

When RUDY Was A Boy

The Wild Days of Valentino's Childhood are told for the First Time

By
Hiram Kelly Moderwell

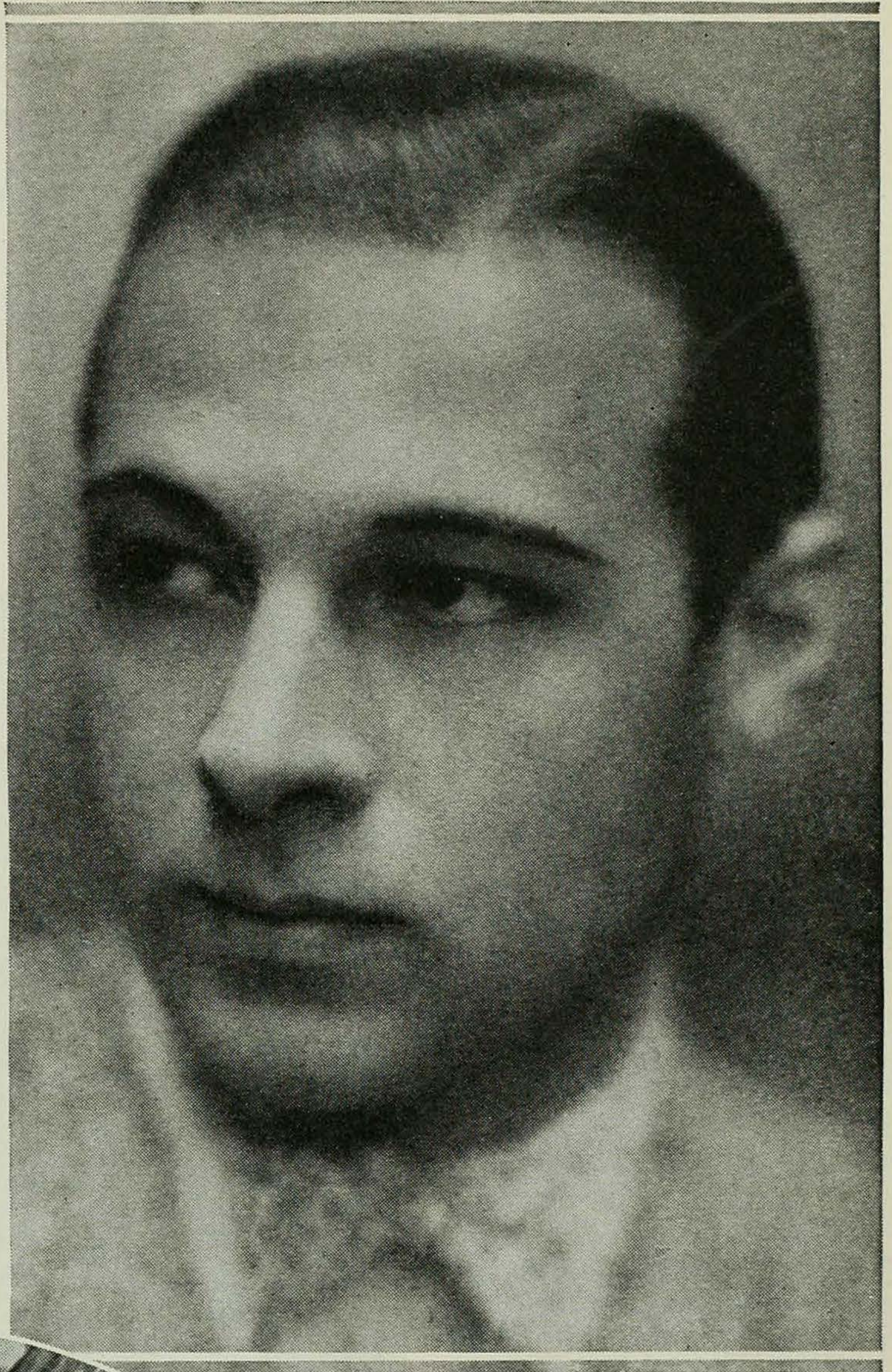
(Mr. Moderwell is a well known author, as well as being special representative of a leading Chicago newspaper in Rome, Italy. Mr. Moderwell spent weeks investigating and checking the early days of Rudolph Valentino in the little south Italy village of Castellaneta. He talked with Rudy's boyhood friends, the family doctor, the nurse, Rosa, and others who knew the screen star intimately. Mr. Moderwell has obtained a wealth of interesting facts about the childhood of the ill-fated film idol.)

WH O is the most beautiful woman in Castellaneta?"

The speaker is eleven-year-old Rodolfo Pietro Filiberto Raffaele Guglielmi, the town bully. He is standing with clenched fists amid a group of small boys in the main square of the agricultural village of Castellaneta, near Taranto, in south Italy.

"Rosina Maria," answers one, loyal to his sweetheart.

Bing! Rodolfo's fist lands on the boy's jaw. Another blow and another. The boy is on the ground, blubbering and half uncon-



Rudolph Valentino, then Rodolfo Guglielmi, at eleven was the daredevil of Castellaneta



Valentino was born in the small room above the door of this white corner house

scious. He knows the required answer, but his loyalty forbids him to give it. Rodolfo lifts him bodily and throws him into the town fountain. The boy sinks, rises to the surface, and Rodolfo, red with rage, pushes him under again.

Once more he rises. This time he knows he is licked. He gives the correct answer.

"Donna Gabriella," he blubbers. He is permitted to crawl out of the water, sit on the coping, and get his breath.

Donna Gabriella is Donna Maria Berta Gabriella Barbin Guglielmi, the French mother of Rodolfo Valentino, who 20 years later died in New York calling on her name.

The villagers of Castellaneta are full of such reminiscences as this about their Rudolph, who was born in their town and lived there until, at the age of twelve, he moved

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with his family to Taranto. When I went there, on learning that the great lover was dead, I expected to hear touching stories of his affection for school-girl sweethearts, or memories of a beautiful, dreamy lad petted and cherished by soft-hearted women. Not at all! The anecdotes told by his boyhood friends, Alfonso Patarino, who is now studying engineering in Naples, by Giuseppe Tamburrino, by Giacomo De Bellis, and especially by the village doctor, Cavalier Michele Converso a close friend of the Guglielmi family were all about the town bully, the town mischief-maker, the incorrigible bad boy of whom everybody said that he could come to no good end.

YET it is not surprising that Rudolph Valentino was not a boy flirt. Boys who are "mushy" in their early youth rarely grow into the type of man who fascinates women. And Italian boys, especially, rarely show sentimentality toward girls of their own age until they are thirteen or more. Then, under the hot Italian sun, they develop with astonishing suddenness into full-grown men and lovers.

But what kind of lovers men become is largely established by their traits and experiences of early youth. Modern psychology has taught us this. So I wondered what could have been the formative experiences which created the man who in the feminine imagination of the world is the perfect lover.

The reminiscences of the Castellaneta folk answered the question. No doubt a professional psychoanalyst would demand a more intimate knowledge of his infantile experiences and his boyhood dreams. But the chatter of his boyhood friends gave a reliable outline of the process by which a sheik is made.

One of Rodolfo's stunts which is best remembered in his village is the way he taught the smaller boys to be "brave." He used to 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, and catch them by the arms the instant they thought they were about to be dashed to death on the pavement below.

THIS strain of cruelty is in the authentic sheik. It is a trait which captures many women's imagination. They will deny it, of course. But secretly they love to dream that the man who loves them is a man whose passions are so uncontrollable that all who incur his displeasure are in danger of suffering for it, even they themselves.

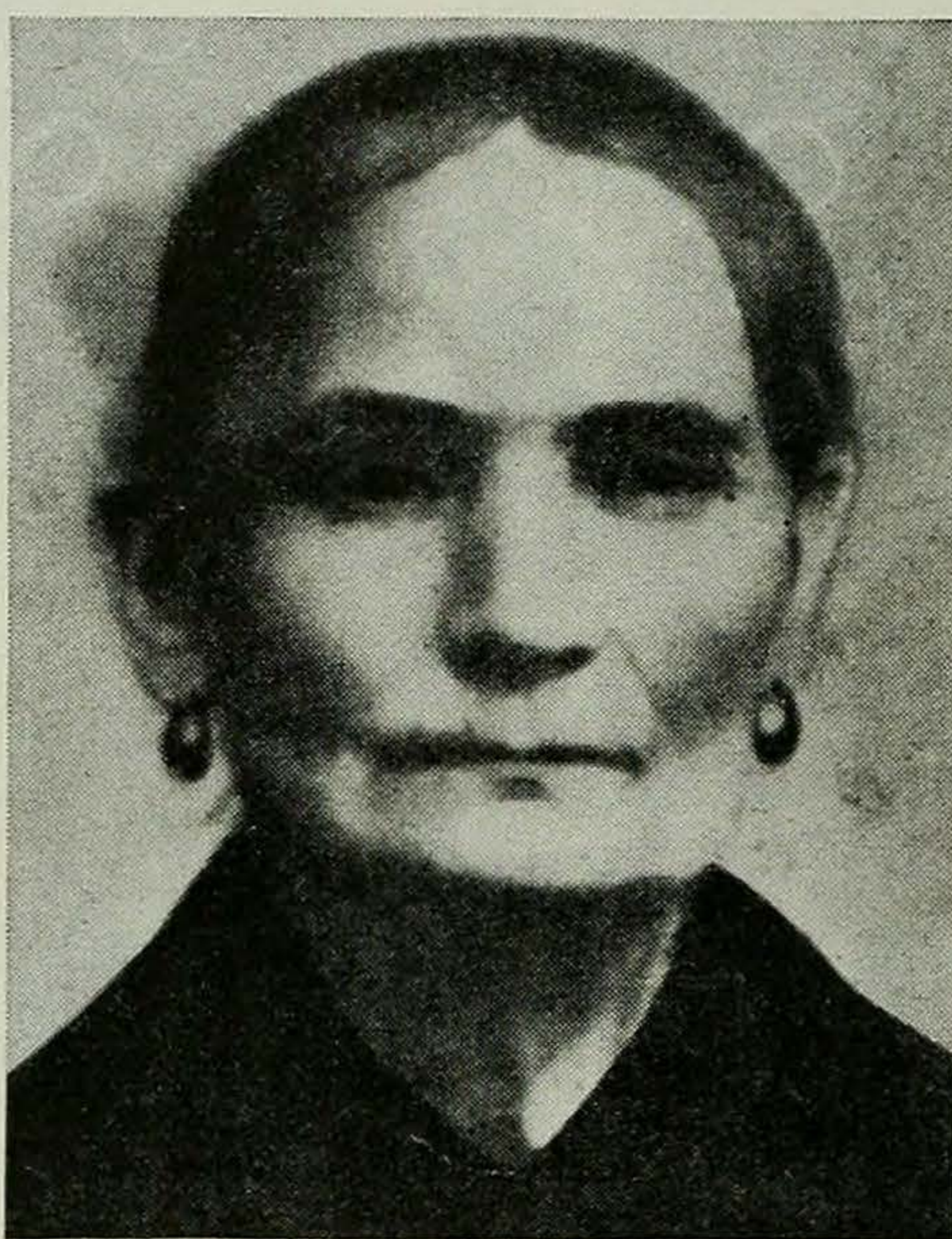
What else is the make-up of this sheik? Physical strength, of course. But not merely the prizefighter's brawn. The prizefighter is not supposed to have much discrimination in the selection of his sheba. Rather, what the woman craves is that sort of strength which we call vitality. This, physiologists say, is a matter of chemistry rather than of muscle; it is the ability to transform one's food into energy at such a *tempo* as to pro-

duce energy, daring, and endurance far beyond the ordinary.

Besides this vitality and the fascinating dash of cruelty, the sheik must have fearlessness, cleverness, and the gift of dominating men. For no woman wants to believe that her lover is an average man; he must be a chieftain, a conqueror.

Every one of these qualities Rodolfo Guglielmi manifested in his boyhood. He did not show at all, so far as his townfolk can remember, the gentler and stabler qualities which are commonly commended.

Dr. Giovanni Guglielmi, Rudolph Valentino's father, came of excellent family.



Rosa, Valentino's babyhood nurse, who tells interesting tales of Rudy's childhood

He was the son of a famous civil engineer who built some of the most difficult railroad bridges in south Italy. But some gypsy streak, whether in his blood or merely in his temperament, made Giovanni Guglielmi a wanderer. He came to Castellaneta with a circus. There he fell in love with Donna Gabriella Barbin, a school-teacher of French extraction and, it was said, of noble family. He settled down perforce and took up his trade of veterinary, which took him all over the region curing the peasants' donkeys or writing them their love letters. He was a "gran' signore," perhaps the most eloquent and learned man of the village.

But the gypsy streak got into his son Rodolfo, and with it restlessness, unruliness, defiance. The father punished with terrific severity. He would lock him without supper in a dark closet and listen unmoved to his passionate beating on the door. The legend of the father's severity still exists in Castellaneta. More than any other one fact, it explains what sort of boy Rudolph became.

This violent antipathy—relentless struggle between father and son—is a commonplace of early childhood. Modern

psychology has a name for it; it is the "Hamlet complex." And it is, the psychologists say, nothing less than an infantile form of jealousy—the boy's resentment of the fact that his father is the favored admirer of his mother. The child struggles against this, not fully realizing the cause of his emotion, but stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the humiliation of inferiority to his rival.

OF course, he is inferior in physical strength. The father can punish him in any way he chooses. So the boy, to soothe his wounded vanity, must dramatically demonstrate his superiority over other boys. In short he becomes a bully, and the more cruel the father's punishment is, the more passionate and pitiless is the boy's need to prove to himself and to others his superiority over other boys. Rodolfo adored his mother. And so he got his keenest pleasure in demonstrating his superiority over other boys on the pretext of defending his mother's name against all detractors.

That is why he went around the village daring anybody to say that there existed any woman more beautiful than Donna Gabriella.

His passionate refusal to acknowledge anyone's superiority over him made him hopeless in school. His teacher, Signor Parroni, said that he was quick at learning, and had an iron memory, but that he refused to submit to the routine of schooling. Two sisters of the village who tried to make a tractable pupil of him said that they used to punish him by placing him in a barrel with only his head protruding through a hole in the top. But he never willingly submitted; sometimes, such was his strength, he broke the barrel and escaped.

HOW Rudolph Valentino got the vitality which sustained his tireless revolt against authority is not to be explained by psychoanalysis. This vitality is one of the miracles of nature which seem to happen more frequently in Italy than elsewhere. Italian history shows a long line of such supermen, with Leonardo da Vinci, Master of all the arts and sciences; Napoleon (a full-blooded Italian) conqueror of Europe; and the Dictator, Mussolini, who is personally directing nearly everything and everybody in Italy.

But it is the experiences of infancy which determine how this vitality shall express itself. Rodolfo's father used to punish him by refusing to give him pocket money. The boy, smarting with a sense of injustice, developed the cleverness (another sheik trait) to get the money for himself. He went to the stationery store, where his father had a charge account, and bought things on credit, then sold them for what he could get in cash. With the money he bought candy.

Candy was his boyhood passion. He could never get enough sweets. Perhaps this is to be explained by the fact that

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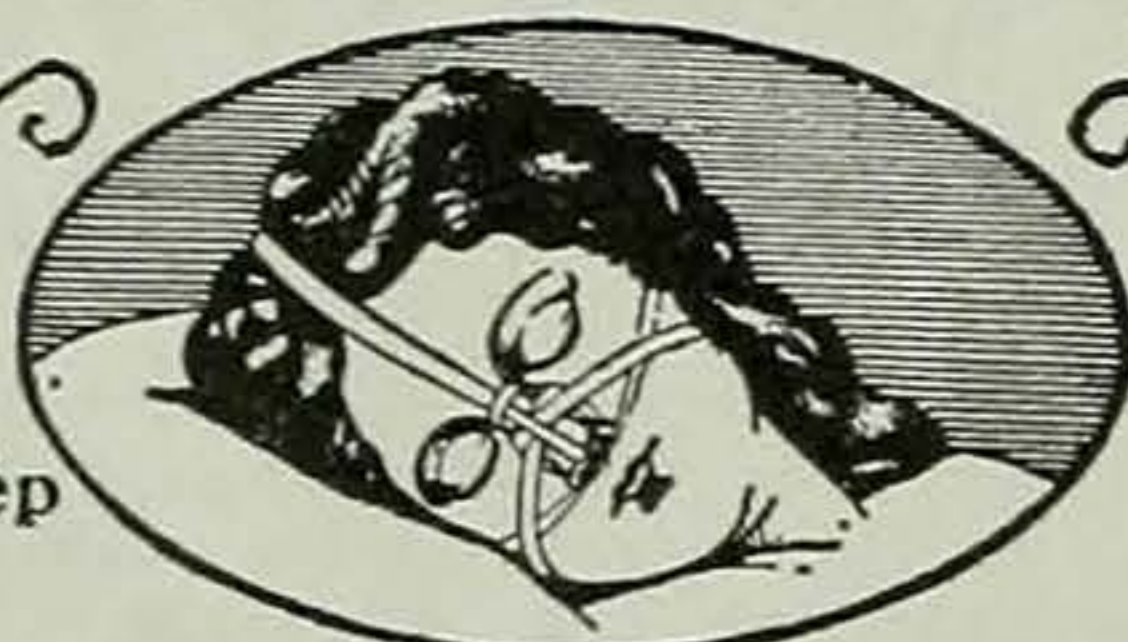
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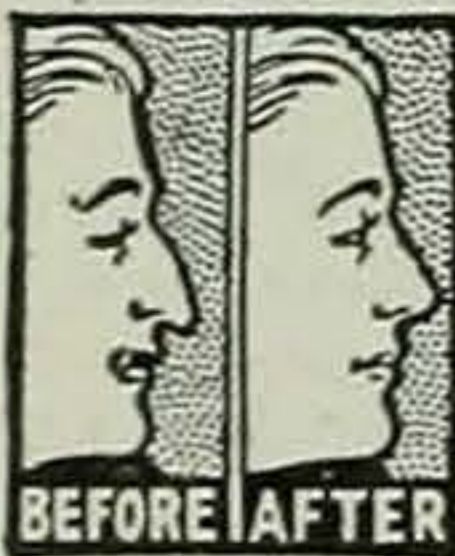


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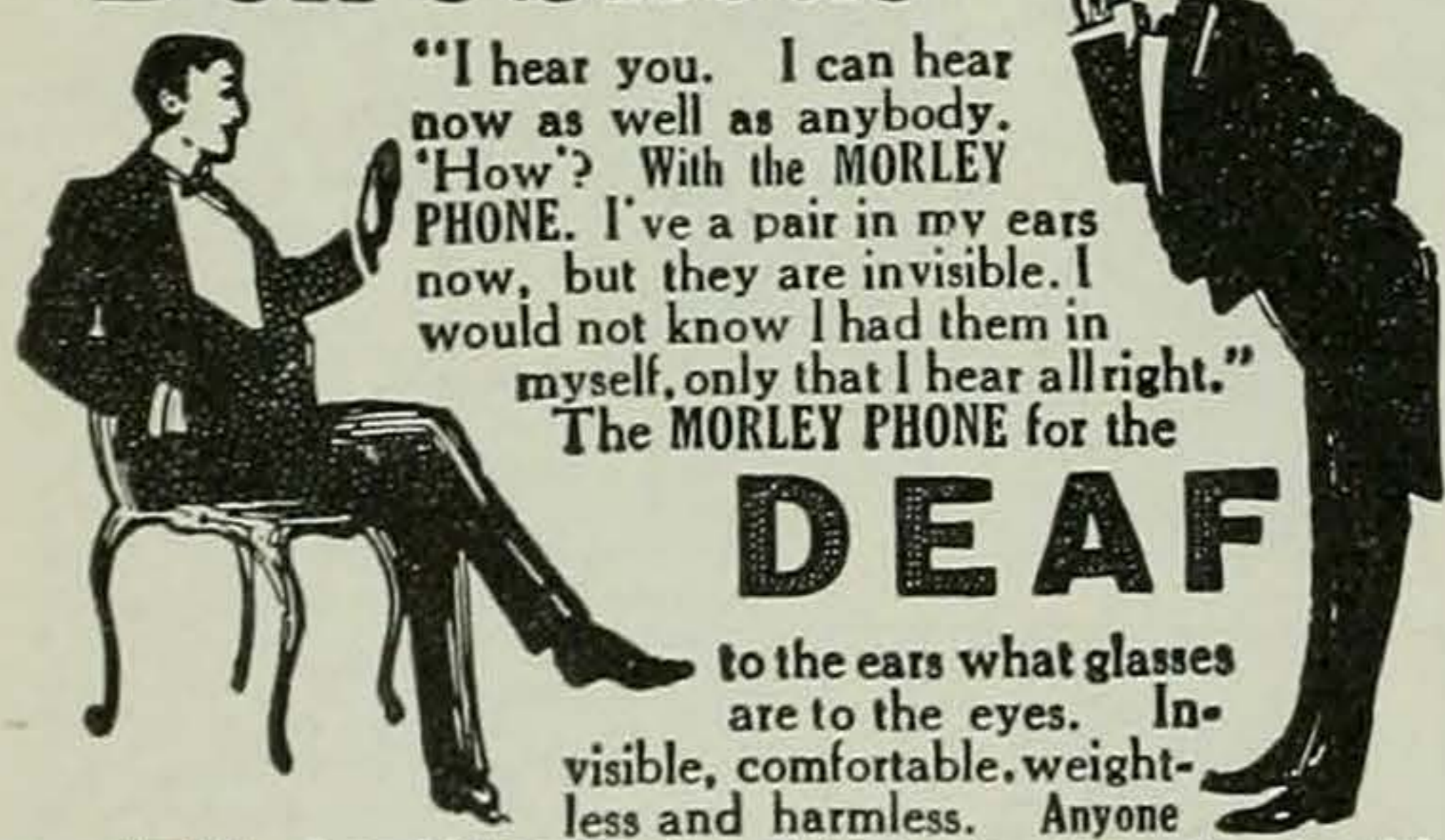
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sugar is the physiological supplier of energy—and his supervitality required an extra supply.

His desire for sweets, and for demonstrating his cleverness and daring, made of him, the townfolks say, an accomplished thief. But not a thief of the ordinary acquisitive type. The candy which he stole was distributed with signorial generosity to his friends. And once, at least, it served his passion for inflicting pain. He offered a piece of candy to a smaller boy, and then, when the first bite was taken, snatched it back; the boy broke into tears, and was consoled with another piece of candy, whereupon the process was repeated, until little Rodolfo had sated his lust for power.

OF course, Rodolfo organized a club of "bandits" with headquarters in the many caves of the romantic gorge of Castellaneta. He was, needless to say, leader of the gang. He used to ask the boys of the town, his fists clenched the while, whether he was not a greater bandit than Musolino, the legendary Robin Hood of Calabria. The boy who denied it nursed his bruises at home.

But there was one person, above all others, to whom he loved to give his candy. That was his nurse, Rosa. Rosa has no last name. At least she has forgotten it and the townsfolk never knew it. Rosa was, next to his mother, the idol of his boyhood.

Rosa, when I finally found her in Castellaneta, was placidly riding her donkey on her way to her vegetable garden. She is now nearly seventy and she showed an old woman's suspicion of a stranger. But once her confidence had been obtained, she poured out reminiscences of her Rodolfo.

ROSA didn't like sweets. But when Rodolfo brought her a gift of candy, he insisted on her eating it. For the true sheik must dominate not only his rivals but also the woman he loves. Sometimes he stole bright colored ribbons for her, and she would accept them in order, the next day, to return them to the original owner. Any boy to whom Rosa was friendly received a beating. The youthful sheik showed the jealousy which is but the other side of romantic love. Once, in a jealous rage, Rodolfo threw at Rosa one of the copper kettles in which Italian women carry water on their heads. She bears the scar on her chin to this day.

Rosa told of the time Rodolfo rode bareback a wild donkey whom nobody else could mount—and stayed on. She told of the time he stretched a rope from the balcony of his house to that of the house opposite, and walked across it, fifteen feet above the pavement. She told of the days he played hookey, and of his long periods of absent-mindedness.

A bully and a dreamer. Such a boy could hardly be a favorite in the town.

Castellaneta breathed a long sigh of relief when he left. .†

When he returned, one day two years

ago, in a high-powered motor car, accompanied by his sister and sister-in-law, nobody wished to recognize him. He asked for Rosa; she could not be found. He sought out the family which had been friendly with his father and mother; they were cool to him. It is a point of honor in Italy that those who become rich shall give money to their native town, and Valentino had failed to do so. He found one woman who gave him a cup of coffee. He wrote a grateful line in her visitor's book, cleared away the vines and photographed the grave of his baby sister Bice, in the village cemetery, took a snapshot of the central square, visited the monument to the Unknown Soldier, and—within two hours of his arrival—departed.

But now Castellaneta is proud of him. Within twenty-four hours of his death the following handbill, printed in enormous letters and deeply bordered with black, was posted everywhere in the town:

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 ardours of our land and was proclaimed the sovereign of the cinematographic art.

RODOLFO GUGLIELMI

has 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. Every day newspapers and magazines from every corner of Europe and America report the delirium of acclaiming multitudes.

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.

Now he is no more and we feel the need of commemorating him.

HE BELONGS TO US AND THE EYES OF ALL THE WORLD ARE FIXED ON US EXPECTING THAT HIS REMAINS MAY BE WORTHILY PRESERVED IN HIS NATIVE SOIL.

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 being rendered to the hero of art, such as few in the world have received, and Castellaneta remembering him sorrowfully offers him the last and best tribute of affection.

The Committee.

Castellaneta, Italia.