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CHARLIE CHAPLIN, AS A COMEDIAN, CONTEMPLATES SUICIDE

CHARLES CHAPLIN loathes Charlie Chaplin. The artist despises his brushes. The slapstick comedian who, in private life, understands Kant and Schopenhauer, despairs of understanding himself and is reported to be wishing he were dead. Altho raised from obscurity to fame, from poverty to bewildering wealth by a small derby hat, baggy trousers, huge feet much pointed out, a burlesque mimicry, a gauche manner of walking, many rapid gestures which stimulate the imagination, he longs for the black vestments of Hamlet and the serious drama. As a writer in the Boston *Transcript* amusingly laments, "Charlie Chaplin is strangling the slapstick vulgar comedian whom many of us loved best. From the memorable evening when I first saw him striving to fit the silly world in which we find it necessary to live, and failing ludicrously, through the years which have followed until he began to take a 'larger view' of his art, I have found unceasing joy in him as an original patiently striving to do what other people do, eager for friendship yet always alone. But now

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he has found the magic key. The mystery has blown away. In 'The Kid' and in 'The Idle Class' he has become acclimated. Doors long closed have swung open. Charlie is dying; Charles tries inadequately to take his place. A great figure is passing away."

But is it? St. John Ervine, the British dramatist and critic, is doubtful. Reviewing Charlie's recent triumphal tour of England, in *Vanity Fair*, St. John Ervine observes that "Chaplin has conquered the world because he has remained in the world. Report says that he aspired to be a tragedian, and probably report is true, for most of the great comedians have had this aspiration; but if he had set out to be as great a tragedian as he is a comedian, he could only have done so by traveling along very much the same sort of road which has led him to his present high position. Epigrams are local in their effect, but the slapstick is universal; and a man will win wider suffrages by wearing a wreath of cabbages than he will ever win by wearing a wreath of laurels. Virtue is its own reward; it is also its own punishment; and those who strive to get beyond the elementals must put up with the consequences, the disregard, even the contempt, of the mass of mankind. Chaplin has publicly stated that he is tired of hitting people in the face with custard pies. He will do well not to let his fatigue prevent him from continuing to hit people in the face with custard pies, for most of us would much rather see a man covered with custard than covered with glory."

What, inquires Mr. Ervine pertinently, is there in Charlie Chaplin which makes men and women and children of every sort, gentle and simple, highbrow and lowbrow, pay tribute to him? Is it made explicable by M. Bergson's dogma that laughter is caused when the "mechanical is encrusted on the living"? No, he pursues, there is something profounder than that in the laughter provoked by a comedian who builds his movies on the things which enthralled and amused us when we were children. "He keeps us who are adult continually entertained because he takes the secret aspirations of children, together with

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their cruelties and fears and vanities and adventures, and puts them into the circumstances of men. And since man is never so universal in character as he is in his childhood it follows that the laughter which Chaplin excites can be shared by the whole world. We do not love the stars the less because all men can see them; we are not any the less amused by Chaplin because he can make an old man laugh as heartily as he can make a child."

It is the great gift of Charlie Chaplin, concludes this critic, to make men recognize their identities. "He has taken Englishmen and Irishmen, Spaniards and Russians, Frenchmen and Germans, Americans and Japanese, and reduced them all to their elements; and in so doing has achieved very largely what the more sober Dr. Wilson failed to do at Paris."

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