



# LON CHANEY AS THE MAN WHO LAUGHS - An Alternate History for Classic Film Monsters

*Philip J. Riley*

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Lon Chaney became a top star with his portrayal in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1923. Carl Laemmle announced to his exhibitor's, in 1924, that Chaney would sign to do one more pictures before he started his contract with the newly formed Metro-Goldwyn company. To capitalize on the *Hunchback's* huge success he wanted to combine the names Victor Hugo and Lon Chaney and proudly stated that the project was Victor Hugo's "The Man Who Laughs". Meanwhile at Universal City, treatments and scripts were being prepared and contracts between Chaney and Universal were being drawn up by Universal's lawyers Loeb and Loeb. All was going smoothly until Laemmle returned to California and found out that no one had secured the rights to *The Man Who Laughs*. The production came to a dead stop. Chaney suggested *The Phantom of the Opera* and Laemmle happily agreed, since he could still use the standing sets from the *Hunchback* and having met with Gaston Leroux, the author of the *Phantom* he was familiar with the story. It wasn't until 1928 that *The Man Who Laughs* rights were secured and production started but with a complete new cast and crew. The role previously meant for Chaney was taken over by Conrad Veidt and Mary Philbin, who was scheduled to play the part in the Chaney version, resumed her starring role as Dea, the blind girl in love with Gwynplaine, who as a child had his face disfigured into a permanent grin by a sadistic band of gypsies. Gwynplaine grows up and is a great success as a carnival attraction. Unknown to everyone, Gwynplaine is actually the son of a Peer of England, whose father had to go into exile to escape the wrath of the King of England. Also included in this volume is a facsimile of the complete 5 chapter story from *Liberty Magazine*, by Adela Rogers St. John, "Lon Chaney, Portrait of the Man of a Thousand Faces" published in 1931, 9 months after his untimely death at age 47.

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