



He was the object of desire for women all over the world, but silent-screen star Rudolph Valentino was happiest in the company of his four-footed companions.

HEARTTHROB'S

By Brian Duggan

HEART DOGS

Valentino was America's first Latin lover—women wanted him and husbands were threatened by him. Called a "sexual menace" by admirers, his critics dismissed him as a "pink powder puff." When he narrowed his eyes on screen, women melted—and still do. Yet, at home, Valentino preferred cooking family-style meals for friends and riding horses or walking his dogs.



Rodolfo Guglielmi was born in Castellaneta, Italy, in 1895, and while no biography mentions boyhood dogs, it is almost inconceivable that the son of a rural veterinarian would not have had at least one as a pet. He loved riding horses and working with cattle, but convinced he had a glamorous destiny, Rodolfo gave up animals in 1912 and left for the bright lights of Paris and New York.

Sharing rooms and eating cheaply, Rodolfo overspent on fashionable suits to give the impression he was *someone*. He got small parts in silent pictures, but in those days olive-skinned men were relegated to crowd extras or heavies, as the ideal hero had the same pale complexion as the heroine.

The sultry Argentine Tango was all the rage in New York and could have been invented for the graceful Rodolfo—who created palpable erotic tension on the dance floor. He paid his rent by working as a "taxi dancer" in nightclubs, and women were smitten by his handsome looks and Continental manners. Success was still beyond his reach and he often spent his last nickel to be "seen" at clubs while going hungry or sleeping on park benches. The

promise of more stage and film work lured Rodolfo to Hollywood in 1917—where he would change popular culture forever.

Rodolfo Guglielmi became Rudolph Valentino—who dressed flamboyantly in borrowed clothes and took Sunday beach strolls in a white bathing suit with a friend's brace of white Borzoi. To be noticed, he sat in the right hotel lobbies, hung around studios, and went clubbing.

Valentino's screen presence in a bit part and his tango artistry landed him the starring role in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921).

Cast as an ill-fated, aristocratic gaucho, Valentino dances a smoldering tango and eventually goes to fight in the trenches of France. His electric performance drew women into theaters, and later that year he starred in *The Sheik*—the film that made him a star and gave him the means to indulge his love of animals.

Valentino was perfect for the menacing but sensual Ahmed Ben Hassan in the adaptation of the hugely popular novel of the same name. Similar to today's *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the scandalous book would eventually codify the theme of a civilized woman being repelled, but eventually won, by a noble savage—who in this film, owned a dog. Ahmed





greet his Harlequin, lop-eared, Great Dane lounging by the desert tent. Among the many dogs he would acquire, Valentino did have Harlequin Danes, and it is possible that he was celebrity enough to have his own dog in the film.

Valentino's second marriage was to costume and set designer Natacha Rambova (his first stalled at the wedding night), and pets filled their Hollywood bungalow. Natacha's favorite was Valentino's Christmas present—a Pekingese named Chuckie. Before stardom, Valentino had made do with the dogs of his friends and even the sled dogs on the set of *Uncharted Seas* (1921). Now he owned pairs of German Shepherds (Marquis and Sheik), Great Danes (Valentino and Brownie), and Cane Corsos given to him by admirers in Italy. They had birds, a gopher snake, a green monkey, and a lion cub named Zela who followed Valentino around like a puppy and persistently opened latches to go out on her own walks.

The exotic foreigner in *The Sheik* was a new kind of romantic hero—dashing, costumed, openly passionate, and free of Western social constraints. Women on both sides of the Atlantic abandoned pale matinee idols and sighed, "I'd give anything in the world to be carried off by a Sheik!" A stream of costume films, magazine features, dance exhibitions, and cosmetic and health



promotions kept Sheik Valentino constantly in the public eye, but he lamented that his fans often prevented the simple pleasure of walking his dogs.

With Fame Came ... Puppies

Now a genuine star, Valentino made swashbuckler films and lived extravagantly with no heed to restraint. His collection of horses and dogs grew and were genuine objects of affection. Frequently photographed with his dogs, Valentino acquired popular breeds and once tried to purchase an entire Saluki litter from England to establish a kennel, but eventually settled for just one. He had an Irish Wolfhound with the amazing name of Centaur Pen-dragon, and a black Cocker Spaniel named Mission Valentino from the mayor of San Francisco, but his favorite was Kabar—a Doberman Pinscher given to him by a Parisian impresario.

Valentino loved to travel and frequently would choose Kabar or one of the others to go along in motorcars, trains, and ocean liners. Natacha always had at least one Pekingese with her and bought three more in England and five in France. After the Pekes damaged a ritzy hotel room, Valentino had to appease the manager as well as pay extra for the furniture stained by his hair pomade.

In 1925 Valentino bought a Spanish-style house with even bigger quarters



Rambova and friend

for his horses and dogs, called it Falcon Lair, and filled it with antiques and art. He and Natacha had grown apart and they divorced that year. Valentino was only 30 but stress from the separation, hard work, and attacks from hostile press gave him stomach trouble. Not one to sleep in an empty bed for long, Valentino and femme fatale Pola Negri became lovers.

With box-office clout, he sometimes cast his dogs in his films. That year, he made *The Eagle* and played an avenging Cossack outlaw who is seen in camp with his Greyhound. It was probably his own Mirtza, as still photos from the set show Valentino in costume with her.

The year before sound came to motion pictures was the last of Valentino's life. In 1926, *The Eagle* was released and he filmed *Son of the Sheik*, where he played both the elder Ahmed Ben Hassan and his son. Valentino insisted on riding an Arabian stallion in the film and borrowed the famous Jadan from breakfast-cereal magnate W.K. Kellogg, who owned an Arabian horse ranch in Pomona. Arabian hounds were wanted, but a pack of Greyhounds were used as stand-ins for hard-to-find Salukis. In the film, Sheik Ahmed rides home from hunting with his pack, and one of them, Valentino's unmistakably marked Mirtza, follows him up the manor stairs and inside to be seen in a few interior shots. It was the last film for her master.

Valentino went to New York to promote the film and collapsed in pain. The ulcer he had been ignoring had finally perforated. He underwent surgery but succumbed to peritonitis and cardiac complications. Valentino died on August 23, far from Pola and his dogs.

The nation's women went into mourning and the mob at his funeral service in New York made newsreel history. Valentino's body was taken to Los Angeles, where a second crowded service was held before it was entombed in the Hollywood Memorial Park. Valentino's skyrocket had fallen back to earth.

Valentino's manager, George Ullman, had the Herculean task of sorting out the estate. The star's opulent lifestyle and profligate spending had left massive debts. Ullman auctioned off the custom-built automobiles, art, furniture, books, antiques, armor, tapestries, and horses. Valentino's 12 pedigreed dogs were valued at \$10,000 (including the Danes, and an Irish Setter given to him by William Randolph Hearst), but only three were sold. Despite Valentino's blazing popularity on the screen, the net from the two auctions fell far short.



Valentino with Centaur Pendragon and Haroun

HE TOOK
BEACH
STROLLS IN
A WHITE
BATHING
SUIT WITH
A BRACE
OF WHITE
BORZOI

Kabar, disconsolate, was presented to Valentino's brother as memento. In 1929, Kabar followed his true master in death and was buried with ceremony in the new Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park. The famous Lady in Black, who annually placed a bouquet on Valentino's tomb, was also said to have periodically left flowers on Kabar's grave.

Tales of ghostly manifestations at Falcon Lair began to circulate and séances attempted to contact Valentino. The supernatural aura around his death encompassed even the faithful Kabar.

Stories persist today that visitors to his grave occasionally hear panting and have their hands licked when they stand before the weathered bronze plaque that reads simply:

KABAR
MY FAITHFUL DOG
RUDOLPH VALENTINO
OWNER

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