



SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

September 1929

VOL. LXXXVI

NO. 3



Charles Chaplin

A PORTRAIT

BY WALDO FRANK

Loving the world he lives in and despising it, Charlie Chaplin, the idol of millions, moves through life as through his pictures, a lonely figure. Waldo Frank here presents a close study of Chaplin which explains his nature and his hold on the American people.

I

CHAPLIN's eyes are a blue so darkly shadowed that they are almost purple. They are sad eyes; from them pity and bitterness look out upon the world. They are veiled: while the man moves forward with irresistible charm, his eyes hold back in a solitude fiercely forbidding. No one who sees the eyes of Chaplin could feel like laughing. They are the one part of the man which does not show in his pictures.

For fifteen years these eyes have looked out on Hollywood. Much nonsense has been written about this suburb of Los Angeles, which is itself a suburb of the country. America reviles it as an indecent stranger somehow lodged in its midst, or romanticizes it into a scene from the "Arabian Nights." But, of course, Hollywood is no worse a place than any provincial city of our land; nor

better. Hollywood's producers are typical money men; its directors are typical professional men; its actresses and actors are typical girls and boys. Its army of mechanics, craftsmen, engineers, are the usual American sort: grime them up a bit, lower their wages, and they would fit into your town garage. Hollywood's swarms of aspirants buzzing about the lots are typical floating seed of the American jungle: the wastrel seed that finds no soil to root in, whether it rots near home or blows away. Only in one respect is Hollywood unusual: its girls are really as fair as all girls would like to be.

Hollywood is the perfect mirror of banal American success. Ordinary souls dream extraordinary dreams—in the way of ordinary souls. And in Hollywood the dreams come true. Here is

uncounted money, here is glamour, here is the exact mechanical production of that ideal to which success means a show. And Chaplin, with those frightening eyes of his, which almost no one ever sees, looks out upon this world, his home since he was twenty-four. There is another world which he looks in upon: the gray, grinding London of his childhood. He loves the London slums; for these slums were his and they are in his heart. But on his mother's side the blood of Chaplin is half gypsy. Through her, whom he brought from England to live near him on the coast, yet another world lives in him: a world of meadows and irresponsible laughter.

In the city of success he carries with him the taste of the London slums. But even there he was not at home: even for that sad past which formed his body and his mind he has a grim, ironical refusal—since there, too, the gypsy in him was a stranger.

This counterpoint of sympathy and denial is our first clew to the man. The drawing-room of his house is packed with bibelots, pictures, bric-à-brac sent him by the admiring splendor of the world. Here are tributes from Chinese mandarins and from the royalty of Europe. And here too, on the wall, hang a few colored lithographs of Whitechapel and Wapping. Chaplin loves to take these from the wall. They depict streets that are like some cold inferno, in which the people stir slowly like souls stripped of all save the capacity to suffer. Watch his eyes as he looks at this picture of his childhood world. They are at once too soft and too hard. The emotions of understanding and of refusal are separate in them. In this room I once sat with Chaplin while the Comte de Chasseloup exhibited to us what are perhaps the most terrible photographs in the world:

close-ups in progressive detail of tortures and executions which he had collected in China. We looked on the deliberate process of men being carved alive—as a butcher quarters a calf. We saw faces black with the horror of their pain, and then white with the relief of death. And in Chaplin there was the same counterpoint of feeling. His eyes took in the tremendous pity of these portrayals of man's way with man. Suddenly his eyes hardened; he jumped up, and his mouth was cruel. "There's humanity for you! By God, they deserve it. Give it to them! That's man. Cut 'em up. Torture 'em! The bastards!" . . . The pity he had felt was intolerable to him. He summoned hardness to wipe it out: to save himself from this danger of being overwhelmed. Chaplin does not wish to give himself to any emotion, to any situation, to any life. Life draws him too terribly for that. Whatever he feels must immediately arouse its opposite; so that Chaplin may remain untouched—immaculate and impervious in himself.

With this same reserve he moves through Hollywood. He is no recluse. His secret apartness is far subtler than that. He frequents the Coconut Grove at the Ambassador, where the slightly decayed youth of the coast ferments in dance. He sits for hours in the smoke of his friend Henry Bergman's restaurant on the crowded boulevard. He goes to parties—to those of his friend Marion Davies at her Beach House, to those of William Randolph Hearst at his ranch. And wherever he goes he is the life of the crowd. He acts, he mimics, he plays, he insists on amusing and on being seen. But always there is the same immediate wavering away from the life about him and from the effect he produces. He does not give himself nor does he really take. Above all, he does not aggressively re-

fuse any advance or emotion. He is non-committal.

Intactness—this is the principle that best explains the balance of opposites in feeling, conduct, thought which he sets up. He is like an atom that must journey alone through the world. It moves an intricate course, swerving here and there, myriadly attracted, myriadly repelled, seeming to give, seeming to respond—always remaining free and alone. A direct refusal of the world about him would mean a definite relation with it. This is not his game. If the world draws him, he responds—passive. His course has been swerved, but he is uncommitted. He resolves every force with its opposite. Emotionally this means that he frustrates in himself every impulse of utter giving or of utter taking. He remains unpossessed and ultimately unpossessing. But this deep frustration is the key to his profound success. Do not pity him for it. He is no pitiable creature.

With sure instinct Chaplin has guided his personal life through channels where he would be always alone. He loves the world he lives in, and despises it. He does not want to change it: no man is farther from the fervor of the prophet, and yet few men have done so much to show it up as ridiculous and worthless. He does not want another world. He uses this one, just as it is, in order to insure his aloneness. But, were he really alone, he would meet in the silence of himself some acceptance which would prove his unity with the world. So he courts the world, and dwells in it, in order to frustrate such a possible self-encounter.

There was a time when Chaplin seemed to me a kind of fallen angel: an angel cursed by God with all human feelings and with the inability to

fulfil them: cursed with the gift of evoking laughter and love and with no power to take laughter and love to himself. But this was a sentimental error. The inordinate tenderness of the man, his gentility and grace, are checked by his native rejection of the self-bestowal to which such qualities must lead. Hardness and ruthless egoism are as primal in him as the generous emotions. He refuses to be lost in any synthesis of love. He must remain the atom of himself. And in his perfect poise *between* the forces of the world—the poise of opposites—this is what he remains. And this is what he wants.

What he wants Chaplin has infinite resources for getting. The shrewd technic of his art is but a phase of the same art in his life. This is the man who, when he was first approached with an invitation to enter pictures—untried and unknown—jacked up the initial offer of seventy-five dollars a week to twelve times that figure. "I saw they were anxious," he explained to me. "When I said to them, 'I think I'll study philosophy; I don't care for acting,' I saw them go white. That's how I knew what I was worth." And this is the man who, three years later, when Mary Pickford, Fairbanks, Griffith, Hart, and himself were in danger of being shamefully exploited by the business end of the game, gathered them all together into "United Artists" and preserved a fair portion of the treasure to the men and women who were doing the work. Chaplin is endowed with consummate powers for connecting with the world. "I'd make a great banker," he once told me. He is intelligent, so intelligent that he intuitively grasps the abstruse currents of modern thought, æsthetic, political, even philosophic. He is sensitive, so exquisitely that the gamut of hu-

man joy and pain plays endless responses within him. And he is passionate and earthy, a lover of good food and of women and of racy words. All these gifts naturally conspire to make him one with the world. Yet there is in him this dominant need to be one only with himself, to submit to no marriage, to let himself be lost in no union, to which his mind and sense impel him. What, in this diathesis, can he do? He can keep on moving. He can make his life a constant journey through the inconstancy of impressions which, if he dwelt with them, would bind him. He can make of his life an *escape*.

II

The life, then, of this first master of the motion-picture, is motion. His art is the treasured essence of his life. The theme of the Chaplin picture is Chaplin himself, in relation (opposition) to the world. He journeys through it, immeasurably roused, solicited, moved—yet aloof, yet intactly alone. The form of the Chaplin film is his own body, set off by the world: his body made into a mask behind which the man, all intact, goes slyly and painfully on his impervious journey. And the plot of the Chaplin film is merely some sequence of episodes in this constant opposition of himself journeying through life and never fused within it.

Of course it is not as easy as it sounds. Precisely because his work is the incarnation of his life-mood, of his life-journey, its birth is a delicate issue. In the beginning there is the atomic Chaplin, cast in some rôle that will motivate his passage through the required number of reels. But that passage—as pawnbroker's assistant, circus fool, convict pilgrim, fireman, seeker of gold, tramp, janitor, country bumpkin, etc.—that

passage must be blocked out with events. Each foot of the film is an event, an encounter between Chaplin and the world. Since the art is to be the essence of his life, it too, like his life, must be completely *fleshed*; and must breathe! From each encounter, either with another person or with some inanimate object like a brickbat, there must rise visibly and palpably the personality of the entire journey. So each event of the film must be a work of art in itself. And there must be sequence, breathing, flowing, mounting. Each event must rise into the next until the mass of events becomes a plastic music where each episode is a note. The whole tale is a motion of events to represent the journey of the man—his escape, intact, through the myriad mass of life.

The mood of the tale, being intimately Chaplin's own, is carried within him. What he must wait for is the precise scale of episodes that will form the mood. Even when the events have come to him (the particular stunts of the film) they must be weighed and measured. Where do they fit in? Do they fit in at all?

This period of gestation is painful and long. Chaplin lies abed an entire morning. He broods, measuring the tentative "body" of his tale by the inner sense of what he wants. This sense is infallible, but it is inarticulate save as the completed picture will be its articulation. Chaplin does not know, he has no words for saying, the exact timbre and gamut of physical actions that will express this particular body of his life-journey. The picture will be his knowing. . . . Meantime, several miles away, his studio awaits him. It is a charming lot, several acres in size. Here lives Kono, the remarkable Japanese factotum who manages Chaplin's personal journey through

life, who serves as a kind of intelligent oil against the inevitable frictions of the inevitable encounters with stranger and friend. Here wait his general staff: Alf Reeves (who has been with him since music-hall days), Harry Crocker, Carl Robinson, Henry Bergman, Henry Clive, Roland Totheroh—possibly the director Harry d'Arrast, who once worked with him in Crocker's present place and who remains his chum. All these men are distinguishably sweet, sensitized, intelligent, aloof in the crass Hollywood world. (That world is full of workers who carry on after they have left him, bearing the stamp he gave them—Menjou is a celebrated instance.)

The staff all feel the tension of their chief. The strain, indeed, is so great that there are men in the "industry" who could not stand it. At last, possibly around noon, Chaplin arrives. The instant has come when he was ready. He has dropped into his clothes, stepped into the limousine which waits all morning at the door, with the engine throbbing. He is hatless, tie-less, and his vest is open. But the clothes are the most dapper product of the London tailor. He wears them, at work, like a gypsy. Even in this detail there is the meeting of the Chaplin opposites. Gypsy and exquisitely groomed young gentleman delete each other: leaving, as ever, merely Chaplin.

He joins his crowd in the little bungalow on the lot, where lunch is served and where he has his dressing-rooms. Tentative moments of the film are brought up, altered, discarded, readjusted. Chaplin paces, his face hard, his mouth half-open, his eyes far off in himself. Infinitesimal details are studied, rehearsed, discussed: gags, postures, meanings, properties, business. Walking up

and down, the little man holds in his head the film's inexorable rhythm, the inner logic of its growth. As the ideas fly back and forth, in words and mimicry, Chaplin brings them to the measure in himself: rejects or accepts.

There may be months of this. Nothing seems to be going. The corps of workers champ and chafe. Chaplin moves with his preoccupation through his habitual life: parties, dinners, wanderings about town, swift flights with friends, long hours alone. At last certain scenes, having withstood the critical pause, seem certain. Carpenters and plasterers get busy. Sets rise on the lot. Chaplin wanders about among the hammers, alone or with his group: judging, silent, suddenly exasperated, lost in a new angle of vision—giving sharp orders that destroy the work of weeks. A shot that cost a long journey to location (and \$50,000) will be ruthlessly scrapped. Later a scene will be repeated a literal hundred times; and, if the fifty-ninth time was right, each detail of it will be so clear in Chaplin's eye that he will reproduce it for the camera. Finally a thousand feet of photography will be collapsed into a yard so pregnant with the essence of the event that it will move, intact like the man himself, through all the world.

This perfect consciousness of Chaplin as craftsman would of course be less conspicuous in any other place. (In Paris, for instance, where men work with words and with pigment as Chaplin does with human masses, his *métier* is understood as merely the highest form of a common practice.) But Hollywood is a usual American town—not a capital of artists. And the studios of Hollywood confine their precision and consciousness to problems of mechanics and finance. They are monuments of æsthetic vague-

ness, intellectual nullity, artistic hit-or-miss. The usual story, to begin with, is an externalized contraption put together by the combined shrewdness of half a dozen wholesalers parading as writers, scenarists, directors, and producers. The actors have no accurate technic. The directors have no conscious control. In such a combination the chance artist is helpless and lost. When a scene is "pretty good" it is shot. And the result is the kind of flat approximation that feeds the dreams of the millions. But by the time Chaplin gets ready to rehearse a scene its precise place in the architectonic of his tale has been measured, even as the theme itself has been measured in his life. And as he rehearses he knows what happens. I mean that he knows the interplay of muscle, mass, space, and their focal value as the camera lens will catch it. He is no expert in photography. In his especial choreography he is supreme.

All organic life has a commanding, individual rhythm: the beat of a heart, the slant of a mind, the indecipherable stir of cells must go with that rhythm. Such an organic rhythm besets the consciousness of Chaplin, incarnating his subjective mood into a story. At the beginning, he knows the rhythm only. He has to grope for the episodes to flesh it. But when he finds his episodes he knows what he wants. And at the moment of shooting a scene he knows how to recall what he wants. And he can do this because, from the twist of a leg to the flicker of an eye, he knows how everything is done.

III

All this, however, has not explained what it is that Chaplin is doing. His work may be the incarnation of his personal escape from those trammels of life to which his sensitivity and capacity for

love expose him; his way of escape may be shrewd with all the shrewdness of his cockney-gypsy genius; and the æsthetic expression of that journey of his soul may be done with consummate craft. Yet the inward value of the entire adventure is not yet clear.

We can best approach the significance of Chaplin's art by considering another constant presence (besides himself) in his meditations on the story, in his conferences with Crocker and d'Arrast, in his rehearsals, in his final prunings, acceptances, and rejections. That other presence he always alludes to by a simple name. He calls it "they." "They" is the public. "They" collaborates unceasingly with Chaplin. "They" has the final veto over even Chaplin himself.

Of course a similar "they" seems to preside over all the lots of film-land. But in the usual studio there are a number of men pawing over the platitudes of the human race in the deliberate effort to concoct from them a pattern which the public will pay for. Chaplin too is a child of the theatre. And there is no theatre without a "box" in front. But in the studio of Chaplin there is, most really of all, a man of the people—a cockney, a gypsy, a music-hall fellow—who looks into the eyes of the world as in a mirror, in order to see *himself* more objectively and sharply. So it is that, coming to Chaplin's public, we return to the man. By means of this reflection we can see at last, in clarity, how he manages his escape and what it is which, behind the mask of "funny-legs," goes its immortal journey into the heart of the world.

Chaplin looks upon the world of to-day. He sees failure: poverty, agony, disease, chaos, fear, pitiful passion, pitiful love. He sees success: deceit, garishness, tinsel, boast, disillusion. He sees his own past in London—his mother in the drab

uniform of the poorhouse. He sees his own victorious present. He sees and feels too much. He is afraid of being lost in this world. There is a kernel of him that is neither this success nor this failure: a core in the man that can dance its own life if only it may remain alone. That is why he must escape; why he must look on all the invading world as an enemy and must hate it. Chaplin is a hard and princely fellow: his brow is strong, and his jaw and his mouth. But the modelling about his temples is girlishly tender, and the deepest spirit in his eyes is a retreating terror. He is afraid for that core in him of grace and loveliness and youthful dance. To protect it, he will fight—he will employ all his skill, all his hardness.

Now consider Chaplin's public, which is the modern world. In each breast live grace and loveliness and wistful dream. But in the common man that personal treasure of each heart cannot remain intact. Family, business, law, and war invade it. All civilization becomes a foe, trampling on this secret heart, dispersing its dream, bruising and breaking its love.

Chaplin, who has striven to keep it whole for himself, has made his fight for the world. Here, in his films, the grace and beauty of the human "atom" are visible once more. Behind the mask of Chaplin—behind the swinging cane, the ambling, painful feet, the tight-drawn coat, the cocky derby hat—marches the common loveliness of man—marches and journeys as it must through a hated modern world—dissociate from social forms, shabby, despised, pitiful, poor; yet miraculously intact and miraculously triumphant.

Rousseau, I suppose, perfected this tragicomedy of the modern world, with its dualistic conflict between beauty and

civilization, between love and man's habitual life. Marvellously gifted, he gave to the world its rationale for the impulse to creep back into a mythic childhood, to worship the self at the expense of the towering forms about it. As Mr. Lardner might say: "Jean Jacques started something." Charles Chaplin has finished it. (Even the cut of his comic coat recalls the romantic century—the age of Alfred de Musset.) The cult of loveliness at war with the sobrieties of life could beget no greater art than this journey of Chaplin carrying beauty untouched through an atmosphere of heavy institutions, of brickbats and policemen. French intellectual, London clerk, Chinese coolie, Mexican peon, Park Avenue child, in the common distress of their submission to a world too full of money to leave room for singing and for dancing, can gaze together at this secret triumph which Chaplin has enacted for them. His song explodes their oppressive world. His primitive refusal to "grow up" in the "respectable way" becomes the modern spirit of revolution.*

IV

In the old days Charles Chaplin worked not less meticulously but a good deal faster. His theme has always been the exact transcription of the mood of his life. But when his life was simpler the bridge to his work was more immediate. It was easier for the man to remain impervious, intact, virginally himself. The instinctive operation of his will had found no invasion too bruising or too

*Arturo Mom, the Argentinian writer, tells us that Lenin once said: "Chaplin is the only man in the world I want to meet." It is a story readily believed. Chaplin's art expresses the germinal seed of the revolt—tender and ruthless, romantic and realistic—which Lenin's technic attempted to fulfil. Chaplin and Lenin—they are probably the two most potential spirits of our age. Bring them together—pure individualist and pure collectivist—into a single force, and you have a vision of to-morrow.

tiring for him to repel. But he has had to pay the toll of his way; and that toll has grown great. It is hard to sustain one's solitude when one is so full of eagerness as Chaplin; and when, precisely because the world loved his aloneness, the world has done everything to destroy it. His recent struggles, not so much against the clamor of the public as against his own human need for that peace and love which can be gained only by some union with another, have made him conscious of himself. Consciousness and weariness have stood between him and his journey—slowing him and slowing his work, which is the expression of that journey. His hair has turned gray, and his beautiful face is lined.

"The Circus" marks the crisis. The terrible year* that separated its first-made scenes from the last brought a new sombreness into his art. The picture on which he is at work at present is the most meditative, the most complex, the darkest story he has ever imagined. A progress like that which distinguishes the end of "Don Quixote" from its rol-

licking outset is manifest in his work. Chaplin is still alone; still intact. But the fight he has had to wage in order to remain so has worn him. It is the natural destiny of so passionate a man to lose himself. Thus far Chaplin has refused this death. It would mean indeed the death of his old gay art. It might mean the birth of a new tragic artist.

Meantime the circumstances of his career in Hollywood have conspired to perfect his solitude. Here was an artist whose theme was an essential motion: the pantomimic medium of the motion-picture was there to express him. But now the motion-picture industry of Hollywood decides to talk. Chaplin, whose excellence made him solitary enough, finds himself almost literally alone.

A little more entirely than he may have dreamed he is having his way. He is alone in his great house, alone with his few friends, who love him but who cannot really reach him. He is alone among his professional comrades, who, unlike him, have abandoned the silent picture. Chaplin has reached a goal. A goal is an end. An end can be also a beginning.

*The year of his trouble with his second wife, the truth about which has not been told.





New Divorce Courts for Old

BY CARRINGTON T. MARSHALL

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio

A proposal for dealing with the problem of dissolving marriage by a jurist of high authority, who finds human lives under the present system placed at the mercy of ignorance and indifference, with no facts about underlying causes learned even after the breaking up of more than a million homes.

EVERY Saturday morning, in the city of Cleveland, the judges of the court of common pleas, setting aside the commercial proceedings which occupy their time on other days, devote the hours until noon to hearing divorce cases. All morning, in perhaps ten different chambers, men and women, abetted by lawyers, witnesses, and sympathetic relatives, and in the presence of any stranger curious enough to listen, wait their turn to lay bare the intimate unhappy segment of their lives which prompted their presence there.

Some judges hear two cases in a morning; some can dispose of as many as twelve. Some approach their work in the spirit of a scientist who weighs fragile, unknown values; others, feeling a sense of helplessness in domestic affairs, run through their cases as a matter of routine. Some judges lend a bored ear to these tragedies, others may be sentimentalists, or cynics. Some believe in the letter of the law, some in the spirit of the law. Nor are these judges nor is this system in Cleveland unique. In every county in Ohio and in nearly every community in America divorce cases are disposed of in courts of general jurisdiction. Cuyahoga County, where Cleveland is located, only differs from other counties in Ohio in the fact

that twenty-two thousand cases of all kinds are filed each year in that county, while in some of the smaller counties the number does not exceed one hundred. In all counties, large and small, the methods and the procedure are the same, and the defects and difficulties are equally glaring.

It is nowise improper that courts of general jurisdiction receive such cases, for the parties seek nothing less legitimate than to dissolve a civil contract—an agreement, like all contracts between parties, involving rights, duties, and obligations which can be enforced or dissolved only by due process of law. Yet obviously the marriage contract is no ordinary agreement. Rooted in the *mores* out of which society has developed and upon which it depends, it implies legal and social obligations far transcending the terms of the contract itself, and is the one civil contract which is held by the State to be sacred. A legal contract, since the sanction of the State is required to seal it—more than a contract, it is a spiritual adventure; and when the adventure fails, and the legal status of the parties is changed, their moral and social status is much more altered, so that no decree or judgment of the court can make them whole or fully restore them to their former position. It