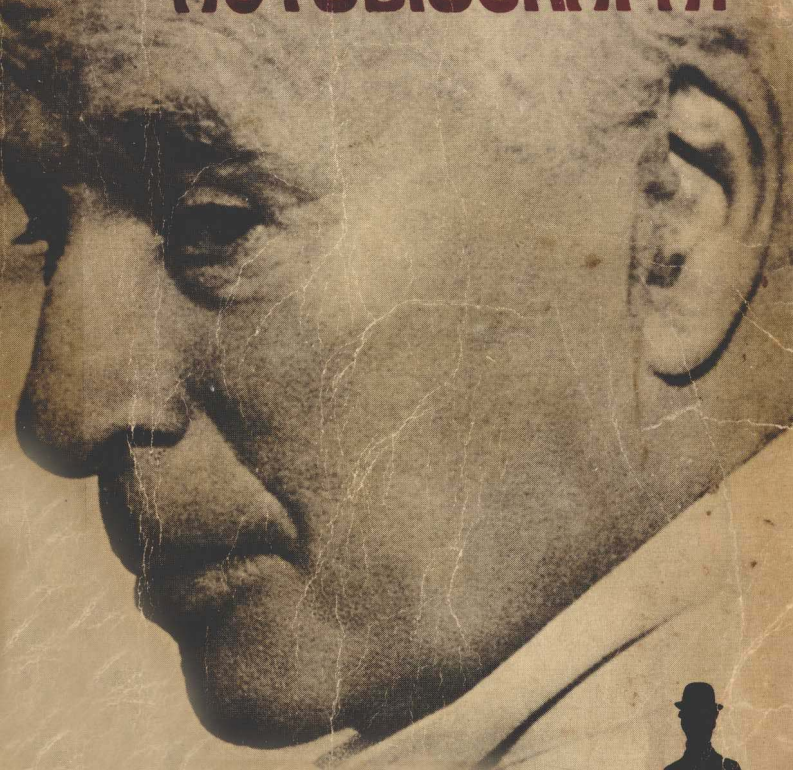




Charles Chaplin

MY
AUTOBIOGRAPHY



MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Charlie Chaplin, who tells the story of his life in this book, was born in London in 1889. Both his father and mother were on the stage. Parts of his childhood were spent in extreme poverty and for a period his mother lived with him and his elder brother, Sydney (later his manager), in the Lambeth workhouse. Eventually he obtained work as a comedian with Fred Karno's company and toured the United States, where he was asked to join the Keystone Comedy Film Company in Los Angeles. Chaplin made a string of 'single-reelers' for Keystone in 1914 and was soon in a position to dictate his own terms, so immediate and overwhelming was the success of his 'tramp'. He made films for Essanay, Mutual, and First National, between 1915 and 1923, when United Artists (the company formed principally by himself and the Fairbanks) started to claim all his time. His outstanding full-length successes have been *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, *City Lights*, *Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator*, and *Limelight*, but his immense reputation was created by the 'off-the-cuff' fooling of his short early films. He is married to Oona, the daughter of Eugene O'Neill, the playwright; and has three sons and five daughters, as well as two sons by a previous marriage. Charlie Chaplin, who is now domiciled in Switzerland, has just completed *The Countess of Hong-Kong* at Pinewood Studios.

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To Oona

CHARLES C

My Autobiography



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prelude

BEFORE Westminster Bridge was open, Kennington Road was only a bridle path. After 1750, a new road was laid down from the Bridge forming a direct link to Brighton. As a consequence Kennington Road, where I spent most of my boyhood, boasted some fine houses of architectural merit, fronted with iron grill balconies from which occupants could once have seen George IV coaching on his way to Brighton.

By the middle of the nineteenth century most of the homes had deteriorated into rooming houses and apartments. Some, however, remained inviolate and were occupied by doctors, successful merchants and vaudeville stars. On Sunday morning, along the Kennington Road one could see a smart pony and trap outside a house, ready to take a vaudevillian for a ten-mile drive as far as Norwood or Merton, stopping on the way back at the various pubs, the White Horse, the Horns and the Tankard in the Kennington Road.

As a boy of twelve, I often stood outside the Tankard watching these illustrious gentlemen alight from their equestrian outfits to enter the lounge bar, where the élite of vaudeville met, as was their custom on a Sunday to take a final 'one' before going home to the midday meal. How glamorous they were, dressed in chequered suits and grey bowlers, flashing their diamond rings and tie-pins! At two o'clock on Sunday afternoon, the pub closed and its occupants filed outside and dallied awhile before bidding each other adieu; and I would gaze fascinated and amused, for some of them swaggered with a ridiculous air.

When the last had gone his way, it was as though the sun had gone under a cloud. And I would return to a row of old derelict houses that sat back off the Kennington Road, to 3 Pownall

Terrace, and mount the rickety stairs that led to our small garret. The house was depressing and the air was foul with stale slops and old clothes. This particular Sunday, Mother was seated gazing out of the window. She turned and smiled weakly. The room was stifling, a little over twelve feet square, and seemed smaller and the slanting ceiling seemed lower. The table against the wall was crowded with dirty plates and tea-cups; and in the corner, snug against the lower wall, was an old iron bed which Mother had painted white. Between the bed and the window was a small fire-grate, and at the foot of the bed an old armchair that unfolded and became a single bed upon which my brother Sydney slept. But now Sydney was away at sea.

The room was more depressing this Sunday because Mother had for some reason neglected to tidy it up. Usually she kept it clean, for she was bright, cheerful and still young, not yet thirty-seven, and could make that miserable garret glow with golden comfort. Especially on a wintry Sunday morning when she would give me my breakfast in bed and I would awaken to a tidy little room with a small fire glowing and see the steaming kettle on the hob and a haddock or a bloater by the fender being kept warm while she made toast. Mother's cheery presence, the cosiness of the room, the soft padded sound of boiling water pouring into our earthenware tea-pot while I read my weekly comic, were the pleasures of a serene Sunday morning.

But this Sunday she sat listlessly looking out of the window. For the past three days she had been sitting at that window, strangely quiet and preoccupied. I knew she was worried. Sydney was at sea and we had not heard from him in two months, and Mother's hired sewing machine with which she struggled to support us had been taken away for owing back instalments (a procedure that was not unusual). And my own contribution of five shillings weekly which I earned giving dancing lessons had suddenly ended.

I was hardly aware of a crisis because we lived in a continual crisis; and, being a boy, I dismissed our troubles with gracious forgetfulness. As usual I would run home to Mother after school and do errands, empty the slops and bring up a pail of fresh water, then hurry on to the McCarthys' and spend the evening there - anything to get away from our depressing garret.

The McCarthys were old friends of Mother's whom she had known in her vaudeville days. They lived in a comfortable flat in the better part of Kennington Road, and were relatively well off by our standards. The McCarthys had a son, Wally, with whom I would play until dusk, and invariably I was invited to stay for tea. By lingering this way I had many a meal there. Occasionally Mrs McCarthy would inquire after Mother, why she had not seen her of late. And I would make some sort of excuse, for since Mother had met with adversity she seldom saw any of her theatrical friends.

Of course there were times when I would stay home, and Mother would make tea and fry bread in beef dripping, which I relished, and for an hour she would read to me, for she was an excellent reader, and I would discover the delight of Mother's company and would realize I had a better time staying home than going to the McCarthys'.

And now as I entered the room, she turned and looked reproachfully at me. I was shocked at her appearance; she was thin and haggard and her eyes had the look of someone in torment. An ineffable sadness came over me, and I was torn between an urge to stay home and keep her company, and a desire to get away from the wretchedness of it all. She looked at me apathetically. 'Why don't you run along to the McCarthys?' she said.

I was on the verge of tears. 'Because I want to stay with you.'

She turned and looked vacantly out of the window. 'You run along to the McCarthys' and get your dinner - there's nothing here for you.'

I felt a reproach in her tone, but I closed my mind to it. 'I'll go if you want me to,' I said weakly.

She smiled wanly and stroked my head. 'Yes, yes, you run along.' And although I pleaded with her to let me stay, she insisted on my going. So I went with a feeling of guilt, leaving her sitting in that miserable garret alone, little realizing that within the next few days a terrible fate awaited her.

one

I WAS born on 16 April 1889, at eight o'clock at night, in East Lane, Walworth. Soon after, we moved to West Square, St George's Road, Lambeth. According to Mother my world was a happy one. Our circumstances were moderately comfortable; we lived in three tastefully furnished rooms. One of my early recollections was that each night before Mother went to the theatre Sydney and I were lovingly tucked up in a comfortable bed and left in the care of the housemaid. In my world of three and a half years, all things were possible; if Sydney, who was four years older than I, could perform legerdemain and swallow a coin and make it come out through the back of his head, I could do the same; so I swallowed a halfpenny and Mother was obliged to send for a doctor.

Every night, after she came home from the theatre, it was her custom to leave delicacies on the table for Sydney and me to find in the morning – a slice of Neapolitan cake or candies – with the understanding that we were not to make a noise in the morning, as she usually slept late.

Mother was a soubrette on the variety stage, a *mignonne* in her late twenties, with fair complexion, violet-blue eyes and long light-brown hair that she could sit upon. Sydney and I adored our mother. Though she was not an exceptional beauty, we thought her divine-looking. Those who knew her told me in later years that she was dainty and attractive and had compelling charm. She took pride in dressing us up for Sunday excursions, Sydney in an Eton suit with long trousers and me in a blue velvet one with blue gloves to match. Such occasions were orgies of smugness, as we ambled along the Kennington Road.

London was sedate in those days. The tempo was sedate; even the horse-drawn tram-cars along Westminster Bridge Road went at a sedate pace and turned sedately on a revolving table at the terminal near the bridge. In Mother's prosperous days we also lived in Westminster Bridge Road. Its atmosphere was gay and friendly with attractive shops, restaurants and music halls. The fruit-shop on the corner facing the Bridge was a galaxy of colour, with its neatly arranged pyramids of oranges, apples, pears and bananas outside, in contrast to the solemn grey Houses of Parliament directly across the river.

This was the London of my childhood, of my moods and awakenings: memories of Lambeth in the spring; of trivial incidents and things; of riding with Mother on top of a horse-bus trying to touch passing lilac-trees – of the many coloured bus tickets, orange, blue, pink and green, that bestrewed the pavement where the trams and buses stopped – of rubicund flower-girls at the corner of Westminster Bridge, making gay *boutonnieres*, their adroit fingers manipulating tinsel and quivering fern – of the humid odour of freshly watered roses that affected me with a vague sadness – of melancholy Sundays and pale-faced parents and their children escorting toy windmills and coloured balloons over Westminster Bridge; and the maternal penny steamers that softly lowered their funnels as they glided under it. From such trivia I believe my soul was born.

Then objects in our sitting-room that affected my senses: Mother's life-size painting of Nell Gwyn, which I disliked; the long-necked decanters on our sideboard, which depressed me, and the small round music-box with its enamelled surface depicting angels on clouds, which both pleased and baffled me. But my sixpenny toy chair bought from the gypsies I loved because it gave me an inordinate sense of possession.

Memories of epic moments: a visit to the Royal Aquarium,* viewing its side-shows with Mother, watching 'She', the live head of a lady smiling in flames, the sixpenny lucky dip, Mother lifting me up to a large sawdust barrel to pick a surprise packet which contained a candy whistle which would not blow and a

* A large hall which stood on the corner of Victoria Street opposite Westminster Abbey, where there were spectacular entertainments and side-shows.

toy ruby brooch. Then a visit to the Canterbury Music Hall, sitting in a red plush seat watching my father perform . . .

Now it is night and I am wrapped in a travelling rug on top of a four-in-hand coach, driving with Mother and her theatrical friends, cosseted in their gaiety and laughter as our trumpeter, with clarion braggadocio, heralds us along the Kennington Road to the rhythmic jingle of harness and the beat of horses' hoofs.

*

Then something happened! It could have been a month or a few days later – a sudden realization that all was not well with Mother and the outside world. She had been away all the morning with a lady friend and had returned home in a state of excitement. I was playing on the floor and became conscious of intense agitation going on above me, as though I were listening from the bottom of a well. There were passionate exclamations and tears from Mother, who kept mentioning the name Armstrong – Armstrong said this, Armstrong said that, Armstrong was a brute! Her excitement was strange and intense so that I began to cry, so much so that Mother was obliged to pick me up and console me. A few years later I learned the significance of that afternoon. Mother had returned from the law courts where she had been suing my father for non-support of her children, and the case had not gone too well for her. Armstrong was my father's lawyer.

I was hardly aware of a father, and do not remember him having lived with us. He too was a vaudevillian, a quiet, brooding man with dark eyes. Mother said he looked like Napoleon. He had a light baritone voice and was considered a very fine artist. Even in those days he earned the considerable sum of forty pounds a week. The trouble was that he drank too much, which Mother said was the cause of their separation.

It was difficult for vaudevillians not to drink in those days, for alcohol was sold in all theatres, and after a performer's act he was expected to go to the theatre bar and drink with the customers. Some theatres made more profit from the bar than from the box office, and a number of stars were paid large salaries not alone for their talent but because they spent most of their money at the theatre bar. Thus many an artist was

ruined by drink – my father was one of them. He died of alcoholic excess at the age of thirty-seven.

Mother would tell stories about him with humour and sadness. He had a violent temper when drinking, and during one of his tantrums she ran off to Brighton with some friends, and in answer to his frantic telegram: ‘What are you up to? Answer at once!’ she wired back: ‘Balls, parties and picnics, darling!’

Mother was the elder of two daughters. Her father, Charles Hill, an Irish cobbler, came from County Cork, Ireland. He had rosy apple cheeks, a shock of white hair and a beard like Carlyle in Whistler’s portrait. He was doubled over with rheumatic gout due, he said, to sleeping in damp fields hiding from the police during the nationalist uprisings. He eventually settled in London, establishing himself in a boot-repairing business in East Lane, Walworth.

Grandma was half gypsy. This fact was the skeleton in our family cupboard. Nevertheless, Grandma bragged that her family always paid ground-rent. Her maiden name was Smith. I remember her as a bright little old lady who always greeted me effusively with baby talk. She died before I was six. She was separated from Grandpa, for what reason neither grandparent would tell. But according to Aunt Kate there was a domestic triangle in which Grandpa surprised Grandma with a lover.

To gauge the morals of our family by commonplace standards would be as erroneous as putting a thermometer in boiling water. With such genetic attributes, two pretty cobbler’s daughters quickly left home and gravitated to the stage.

Aunt Kate, Mother’s younger sister, was also a soubrette; but we knew little about her, for she wove in and out of our lives sporadically. She was pretty and temperamental and never got along very well with Mother. Her occasional visits usually ended abruptly with acrimony at something Mother had said or done.

At eighteen Mother had eloped with a middle-aged man to Africa. She often spoke of her life there; living in luxury amidst plantations, servants and saddle horses.

In her eighteenth year my brother Sydney was born. I was told he was the son of a lord and that when he reached the age of twenty-one he would inherit a fortune of two thousand pounds, which information both pleased and annoyed me.