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Charlie Chaplin

Intimate Close-Ups

Georgia Hale
Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
Heather Kiernan



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For Papa and Mama Bessler
and in memory of
Ivor and Hell
with love



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Editor's Introduction

What is not original is of no importance, and what is original is bound to be fraught with the weakness of the individual.

GOETHE

In 1925 when Charlie Chaplin's *Gold Rush*, in his own estimation the finest of all his films, was released, it made an immediate Hollywood star out of a pretty young actress named Georgia Hale. Sixty years later, in the year she died, Georgia was still receiving a trickle of fan mail from admirers around the world, who remembered the performance that earned her a permanent place in film history. Georgia's appearance in *The Gold Rush* was her first major role, and although she continued to act in films until 1931, she would never again have a triumph of the kind she had initially enjoyed. In many ways her experience in Hollywood was typical of that of many young women attracted to the glamour of the silent film world, and then faced with premature oblivion.

The story of how Georgia Hale, the dress extra of Poverty Row, became for a while the leading lady to Charles Chaplin, is a classic example of the American success myth, though in her case success did not last for long. As Daniel Boorstin has written, "the film star legend of the accidental discovered soda-fountain girl who was quickly elevated to stardom soon took its place alongside the log-cabin-to-White-House legend as a leitmotif of American democratic folk-lore."¹

It is impossible to write about Georgia except as someone who believed that her fate, desires, and aspirations were linked to Charles Chaplin. That she was profoundly affected by her love for him would be obvious to anyone who reads this memoir. Through periods of close and intimate friendship, her devotion to him, next to that of Edna Purviance, was until his marriage to Oona O'Neill the sincerest in Chaplin's experience. Through that fragmented, shifting, and often lonely life, Georgia's attachment persisted unchanged. In spite of waverings and withdrawals, Chaplin for his part seems to have felt a genuine affection for her. Like Edna Purviance, Georgia never married, clinging instead to a belief that there could never be anyone for her but him. "He asked if I had married?" she wrote in a letter after Chaplin's return to Hollywood in 1972, "and I told him, no . . . because everyone else seemed so impossible after knowing him."²

After some bitter disappointment both with her career and with the romance, she turned eventually to Christian Science, which comforted her in her middle and later years. In the calm of those years she worked out for herself an explanation that left the object of her infatuation, "Charlie," essentially undisturbed, and put the responsibility for the cruel disappointment on "Mr. Chaplin," a very different person. Charlie, sweet, charming, and innocent, she had loved from adolescence; a love that endured. His opposite, Mr. Chaplin, the cold, self-absorbed, producer-actor-director and socialite, was the source of much pain, as her story makes clear. If Charles Chaplin carried within him many contradictions, was tender-hearted, cruel, sensitive, child-like, a poseur, all of these qualities were parts of his creative spirit.

Georgia wrote two versions of *Intimate Close-Ups*. The second, the one that appears here, considerably longer, denser, and more complex; it lacks the single-threadedness of the first version. Perhaps she looked at her first effort and cast it aside as too one-dimensional a picture of Chaplin. Both were written during the 1960s, long after the events they describe. Both failed to find a publisher. “I’ve written down all the little incidents I knew with him but it isn’t commercial. They want the lurid.”³

Much has been written about Charles Chaplin. His life has been analysed, annotated, and probed by his biographers, but it is remarkable that so little of this has been by those closest to him. As a source of intimate knowledge relating to Chaplin, Georgia occupies an almost unique place. For apart from Lita Grey’s account, *My Life with Chaplin* (see p. 46, fn. 1), and that of May Reeves, *Charlie Chaplin Intime* (see p. 152, fn. 1), not one of the women who found a place in Chaplin’s life chose to write about her relationship with him. Some may wish to challenge some of Georgia’s assertions. Many writers have deemed it necessary to mix fiction with fact in any memorable testimony, very often inventing life rather than recapturing it. Then the question of what happened and how people thought and felt remains open. Apart from the impossibility of seeing into people’s hearts and heads, time darkens some things and reveals others. Chaplin as he appeared to the people who knew him was different for each of them.

Looking back into childhood is like turning a telescope the wrong way round. Everything appears in miniature, but with a clarity it probably does not deserve; moreover, it often becomes concentrated and stylised. Happiness and sorrow, love and friendship, hostility, must all find a place somewhere. Some memories are preserved, while others are sealed off behind a curtain.

Georgia Theodora was born on June 25, 1900, at St. Joseph, Missouri, the youngest daughter of George Washington Hale and his wife Laura Imbrie. There has been much confusion about the date of her birth, chiefly because she herself gave different dates. Georgia kept among her papers a copy of her birth certificate with the date 1909. In the late 1920s Paramount gave the date as 1904, and Chaplin’s biographer David Robinson has given it as 1906. While the 25th of June is the date she consistently gave as her birthday, Georgia’s school record makes it clear that the year was 1900.

The Hale family moved in late 1902 or early 1903 to Englewood, Illinois, a then middle-class suburb of Chicago. Following her two older sisters, Eugenia and Helen, Georgia attended the Beaumont Elementary School, entering in 1906. The early chapters of her memoir depict a family full of the usual jealousies and sibling rivalries; it was, by her account, not a happy or loving one. There is a likeness between some words of Chaplin’s about his childhood—“I was aware of the social stigma of our poverty . . .”—and Georgia’s “ashamed and dismayed” by the poverty of her surroundings. In her case however, this seems to have made her from a very early age, sensitive to the injustices of the world: “my urgent need for the answer to the tragedies I saw around me was not silenced.” Though “poetic soul,” her hard-worked mother was of little help as a counsellor. Still less was her unsympathetic father, whose frequent absences—another resemblance to Chaplin’s experience—made him seem more like a boarder. The answer did not come through Nature or religion as Georgia hoped, but “that blessed day” when she first saw Charlie Chaplin.

The Tramp’s philosophy, or personality, must have appealed to many individuals like Georgia. Chaplin, as one who had escaped from the slums of Victorian London, was well suited to carry his message across the ocean—that life, however wretched, is always worth living; the same lesson of faith in life so prominent in *Limelight*. With the Tramp as a kind of Redeemer figure, this revelation came to her with something like an Evangelical fervour of conversion, for she was transformed from a sad and despondent young woman into one “changing for the better . . . changing within.”

Known affectionately to her family as “Dixie,” Georgia entered Englewood High School in 1917. The school yearbook states that she “assisted on a great many school occasions with her singing and

expects to go on with her music after leaving school.” Following graduation in June 1918, Georgia attended one of Chicago’s musical colleges, but it is uncertain whether she completed the course of study. Her only known professional theatrical engagement at this time was at the Chicago Winter Follies during the autumn of 1920, and for some reason, she seems to have appeared under the name of Olive West.

Between the Winter Follies and a beauty contest in 1922 nothing is known of her life. Like much else in Georgia’s memoir, her account of the contest is reliable, if a little vague. A scrapbook of newspaper clippings she proudly compiled of the event survives.⁴ Chosen from twenty contestants as Queen of the Pageant in August 1922, she was “crowned” by U.S. Post Master General Hubert Work. Jack Dempsey, who had arrived in Chicago to train for his next fight with Bill Brennan, paid the occasion the honour of appearing. After receiving the double honour of being chosen “Miss Chicago” and then “Miss America Pageant Queen of the United States,” Georgia stepped into another beauty competition in Atlantic City. Following the lead of the *Chicago Evening American* in establishing an annual Pageant of Progress, Atlantic City inaugurated its own national beauty contest in September 1922. Unsuccessful in her attempt to capture another title, Georgia went to New York.

Contrary to what has been supposed, Georgia’s film career did not begin in Hollywood, but in New York. Along with prize money totalling \$2,500, she had been offered two movie contracts. Travelling there in the autumn of 1922, she was, according to a newspaper clipping, employed in upwards of ten pictures.⁵ Only one however has been identified, *Enemies of Women*. A story of a modern Babylon, the lavish production, directed by Alan Crosland, featured the Broadway veteran Lionel Barrymore as a libertine Russian prince. She was recalled to Chicago by the illness of her mother in April 1923. Deciding against returning to New York, Georgia left the following month for the West coast, and arrived in Los Angeles on May 19, 1923.

Soon after her arrival she was again competing in a beauty contest. Goldwyn studios, together with Hearst’s *Los Angeles Examiner*, announced a Motion Picture Exposition to be held in July. Among the committee of judges asked to select the most beautiful blonde and brunette in Southern California were two Goldwyn stars, Claire Windsor and Mae Busch, the author and director Rupert Hughes, and the British novelist Elinor Glyn, one of whose own stories was to be filmed. Supervising the screen tests was the actor Frank Mayo.⁶ Georgia, who according to the *L.A. Examiner* had “a striking resemblance to Helene Chadwick, the Goldwyn beauty,” and one Lillian Collier, were awarded contracts, each for four weeks, to appear respectively in Rupert Hughes’ *Law Against Law*, and which became the hugely successful *Three Weeks*.

“I’ve been watching Rupert Hughes’ productions for a long time,” Georgia told the *Examiner*, “and it seems a peculiar twist of fate that this man’s pictures that I have always liked so much should now prove a vehicle in which I will make a bow myself.”⁷ Though production did not begin for several months, Hughes’ film was completed and released in December 1923, under its new title, *Remorse*. Curiously, it featured Helene Chadwick.

Over the next few months, Georgia found work as one of the “splash me” bathing beauties in pictures like *The Temple of Venus* and *The Goof*.⁸ Following the success of Mack Sennett and Al Christie, producers during the early 1920s resumed making clean comedies, which reopened a great opportunity for screen-struck girls to get into movies. Many stars of the silent era, like Gloria Swanson, Phyllis Haver, Bebe Daniels and Betty Compson disported themselves before the camera like daughters of Neptune, on their way to becoming featured players. “For if you are sufficiently pleasing to the eye to land a berth of this kind in a comedy company, your success is assured.”⁹

Georgia’s recollections of how she came to star in Josef von Sternberg’s *The Salvation Hunters* have charm, and in many of their details are consistent with Sternberg’s own, though sometimes rather caustic account.¹⁰ They met in the autumn of 1923 when both were working, he as assistant director

she as an extra, on the film *By Divine Right*. A few months later, they worked together again on another that neither refers to: ~~*Vanity's Price*, a Film Booking Office production, with a screenplay by Paul Bern.~~ Georgia was given a part in the chorus, but an unlucky accident to her ankle prevented her from taking it up.

In his memoirs Sternberg said that when he first noticed “this Galatea” she was reading “a book of mine, a translation of a Viennese novel, and the page she was perusing was splashed with a mascara tear.”¹¹ Skeptical readers of this story will feel doubtful about it. Their skepticism may be too cynical, but it is quite easy to suppose that he thought of Georgia when planning his own first film, *The Salvation Hunters*, simply because they had already worked together. She displayed what Sternberg described as a “sullen charm.” But no matter what the story, Georgia owed much to *The Salvation Hunters*, as did Sternberg. United Artists agreed to distribute the film, and this provided each of them with a crucial opportunity to advance their careers. For Georgia it meant that rescue had come a second time from her “miracle man,” Charles Chaplin.

When *The Salvation Hunters* was completed in November 1924, Chaplin was ten months into production on his epic film, *The Gold Rush*. That month he married Lita Grey, and when it became clear that her pregnancy would keep her from continuing in the role of the dance-hall girl, Chaplin sought a new leading lady. Before Christmas, and after a screen test of Georgia had been completed, it was announced that the heroine would be portrayed by her. Georgia was twenty-four, and compared with many other featured actresses of the time was, by Hollywood standards, almost middle-aged.

Many of the earlier sequences had already been shot, and the appearance of the dance-hall girl in the second half of the film made it easier for Chaplin to re-work the story. It is not certain how the character of the dance-hall girl was originally to have evolved. She is one of Chaplin's few demimondaine heroines—clearly a significant departure from his usual onscreen partnership with a leading lady. Gone are the playful teasing and flirting so characteristic of the love scenes with Edna Purviance. *The Gold Rush* was his first major attempt at portraying a romance between the Tramp and a heroine, a love on his side at first unrequited, but in the end fulfilled. Unrequited love reappears in *The Circus* and *City Lights*, but there ends in disappointment. While Georgia tells us little that is altogether new about the making of *The Gold Rush*, or about Chaplin's directorial methods, she does provide some corroborative detail. His passion for perfection, often requiring numerous retakes, his days absent from the set, are all consistent with what others have told us.

After a colourful and elaborate prologue entitled “Charlie Chaplin's Dream,” *The Gold Rush* had its world premiere in Hollywood at Grauman's Egyptian Theatre on June 26, 1925. As part of the publicity campaign, Chaplin and Sid Grauman, in co-operation with the *Los Angeles Examiner*, scheduled a “gold rush” for Sunday, September 27. Chaplin, who had left Los Angeles for New York in July, sent Georgia a wire delegating her to plant the treasure in the sands along Santa Monica. In addition to money, each bag was to contain a pass for that night's showing of *The Gold Rush*. “Fortified with the latest tips furnished daily on the screen at the theater [Grauman's Egyptian] and from the columns of the *Examiner*,” thousands of “prospectors” planned visits to the beach in order “to size up the situation as to the possible locations where the \$500 in twenty small bags will be planted.”¹²

Chaplin began preparations for *The Circus* in the autumn of 1925, and had considered employing Georgia again, as her name in his original outline indicates. The contract that she had signed with him the year before ended on the last day of December 1925. The reason for its not being renewed is unknown. Perhaps it was at the urging of Lita Grey, who wanted Chaplin to cast her childhood friend Merna Kennedy, in the role of the equestrienne. Whatever the reason, Georgia signed instead a contract with Famous Players-Lasky. From 1926 until *The Circus* was released in January 1928, she appeared in eight films.

One film Georgia appeared in during this time, *The Last Moment*, is worth mentioning if not because of the curious parallels between it and her earlier film, *The Salvation Hunters*. Both were experimental in their technique, and featured the same star actor, Otto Matiesen, and both were made on a modest budget of \$5,000. Each was highly acclaimed by the Hollywood intelligentsia; and in each case Chaplin's warm interest helped their success.

Shortly after Chaplin's divorce from Lita Grey in August 1928, Georgia became his constant companion. He had been working for more than a year on *City Lights* when he decided that Virginia Cherrill was unsuitable for the role of the blind girl. Naturally perhaps, Georgia was considered for the part. She was tested, and put on the payroll on November 11, 1929. Georgia's screen-test survives, and shows that she would have made a splendid blind girl. Chaplin, however, decided against her. The reason seems hard to explain, and Georgia leaves the reason in doubt. The only other witness is Chaplin's publicist Carlyle Robinson, whose statement that his own unfavourable opinion of Georgia was what influenced Chaplin has perhaps been too uncritically accepted. She was removed from the payroll at the end of November. Georgia's account of why Chaplin decided to drop her, and of his cruel and inflexible behaviour, is one of the most painful and revealing stories in her memoir. Surprisingly, they continued to be inseparable until his departure for Europe in 1931; but Georgia would cite this bitter disappointment, among other matters, in her attempt to bring suit against the Charles Chaplin Film Corporation in the late 1950s.

Except for the *City Lights* episode, these were the "happiest days" of Georgia's life. Chaplin introduced her to Ivor Montagu and his wife Eileen Hellstern. Known to her friends as "Hell," she and Ivor arrived in Hollywood in the spring of 1930, in part "to play John the Baptist," as he jokingly said, "and put in a word here and there in the right quarters, singing the praises of Eisenstein."¹³ He had written several letters of introduction, including one from H.G. Wells. A great admirer of Wells, Chaplin had spent several weekends with him and his family during his visit to England in 1921. Ivor was soon joined by his old friends, Sergei Eisenstein, and fellow-Soviet director, Grigory Alexandrov. Given a six months' contract, the three were employed by B. P. Schulberg, then head of Paramount's West Coast studio, to collaborate on two scenarios, including an adaptation of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.¹⁴

By July 1930 Chaplin was nearing completion of *City Lights*, and could now afford to spend a little more time in leisure. He would take the five visitors (Eisenstein's cameraman Eduard Tisse had also come) on his yacht to Catalina. The other who was often with them was Georgia. The Montagus became for Georgia both allies and confidants. "They understood the relationship between Charlie and me . . . why it had extended over so many years . . . even before and after his marriages" (Memoir, p. 130). When they departed for England in December 1930, she and the Montagus kept up a close but irregular epistolary friendship that lasted until "Hell," and then Ivor, died in 1984.

Georgia frequently refers to the Bible and to religion. Although this is not the place to discuss her religious development to its culmination, Georgia gropingly came to believe that only through spiritual rebirth could she effect an emotional liberation from Chaplin. "I was commencing to realize that my teacher was becoming more my idol" (Memoir, p. 131). It was not long after that she discovered "a scientific religion." It is doubtful whether Georgia's adoption of Christian Science came as early as Sternberg suggests, whether or not one accepts his conclusion that religion was for her, and for many others in the film industry, "a spiritual crutch."

Following the premiere of *City Lights* in January 1931, Chaplin departed from Los Angeles with plans to attend the New York and London premieres. However, once in Europe, Chaplin stayed for more than a year. During his absence Georgia seems to have had an active enough social life—

I had dinner the other evening with Dr. Reynolds . . . Poor man is still raring to act . . . What c

you think of Charlie's refusing the King and Queen? They have made so much of it here in the papers. Oh I've been playing tennis up at Charlie's and the other day we found a huge snake. seems to be a rendez-vous for reptiles, animals and insects since Charlie let the Gardeners go . . . went to the opening of Sid Grauman's *Street Scene* here with big fat Henry [Bergman] and I had the best time. He's a dear and he was so proud to take me to his restaurant afterwards . . . By the way I've been playing quite a bit of table tennis or ping-pong. I like it so much & have improved since I played with you. Thank goodness! I do hope some day we can all see each other again. Why don't you come back with Charlie.¹⁵

She returned to the screen in a light serial for Mascot, but her film career, such as it had been, was in effect over. She continued to be listed as a leading lady in *The Standard Casting Directory* to June 1933, but there is no evidence of her having been contracted to appear in another film until the next issue of *The Gold Rush* in 1942. From various sources, we have diverse explanations of why Georgia's career faded. David Robinson's is that "her voice and diction were not as pleasing as her looks and her career was doomed by talking pictures."¹⁶ Sternberg says that

After her stint with Chaplin she joined the star roster at Paramount . . . and there her talents, such as they were, were exploited by two or three top directors who must have been shocked to find that the attributes she had been credited with were not hers.¹⁷

Ivor Montagu felt that "the career she should have had . . . failed to materialise. A Studio quarrel which her independence and uprightness forbade her to compromise had brought about her blacklisting."¹⁸ A newspaper article of 1927 described her as a former favourite "now striving to make both ends meet."

Georgia Hale seems to be sinking from sight inasmuch as Famous Players did not take up its option on her contract . . . for some reason [she] failed to click.¹⁹

But how much weight is to be given to any of these opinions must depend to a certain extent on how true it is that all talented performers become stars, or that all stars are talented. Perhaps there is more truth in the old adage about "the right type in the right place at the right time."

In the letter to Ivor quoted on the previous page, Georgia mentioned having received a telegram from Chaplin; he was writing her no letters however, and she felt neglected. Clearly he was relying on gifts to convince her of his continued affection. This neglect resulted, when he returned to the United States in the summer of 1932, in an almost ten-year rift between them. They did not see one another again until the summer of 1941.

You & Hell loved Charlie and how badly he needed that love—of course you were close to us and knew how deeply I loved him and still do. I am under contract again with him because of the release of *The Gold Rush* & hope to work in his next picture which is *Substance & Shadow* [*sic*]. I have had for two years a radio program. Singing & doing skits. It was fun but dull compared to pictures . . . You can always reach me at Charlie's studios now . . . Maybe some day we can all work on a picture with Chaplin. He looks just exactly the same as when you were here; he hasn't aged at all and has worlds of pep. In fact the other nite [*sic*] he made all his 2nd Front speeches to me. Then read his script thru, acting and jumping around. At three o'clock in the morning I was exhausted just watching him.²⁰

Georgia signed a contract with the Charles Chaplin Film Corporation on 1 October 1941, and

although it was to have concluded after a year, Chaplin continued to pay her \$25 a week, the sum agreed to in her contract, until the end of March 1953.²¹

Georgia's memoir ends with Chaplin's marriage to Oona O'Neill in June 1943, and a very long fictional "dream." His perceived abandonment of her, it is worth pointing out, provided the basis for the novelette she wrote during the early 1950s entitled *The Edge of Life*. Like the memoir, it never found a publisher. The Roy Mack Agency considered it "unsuitable for today's market";²² Warner Brothers said that it was the "type of story which does not fit into our current production plans."²³ The plot begins with the heroine waiting impatiently for her childhood sweetheart, now a soldier in the United States army, to return from the Civil War so that they can be married. A day or two before the wedding, she receives news that he has been killed. Losing all account of time, much like the jilted Miss Havesham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, she is condemned to a life of mental paralysis. Years pass, and she now mistakes a young man for her long-lost lover. Though this youth is terminally ill, he too falls in love; and the pair end happily in the belief that Love, the great healer, will cure all. Perhaps as a consequence of having been in movies, Georgia often resorted to dialogue in the florid language characteristic of late Victorian novels. Melodramatic though it is, the story is full of naïve disclosures about its author and her own romance. Like many writers who have saved their "autotherapy" for their books, Georgia kept the pain of her loss hidden until she could find expression for it in the novelette and then in the memoir. Both of these served, no doubt, a cathartic function after her deep disappointment.

The information that can be gleaned from Georgia's letters to the Montagu's, however sketchy, is almost all that can be added to the story of her later years. After hearing of Chaplin's marriage she wrote—

It has been ages since I received your note and my excuse is that I was too low to stay around here so I took a trip. Charlie as you know is married again & of course you know why. The same reason he has always married. It's so funny the way he detests marriage & then is obliged to marry. He told me all about the Joan episode and also the latest. We have a deep love for one another but I would never play that game. I will always love him, almost as if he were my child but I will never swerve one inch from what I think is right . . . Charlie spoke for the "Second front" again and I stepped on the toes of some of our big shots, that's why the papers have been so mean to him about the latest affairs, but he is fearless and really a great sweet person.²⁴

Not surprisingly she doubted his motive for marrying. In her memoir Georgia never mentions Joan Barry. The reference in this letter suggests that she believed her to have been a factor in Chaplin's sudden decision to marry; this perhaps lends some little corroboration to Georgia's claim that he had asked her to run away with him. Joan Barry was a young aspiring actress, who had been introduced to Chaplin early in June 1941, and had signed a six months' contract with him later that month. Chaplin in his autobiography, and Joan Barry in her testimony to the FBI, gave contradictory versions of the relationship. They had an affair, which continued intermittently through much of 1941 and into 1942 when he brusquely attempted to put an end to it. After an interlude in New York, she returned to Los Angeles, pregnant, in May 1943. When it became clear that Chaplin would not marry her, Barry's lawyer filed a paternity suit on June 3 citing Chaplin as the father of her unborn child. He was served with papers and ordered to appear in California Superior Court on June 17 to answer the charge. An agreement was worked out allowing time for blood tests, and the hearing postponed until after the birth.

Chaplin was indicted by a Federal Grand Jury on February 10, 1944 to answer charges alleging violation of Joan Barry's civil rights, and of the Mann Act, a piece of legislation dating from the

twenties which made it illegal to transport a woman across a state border for “immoral purposes.” The trial was set to begin on March 21, and on April 4 he was found not guilty, and discharged. Joan Barry had given birth to a daughter the previous autumn, and although independently administered blood tests had proved that Chaplin was not the father, the federal government continued to pursue the case. Writing to Ivor, Georgia commented:

Charlie is out of the worst of it. I wish his case were over. I don't want to see him have to give large sums of money to this girl and child. He always had the faculty of surrounding himself with enemies. And his real friends he doubted. I saw him several times before he married “Oona.” He isn't happy but some foolish inferior feeling gets him into these “jams.”

Georgia repeated that she still had a contract signed two years earlier with him. “I was to play the heavy [?] and Joan Barry the lead. But as you know the season closed for her and he lost interest in the picture. I'll probably see him again soon.”²⁵

Georgia did see Chaplin again, but not, it seems, until they met at a funeral in April 1946. “Mr. Alfred Reeves passed on last week. Do you remember him? He was Charlie's manager and the one who brought Charlie to this country.” Chaplin mentioned to her that he was “starting a new picture, “Bluebeard” idea. Some of the scenes are going to be so funny of him killing his different wives.” She had opened a dancing academy during the War, thinking “it served a good purpose, teaching the boys how to dance and making them happy.” It is clear that her old relationship with Chaplin had come to an end.

After the news of Eisenstein's death in February 1948, Georgia wrote to Ivor and Hell thanking them for “the souvenir of the memorial meeting. The picture of Eisenstein brought back fond memories. We had fun together.” She had to confess that “I never see him [Charlie] anymore however I'm still with his studio and so I visit with the staff over there every now and then.” Georgia now had two schools of dancing, “and they keep me busy. Aside from this interest, I'm also writing a short story.”²⁷

With the completion of *Limelight*, Chaplin set sail September 18, 1952 from New York for London aboard the *Queen Elizabeth* to attend its premiere. Once at sea, he was told that Attorney-General James McGranery had revoked his reentry permit, and that in order to be readmitted he would have to answer questions as to his moral behaviour. Chaplin's decision not to return to the United States to answer the Immigration and Naturalization Services charges, led to his removal from England and Switzerland early the following year. The INS requested the assistance of the FBI in its investigation of him, and attempted to obtain from friends and colleagues evidence to support their allegations that he had been guilty of moral turpitude. Georgia was among those who were questioned.

I was a witness for him the other day and told them the truth and of course everything was in his favor. I told them of his high morals around me and that we were just friends even though in love. They said I was thus far his best witness. I hope everything goes well for him . . . Perhaps you'll have him for “keeps”, as your neighbor. He'll be happy wherever he lives.²⁸

When Chaplin decided to close his studios, he gave instructions that Georgia's allowance be terminated “as of week ending March 28, 1953.”²⁹ Feeling ill-used, she enquired about the possibility of bringing suit against him. Writing to an attorney,³⁰ Georgia gave four reasons for the proposed action: 1. that Chaplin and Alf Reeves had told her the “allowance was for life”; 2. that Chaplin had promised her “a royalty from the re-release of *The Gold Rush*,” and that “this promise was published in *Variety*”; 3. that he had promised to put her “in a picture and that this contract [the one signed on

October 1, 1941] was just for that purpose”; and 4. that Chaplin’s decision not to employ her in *Circus* had prevented her “from doing other things.” The attorney’s reply stated “that in my opinion you have no case against the Charles Chaplin Film Corporation by virtue of the agreement of October 1, 1941 which, in the fourth paragraph, provides that after one year your employment could be terminated upon thirty days’ notice, and it appears that such a notice was given to you on January 2, 1953.”³¹

How much this payment had meant to Georgia and her financial position is hard to estimate. Similarly we do not know how much money she was earning during her later years. Although the years were successful, she had closed her two dancing-schools in September 1946. At the end of the year she was “tired of Hollywood,” Georgia decided to get out of the movie business and go “into a ‘cosmetic line.’” However, a screen actor’s and extra’s Guild card dated 1951 and 1952, and issued to Georgia LaCarr, were found among her papers; but whether she ever performed under this name is unknown. During the sixties she made use of her musical knowledge to compose and record several songs, including “Painted on Black Velvet,” released under the pseudonym Georgie Hale. At the time of her death, Georgia left several properties, including a duplex she occupied on La Brea, a few blocks away from the Chaplin Studios.

After twenty years of separation, Georgia met Chaplin again when he returned to Hollywood in April 1972.

I had the joy of spending about forty-five minutes alone with Charlie at lunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel. We talked over everything . . . He spoke of our happy days together and of how close we always were . . . He introduced me to Oona. She came up just as I was leaving . . . I wish I could turn back time.³²

She never saw him again. When Chaplin’s *My Life in Pictures* was published in 1975, the Montagu’s sent a copy to Georgia.

What a joy to find . . . that thrilling book when I finally returned from San Francisco. The book brought back dear memories of those days we spent at Charlie’s house. We were all one in love . . . So now Charlie is a “Sir.” From what I read he seems to want to do things again. I hope he is not being held back by too many well-meaning “no nos.” He seemed to want to break out of his way of thinking & have fun & express himself . . . I’ll treasure that book and your sweet note always.³³

Charles Spencer Chaplin died on Christmas Day 1977. Shortly after, Georgia wrote to thank the Montagu’s for their “kind words which helped me so much,” and to express her own deep sense of loss.

There is a void feeling. Just to know he was over there in Switzerland warmed my heart. But I am so happy I saw him and was alone with him for a full hour in 1972. I told him I loved him and would never marry while he lived. It made him so happy he grabbed and kissed me again and again. You know the night before he married Oona he came to my house and begged me to leave the country with him. But I knew it wasn’t right not with him in his situation. So at three in the morning he left and how sad it all was . . . Charlie did recognize true values but somehow he could be flattered and it would get to him and all the while he knew he was being fooled. All that was absent at our last meeting. The real sweet Charlie was present. Of course you and Hell were the two who knew how I adored him—faults and all—As you said—he did have a full life and passed

on peacefully in his sleep. I feel rich for having been so close to him.³⁴

A little over two months after the funeral, in a rather macabre incident, Chaplin's body was stolen. On March 18, 1978, the day after it was recovered, Georgia wrote the last letter in which she would mention his name.

How I loved your article! You understood Charlie in depth . . . Oona I believe really loved Charlie but her endeavour to shield him from the world was not only feeble but it seemed to me to weaken[ed] the one she smothered with her love. What could have been the motives of this vicious theft? Do you suppose it was someone who wanted it for ransom or someone who just wanted it? How little those pitiful remains had to do with the undying genius we loved. How quickly most people seem to forget him. However his pictures will make him live in our hearts forever. I'm so grateful for your beautiful tribute to him. I feel so rich to have known and loved him so deeply. You and Hell have been so dear to me and understanding. Even my sister and close friends never understood my love of Charlie nor his genius.

loads of love

Georgia

Georgia spent her last years in Los Angeles, surrounded by friends, many of them fellow-members of the Christian Science Church there. She was still able to take pleasure in memories of a career which, although unsatisfactory in some ways, had enriched her life. Her death on June 17, 1985, at the age of 85 went virtually unnoticed. Georgia had never lost her essential strength and individuality, and while Chaplin was alive had been willing to live joyfully, sometimes painfully, on the periphery of his life. "So Hell just tags along," she once said, "that's all I've ever wanted to do with Charlie."³⁶

H. Kiernan
Stow, Scotland
November 1999

¹ *The Image* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 156-57.

² GH (Georgia Hale) to IM (Ivor Montagu), Los Angeles, May 1972: MP (Montagu Papers).

³ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 1966: MP.

⁴ The scrapbook, along with Georgia's personal papers, letters, photographs and so on, are now in the possession of the editor.

⁵ *The Chicago Herald and Examiner*, 25 March 1923.

⁶ Frank Mayo (b. New York 1896) signed a long term contract with the Goldwyn Picture Corporation, but by 1929 he had ceased to be a leading man.

⁷ *Los Angeles Examiner*, 23 July 1923.

⁸ This film was released in June 1924 as *A Self-Made Failure*. Georgia was among the beauties known as Spike Malone's diving-girls. The role of Spike was played by "Chuck" Reisner. An actor in three of Chaplin's films made for First National, Reisner was also assistant-director of *The Gold Rush*.

⁹ *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 26 August 1923, p. 37.

¹⁰ *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

¹¹ Josef von Sternberg, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹² *Los Angeles Examiner*, 17 September 1925.

¹³ *With Eisenstein in Hollywood* (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1968), p. 34.

¹⁴ Paramount Pictures rejected Eisenstein's treatment as being too incomprehensible and invited Sternberg to replace him. An admirer of Eisenstein, Dreiser brought suit against Paramount, and lost.

¹⁵ GH to IM, Hollywood, 1931: MP.

¹⁶ *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1985), p. 366.

¹⁷ Josef von Sternberg, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

- ¹⁸ Ivor Montagu, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
- ¹⁹ *Boston Advertiser*, 18 March 1927.

- ²⁰ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 23 April 1943: MP.
- ²¹ Georgia's copy of the contract in KP (Kiernan Papers).
- ²² Roy Mack to GH, Hollywood, 2 May 1955: KP.
- ²³ Wesley Haynes to GH, Burbank, 19 April 1951: KP.
- ²⁴ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 1943: KP.
- ²⁵ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 1944: KP.
- ²⁶ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 20 April 1946: KP The film she refers to is *Monsieur Verdoux*. Although preparations began in 1945, Chaplin did not start production until April 1946.
- ²⁷ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 6 October 1948: MP.
- ²⁸ GH to IM, Los Angeles, December 1952: MP.
- ²⁹ The Chaplin Studios, Inc. to GH, 24 January 1953: KP.
- ³⁰ Manuscript copy of a letter from GH to Sidney Fischgrund, Los Angeles, November, 1957: KP.
- ³¹ Sidney Fischgrund to GH, Los Angeles, 29 November 1957: KP.
- ³² GH to IM, Los Angeles, 1972: MP.
- ³³ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 22 February 1975: MP.
- ³⁴ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 6 January 1978: MP.
- ³⁵ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 18 March 1978: MP.
- ³⁶ GH to IM, Los Angeles, 23 March 1943: MP.

Note on the Text

Attention must be drawn to the limitations implicit in the title of this book. While it is important to remember that this narrative was not planned as an autobiography—Georgia may have been too modest to think of that—it was shaped by an understanding that what would make her interesting to succeeding generations of film-goers was her relationship with Charles Chaplin. Inevitably a portrait of Georgia emerges side by side with his. Even in this light, it is selective rather than complete.

The reader should not be surprised to find it frequently vague about details. There are many matters of potential interest about which Georgia is regrettably silent. After three decades, it has proved possible to check and correct inaccuracies, to add further detail, and clear up facts and chronology. The notes provided point to a number of these clarifications. This does not imply that where there is no comment, Georgia must be entirely reliable. Editorial silence may mean ignorance or not consent. Nevertheless, once some allowance is made, she would seem to be a credible, if not comprehensive, witness to the events of which she was a part.

As an historical document, this memoir has the obvious merit of not having had the assistance of a ghost-writer. The numerous drafts, with many manuscript additions found among Georgia Hale's papers after her death, were written by her. In consequence the originals contained many typographical errors. Modern scholarly practice might require an editor to reproduce these, with the painfully frequent use of the term "sic". But this book is not a biography, and so, in the main, only her inadvertent misspellings have been reproduced, the rest being silently corrected.

The technicalities of presentation largely follow convention. Every intrusion into the text is enclosed in square brackets []. Her characteristic, though idiosyncratic use of ellipsis (. . .) has been preserved. Grammar and punctuation, often eccentric, have also been largely left unaltered. Individual forms of grammar, punctuation and spelling seem to convey her personality directly, and to standardize them would have weakened this lifelike impression.

The notes attempt to identify persons referred to and explain obscure allusions without, I hope, too much interruption to the text. I have been able to present some facts hitherto not known, which help to provide a clearer and more accurate outline of Georgia Hale's life and career.

It may occur to the careful reader that the title is quite literally intended, and that it is not an accident that the text reads much like the scenario of a film, with a great deal of dialogue, directions as to movements, and instructions to the principals about what should be conveyed in their "close-up" scenes. Georgia cast herself as the heroine of a great dramatic romance involving "Charlie, the little fellow" as hero, thus giving her memoir a verve that the more restrained writer lacks. We all invent ourselves, but some of us with more conviction than others.

Unpublished letters referred to in this book belong either to the Ivor Montagu Papers (now housed at ~~The British Film Institute, London~~), or to a series written by Georgia Hale to the Montagu's, and now in the editor's possession. These two sources are referred to in the footnotes as MP, and K (Kiernan Papers).



Foreword



Charlie Chaplin was not one but two. For many years I was under contract to Charlie Chaplin. Now I want you to know him as I do. These intimate close-ups of him, reveal the still calm of a sun-lit lake and the fury of an unspent sea.



Introduction



In order to understand the deep impact Charlie Chaplin made upon my life and my way thinking, let me tell you some of the events leading up to my first glimpse of the little clown. Let me take you back a little, just a little to the days preceding [*sic*] the great event . . . that of seeing the little comic for the first time on the silver screen. That blessed day I saw the famous comedian Charlie Chaplin.

As a child I was aware of the poverty of my surroundings. I felt deeply, for a little girl of five, even my own shortcomings. “Five years old and can’t ‘dun-down’ my pants yet,” my mother heard me say. This little remark became a standard joke. The family would chide and tease me with it constantly. I couldn’t appreciate their fun.

Mother, a short, plump woman, was very loving and completely impartial. My father, a tall, handsome, well-educated man, was like a boarder. He’d come and go, mostly go. He held a good position as wire-chief, with the telephone company of our town, St. Joseph, Missouri. He would give my mother part of his salary, a small part, the first of the month. She was a poor manager and the allowance, so inadequate, would all be spent in the first couple of weeks. The last days would find me broke and hungry. My sisters accepted this.

My sister Frances¹ was six years older than I. She was quite pretty and up to my appearance received most of the attention, which she cherished. She was very practical and loved to cook and sew. Her goal was to be efficient. She was.

My middle sister Melissa, the tallest, was a red-head, with lots of freckles. She thought of herself as very plain, but she was sweet and kind. She had no ambition other than to just get by . . . that was all.

Mother was a slave. She washed all of our clothes by hand, scrubbed floors the same way, and even shoveled coal. I crept down stairs to the basement and asked “Why—why doesn’t papa come down here too, and help you?” She shrugged her shoulders and whispered, “I guess he figures he does enough.”

I didn’t agree. When her back was turned, I began to pitch in and help her. I picked some black, dirty coal and started filling the pail. When she turned and saw me, she threw up her hands and exclaimed, “No, don’t you dirty your little white hands with coal . . . ever! I want you to do big things and lift your mother out of this basement forever.” She kissed me on the forehead and chased me upstairs. I left reluctantly. There she stood . . . with a wet stomach and black hands. I didn’t like the picture.

With mother so busy, Frances had to look after me. Mrs. Hogan, our aristocratic neighbor, lived on a hill, across the street in a great big gorgeous house. We looked up to her. Everyone did, for she was rich. She called Frances one day when we were out playing and said, “Give this doll to your prettiest little sister, Georgia. You know, I predict a big future for her. Mark my word, she’ll be a star.”

This was the last straw. Frances heard this all the time and now from Mrs. Hogan. Frances turned on me and said angrily, “Don’t let all this flattery go to your head, for heaven’s sake. They just feel sorry for you. They pity you, because you put on that sad face. They’re only trying to cheer you up. Why in the world don’t you smile once in awhile?”

I tried to explain. “So far I haven’t seen anything to smile about,” I said. Then I asked, “What about mother? What about . . . ?” But she interjected, “Well, what about her?” Melissa stepped between us and took me away. She whispered, “Don’t mind Frances. You see she used to get all the attention and now you get it . . . you’re the baby . . . you see? Don’t let her sharp tongue hurt you.”

Finally, I was old enough to go to school with my sisters. This day we were all called into the assembly hall, to try out for the big play of the year. My sisters and I, and everyone, were given the opportunity to read lines, walk about the stage and even sing a little song. It was such fun for me to be included.

At the close of the day, we all had to re-assemble and hear who had been chosen. Mrs. O'Donnell, the dramatic teacher, made the announcement. She said solemnly, "The judges have chosen . . . Miss Georgia Hale to play the leading role. She will play the little fairy, who with the touch of her wand can change the most ugly and naughty child into a beautiful and heavenly angel." My heart thumped with joy. The kids applauded generously . . . but not Frances. She looked angry. I watched her leave the hall even before they announced the names of the rest of the cast.

On the way home, she waited for me and said, "I refused to be in that play, because you're going to make it ridiculous. Wait and see! Little you, going around touching those big kids with a wand." Then she burst out laughing as she picked up a stick and started patting me on the head, as if it were a wand. The patting grew harder. She exclaimed, "Look, this is the way you'll do it." But as she pranced around, she tripped herself, stumbled and fell.

I picked her up and started to brush her off. She yelled, "Stop it! Mercy . . . we think we're the fairy, already." This struck her as funny and she laughed louder than before saying, "You little fool. I fell on purpose. I wanted to show you what's going to happen to you on the stage . . . in front of everyone." I swallowed hard and managed to giggle . . . a little.

I had no heart now for the part . . . a fairy. I wasn't making people beautiful and heavenly, nor was I making them happy. But mother stood by me and helped me with my lines. My father thought that Frances should have gotten the part. He tried to put a stop to my doing it. He said, "Frances should have had the part. Georgia is far too serious, too heavy in spirit to be a fairy. I'm going to call the school! Why doesn't she forget it and go out and play like the other children of her age? My goodness, I named the child George, hoping it would be a boy. Just think . . . by now we'd be playing baseball . . . too bad!" Mother simply replied, "Georgia is a happy little girl." But I wasn't.

The day came for the play. The big hall was filled. My heart was low. I peered out through the curtains and could see mother in the front row. When the play was over, to my surprise, everyone seemed to like it. I rushed out to join mother. But she was surrounded by people saying, "Your daughter made the daintiest little fairy . . . She is so talented . . . You must put her in pictures or on the stage." Mrs. Donnell shook hands with mother and said, "I hope you realize that Georgia has a real gift for the theatre. You must make use of it."

I stood aside studying my mother's face. Every line that had been running down, now turned up. Her poor little face looked young and pretty, her eyes were dancing with hope and pride. This joy, no one could take from her . . .

The next day my mother told my sisters, "Maybe, Georgia can help the family. Even if she can make a few dollars . . . it would put more food on the table." She then dolled me up and off we went to a stock company downtown.

We obtained an interview. I read some lines from the play. I shall never forget the triumph in my mother's expression when he said, "Yes, she's alright. The Marlow Group has a small part for Georgia in the production now in rehearsal." She literally bowed to the floor when he handed her five dollars for my lunch and carfare. I was to return the very next day. She grabbed me by the hand. I could barely touch the ground as she raced me home to tell the girls.

But was it worth it? When I returned to school, I was ostracized. One little chum of mine said scathingly, "Everyone thinks you're a tough, now that you're an actress. I cannot go around with you any more."

Frances came home from school and told mother, "She's disgraced the family." This did not worry

me and I wouldn't let it torment mother. Far more disappointing to me was that the money I made was not enough. The need was so great and I wanted so to lift that burden from her shoulders. Life was still a struggle and bleak.

¹ See Introduction, p. x. Eugenia (Frances) was born on 16 March 1896, and Helen (Melissa), on 19 August 1898. Georgia's reason for altering the names is uncertain; possibly it was out of deference to her sisters' wishes.

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