sensation, Coleen Moore, the Talmadge sisters, Richard Barthelmess, Irving Thalberg, the boy genius of Metro; John Barrymore, who had just deserted the Broadway theater for the movies, John Gilbert, Mae Murray, Dorothy Gish, the Tom Meighans, Harold Lloyd, Gloria Swanson, Alma Rubens, the Milton Sills, Barbara La Marr, Marion Davies - everybody who was anybody in filmdom was there. Although the gowns that adorned some of the loveliest bodies in America would have rivaled any Paris opening, Madame Valentino, in a jeweled turban, clanking bracelets and an Oriental gown of luxurious silk, reduced the glittering galaxy of assembled stars to her court of honor as she made her regal way through the suite. Behind her at a respectful distance trailed the subservient Rudolph Valentino, smiling awkwardly, trying desperately to appear friendly and natural.

Although she had domesticated Valentino to her taste Natacha was suddenly forced to endure a gadfly attack from an unexpected quarter. Jean Acker had been appearing on the B. F. Keith circuit and had been billing herself as Mrs. Rudolph Valentino.

'I am the only Mrs. Valentino,' Natacha screamed at her lawyer as she shoved a Keith program across his desk. 'Listen to this: "Lewis and Gorden presents the Sheik's romantic wife (Jean Acker), Mrs. Rudolph Valentino, in a new one-

act comedy playlet by Edgar Allen Woolf entitled 'A Regular Girl'."'

'She was his wife,' her attorney counseled her. 'There's not a thing you can do about it.'

'File suit anyway,' Natacha snapped. 'At least I can make things hot for her.'

Things did not get 'hot' enough to prevent Jean Acker from starring in an Amalgamated-SR production, *The Woman in Chains*, or from being billed as 'Mrs. Rudolph Valentino'.

It appears that the only fly that was ever able to make any appreciable tracks in Natacha's ointment was 'poor little Jean Acker'.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE Valentinos had returned to New York eager to begin production on *The Hooded Falcon*. For Natacha, the film would not only have the benefit of her criticism but would also bear her indelible imprint as its author. For Valentino, *The Hooded Falcon* at last offered him a role that met with full approval on the part of his shrewish wife. They were understandably disappointed when J. D. Williams informed them that work on the picture would have to be temporarily delayed to allow the studio time to move to Hollywood. No eastern studio, he explained, had the necessary space to film an epic of such lavish proportions. The Valentinos could not argue with Williams on this point. They certainly wanted the movie to be filmed on the proper scale. Although quite vocal in her disgust at Williams' inability to have foreseen such an eventuality in the first place, even Natacha was somewhat acquiescent during the move back to their Whitley Heights home.

It was when they arrived in Hollywood that the combined Valentino tempers turned the air of Williams' office heavy with sulfur. June Mathis had not yet finished a scenario from Natacha's story, and Williams was insistent that Valentino get into immediate production on a script that was completed. Ritz-Carlton wanted Rudy to star in a film adaptation of *Cobra*, a play which had starred Judith Anderson and Louis Calhern on Broadway.

'But what of my script?' Natacha demanded.

Williams raised a placating palm. 'We'll film it just as soon as Rudy finishes *Cobra*, and June Mathis finishes the script. You can't expect the company to wait until a writer is ready with a scenario. The backers have already had a long wait

while Rudy worked out his contract with Famous Players. They're getting itchy, and you can't blame them.'

'But *The Hooded Falcon* will be next?' Natacha asked, insisting upon reassurance.

'Of course,' Williams sighed wearily. He was beginning to realize why studio executives at Famous Players had grinned knowingly when Valentino had signed with Ritz-Carlton. 'You're not only gaining a star,' they had told him, 'but you're also getting a director, writer, cameraman, critic and costume designer.'

'I don't care for the idea of filming *Cobra*,' Valentino objected from the leather chair in which he had slumped. The sound of his voice startled Williams; it was so seldom that Rudy spoke during these impromptu conferences. Usually Natacha served as 'mouthpiece', with Valentino becoming animated only when he felt that his wife needed his influence to gain a victory.

'The play was big on Broadway,' Williams told him.

'But the male lead is not a big one,' Rudy pouted. 'The female has the better part.'

'Don't worry about that,' Natacha said firmly. 'We'll rework the script and build up your part. We'll get "Nitzie" for your co-star. You know how you like to work with "Nitzie".'

Williams frowned. He had not envisioned Nita Naldi in *Cobra* at all. He reached for a fresh cigar. There was little he could do but sit back and watch Madame Dictator at work. Too many people had too much invested in Valentino to have the Great Lover throw one of his temperamental fits and walk off the lot.

'I do not care for the vehicle,' Rudy continued to object. His eyes had become wide, as they did on-screen when a villain was threatening virtue.

'You'll do it,' Natacha said coldly. 'We'll be certain that there's a part in the film so that you can take off your shirt and show your muscles.'

Williams did have the script reworked and the male lead expanded for purposes of better displaying Ritz-Carlton's

recently acquired star. This he had intended to do from the time he had purchased film rights to the play. He had not intended, however, to have an 'assistant director' offer emphatic suggestions on every single camera angle, every bit of stage direction and even on the manner in which he gave his directions. There seemed to be no production point so minor that it was not eligible for debate.

'It got so bad,' Williams is said to have remarked to a friend, 'that I felt that the only place I could be alone was the bathroom. And sometimes even there I was afraid that Madame Valentino would barge in and begin telling me that I was doing something wrong.'

Valentino limped through his part as if it were a death march. The only thing he liked about the film was that Jack Dempsey was hired as a technical advisor for his fight sequences and sparred with him on the set daily. A press agent quoted Dempsey as saying that if Valentino ever quit acting and took up boxing, the prizefighters would be in for a rough time of it. Rudy gloried in the quote and could not conceal his pleasure with Dempsey's generous appraisal of his pugilistic prowess. 'How can they say I'm a sissy now?' he asked friends. 'How many men in America would dare get into the ring with Jack Dempsey?'

Few cameramen or grips on the set were very much impressed with Rudy as they watched him go through his workouts with the heavyweight champ. It was difficult to respect a man who was boastful of his courage in the ring, but who could not face up to his wife in the boudoir. Besides, they knew that Dempsey was only playing with Valentino. Their daily bouts were just so much make-believe – just like the projected sex fantasies they saw acted out in front of the cameras every day. If Rudy really had guts, why the hell didn't he stand up to his wife, just once? Then maybe they could overlook all the other stories they had heard about him and respect him at least a little bit.

When *Cobra* was released, the fans, for the first time, were unenthusiastic. Most of the critics had shown mercy on *A*

Sainted Devil, but nearly all of the critical thumbs were turned down for Valentino's most recent effort.

Williams and S. George Ullman had each offered Valentino the same diagnosis by way of an after-production analysis.

'Even your fans know how Natacha runs your life,' Ullman told Rudy. 'They like to think that you're as much a man – and a lover – off the screen as you are on. The newspaper reporters have been leaking out too many stories about how Natacha bosses you around and the way you accept everything she tells you like a henpecked husband.'

Valentino's vesuvian temper erupted, and for the first time, he and Ullman quarreled.

'You and Williams would like to blame Natacha for your own stupid mistakes, wouldn't you?' he stormed. 'If you had listened to more of her suggestions, the picture would have been a great success.'

'Be reasonable, Rudy,' Ullman begged.

'That's the trouble,' Valentino snapped. 'I am *too* reasonable and you try to take advantage of me. Natacha and I are leaving for Palm Springs at once. Only if a matter of the utmost urgency arises are we to be disturbed. Is that quite clear?'

On-screen, Rudolph Valentino was the impetuous lover of whom every woman dreams, the man clothed in the insubstantial garments of feminine fancy. He walked through a woman's imaginings as the perfect answer to longings which she could neither define nor voice. Valentino could well be envisioned as the hero of every romance since Adam and Eve. He could be imagined as Leander, as Abelard, as one of the Knights of the Round Table. In brief tunic or in shining armor, in plumed helmet or powdered wig – all the romantic accouterments suited him admirably.

In order to effect a transmigration of roles from screen to real life, studio press agents carefully planted articles, ostensibly written by Valentino himself, detailing his hardy life or

extolling the virtues of clean living and loving. Most of these articles were written in a heavily masculine style, with wry humor and extreme modesty.

Pictures of Valentino in varying stages of undress had a twofold purpose: to titillate the females and to impress the menfolk with Rudy's magnificent muscles. Rudy, himself, arranged for a picture-taking session that flooded the newspapers and fan magazines with photos of the Great Lover working out with a large dumbbell.

A caption beneath an Underwood and Underwood photo of Rudy in black trunks, sparring with 'Society' Kid Hogan, reads: 'If you'll notice Rudolph Valentino's muscles – and who could help it? – you'll understand why Rudy is willing to fight ten rounds with any critic who pans him unfairly.'

For a fan magazine, Valentino's ghost writers informed readers just how tough one had to be to be a movie star: 'Having arrived at the position of stardom, I feel a desire to remain there. This imposes upon me a regimen of living far more rigorous, I believe, than is imposed on the average successful businessman.

'While working on a picture I arise at five o'clock in the morning and am at my studio riding ring by six. I ride horseback for an hour under the tutelage of Mario Carillo, a former captain of Italian cavalry, who is putting me through the same course as though I were in training to become an army officer.

'At seven, I go to the dressing room and am rubbed down by my trainer. Then I don my costume and make-up and am ready for work at eight-thirty.

'Acting before the camera, and attention to the hundreds of details which attend picture-making, take up my day. I seldom leave the studio before seven at night. You will believe me when I say that I am in bed at nine. On the evening before a recent holiday, I planned to celebrate by going to the theater. After dinner I was so sleepy that I decided to forego even that mild dissipation.'

A volume of love poetry, supposedly written by Rudy and Natacha, was gobbled up by his female fans. Two posthum-

ous books also sold well to those who sought a remembrance of Rudy. One of the books was ghostwritten in Valentino's he-man image and was entitled *How to Keep Fit*. The other repository of the Master's immortal words took the form of a second volume of love poems. 'A Baby's Skin' was, according to Valentino, written under the spiritual guidance of Walt Whitman.

Texture of a butterfly's wing
Colored like a dawned rose,
Whose perfume is the breath of God.
Such is the web wherein is held
The treasure of the treasure chest,
The priceless gift – the Child of Love.

'You' achieved great popularity among Valentino's female admirers. Reprinted even today in the mimeographed bulletins of Valentino memorial clubs, the poem seems to offer the votary the blessed illusion that the God of Love speaks directly to her.

You are the History of Love and
its justification.
The Symbol of Devotion.
The Blessedness of Womanhood.
The Incentive of Chivalry.
The Reality of Ideals.
The Verity of Joy.
Idolatry's Defense.
The Proof of Goodness.
The Power of Gentleness.
Beauty's Acknowledgment.
Vanity's Excuse.
The Promise of Truth.
The Melody of Life.
The Caress of Romance.
The Dream of Desire.
The Sympathy of Understanding.

My Heart's Home.
The Proof of Faith.
Sanctuary of my Soul.
My Belief in Heaven.
Eternity of All Happiness.
My Prayers.

You.

Valentino was always sobered by the thought of his own mortality. Again, the influence of Whitman was accredited to 'Dust to Dust'.

I take a bone – I gaze at it in wonder – You, O bit of strength that was. In you today I see the whited sepulcher of nothingness – but you were the shaft that held together the vehicle of Man until God called and the Soul answered.

S. George Ullman could always be counted on to advance the private image of Valentino as being every bit as exciting and dynamic as his performances on the screen. Ullman had learned to roll with the punches when charged that his he-man was less than virile in real life, but he always became highly incensed when certain elements of the press implied that Valentino was dull-witted. To combat this charge, Ullman often went to extremes to establish Valentino as a good-natured mental wizard. Once, when describing the actor's personal library of 'beautiful specimens of the book-binder's craft', he listed Valentino's books as being in Latin, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Old English, Russian and Greek and claimed that the holder of a degree in agriculture was familiar with the contents of all of them.

At about this time, Chaw Mank had begun molding the Valentino image in earnest. Honorary presidents of Mank's Friendship Club were Milton Sills, Philo McCullough, Anna Q. Nilsson and Warner Baxter. 'Rudy constantly worried about his public image,' Mank says. 'He was very upset, in 1925, by the way things were going for him in his marriage

and by the way the press had begun to treat him. He complained bitterly that he was being misunderstood by friends and enemies alike. He concluded one of his letters by writing: 'One of the saddest and truest cries in all the world is the cry of the Arab when he says, "Only God and I know what is in my heart!"'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHILE Rudy and Natacha were sulking in Palm Springs, J. D. Williams served notice that he was breaking the contract that his studio had with Valentino. There would be no *Hooded Falcon* filmed at Ritz-Carlton. What could have prospered as a unique partnership between actor and studio had been surely and methodically destroyed by the actor's wife.

Natacha's first reaction to the news was to seek a scapegoat. She reached quickly for the phone and delivered a scathing verbal attack on the innocent ears of June Mathis. It was her fault, Natacha told the scenarist, that the Ritz-Carlton contract had been broken. If she had had the script ready, *The Hooded Falcon* would have been filmed and all would have been well.

It was not enough to attack June Mathis. S. George Ullman would have to receive castigation for his failure to control Williams and the Ritz-Carlton executives. Natacha left Palm Springs alone. She had girded herself for battle and Valentino would only be in the way.

Ullman had mentally prepared himself for the onslaught. When Natacha burst into his office, he was able to remain calm and weather her verbal abuse without losing his own temper. The actor's manager let Natacha fulminate for nearly an hour about his incompetence and ineptitude in allowing Williams to get the better of him in a business deal. When the turbaned termagant at last paused for breath, Ullman used his secret weapon on her.

'I've arranged an excellent deal for Rudy with United Artists,' Ullman said softly. 'I have the contract in my desk.'

Natacha appeared stunned. Rudy's signing with United Artists would put him in a kind of partnership with the original 'Big Four' who had founded U-A – Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin and D. W. Griffith.

'You know that Joe Schenck has been after Rudy since January of 1923, just before you went on your dancing tour for Mineralava,' Ullman reminded her. 'He wanted Rudy for *Romeo and Juliet* then, remember?'

'Yes,' Natacha agreed. 'I remember. Is it a good contract?'

Ullman leaned back in his desk chair. 'It is quite the best contract that Rudy has ever had.'

'Well,' Natacha said, managing a feeble smile. 'That's wonderful. When does he begin work?'

'Right away,' Ullman told her. 'There is, however, one clause which you may not appreciate.'

Natacha's eyes narrowed angrily, and she seemed almost pleased that she would have another opportunity to fan her fury into holocaustic proportions. 'What is it?' she demanded. 'I suppose they want him to agree to appear in just any trash that they please and won't allow him the right of script approval!'

'It's nothing like that,' Ullman said, keeping his voice even. 'Schenck has included a clause which insists that Mrs. Valentino will have absolutely no authority whatsoever in any department in any of Valentino's productions. That means you cannot advise make-up men, cameramen or even the lowliest grip – to say nothing of getting into the director's hair. In fact, Schenck would rather that you not even enter the studio gates.'

Natacha's face became livid with indignation. 'Valentino will never sign such a contract,' she said. 'He needs me with him on the set. Without my counsel, he flops around like a foolish fish out of water. He wants me at his side through every step of film production.'

'Be reasonable, Natacha,' Ullman pleaded. 'It is to Rudy's advantage to sign this contract. If you really have his best interest at heart, you'll agree to fade into the background in his career from now on.'

'Valentino will never sign,' Natacha repeated. 'He needs me.'

After much deliberation, however, Valentino did sign the contract with United Artists. Ullman was at once relieved and elated, and Schenck announced that Valentino's first project would be *The Eagle*, a film adaptation of Pushkin's *Dubrovsky*. Hans Kraly had written the scenario, and Clarence Brown would be the director. His co-star would be Vilma Banky, the beautiful blonde whom Sam Goldwyn had discovered in Budapest.

When Valentino told Natacha that he had signed with United Artists, he expected a withering denunciation of his business acumen and a reproachful lecture on how he cared not at all for her sensitivities and sought only to embarrass her. He was surprised to find that Natacha had seemingly steeled herself to the inevitable.

'It is time that I begin to advance my own career,' she told Valentino. 'I have wasted enough precious months struggling with yours. I plan to begin work on a film of my own at once.'

'Then you aren't upset about the - ah - clause in my contract?' Rudy asked.

'Of course not,' Natacha scowled. 'Why should I care? They're all too stupid to take advantage of my advice, anyway. While you're floundering about in your cheap commercialism, I'll be achieving exciting new techniques of cinema artistry in my own production. Nazimova will be certain to advise me, and Nitzie will surely agree to star. If not, I'll write, produce, direct and star in it myself!'

Valentino seemed pleased that Natacha had found a project which would so completely occupy her time. His delight began to turn into desperation, however, when he learned that Natacha intended that he finance her production. He tried to plead with her and convince her that his finances could hardly stand the drain of an independent movie venture. Surely, Rudy suggested, she might find additional backers for her film. What about her own stepfather?

It is doubtful that Richard Hudnut would have been

interested in financing a film which satirized the cosmetic industry and poked fun at the agonies of beauty parlors, even if his stepdaughter had approached him for financial support. Natacha's film, *What Price Beauty?*, seemed some bizarre expression of 'dishonor thy father and thy mother' and a peculiar attack on the vanity of one's own sex. The picture, much too avant-garde in its satire for the twenties, failed to attract either popular or critical attention on its release. Today Hollywood historians regard the film's only merit to be an early appearance of Myrna Loy in the cast.

Valentino, weary of quarreling with Natacha about the film, agreed to finance *What Price Beauty?* when she assured him that the project would not take more than \$30,000 to film. Nita Naldi consented to be the picture's star, and although she suffered professional embarrassment upon the movie's release, she was not hit by a bill for \$100,000 for production costs, as was Valentino. Natacha tendered her husband a brief apology, explaining that her original estimate had been a bit low.

'It was as if she had decided to ruin Rudy financially because she had been shut out of his picture-making at the studio,' Nita Naldi later charged. 'Natacha damned near ruined me, too, with that silly movie. Nazimova still had too great a hold over her, and Natacha was trying to be arty to please her idol. She never realized how good she could have had it, simply being Mrs. Valentino.'

S. George Ullman wrote later: 'When her [Natacha's] dictatorship was taken from her, it was not long before her loyalty to Valentino, not only to his business interests, but to him as a wife, began to fail her. When she ceased to collaborate, she also failed to cooperate - in more ways than one.'

While Rudy completed work on *The Eagle*, Natacha began taking long motor trips by herself. Valentino would often come home to find their Whitley Heights place empty. After a lonely dinner, he, too, would go off by himself, sometimes riding in the desert sunset, sometimes to the opera. It

was as if the two 'perfect soul lovers' had declared a cold war on each other.

Mrs. Theresa Werner, Natacha's aunt, tried to heal the ever-widening breach between her niece and Valentino. 'Auntie' Werner had quickly replaced June Mathis as Valentino's 'soul mother' upon his marriage to Natacha. Mrs. Werner was always available to listen to Rudy's troubles and to advise him on the course of action she thought most advisable. She was much more sympathetic to the temperament of the actor than had been his own mother, who had been, as he matured, forever afraid of what Rudy would do to bring shame to the family name.

Rudy took Mrs. Werner's advice that a dramatic gesture on his part would supply the necessary balm to heal the ego that had been bruised by the 'insulting clause' in his contract with United Artists. He had long had his eye on a mansion on a Benedict Canyon hillside that seemed completely suited to become the physical castle of his and Natacha's spiritual dreams. He would even name it 'Falcon Lair' in honor of her story, *The Hooded Falcon*, which they had both wanted so very much to film.

While contemplating the purchase of Falcon Lair, Valentino wrote Mank: 'Personally, I think the thing to do is to have an all-year-round home, somewhere as near to ideality as you can find a place. I should like to have such a place done somewhere in the medieval style. I'm not particularly keen for modernity, either in house, dress or woman. I like a touch of the Old World, a flavor of tradition, a hint of other lands and other times. Old golds, somber reds . . . dull blues; grays that are like smoke drifting. I should like to live in such a place year by year, season after season so that I should know the place.

'I have no desire for this flitting from house to house; from estate to estate, never really making a home. I should like to know my house, to make a shrine of it where all the beautiful things I am able to garner from the four corners of the globe would find abiding places. Where my friends might come to remember me as permanently fixed on a set

'at last', and where I might die, at last, after the storm of stress.

'But if ever my belief in myself should utterly fail, if the day should come when struggle for my individual right should wear me threadbare of further effort, then I should come to a garden place where the sky would ever be blue above me; where my feet would press soil as vernal and virgin as I could find. Where, below me, under white cliffs, the sea could sing me its immemorial lullaby.'

Falcon Lair certainly had most of Valentino's prerequisites for a home 'somewhere as near to ideality' as he could find. The mansion was done in the medieval style, and Rudy had it outfitted with tapestries, weapons and armor that truly made the place seem baronial. It would also be, one could not help noticing, an ideal place in which Natacha might hold the seances of which she was so fond.

But Natacha never spent a night in Falcon Lair. She went East with 'Auntie' Werner and took an apartment in Manhattan at 9 West 81st Street. Ullman heard from her; she wanted him to find her parts in pictures. He did arrange one movie for Natacha, an inept vehicle aptly named *When Love Grows Cold*.

Rudy sought solace in the company of Vilma Banky, who joined him in his elaborate studio dressing room for dinner. Attempts of press agents and reporters to make a new romantic duo of the stars were thwarted, however, when it was discovered that Rudy was always duly chaperoned by 'Auntie' Werner, who had returned to Los Angeles. No one, the press decided, could make out with another woman while his wife's aunt looked over his shoulder.

The Eagle opened to an enthusiastic box office response which would make the film one of Rudy's most successful pictures. Natacha had been hoping for a dismal failure that would bring her back to the studio in a march of triumph, with Joe Schenck begging for her advice and insisting on her daily appearance on the set. The lesson was there for her to read with devastating clarity. She had 'advised' J. D. Williams on every frame of celluloid that clicked through the

camera, and *Cobra* had laid Valentino's first box office egg. She had been banished from the studio while Rudy filmed *The Eagle*, and critics were saying that Valentino had delivered his best performance to date. Joe Schenck had demonstrated that Valentino, United Artists and the entire motion picture industry could get along without Madame Valentino very well. Natacha would not be around for the gloating. She booked passage for Europe on the first convenient ocean liner. Her destination: Paris. Her object: divorce.

A. L. Wooldridge was with Valentino on the afternoon that the actor received word of Natacha's intentions. Wooldridge wrote Chaw Mank: 'We had walked and walked until tired and had found a place to rest and watch the day ending. The thought that his wife had gone to Paris to obtain a divorce depressed him. He sat silent for a while then said:

' "I'm sorry it had to happen."

'In a moment he added: "But we cannot always order our lives as we would like to have them." '

This was a maxim that the young romantic had taken a long time to observe, but he would repeat the words often to his friends during those last troubled months.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RUDY had begun to complain of abdominal pains to close friends. Once he doubled over, clutching at his stomach as he sat in a taxicab prior to entering a night club. Although Rudy steadfastly refused to see a doctor, most of his friends were familiar enough with ulcer attacks to recognize the symptoms evident in Valentino.

'Tonight, you drink milk,' a friend told him as they waited for the pain to subside so that they might enter the club.

Valentino choked dry laughter past his pain. 'That is all the reporters would need, isn't it? The great lover and hero drinking milk. No, a man who can outfight, outwit and outlove all other men on the screen must drink burning brandy.'

Whenever Valentino was frustrated or upset about something, friends remember, he would order mammoth servings of spicy Italian foods and wash them down with bottles of chilled wine. Although he seldom drank whiskey, he rarely ate a meal without a bottle of wine. A chain-smoker since his early days in Hollywood, Valentino without his long cigarette holder was a rare sight. His regimen would hardly be recommended as therapeutic for an ulcerous stomach.

Perhaps as an adhesive for his own shattered ego in losing another wife to the divorce courts, Valentino began to throw extravagant parties at Falcon Lair. He had had the lavish home done to his taste in all shades of dark red, his favorite color. There were brocades, velvets, satins and embroideries in gold and silver in abundance. Wall hangings of wrought iron offered perfect complement to finely crafted carvings in ivory and jade. His library boasted rare volumes, vellum-bound with colored plates. His table was set with china,

porcelain, Venetian and Bohemian glass. Daytime visitors were treated to a hilltop view of Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, and on clear days, Catalina Island. The homes of Harold Lloyd, Thomas Ince and Charlie Chaplin were situated below Falcon Lair, as were Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in their Pickfair and Marion Davies in her English country place. To the left of Falcon Lair, and equally as high, was the estate of Valentino's arch-rival for the crown of the movies' greatest lover, John Gilbert. On a hilltop at the back, rising even higher than the estates of either Valentino or Gilbert, was the lush Spanish home of Fred Thompson and his wife Frances Marion.

Shortly after the completion of *The Eagle*, Valentino left for New York to promote the film. The picture proved to be popular and well-patronized by New Yorkers, a welcome change from the poor reception accorded *Cobra*, which had suffered from the heavy-handed interference of Natacha during its production. Rudy left New York for London for the British première of *The Eagle*, then boarded ship as soon as possible for Paris. He told friends that he hoped to reach Natacha before she followed through on her intended divorce plans and perhaps bring about a reconciliation. He was greatly disturbed about the effect Natacha's divorce would have on his Great Lover image when it became generally known that 'the great love of his life' was leaving him.

Rudy checked in at the Plaza Athene. Natacha had left Paris. He called on the Hudnuts at their chateau outside Nice, but they claimed they had no idea where their wandering daughter could be. Perhaps New York. Who knew? Rudy did manage to locate Natacha's lawyer in Paris, and the word that the attorney relayed from Natacha was not good.

She was not interested in a reconciliation. If Valentino sought in any way to interfere with the divorce proceedings, Natacha would tell the world what kind of man he really was. She would tell every newspaper service in the world that the Great Lover was incapable of love.

'Am I really incapable of love?' Valentino wondered in a moan of anguish to his traveling companions.

All of his life he had sought for an ideal – one that had ever eluded him and had always remained unobtainable. There had been times when he had thought that he had attained love on a higher plane, only to find himself betrayed, debased and shattered. There had been times when he had found himself humiliated and mocked.

The world had draped about his shoulders a mantle of Eros that he had never been able to wear comfortably. Millions of women saw him as the ultimate in male appeal, yet to their escorts, he was not even a man.

In a fleeting shadow of memory, he saw the smile of triumph on the face of Claude Rameau as he had initiated the young Rodolfo into his own peculiar kind of love.

‘That was not the love that I sought,’ he said, slapping his white kid gloves into an open palm. ‘I found it vile and disgusting.’

The man whose magnetic allure was capable of reaching across the screen with enough force to arouse millions of women to heights of sexual ecstasy could not be that kind of man.

‘But both my marriages have failed. Dear little Jean was my bride for only a month. And Natacha – she was never a wife at all.’

His was not a love that could be measured by notches on a bedpost. He quested for a love that was not debased by the tyranny of the flesh. Such a love had been Blanca deSaulles, who remained, in his mind, ever pure and unobtainable.

It was the very image that had been created for him that denied him the right to his true expression of love. He would never be able to live up to the image of the virile, grinning satyr. The love he sought was of the soul.

‘But people are not interested in my soul. They want my body, my good looks, my fame.’

Valentino had failed to find his ideal; he had failed to find sexual happiness with men; he had failed as a lover of women. What he wanted, what he did and what the world expected of him could never be made compatible.

‘I can never be the Great Lover that they want me to be,’

he said. 'I am no longer Rodolfo. They have made me Valentino – and there is no real Valentino.'

Rudolph learned that his old friend, Mae Murray, who had recently undergone turmoil in her own love life, was in Paris. He had to see her. With a need born of desperation, he called on her in her suite at the Crillon Hotel.

'Natacha has threatened to tell the world that I am not a lover,' he told Mae, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'She has said that she will tell people that I am really like in the bedroom. She will tell them that I am a freak, not a sheik!'

Mae Murray held Valentino as if he were a child. 'She can't hurt you if you don't fight the divorce. The whole world loves you and the gift of romance which you have given it. Don't let Natacha destroy you. Let her go.'

As she had so often in the past, Mae Murray had hit upon the right combination of sympathy and encouragement to bolster Valentino's spirit. That very night they went dancing at the Lido, and Valentino decided to see Paris as he had not seen it since he had been an innocent of eighteen. Every night he hosted a party in a different club, the Ambassadeurs, the Florida, Ciro's. He appeared often with Mae Murray, Jean Nash and the Dolly Sisters. Valentino had jumped aboard the merry-go-round that is Paris night life and vowed that he would not get off until he had caught the golden ring.

Paris was still tango-mad, but while they recognized the skill of Rudy's interpretation in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the rage of Paris was Carlos Gardel, the great Latin American tango singer. The sale of Gardel's records in Paris alone sold at the rate of 70,000 copies during a three-month period. His handsome features smiled out at Parisians from the covers of magazines and music catalogs. Even the best people no longer regarded *le tango* as something pornographic or inconvenient, but as something picturesque and exciting – so exciting, in fact, that the Vatican, alarmed, condemned the tango and sent instructions to all priests that they should attack that 'savagae dance'. The prohibition was ignored by the aristocracy of Europe and placed the Vatican

in an embarrassing position. Pope Pius X, to save face, pretended that he needed more information about the new dance and finally succeeded in getting a young couple from the Roman nobility to dance the tango before him in the same way that it was being danced in the salons of Europe. After the performance, the Pope declared himself very favorably impressed with the dance and put an end to the prohibition.

Valentino attended a number of performances of the famous tango singer, but he never went backstage to introduce himself and make the Latin American's acquaintance. They would certainly have liked one another and would have discovered that they had very much in common, in addition to a marked physical resemblance. Gardel appeared always to be jovial and gay, but his close friends knew him to be an introvert. According to Jose Razzano, Gardel was 'always accompanied by a torturous sadness, as dark as the streets of the slums that sang his melodies', Gardel had more female fans than any other Latin American actor, yet he never fell in love. 'All women deserve to be loved,' he is said to have remarked; 'to give an exclusive rights to anyone in particular would mean to offend the others.' Gardel lived strangely alone, yet solitude always terrorized him, and he sought always to be surrounded by friends. Indeed, he seems to have suffered from the same perverse combination of fear and driving ambition that plagued Valentino.

S. George Ullman was becoming alarmed at the rate that Rudy, whose estate was already in debt, was spending money in Paris. In several letters and telegrams, he stated his dissatisfaction with Valentino's prodigality and his distaste of the many ribald stories that had begun to circulate during Rudy's European adventure, featuring the Great Lover as their picaresque hero. There was the tale about Valentino renting an entire brothel for him and his traveling companions to lodge in while in Paris. 'Hot and cold running women' was the punch-line. Anyone who knew Valentino knew that the story was pure fabrication, but it made a good cocktail hour anecdote back in the States. As did the one

about Valentino and the male dancers of the Paris Ballet Company: It seemed, according to the story, that Rudy and the dancers had settled their argument about who was to sleep with the balletmaster by comparing the length of a certain part of their anatomies. Rudy, of course, had won by producing an organ of Herculean proportions.

When it was time for Rudy to return to the United States, he tried to persuade his sister, Maria, and his older brother, Alberto, to accompany him. Alberto, who had married and had an eleven-year-old son, accepted his brother's invitation to visit America, but declined his offer of establishing residence in California. Maria had no desire to see the 'streets paved with gold', so Valentino arranged a position for her as a seamstress in Paris. This, to Maria, was the height of ambition, and so much more practical than jumping about on a movie screen. Valentino also used his influence to get Alberto a job in the Paris office of United Artists; upon his return from America, he would be set up as U-A's Italian representative. Satisfied that the Guglielmi family affairs were well in order, Rudy set sail with Alberto and his family for America. It would be good to have others to live with him in Falcon Lair, even if it were to be for just a short time. They would help drive out the ghost of Natacha that haunted every corner of the mansion.

Back in Hollywood, Valentino soon discovered another means of exorcizing the ghosts of the past. Once he had mentioned to Louella Parsons that he would like to meet Pola Negri. He had expressed this desire shortly after Natacha had left him, and it was done partly out of spite. Natacha had often mentioned her dislike of Pola Negri from the first moment that the tempestuous German actress had landed on American shores. Valentino had never been able to determine just what it was about Pola that so upset Natacha. He had often joked that maybe it was because 'Pola Negri' was an even more exotic and movie-queenish name than 'Natacha Rambova'. Or maybe it was because of the frank animal magnetism that Pola projected, along with that ever-present aura of sophisticated decadence. S. George

Ullman later ventured that Pola was the 'complete' anti-thesis of Natacha Rambova, passionate, hot-blooded, volcanic'. At any rate, Valentino realized the publicity value of a new romance to offset the blow of Natacha's divorce; and, even though the love affair might not be sincere, the fiery Pola would at least keep him occupied with a whirl of night clubs, parties and premières.

Valentino was also excited by the new project that United Artists had prepared for him while he had been relaxing in Europe. They had purchased the screen rights to E. M. Hull's new novel, *The Son of the Sheik*. Frances Marion, his 'next-door neighbor', would handle the adaptation, and his leading lady of *The Eagle*, Vilma Banky, would once again be his co-star. That was not all. George Fitzmaurice would at last direct Valentino in a picture. It was Famous Players-Lasky's failure to provide Rudy with Fitzmaurice that had precipitated their big blowup. Valentino would play a double role, that of Ahmed and that of Ahmed Ben Hassan, the 'original' sheik. As a special favor to Rudy, Agnes Ayres had agreed to appear in a brief flashback sequence as 'Diana', the English mother of Ahmed. To complete the perfect welcome-home package, W. K. Kellogg was going to loan Valentino the splendid white stallion, Jadan, for the sequel. Filming on *The Son of the Sheik* was soon progressing smoothly to the strains of Homer Grunn's *Desert Suite*, Rudy's favorite background music.

Even though Valentino was leading a more tranquil and orderly life than he had in months – he had his brother and his family to keep him company at Falcon Lair, and for diversion, he had Pola (without 'Auntie' Werner as chaperone) – the ulcer pains had seemed to increase in their intensity. Perhaps it was the ever-present reminder of his mortality that made Valentino reflect more and more often on his future in films.

He would not, he told friends, try to be the young lover forever. He figured that he had about five to six years remaining to essay the role of the romantic hero. He wanted to play Ben Hur, but then he would be satisfied to move on to

character roles. He spoke often of enacting Cesare Borgia, Columbus and even of sprouting the long nose of Cyrano de Bergerac. Then, of course, he wanted to do the Indian chief, and, most of all, the apache dancer.

In the meantime, he was playing at being the suitor of Pola Negri. Newspaper columnists and fan magazines gushed with the thrill of their 'new found love'.

'Pola and Rudy are really too cute about it,' cooed one fan magazine. 'They insist on being put next to each other at dinner parties, and then they calmly ignore everybody else, and if my eyes don't deceive me, they hold hands under the tablecloth. At any rate, Rudy is becoming really expert at eating with his left hand.'

A caption beneath an Internation Newsreel photograph of Pola and Rudy in matador and gypsy girl costumes reads: 'Valentino says one thing. Pola says another. And Hollywood makes up her own mind. Needless to say the doings of Rudy and Pola were the center of attraction at the spring costume ball of the Sixty Club.'

Valentino attended the world's première of *The Son of the Sheik* at Grauman's Million Dollar Theater with Pola on his arm. The film was received with gratifying critical notices, but the studio was worried about an only mild audience response and feared for the worst in the New England states. Rudy was told that he should prepare at once to attend a series of premières in the East, followed by a cross-country personal appearance tour, immediately after he had attended the San Francisco opening of the picture.

Rudy knew that the tour would be a grueling one, but he looked forward to it with great enthusiasm. He would leave at once for San Francisco, and his brother and his family would leave a few days later by the southerly route to New York, where he and Ullman would meet them and see them off to Paris. It was while Rudy was in such high spirits that he called June Mathis and arranged for a quiet dinner. He had not spoken to June since Natacha had locked horns with her over the script of *The Hooded Falcon*, and he was eager to make peace with his old friend. Valentino chatted happily

with June Mathis and pressed her hand warmly between his own as the two friends healed the open wound. Although the smoothing out of relationships with old friends seems to smack of a premonition of death, Valentino gave June Mathis no sign that he had received any preternatural preview that he would not return to Hollywood alive.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was in Chicago, while waiting to change trains, that Ullman was handed a copy of the personal attack on Valentino in the *Chicago Tribune*. Ullman later wrote that the 'scurrilous attack embittered Valentino's last days, killing his usual joy in living and causing him more mental anguish than any other article ever written about him'. Ullman claimed that he recognized the editorial as coming from 'the same poison pen which earlier had, without cause and reason, attacked my friend'.

The editorial, entitled 'Pink Powder Puffs', regarded Valentino as the epitome of foppishness, slurred his masculinity and charged him with the effeminization of the American male.

A new public ballroom was opened on the north-side a few days ago, a truly handsome place and apparently well run. The pleasant impression lasts until one steps into the men's washroom and finds there on the wall a contraption of glass tubes and levers and a slot for the insertion of a coin. The glass tubes contain a fluffy pink solid, and beneath them one reads an amazing legend which runs something like this: 'Insert coin. Hold personal puff beneath the tube. Then pull the lever.'

A powder vending machine! In a men's washroom! Homo Americanus! Why didn't someone quietly drown Rudolph Guglielmi, alias Valentino, years ago?

And was the pink powder machine pulled from the wall or ignored? It was not. It was used. We personally saw two 'men' step up, insert coin, hold kerchief beneath the spout,

pull the lever, then take the pretty pink stuff and put it on their cheeks in front of the mirror.

Another member of this department, one of the most benevolent men on earth, burst raging into the office the other day because he had seen a young 'man' combing his pomaded hair in the elevator. But we claim our pink powder story beats this all hollow.

It is time for a matriarchy if the male of the species allows such things to persist. Better rule by masculine women than by effeminate men. Man began to slip, we are beginning to believe, when he discarded the straight razor for the safety pattern. We shall not be surprised when we hear that the safety razor has given way to the depilatory.

Is this degeneration into effeminacy a cognate reaction with pacifism to the virilities and realities of the war? Are pink powder and parlor pinks in any way related? How does one reconcile masculine cosmetics, sheiks, floppy pants and slave bracelets with a disregard for law and an aptitude for crime more in keeping with the frontier of half a century ago than a twentieth-century metropolis?

Do women like the type of 'man' who pats pink powder on his face in a public washroom and arranges his coiffure in a public elevator? Do women at heart belong to the Wilsonian era of 'I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be A Soldier'? What has become of the old 'cave man' line?

It is a strange social phenomenon and one that is running its course not only here in America but in Europe as well. Chicago may have its powder puffs; London has its dancing men and Paris its gigolos. Down with Decatur; up with Elinor Glyn. Holywood is the national school of masculinity. Rudy, the beautiful gardener's boy, is the prototype of the American male. Hell's bells. Oh, Sugar.

Valentino had to be forcibly restrained by members of his entourage from marching on the editorial offices of the

Chicago *Tribune* and wreaking havoc. 'Why the hell should I be blamed for those bastards and their pink powder?' Valentino shrieked. 'If that son of a bitch thinks I'm a sissy I'll let him feel my fists against his jaw. We'll soon see which one is the better man.'

Reporters had gathered around the infuriated Valentino and had begun to egg him on. Ullman, fearful that Rudy might begin swinging on the press, managed to get him to a room in the Blackstone Hotel, where, having exhausted his plentiful stores of English and Italian profanities, Valentino was at last calm enough to listen to his manager's suggestion that they summon a representative of the *Tribune's* rival, the Chicago *Herald-Examiner*, and fight the editor with his own weapons. Rudy agreed to this, and while the *Herald-Examiner* reporter gleefully took it all down in shorthand, Valentino dictated a reply that – with Ullman's help – was calculated to boast of the Great Lover's physical prowess while insulting the writer of the personal attack.

'To the Man (?) Who Wrote the Editorial Headed "Pink Powder Puffs" in Sunday's "Tribune":'

The above mentioned editorial is at least the second scurrilous personal attack you have made upon me, my race and my father's name.

You slur my Italian ancestry; you cast ridicule upon my Italian name; you cast doubt upon my manhood.

I call you, in return, a contemptible coward and to prove which of us is a better man, I challenge you to a personal test. This is not a challenge to a duel in the generally accepted sense – that would be illegal. But in Illinois boxing is legal, so is wrestling. I, therefore, defy you to meet me in the boxing or wrestling arena to prove, in typically American fashion, (for I am an American citizen), which of us is more a man. I prefer this test of honor to be private, so I may give you the beating you deserve, and because I want to make it absolutely plain that this challenge is not for purposes of publicity. I am handing copies of this to the newspapers, simply because I

doubt that anyone so cowardly as to write about me as you, would respond unless forced to do so by the press. I do not know who you are or how big you are, but this challenge stands if you are as big as Jack Dempsey.

I will meet you immediately or give you a reasonable time in which to prepare, for I assume that your muscles must be flabby and weak, judging by your cowardly mentality, and that you will have to replace the vitriol in your veins for red blood – if there be a place in such a body as yours for red blood and manly muscle.

I want to make it plain that I hold no grievance against the *Chicago Tribune*, although it seems a mistake to let a cowardly writer use its valuable column as this 'man' does. My fight is personal – with the poison-pen writer of editorials that stoop to racial and personal prejudice. I welcome criticism of my work as an actor – but I will resent with every muscle of my body attacks upon my manhood and ancestry.

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 and that I may teach you respect of a man even though he happens to prefer to keep his face clean, I remain with

Utter Contempt,
Rudolph Valentino

Rudy seemed somewhat pacified after he had replied in kind to the anonymous character assassin. Ullman told him that he doubted that there would ever be an answer to Valentino's challenge.

'I pray that there will be,' Rudy said. 'How I would love to smash in that detestful face. I would have reporters from all the papers take pictures of me standing over his mangled body. That would prove to every smart son of a bitch in America that I am a real man.'

By the time their train had reached New York, another skeptic had demanded tangible proof of Valentino's fistic

abilities – and this doubter was perfectly willing to meet Rudy in the ring.

‘Frank O’Neil, the boxing expert on the New York *Evening Journal*, just called,’ Ullman told Valentino as the actor lay resting. ‘He says that he doubts your athletic ability and asks if you would like to go a couple rounds and see if you can hit him.’

Rudy sat up, his eyes narrowed. ‘Call him back and tell him I accept his challenge.’

‘Don’t be a fool, Rudy,’ Ullman told him. ‘O’Neil is big – and an expert on boxing. I told him that you were exhausted after your long trip. He didn’t really expect you to accept.’

‘That’s the point!’ Valentino shouted at his manager. ‘They all think I’m some pansy who acts the he-man for the movies but who can’t punch his way out of a paper bag in real life. This is a chance to prove that I am a real man. Call O’Neil back and tell him I’ll meet him any time and any place he wants.’

The match was arranged for that evening, before dinner, on the roof the Ambassador Hotel. Valentino made certain that the press was adequately represented and issued statistics as if it were a championship fight. Frank ‘Buck’ O’Neil stood six-feet-one and weighed about one hundred and ninety-five pounds. Valentino was five-feet-eleven inches tall and scaled in at one hundred and sixty-seven pounds.

The two men boxed lightly at first, each trying to size up his opponent. Then O’Neil curled a left to Valentino’s chin that rocked him back on his heels. Rudy shook his head as if cognizant for the first time that the cameras were not running and that this was not make-believe. He aimed a short jab at O’Neil’s jaw. The newspaperman ducked, caught the punch on the side of his head and went down on his knees to the gravel of the roof.

‘Are you all right, O’Neil?’ Rudy asked, beside the man at once. ‘I’m sorry if that one hurt a bit.’

O’Neil said nothing, got to his feet, and once more the two men began lightly boxing. The newspaperman was hardly in top physical condition and soon began puffing noisily. It was

readily apparent that Valentino, if not exactly of prize-fighter caliber, was at least in good shape. O'Neil began to resort to turtleshell tactics, bunching up to protect his face and body. With a wild flurry of swinging arms, he managed to land a blow on Rudy's nose that brought tears to the Great Lover's eyes.

Then, when Valentino began closing in on O'Neil, the boxing expert dropped his gloves and puffed: 'The hell with it. Okay, Valentino. You can box a decent enough fight. Let's go eat dinner.'

The next morning, Rudy was elated at the coverage the press had given the bout. 'That should prove something to someone,' he grinned.

Valentino ate a quick breakfast, for it would be a busy morning. His brother Alberto and his family were sailing for Paris on the *S.S. France*. He bade the Guglielmis a hasty farewell, then, without waiting to see the ship sail, he jumped into a taxi and drove to another pier where General Nobil was sailing on an Italian liner. Ullman had counseled that photographs of Valentino shaking hands with the daring Italian aviator, who had just completed a successful flight over the North Pole, would also be good for Rudy's rugged, he-man image. In addition, of course, it never hurt to acknowledge the deeds of a countryman. Even though Mussolini had forbidden the showing of Valentino's pictures in his fatherland, there were plenty of Italian-Americans around to patronize his films.

The next day, *The Son of the Sheik* opened at the Mark Strand Theater. The crowds had begun to gather in the early morning, and by the time Valentino arrived for the afternoon performance, double lines stretched two blocks in each direction. It was oppressively hot with the temperatures nudging the ninety-eight degree mark. Police feared a riot of Valentino's fanatic female admirers and assigned a contingent of mounted policemen to see that the Sheik was not mauled to death or trampled by his assembled fans. Aileen Pringle, the daughter of a British governor of Jamaica, who had become popular as the enraptured heroine of

Elinor Glyn's screen romances, served as Valentino's 'date' for the afternoon première. The audience response was extremely satisfying to Rudy and his party; and after the final reel, he got up on the stage to make a small speech of thanks to the worshipful throng. Women began to moan excitedly, and the Ullman feared for the safety of his client. Signaling to a group of policemen to run interference, Ullman utilized a favorite 'crowd-busting' technique. With Rudy behind him, the actor's hands on his shoulders, Ullman charged through the squealing women for their limousine.

Eager fingers plucked at the fleeing form of their idol, seeking some token of his passing. A pocket handkerchief was taken from a breast pocket. Buttons were ripped from his suit coat. Cuff links were snatched from his sleeves. His hat was grabbed from his head with a whoop of triumph by a graying dowager. At last they made it to the waiting automobile and drove under police escort back to the hotel. Studio executives would be pleased to learn that the presence of Valentino could still stimulate box office receipts.

That evening, Valentino picked up Jean Acker at her home and took her to a party at Texas Guinan's famous supper club. Reporters, who faithfully recorded the Great Lovers' every move, began pressing the couple for any comment which might indicate that the two former marriage partners were planning to retie the bonds of matrimony. Jean Acker remained coyly noncommittal, but Valentino issued a statement that 'they should always remain good friends'.

Rahmin Bey, a popular night club magician of the twenties, was playing at Texas Guinan's and immediately singled out Valentino and his party for special attention.

To the delight of the audience, Rahmin Bey, in flowing Oriental robes, swept over to Rudy and flourished a long needle under his nose. 'Can the mighty Sheik submit to the test of the needle?'

Rudy laughed. 'And just what is the "test of the needle"?''

'I shall pass this needle through your cheek without pain and without drawing a drop of blood. You have but to believe in the powers of the great Rahmin Bey.'

'Very well,' Rudy smiled. 'I have faith in your powers.'

'Oh, no, you don't,' Ullman frowned, placing a restraining hand on Valentino's arm.

'He's afraid he'll get his pretty face scratched,' a man snorted loudly from a nearby table.

Rudy turned to scowl at the man, who grinned back at him foolishly, obviously in his cups. 'You see what they say?' he asked Ullman in a hoarse whisper. 'Valentino the coward, Valentino the "pretty gardener's boy". I will show them that I am afraid of nothing.'

He removed his arm from Ullman's grasp and got to his feet. 'Come then, Rahmin Bey. Come with your needle. But,' he added as he slipped off his dinner jacket, 'you must be contented with my forearm. My manager fears for his investment.'

The audience laughed its approval of Valentino's game spirit. Rudy rolled up his sleeve, offered his arm to the night club fakir, who, with a rapid thrust, impaled the actor's forearm with the long needle, then withdrew it. There was an audible gasp of shock from the audience.

'Was there pain? Was there blood?' the fakir asked.

Valentino laughed and held his arm aloft. 'No pain and no blood,' he said to loud applause from the fascinated audience.

'Don't bother to put down your sleeve,' Ullman told Rudy as the actor reached for his coat. 'I've sent a waiter for some alcohol. I'm not risking an infection in case some germs don't respect that fakir's magic.'

The following week, Valentino left for Chicago. There had not yet been a reply from the 'Pink Powder Puff' editorialist, and Rudy found himself incessantly besieged by sports editors and feature writers, who sought personal accounts of what the Great Lover would do to the 'contemptible coward' if he ever got him in the ring. Ever eager to demonstrate his athletic prowess, Rudy called a special news conference in a gymnasium and answered all questions put to him in rhythm to rapid blows on a punching bag. It had been two weeks since he had delivered the challenge,

Valentino said by way of concluding the interview, so now he was issuing the prepared statement which his aides would distribute to them as they left.

It is evident that you cannot make a coward fight any more than you can draw blood out of a turnip. The heroic silence of the writer who chose to attack me without any provocation in the *Chicago Tribune* leaves no doubt as to the total absence of manliness in his whole makeup.

I feel I have been vindicated because I consider this silence as a tacit retraction, and an admission which I am forced to accept even though it is not entirely to my liking.

The newspaper men and women whom it has been my privilege to know briefly or for a longer time have been so absolutely fair and so loyal to their profession and their publications, that I need hardly say how conspicuous is this exception to the newspaper profession.

The Chicago première of *The Son of the Sheik* was even more successful than had been the opening in New York. The Chicagoans had been suitably impressed by the Sheik's bravado, and there were many more male patrons waiting in line before the box office for this film than there had been for any other. The Associated Press had given wide publicity to Rudy's second defiance of his anonymous assailant, and the whole imbroglio had turned out much better than his advisers had anticipated. United Artists was especially pleased. Valentino's films had begun to lag behind in box office receipts, and the more excitement Rudy's tour created, the better were their chances to make a killing on *The Son of the Sheik*.

Back in the East, Rudy went down to Atlantic City where his old friend Gus Edwards was running one of his famous revues. Edwards had begged Valentino to put in an appearance at the Ritz-Carlton after the actor had attended the showing of *The Son of the Sheik* at the Virginia Theater. Rudy got to the theater fifteen minutes later than he had promised. Edwards had been nervously pacing the

boards backstage because he had told the audience that Valentino would put in an appearance that night. The announcer was at the microphone making nervous jokes in an attempt to pacify the restive crowd that had been offered a peek at the Sheik as a bonus for purchasing their revue tickets. Valentino walked up behind the announcer and tapped him on the shoulder in mid-joke. To enthusiastic audience applause, Gus Edwards awarded Rudy with a pair of boxing gloves in case the editorialist should ever accept his challenge. Then, at Edward's urging, Rudy danced the Argentine tango with a dancer in the revue. It would be the last time Valentino would ever perform in public.

Rudy had from 2nd August until the 16th to relax in New York, and he intended to make the most of his vacation. Although at times the pain from his ulcers became so bad that he would bend double in agony, he refused to call off the evening revels which he had planned. He would often begin an evening with dinner with Jean Acker, then take her home in time to pick up a Follies girl for dancing until dawn.

One morning, S. George Ullman was awakened by Rudy 'still in his evening clothes, with a glass of ice-cold Vichy in his hand'.

'Would you like some water?' Valentino asked his manager.

Ullman blinked, wondered grumpily why the special service.

'Oh, I thought you might be thirsty,' Valentino grinned sheepishly.

'You mean that you are bringing me this peace offering, hoping that I will not scold you for getting home at five o'clock in the morning.'

'Well,' Valentino admitted, 'I did intend to ask you to see that I was not disturbed until noon. I'm going to lunch with Jean at one.'

Friends, who were aware of Valentino's bleeding ulcers, cautioned him to take it easy and to get more rest. 'No!' Rudy snapped at them. 'There will be a party every night and a new girl every night. The papers will be full of the

night life of Valentino. No one will be able to say that I am a pansy when they read about my escapades. They will know that no one but a real man could keep up a pace like this!

Valentino's pathetic struggle to prove his masculinity by a ceaseless orgy of dissipation was only depleting the last reservoirs of his strength and his last bulwark against the ulcers that voraciously ate away at his insides. On the Saturday night of 14th August, 1926, Valentino ignored Ullman's advice to get a good night's sleep before the new round of personal appearances began and went out on a drinking party that lasted until ten o'clock the following Sunday morning. Rudy barely managed to stagger back to his hotel room, and once there, he collapsed across his bed while undressing.

He was taken to Polyclinic Hospital where, at six o'clock that evening, he underwent surgery for gastric ulcers and appendicitis. Valentino survived the operation, but after a few days peritonitis set in. The heaven-directed beseechments of imploring multitudes were in vain. On 23rd August a bulletin from International News Service broke the news to a public of weeping female fans and imitation 'sheiks'.

Valentino's condition today:

Midnight - Valentino gravely ill. Had been slowly sinking. Asleep at this hour. Saline solutions had been injected into his chest. Pleurisy, which developed, spreading.

2 A.M. - Sleeping soundly.

4 A.M. - No change in condition.

6 A.M. - Slightly restless, but still sleeping.

7 A.M. - Temperature, 104, pulse, 130, respiration, 30

9 A.M. - Awake. Doesn't seem to realize he is critically ill. Temperature has gone up to 104½

11 A.M. - Word from the sick room was that Valentino was dying.

12:10 P.M. - Valentino died.

Almost before Rudy had died, press agents were at work

to make certain that his name continued to live. United Artists had suffered a brief moment of panic when they learned that their super-star had passed away. Theater patrons were unpredictable. Would they stay away from Valentino's last film now that the 'Sheik' was himself no longer present in this world? A brief conference held on the studio lot had brought about a dual decision: The studio must get its investment back on *The Son of the Sheik*, and at all costs, by any means possible, the public's emotional awareness of its 'great loss' must be kept at panic pitch for at least a week.

Oscar Doob, chief press agent at U-A, decided that the place to begin was with suitable 'last words' for Valentino. According to one of the doctors who had attended Valentino, Rudy had mumbled only unintelligible words in Italian after 6:30 A.M. on the day he died. Ullman, unable to stand vigil at the star's bedside any longer, had not been present when his client passed away. It was, Doob declared, up to the studio to come up with a memorable deathbed phrase for the Great Lover.

According to M. M. Marberry's article, 'The Overloved One', which appeared in the August, 1965, issue of *American Heritage*: 'Doob solemnly declared, "Let the tent be struck!" This was regarded as a dignified deathbed message, with a fine literary ring to it. It had the added attraction of reminding the public of the Arabian tent in which *The Son of the Sheik* wooed Vilma Banky, the Hot Paprika from Hungary. (There was also a popular song of the day, "The Sheik of Araby", with some piquant lines about creeping into a lady's tent.)

'Before the phrase hit print, however, a bright publicity man remembered that these were almost the identical words spoken in 1870 by Robert E. Lee on his deathbed. Valentino's parting message was hastily revised. He had been misheard by an intern whose familiarity with the English language was slight. What Valentino had really said was: "I want the sunlight to greet me - don't pull down the shades!"

'It was feared that these last words were a little too

lengthy for a deathbed statement – in addition to being an elaboration of the more succinct dying utterance of Goethe (“*Mehr Licht*”) – but to the relief of Doob, they caught the fancy of the public and were relayed all over the world.’

By the time Ullman got around to writing his biography of the actor, he, too, had ‘remembered’ Valentino’s last words. As Ullman tells it, he had just noticed a ray of light falling across Rudy’s face and had got up to adjust the blinds. It was then that Valentino gasped his last words: ‘Don’t pull down the blinds! I feel fine. I want the sunlight to greet me.’

The press-agented pageantry of Valentino’s funeral, which primed the emotional pump of a nation eager for some sort of exhibitionistic release, was as elaborately staged as any of the Great Lover’s filmed epics had ever been. And, as he had in life, Valentino could only serve as the unprotesting tool for the machinations of the Great Manipulators.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

'*Valentino Lives In Spirit.*' Read the appealing story of 'Rudolph Valentino Is My Spirit Friend'. Book, \$1.95 . . . No C.O.D. (A classified advertisement in a 1963 astrology yearbook.)

FORTY years across the bar have not weakened Valentino's magnetic hold on the many cults, clubs and memorial guilds which still bear his name. But the shining image of the Valentino who lives agelessly on in the hearts of his aging admirers is as much like the man as the Angel Gabriel is like the Fallen Angel Michael. Rudolph Valentino had, in death, been granted a metamorphosis to a peculiar sainthood which demanded a strict and often bizarre obeisance on the part of those who sought intercession.

The strange cult of necrophiles was given its greatest boost shortly after the Great Lover's death when Natacha Rambova returned to America. She managed to comfort many grief-stricken fans and win a place for herself on the front pages of the newspapers by declaring that she had been, and was, receiving spirit messages from Valentino. The communications, she told the press, had begun to come three days after Rudy's death while she was in southern Europe. With the aid of George B. Wehner, a trance medium, she had managed to conduct, lengthy discussions with her former husband. It was only natural, she explained, that Rudy should have chosen her as the instrument whereby to transmit his messages of spiritual comfort; their psyches had been the most dynamically intermeshed on earth.

Photoplay felt duty bound to submit a series of questions

to the psychically attuned Miss Rambova and to publish the results of the astral interview.

Is Valentino happy?

At first he was anything but happy. Three days after his passing, I received his first message. Incoherent as it was it showed Rudy as resentful and bitter at his being taken at the height of his career. The spirit of his mother spoke, too, protesting at Rudy's terrible unhappiness. Then the tone of Rudy's message changed. Not, however, until after his final burial service in Hollywood. Concentrated public thought had held him earthbound. The prolonged cross-country funeral had held him in the agonies of the spirit in passing.

Rudy, of course, saw his funeral. He was torn with unhappiness as New York mobs fought for a view of his body. He realized his great popularity as he had never realized it and knew what he had lost by being taken. To him it was wonderful but cruel . . .

Whom has he met?

He has named Wallie Reid, Barbara La Marr and little Olive Thomas. He has been most interested in meeting and talking with Enrico Caruso . . . Rudy, too, has met the personal friends with whom we used to communicate by means of automatic writing.

Valentino has said there are no movies. Why?

Because the films are a mechanical perversion of the drama. In the astral world there is nothing mechanical . . .

What earthly successes does Valentino remember now?

He remembered all, at first. Rudy wandered the film theaters where his last film was being shown to sorrowing audiences. He walked his old haunts on Broadway, particularly around 47th Street, where he used to spend many hours of his old penniless dancing days. He suffered because his old friends used to pass him by, unknowing. He

shouted "I am Rudolph Valentino" but they did not hear. It was hard for him to understand. He was just as alive, but in a different vibration. As Rudy has grown in astral knowledge, however, these earthly recollections have lost their appeal. The old glamour of the earth-people is passing. Our world is growing fainter.

Has Valentino any message for his old host of worshippers?

Yes. He has a message for everybody. He wants earth-people to know and realize that there is no death and no separation. He wants earth-people to miss his heart-rending experience. He wants them to realize and believe in the beauty and perfection of this after-life.

Natacha Rambova enacted her new role as the high-priestess of the cult of Valentino with gusto. Her penchant for Oriental costumes and her perpetual dabbling in the occult had given her a solid background in the business of mediumistic mumbo-jumbo. Then, too, her earthly marriage of convenience with the dead actor seemed to give her an undeniable prerogative to receive his spirit messages. Cynics recalled how completely she had dominated Valentino and declared that if anyone could demand his materialization from 'the other side' it would certainly be Natacha. In life, Valentino had been clay for her ambitious hands. She had sought to mold a masterpiece from the raw material of her unsophisticated husband and had dictated her desires to everyone from cameraman to director. Now, once again, she could make of Valentino what she wished; his memory would prove much more malleable than had the man.

When Valentino's personal effects were auctioned in December, 1926, the crowd was composed primarily of necrophiliacs who sought a remembrance of their idol. When the doors of the Hall of Art Studio were opened, 45 policemen were almost swept off their feet as the women surged into the building. The thousand chairs were quickly filled.

'That's all!' a police sergeant ordered. But his shouted command could hardly be heard over the rush of the crowd, and those who heard it chose to ignore it. A. L. Wooldridge covered the auction for *Picture Play* and his article appeared in the April, 1927, issue.

The crowd gathered in the doorway, blocked the sidewalk, pushed out into the street. Women stood with their faces pressed against the windows, while others strained to hear the voice of the auctioneer as the precious possessions of Valentino were put up for sale.

... Most of the things brought but a fraction of what Valentino had paid for them. A player piano brought \$2,100, and a silver-mounted whiskey keg and stand, \$27. A Spanish shawl for which Valentino had paid \$2,000 was purchased by F. W. Vincent for \$350. A gold-and-silver tapestry which had cost \$20,000 was sold for \$2,900 ... Valentino's bedroom set, for which he had spent a small fortune, was sold to Mrs. Frank McCoy, of Los Angeles, for \$875. Theresa Werner, aunt of Natacha Rambova, and an heir under the terms of Rudy's will, purchased a book on Chinese costumes for \$300 ... Valentino's sterling silver dinner service of two hundred and twenty-five pieces was bought by Mrs. Tom Santschi for \$515.

Adolphe Menjou paid \$390 for an antique cabinet and \$750 for a Spanish screen.

Far into the evening of that first day, the auctioneer's voice droned over the late star's precious belongings. The sale was not expected to be completed for two weeks, so there was no attempt to hurry it.

A hush fell over the crowd when one of Rudy's most prized possessions was carefully laid on the table. It was the sculptured hand of Valentino, done in white marble and mounted on a block of black, showing in its palm the broken lifeline. The hand had been made by Prince Troubetzkoy, a great friend of Valentino. The index finger pointed upward, as though the spirit of the dead had returned to halt the scattering of the things he loved so well.

The bidding for the marble hand did not start briskly. It was as though everyone feared it might be an omen — that broken lifeline, that warning, protesting gesture! It was, however, sold to a woman for \$150.

When Valentino's jewel case was opened, a glittering array of almost priceless gems was disclosed. Fifteen rings, ranging from an Oriental band set with a cat's-eye weighing twenty carats to a diamond set in platinum which weighted six carats. Scarfpins, cuff links and shirt studs, set with rubies, sapphires, emeralds pear-shaped pearls and diamonds. There were wrist watches and pocket watches ... a cigarette case, match case and cigarette holder combined, made of platinum and white gold. On the front of the case were finely cut diamonds in a cobra design, and on the back Valentino's monogram was similarly inlaid ...

... That he had prized certain reminders of his first successes was indicated by the wardrobe he left in his house. There were, for instance, the two Argentine sombreros he had worn in *The Four Horsemen*. Keepsakes they had been to him of the time when the world first rose to give him acclaim. Then there were the torador costumes, beautifully brocaded, that he had worn in *Blood and Sand*. Besides these, there were the coat, breeches and waistcoat he had used in *Monsieur Beaucaire*.

The votaries who sought relics of their love god in the Hall of Art Studio had not been interested in the previous auction of Valentino's home, his motor cars, horses, saddles, harness and three dogs which had netted \$182,073.50. With understandable envy, they had sighed wistfully when they learned that Jules Howard, a New York jeweler, had purchased Falcon Lair for \$145,000 (at this writing, the home is owned by Doris Duke); but real estate, fancy foreign automobiles and livestock were simply too rich for their blood. Besides, it would be the intimate personal items which would contain more of the aura of the real Rudy. It had often been said that Valentino's vast wardrobe made him the best-

dressed star in Hollywood. Any article of clothing that had once graced the physique of Valentino would have brought ecstasy sublime to any one of his female cultists. Ullman, however, declined to place any of the garments on the auction block. 'I just can't do it,' he told the disappointed women. 'Those clothes nearly talk to me. Rather than let anyone else have them, I'll buy them myself.'

Ullman's unexpected act of sentimentality blocked a variety of religious experiences from innumerable women who would have bought, bartered and enshrined the nearly two thousand pieces of personal attire which Valentino had possessed at the time of his death. Matrons, who had come prepared to purchase one of the Great Lover's 30 business suits, 3 red riding coats or 60 pairs of gloves as a meaningful legacy to pass on to a young daughter, went away gray with sorrow. Giddy young flappers, who had saved lunch money to purchase one of Rudy's 6 pairs of silk knit garters, 10 pairs of suspenders or 111 assorted ties, left the studio once again doomed to sodas instead of status. Slicked down 'sheiks', who had hearts set on owning one of the Master's 7 Palm Beach suits, 110 silk handkerchiefs or 59 pairs of shoes, withdrew, grumbling their bitterness. Severely dressed maiden ladies, who had hoped to find spiritual communion with one of their daemon lover's 6 Japanese colored pajamas, 17 white silk drawers or 66 white silk undershirts, quickly vacated the auction studio with drawn lips that betrayed their anguished frustration.

Letters addressed to Valentino continued to arrive at the studios, asking for pictures of 'the world's greatest lover'. News dispatches began to carry morbid accounts of young women who had jumped from cliffs and hotel windows, thrown themselves in front of automobiles and trains, slashed wrists in bathtubs, or sought other suicidal paths on which to 'join Rudy'. A young wife from Budapest surrounded herself with pictures of Valentino, then killed herself, leaving a note which said that she had gone 'to be with Valentino in heaven'. Her husband had done his best to pre-

vent such a rash act, but no husband could compete with such a potent memory.

Weird stories began to circulate about the shade of Valentino frequenting the old earthly haunts of the actor. Falcon Lair was the most popular site for a manifestation of the 'presence' of the Great Lover. Pilgrims who managed to wangle an invitation to stay the night in the luxurious home which their idol had rebuilt and furnished always tried to sleep in Valentino's bedroom. All night long they would lie there ready to receive any messages he might choose to deliver. If he did not manifest himself, they were prepared to believe that they had not chosen the propitious evening. All Valentino fans knew that Rudy himself believed in the return of the spirit. Natacha Rambova had imbued him with this belief and had communed with him since he had departed.

Mediums, mystics and priests of the cult of Valentino had found it most significant when the New York jeweler, who had won the bid for Falcon Lair, later refused to complete the transaction. The spirit of Valentino, they asserted, had not wished to be usurped by a physical presence. That the mansion so beautifully poised on the picturesque mountain remained unsold was mute testimony that the shade of Rudy wished Falcon Lair to remain a temple of pilgrimage. Prospective buyers visited it, the cultists claimed, and went away never to return for a second investigation.

Stories traveled around Hollywood of one caretaker who had run down the canyon in the middle of the night yelling that he had seen Valentino. Another told of the stableman who had left without collecting his belongings because he had seen the master petting one of the horses just before dark one evening.

Then there was the woman from Seattle who had visited the caretakers in their quarters over the garage far to the rear of the main building. Her friends went out at dusk to exercise 'Rudy' and 'Brownie', the two Great Danes that had belonged to the actor. She was writing a letter in the back room of the quarters.

She paused, pen raised, ink blotting her letter. Footsteps shuffled up the stairs. An inner door opened. Thinking it was her friends returning, she called their names. No answer. The door closed and footsteps shuffled back down the stairs. Garage doors closed.

Three minutes later, her friends, the caretakers, had returned.

'Why didn't you answer when you came up and I called to you?' she asked them a bit angrily.

'Came up? Neither of us came up. You must have been dreaming,' was their bemused reply.

At the woman's insistence, they investigated. No one could have climbed the steep ascent from the main canyon road without passing the caretakers exercising the dogs of Valentino. No one could have hidden on the premises without being discovered.

Two days later the guest from Seattle had prematurely departed.

In August, 1927, the first annual memorial service was held for Rudolph Valentino at the Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Hollywood. Jeanne Anderson, a neophyte journalist who had previously won a Valentino ring contest conducted by *Screenland* was in attendance to record her impressions for the fan magazine.

Something odd about this crowd – if you are used to the 'feel' of the mob on occasions like this. An atmosphere of sincerity and quiet purpose. An absence of the usual callous, curious, silly faces, craning necks and noisy whispers. Well-balanced, average-looking people who have left their customary daily tasks and traveled here through sun and heat for reasons, to them, good and sufficient. One might point to the sedate and elderly woman in black, with little prayer book in her correctly gloved hand, as typical . . .

But right behind the impeccable one is a skinny girl in a cheap silk dress and fur. And next to her is a large

woman in a faded wash dress, heavy black shoes, her rough, red hands holding tightly a shabby old purse. It takes no imagination to visualize her bending over other people's wash tubs, and to know that she is losing 50 cents for every hour she is here.

Falcon Lair before sunset ... its white walls rising proudly from a flower carpet of rosy pink flung broadly across the rocks.

His view - and we - not he - here to see it! Something wrong with the Big Plan!

Dusk, and little lights coming out in the valley below. The mournful insistent cry of a bird among the hills. The brooding hush becomes oppressive, almost a command. The romantic ones pluck some white clover blossoms from the lawn, and turn slowly toward the gates.

The cult of Valentino, with attendant memorial services, was by no means limited to the United States. The *Literary Digest* for 20th August, 1927, quoted a lengthy article from the London *Daily Express* as ample proof that the women of England were as afflicted with Valentino mania as were their American cousins. The article reported a 'Valentino Memorial Service' which had been held at the Shepherd's Bush Pavilion in London by arrangement with the Valentino Memorial Guild and the Valentino International Memorial Fund. The guild had been founded to perpetuate Valentino's memory through reissues of his films and to engage in charitable work known to have interested their idol. The fund had been created to perpetuate Valentino's memory in 'some more tangible form', such as a hospital for children.

The London *Daily Express* commented: 'There has been nothing in the history of either stage or screen to equal the passionate sincerity of devotion evoked by Valentino among his countless women admirers.'

According to the London journalists who witnessed the 'memorial service', several women had erected shrines to Valentino in their boudoirs. Others grew flowers beneath his

framed photograph. One woman kept one of his old shirts in a gold embroidered casket. All of them – married, single, young, middle-aged and elderly – were united in the common purpose of defending Valentino's name against the aspersions of the cynic.

In an attempt to analyze the phenomenal growth of the Valentino Mystique, the *Daily Express* said: 'They admire him because, in the technique which he developed as a screen lover, he knew not only how to love, but how to worship.

'Valentino was a worshipper of women, and women in turn worshipped Valentino.'

The English women had chosen the slogan 'Toujours Fidele' (Always Faithful) to express their personal commitment to the Great Lover. The more talented of their group composed songs in which Valentino was figured as looking down from Heaven and asking that his critics might be forgiven 'for they knew not what they did'.

One of their members had written in an English newspaper: 'I feel sure that had Rudolph Valentino not been so sensitive about those critics who called him effeminate, he would have been alive today. The price that he paid for film-fame was death.'

The gentle Englishwoman would have become greatly disillusioned had she been present to observe yet another 'memorial service' which took place in a Los Angeles night club which openly catered to homosexuals. The assembled deviates had regarded Rudy as 'one of the boys'. Several had donned costumes reminiscent of Valentino's most popular roles, and a slim young Latin danced his interpretation of Rudy's famous Argentine tango with a partner who had come in 'drag'. The 'eulogy' for the service was delivered by a dancer who claimed to have known Valentino 'very well'. He described an oral sex incident with Rudy as 'divine communication with the Godhead' and wore about his neck a locket in which he allegedly kept 'several hairs from the Master's loin'.

On 23rd August, 1928, the first 'lady in black' appeared to kneel at Valentino's marble mausoleum and leave her flowers and tears. In his book on hoaxes, Curtis MacDonald dismisses the mysterious mourner as 'a press agent's stunt which got way out of hand'. According to debunker Mac Dougal, Russel Birdwell was responsible for the whole legend when he hired an unknown girl to kneel at the grave of Valentino for a one-reel short, 'The Other Side of Hollywood', which he was filming. The narration for the short simply 'made up' the myth of the mysterious 'Lady in Black' who arrived at dawn each 23rd August, paid her respects and departed in silence. To Birdwell's amazement, in the succeeding years there actually was a black-garbed mourner who appeared at the grave of the actor. In her syndicated column of 14th February, 1940, Hedda Hopper claimed that it was all a florist's hoax perpetrated to encourage the annual laying of flowers on Valentino's grave and, subsequently, to propagandize for other periodic floral observances.

The most persistent of the ladies in black is Miss Ditre Flame, who claims to be the 'authentic and original' bearer of the 13 roses – a dozen red and one white.

'I visited the grave daily for the first three years,' Miss Flame said, 'then only on the anniversary of Rudy's death.'

'At first everyone believed that I was only some kind of publicity stunt, but then the reporters talked to me and I told them my story – "our" story. I met Valentino when he was a dancer in New York. I was only fourteen. One time I became very ill and Rudy came to see me in the hospital. He seemed immediately to sense that I had been thinking of death.

'"You won't die," he told me. And then he added with a kind of funny look, "But if you do, you won't be lonesome. I'll bring you flowers like these every day. Red roses. But you must remember, if I go first, I don't want to be lonely either!"'

The 24th August, 1951, Los Angeles *Examiner* carried a story of one of Miss Flame's annual pilgrimages to Valentino's grave. Before the 'Woman in Black' arrived at the

Hollywood Cemetery to observe the 25th anniversary of Rudy's death, two teen-agers showed up in Moroccan costumes to pay their respects to their 'television idol'. A Swiss spiritualist, Amanna Tannarose, gave a ten-minute lecture on how she had met Valentino 10 years ago 'up there'. She explained that she had been introduced by a Persian poet, also deceased. The worshipful crowd of tourists, publicity men and bobby-soxers continued to have their interest spans reinforced with the arrivals of other 'Women in Black' every half hour.

Then, promptly at noon, Miss Flame arrived in a chauffeured limousine. She carried the traditional bouquet of roses – twelve red and one white – which she placed in two vases flanking her idol's tomb (first testily removing some flowers set there by another 'Woman in Black'). She unveiled a life-sized portrait of Valentino and a bronze bust which she presented as gifts to the cemetery. A song-plugger passed out copies of Ditre's 'Candlelight' with words taken from a poem by Valentino to Miss Flame. 'Your love has lighted a thousand candles in my soul,' the Woman in Black managed to quote, by way of brief eulogy, before she fainted.

Miss Flame had scarcely regained consciousness when Anthony Dexter, a later day Valentino look-a-like who had portrayed the Great Lover in an inept screen biography, arrived in burnoose and pantaloons from the set of his next picture, a feeble remake of *The Sheik*. Confronted with such a full-bodied apparition, the poor Miss Flame was obliged to faint once more.

When Ditre regained her composure, the *Examiner* quoted her as sighing: 'I know they'll say this is a publicity stunt, but it really isn't. I was overcome with it all.'

Women have been 'overcome with it all' ever since Valentino acquired the role of Julio in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, then went on to secure his position in the Hollywood galaxy by offering himself as a young Arab chieftain in *The Sheik*. It was a portrayal that caused feminine patrons to swoon in the aisles and their male escorts to snort in dis-

gust. But hoot as his detractors might, they could not deny that Valentino had zeroed in on the *zeitgeist* of the twenties with such uncanny accuracy that he had become the decade's ultimate in masculine appeal. It had fallen on this bewildered young man to become the sex symbol of a tinsel age and to experience an agony that H. L. Mencken described as that of 'a man of relatively civilized feelings thrown into a situation of intolerable vulgarity'.

Once, in a letter to Chaw Mank, written while relaxing in the sun, Valentino wrote: 'I extricate myself with some difficulty from this musing in the sun . . . a place in the sun . . . I have always loved the sound of that phrase. It seems to me to sum up in a few words an ultimate philosophy of happiness and peace. What could be more desirable? Not castle walls nor turreted mansions nor the velvet-shod ways of the rich. A place in the sun is the birthright of every man and woman.'

The young romantic from Castellaneta had paid a great price for his 'place in the sun'.

THE END

JUDY GARLAND BY ANNE EDWARDS

In this brilliant, deeply human and glittering book – the definitive biography of Garland the star, Judy the woman – Anne Edwards has re-created the life, the loves, the sorrows, the joys, the disasters of a legendary woman. Drawing on a wealth of previously unavailable material, on the intimate revelations of those who knew and loved Judy, on her own meeting with Judy Garland, on the memories of friends, fans, strangers and contemporaries, she has written a book that is sensational in its revelations of the truth behind the Garland legend and the Garland headlines, and at the same time hauntingly, heartbreakingly moving and compassionate; at last, the great, major book that Judy Garland's life deserved.

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When Diane de Poitiers was born to joyful parents in the little town of Saint-Vallier, in the valley of the Rhone, an old crone prophesied 'she will cause tears to fall and joys to be known. And those who weep and those who rejoice she will be greater than them all.' Diane was indeed destined to be great - she was a descendant of Louis XI and related by marriage to Charles VII. As she grew up she displayed formidable qualities of intelligence - and her beauty was just as remarkable. When her lover, Henri, was crowned King, she skilfully piloted him through the first difficult months of his reign. She was an important member of the King's Privy Council, controlling its members as well as its master.

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Metternich's life was a series of amorous episodes. His Mistresses included Constance de la Force, a high-born refugee from the French Revolution, Caroline Murat, Napoleon's sister, and Princess Katherina Bagration, mistress of the Tsar of Russia. And despite this philandering, Metternich inspired devoted love in his three wives . . .

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In August 1926, New York City police were confronted with some of the most astounding displays of mass hysteria and rioting ever witnessed in the city's history. Vast and unruly mobs massed in the streets. Women wept openly.

The cause: the death of Rudolph Valentino. Lean, hot-eyed and Latin, Valentino was every woman's dream. On screen and off, his smouldering glance ignited fierce sexual fires in millions of women. He was The Great Lover, the man who made sex a four letter word.

But only a few have known the closely guarded truth about Valentino. Only a few have known why his first wife left him before dawn on their wedding night; why his second wife threatened him with blackmail; why he was haunted by a dark secret until the day of his tragic death. Here is the scandalous truth—uncensored at last!

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