



The Perfect Lover

by HAROLD QUEEN

In the gaudy, fantastic Twenties, mass hysteria surrounded the life and death of Valentino, sultry silent-screen idol

IN THE LITTLE THEATERS that feature old-time films, Rodolpho Alfonzo Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla still plays to packed houses.

Thousands of aging matrons remember him as the *beau ideal* of the 1920s—the decade of the Charleston and Al Capone. Some 35 women named their children after him, and three others committed suicide on his account. Indeed, few figures of modern times have inspired the mass hysteria that swirled about the life, loves, and final curtain call, at 31, of Rudolph Valentino, “The Perfect Lover.”

The supple, olive-skinned son of an Italian veterinarian was both the expression of his era and in a sense its part-creator. He gave the language a new word—“sheik”—to describe the great brotherhood of street-corner musketeers who pomaded their hair and grew long sideburns in imitation of their hero.

When he first flashed across the screen in flowing white burnoose, women everywhere rushed to purchase Sheik hats and frocks, Sheik cosmetics and handbags. He gave the tango its greatest lease on life in America, and few survivors of that dim age fail to remember the hand-wound phonographs grinding out *The Sheik of Araby*.

The Valentino cult frequently took more exuberant turns. The platinum slave bracelet he wore on his wrist, his reported communications with the other world, and his extravagances fed a steady stream of material into the newspapers and magazines of the day. In his public



appearances, admirers often stripped him of hat, tie, pocket handkerchief, even cuff links.

When his second wife, Natacha Rambova, left for New York during an enforced separation until his divorce became final, reporters on the train intercepted his telegrams and rushed them into headlines before she had seen them.

When the couple later appeared together in a nation-wide dance tour, thousands gathered at sidings to catch a glimpse of them in their special railway car.

The Sheik's acting rated high by standards of the silent screen, and it is likely that he would have done equally well in talking pictures. His pantherish grace, exotic features, and sturdy physique contributed to the actual tremors many women experienced when seeing him on the screen.

The young Italian had the added faculty of completely absorbing the personality of his screen characters. In preparing for *Blood and Sand*, he studied the art of bullfighting with a retired toreador, spoke nothing but Spanish, grew sideburns, and learned to walk and swagger like a true hero of the ring.

The prime reason for his extraordinary appeal, however, lay in the fact that, to millions of moviegoers, the name Valentino spelled romance. In the workaday world of Harding and Coolidge, he was the high lama of escape. For the small price of a ticket, he secured for his devotees temporary admission to a dream world of daring gallantry and erotic suggestiveness.

This talent lifted the dark-eyed tango partner from the dance hall to a Hollywood manor, a stable of exotic foreign cars, and the title of "The Screen's Greatest Lover."

The man to whom these honors came was born in southern Italy in 1895. In 1913, his family packed

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him off to the New World, where, according to legend, he landed a job as a bus boy and dancing partner, with meals thrown in.

This was the age of Irene and Vernon Castle, and the dance craze was sweeping America. So Guglielmi turned professional, making the vaudeville circuits of the period. In 1915, when Italy entered the war, Rodolpho applied for the Italian Air Force but was turned down because of poor eyesight. A try at the British Royal Flying Corps brought similar results.

Finally he joined a musical company making its way to California, but when he landed in San Francisco, both job and income ended. It was at this point that a friendly screen actor, Norman Kerry, thought the young Italian had film possibilities and staked him to an apartment near Hollywood.

FOR A TIME, Valentino (whose name by now had changed), went unrecognized. He took bit parts at \$5 a day and lived sparingly. Gradually, he got better parts and salaries up to \$150 a week.

In 1920, Rex Ingram, casting for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, selected Valentino as Julio, the story's young Argentine hero. In the film, Valentino danced the tango, and when *The Four Horsemen* opened in New York, word filtered back that he was sensational. Valentino promptly asked for a \$50-a-week raise and was curtly refused.

A woman, E. M. Hull, had written a book, *The Sheik*, describing love and lesser matters on the Sa-



Valentino

hara Desert. When Valentino appeared in the film version, sheik became a national byword. Ten thousand letters a week jammed the star's mailbox. His salary leaped to \$1,000 a week.

Valentino's succeeding films, and particularly *The Young Rajah*, involved him in a battle with his employers, whom he accused of putting him in inferior productions. The result was a court injunction banning him from stage or screen until he fulfilled his contract. He and Rambova then undertook the dance tour, which was sponsored by the makers of a beauty clay.

The salary, \$7,000 a week, enabled him to maintain his well-publicized extravagances, which sometimes landed him in debt by as much as \$100,000.



When he returned to the screen after a two-year absence, Valentino found that, if anything, his popularity had spurted. Millions came to see him in *Monsieur Beaucaire*, *The Sainted Devil*, *The Cobra*, and as a Cossack in *The Eagle*. He was separated from Rambova, and the public took avid delight in his new emotional attachments—Vilma Banky, and later the tempestuous Pola Negri.

For the New York opening of *Son of the Sheik*, thousands waited in a withering heat wave. Some 4,000 more gathered at the stage door to mob their idol, who was making a personal appearance.

It was the summer of 1926, and a somnolent nation sought distraction in the Hall-Mills murder case, *Abie's Irish Rose*, and the swimming of the English Channel by Gertrude Ederle. On August 15, Valentino, then 31, was quietly reading the Sunday papers in his hotel suite when he suddenly clutched his side and collapsed. He was rushed to

Valentino

Polyclinic Hospital where four physicians operated for acute appendicitis and perforated gastric ulcers. Peritonitis set in the following day.

In the week that Valentino lay battling for his life, thousands of calls and telegrams, gifts and nostrums for his recovery poured into the hospital. A special information booth answered hundreds of personal queries each day. The press carried special bulletins from the battery of doctors.

On the eighth day, a priest pressed a crucifix to the actor's lips. Two hours later, Rudolph Valentino passed away, while thousands milled in the streets below. But no friend, relative, or business associate was at his side.

Next morning, a crowd of 600 gathered at the funeral parlor where Valentino lay in state. Soon police were having difficulty controlling 10,000 people, including women dressed in widow's weeds.

When the doors opened at 2 o'clock, the crowd surged forward, bowling aside police and invading the parlor. The great window of the establishment suddenly gave way, spraying glass, and three policemen and a photographer were gashed. Police and undertakers in cutaways and white gloves battled the hysterical mob. Riot calls flashed out, and the huge reception room of the funeral parlor was converted into an emergency hospital, with two doctors working on the injured.

Upstairs, Valentino lay in a \$10,000 bronze-and-silver casket. Guarded by police, groups of 75 to 100 were herded swiftly to the coffin room. There, each mourner was allotted a two-second glance, then hustled on his way.

The rioting continued until midnight, when the doors were closed. But thousands lingered until early morning, and when the melee finally ended, more than 100 people had been injured, 15 seriously.

Next day, 200 officers were on hand to control a crowd expected to swell to 200,000. By midmorning, the line was 15 blocks long. This time, Valentino's followers were comparatively orderly, but only a relative minority approached with a sense of reverence for the dead. Flappers giggled as they neared the coffin.

On the third day, when a mob

Valentino

of 5,000 again rioted, S. George Ullman, Valentino's manager, ordered the public display ended.

The curious gathered again when Pola Negri, Valentino's reputed fiancée, stepped from the 20th Century Limited after a dramatized dash across the continent. Miss Negri, in a specially designed mourning costume, screamed and collapsed at the coffin.

There was a brief revival of interest in this event; but public attention already had shifted to the official welcome for Miss Ederle, fresh from her successful plunge. Not until nearly a year later did the public find another hero on whom to shower its emotion. On May 20, 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh flew the Atlantic.

Rudolph Valentino's life and death typified an era that received its own sudden and unexpected deathblow three years later in the gray canyons of Wall Street. Escape and romance had had their greatest fling in the history of America. As things turned out, perhaps the Sheik might never have been able to gallop successfully across the black sands of realism that followed him so shortly after his passing.

