

# The Age of Charlie Chaplin

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## The Immigrant

More than a day had gone by since the passengers had heard the cry of "Land Ho!," but from the deck of the SS *Cairnrona*, Charles Chaplin couldn't spot much land. Newfoundland was shrouded in thick fog. The gray rock formations that now and then jutted into view suggested a sparsely inhabited landscape, and the Canadian mainland, which came in sight some hours later, looked largely deserted. When the fog lifted, he saw only Québec's endless salt marshes stretching out ahead. Was this the New World, about which other performers in Fred Karno's vaudeville company had told such jaw-dropping stories? For months, Chaplin had hoped that the "guv'nor" of the English music hall would bring him along on the American tour, but now that he'd reached the last stage of the journey, he had to admit it was not as he'd imagined.

Chaplin's thoughts strayed to Hetty Kelly, the girl with whom he'd spent a romantic afternoon in 1908. She had been on his mind ever since. He'd run into her by chance in London—how long ago was that? A few weeks, a month? They hadn't had much time. The next day she was leaving for France, she told him, to stay with her sister, who was married to an American multimillionaire.

"Now tell me something about yourself," Hetty hastened to ask, embarrassed by Chaplin's disappointed look.

"There's very little to tell," he replied. "I'm still doing the same old grind, trying to be funny. I think I'll try my luck in America."

The words had spilled out before he knew it.

"Then I'll see you there," Hetty said eagerly.

"Oh, yes, I'll fix that up with my secretary."<sup>1</sup>

A silly joke. But who could say? Maybe someday they would meet again. Maybe he would run into Hetty in the streets of the New World—if he ever reached his destination. The vast gray desolation seemed never-ending.

It was Friday morning, just after ten. The SS *Cairnrona* had entered the St. Lawrence River at Pointe-au-Père and still had almost a full day's journey ahead before it docked, in the early morning of October 1, 1910, in the port of Québec City.<sup>2</sup>

That same day, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that with transatlantic shipping routes so heavily trafficked in recent years, it had become increasingly difficult to obtain a berth on a ship bound for New York. Even "Karno's Komediants, the English pantomimic act, which will make its American debut in 'The Wow-Wows' at Percy Williams' Colonial Theater"—continued the reporter, who was looking forward to the arrival of Chaplin and the ensemble—"were among those affected, the entire company, together with their elaborate scenic effects and properties, being compelled to cross to Québec."<sup>3</sup>

According to the *Eagle*, the reason for the shortage of space on ships to the United States was the large number of Americans returning from vacations in Europe. That was undoubtedly a factor in late September, but at the same time, emigration to North America remained at a high level. Between 1900 and 1910, more than 8 million immigrants traveled to the United States. It was not mainly the British who came from England to try their luck on the far side of the ocean, but Russians, Poles, Romanians, and even Syrians, using Great Britain as a stepping stone to America. Some of them deliberately chose the Canadian route to avoid the increasingly strict medical examinations on Ellis Island.

Six months earlier, in early April 1910, a shocking incident had made it clear how many Eastern Europeans were passing through British ports on their way to America. The same ocean liner conveying Chaplin and his company had burst into flames off Beachy Head with more than 800 passengers on board, most of them Russians. Great panic ensued as everyone rushed for the lifeboats. A child was crushed to death in the throng, four people fell

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Chaplin, *A Comedian Sees the World* [Lisa Stein Haven, ed.], University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri, 2014, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> For the arrival times of the SS *Cairnrona* and the weather conditions on and around that day, see the section "Maritime Matters" in *The Montreal Gazette*, October 1 & 3, 1910.

<sup>3</sup> Anon., "Gossip of the Stage," in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 1, 1910.

overboard, and several women were nearly trampled. It was thanks to the decisive action of Captain Stooke and his crew that there were no other victims. Keeping their heads cool, they had beaten down the men who had started the run on the lifeboats. Only by showing who was in charge could they ensure an orderly evacuation.

The *Cairnrona* had been patched up, and Stooke was still in command of the vessel during Chaplin's voyage. Besides the British, Germans, and Scandinavians, there were once again many Russians, Poles, Romanians, and Syrians on board. This time the crossing proceeded without major incidents, but Chaplin was thrilled enough by the sight of the many Eastern Europeans and other migrants from distant lands, heading for a new life in America. Seven years later, when he made the movie *The Immigrant* (1917), the variety of passengers on board the ship that brought the Tramp to the New World was a funhouse reflection of the ethnic mix on the *Cairnrona*. Almost everyone seemed to come from Eastern Europe or Asia Minor. The women wore headscarves, the men had bushy beards and large boots, and a few of them wore astrakhan hats. Although these cultural stereotypes were too broad to refer to particular nationalities, Charlie's fellow transatlantic voyagers were obviously not Western Europeans.

*The Immigrant (first reel)*

*As the two-funneled steamship cuts through the water, the poor wretches from steerage lying strewn across the deck—exhausted, uprooted, and nauseated—the Tramp is dangling over the taffrail, cane and all. He must be in the throes of seasickness, you think at first, but when he struggles back on his feet, we can see that he's pulled in a fishing line. He glows with pride as he unhooks his catch. (When the fish starts to struggle, Charlie quickly tosses it among his fellow travelers, who are piled on deck like half-dead sardines. One man, startled by the sound, wakes up and finds himself nose to nose with a live cod. Chomp, goes the fish.)*

*Typically for Charlie, he seems to be in a completely different setting from the people around him. While one passenger after another stands up to empty his stomach into the sea, he cheerfully goes for a stroll—sliding on one foot each time the boat rolls to one side. That is, until he stumbles (hic) into a hiccuping Cossack. They both sit down (hic) against the rail (hic), and the rhythm of the (hic, hic) hiccuping Cossack begins to take hold of Charlie, who hiccups faster and faster (hic) until the two of them (hic, hic) are in the same tempo.*

*From the start, the camera has lingered on her from time to time, with her ailing mother in her arms. But not until Charlie arrives in the mess—which is tossed back and forth so violently by the waves that Charlie and the Cossack, almost without noticing, take turns eating from the same bowl—does he glimpse the most beautiful woman he's ever seen (Edna Purviance). He offers her his seat and, as he leaves, takes a longing look back at her.*

*Perhaps inspired by her beauty, he joins a dice game soon afterwards and proves to be a high roller. His fiercest opponent leaves the table angry and broke, realizing he's gambled away what little money he had. But then he sees the young woman's old, sick mother lying on deck, with her savings in a leather pouch around her neck. This is my chance, thinks the gambler. He cuts the string and takes off with his ill-gotten gains.*

*Back at the gaming table, Charlie is trying out some new rolling techniques. But when the man he plucked bare just a moment ago throws a deck of cards down on the table and demands revenge, he is suddenly ready to quit. He gathers up his winnings, but the man won't let him leave. He is forced to sit back down and deal the cards. Charlie shuffles the deck with a practiced air, but without moving a single card. Is it luck, or a ruse? In any case, he ends up with the winning hand. He raises the stakes, then again, and then once more, until the man who was out for revenge has lost all of the old woman's money. "I'll buy that from you," the tramp gestures, pointing to the man's revolver. Pointing it between his legs and over his shoulder, he keeps his adversary covered as he collects his loot and walks off.*

*One... two... three... it's a lot of money, Charlie concludes, as he gives up trying to count how much he's won. Putting away the money, he notices he's sitting right next to the beautiful woman and her mother.*

*"Mother lost her money," the girl sobs. Charlie sighs, but he knows what he must do. He fishes out the roll of bills and secretly slips the whole thing into the young woman's coat pocket. Or wait, the whole roll... maybe he could keep one, or two... two is probably best.*

*And of course, that's when he's spotted by the captain. "You pickpocket!" he says to Charlie, and he calls the young woman over. "This man is trying to steal your money," he points out to her.*

*"Money?" she says in surprise. When she discovers a large roll of banknotes in her pocket, she can't contain her joy. "He helped me," she explains to the captain, shooting Charlie a grateful look. He stares back at her, lovestruck.*

*"I can't accept this," she gestures. "It's for you," he assures her. She cries tears of happiness.*

*"The arrival in the land of liberty," the intertitle announces. Wearing tags and full of high expectations, the travelers are sitting on deck, ready to disembark in America. "The Statue of Liberty," the Cossack shouts, and everyone runs to the railing to view the symbol of hope. But their delight is short lived. The immigrants are roped together like cattle and roughly herded along the immigration desk. With a heavy heart, Charlie watches the young woman and her mother as they vanish into the crowd.*

The actual arrival of Karno's Komediants must have gone quite a bit more smoothly than in the film, although Chaplin was right in observing that intimidation and shows of authority had become an integral part of the quintessentially modern experience of transatlantic travel. Even model travelers who followed all the rules were given the sense that the government official was admitting them to the New World as a special exception, out of the sheer goodness of his heart. That sense was reinforced by the sometimes ruthless decisions made, in public, by the immigration inspectors.

In 1907, at the insistence of the United States authorities, Canadian ports had adopted the much stricter American inspection procedures. Their purpose was to screen out most of the poor or illiterate, any ex-convicts, and anyone who was mentally or physically ill. Furthermore, the United States legislature had passed a series of laws, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which (although not all of them had such pointed titles) were all intended to safeguard the so-called cultural unity of the nation. From 1906 on, for instance, immigrants were required to learn to speak English. Measures like these were intended to prevent too many non-Western ingredients from finding their way into the American melting pot.

The results were clearly visible on October 1, 1910. Of the 376 people on board the *Cairnrona*, 40 were detained for medical or civil reasons. Two carpenters from Beirut, then part of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, admitted that they could not read or write and were locked up at once, along with an illiterate farmhand from Galicia (Austrian Poland).

Albert Austin, who would play the seasick Cossack in *The Immigrant*, saw it all happen in front of his nose. Right behind him was Stanley Jefferson, who would later make his name as Stan Laurel, and behind Jefferson was Alf Reeves, Karno's manager for the American tour. A little further back was the seasoned performer Amy Minister—on her fifth tour of the United States—with the still somewhat insecure Charles Chaplin at her side.

"Name? Age? Married or single? Purpose of your visit? Can you read and write? Address of your closest relative?" The questions fired off at them were cold and methodical, but none of the Komediens had anything to fear. Before they had fully fathomed what was going on, they were standing on the wharf in Québec. It was not yet eight in the morning. They had three hours to kill before the special train would arrive to take them to Montreal, from where they would travel on to New York.<sup>4</sup>

Moving onward (by land, by sea, and by air)

When Charles Chaplin and his travel companions alighted in New York, they found a city in constant motion. Traffic was still largely dominated by pushcarts and carriages, but increasingly often the pedestrians and horses had to make way, especially on major thoroughfares, for cars and electric trolleys. This alone was nothing new, since motor traffic was also on the rise in London around that time. But Chaplin would later recall being struck by "the high, hysterical, shrill sound of the street traffic, so different from the heavy roar of London."<sup>5</sup> New York was in a rush, a rush to move onward.

"In New York," Chaplin wrote *My Autobiography*, "even the owner of the smallest enterprise acts with alacrity. The shoeshine boy flips his polishing rag with alacrity, the bartender serves a beer with alacrity, sliding it up to you along the polished surface of the bar."<sup>6</sup> Every transaction was seen as a unique opportunity to climb the ladder of success. This was also the attitude of the managers of America's largest companies. Since the construction of the transcontinental railroads, the economy had become much more compact, allowing businesses to pursue their activities on a much larger scale and thus to earn unprecedented profits. In Manhattan, the runaway growth of these corporations had resulted in a race to the

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the manifest of the ss *Cairnrona*, drawn up in the port of Québec on October 1, 1910, and now in the collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, under the title of "Canada Passenger Lists, 1881–1922." The document can be viewed on the website <https://familysearch.org>. There is a copy of this manifest—made for the American customs service, which had an office in Montreal at the time—at the National Archives Records Center in Boston (Waltham), Massachusetts. Incidentally, Chaplin must be wrong in claiming in *My Autobiography* that the troupe traveled by way of Toronto but was in New York by the morning of Sunday, October 2. In 1910, the journey from Québec to New York via Toronto took at least forty-eight hours.

<sup>5</sup> [Rose Wilder Lane], *Charlie Chaplin's Own Story, Being The Faithful Recital Of A Romantic Career, Beginning With Early Recollections Of Boyhood In London And Closing With The Signing Of His Latest Motion Picture Contract*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, Indianapolis, 1916, pp. 189.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 120.

clouds. Headquarters and office buildings were shooting upwards on all sides. In 1908, the Singer Building, 612 feet (187 meters) high, held the record. A year later, it would be trumped by the 213-meter-high Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower, but the new champion could not enjoy its supremacy for long. The plans for the still taller Woolworth Building were already in development.

The height of New York's buildings had also increased on average in the previous twenty years. A ten or even twenty-story hotel or office building was no longer a rarity. One such high-rise, Hotel Normandie at the intersection of Broadway and 38th Street, had been fitted earlier that year with the world's largest commercial electric sign. The bottom half of the 60-by-90-foot (more than 18-by-27-meter) sign displayed a scene that highlighted the American race to the top. Over a screen composed of 20,000 bulbs flashing 2,500 times a minute, several Roman chariots dashed in continual pursuit of one another. Passing by in an endless loop above them were the slogans of some 150 companies, which hoped that this new technology would win them the business of the dumbstruck public.

[...]

#### A Night in a Secret Society

"That first day I felt quite inadequate," Chaplin wrote in *My Autobiography*, looking back at his arrival in America. "I was alien to the slick tempo." The breathless pace was not limited to the streets of New York. He recalled the theatrical world as being equally frenzied. "Newspapers each day devoted a whole page to theatre," he wrote, "got up like a racing chart, indicating vaudeville acts coming in first, second and third in popularity and applause, like race-horses."<sup>7</sup>

Amid this whirlwind, Karno's Komediants had to prove themselves, little more than twenty-four hours after arriving in New York. On October 3, *The Wow-Wows or a Night in a Secret Society* had its premiere in the Colonial Theater on Broadway. The show had been written specifically for the American tour, but from the first try-outs in England, there had been concerns about whether it was really "the very thing for America," as Fred Karno claimed.<sup>8</sup> These concerns had grown once the Komediants could see New York for

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, Penguin, London, 2003, pp. 120–121.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves. There was no sign that secret societies were all the rage there, as Karno had assured them. What had given him that idea? It's unclear. Perhaps the troubling revival of the sinister Ku Klux Klan, which was popping up in various places. But for the time being, this was limited to scattered incidents. The days of the large-scale organized lynchings had not yet begun. The strong and deliberate resemblance between Karno's ceremonial garb for the Wow-Wow members—black robes with long pointy hats—and the costumes of the Ku Klux Klan therefore went completely unnoticed by the reviewers.

Nor does the subject matter of *The Wow-Wows* have anything to do with race hatred. The lead character is the tippler Archibald Binks, played by Charles Chaplin. Archie is a typical product of the English upper class: none too bright and wealthy enough to remain rather oblivious to the world around him. He shows a characteristic blend of alcoholism and stinginess; in short, he loves to drink at other people's expense. When Archie misses one round too many on a camping trip, his friends decide to get back at him by subjecting him to the ludicrous initiation ritual of a secret society that they invent on the spot: the Wow-Wows.

The reviews were mixed. *The New York Clipper* called Karno's Komediants a "collection of blithering, blathering Englishmen." *Variety* saw nothing contemporary, or "American", about the production and declared it a typical English comedy, enjoyable at times, but added that the "genuine fun in *The Wow-Wows* is not quite enough to stand off the half-hour running time." The reviewer suggested, in the spirit of the age, that the show could easily be improved "by interjecting more speed, and cutting the unnecessary talk."<sup>9</sup>

Chaplin was disappointed—above all, in the production. He is said to have tried to persuade Karno not to open with *The Wow-Wows* in New York, but according to Chaplin, Karno had been "stubborn." In the meantime, they had a problem. As foreign as America's competitive culture had seemed to Chaplin when he first arrived, he had nevertheless been very curious "in what position we would finish on the chart." After the premiere, however, he feared the company was losing the race. To make matters worse, they did not have much time to regain the lost ground. Beyond the first six weeks, in Percy Williams's theatres in and around New York City, no firm plans had been made. Unless the reviews improved fast, their tour was likely to come to an abrupt end.

And in fact, not enough bookings had come in six weeks later to justify an extended tour—for which they would have to rent an entire freight car. The tide started to turn only

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in A.J. Marriot, *Chaplin: Stage by Stage*, Marriot Publishing, Hitchin, 2005, pp. 135–137.

when the impresario Marcus Loew brought the Komedians to his Bronx theater for a week, starting on October 14, 1910. Instead of *The Wow-Wows*, Loew requested a different production from Karno's repertoire: *A Night in an English Music Hall*. This tried-and-true show was the success of which they had dreamed. Despite having been performed in America before, it garnered rave reviews.

*Variety* breathed a sigh of relief. "The change of sketch had obviously fixed the problem," the periodical reported, before pointing out to theaters and booking agencies that, starting on October 28, the Karno troupe would present a three-week-long series of try-outs in the American in New York, a new show each week. The three weeks were later extended to five, and in the course of those five weeks audiences and, more importantly, impresarios were offered four productions from which they could choose for the coming season: *A Night in an English Music Hall* (first and fifth weeks), *The Wow-Wows* (second week), *A Night in a London Club* (third week), and *A Night in the London Slums* (fourth week).<sup>10</sup>

This tactic worked. The American theater world was made aware of how spectacular a good Karno production could be, and the bookings poured in. Chaplin and his fellow performers had the opportunity for a 22-week tour of Tim Sullivan and John Considine's circuit of theaters, which extended from the American Midwest through the Canadian province of Manitoba to the Pacific Northwest and sunny California.

The tour began in late January 1911 in the American Music Hall in Chicago, where the company tested its three most appealing shows once more to determine which were the most promising candidates for the tour. Unsurprisingly, they ended up choosing not *The Wow-Wows* but *A Night in an English Music Hall* and *A Night in a London Club*, the two most efficacious vehicles for Chaplin's expert portrayal of a drunken gentleman. In *A Night in an English Music Hall*, Chaplin played a drunk who spoils a variety show. Whether he was trying, in his alcoholic fuddle, to drive an act off stage or to woo a comely singer whose cheeky serenade he mistakenly assumed was meant for him, he always found a way to return to the spotlight. Because the character's boozing impaired his motor skills, Chaplin made one spectacular tumble after another over the edge of the theater box, followed by a drunkard's ballet on stage. *A Night in a London Club* proceeded along similar lines. The setting was a lively dinner party, where each guest made a speech or did a dance. None of them got very far

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

before Chaplin, in his role as the conspicuously slobbered Archie Binks, stole the scene once again.

Audiences adored Archie Binks and his intoxicated hijinks. The shows were so successful that when the first tour came to an end, Chaplin and company were invited straight back for another round, so to speak. The group eventually completed the circuit three times in 1911 and early 1912, and after spending the summer of 1912 in England, they came back for two more tours of the same theatres. Every time they returned, the audiences and critics seemed to grow more enthusiastic, until Karno's Komedians found themselves topping the charts in the vaudeville sections, not because they had responded to American trends, but because they were so unapologetically British.

Fred Karno and Alf Reeves present...

But before you can be yourself, you have to invent yourself. British humor was still very popular in the United States, but as a Minneapolis newspaper commented in March 1911, "Broad English humor is very broad indeed. It smacks even more of the slapstick than our old friend, the burlesque comedian."<sup>11</sup> Not that that was necessarily a problem. Complaints were few and far between. Still, it gradually became clear that even in a genre like vaudeville, theatergoers were looking for a little more personality.

For years, Fred Karno had told himself that in his theater troupes there was only one name that really mattered: his own. His shows could never be mistaken for run-of-the-mill British farces—after all, they were Karno productions. He had stamped them with his personal seal of approval. Yet the premiere of *The Wow-Wows* had demonstrated that, while Americans still thought highly of the Karno brand, it was not enough to turn a flop into a hit.

Fortunately, this group of Karno actors had another trump card to play. Even in the initial, critical reviews of *The Wow-Wows*, critics had made a special exception for the lead actor. "Chaplin will do all right for America," the *Variety* critic predicted, adding in the same breath that it was too bad the actor's New York debut was such a lousy production. *The New York Clipper* agreed wholeheartedly: *The New York Clipper* agreed wholeheartedly: "Now, in Charles Chaplin, is so arriving a comedian that Mr Karno will be forgiven for whatever else the act may lack." The reviewer went on: "The most enthusiastic Karno-ite will surely admit,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

too, the act lacks a great deal that might help to make it vastly more entertaining. Still, Mr. Chaplin heads the cast, so the people laughed and were content.”<sup>12</sup>

Charles Chaplin was not the first Karno actor to be showered with praise. His own half-brother, Sydney, had gone on a reasonably successful tour of American theaters in 1906, and his immediate predecessor Billie Reeves, Alf's brother, had also made a strong impression. But never before had one actor stood out so clearly from all the rest that the moment he stepped off stage he was already missed.

There was something special about Chaplin. His antics drove audiences wild, and almost every critic spoke in admiring tones of his exceptional talent. Alf Reeves soon realized that he could take advantage of this to promote the troupe; he placed advertisements referring to "Charles Chaplin in his well known roles of inebriates." Later ads were sometimes accompanied by two photographs: one of Chaplin "as Archie" and one "as he is."

Reeves saw no reason why the actor's success should end there. In a world of transatlantic flights and automobiles traveling at speeds of more than 100 kilometers an hour, the idea of celebrity was beginning to take hold. In fact, the two often went hand in hand. In 1908, when Wilbur Wright's spectacular demonstration flight near Le Mans, France, persuaded the world that he and his brother had come up with the only truly functional design for an aeroplane, Wilbur had instantly become world renowned. Everyone wanted an odd little cap like the one he had worn on his flight. The rumor mill began to churn furiously. Many people boasted of having joined Wright for a night of hard drinking. Cartoons depicted the aviator as the consummate daredevil, smoking like a chimney and surrounded by worldly women. No one was bothered by the total incompatibility of these stories with the Wright brothers' ascetic lifestyle. They helped to keep the Wright brand selling like hotcakes. Alf Reeves must have thought, What the Wrights can do, we can do too.

A flexible approach to the truth was a tradition among vaudevillians. Traveling from village to village in small troupes, they had generally been responsible for their own publicity and had to find some way of setting themselves apart from the other acts. For instance, when Mr. and Mrs. Keaton had swept the fairs and carnivals of the United States a few years earlier with their young son, Keaton senior had often supplied the local press with an attention-grabbing article emphasizing his son's exceptional abilities and presenting himself and his wife as profiteers. "The old folks should be ashamed of themselves of living off a little kid,"

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135–137.

he once wrote, in profound self-mockery. "I'll bet Buster is not their son all right, they have just picked him up somewhere (what a lucky find)."<sup>13</sup> The point of such a piece was not to present the facts (though it was hardly inaccurate to claim that the Three Keatons would be nothing without little Buster), but to lure the public to come and see your act.

Reeves went one step further. Rather than making a one-time play for the public's attention, he intended to market Chaplin as a modern, slightly eccentric, celebrity—a bit like the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, whose worldwide fame had certainly not been diminished by the many tales of her stormy love life and whispers about her strange habit of lying down for her beauty sleep in her very own coffin. The newspapers lapped up stories like these, and every article they wrote was free advertising. Chaplin's love life was not yet anywhere near as turbulent as Bernhardt's, but the romantic intrigues that were lacking in reality could easily be filled in by the imagination.

The funniest drunk you've ever seen

The first real opportunity to try out the new media strategy came when Karno's gang arrived in Winnipeg on Monday, September 4, 1911. *A Night in a London Club* was on the program for the entire week at the Empress Theater, with three shows a day. The show was exceptionally successful in Canada. As early as Tuesday, the *Winnipeg Telegram* reported that at each performance hundreds of excited theatergoers had to be turned away. If there was any place where the public was slaving for tales of the man behind Archie, then it was there.

A few days later, Reeves and Chaplin set their plan in motion. They had managed to sell a first article to *The Winnipeg Tribune*; on September 8, 1911, the newspaper published a short piece about the "peculiar idiosyncrasy of Charles Chaplin, one of England's foremost comedians."

"There are, by actual count, two hundred and seventy-three opportunities for psychological study in Fred Karno's London comedians," the article began, and this was just the start of an uncharacteristic gush of literary enthusiasm.

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<sup>13</sup> Imogen Sara Smith, *Buster Keaton: The Persistence of Comedy*, Gambit Publishing, Chicago, 2008, p. 38. For the influence of the vaudeville tradition on promotional copy and trailers for early films, see Lisa Kernan in *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2004, pp. 17–24.

One might study the effect of English humor on a Canadian audience, finding occasion for reflection in the fact that bits of comedy which would bring down the house in England pass almost unnoticed here, while other lines that would merely provoke a smile in the heart of London are capable of sending a Winnipeg audience into forty-six convulsions. But the biggest psychological study of the whole thing is wrapped up in a bundle of human flesh, bones and other such ingredients which comprise the human form divine, said conglomeration of pulsating matter masquerading under the name of Charles Chaplin, a name that was tagged onto him without a struggle when he was an innocent, unsuspecting infant.

Reeves and Chaplin had hit the ground running, presenting Chaplin in no uncertain terms as a unique individual. Whatever Thomas Edison might say, the agglomeration of tissues and cells that went by the name of Charles Chaplin was an authentic genius, a man so gifted that with "every little alteration of his dissipated facial features, be it merely a movement of an eyebrow," he could bring about "uncontrolled roars of merriment from his audience." And to think that this same man who was so convincing "in the role of an inebriate" had a rather strange character trait:

His pet idiosyncrasy is an abhorrence of the "booze" when off the stage, and no one has ever seen him enter a saloon, which might be a tribute to his temperance principles or to his slyness. But when playing the part of a "common and garden drunk" the stuff that's handed to him is not the stock cold tea but real ale and he seems to enjoy it. There's a paradox for you; also a chance for psychologists and spiritualist researchers to rant about obsession and similar weird things.

A strange fellow, Chaplin. But the pseudonymous reporter, despite acknowledging that the actor's behavior was a psychological riddle, showed not the least interest in solving the mystery. That was just how Chaplin was, he seemed to say, and furthermore, he had always been out of the ordinary. But if you insisted on an explanation for his talent, you would be better off investigating his childhood. According to the article, his "histrionic ability" was "born in his marrow, so to speak, his parents having spent the best part of their lives before the footlights." That much was true. Later in the piece, Chaplin is said to have "made his first nervous bow to his first audience" at the age of seven. That too was more or less accurate. As

an eight-year-old boy, Chaplin had become one of the Eight Lancashire Lads, a troupe of young dancers who performed throughout Great Britain. The article goes on to report that at an event in Transfield's Circus in Middlesbrough, the young Chaplin won the title of "the undisputed clog dancer of England"—a more dubious claim, which Chaplin would repeat in 1928 but which has never been verified.

But what did it matter whether it was true? It made a good story. Chaplin was a child prodigy and a budding superstar rolled into one—not to mention a man of mystery, the kind of fellow whose life was always taking unexpected turns. "A peculiar incident happened to Mr. Chaplin recently," the article continues:

Being far from home his heart yearned for something more comforting than bottled consolation and so sent an appeal for help to Miss Somebody, Some Street, London—said Miss Somebody being an attractive maiden who used to occupy his dreams in boyhood days. The letter went to a lady of the same name, but not the same lady, and she, detecting the pathetic spirit that oozed between the lines, answered in a comforting vein and suggested an interchange of photographs. Chaplin promptly purloined a photo of the most unhandsome member of the company and while that was en route the lady sent hers—or somebody else's. It was awful, but what the lady thought when she received Chaplin's alleged physiog is consigned to the realm of conjecture. Anyway, they both promptly wrote each other, calling the deal off. Such is the fickleness of love at first sight.<sup>14</sup>

Besides neatly tying up this anecdote, the allusion to the fickleness of love also served Reeves and Chaplin's purposes in another way. The Chaplin persona and his parallel universe were not meant to constrain the real actor's freedom too severely. In the world of flying machines and rapidly changing perspectives on human life, the fictional Chaplin would be most effective as a marketing strategy if he remained a free agent.

In that respect, the fact that he, like his real-life counterpart, abstained from drinking was troublesome. The debate about total prohibition of alcohol was in full swing, especially in America. Supporters contended that alcohol was a frightful demon which would slow the otherwise unstoppable march of social progress. Opponents called it a serious infringement of

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<sup>14</sup> Anon., "Only Drinks When Playing 'Drunk,'" in *The Winnipeg Tribune*, September 8, 1911.

personal liberty. Although Chaplin was determined not to fall prey to alcohol as his father had, he wanted to avoid becoming a poster boy for the prohibitionists, if only because prohibition was unlikely to benefit the vaudeville theater. To emphasize his independence in this regard, he and Reeves picked up the story where they had left off when they returned to Winnipeg in March 1912.

Teetotalers and an heiress turned stalker

"Although he is a confirmed teetotaler, having 'fallen from grace' only once," began the new article, published on March 6, 1912, 'Charles Chaplin, who so vividly plays the inebriated swell in 'A Night in an English Music Hall' at the Empress this week, is, strangely enough, in full sympathy with those who imbibe not wisely but too well."

During Chaplin's recent stay in Los Angeles, the story went, a well-known photographer captured him on film in the role of Archie Binks. In the picture, Chaplin's glassy-eyed stare, devoid of all humanity, was so compelling that the supporters of prohibition wanted to buy the photo and use it in their political campaign as "a horrible example of the drunkard." The photographer, who was unsympathetic to their cause, flatly refused to sell them the photograph, and Chaplin showed no interest in changing the man's mind:

Incidentally the prohibitionists lost the fight "and," says Chaplin jocularly, when speaking of the affair, "I consider I saved the town!"

So much for that problem. The campaign to introduce Chaplin to the public as a global star could be continued without further ado. The article concludes:

Chaplin has been described, by some critics, as a genius. To say the least, he carries the hallmarks of genius—a plentiful supply of the most diabolical eccentricities.<sup>15</sup>

By this point Reeves and Chaplin had settled on a clear strategy. They would portray "Charles Chaplin" as a typical exponent of stardom: a capricious figure who defied classification. But the minor clash with the prohibitionists had an effect that was unforeseen, though not

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<sup>15</sup> Anon., "At the Empress," in *The Winnipeg Tribune*, March 6, 1912.

altogether unwelcome. One of the Chaplin character's fascinating idiosyncrasies—his abstinence from drink—left him with no choice but to take sides in American social debates. Remarkably, the real Chaplin managed to move through this minefield without blowing up his career.

Back in Canada—a cultural middle ground between England and the United States, where *The Winnipeg Tribune* was still offering a listening ear—Chaplin and Reeves realized that their character needed to be more firmly anchored in his host society. The question was what part of American life would form the most attractive backdrop for his adventures. They knew they didn't want to strip away too much of his British aura, which had been crucial to his success as the dissolute aristocrat Archie Binks. At the same time, they recognized that their readers would be better able to identify with Chaplin if he made an appearance in their familiar world, or at least an idealized version thereof. In short, the best possible fantasy might unite a reserved British manner with the no less stereotypical image of America as the land of boundless opportunity.

In this new episode, an exhausted Chaplin rushed into his dressing room, collapsed into a chair, and shouted, "Damn!"

The performance had gone particularly well. That wasn't the problem. But Chaplin had seen someone in the audience he would rather not have seen.

"What? Is she here?" asked one of the other actors, concerned.

Chaplin nodded and let out a loud sigh.

"Pretty little love story, eh?" asked a journalist, who had previously gone unnoticed.

Chaplin cursed again. The press! Just when his private life had pursued him into the theater.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I may as well tell you the story. But you must promise not to breathe a word of it!"

"I promise," the journalist said. But nothing was said about writing, the journalist continued in a triumphant tone, so he saw no barrier to sharing Chaplin's secrets with the newspaper's subscribers.

It just so happened that Chaplin was being pursued everywhere he went by the daughter of a wealthy New York industrialist. The actor had met her while she was on vacation in London and fallen head over heels in love with her—and she with him. But her father had disapproved of the match, wondering what on earth his daughter and sole heir saw in that penniless showman.

At that stage, the article helpfully explained, Chaplin's whole future had still lain ahead of him. He had not yet risen to fame as a theatrical souse. But it went almost without saying that everything had changed now. Even the New York millionaire could hardly object to his daughter's dalliance with one of the stars of the comic stage. There was only one problem: in the meantime, Chaplin had lost his heart to an English rose, who was also "high in the social scale," but whose parents were less snooty. After he returned to England, he would marry this girl, the reporter added.

But now here she was, his old flame, refusing to give up hope and possessed of the means to follow Chaplin wherever he went.

"What can I do?" he asked in desperation. "I'd gladly take her back, but I'm engaged to Dol—to another affinity in London. I wish you'd ask your women readers to send along some advice. They can generally solve these problems much more readily than men."<sup>16</sup>

Oh, the temptations of stardom! Chaplin and Reeves must have had amused themselves no end while writing this piece. It is one in a series of fantasy articles for *The Winnipeg Tribune* preserved in his folder of press clippings. Whether this fantasy appealed to the public is a different matter. Although there were undoubtedly wealthy heiresses in high society in Los Angeles and New York, the problem described was not one with which the average Manitoba theatergoer could identify. The world of romance and glamor may not have been as exemplary of the American experience as Chaplin and Reeves had naively imagined. Not everything that glittered under the American sun was gold.

### The wild, wild West

After their stay in Winnipeg, Karno's company moved on to Montana, where the only things gleaming in the sun were coal and copper ore. Their first performances were in Miles City and Billings. Then, starting on March 16, they performed for a week in the Empress Theatre in Butte. Chaplin was charmed with the mining town. In his autobiography, he wrote that Butte circa 1910 was still a real "'Nick Carter' town, with miners wearing top-boots and two-gallon hats and red neckerchiefs." The wildest city in the wild West, it had not yet lost its atmosphere of lawlessness. Butte had a lively red light district; Chaplin described the girls

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<sup>16</sup> Anon., "Followed Here by New York Heiress," in *The Winnipeg Tribune*, March 7, 1912.

there as the most beautiful in the Midwest. And according to him, you might easily find the frustrated sheriff racing through the streets, "shooting at the heels of an escaped prisoner."<sup>17</sup>

Chaplin painted his portrait of Butte with a broad brush. Like the romantic comedy that he and Reeves had concocted for *The Winnipeg Tribune*, this too was a scene from the American dream, but one that contained a kernel of truth. On the evening of March 18, 1912—probably right after the Komedians took their bows—Officer Prlja, one of Butte's most infamous law enforcers, was called to Walker's Saloon, where someone was causing a disturbance. No sooner had Prlja gone inside than miner Peter Lackner jumped him. If anyone was going to be arrested, it might as well be him, he shouted. Prlja tried to calm the man down, but before he knew it the two of them were rolling across the floor, fighting. Near the entrance, Prlja tried to arrest Lackner. By this time, however, so many of the bystanders were getting involved that it was very hard for the officer to keep Lackner under control. The two of them stumbled outside, their struggle attracting more and more onlookers. With his revolver in one hand and the troublemaker's collar in the other, Prlja fired into the air three times—to little effect. The crowd was not so easily deterred. They began to push and shove. Lackner was on the brink of escaping, and amid the brawl, Prlja's revolver went off once more—by accident, or so the officer claimed, but Lackner, lying on the floor with a bullet in his leg, was not entirely convinced.

For a moment, everything came to a standstill. Then the crowd turned their rage on the policeman. Prlja had no choice but to run for the police station with hundreds of angry miners on his tail. What followed was a full-blown siege, with more than 2,000 people surrounding the station. "Lynch him! Lynch him!" they shouted. In the end, the fire department had to turn the hoses on the furious crowd to disperse them.<sup>18</sup>

Chaplin recounted this incident as an almost cartoonish scene from the Wild West, but in fact it was the result of a long-simmering social conflict that had finally boiled over. It had everything to do with the success of organized labor in Butte. Almost all the workers in town belonged to one union or another, from paperboys to ushers and from itinerant workers to prostitutes. Butte also had a constant stream of immigrants and migrant laborers, in such large numbers that the city was fertile ground for the radical socialist organization International Workers of the World (IWW).

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., "Butte City Jail Stormed By Mob," in *The Anaconda Standard*, March 19, 1912.

This development infuriated the mining companies; the only thing that seemed to matter to them was maximizing profit. They did their utmost to prevent the unionization of their employees. Earlier that month, the Amalgamated Copper Company had sent five hundred workers packing because they were suspected of harboring socialist sympathies—an insidious and dangerous move. It may have been a defeat for the unions, which were not yet strong enough to cope with a mass dismissal on that scale, but that did not mean that from then on the miners would bow to the whims of "the Company." They were angry, and much of their anger was directed at police officers like Prlja, who was widely known to have previously worked in the Amalgamated Copper Company's security service and still to have strong ties to his former employer. To many miners, he was a symptom of the underlying problem: the strong arm of the law was wrapped in an intimate embrace with the mining companies.<sup>19</sup>

That too was America, but it was a reality that Chaplin could not yet grasp in the spring of 1912. One might well ask whether at that stage he even thought of himself as part of American society, as he would later claim in his autobiography. However innocent his fantasies about the temptations of the theatrical world and his London sweethearts, they revealed that his country of birth still had a strong hold on him, which kept him from plunging wholeheartedly into American society.

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<sup>19</sup> See Eric Thomas Chester, *The Wobblies in Their Heyday*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, California—Denver, Colorado—Oxford, England, 2014, pp. 65–116.

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