

Without the Cane and the Derby

Charlie Chaplin Playing for His Friends After Dinner

A Poem by CARL SANDBURG



THE woman had done him wrong.
 Either that.. or the woman was clean as
 a white rose in the morning gauze of dew.
 It was either one or the other or it was the two
 things, right and wrong, woven together like
 two braids of a woman's head of hair hanging
 down woven together.

The room is dark. The door opens. It is Charlie
 playing for his friends after dinner, "the mar-
 velous urchin, the little genius of the screen,"
 (chatter it like a monkey's running laughter cry).
 No.. it is not Charlie.. it is somebody else. It
 is a man, gray shirt, bandanna, dark face. A
 candle in his left hand throws a slant of light on
 the dark face. The door closes slow. The right
 hand leaves the door knob slow.

He looks at something. What is it? A white sheet
 on a table. He takes two long soft steps. He
 runs the candle light around a hump in the sheet.
 He lifts the sheet slow, sad like.

A woman's head of hair shows, a woman's white
 face. He takes the head between his hands and
 looks long at it. His fingers trickle under the
 sheet, snap loose something, bring out fingers
 full of a pearl necklace.

He covers the face and the head of hair with the
 white sheet. He takes a step toward the door.
 The necklace slips into his pocket off the fingers
 of his right hand. His left hand lifts the candle
 for a good-by look.

KNOCK, knock, knock. A knocking the same as the time of the human heartbeat.

Knock, knock, knock, first louder, then lower.

Knock, knock, knock, the same as the time of the human heartbeat.

He sets the candle on the floor.. leaps to the white sheet.. rips it back.. has his fingers at the neck, his thumbs at the throat, and does three slow fierce motions of strangling.

The knocking stops. All is quiet. He covers the face and the head of hair with the white sheet, steps back, picks up the candle and listens.

Knock, knock, knock, a knocking the same as the time of the human heartbeat.

Knock, knock, knock, first louder, then lower.

Knock, knock, knock, the same as the time of the human heartbeat.

Again the candle to the floor, the leap, the slow fierce motions of strangling, the cover-up of the face and the head of hair, the step back, the listening.

And again the knock, knock, knock.. louder.. lower.. to the time of the human heartbeat.

Once more the motions of strangling.. then.. nothing at all.. nothing at all.. no more knocking.. no knocking at all.. no knocking at all.. in the time of the human heartbeat.

He stands at the door.. peace, peace, peace everywhere only in the man's face so dark and his eyes so lighted up with many lights, no peace at all, no peace at all.

So he stands at the door, his right hand on the door knob, the candle slants of light fall and flicker from his face to the straight white sheet changing gray against shadows.

So there is peace everywhere.. no more knocking .. no knocking at all to the time of the human heartbeat.. so he stands at the door and his right hand on the door knob.

And there is peace everywhere.. only the man's face is a red gray plaster of storm in the center of peace.. so he stands with a candle at the door.. so he stands with a red gray face.

After he steps out the door closes: the door, the door knob, the table, the white sheet; there is nothing at all; the owners are shadows; the owners are gone; not even a knocking; not even a knock, knock, knock.. louder, lower, in the time of the human heartbeat.

THE lights are snapped on. Charlie, "the marvelous urchin, the little genius of the screen" (chatter it with a running monkey's laughter cry). Charlie is laughing a laugh the whole world knows.

The room is full of cream yellow lights. Charlie is laughing.. louder.. lower..

And again the heartbeats laugh.. the human heartbeats laugh..