



# BLIND HUSBANDS

**MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT BY MONT ALTO MOTION PICTURE ORCHESTRA**

**DIRECTED BY ERICH VON STROHEIM, USA, 1919**

**CAST** Erich von Stroheim, Francelia Billington, Sam De Grasse, and Gibson Gowland **PRODUCTION**

Universal Film Manufacturing Co. **PRINT SOURCE** Austrian Film Museum

**“**If we are not very much mistaken, *Blind Husbands* will introduce to the industry a new ‘super director’—Erich von Stroheim. Unlike many other directors who aspire to the ranks of the fortunate, he is not a near-Griffith, a near-De Mille, or a near-Tourneur. His work is quite in a class by itself.”

— Agnes Smith, *New York Telegraph*

Agnes Smith was not alone. Until the coming of Orson Welles, *Blind Husbands* was the most impressive directing debut in Hollywood history. And even today the most surprising, as no one was expecting to see great things from Erich von Stroheim, best known for throwing a screaming infant out a window in one of his many World War I propaganda pictures. How Stroheim made the leap from obsolete Prussian villain to the peer of Griffith and DeMille is a long story, or actually many different stories, sometimes told by the man himself, sometimes by historians who spend decades sorting fact from fantasy.

Stroheim insisted that a director should only work on material with which he was personally familiar and expected his audiences to approach his films as part of an ongoing biographical narrative. If he plays the handsome prince on screen, that’s because he is recreating moments of his own history. If he plays an Austrian cavalry officer on holiday in the Dolomites, that’s because he was one of those, too. As a Hollywood personality, he

expects to be forgiven for a bit of embroidery, some artistic touches to make things more interesting. What his wives thought when he put this same mask on for them is another matter. When he married Margaret Knox at her family home in Oakland in 1913, he boasted in the marriage certificate that his mother was the Baroness Bondy. Not true? Well, Margaret swore in the same document that her age was eighteen, around half the actual figure. A typical von Stroheim document, filled with alternate facts.

Stroheim had been spinning stories like this ever since he landed in New York in 1909, one more impoverished foreigner claiming an elevated status that could never have been his back in the old country. But things changed when he arrived in San Francisco in 1912 and began waiting tables at the West Point Inn on Mount Tamalpais. That’s where he first met Margaret, the woman he claimed introduced him to the work of Stephen Crane and Edgar Lee Masters and encouraged him to put those stories on paper. A few years later, in Hollywood, he could draw on the resources of Universal and MGM and send those stories around the world. And who better to play the handsome prince?

His climb through the ranks in Hollywood was slow but steady, and eventually he created a niche for himself as stuntman, assistant director, technical expert, and heavy lead on films like *Intolerance*,





*Reaching for the Moon*, and *The Heart of Humanity*. By 1918 he had cornered the market for Prussian villains, but the end of the war dried up those roles. Worse, he had alienated his contacts on the Fine Arts lot, killing any further chances with both Griffith and Fairbanks. When the Spanish Flu tore through Los Angeles that winter, Stroheim fell victim to that as well. Now separated from his second wife, Stroheim was nursed back to health by the family of Valerie Germonprez, an aspiring actress and hand model whom he married in 1920. According to Germonprez, she convinced him not to abandon the picture business and encouraged him to write a new style film for the postwar era. She remembered the first draft taking only two nights and a day.

Avoiding Universal's bureaucracy, Stroheim appealed directly to "Uncle" Carl Laemmle himself, the one studio head likely to cut a fellow German-speaking immigrant a break. There are various accounts of how he managed this, but Stroheim agreeing to work cheaply could not have been the only reason. Laemmle recognized something good when he saw it. *Blind Husbands* was far more expensive than the average Universal production, with a negative cost of \$112,000 topped by another \$140,000 for prints and advertising. Laemmle approved the construction of an entire

Tyrolean village, location trips to both Big Bear and Idyllwild, and a comfortable shooting schedule that dragged on from April 3 to June 12, 1919. This was serious support for an untried director, a no-star cast, and a property that wasn't even pre-sold.

*Blind Husbands* is a film about the manners and mores of resort living, where social inhibitions relax amid the pagan splendor of the mountains. An American couple are vacationing at Cortina d'Ampezzo, a mountain resort in the Dolomites. Stroheim had spent time in this area in 1903 (although not as part of any military service) and would have heard tales of the legendary Innerkofler family, pioneer mountain guides who first mastered many of the local peaks and ran the best hotels. Stroheim dedicated *Greed* to his mother, but his first film, *Blind Husbands*, is dedicated to mountain guide Sepp Innerkofler. How to explain this? And why did Stroheim apparently confuse Sepp, who died a war hero in 1915, with his uncle Michel, the Innerkofler really lost on Monte Cristallo in 1888? "Silent Sepp," the mountain guide played by Gibson Gowland (later the star of *Greed*), doesn't have much to do here, but the character appears to have cast an especially long shadow in Stroheim's imagination.

Cortina d'Ampezzo had been attracting German and British tourists for years, although not so many Americans as the film suggests (Ernest Hemingway didn't turn up until the 1920s). The area was already an established destination by 1891, name-checked in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* when Hedda brings out her honeymoon album, with its pictures of the Dolomites and Val d'Ampezzo. Her husband seems to have spent most of the trip researching his boring new book, and Stroheim's blind husband is equally obtuse. Though early reviews linked it to Schnitzler and Sudermann, this Stroheim film seems to belong more to Ibsen. A natural movie location, the area around Monte Cristallo inspired everyone from Leni Riefenstahl (*The Blue Light*) to James Bond (*For Your Eyes Only*). But that was later.

The film describes the location as "on the Austro-Italian frontier," which is one way of putting it. Part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the war, this was now Italian territory, the result of four years of brutal mountain combat. Indeed, the region's recent geopolitical history is not addressed at all here, and promotional material sent out by the studio tells us that the action takes place "three years after the end of the present war"—that is, sometime in the future! In this land of legend there are no battlefield markers and American tourists are ubiquitous, comfortably sharing the sights with a vacationing Austrian military officer, Lt. Eric von Steuben.

But while *Blind Husbands* may be a film about vacation hijinks at a mountain resort, I think it has less to do with Cortina d'Ampezzo than it does with the rugged landscape of northern California, where he stayed for two years and learned to live as an American. Winning the older and wealthier Margaret Knox during his time on Mount Tamalpais was only the beginning of the story. When that marriage collapsed in the summer of 1914 he fled to another mountain resort, Lake Tahoe, where he

worked for the summer rowing tourists around the lake, handling their horses and frying their fish.

According to stories he told his friend and biographer, Tom Curtiss, Stroheim made a special friend of one of these vacationers, a Mrs. Bissinger, "wife of a California millionaire." Impressed by his continental charm, she agreed to back production of a play he had written to the tune of \$500 (almost \$14,000 in today's money). How Mr. Bissinger figured in this equation is unknown. The play was a disaster, but by then Stroheim was already in Hollywood.

Carl Laemmle's gamble on this romantic mountain triangle paid off handsomely. At a time when the average Universal feature netted some \$55,000, *Blind Husbands* earned \$327,000 in its first year of release (a financial windfall that also distinguishes it from Welles's debut). And that figure doesn't even include its popularity overseas. In 1924 Universal reissued the film in a streamlined version that removed about nineteen minutes of footage. They did this without much damage to the plot, but reducing the length of individual shots and eliminating atmospheric footage seriously affected the pacing and milieu detail so characteristic of Stroheim's work. That cut was supplied to the Museum of Modern Art in 1941 and was subsequently regarded as the standard version. Then in 1982 a tinted nitrate copy dating from the original European release was acquired by the Austrian Film Museum. Struck from the same camera negative, this version was longer than the 1924 release but had suffered cuts of its own. The current restoration incorporates footage from both copies, with intertitles drawn from a surviving studio release continuity.

— RICHARD KOSZARSKI