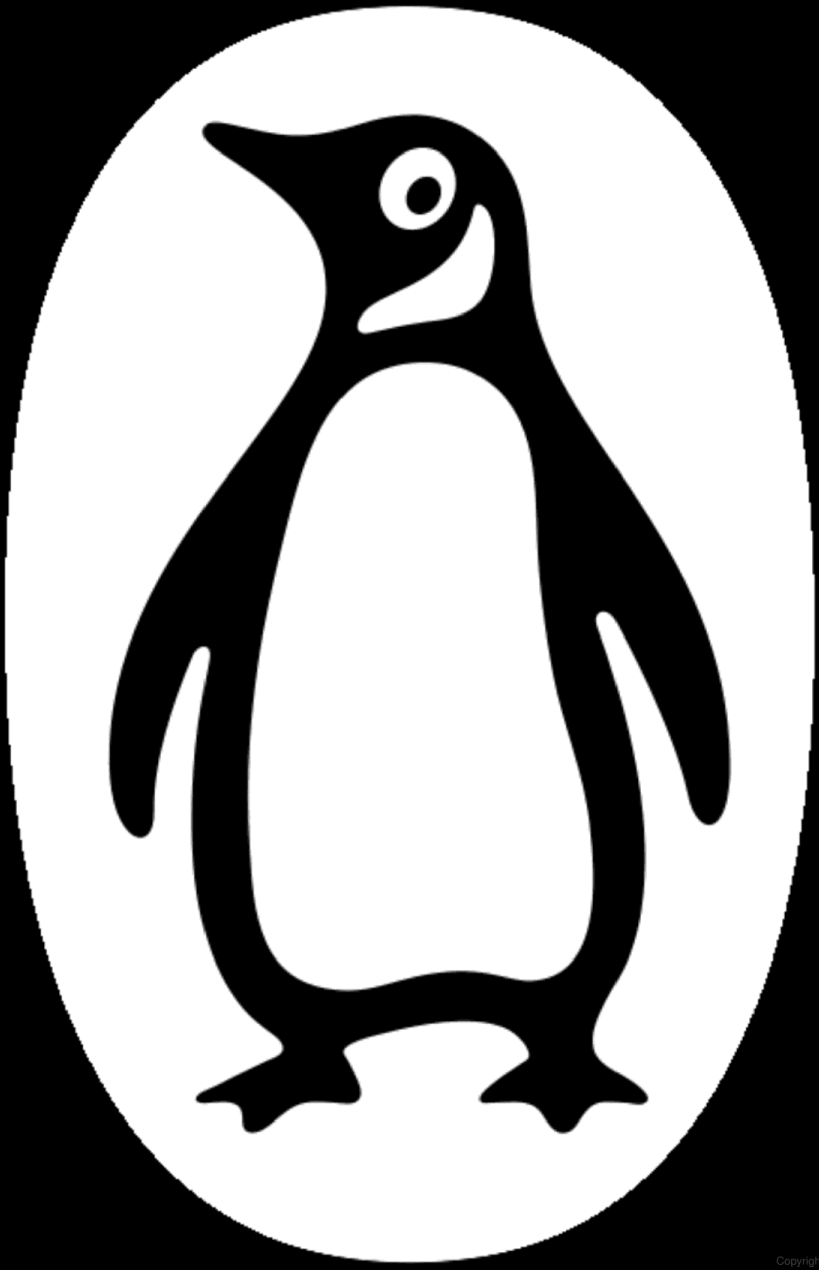

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ALISTAIR COOKE

Six Men

PENGUIN BOOKS

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For
Nunnally Johnson
1897–1977

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In a shorter form, the chapters on Mencken and Bogart originally appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the one on Edward VIII in the *New Yorker*. The chapters on Chaplin, Bertrand Russell and Adlai Stevenson are quite new.

A.C.

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A NOTE ON FAME AND FRIENDSHIP

More than half a century ago, in his *Mirrors of Downing Street*, a collection of what were then called 'character studies' of men in power, Harold Begbie put the quandary of the memoirist very succinctly: 'Public men must expect public criticism, and no criticism is so good for them, and therefore for the State, as criticism of character; but their position is difficult, and they may justly complain when those to whom they have spoken in the candour of private conversation make use of such confidences for a public purpose.'

In our day, the marketing of confidences 'spoken in the candour of private conversation' has become a big and frequently disreputable business. An outraged victim can expect little balm from the courts, since the courts have decided that almost any act of licence — from a scurrilous biography to filmed close-ups of writhing genitalia — is just what the Founding Fathers had in mind to defend when they wrote the First Amendment to the Constitution.

Anyone who has been subjected to press interviews or, worse, to profiles 'in depth' (usually composed on the basis of a two-hour conversation) knows that only very rarely does the printed piece approximate to a plausible account of the subject's views, let alone to a recognisable sketch of a character that is not a stereotype.

The intelligent complaint is not that the subject's vanity has been punctured, or — what, as a general proposition is always true —

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that he dislikes being disliked. The flattering pieces are, in my experience, often as unsatisfactory as the denigrating ones. Not from the interviewer's ill-will, but because a 'profile' of anybody's character has to be so selective of obvious traits and passing impressions as to create not so much a false image as a synthetic original. It is, indeed, with such slick confections that politicians and movie and television stars have to come to terms.

I have tried to bear these things in mind. But Begbie is right. Famous men and women, by the act of putting themselves on display, whether as politicians, actors, writers, painters, musicians, restaurateurs or whatever, invite public appraisal. They are all, impressively or pathetically, acting on the presumption that their ideas, their fantasies, their music, their bodies are more original than those of, say, a plumber or a chartered accountant. They are all exercising the impulse, as Mencken put it, 'to flap their wings in public'. This is so obvious to the critic — and, I believe, to the ordinary reader or spectator — that it seems hardly worth saying. But resentment of the practice of criticism itself is strong among professional artists (and all Presidents of the United States). There is a psychological type among them that hates critics *on principle* as parasites or failed performers. This is very natural but surely very childish and, in any country claiming to be civilised, actually anti-social. The existence of critics, good, bad or indifferent, is a firm clause in the social contract between the governors and the governed in any nation that is not a dictatorship. Public figures should accept with good grace the public response to their invitation to be admired and resist the temptation to retort, except in the face of flagrant malice. The truth is that the constant reader,

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or viewer or listener, is usually prejudiced about the performer before the performance. If he likes you, he will like you all the more; if he dislikes you, he will dislike you all the more. Very few people who begin to read this book will, I imagine, have an open mind on more than one or two of its subjects.

Granted, then — I hope — that my own motives are if not pure at least circumspect, the reader will want to know why the choice of these six. I could say, truthfully, that they are six men I have admired and also liked. But the question that naturally follows is, how did it come about that I, who half the time was an obscure journalist, could come close to such gods as Chaplin and Mencken? The simple true answer is that of all the eminent people I have had occasion to run into, these six were the ones who most demonstrably took to me! I hasten to dampen the ardour of this egotism at once by saying that it is not difficult for political journalists in America, for foreign correspondents especially, to get on familiar terms with public men. Indeed, the higher the status of a politician, the more he seems to crave a good notice abroad. It is one of the hazards of our trade. Washington is haunted by the apologetic ghosts of once first-rate correspondents who became permanently disabled for the disinterested reporting of a President, or some other bigwig, after an early dose of intimacy. More than thirty years ago, I took a pledge with James Reston of *The New York Times* — my oldest friend in the business — to resist consorting with politicians beyond the bounds of acquaintanceship. Adlai Stevenson, I think, is my only case of backsliding. There were times when it was awkward to have to write freely about him, although I must say that when I took the risk he was remarkably

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Malraux, in one of those blasting sentences with which Frenchmen love to seal off whole tunnels of enquiry, said that 'The death of Europe is the central fact of our time.' I don't know about that, but I am pretty sure that in their different ways these six sounded various tocsins: Mencken tolled the bell on the genteel tradition; Russell expected, single-handed, to cleanse the Establishment; Bogart was the first anti-hero hero; Stevenson, with noble naïveté, hoped to render obsolete the American political party machine; Chaplin did much to anachronise the tradition of the gentleman by parodying it on behalf of the dispossessed; and in the ordeal of Edward VIII we may hear the first death rattle of kingship.

So there are, I hope, objective reasons for finding much fascination in this sextet. Not to tie the reader down to a thesis, but to risk a suggestive generalisation: they all seem to me to be deeply conservative men who, for various psychological reasons, yearned to be recognised rather as hellions or brave progressives. Perhaps that is the real link with this writer.

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I

Charles Chaplin

The One and Only

The fans. They sift around the entrance to the Dorchester or huddle against a knifing wind on the sidewalk outside the Broadway stage doors: miniature traffic cops with their little books out, poised for the kill. They palpitate up against the improvised stage on any field large enough to enclose the pandemonium of a rock festival. Like Olympic relay runners, they stretch their arms to the limit, over the barricades at Wembley or Yankee Stadium waiting for the touch of the afternoon hero. They used to mob department stores where Sean Connery was rumoured to be shopping. I have seen them as a congregation of dolls, bobbing behind the customs barrier at Tokyo, waiting for the Rolling Stones to wing in from Seattle or Hawaii. They are the distorting mirrors in which the stars see their images blown up beyond any human scale.

What this ceaseless adoration does to the psyche of the victims is something that the victims rarely seem to examine, though they reveal it in various touching or unlovely ways. They learn to practise self-deprecation by way of fake surprise. Or they bear with it as the inevitable codicil to a million-dollar contract. Or, more often than is pleasant to see, they wallow in the ocean of their

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narcissism and accept it as no more than the due of their uncanny beauty or talent.

But the fans today are not to be confused with the public. They are specialists, devotees of a particular cult that may be worldwide but is exclusive nonetheless. The disciples of Elton John have never heard of Giscard D'Estaing. Girls and matrons dizzy with desire for Robert Redford would not know Saul Bellow or Bjorn Borg, or maybe even Nelson Rockefeller, if they fell over them. Perhaps only Presidents of the United States and the Queen of England — Muhammad Ali dissenting — can bring out a general crowd, and then only during an election campaign or a coronation. Somewhere along the falling graph of our allegiance to authority, the general public seems to have exhausted its naïve impulse to appear *en masse* for the arrival of the famous one — except in those 'people's republics' where a million people can be commanded to appear on the double in the great square, or else.

But most of all, in our century, more people have come out everywhere to catch a glimpse of Charles Chaplin than did so for any other human in history. This sentence seems a contradiction: no celebrity could be seen by more people in more countries, though in the bacterial stew of the early cinemas, than Charles Chaplin was. But he was the first world entertainer whose film persona seemed too real to be true: to see Charles Chaplin was to come face to face with the living Aladdin whose lamp had conjured up the genie we all loved and laughed at.

To say that anyone is the most famous, or the best, the greatest, the most beautiful, is — like all rhetoric — a method of bullying the reader into sharing a prejudice. The journalists who garnish a

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magazine profile with such superlatives, like the authors of screenplays about some chosen eminence (Pasteur, Beethoven, Sister Kenny), are writing from the focal centre of their idol's local fame and assume that the din of it reverberates out from centre to the farthest corners of the earth. This convention can produce scenes of hilarious innocence in the movies, where, say, an enterprising producer offers us a Parisian soirée at which our heroine George Sand is an invited guest. To foster a little desperate verisimilitude, the camera pans over the assembled company, and you get a glimpse of an Orson Welles bulk addressed as 'M. Balzac,' a passing remark addressed to a dandy with whiskers ('Tell me, Mr Dickens'), a French lieutenant deferring to a fellow called Bismarck (no matter whether the Iron Chancellor had ever been in Paris or not). They are all hushed into reverence by the arrival of Merle Oberon in a tuxedo, for although the casual spectator may have thought of this as the Age of Revolution or the Reform Acts he is meant to realise that the whole world swooned at the appearance anywhere of George Sand. In dull fact, George Sand and Charles Dickens, even with Bismarck in tow could probably have roamed through Paris or London arm in arm and gone unrecognised by all but a chance acquaintance or an *aficionado* of daguerreotypes. Johnny Carson cannot go into a delicatessen anywhere between the Florida Keys and Fairbanks, Alaska, without a chorus of oohing and ahing and a rush of autograph hounds.

A year or two ago a New York magazine concocted a list of the one hundred 'most famous men and women in the world'. By the most generous count, not more than a dozen of them could have

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been heard of outside the regular readers of the American editions of *Time* and *Vogue*, the night-time audience for American television talk-shows, dentists' patients, and the addicts of *The New York Times's* proliferating gossip columns. The composers of the list had plainly ignored the fact that our world includes the inhabitants of Europe, Communist China and Upper Volta, not to mention all of South America and Australasia.

Yet Will Rogers was saying nothing but the literal truth when he wrote, in 1931, that 'The Zulus know Chaplin better than Arkansas knows Garbo.' Throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s, Chaplin was the most famous man on earth. It is impossible to pick another person of any nationality to whom such a legion of other international celebrities was eager to be introduced. At one time or another, they included the Crown Prince of Japan, Woodrow Wilson, Prince George of Greece, Nijinsky, Lord Louis Mountbatten, Franklin Roosevelt, Georges Carpentier, Diego Rivera, Albert Einstein, Pandit Nehru, Pablo Casals, Nikita Khrushchev, Jean Cocteau, and Chou En-lai.

As early as 1917, when Chaplin had been making two-reelers for only three years, his studio was the court to which trooped the most eminent of touring artists: Paderewski, Godowsky, Heifetz, Harry Lauder, Dame Nellie Melba. In 1921, on his first return to Britain since he had left it as an obscure vaudevillian, the crowds at Waterloo lifted him on their shoulders from the boat train, and the streets along the three-mile route to the Ritz were lined as for a coronation. Ten years later, over a hundred police were required to guard him between the Tokyo docks and the Imperial Hotel. On a two-month visit to Europe in 1931, which included a short detour

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evening. He must have been as flattered as any other European visitor to be socialising with the legendary 'Charlie'. But he told me what a shock it was to notice the crudity of Chaplin's table manners, his brusqueness with waiters, his cocky assumption that he was the smartest movie-maker in town. Which indeed he was, even though his conceit was a kind of bluster covering up the rueful knowledge that he was no more than a big fish in a tiny and socially rather murky pond of Southern California.

On lonely evenings — and Chaplin always prized the good artist's retreat into the loneliness that breeds ideas — he liked to go over to a favourite café in Santa Monica owned and run by one Nat Goodwin, a light comedian who had long ago established himself in London as what Max Beerbohm, among others, thought of as the supreme 'American mime'. Goodwin had retired to California and there looked back with anecdotal amusement over the ease of his theatrical fame and the strain of eight marriages, one of them to Maxine Elliott, a mountainous beauty whom he recalled as 'the Roman Senator'. Chaplin knew all about Goodwin's fame and looked on him, no doubt, as the first among equals. He went to Nat Goodwin's café as to a court and listened to the king recall his triumphs. But Goodwin was far more aware of Chaplin's fame than Chaplin was.

There came a time in the beginning of 1916 when Chaplin was exhausted by the frantic routine of making thirteen films in fourteen months. He had just finished cutting *Carmen*, his parody of the opera, and he decided to accept the invitation of his brother, Syd, to rest and play in New York. It would be the first time he had seen the big city since he had left it as a member of Fred Karno's

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vaudeville company. Goodwin told Chaplin that he would be lionised and gave him a little avuncular advice: 'You'll be invited everywhere, but don't accept. Pick out one or two friends and be satisfied to imagine the rest… John Drew was a great favourite with society and went to all their houses, but they would not go to his theatre. They had had him in their drawing-rooms.'

Well primed by this cautionary tale, Chaplin boarded the train for the journey east and relaxed into the five days of anonymity that would precede the social whirl he had been warned to expect from the actors and actresses and social-theatrical hangers-on in New York. On the evening of the second day, he was standing in his underwear shaving in the washroom as the train pulled into Amarillo, Texas. He was aware of a vague baying sound as the train slid into the station. He peered out and saw a dense crowd on the platform and a line of trestle tables piled with refreshments. Like any other traveller, he assumed that Amarillo was out to welcome some local hero — a football star, the Governor, perhaps — and he went back to his lathering. The baying sound came into focus as a chant: 'Charlie! Charlie! Charlie! Where's Charlie Chaplin?' There was a rush of footsteps along the corridor and a deputation caught him. He was allowed to wipe his face and pull on a shirt and tie and descend to a roar of cheers, as the Mayor stepped up to invite him to 'have a drink and a light refreshment' with, apparently, the entire population of Amarillo. At any rate, the crowd was too boisterous for safety, and the Mayor, slammed against the train with a rumpled Chaplin, as the cops strode and shouted, performed a Groucho switch of mood and snapped, 'All right, Charlie, let's get it over with.'

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In the retelling of it, Chaplin recalled this line as the one delightful memory of what had been a trauma. When it was all over, and the train moved off, he sat in his compartment, huddled against the pointings and gigglings of the people who had lately seen a fellow passenger and now recognised a marvel. He was, he would admit, at first wildly flattered, then frightened, and, long before New York, facing for the first time the fact of universal fame and the psychological problem, peculiar I imagine to ventriloquists, of being worshipped as the creator of a being outside himself.

It was the same in Kansas City and Chicago. Along the route, where the train ran through suburban stations, people stood in clusters or long lines beside the track waving at the Man who must be in there somewhere. It was no longer the Southern Pacific trans-continental daily out of Glendale. It was the Chaplin Train, as one would say the Lincoln Train.

From then on, he had to learn to acquire the protective affability, and the stoicism, that recognisable celebrities must live with. It was not easy for him. He discovered with some alarm that he cherished his privacy, which was now invaded night and day. He was also highly opinionated, and while he responded extravagantly to anyone who sincerely sought advice about some private turmoil or the future of capitalism, he was insulted by general questions that might be put to any other celebrity, and he was rattled to the point of outrage by gossip-column queries about his taste in women, in food, whether he would ever play Hamlet or become an American citizen. He refused to perform for a shipboard concert. At Cherbourg, a ship's reporter wondered whether he considered

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Lenin or Lloyd George the greater man. He snapped, 'One works and the other plays,' thus planting an ominous hint of other innumerable offhand sallies that would get him into a thicket of public squabbles in the years ahead.

When he had acquired some self-possession, which he once admitted to me deserted him most often when most he needed it, namely in the presence of newspapermen out to bait him, he was most concerned to dispose briskly of the interview, the war bond speech, the balcony appearance, and lock himself into his privacy. This impatience to have done with the adulation — which he once significantly remarked 'is given, after all, to the little fellow, not me' — brought him unfairly the reputation of a misanthrope. Simply, but hopelessly, he discovered, after the first return to New York, that he could enjoy no such luxury of choice as Nat Goodwin had recommended: 'Pick out one or two friends and be satisfied to imagine the rest.'

For, it is fair to say, the next twenty years or so, the shoals of mail (in London 73,000 letters in two days) never ceased, nor the flood of invitations, nor even the celebrity-seeking raids of other celebrities. It forced his private life to be surreptitious; and few public figures had for so long such a continuously turbulent private life. From his earliest slapstick days, when director, cast, actors and crew were vagabonds, there was always some mischief brewing with one or other of the Mack Sennett bathing beauties. Chaplin, it should be remembered, was not only a dapper and amusing man, an enchanting mimic from childhood on. He was also remarkably handsome, extremely attractive to women and instantly susceptible to them — to two types more than most: the

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femme fatale and the child-woman. The gamut is represented at its polar opposites by Pola Negri (for all that she was born Appolonia Chalupek) and his first wife, Mildred Harris. Time and again he found himself involved with earthy, lusty women. But the ones he sought were nubile adolescents. He married three of them: Mildred Harris at 16, when he was 29; Lita Grey at 17, when he was 35; Oona O'Neill at 18, when he was 55. I state this as an interesting but probably inexplicable emotional pattern.

Most of this, all the accumulated detail of his fame as the one and only Charlie Chaplin, was known to me — and much of it was flooding through my mind — on a still and brilliant midsummer morning in 1933 when I sat on the deck of a yacht, anchored twenty-odd miles south-west of Los Angeles Harbour, looking across the shimmering water to the small mountainous island called Catalina. The yacht was, by Riviera or even Hollywood standards, modest, a fifty-footer Chaplin had named the *Panacea*. There were five of us aboard. Chaplin, then forty-four. Paulette Goddard, an enchanting twenty-two-year-old brunette, as trim and shiny as a trout, whom Chaplin had known for little more than a year. Andy, the skipper (a former Keystone cop), was a gnarled, good-natured man of few words. And Freddy, a Japanese cook. And there was I, a lean, black-haired, twenty-four-year-old Englishman on a two-year fellowship at Yale. In another place, or applying for a job on paper, I would have explained that I was a young man of mixed but lively aspirations to be either a theatrical director of the stature of Reinhardt, Piscator or Meyerhold *or* a playwright of deafening fame (I was undecided just then whether to be the acknowledged successor to Noel Coward or Eugene

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rumour of the American dream and who settle for a lifetime in a humble job without any apparent sense of disillusion.

Alfred Reeves had come over on the ship with Chaplin and the London vaudeville troupe, and until he died he was Chaplin's only manager. He offered in person a first proof of something very appealing about his boss. Chaplin could sustain outrageous feuds with business partners, drop old friends on a whim and walk in on them again with a grin, issue imperial edicts banning this titan or that from his studio, and summarily jilt houris both obscure and famous. He skipped engagements as the mood took him. But he was unflaggingly loyal to his old-time staff, in the manner of a sergeant who has been through years of trench warfare with a motley pack of privates and ever afterwards uses them as a protective base of sanity against the fits and starts of the higher-ups. At least half a dozen of the vaudevillians who appeared in the earliest Chaplin primitives could be spotted in character parts a quarter century later. As the most creditable example, there was Rollie Totheroh, who was Chaplin's cameraman at Essanay in 1915. As Chaplin became Shaw's 'one artist of the cinema' and moved out of two-reelers into the grandeur of full-length feature films, with a correspondingly grander investment to protect, it would have been entirely sensible for him to cast around for new and spectacular talents. But Totheroh, a diffident and thoroughly competent craftsman, was still there shooting *Monsieur Verdoux* thirty-two years later. He was there, in fact, on the day of my arrival, filing some old prints and pottering around in a leisurely fashion, on full pay, though there would be no more filming for another two years.

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Reeves took me off into Chaplin's office, another shock but one softened by the inoculation of the first: the row of workers' mock-Tudor cottages which constituted the facade of the studio itself. The office was the central room of a small bungalow. It had worn oilcloth on the floor and if it was ever wallpapered, the paper had rotted in the fungi of mildew. There was one small window, three straight-back chairs, an old table, about half a dozen books with peeling spines, and an ancient upright piano hideously out of tune. It was probably about as luxurious as any of the rooms Chaplin rented in the boarding-houses of pre-war England, and as I was to learn, in working there the following year, it reflected Chaplin's deep distrust of elegant surroundings whenever there was serious work on hand. It was also, it now strikes me, the reassuring home base that some men whose childhoods have been grindingly poor require in the years of their affluence. Chaplin himself had noticed the same trait in Bronco Billy Anderson and may have caught from him the courage to indulge it. ('It was dark when we entered his bungalow… the place was empty and drab. In his room was an old iron bed with a light bulb hanging over the head of it. A rickety old table and one chair were the other furniture. Near the bed was a wooden box upon which was a brass ashtray filled with cigarette butts… This was the home of G. M. Anderson, the multi-millionaire cowboy.')

Reeves was saying something about Chaplin's frequent burnings at the hands of the press but how, for some unstated reason, 'This is different and he'll be happy to see you,' when the man himself stepped smartly through the door and came into the room. The first impression was of being suddenly with two optimistic midgets in the office of a failing vaudeville agent. Neither Reeves nor Chaplin

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could have been much over five feet. We exchanged the usual nervous grins and 'Well, well!' handshakes, and Reeves, assuring himself that Chaplin was in an affable mood (the precaution of a swimming teacher who is satisfied that the children are playing safely at the shallow end) bowed out and left us alone.

You expect a small man to have a small hand, but it was not until you doubted for a moment whether it was flesh you were holding or some ivory knick-knack, that you looked up at its chuckling owner and said to yourself, he certainly is a tiny man. His feet were in scale, peeking out like mice from under highheld trousers. Above the trousers was a white angora sweater, and above that a tanned face, small ears set behind the cheek bones, grey eyes of a dancing mobility, and above them a monumental forehead and hair piled like a melting snowball. I like to think I would have been arrested anywhere by the face: features evenly sculptured into a sensuous whole, strong and handsome beyond any guess you might have made by mentally stripping away the black half-moon eyebrows and the comic moustache. This startling disparity between Chaplin and 'Charlie' might be thought to have protected his identity from the fans, and I remember once, coming out of a movie theatre with him, how a young man nudged his girl and hissed, 'There's Charlie Chaplin!' She made the obvious comment that it didn't look like him, to which the young man irritably snapped, 'You can't expect anybody to *look* like Charlie Chaplin.' In the early days, he could wander incognito through the cities of California. But by the time of that first railroad journey east, the news of his presence anywhere was so trumpeted in the papers or by word of mouth that people had to see him in order to

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believe that the creator of the immortal tramp was the same person in another guise. So seeing Chaplin for the first time was a more curious pleasure than having the screen image of any other star confirmed in the flesh.

Reeves's notion that this press interview would somehow be 'different' was explained by the sort of lucky coincidence that can transform a wary first meeting into a starting friendship. Reeves had warned me that Chaplin, after a spate of more or less scurrilous articles about him (the papers had made a messy thing out of his second divorce), had cut himself off from all access to the press, thereby compounding his normal isolation from Hollywood and all its denizens. In the two summers I spent with him, the only movie people — the only people, for that matter — who ever appeared at the house were King Vidor, Frank Reicher, an old German character actor, and Dr Cecil Reynolds, his stage-struck doctor.

On his recent visit to England, Chaplin had been warmly entertained by the Astors, who owned the paper I was writing for. He had also struck up a congenial relationship with another Alister, the son of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. It was as simple as that. At any rate the 'interview' dissolved into lively conversation, and from there we went to lunch and then up to his house, where I was introduced to 'my friend Miss Goddard'. A routine mannerly hint from me that I ought to be on my way was brushed aside, and through the long afternoon we sat round the empty swimming pool (there was a polio epidemic that summer) and I left at sundown on a promise to be back next day to dinner. After that, I was up at the

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house almost every day, and then he invited me for a week-end aboard the *Panacea*.

It was the beginning of a friendship that was as close as could be through that summer and the next. But I come back to the first cruise on the *Panacea*, because during its four or five days Chaplin opened himself up in the most natural and revealing way, and very little that happened afterwards was much of a surprise to me. The impression I picked up then, confirmed later by other close friends — Frank Reicher, John Steinbeck, and more than any other Dr Reynolds — was that when Chaplin took to anyone he was wide open from the start, spontaneous, generous, gabby, confidential, as if taking up again where he had left off with a favourite, long-lost brother. I could see then how, if it were a woman who attracted him, he would soon be deep in intimacy as Macbeth was in blood and find 'returning as tedious as go o'er'. This instinct to plunge into a relationship with all the defences down can be darkly ascribed to a helpless reflex of egocentricity. And Chaplin undoubtedly needed to dazzle a new friend with the whole panoply of his charm, humour, talent, knowingness, and — which was a little less impressive to anyone used to thinking — his intellect. But, instant psycho-analysis apart, it ought to be said that whatever the spring of its motive, it was a warming thing to receive. There was nothing of the poltroon about Chaplin. Neither in love nor in friendship did he ever tread water. He regularly took a header into deep water, and the splash usually shocked his envious neighbours. Much of the public uproar about his matrimonial troubles came from highly moral women's groups, who, no doubt correctly, felt their own marriages threatened by the possible contagion of

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humanity, 'the little man', and other desirable abstractions — as humdrum politicians come out for mother-love and lower taxes.)

But I had been in Germany two summers before and seen all around me the blue faces and bloated bellies of starving people. I had enough political instinct, however uninstructed, to sense the depths of despair from which the mass of people could look up to Hitler as to the only possible saviour. And I had just driven half-way round America and told him how roused I had been by the contrast of a listless nation suddenly galvanised into energy and confidence by Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt! I had made the connection: the dense pupil suddenly says a bright thing. He was all for Roosevelt, believed he had saved the country from revolution, and saw the New Deal as a promising half-way house on the road to 'true socialism', which, I gathered, was not Ramsay MacDonald's spurious brand but something on which Josef Stalin had the only legitimate patent. (In his autobiography, Chaplin is frank enough to leave in the recollection of a conversation with H. G. Wells, whose fears of dictatorship and the suppression of civil liberties in Russia are dismissed by Chaplin as growing pains or tactical 'mistakes' not to be compared in grossness with 'the repudiation of foreign loans'.) There is an interesting psychological point here. Chaplin always talked about capitalism as a more or less failing system and showed no anxiety about its doom. But I was told by people who knew him as a businessman that he was as alert as a radar specialist to the rise and fall of the stock market. He told me, that summer, in a moment of offhand pride, that he had felt in his bones the coming of the 1929 crash and astutely transferred his holdings to Canada and South Africa and other

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places where the collapse was less painful. He had, he once boasted, lost little or nothing in the Depression.

I was beginning to think that actors, like writers and opera stars, were never the same at home. Certainly, the world's funniest man would have turned into the world's most hectoring bore if he had gone on and on even as long as these recollections. But I have, unfairly, lumped his political sermons into a running credo. He was always reciting them in snatches, at the unlikeliest times, and in the end they led to his banishment from the United States, an outcome that no one could possibly have predicted on that August morning as Chaplin preached to the Catalina hills and to me.

A funny memory of the First World War incidentally revealed on that occasion a wound long forgotten in England and, I should guess, hardly known about in the United States. As soon as Chaplin had established his no-nonsense political credentials, he fell into reminiscences of the old music-hall songs and, cued by my mention of some of the great names, he went off into a bout of marvellous total recall, ballooning before my eyes into the bosomy swagger of Marie Lloyd and bawling out 'A Little of What You Fancy Does Y'Good', then shrinking into the exquisite shape of Vesta Tilley, the pocket Astaire, and singing 'I'm Colonel Coldfeet of the Coldstream Guards' and 'Into a cookshop he goes dashin', Who should bring his plate of hash in, But the girl he had been mashin', By the sad sea waves.' I told him that my father had kept for me, and I still had, a wartime record of 'Oh, the Moon Shines Bright on Charlie Chaplin'.

'That,' he said, in sudden alarm, 'scared the hell out of me.'

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What I'd forgotten in mentioning that song, though it was neither hard nor pleasant to recall, was the insensate jingoism of wartime Britain, the hounding of German shopkeepers, the cretinous women patriots handing a white feather to young men in civilian clothes, and the holy indignation of comfortable editorial writers against any famous Englishman abroad who had not dashed home to join Our Boys Out There on Flanders Fields. Chaplin was a glaring target, and there was much doltish sarcasm at his expense, until it was discovered that few imports from England bucked up Our Boys Out There like the Chaplin films shown behind the lines. For a nasty spell he was Chaplin the Slacker in the London press and 'Good Old Charlie' in the trenches, after which the hunt was abandoned. At its height, somebody sent Chaplin the new song. In its American original it was about an Indian maiden called 'Little Red Wing', but the lyrics were changed in the British version, whose chorus went:

'Oh, the moon shines bright
on Charlie Chaplin,
His boots are crackin'
For want of blackin',
And his little baggy
trousers they need mendin'
Before we send him
To the Dardanelles.'

'I went home,' said Chaplin, 'and read about the Dardanelles after that, and for a time I was certain they were out to get me.' He

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laughed now, but he remembered it as a threat long enough to begin hustling around addressing war bond rallies with bouncing enthusiasm, once the United States was in the war.

The songs led naturally to the old vaudeville days in England and the seedy rooms, in dark provincial towns, that he had shared with Stan Laurel. I don't think he saw much of Laurel in Hollywood, certainly not in my time, but he spoke affectionately of him and told me why. There was a time during a provincial tour when Chaplin was often absent from his lodging, till one Saturday night he came back petrified with fright that his girl in the show was pregnant. Laurel evidently confronted this life crisis as mildly as he contemplated the crasser ordeals of Oliver Hardy. He went off to his trunk and fumbled around in it for a while and came back with a handful of pound notes. They were such savings as he could have scratched up from a fifteen-shilling-a-week salary. Chaplin never said whether the offer had to be taken up, but the memory of it made him more indulgent to the antics of Laurel and Hardy than to any other of the Hollywood comedians, of whom he was uniformly contemptuous. The Marx Brothers were just then getting into their swing, and Chaplin was almost defensively scornful of them. 'Nothing but anarchists,' he'd say, which — considering the implicit anarchy of his own film career — suggested that Chaplin thought the best way to mock society was not to fight it but to join it by way of parody.

He talked in a touching and rambling way about his childhood, but neither then nor ever later did he moon over his poverty or sentimentalise the grovelling times. (He left the tearful touch, regrettably, for the heroines in his movies.) As he went on, acting

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