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THE PHANTOM PHOTOPLAY

by TERVA GASTON
HUBBARD



"He lifted her high above his head and with a mighty heave threw her clear to the side-wall of the tent."

MARTINI is dead! I gazed at the headlines dumbly. If I had been a woman I'd have cried. Hundreds of women did. Thus it was that the bud of fame was clipped from the life-bush by Time's ruthless pruning knife.

I arose from my canvas chair, picked it up by the high-back and read the sign painted thereon: "Stanley Milton, Assistant Director." I sighed. That sign I would keep for a souvenir of my short reign in the Kleig-light kingdom of the great director Parmelee.

I knew that I was not liked, though I didn't know why. I knew that my job would pass with the passing of Parmelee's super-picture, *The Reign of the Raja*. And now, a million dollars were wasted, five thousand

people were thrown out of work, and Stanley Milton would lose his position, because one man, Rosoff Martini, idolized by women and envied by men, had died.

Martini had been friendly with me. Perhaps that was why I'd been made assistant. We belonged to the same athletic club, attended the same affairs, played in the same poker games, and admired the same "master," O. Henry. His admiration for O. Henry, I surmised, was one merely of amused respect while mine approached idolatry. I was a slave to the O. Henryesque, to the surprize, the sudden turn. There had never been a hitch in our friendship until one day . . . I borrowed five dollars.

Who's Who proclaimed Martini an Italian, but somewhere under that

Greek profile, that olive skin, and hair of brilliant jet, I'm sure there lurked a bit of Jerusalem because—

Well, in the first place I hate to borrow money, but in the second place I positively abhor giving it back, and it is because of this latter eccentricity that I hesitate to borrow. But when you're out on location in an immature desert and you've just dedicated your whole stack of blues to a straight and someone disrespects your dedication with four queens, why, a man has to do something to retaliate.

So I borrowed five dollars from Martini.

Martini had won the pot before the dedication or he'd never have let me have it, but he couldn't very well refuse a loan of five dollars when he had four stacks of blues and two stacks of reds and whites.

This desert I spoke of was the stretch of rolling sand that lies between Del Rey and Venice, about a quarter of a mile from the ocean, and when a couple of tents had been erected and a dozen palms imported from the studio storehouse it made a vast Sahara where Abd-El-Krim himself would have been proud to cache his stolen women.

It was on this location that Martini first developed signs of the infirmity that finally led up to the headlines on the paper I had in my hand. He was doing the bedroom scene with Hazel Donner—a brand new star just graduated from a beauty pageant—in which there was the usual brief struggle of young womanhood protecting her virtue from the magnificent brute. He had to lift her up bodily and fling her to the divan, a distance of about eight feet, and as the utmost care had to be exercised to prevent injury to Miss Donner, the entire strain of the piece of business fell upon Martini.

Martini's usual way of working was to walk through his "business"

with Miss Donner under Parmelee's direction without emotionalizing, let her get absolutely "set," and then when Parmelee was ready to "shoot," do his "business" from inspiration. This inspirational work always turned out more satisfactorily than the usual "grind." But on this particular Tuesday Martini and I and four others had poker-faced until 4 a. m. and—I had borrowed that five dollars.

I don't know whether it was the five dollars, the lack of sleep or the heat that put Martini in a bad humor. But anyway, he couldn't get his inspiration to work and they'd gone through the "throwing business" until the divan and Miss Donner were nearly wrecked, not to speak of the Raja himself. Parmelee's voice grew louder, and the more he barked the darker became the scowl on Martini's face. Finally, in a terrific effort to "caveman" Hazel Donner, he lifted her high above his head, shouting, "By God! I'll get it right this time!" which wasn't the scene caption at all, and with a mighty heave threw her clear to the side-wall of the tent.

Miss Donner wasn't hurt, just scared a bit. Luckily the tent wall was staked down to keep the wind from flapping it and she'd bounded back and landed full length on the divan. It was a marvelous bit of "business" and the climax of the scene, and Parmelee was so overjoyed that he hardly noticed the crumpled Raja on the cushioned floor. Martini often lay down to rest after a hard scene.

But I had a faculty for finding trouble. There was something awkward about the position in which he lay, and Martini was never awkward, on the set or off. I walked over, feeling constrained to humor him because of that five dollars. His eyes were closed, his lips pressed so tightly together that they were pale through the rouge. That didn't in-

dicate much—probably anger. I couldn't see the olive skin through the grease paint on the set features, but—his ears were white, dead-white.

"Call Dr. Grey!" I shouted. It was orders like that, which I gave without consulting Parmelee, that made my job unsafe.

An hour later Martini lay, still unconscious, in the Oil Refinery's Emergency Hospital at El Segundo, a station just south of Del Rey.

Dr. Paxton, the surgeon, was on his way from Los Angeles. Dr. Paxton was a specialist. It was a small matter to him. A little ether, a little snipping and cutting, the cursory examination of a small hard object, a few stitches and a bill in due time reading, "Removal of Appendix—\$1,000.00." Dr. Paxton always charged that amount.

Dr. Paxton had never lost a patient. But, perhaps he too had played poker until late Tuesday morning. Dr. Grey thought he had been careless.

Dr. Grey was merely a physician. Dr. Paxton was a surgeon. However, Dr. Paxton called in Dr. Graham. Dr. Graham called in Dr. Maxwell. Dr. Maxwell called in Dr. Myers. The bill doubled, tripled, quadrupled, but consultation after consultation failed to stop the pleurisy, which was followed by septoendocarditis, peritonitis and—

I looked again at the headlines on the paper. It was a *Record "Extra."* I could hear shouts outside the deserted studio. Boys were calling other "Extras." The death of Martini was worth a dozen "Extras," while if I died I'd get one line in the obituary column of the evening paper. It wasn't right. I didn't mind dying, but before I stepped out of the picture I must see at least one photoplay title followed by the caption, "Directed by Stanley Milton." I must. And I would—somehow.

I read the paragraph in bold type

under the picture of Rosoff Martini: "Mr. Martini was insured for \$1,000,000, which only partly covers the loss sustained by Cinemagraph Company on the unfinished picture, 'The Reign of the Raja,' which was two-thirds complete. Martini's estate is left to his brother."

I hadn't known there was a brother.

So Rosoff, dead, was worth a million to Cinemagraph. An odd thought struck me. I laughed. Rosoff, dead, was worth a *five* to me. I still owed Martini five dollars. He had once said at a banquet in a moment of eloquence, "I always pay my debts, and I always collect them—*one way or another.*" The last four words had a pugnacious sound, but I couldn't imagine the handsome Raja fighting for anything except in one of Parmelee's tempestuous scenes.

I LEFT the deserted set, walked through the outer office and stood in the doorway leading to the street. The whole place seemed to be in mourning. Even the office girl was missing. I walked over to the swivel chair behind the desk and sat down. I'd enjoy my last day in Cinemagraph's employ. For once I'd be king. I propped my feet upon the roll-topped desk. From my hip pocket I dragged my cigarettes. They were crushed, but I took little note of that. A five-dollar bill was wrapped around the package. Its green was soiled by the burn of a cigarette. I recognized it as the bill I had borrowed from Martini. I wondered how it had gotten out of the bill-fold where I had placed it with the others that I won—after the *dedication.*

Then I laughed. Here was one debt that Martini would never collect—*one way or another.*

Somehow I began to realize that I never had been a friend to the Italian. He had been only a tool by which I should accomplish my ambi-

tion. Now that he was dead it didn't matter *one way or another* and—I still had that five dollars. That thought rolled through my mind till I was feverish.

A shadow shut the sunlight from the doorway. I looked up from the five-dollar bill. The shadow was Rosoff Martini!

Hastily I crumpled the five in my hand. He would never get it. Never. The boaster! The braggart! He always collected his debts! Then I laughed again, a loud, unnatural laugh. How could I laugh naturally in the presence of this man? He was dead!

Martini's face was immobile. "Hello, Stanley," said the lips. He disregarded my laughter.

I was afraid of that frozen face, and those eyes without a gleam of light. I tried to jest. "Why don't you lie down?" I asked.

His lips moved again, "Why?"

"You're dead! Why don't you lie down?" I tried to bellow with laughter but my throat was dry.

"No," was all he said.

I showed him the paper. He read the headlines without taking it from me. I was perspiring, brow and body; even my hands were dripping hot liquid. Events raced through my mind. Perhaps I had caused the death of Martini. I had borrowed the five dollars. That had put him in a bad humor. He had strained himself and—died. I clinched my hands tighter. Something was between them. I looked down to see blood, and saw—a five-dollar bill. I felt eyes boring into me. I unclenched my hands and flung the crumpled greenback against the wall.

"Take it and go!" I screamed.

His eyes did not leave me.

"I have come to finish my brother's picture," he said.

That calmed my mind. For ten minutes I talked to the man I would

have sworn was Martini if I hadn't known Martini was dead.

Finally I asked, "Does anyone else know your resemblance to your brother?"

"No," said the lips, "they think we're the same person."

"Would you mind working for me instead of Parmelee?" I dared to say.

"You *were* Parmelee, on this last picture. You"—he paused significantly—"and the master, O. Henry."

I was surprised and pleased. He continued:

"And besides, you *were* my brother's—friend." He hesitated on the word.

"Yes, his best," I assented quickly. I had formulated a plan by which I would gain my ambition. Only one thing lay in the way. Money! As if in answer to my thoughts there came this statement.

"Don't worry about money. My brother's estate falls to me and I, too, have some of my own."

"It'll take half a million," I said, breathing fast.

"Easy," was the answer. Things were going too smoothly.

"Why," I asked suddenly, "are you so willing to do this?"

"I am like you," he answered coldly: "I want fame. I have money. I have looks. I want fame. You have the ability to finish that picture. Unfinished, it is worthless. You can buy it for a song. I'll pay for it."

This wasn't the plan I had in mind. It was better.

"But everyone knows you are dead," I said without thinking. I laughed at my mistake. "I mean your brother."

"Good advertising," he stated. "Martini comes back from the grave to finish his picture!" Then he almost smiled. "You know I'm to be buried next week."

I marveled. This man was a genius. But he was heartless. He

would do anything to take his brother's place. Suddenly a wild thought struck me. I paused significantly.

"How did you kill your brother?" I said between set teeth.

"I poisoned him," was the calm answer.

"Suppose I tell," I suggested, surprised at my own calmness.

"You won't," was the quick reply.

"Why?"

"Because you've too much at stake. You've a chance at fame, as I have. When you buy the picture it is yours. Parmelee has no more call upon it. You won't tell. You were glad my brother died because you owed him five dollars. You won't tell."

I gasped, "How did you know?"

"I know you won't tell." He combined the two speeches.

"No. I won't," I said, and picked up the five-dollar bill.

WITH Martini's money I bought the picture. Parmelee laughed at me when he heard about it. "Get out O. Henry's Scrap Book," he taunted, "and give my work a new twist." My muscles tightened, not at the bidding of my own will but at that of another, my master. I controlled the desire to choke Parmelee. Words hissed through my teeth; I could not keep them back; "I will give it a new twist."

I started my sensational advertising. I rented the studio for two weeks, rehired the supporting cast at a cut in salary, and began "shooting." The only trouble I had was in the scenes with Miss Donner. She complained about "working with a dead man." My advertising had its effect.

"He's not really dead," I argued. "Can't you see it's a stunt?"

"He is dead," she insisted. "His lips are cold as ice."

There's no arguing with a woman. I knew it was the man's nature to be

cold. Hadn't he poisoned his own brother?

The day Martini was buried his brother didn't show up at the studio. At first I was puzzled, then furious. And the following morning when he arrived on the set I began, "Why the devil weren't you——?"

He cut me short.

"My dear Stanley," he almost drawled, "you can't expect a man to miss his own funeral."

I was in a fever. This mixup in personalities was getting on my nerves.

But finally, after ten days, the picture was finished. I hadn't allowed Parmelee within sight of the studio, and instructed all employees to absolute secrecy. I had to discharge one man to teach the rest a lesson. I had the whole supporting cast believing that Martini was a phenomenal "double."

In another week the picture was ready for release. I heard rumors from the cutting room that there was something queer about the film and I took Martini with me to look at it. The film seemed all right. The figures were as clean-cut as any I'd ever seen.

"What's the matter with it?" I asked.

"Nothing, only"—answered the cutter, looking queerly at Martini—"in Martini's scene with Miss Donner you can't see——"

He didn't finish. His eyes widened like saucers and he fell forward in my arms.

"Fainted," stated Martini coldly. "Too hot in that cutting room. You see there's nothing wrong with the film. Just his overtaxed mind."

He held the film up for my inspection. I could see nothing wrong.

"Let's go to dinner," said Martini, "or we'll be late for the preview. It's 6:15 now."

"George," I called. George was my assistant. I had given him my

canvas chair with his name printed on the back.

"Yes," said George, always at hand.

"See that everything is set for the preview at 8:30."

"Right!" said George.

THE Four Hundred of Hollywood were at the preview en masse. In fact there were as many in the street as there were inside.

"We should have hired an opera house," said Martini, who was in good spirits.

I tried to be the same, but something seemed amiss. I felt that the air brooded expectancy. I was cold and uneasy when I should have been glorying in my coming fame.

I left Martini in his seat and rushed up to the projecting room.

"Is everything all right?" I asked breathlessly.

"All ready to go," was the answer. "I'm running the O. Henry story first."

I was startled. "O. Henry!" I stared.

"Yes. An O. Henry two-reeler. We've previewed two before. This one is taken from his short story, *The Unfinished*—"

"Run *The Reign of the Raja* first," I cut in. "That's the feature. O. Henry can wait."

It was almost unholy to put aside my master like that, but I was burning to see my work on the silver screen.

I flew to my seat on the aisle. It was taken by one of the crowd. Martini's seat was occupied, but not by himself. I looked around bewildered. "Polite, all of a sudden, to give up his seat like that," I muttered.

I could feel the eyes of Hollywood's aristocracy upon me. I bowed—silly of me to bow from the aisle—I should have waited for the end of the picture. Maybe someone had

pushed me over into that foolish bow. A titter flowed over the house and from some spot one hysterical cackle. I hastened to the rear of the house, and from the "Standing Room Only" watched the unfolding of my masterpiece.

I had left unchanged the part of the picture directed by Parmelee and added that of my own, but the opening captions read, "Directed by Stanley Milton." After all, the credit was mine. Why share it?

I heard comments all about me as the plot unfolded, but the part in which I was intensely interested, my part, had not arrived. As my first scene drew near I looked hastily about for Martini. It was impossible to find him in that sea of faces. I read the caption of my big scene between Miss Donner and Martini's men where she is brought back after her escape from his tent. It was good. I liked it. So did the audience, I was sure. They were spellbound.

Martini's men begin the salaam, backing out the front of the tent and leaving Miss Donner expectantly awaiting the entrance of the Raja. This was the second big love scene, and equal to the "throwing scene" that had evidently caused the death of Martini. There was an expectant hush as the tent-flap was drawn back by an unseen hand. A close-up showed the look of horror in the eyes of Hazel Donner. Then, Miss Donner played her tremendous emotional scene—alone upon the screen. The tent-flap had drawn back, but no one appeared. Hazel Donner beat someone's breast, but no one could be seen. She was picked up sobbing and carried to the inner room, but no one carried her.

The audience was gasping. And I—I was paralyzed.

A flood of cold air passed over me. That one hysterical cackle was repeated—in my ear. I looked around.

Staring eyes and gaping mouths were all turned toward the screen. A woman beside me automatically fanned herself. I could smell sweat; someone was reeking with it. But I was cold—cold.

Dimly I heard the clicking in the projecting room above me. Something clammy passed across my eyes and left them watery. I shrank back, closing them. Through my quivering lids I saw the words, "one way or another."

I forced my eyes open and stared again at the screen. "Miss Donner was still being carried—and no one carried her."

Suddenly I remembered I was the director. Martini was late for his cue. He should have come into the picture when the flap of the tent drew back. Why didn't he? I heard that cackle in my ear.

"You don't expect a man to miss his own funeral?"

"Martini!" I shouted, whirling.

"Get on the set. You're late. Get in the picture!" And louder, "Martini! For God's sake, you'll ruin me! Martini!"

I felt eyes, hundreds of eyes, staring. The whole house was on its feet leering back at me. I could *hear* the silence. I leaned against the wall for support.

A laugh sounded in front of me. "That new twist," someone barked. "Page O. Henry." It was Parmelee.

I was weak. Something was pulling at my knees. I lost all enmity for Parmelee. A feeling of compassion for those who didn't know the master surged over me.

"Parmelee," I said gently, knowing he would *never* understand, "you don't need to page O. Henry. He is here." My hand sought my heart, and stayed there.

"So he is," barked Parmelee, looking flippantly toward the screen.

The Unfinished Story, an O. Henry two-reeler, had begun.