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ROUNDTABLE

"Gesture Man": Chaplin's Restraint

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In *Moments with Chaplin* (1980), Lillian Ross recounts how, in 1950, Chaplin was volunteering his services at the Circle, Hollywood's leading noncommercial theatre, directing a production of James Barrie's play *What Every Woman Knows* that starred his second son Sydney, cofounder of the Circle. At 1:00 a.m., as others wearied of rehearsing, "Keep it simple!" he cried. "Too many gestures are creeping in. I don't like that. If the audience notices a gesture, you're gone. Gestures are not to be seen. And I'm a gesture man. It's hard for me to keep them down." Says Ross, "As he spoke, he made a small, delicate gesture of restraint."[1] In this essay I want to dwell a little on this double attitude to gestures: as the unavoidable language of "pantomime," as Chaplin called the form of art he had refined for film from his vaudeville beginnings, yet as something always in danger of becoming too broad, crude, conscious or unnatural. And I'll consider how these issues emerge in one of the peaks of Chaplin's art, *City Lights* (1931).

From the first days of his fame, Chaplin's characteristic gestures were instantly recognizable. A 1915 article in *Motion Picture Magazine* describes "Chaplinitis" as found equally among "the happy youths of the slums, or the dandies of clubdom or college": for both "an imitation of a Chaplin flirt of the coat, or the funny waddle of the comedian, is considered the last word in humour. To be Chaplinesque is to be funny; to waddle a few steps and then look naïvely at your audience."[2] Taken together, the Tramp's gestures amount to a worldview and a modus operandi in a complex ongoing struggle for survival, food, love, status. Raymond Durgnat in *The Crazy Mirror* (1969) eloquently evokes the figure of the Tramp in his appetites and aversions, his pretensions and vulnerability, his defeats and survival, referring to "the delicacy and finickiness of his gestures": "He is at once a tramp trying to be a dandy, and a child trying to be an adult," Durgnat says. "Despite his incessant failure,

[1]Lillian Ross, *Moments with Chaplin* (New York: Dodds, Mead & Co., 1980), 19. I gratefully acknowledge help and encouragement from Judith Hawley, Ahmed Honeini, Danny Karlin, George Potts and Peter Swaab. The essay is dedicated, with gratitude, to my friend Kevin Brownlow.

[2]J. Hoberman, "After the Gold Rush: Chaplin at 100," *Village Voice*, 18 April 1989, in Richard Schickel, ed., *The Essential Chaplin: Perspectives on the Life and Art of the Great Comedian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 297–304, 300.

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the delicacy and finickiness of his gestures are far more than a dandy's. They reveal a genuine, painful sensitivity, not at all unegoistic, that one can fairly call soul – a soul at the mercy of the cuffs, the cops, the bullies, all the gutter bestiary, and fate." He goes on, "Chaplin's short films are probably the only works of art ever created which can spin the spectator from laughter to tears and back in a *few seconds*."[3] Rudolf Arnheim remarks in "Circus" (1928) on the relation between the Tramp's repertoire of gestures and his usual apparel, which strives for an aura of class and displays the fact of penury, so that even

> the uneducated viewer notes immediately that here, the everyday costume takes on an ironic overtone, without his being able to say why this is so. The stiff bowler – the requisite head covering for an inconspicuous citizen – sits on the forehead, a pointless bubble in solitary splendour, and the walking stick, the sceptre of masculinity, struts, stiffly splayed out, in front. Afflicted with a dachshund-like variation on human dignity, the little man strides through life, not in the least inclined to amuse himself or others, but just eager to eat and to love.[4]

The Tramp's outfit is too baggy below the waist (and with outsized shoes), too tight above it, and diverges from a good fit and respectability in two directions at once. A hand-me-down from at least two sources, it's visibly not tailor-made for its wearer.

But as André Bazin reminds us in "Charlie Chaplin" (1948), the costume is *not* the character; in numerous films (such as *Shoulder Arms* (1918), or *The Pilgrim* (1922)) the Tramp is not even dressed as a tramp. There are other more intrinsic, personal physical signs by which he is known: "The public recognises him from his face and especially from his little trapezoidal moustache and his duck-like waddle rather than from his dress which, here again, does not make the monk." For Bazin the gait and tell-tale moustache – as the habit proverbially doesn't make the monk – only hint at "the interior constants that are the true constituents of the character."[5] One of these constants, from early on, is indomitability. Chaplin's essay "What People Laugh At" (1918) evokes the tramp's bloody-but-unbowed stance: "Even funnier than the man who has been made ridiculous ... is the man who, having had something funny happen to him, refuses to admit that anything out of the way has happened, and attempts to maintain his dignity." This is why, Chaplin says,

> all my pictures are built around the idea of getting me into trouble and so giving me the chance to be desperately serious in my attempt to appear as a normal little gentleman. That is why, no matter how desperate the predicament

[3]Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the American Image* (London: Faber, 1969), 78 (in chapter 11, "Aimless Odysseus of the Alleyways"), original emphasis.

[4]Rudolf Arnheim, "*Circus*" (1928), in Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthien (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1997), 129–30, 129.

[5]André Bazin, "Charlie Chaplin" (1948), in Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Essays Selected and Translated by Hugh Gray*, Volume I (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 144–53, 144, 145.

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> is, I am always very much in earnest about clutching my cane, straightening my derby hat, and fixing my tie, even though I have just landed on my head.[6]

This eternal imposter, in his state of denial, stands in for his underlyingly anxious audience. Behind his pluck, we may impute accumulating trauma from the dangers and defeats he endlessly endures – hence the potential for pathos.

The Tramp belongs in America by being so definingly *out of place* there. Desperate to pass muster but doomed never to succeed for long, he became in his nonverbal expressiveness a favourite of the large immigrant audience in US nickelodeons, even when not yet anglophone. Chaplin himself was a product of the physical-comedy sketches honed by the English impresario Fred Karno and his "Speechless Comedians,"[7] but there is also a finer observation at work, as he noted in "What People Laugh At": "Many persons have asked me where I got the idea for the type of the character I play. Well, all I can say is that it is a composite picture of many Englishmen I had seen in London during the years of my life in that city."[8] Those who have fallen on hard times, but try to keep up appearances, are the "shabby genteel," a very English category. In his *Autobiography* (1964), Chaplin writes animatedly of the "ever-present class tabulating I felt keenly while in England," of suffering from the "type of Englishman [who] is only too quick to measure the other fellow's social inferiorities."[9] However reduced by circumstances, he strives to maintain respectability, in case some judgmental superior is watching; for him, manners matter.

Bazin's 1948 essay draws attention to Charlie's outsiderdom, his detachment – most strikingly underlined when he tries to join in – from the social rituals, including the religious ones, of his world: he closes, "a good part of Charlie's comedy is born of the efforts he makes (to fit the needs of a temporary situation) to imitate us, as for example when he forces himself to eat politely, even with delicacy, or when he adds a touch of derisive coquetry to his dress."[10] His clothes don't fit, and *he* is a misfit: Chaplin develops an extreme economy of gesture and expression to keep freshly registering his unquenchable desire and insuperable inability to belong. For these large and small solecisms and gaffes to strike home with the viewer, Chaplin has to maintain a constant level of restraint, delicacy, understatement:

> Charlie's gags are often of such short duration that they allow just enough time for you to "get it," nor are they followed by a time lag that gives you a chance to think about them ... Although he was brought up in the school of the music hall, Charlie has refined down its comedy, refusing in any way to pander to the public. This need for simplicity and effectiveness requires of the gag the greatest elliptical clarity, and once he has achieved this he refuses to elaborate on it.[11]

[6]Charles Chaplin, "What People Laugh At" (*American Magazine*, 34 (Nov. 1918), 134–37), in Donald W. McCaffrey, ed., *Focus on Chaplin* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 48–54, 48.

[7]"Karno's companies were Charlie Chaplin's training ground." Simon Louvish, *Chaplin: The Tramp's Odyssey* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 227.

[8]Chaplin, "What People Laugh At," 49.

[9]Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1964), 140.

[10]André Bazin in McCaffrey, 153.

[11]Ibid., 147.

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One "gag" or gesture illustrating the eternal readiness of the Tramp to try again, another display of nonchalance against the odds, is the little backward kick or flick. It is the flourish with which Charlie the soldier, in the Great War trenches of *Shoulder Arms*, coolly despatches his finished cigarette (at 17:45) before taking up his rifle, and – as a sniper – casually picking off, and chalking up, five of the enemy (it's later revealed to be his dream). Bazin comments on "the style and frequent and very personal use of this backward kick" – calling it, suggestively, "a perfect expression of his constant determination not to be attached to the past, not to drag anything along behind him."[12] Bazin leaves it unstated, but this gesture – which the Tramp executes with his final cigarette before entering jail in *City Lights* (1931), and which most saliently shows our hero's resilience, even after losing the Girl to the trapezist, right at the end of *The Circus* (1928) – could also be related to the immigrant experience, with its conscious, deliberate, ostentatiously casual repudiation of the past, of a string of failures and rebuffs.

Chaplin's own account of the process that led to such economy of means and perfection of finished form, in the "Development of the Comic Story and the Tramp Character" (1915), discusses *The Tramp* (1915) – the first in the series, inspired by meeting and talking to a tramp in San Francisco. Already he was slowing down from the Keystone briskness: it now took three weeks to complete a two-reel comedy. As Chaplin explains, already his gestures needed to ring true. "I have always tried to avoid burlesque ... I was striving for naturalness, and it meant intense concentration and hard work for all of us."[13] The comic point, he insists in "What People Laugh At," has to be made perfectly – without exaggeration:

> One of the things I have to be most careful about is not to overdo a thing, or to stress too much any particular point. I could kill laughs more quickly by overdoing something than by any other method. If I made too much of my peculiar walk, if I were too rough in turning people upside down, if I went to excess in anything at all, it would be bad for the picture. Restraint is a great word, not only for actors but for everybody to remember. Restraint of tempers, appetites, desires, bad habits, and so on, is a mighty good thing to cultivate.[14]

Let's trace this mighty good thing in an extraordinary pair of scenes in *City Lights* (1931), which jointly constitute one of the peaks of Chaplin's art. Borges calls the film "merely a weak collection of minor mishaps imposed on a sentimental story"[15] – a Tramp falls in love with a blind flower girl, who mistakes him for a millionaire until he helps her recover her sight – but this misses the artistry of the way its episodes build up to what some regard as *the* greatest moment in all cinema. There is in fact a real millionaire, abandoned by his wife and suicidally depressed, who befriends the Tramp with dazzling munificence when drunk – only to relapse into chilly gloom and blank him on sobering up. Like the narrative of the blind flower girl, this dramatizes

[12]Ibid., 150.

[13]Charles Chaplin, "Development of the Comic Story and the Tramp Character" (from "How I Made My Success," *The Theatre*, 22 (Sept. 1915), 121, 142), in McCaffrey, 45–7, 45, 46.

[14]Chaplin, "What People Laugh At," p. 53.

[15]Jorge Luis Borges in McCaffrey, 144.

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the Tramp's loneliness, the danger that in a dog-eat-dog world no one will recognize him as a human being worthy of love.

The "intense concentration and hard work" that Chaplin speaks of had intensified by 1928, when *City Lights* was made – the superb television series *Unknown Chaplin* by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, using rehearsal footage discovered in the archives, demonstrates the imaginative pressure Chaplin put on himself, improvising scenes in front of camera and cast and crew without a script, building up scenes step by step.[16] Investigation of the bewilderingly protracted process shows that Chaplin was anything but overweeningly confident and clear at the start: as he reportedly said on the release of *City Lights*, "A new film starts – for me, at least – not as an idea but as an emotion, a feeling which I have to fumble with, to live with, until it has shaped itself into something that will make people laugh."[17]

The early scene where the Tramp meets the blind flower girl (Virginia Cherrill) he falls in love with is a supreme example, described in Charles Maland's excellent book on *City Lights* as "the most troublesome scene to shoot in the whole film."[18] Chaplin's decision – taken after much agonizing, as the "talkies" had by now established themselves – to abstain from including dialogue, though using a musical score with sparse sound effects, is here quite magnificently justified, shaping the scene (*City Lights*, disc 1, 07:10–10:09) and its punctuating turns. Chaplin's essay "Pantomime and Comedy" on the film's release claimed that "The lift of an eyebrow, however faint, may convey more than a hundred words. Like Chinese symbolism, it will mean different things according to its scenic connotation."[19] Shortly before, he had declared, "I am a mime and all the nuances of my art would be destroyed if I were to accompany them with words or with sound effects." (He actively welcomed sound inasmuch as "we can absolutely determine the music … As it is part of the mechanical projection …")[20]

As the scene starts, Charlie is on the run from the cops, as usual, so crossing the road in heavy traffic and blocked in his passage, but wanting to get away from a motorcycle policeman, he takes a short cut by climbing into a very grand car that's pulled up at the kerb – and getting out on the kerb side, closing the car door. The blind flower girl, stationed near the corner of a park or square, presumably hearing the expensive sound of the door, and perhaps also aware of the expensive purr of the car's top-notch motor, assumes he's a plutocrat and proffers a carnation (aural cues, paradoxically, often function potently in silent cinema proper). Charlie, hearing himself politely addressed for once, turns, and, after initial hesitation, finds himself pretending to be a gentleman and buying a flower from her with his last

[16]Charles Maland cites assistant director Harry Crocker quoting Chaplin: "I would love to work methodically, but I can't do it." Charles Maland, *City Lights* (London: Bloomsbury & BFI Film Classics, 2025; first published 2007), 34. Preproduction bled into production in script writing and rewriting; postproduction bled in too, as Chaplin would break to edit sequences together before moving on to the next.

[17]Anonymous, "Charles Chaplin: Film Comedian's Welcome" (1931), in *Charlie Chaplin: Interviews*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 88–90, 90.

[18]Chaplin returned to reshoot it five times in the course of production, the last time in September 1930, right at the end of filming. Maland, 45.

[19]Charlie Chaplin, "Pantomime and Comedy," *New York Times*, 25 Jan. 1931, X6.

[20]Chaplin, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, Nov. 1930, 908, quoted in Louvish, *Chaplin*, 227. Maland, 74, writes suggestively about the scene's five variations on "La Violetera," a 1914 *cuplé* song, with the rhythm of a *habanera*, composed by the Spaniard José Padilla in Paris.

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money. He doesn't realize (and neither do we, on first viewing) that she's blind – until he accidentally knocks the flower from her hand and quickly picks it up – only to find her obliviously groping on the ground for it. "Did you pick it up, sir?" she asks; he's about to rebuke her for her slow-wittedness when, holding the flower in front of her face, he's touched to realize that she can't see it. His disdainful mock-gentlemanly demeanour dissipates as she places it in his buttonhole, at intimate close quarters where he can look in her face and she can't see his (he swallows with emotion). He fishes for a coin – and holds it out, already for a second forgetting that she can't see it – before pressing it into her hand, and helps her sit back down by her change-purse. He's about to get his much-needed change from her – he can't afford to be *that* generous – when the rich man who owns the car returns, slams the door and is driven off. The camera has panned left to see the car leaving; now it pans back to the right to see the girl hear the car depart – and cry out, "Wait for your change, sir" – and then assume that Charlie has gone, leaving her to keep the change (the pan pivots round the Tramp's witnessing and realization of her mistake). Charlie doesn't have the heart to disillusion her – and tiptoes away as she gazes after the departed millionaire. Falling in love, he sneaks back, just to sit silently and malely gaze at her, unseen; again we pan quickly to the right to see her, resuming her work.

His gazing is a piece of voyeurism (we've seen him earlier admiring a nude statue in a gallery window), a touching but disturbing exploitation of her disability. He's promptly and unforgettably punished for it when, to freshen the water for the flowers, she goes to the nearby drinking fountain, beside which he's perched, and washes out her pot, by – after a little dreamy gaze in the direction of the millionaire's car – discharging it directly in his face at point-blank range. Dripping and blinking, he has to remain silent. But his worship unbroken, he just creeps away; she never knew he was there. (The music throughout this scene has been lyrical, gentle strings, with sensitive pauses; it ends quietly as we fade on her still sightlessly gazing.)

What is so extraordinary here is the delicacy of feeling, the deftness and economy of the way we're shown the illusions and realizations of the characters; and the way the comic neighbours the poignantly human. The superb little shock – cold water in the face – which might so easily end the scene, doesn't: the camera holds on the blind girl after it, and we can see that in this play of mistaken identities she has fallen in love with – well, not with Charlie – rather with the millionaire she hears him as (which can and should give a potentially cynical tinge to our reading of her motives and add tension to the relationship – though she does tell her grandmother, "Yes, but he's more than that" (37:41)). To "throw cold water on" proverbially means "to heap discouragement on, disparage, 'damp'" (*OED*); the phrase is given sharp but also poetically resonant embodiment here.

Raymond Durgnat helps us with the scene's complexity: "as so often, a good joke includes all sorts of sub-jokes, that the conscious mind doesn't notice, but that the laughing mind does."[21] For instance, the Tramp is in the literal sense short-changed – his worship of the girl brings here and later an inordinate cost – and can't help a flash of disappointment at it, though the result makes that not matter. Also, the girl's blindness allows a moment of relative empowerment, privilege and impunity for the

[21]Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror*, 79.

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down-and-out, much-put-upon hero. The moment vividly expresses that she doesn't even know the Tramp exists. Simultaneously, she presumably thinks her crush on the millionaire is utterly hopeless.

Perhaps because in silent cinema, or a film like this where dialogue plays so little part, a script can't sufficiently articulate a scene in advance of its realization, Chaplin's process became extraordinarily elaborate and costly. The development and honing of this and other scenes had, for him, to be done on the spot, with full cast and crew present, under immense pressure. And in the words of Chaplin's assistant director Harry Crocker, "The story does not come all at once. It comes in driblets."[22] David Robinson reports Chaplin years later as describing "the process of constructing a film as like being in a labyrinth, challenged to find the exit: 'I've got into the proposition, how do I get out?'"[23] But the scriptwriting process preceding production was nonetheless intensive, and even the initial premise could derive from something quite different. The very notion for *City Lights* was fuelled by another, of even intenser but less balanced, pathos, as Chaplin would recall:

> [*City Lights*] evolved from a story of a clown who, through an accident at the circus, has lost his sight. He has a little daughter, a sick, nervous child, and when he returns from the hospital the doctor warns him that he must hide his blindness from her until she is well and strong enough to understand, as the shock might be too much for her. His stumblings and bumpings into things make the little girl laugh joyously. But that was too "icky". However, the blindness of the clown was transferred to the flower girl.[24]

In his notes Chaplin records an idea for the scene of their first meeting:

> Might have first meeting with girl in helping her across the street. Might have her fixing flowers under parasol and hail him. "Flower, sir?" He thinks quickly how to get coin for flower and comes back to get one. Plays he is wealthy person. "Nice day," he remarks as she puts flower in his buttonhole. Slams automobile door as taxi drives off, to make her believe that it is his.[25]

We can see the purposeful improvements Chaplin makes, building from this sketch. The Tramp doesn't, actively, help her across the street – but is passively hailed by her; he has a single coin in his pocket so can more simply come straight to her after a hesitation; she's mistaken him for a wealthy person when he closes the car door even before he notices her; he's thus passive in the mistake, not a deliberate agent. The added joke of not getting change, not mentioned here, is made eloquent in many small details.

Brownlow and Gill's *Unknown Chaplin* helps us to understand how Chaplin worked to achieve this intricate interweaving of nuances. As Chaplin summarized it, "The

[22]Harry Crocker in *The Charlie Chaplin Archives*, ed. by Paul Duncan in collaboration with the Chaplin Family and the Cineteca di Bologna (Cologne: Taschen, 2025; first published 2015), 313.

[23]David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (London: Grafton, 1992; first published 1985), p. 390.

[24]*Chaplin Archives*, 310.

[25]Robinson, 391.

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whole scene lasted seventy seconds, but it took five days of retaking to get it right. This was not the girl's fault, but partly my own, for I had worked myself into a neurotic state of wanting perfection. *City Lights* took more than a year to make."[26] The process prioritizes not elaboration but concentration: Chaplin also commented, "One reason it took so long to make *City Lights* is that it was so hard to simplify it, to keep the story down, though I do work slowly."[27] He had to feel his way. As Virginia Cherrill put it, "[Charlie] improvises the picture as he goes along, photographs anything he thinks of, and when he believes that he has done enough he just stops."[28] *Unknown Chaplin* shows in successive takes how the meeting scene evolved. Chaplin toys with the beaker on a chain at the drinking fountain, but decides against making it a focus; he tries getting a rich man to buy a flower first to establish the idea of a millionaire – but that's no help; Chaplin gets irritable with his assistant director; then he tries buying one flower, then rushing back to buy a second. But none of it works. Virginia Cherrill: "There was so much *waiting*."[29] After months away, Chaplin returns to the scene, making the Tramp more melancholy, more sensitive: still no success. More attempts reached an almost-decent compromise; only there was *still* no reason for her to mistake him for a millionaire.

Finally, 534 days after shooting began, he came back yet again to the flower-stand sequence – he had had the idea of using the "slamming door of the automobile" (initially, as we've seen, slammed by the Tramp himself), as he told Alistair Cooke.[30] So, in Cooke's account, the Tramp

> gives her everything he has in the world, which could well be a dollar or a dime, and as she's reaching for her change, she hears the rich man walk back across the sidewalk, get in the car, slam the door, and the car takes off. And she's about to give the change and she says, "Oh, *thank* you, sir!" And then Chaplin looks at her and realises, he's not going to get anything back. And turns round and tiptoes away without his change.[31]

Now she thinks the Tramp is a millionaire. The rest of the scene, moreover, has equally filled up with comparable tough and tender detailing – culminating in the discomfiture of the faceful of cold water (after which he also tiptoes away).

More vividly, in an interview with Richard Meryman in 1968, Chaplin recalled the scene in the film as if re-performing, reliving it:

> Everything I do is a dance. I think in terms of dance. I think more so in *City Lights*. The blind girl – beautiful dance there. I call it a dance. Just purely pantomime. The girl extends her hand. And the Tramp doesn't know she's blind. And he says, "I'll take this one." "Which one?" He looks incredulous – what a

[26]Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, p. 354.
[27]Chaplin, in *Chaplin Archives*, 319.
[28]Virginia Cherrill, in ibid., 335.
[29]Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, *Unknown Chaplin* (London: Thames Television/Photoplay Productions, 1983); DVD Network, 2006, 52:24.
[30]Ibid., Part 2, 35:40.
[31]Ibid., 36:15)

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> stupid girl ... Then the flower falls to the ground; and she goes to feel for where it is. I pick it up and hold it there for a moment. And then she says, "Have you found it sir?" And then he looks, and realizes. He holds it in front of her eyes – just makes a gesture. Not much. That is completely dancing ... It took a long time.[32]

One senses in the cadences of this recounting, the delicate movement, how moved Chaplin is by the scene once again, feeling his way through its dynamics – and it's registered in the momentary shift into the first person ("I pick it up").[33] Virginia Cherrill was not an actress by training or experience, and Chaplin, who had met her before, saw her by chance and tested her ability to convey blindness ("I instructed her to look at me but to look inwardly and not to see me, and she could do it."[34] Chaplin was seeking some special kind of truth, one he told her he felt no trained actor could quite give – and there was a good deal of personal friction between them, which gives an edge to their scenes (Cherrill: "I never liked Charlie and he never liked me").[35] Chaplin suffered from – and made her suffer for – the very lack of technique on account of which he had chosen her: "She'd be doing something which wasn't right. Lines. A line. A contour hurts me if it's not right. And she'd say, 'Flower, sir?' I'd say, 'Look at that! Nobody says "flower" like that.' She was an amateur." *And* he suffered from her boredom at all the waiting around, and her negativity: "If I get an idea and someone tries to dampen my enthusiasm, then I'm lost."[36]

Indeed, the great scene we have nearly didn't happen. David Robinson records that, according to Chaplin's son Sydney, in November 1929, before shooting the important final scene, Cherrill "innocently if tactlessly asked if she could leave early because she had a hair appointment. Chaplin ... instructed Carlyle Robinson to tell Virginia that she would not be required for work in the near future."[37] Almost a year after shooting began (though not of many scenes with Cherrill), Georgia Hale from *The Gold Rush* was hired as the blind girl, only for Chaplin then to have *further* second thoughts and finally reinstate Cherrill, on twice her original pay.[38] David Robinson suggests, though, generously and persuasively, that Chaplin's initial intuition wasn't wrong – that it paid off in the naturalness and understatement of the end result:

[32]Robinson, 400. Chaplin called *City Lights* his "comedy romance in pantomime." Maland, *City Lights*, 54.

[33]Which partly contradicts Lillian Ross's observation: "I never heard Chaplin talk about any of his own characters in any person except the third or in any tense except the present." Ross, *Moments with Chaplin*, 42.

[34]Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 353.

[35]Quoted in Robinson, 399. Though she also said later, in the second part of *Unknown Chaplin* (at 30:17), "He gave you so much of the spirit of what he was trying to get out of you ... You found yourself feeling that he *was* you."

[36]Robinson, 400, 405.

[37]Ibid., 405–6. Maland, 47, records a different version, recounted by Cherrill to Jeffrey Vance: "she had left the studio grounds for lunch without Chaplin's permission and had returned five minutes late, keeping him waiting: 'We got into a screaming row and I was fired.'"

[38]Georgia Hale's screen tests survive and are on the Special Features on the second disc of the Chaplin Collection issue of the film.

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> "Perhaps precisely because she *was* so phlegmatic about her work, her interpretation wholly resists all the obvious pitfalls of sentimentality."[39]

The initial scene of meeting we've just considered prepares and rhymes in multiple respects with the film's celebrated ending – another encounter involving flowers. The Tramp has given the girl the money for an operation to recover her sight, but has gone to jail for it (the millionaire gave him the money to help her when drunk, but was knocked out by burglars and forgets his generosity – even demands, about the Tramp, "Who is this man?" (76:09)).

Sight restored, she now runs a ritzy flower shop, some levels up from her previous pitch in the street, employing her grandmother and another woman – and waiting for the return of her beloved benefactor. To attune us to her suspense, a genuine toff comes into the shop, and she wonders for a moment if he was her saviour. The Tramp, by contrast, is now shirtless and caneless and even more raggedly destitute, cruelly mocked and bullied by street urchins. Chaplin had a vision of the ending in his preliminary sketches: "Eventually she is cured and Charlie finds her in little shop. As she laughs at him, Charlie does not dare disclose identity. Girl finally recognizes him – takes him by hand and leads him into flower shop."[40] This sounds like a happy ending; and what Maland describes as an "undated 14-page story summary, probably from 1928," does too:

> As she places the flower in his buttonhole she instinctively recognises the little man and her eyes become filled as her quivering eyes speak: "the Duke" (Chaplin's working label for the Tramp as the flower-girl sees him). He gazes at her as the little sister starts the phonograph record "Bright Eyes," and the record whirls out into the finish.[41]

The blind girl's sister disappears, and the title of "the Duke," and the 1920 song "Bright Eyes" also. Maland also cites another version of the ending from 28 February 1930:

> Slowly the tramp comes to her and as he stretches his hand out for the flower, she grips his wrist and pulls him closer. A strangeness takes hold of her and there is recognition. She seems dazed. He bows his head in acknowledgement and a great emotion rises in the girl; a thousand things run through her mind and then she smiles through her tears as the scene ends.[42]

In the scene as filmed, she is smiling through tears as we see her last, and Virginia Cherrill does extraordinarily make us see "a thousand things run through her

[39]Robinson, 407, original emphasis.

[40]Ibid., 391.

[41]Maland, 37. Another version of the ending is cited in *Chaplin Archives*, 310: "**Notes on Story**: When she recovers sight he may be ridiculed by group of children and thrown to the ground. When he picks himself up she may say, 'You lost your flower, sir!' and as she goes to place it in his buttonhole a feeling about him comes over her. She closes her eyes and realises that it is him."

[42]Maland, 38.

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mind" – but it's the Tramp in close-up whose uncertain, tearful smile fades out as the film ends, while the music continues, seeming to tell us something more.[43]

Another, fuller, sketch points to something crueller in what we might call the scene's aetiology:

> In front of the shop there is a mass of flowers and the flower girl with several others are trimming and watering the various plants. As they throw some of the withered flowers into the gutter, the Tramp comes into view. He stops to bend down and pick up a flower and as he places it in his coat lapel, the girls laugh at him. He fixes his eyes on the flower girl and smiles at her. With a gesture of laughter, she turns to the other girls and remarks, "He's flirting with us," and they all laugh.
>
> She is unaware of the Tramp's identity, but he is of the knowledge that she had dreamed of the day of his return as her ideal. She suddenly plucks a beautiful rose and with extended hand offers it to him while she is still amused at his ridiculous appearance. The Tramp still continues to smile and his gaze is fixed on her and he slowly moves toward her and takes the flower from her hand without turning his gaze from her and places it in his buttonhole and slowly walks away, looking back smiling as though through tears while the flower girl and others are shown in a hearty laugh.[44]

This final "hearty laugh" of her group implies that in joining the sighted world, she has been able to move far enough up the social and sexual ladder, and attained a sufficiently secure status, for her to lose her compassion for the lower depths of society – from this tatterdemalion embodiment of which, however, we know, her own miraculous restoration of sight derives. As in the Meryman interview, Chaplin's style here, with its steady unpunctuated paratactic "and ... and ... and" movement, already imagines the delicacy of what is another "dance."[45]

In the finished film, the Tramp has just come from being hit by missiles from a newsboy's peashooter when he picks up a wilted rose from the sweepings in the gutter (1:23:22); he hasn't looked up, and doesn't see her; she and her female employee laugh to see the boys pull out a loose rag hanging from the rear of his trousers. The Tramp now turns away from the street and gazes in through the flower shop window, holding the flower (an echo of the earlier meeting scene) – and only now recognizes her; *she* doesn't of course recognize *him*. A smile breaks over his face, and she laughs, turning to her companion: "I've made a conquest!" (1:24:09) Her joke is that he absolutely doesn't count. The petals fall from his wilted flower, and she signs to him to

[43]Andrew Klevan, "Shifting Perspectives: *City Lights*," in Klevan, *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 19–25, 24, has a stimulating discussion of the delicately graduated progression from wide shots to this final close-up: "The removal of each barrier permits greater intimacy but also presents new situations of suspension, culminating with the indeterminate final close-up of Charlie's face."

[44]Robinson, 393.

[45]The play on purchased and dropped and discarded flowers and their being picked up between this final scene and the first meeting accentuates the contrast between the present degraded situation of the Tramp, which she can see, and her earlier worshipful idea of him, which only we and the Tramp could see the truth of.

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enter so she can give him a fresh one, and also a coin (which looks like a quarter). He tries to shuffle away shyly, but she comes to the doorway and insists – and as before holds out a white flower to him. To give him the coin she pulls him toward her and presses it into his hand (as the Tramp had done to her with *his* coin in the earlier scene). Now she feels the back of his hand, with the tactile sensitivity of the until-recently blind, and gazing into his eyes, and seeing his expression, and groping with her hand – as before when she attached the buttonhole – up to his lapel, she starts to understand. Putting a hand on her cheek in wonder, she asks, "You?" He nods – and asks, "You can see now?" And after a pause she replies. "Yes, I can see now."[46] She is tearful, and so is he, smiling intensely – but the meaning of her moved response is not clear, and we hold on him in close-up as he looks at her, with a thrilled but uncertain expression – and as the exquisitely melancholy music continues, we fade to black on his face with nothing seemingly decided. What *is* her response? The music continues, and we listen for its resolution in major or minor – and with the screen dark, get a resolution which remains a little ambiguous but seems to have a tragic resonance, or at least not to release the tension into a happy ending.

The process for *this* scene had been comparatively untormented. When, on 22 September 1930, they came to shoot its crucial close-ups, Cherrill's firing and rehiring far in the past, "This time there were no problems, no anxieties, no hair appointments," Robinson tells us. "They worked from 2.30 to 5.30 that afternoon, and made seventeen takes. Whatever it was – enthusiasm, inspiration, magic – this time it worked."[47] Chaplin would later cite it as an example of what he called "that magic":

> I had one close-up once, in *City Lights*, just the last scene. One could have gone overboard ... I was looking more at her and interested in her, and I detached myself in a way that gives a beautiful sensation. I'm not acting ... Almost apologetic, standing outside myself and looking, studying her reactions and being slightly embarrassed about it. And it came off. It's a beautiful scene, beautiful; and because it isn't over-acted.[48]

Richard Meryman praised the ending to Chaplin as "one of the greatest moments in films ever," following James Agee's elevation of it as "the highest moment in movies" because it is "enough to shrivel the heart to see."[49] Chaplin replied simply: "Well, I know it was *right*."[50] It is a vertiginous, ambiguous moment, poised between joy and grief.

Why does this moment register as so perfectly shaped, so profound in its implications?[51] We can connect the emotional shock of this moment when our central

[46]Compare John 9:24–25 in the King James Bible: "Then again called they the man that was blind, and said unto him, Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner. / He answered and said, Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see."

[47]Robinson, 409.

[48]Ibid., 410.

[49]James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era" (1950), quoted in Maland, 10.

[50]Robinson, 410.

[51]One reason is that, as Kornhaber says in her chapter on *City Lights*, "Chaplin crafts the Tramp's interactions with the flower girl to be an almost perfect inversion of the audience's own relationship to the

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character, who has been watching unseen, is finally *looked back at* with another profoundly significant, generically different, moment in film history. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), when Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr) sees Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly), amid the bustle of her arrest in Thorwald's apartment, surreptitiously signalling across the courtyard to her lover Jeff (James Stewart), Thorwald's eyes – seen by us and Jeff in close-up through Jeff's telephoto lens – turn upwards to stare intensely and directly out at *us* – who until now, with Jeff, have been watching safely unseen throughout the film. It's a transfixing moment of confrontation and responsibility, of deepened awareness, of music to be faced. Here, in *City Lights*, the mixture of the Tramp's emotions – the guilt of voyeurism and deception, the shame of abjection and destitution, the pride of having restored her sight, the relief and hope of revealing his adoration, the fear of rejection – is all, miraculously, in play.

Human relations and interactions in Chaplin's cinema become poetic patterns and "dances," woven out of minute observation, a mastery of technique, a choreography of looks and crises of interpretation between people. This great moment, then, exemplifies the centrality of the gesture in Chaplin and yet its naturalness – "I'm not acting"; "Gestures are not to be seen." The whole final scene is constructed, as I've said, to rhyme richly with the initial meeting scene where she seems to fall in love with him, not seeing him, but hearing the car: in both scenes she does not (until this very final moment) see who he is. That is part of what is so satisfying. In the earlier scene she doesn't see the millionaire and assumes that's who the Tramp is; in the final one she does see the Tramp and can't imagine that he's the person she knows and loves as the millionaire. Only in the final seconds is he recognized by her, *seen* and, perhaps, partially understood. It's a test of her – and, daringly, we don't see the result. It seems beautifully poised between the romantic disappointment of the end of *The Circus* and the touching but not entirely credible romantic success with the girl Georgia at the end of *The Gold Rush*. The fully heartbreaking version of the ending, the contemplated ending where she has a "hearty laugh" and he walks away "smiling as though through tears," is contained within but also fended off by the palpable restraint in the extraordinary ending we have – which keeps open all the shadings of possibility we have sensed, and as great endings can, seems to take the weight of, and to crystallize, all that the film hitherto has moved us to feel.

Tramp. The flower girl is blind – she cannot see him; she can only hear. We can see him without impediment, but in the world of silent film we are totally deaf to him. We can never hear what the flower girl hears." Donna Kornhaber, *Charlie Chaplin, Director* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 199.

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