

## *The Gold Rush* (1925) with Charlie Chaplin

**The Gold Rush** (1925) is the quintessential Chaplin/Little Tramp film, with a balance of slapstick comedy and pantomime, social satire, and emotional and dramatic moments of tenderness. It was Chaplin's own personal favorite film, that showcases the classic Tramp character (referred to as "The Little Fellow" in the re-release version) as a romantic idealist and lone gold prospector at the turn of the century, with his cane, derby, distinctive walk, tight shabby suit, and mustache.

Classic scenes include the starvation scene of two cabin-marooned prospectors boiling and fastidiously eating a stewed shoe, the Tramp's cabin-mate deliriously imagining his companion as a large chicken, the teetering cabin on the edge of a cliff, and Chaplin's lonely fantasized New Year's Eve party (with the dancing dinner rolls routine) when he waits for a girl who never comes.

Early working titles for the film included *Lucky Strike* and *The Northern Story*. The film, inspired in part by the gruesome Donner Party story, was shot (over a period of 15 months from spring 1924-summer 1925) both on a Hollywood studio back lot and in Truckee, California/Nevada, and premiered in New York at the Strand Theatre in mid-August, 1925. Chaplin's film was re-released in 1942 with added sound narration and music, both spoken and composed/arranged by Chaplin.

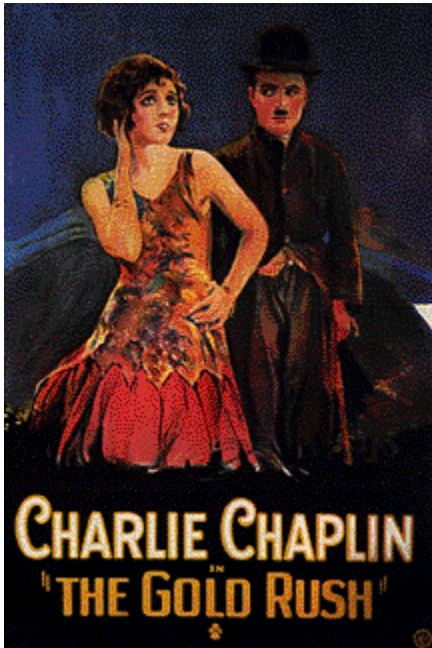


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It is prefaced with historical background:

During the Great Gold Rush to Alaska, men in thousands came from all parts of the world. Many of them were ignorant of the hardships before them - The intense cold, the lack of food and a journey through regions of ice and snow were the problems that awaited them.

In the spectacular opening scene, there is a view of an endless trail/line of hundreds of prospectors in the Klondike of Alaska in 1898, in the days of the Klondike Gold Rush. They are winding their way along to seek their fortunes, climbing up a mountain through the snow-covered Chilkoot Pass in search of the gold fields: "The Chilkoot Pass. A test of man's endurance. At this point, many turned back discouraged, while others went naively on." And then, "Three days from anywhere - a Lone Prospector," a lone Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) appears. With his cane, he is making his own trail on a snow-covered path, unaware that he is being followed by a bear.



Another fortune-hunter is Big Jim McKay (Mack Swain), who has just made a lucky strike fortune of gold. He exclaims, with outstretched arms: "I've found it! I've found it! A Mountain of Gold." Perilously lost, and facing a blizzard storm, the Tramp blindly seeks shelter. At the same time, Big Jim's tent is blown away in the storm. The Tramp arrives at the lone cabin of fearsome trapper Black Larsen (Tom Murray), a violent and "wanted" man. He enters the cabin, warming himself. But then, Black Larsen appears and he is ordered out. In a well-designed sight gag, the strong wind makes it appear that he is on a treadmill. The fierce wind blows him in and out of the doors of the cabin and also blows in Big Jim. Both men seek refuge in

Black Larsen's cabin.

Black Larsen orders both of them out. He and Jim wrestle with a shot gun, forever aiming the muzzle of the gun at the Tramp during their struggle. Thanks to Big Jim's physical strength, Black Larsen is overpowered (and congratulated by the Tramp), and they are allowed to stay. When their food gives out, Jim experiences hunger hallucinations. The three draw cards in a lottery (the low man goes) and Larsen is

sent out into the wilderness to brave the storm and search for help, food and provisions. Out in the wilds, he encounters two lawmen that are looking for him. Following a struggle, he cold-bloodedly shoots both law officers.

Inside the cabin meanwhile, hungry and desperate, the Tramp and Big Jim celebrate "Thanksgiving Dinner," in a famous, classic feast/meal scene. The Tramp and Big Jim are reduced to starvation, so the Tramp resorts to boiling and cooking a tasty dinner for them. He chooses one of his boots [actually black licorice] as the object of their Thanksgiving dinner, taking on airs as a gourmet at a feast. He watches it cooking on the stove until perfectly simmered. He then carves the boot (splitting and cutting it like a filet), and offers the upper part to Big Jim. He pours water over it like gravy. He chews on the lower sole part, treating it like a delicacy, and he twirls the laces like spaghetti. He daintily sucks the nails, like they were the bones of a game bird, or small fish bones.

"Indifferent to his comrade's plight, Black Larsen stumbles on the claim of Big Jim McKay," while the two of them still wait for relief. Because they have eaten his boot, and he only has rags for clothes, the Tramp must now sit with his foot in the oven to keep warm. When starvation strikes again, Jim suffers more "food" hallucinations, and crazily imagines the Tramp transformed into a giant, plump chicken, ripe for slaughter. He chases his appetizing friend with a gun and later with an axe. The panic-stricken Tramp defends himself with the shot-gun in a hand-to-hand struggle with Jim. A hungry passing bear wanders into the cabin and gets involved in the struggle. The Tramp aims and kills it as it runs off, solving their food problem.

They finally part ways, leaving the hut to go their own separate ways, Big Jim to "his secret mine," the Tramp "to his fate." On his mountainside of gold, Big Jim finds Black Larsen, who has stolen his mining claim. With a blow of his spade, Black Larsen knocks Big Jim to the ground. "The North. A law unto itself," repays Black Larsen shortly thereafter - he perishes in a crumbling avalanche beneath his feet.

Meanwhile, the Tramp, "a disappointed prospector," arrives in a little gold-mining boomtown, "one of the many cities in the Far North, built overnight during the great gold rush." Other characters are introduced

in the town, Jack Cameron (Malcolm Waite), "the ladies man," and his girl Georgia (Georgia Hale). The Tramp redeems the only gold he made with pick and shovel.

In the Monte Carlo Dance Hall that night, the pretty dancing girl named Georgia argues with tough and abusive Jack Cameron when he grabs her photograph. The Tramp, "the stranger," slowly enters the saloon, lonely and sad-faced. From a solitary vantage point, he watches others happily dancing and drinking at the bar. Thinking that Georgia is smiling at him from the bar, he is mistaken - she is looking at someone behind him. He overhears an upset Georgia tell one of her girlfriends: "I guess I'm bored...If I could only meet someone worthwhile - I'm so tired of this place." He immediately falls in love with her, although she looks past him and ignores him. The Tramp picks up a discarded and ripped photograph of Georgia, and tries to pretend that he isn't interested in keeping it.

A raucous Jack returns, and while surrounded by other dance-hall girls, he pulls Georgia to himself and calls her a "little spitfire." When she rejects him, pulls herself away and turns her back on him, he calls her "pretty fresh" for ignoring him. Jack demands a dance with Georgia, but to spite and provoke him, she calls out: "Hey you! Come here!" and dances with the first available man - the incredulous Tramp. She insults Jack: "You see. I'm very particular who I dance with."

The Tramp dances with her, with his bootless foot still bandaged. In a comical dance sequence, he ties up his trousers that are falling down with a piece of rope (a substitute for a belt), not realizing that the other end is attached to a large dog. When the dog growls at a cat and chases it, the Tramp is jerked to the floor. Georgia encourages the Tramp to bravely defend her from Jack's continued insults. The Tramp is no match for the brawny Jack. With the fortuitous help of a heavy grandfather clock that falls on Jack's head, his rival is knocked out.

The next morning, the Tramp walks by the cabin of Hank Curtis (Henry Bergman), "within a stone throw of the dance hall." The Tramp pretends to faint outside the cabin to get breakfast. Hank is a kindly prospector, and the Tramp is brought in for a warm meal.

"Big Jim McKay owing to the blow he had received lost his memory and wandered aimlessly on." Back in town, Hank and his partner prepare for a trip to their mine. The Tramp is asked to care for the cabin and feed the mule during Hank's absence. Outside the cabin, Georgia and other girlfriends away from the dance hall, have a snowball fight. During the commotion, he opens the door and gets a snowball in the face. He sees Georgia again and she instantly recognizes him. "I haven't seen you since we danced together," she remarks. While he goes outside to retrieve firewood, Georgia discovers her photo under the Tramp's pillow. She observes: "I guess you're lonesome here." Winking at her girlfriends, she suggests a practical joke for him, asking to be invited to dinner sometime. He invites them to an 8 o'clock New Year's Eve dinner at the cabin. As they leave, they laugh at his foolish gullibility, but he falls more deeply in love with her. Exploding with utter joy, he tosses around his pillow, sending feathers flying everywhere. Georgia returns momentarily to retrieve her forgotten gloves, and finds him covered with feathers.



To make the dinner financially possible, "he begged, borrowed and shoveled." To earn money for favors and presents for the party, he takes a snow-shoveling job in a classic sequence. The Tramp cleverly shovels snow from one cabin's doorway to the next doorway, creating new customers as he progresses along.

On New Year's Eve, the night of the dinner, he excitedly gets ready for the party. By five minutes to eight, he has made elaborate preparations - he sets the table with lighted candles, table napkins, and a heart-shaped place card at Georgia's seat, with "To My Love" written on it. A chicken is roasting in the oven. He also places party favors at each place setting for each guest. Then, he dozes off while he waits, pathetically, for them to appear. He dreams of the party and is the perfect host/entertainer with Georgia. In a classic gag, "the Dance of the Rolls," he spears two French bread rolls with forks and makes

them do a pantomime ballet-dance - the Oceana Roll. The two rolls are stand-ins for his big boots - he smiles above the dancing shoes.

At midnight, Georgia fires a gun salute in the raucous dance hall saloon, and the Tramp is awakened by the celebrants. He realizes the women have stood him up - they have forgotten all about his dinner invitation. With a look of deep hurt and with a sad feeling of unrequited love, he hears members of the gold rush town distantly singing "Auld Lang Syne" from his opened door. When dancing begins, Georgia suddenly remembers her little friend the Tramp, and proposes to her friends (including Jack) that they visit his cabin: "Let's go up and have some fun with him." At the same moment, the Tramp leaves the cabin and shuffles up to the saloon window to watch the party through the window. By the time they arrive, the Tramp has already left and they find his hut empty. Georgia opens the door and enters the room, seeing the decorated dinner table. She is filled with remorse. Just then, Jack follows and demands a kiss from her, but she pushes him away. She tells her girlfriends: "The joke has gone too far, let's go!" She angrily slaps Jack when he asks for another kiss.

The next day, a dazed Big Jim wanders about in town, and ends up at the recorder's office. He has "a mountain of gold," but he can't remember the location of his gold mine claim. He suddenly gets a bright idea: "The cabin! That's it! If I only knew the way to the cabin, I could find the mine." Stepping outside the office, Big Jim just misses noticing the Tramp.

In the dance saloon that night, Georgia writes a note to Jack, apologizing for the previous night: "I'm sorry for what I did last night. Please forgive me. I love you. Georgia." Jack receives the note as Georgia watches from the second floor balcony. When the Tramp walks by, Jack asks the waiter: "Give that bum this note, and don't tell him I sent it." Obviously, the Tramp immediately wishes to find Georgia and speak to her, asking: "Where's Georgia?" But Big Jim spots the Tramp in the saloon and cries out: "THE CABIN!" - he eagerly wishes to renew acquaintances. The Tramp is surprised by Big Jim, shouting that if they locate the cabin, they will also find the claim:

The Cabin! The Cabin! Take me to the cabin...Take me to the cabin and I'll make you a millionaire in less than a month!

The Tramp notices Georgia, rushes to her on the second floor, hugs her, and kisses her hand. He is placated after reading the note, and declares his love for her. "...And now I'm going to make good --," he promises her. Kicking and protesting, the Tramp is led by Big Jim out of the saloon to his gold strike.

"After a long and tedious journey," they locate their old cabin and plan to set out for the mine in the morning. The subtitle reads, "Man proposes, but a storm disposes." While the heroes slumber during the night, the wind begins to blow hard and a blizzard develops. The cabin in which they are sleeping is swept away -- "fate guided them to a spot where all was calm." The cabin ends up hanging halfway on the edge of an abyss. In the morning when they wake up, they are blissfully ignorant.

The cabin dangerously tips and shifts, teetering back and forth on the edge of the cliff. The Tramp walks from one side of the cabin to the other while preparing for breakfast, causing it to rock up and down - precariously balanced. The funny sensations are attributed to their stomachs. The Tramp opens the door to investigate and see what's outside and almost falls, but clammers back in, the floor tipping up. After hair-raising adventures in the cabin, it totally tips over, but a pick axe roped to it and stuck in a rock prevents its tumble into the precipice. The two must scramble up the floor's steep incline to safety. Big Jim climbs out first, and finds that his lost gold claim is located right where the pick axe is stuck in the mountainous ground. Then he helps pull the Tramp out too just as the cabin falls into the abyss. They embrace and Jim tells them: "Look! We're rich! We're millionaires."

As a result of their gold-mine windfall, they become elegant, well-dressed multi-millionaires on board a ship returning home from Alaska. Press photographers who are publishing a story on the Tramp's rags-to-riches career persuade the ex-Tramp to pose for photographs in his original, ragged mining clothes. The ex-Tramp wistfully looks at his picture of Georgia and thinks: "Everything but Georgia." Georgia, in fact, is on the same boat, one of the steerage passengers.

Accidentally falling off the deck during the picture taking, tumbling off to the steerage level, the tattered-looking Tramp lands in a coil of rope and emerges to see Georgia's face. Georgia mistakenly thinks he is a stowaway that is being sought by ship officials. She promises to protect him from the officers and pay his passage's fare, without knowing his good fortune. The misunderstanding is explained and the truth is

revealed that he is Big Jim's partner, the Multi-millionaire. The ex-Tramp orders: "James. Make arrangements for another guest."

He takes Georgia in his arms implying that she is his fiancée, and invites the photographers to take an engagement picture of them. The photographers are pleased: "Gee! This will make a wonderful story." The couple cannot restrain themselves and stand still any longer for the photos - they move their lips together to kiss. The photographer shouts at them: "Oh! You've spoilt the picture," as the final image fades out on their loving kiss.

### **Production Notes**

About 600 men, mostly hoboes, were brought by train into the Sierras to film the Chilkoot Pass scene at the beginning of the movie. They slept in the boxcars, however, there was little complaining since assistant Eddie Sutherland had arranged for the railroad to provide food service from its regular dining cars which included roast beef, ham, vegetables, bread and pies. The location filming at Truckee was done in April, 1924. Other than the Chilkoot Pass scene, some other scenes that were shot on location include Charlie finding a grave marked "Here lies Jim Sourdough," the bear prowling around the cabin, Big Jim chasing the chicken across the snowy wastes, and Charlie sliding down the "Chilkoot Pass."

Chaplin himself went to scout locations in the in and around Truckee, California, in February, 1924, just below the famous Donner Pass. There wasn't much in the town except a small hotel. Chaplin had his carpenters come in and renovate a suite for him prior to bringing the filming there.

Although there was some melting of the snow and mud to contend with at first, one night about two feet of snow fell, and the storm continued. Chaplin decided to make use of the blizzard and filmed some footage of Black Larsen battling through the snow storm with his sledge.

In the beginning, all Chaplin knew was that the setting for his next movie would be the 1898 gold rush, so he began construction on a set recreating the "frozen north" on his studio back lot. The set would take months to complete and required 239,577 feet of lumber, 200 tons of plaster, 22,750 feet of chicken wire, 22,000 feet of burlap, 100 barrels of flour and 285 tons of salt which served as "snow."

In early 1925, the last sets were built - the streets of the mining town - and the sequence where Charlie shovels snow to earn money for his New Year's Eve party was filmed. In April, Charlie, Georgia Hale and Mack Swain went to San Diego to film the scenes on the on the boat where Charlie and Big Jim are millionaires and the tramp meets Georgia again. Actually, the very last of the filming (other than retakes and miniatures) was the scene where the chasm opens up and Black Larsen plummets to his death.

While the carpenters were making some changes in the cabin set, Chaplin spent the day bobsledding and ski racing with some of the unit. The next day he was confined to bed with a chill. Mack Swain got the flu, and one scene where Big Jim chases the chicken across the snow is actually Sid Swaney standing in for Swain.

The dance hall scenes included as many as 100 extras, including Mexicans and Indians hired for \$7.50 a day. Tiny Sanford, who played the bartender, received \$20 a day, but the highest paid "extra" was the dog on the other end of the rope Chaplin ties to his waist while dancing with Georgia - the dog got \$35 a day. The old man who has a short dancing scene in the dance hall is a 100-year old Civil War veteran named "Daddy" Taylor.

<http://www.silentsaregolden.com/index.html>

Review *THE GOLD RUSH*, starring Charlie Chaplin

MOTION PICTURE CLASSIC, September, 1925

"The Gold Rush" has depths unknown to Chaplin of "Shoulder Arms" and "The Kid." Makes you laugh to keep back tears, coming seemingly from a saddened and understanding heart.

Simplest of stories: just a little tramp who wandered into the Klondike and fell in love with a music-hall girl. For a joke, she pretended to return his affection - and the joke went too far. With remorse came her own love. It is funny; also pitiful. Oddly enough, many critics and writers seem dubious; but directors and actors are crazy about it.

In points of artistic skill and subtle method it seems to me the greatest comedy ever made. The little tramp has starved and saved to give New Years dinner to music-hall girls and they forget to come. So he sits there alone and pretends they are at table with him. Here is the most brilliant bit of pantomime I have ever seen on the screen.

Everything is there; but depends entirely upon the public as to how much they will see. Before the picture was released we heard much of an "epic sweep" which promised to eclipse "The Covered Wagon." Charlie certainly used lots of people in the Klondike trail scenes, but I couldn't see much epic sweep.

Review *THE GOLD RUSH*, starring Charlie Chaplin

MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE, November, 1925

The Chaplin of the funny shoes, the little derby, the mustache and the trick cane is back with us in a comedy which many will say is his greatest effort. It hasn't the hilarity of "Shoulder Arms" and "The Pilgrim," nor the smart subtlety of his directorial creation, "A Woman of Paris," but if you want a picture technically perfect in its blending of comedy and pathos, its satirical thrusts, its caricature, its keen lampooning of the northland melodramas, and its direction, you will find it here. Chaplin has brought forth some gorgeous touches of comedy, but it is the poignant note which takes the most emphasis.

**Distributor** United Artists

**Cast** Charlie Chaplin (the tramp), Georgia Hale (Georgia), Mack Swain (Big Jim McKay), Tom Murray (Black Larsen), Henry Bergman (Hank Curtis)

**Synopsis** After finding a "mountain of gold" and staking out his claim during the 1898 Yukon gold rush, Big Jim McKay finds himself seeking refuge in a dilapidated, abandoned shack with fugitive Black Larsen and the little tramp. After days of hunger, the storm continues, and the men realize they must do something or starve. By cutting cards, it is decided Larsen will go for food. After venturing out, Larsen happens upon two law enforcement officers, kills them and steals their supplies. He does not return to the cabin. Meanwhile, the tramp and Big Jim kill a



bear which provides them the food they need until the storm subsides.

They leave the cabin and part company. Big Jim goes back to his claim and finds Larsen there. In a fight, Larsen hits Big Jim over the head with a shovel knocking him out. Later, Larsen

meets his end as the snow under him gives way on a steep precipice.

The tramp arrives in town and visits the dance hall. There he meets and falls in love with Georgia, a beautiful dance hall girl, which also brings down the wrath of ladies' man Jack Cameron who considers Georgia his girl.

The tramp later makes friends with Hank Curtis who lets the little fellow stay in his cabin while he goes to check on his claim. One day, Georgia and the other dance hall girls happen upon the cabin, and the tramp invites them for a New Year's Eve dinner. As a joke, they accept the invitation.

The tramp works shoveling snow in the town so he can afford the meal and gifts for the girls. On New Year's Eve, he has the food cooked, the table set, and the gifts wrapped, but Georgia and the others do not show up. They are busying celebrating at the dance hall with no thought of the tramp.

Finally, after midnight, Georgia suggests to Jack and the girls that they go to the tramp's cabin and "have some fun" with him. When they arrive, he is not there. He has gone to the dance hall to see where Georgia is. When Georgia sees the table and what has been prepared, she begins to feel remorse and tells the others "the joke has gone too far."

Later, Big Jim wanders into town in a dazed state. He goes to the recorder's office to record his claim, but can't remember where the claim as a result of the blow to his head. He realizes that he can find the claim again if he can only locate the little cabin that he, the tramp and Larsen stayed in.

In the dance hall, Georgia has written a love note to Jack, but she is hurt and angered when she sees him make light of it and pass it around carelessly for others at his table to see. When the tramp comes in, Jack has the note delivered to him, and the tramp really



believes Georgia wrote it to him. Before he can get to Georgia, Big Jim comes in the dance hall and recognizes the tramp. He knows the tramp can show him where the cabin is which will lead him back to his claim. He tells the tramp he will split his fortune with him if he will guide him back to the cabin, and Big Jim drags the tramp off.

After weathering a stormy night in the cabin which almost blows it off a precipice, with Big Jim and the tramp in it, they find the claim. When next we see them, the two are on a steamer, wealthy millionaires, headed for home. By coincidence, Georgia is on the steamer, too, and she and the tramp reunite with plans to marry.

### **Commentary**

Certainly there are people who prefer "City Lights" or "The Kid" or "Modern Times," but, if a poll were taken, it would be safe to say that "The Gold Rush" would emerge as the favorite Charlie Chaplin film for most silent movie buffs. And, quite often, it emerges as the favorite of all silent films for some, and deservedly so.

Chaplin's forte has always been the ability to combine comedy and pathos, and ever since "The Tramp" (1915), he exhibited an ever increasing skill at this delicate balancing act. "The Gold Rush" may not have been Chaplin's most successful matching of the two (many would say "City Lights" deserves this honor), but it is a masterful blending so that one does not overwhelm the other, and the comedy plays off the pathos, and vice versa, without being forced or inappropriate.

Considering the backdrop for this story, Chaplin deserves some extra credit for this balancing act, for the struggles and hardships endured during the 1898 gold rush could prove to be too delicate a subject for comedy (consider the presence of death and near starvation in the storyline), but he handles them adroitly and without offending the senses.

Also, if asked to name the most famous sequence or sequences in a Chaplin film, the Dance of the Rolls and the eating of the cooked boot come to mind immediately, both from "The Gold Rush" (the ending to "City Lights" is also right up there with the most memorable). These are indelibly etched in our memories and are a part of the Chaplin lore as well as silent movie lore in general.

The film is sprinkled throughout with bits and pieces of genius, and, yes, there is slapstick, but



it's slapstick with a reason, not just for slapstick's sake. Here are some examples:

. . . Big Jim and Black Larsen struggle to wrest the rifle from one another. As the two fight over the weapon, the tramp scurries all around the little cabin trying to move from in front of the gun barrel. However, no matter where he moves - under the table, stranding on the bed - the gun barrel follows him aimed straight for him.

. . . Lacking one shoe, the tramp has one of his feet wrapped rather bulkily with burlap or some similar material to keep it warm. While filling a lamp with kerosene, he spills some of the fuel on the wrapped foot. When Georgia and the other girls are visiting him in the cabin, one of the girls throws a lighted match down which lands on his foot. The kerosene ignites. At first no one realizes this as he has his legs crossed and the foot is under the chair of one of the girls. Soon,

however, the chair catches fire, the girl jumps up, and the tramp hurriedly extinguishes his burning foot.

. . . In his first meeting with Georgia in the dance hall, the tramp has an opportunity to dance with her; however, he is having a hard time keeping his pants up and tries to hide this from Georgia. He spies a piece of rope on a table, and, while Georgia turns to speak to someone, he quickly ties it around his waist. When they go on dancing, it becomes obvious that rope is attached to a dog. This is not a problem until the dog notices a cat and chases after it, dragging the tramp behind him.

All of this are delightful bits of business that add to the charm of the film, keep it moving along at a nice pace and prevent the serious side of the film from burying the comedy.



There have been some comments over the years about Chaplin's lack of directorial skills, the "cardboard" look of the sets and the direction reminiscent of the two-reeler days of the twenties. Admittedly, there are some questionable cinematic areas in the film. For example, we are shown the title card identifying "Georgia" three times, as if we won't recognize her again after she was identified the first time. Also, when we are given a long shot of Georgia standing on the balcony in the dance hall watching Jack down below made fun of her love note, the camera irises in to Georgia to make sure we notice her watching the whole scene - really unnecessary and, admittedly, reminiscent of comedies from 10 or 15 years earlier.

As to the storyline, it has been woven well with all pieces fitting together nicely. However, there is one question that arises at the end. Remember that the tramp was sent Georgia's love note as a

joke by Jack, however, he really believed Georgia sent it and loves him. However, after he and Big Jim discover the claim again, the tramp doesn't go back for Georgia, and certainly they had to go back into town to record the claim. The next time we see the tramp, he is on a steamer headed for home. Did he decide to leave Georgia behind? Did he go back for Georgia and she wasn't there. It is nicely convenient that she is on the same steamer as he and Big Jim, but it leaves some questions unanswered in the viewer's mind.

***What Others Said About "The Gold Rush" (1925)***

Neil Sinyard (*Silent Movies*, Brompton Books Corp., 1990)

" . . . one of the greatest and most popular Chaplin comedies."

"The film's themes of starvation and cannibalism, not to mention greed and madness, could hardly have been more savage and desperate, yet they seem to have inspired Chaplin to new heights of comic invention."

Maurice Bessy (*Charlie Chaplin*, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983)

"'The Gold Rush,' made in 1924-25, is Chaplin at the height of his powers; in it we experience that laughter mingled with tears that is the essence of his genius, all the pathos of the little fellow with the big heart, sublime in defeat. Genius like that is unanswerable. Supremely confident, it sweeps all before it."

Charlie Chaplin (*My Autobiography*, Simon and Schuster, 1964)

"In the creation of comedy, it is paradoxical that tragedy stimulates the spirit of ridicule, because ridicule, I suppose, is an attitude of defiance: we must laugh in the face of helplessness against the forces of nature - or go insane. I read a book about the Donner Party, who, on the way to

California, missed the route and were snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Out of 160 pioneers, only 18 survived, most of them dying of hunger and cold. Some resorted to cannibalism, eating their dead; others roasted their moccasins to relieve their hunger. Out of this harrowing tragedy, I conceived one of our funniest scenes. In dire hunger, I boil my shoe and eat it . . ."

David Robinson (*Hollywood in the Twenties*, A.S. Barnes & Company, 1968)

"The Gold Rush' is an elaborate episodic comedy which derives its peculiar strength from the underlying blackness of the situation. Behind the gags and laughter, the theme is the privation and the jealous greed of the nineteenth-century gold prospectors. . . Practically the whole repertory of gags in this film has become legendary; it is one of those rare pictures whose lore has been passed down from generation to generation."

Edward Wagenknecht (*Stars of the Silents*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987)

"There has never, I think, been any serious question that it is one of his finest achievements, though photographically, it is less rewarding to watch than some of the others, as the predominance of snowscapes becomes monotonous. Personally, too, I find Chaplin's introduction as a 'lone prospector' teetering on the edge of a precipice, with a bear coming out of a cave behind him and then lumbering off unseen into another, infelicitous and glaringly movie-like in the bad sense, especially coming after it does after the stark reality of the great opening shots. . . At the beginning, however, the note of reality, daringly but triumphantly blended with the best Chaplin high jinks, is soon regained in the cabin of the killer Wolf Larsen . . ."

Roger Manvell (*Chaplin*, Little, Brown and Company, 1974)

"Charlie gave one of his very finest dramatic performances in this film, which many still

consider to be his best. . . Although the film is laced throughout with a wonderful sense of humor, one is left with the overall feeling that it is a sad, not humorous, film with a somewhat contrived happy ending. It is as if Charlie could not bear to leave 'The Gold Rush' without relieving its melancholy. . . But, if this film can be accepted as a fable, and not as a story which (for all its moments of seeming realism) should conform to actuality, the happy end can be seen more as a comment than a contrivance - human beings can achieve happiness if they set out to do so. . . 'The Gold Rush' could be called at once Charlie's saddest and most humorous film, and this is probably the reason why he feels it to be his best, or at least the film for which he prefers to be 'remembered.'"

Lewis Jacobs (*The Rise of the American Film*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939)

"The story was also an autobiographical picture of Chaplin himself. It showed that wealth is illusion; that the happy moments of life are those of anticipation. (Extremely wealthy now, was Chaplin giving us an insight into his own feelings?) At the moment of striking it rich, the little prospector finds himself suddenly and completely alone. (Was there some resemblance here to Chaplin's own life?) When the prospector thinks the most beautiful girl in the world is beckoning to him, his face lights up with ecstasy, and when he realizes that she is summoning someone else, another illusion is shattered. . . The cabin teetering on the edge of the abyss was another incomparable moment of satirical fantasy springing from deep experience of the real world."

Robert F. Moss (*Charlie Chaplin*, Pyramid Publications, 1975)

"As always in Chaplin's work, most of the humor is generated by the Tramp's struggle against adversity, which often takes amusing forms, and his imaginative strategies for overcoming it."

Here the scope of his conflict, usually limited to society, is widened to include nature. . . 'The Gold Rush' is probably Chaplin's most successful union of comedy and sadness."

John Grierson ("The Product of Hollywood" *Motion Picture News*, Vol. 34, No. 19, November 6, 1926)

"Here is Chaplin with his "Gold Rush," a step ahead of the old Chaplin. The picture has moments of weakness and a bad ending, and it is not without stray elements of slapstick, but Chaplin's pyrotechnics on the borderline between tragedy and comedy are profounder than before."

Uno Asplund (*Chaplin's Films*, A.S. Barnes and Company, 1971)

"In it we find everything that is best in Chaplin's repertoire: his pantomime, his biting satire, the human drama, the tenderness. The film is a cavalcade of mankind's hopes and disappointments, a documentary of his deprivations. Goodness symbolized by Charlie, triumphs in the end. And all the while the sentimental elements are interrupted by logically introduced farce."

Richard Koszarski (*An Evening's Entertainment - The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*, University of California Press, 1990)

"'The Gold Rush' was revered for its humanity, for its studied mixture of pathos, drama and slapstick, and for its very existence as the latest example of Chaplin's art. . . Chaplin's films remain as imaginative and affecting as always, but the passage of years since their creation has allowed their flaws to show through, as well. The crudities of Chaplin's technical methods were simply not an issue in 1925. His cutting, his camera placement, even his scenic design, seem to later audiences a crude holdover from a simpler age of cinema . . . The cardboard sets of 'The Gold Rush' offer very little help to the star and director of this picture, who seems to care not a

whit for the actual ambiance of the Far North and, in the old music-hall tradition, is satisfied to throw up a flat."

Joe Franklin (*Classics of the Silent Screen*, The Citadel Press, 1959)

"The Gold Rush,' at any rate, despite some admittedly slow sequences, some inexcusably cheap sets (the more obvious since they are supposed to represent the 'great outdoors'), and a tendency to too much repetition in gags, is quite wonderful entertainment. Some of the episodes rank among the best that Chaplin has ever created, most notably, of course, the famous 'Dance of the Rolls' sequence."

**From 'Demure' to 'Tempestuous' "*The Leading Ladies in Chaplin's Silent Features*"  
by Tim Lussier**

Chaplin made five silent features in the 17-year period from 1920 to 1936, and although the tramp character remained fairly consistent through each one of them, his leading ladies were a varied group ranging from the demure to the tempestuous.

**The Kid's Mother**

It was only fitting that his first feature film included the beautiful Edna Purviance who had been Chaplin's leading lady since his second Essanay short in 1915. Purviance will always have a



special place in movie history because the years in which she served as Chaplin's leading lady are so important to Chaplin and movie history buffs. Although he created the tramp character during his years at Keystone, the Essanay, Mutual and First National years are when the character was truly developed, and Purviance was right by his side, on and off the screen, through it

all. It is only fitting she should co-star in his first feature film.

However, "co-star" may be too generous a word since the real co-star in his first feature, "The Kid" (1920) was Jackie Coogan. All things considered, Purviance's part as the kid's mother is almost incidental to the film, necessary only in setting up the story of the tramp raising the child and his attempts to keep the him.

In *Charlie Chaplin* (Arno Press & The New York Times, 1972), author Theodore Huff says, "Direction and acting, on the whole, are very fine. Edna Pruviance's first emotional scenes, however, seemed rather stilted, even at the time of release." This may be somewhat true, but, as mentioned, her part was not a very significant one in the film, and she portrays the unwed mother very well. This type of role would be perfectly suited for the serene beauty of Purviance, whom Huff also described as "demure and ladylike."

Unfortunately, Purviance was not to serve as Chaplin's leading lady in any more of his films. It has been noted that she had begun to put on weight (her looks were sometimes described at this time as "matronly"), and her persona just didn't fit the 1920's flapper-era very well. According to Chaplin biographer David Robinson in *Chaplin, His Life and Art* (McGraw-Hill, 1985), Chaplin's first wife, Lita Grey (she played a small part in the film's dream sequence), was quoted as saying, "During the shooting of the film, she had begun to drink, not heavily, but enough to displease Chaplin, who viewed drinking during working hours as unprofessional and therefore intolerable."

Chaplin, of course, did try to promote Purviance's dramatic capabilities by starring her in "A Woman of Affairs" in 1923, but, when it came time to make his next film, "The Gold Rush" (1925), he moved to a younger leading lady with a different look.

### **The Dance Hall Girl**

Georgia Hale had caught Chaplin's eye in Josef Von Sternberg's "The Salvation Hunters" (1925), and after marrying Lita Grey (she was to co-star in the film until she became pregnant with Chaplin's first child), Hale was selected for the role of the dance hall girl with whom the tramp falls in love.

According to Huff, "In 'The Gold Rush,' impersonating a hard, impulsive and fiery-tempered dancehall girl - a Chaplin heroine quite different from the pretty and agreeable Edna Purviance - Georgia Hale gives a performance of considerable verve although there are moments when she slips into some stilted conventions of the period."



In *Tramp, The Life of Charlie Chaplin* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), author Joyce Milton observes, "A former Miss Chicago, Georgia Hale was an interesting combination of glamour and Midwestern straightness. She was well cast as the fiery-tempered but good-hearted bar singer, and the shooting of the complicated dance hall scenes moved along briskly." She added, "Hale's work on 'The Gold Rush' had been singled out for praise by the critics, and she was a cooperative actress who had never given him a day's trouble."

The pleasant working relationship between Hale and Chaplin was due in no small part to two factors - first, Hale was very candid about her admiration for Chaplin which went back to her

childhood days watching him on the screen, and, secondly, the two developed a romantic interest in one another. As Robyn Karney and Robin Cross noted in *The Life and Times of Charlie Chaplin* (Smithmark Publishers, Inc., 1992), "For Georgia Hale (delightful in the part), who had hero-worshipped Chaplin from afar, the experience of working on 'The Gold Rush' was rewarding. 'You just knew you were working with a genius. He's the greatest genius of all times for the motion picture business. He was so wonderful to work with. You didn't mind that he told you what to do all the time, every little thing. He was infinitely patient with actors - kind. He knew exactly what to say and what to do to get what he wanted.'"

Hale looked the part of the tough dance hall girl (named Georgia in the film) and acted the part very well. It was no "push-over" role, either, calling for a varied range of emotions.

In dealing with ladies' man Jack Cameron (played capably by Malcolm Waite), the fiery-temper comes through well, and her face portrays the anger superbly with narrowing eyes and tightly pursed lips. According to Hale, in one scene where she is required to slap the character of Jack, Chaplin had them do the scene so many times she really did become angry. The 'take' that was finally used was when she has essentially lost her patience and gave fellow actor Waite a very hard, and very real, slap.

In another scene, Georgia goes to the tramp's cabin and, finding a neatly prepared table, realizes she had forgotten a promise to share New Year's Eve dinner with him. It is obvious she is disturbed by the hurt she must have caused him, and the fiery temper is displaced by compassion.

The final scene of the movie has her unexpectedly encountering the tramp again (and not realizing he has become a millionaire since they last met). She gives a sensitive portrayal here at

meeting the little guy once again that she had learned to like so much, and plays the part with restraint that implies surprise when she learns he is now a millionaire. Their final kiss to end the movie is touching.

Yes, Hale deserves praise for her part in the film, and, certainly, she brought much more to the role than the youthful-looking Lita Grey could have. Yet, as good as she was, Chaplin was to choose the "weakest" of his leading ladies for his next film.

### **The Circus Girl**

"The Circus" was released in 1928, and the leading lady was another very youthful teenage "find" of Chaplin's who had actually been recommended to him by his wife. Grey and Merna Kennedy were friends, and Grey felt she could trust Kennedy with her husband, but, by the time the movie was finished; Chaplin and Grey's marriage was finished anyway.



Huff gives a somewhat less than glowing appraisal of Kennedy's work in "The Circus." He notes, "Merna Kennedy, slightly reminiscent of Mabel Normand, though lacking her talent and personality, is merely competent." Certainly Huff must be referring to some of the physical similarities of Kennedy and Normand, because Kennedy obviously doesn't have any of the "life" or charisma that Normand had onscreen.

However, his appraisal of a "competent" performance is accurate and about the best that can be said of Kennedy's portrayal. For example, when she's called upon to cry, she accomplishes this by quickly throwing her head down and hiding her face. When fear is called for (because of her

abusive father), she throws an arm up as if to ward off a blow. With facial expressions so important in silent movies to convey emotion, Kennedy only does a passable job.

This is disappointingly true in a scene where the tramp shares his bread with her admonishing her to eat slowly. She has been gobbling the bread ravenous because her father has denied any food for her since the day before. Throughout the scene, she stares blankly at the tramp showing no emotion whatsoever whether he's chiding her or explaining how bad her eating habits are for her health.

This is not to say that Kennedy doesn't bring some girlish charm to the part (she was not quite 20 at the time) and looks fragile and helpless enough when her abusive father is grabbing her by the arm and throwing her about. She's at her best, however, when called upon to be happy and giddy as she is in the closing scenes after marrying the tightrope walker.

All in all, Kennedy is attractive, and the fact that she doesn't give the most memorable performance of any of Chaplin's leading ladies could be due in no small part to the role she was given and the film in which she plays. Let's face it; Chaplin's next two films give the leading ladies much more opportunity to "shine" than the little girl of "The Circus."

### **The Blind Girl**

Virginia Cherrill seems to have been a little unfairly maligned over the years because she was most likely Chaplin's least favorite leading lady and she was not a professional actress. However, she turns in a commendable performance, *especially* when one considers she was not a professional.

Jack Spears, in his book *Hollywood, The Golden Era* (Castle Books, 1971), praised her performance, albeit giving Chaplin most of the credit. "He (Chaplin) extracted a fine performance from Virginia Cherrill as the blind girl of 'City Lights' under difficult circumstances (she was addicted to parties and good times and indifferent to acting)."



Huff gave a little harsher appraisal. "All she brought to the part was good looks and near-sightedness, the latter a deficiency in general, though an asset for the particular role she was cast in," but goes on to add, "Virginia Cherrill proved to be unusually effective as the blind girl, and certainly she is one of the most strikingly beautiful young women to ever appear in films."

Huff was also one of many authors over the years who have outlined some of the problems Chaplin experienced with his leading lady while making the film. "She had given him trouble from the beginning. Living on alimony, she felt no compulsion to work. She was a party girl given to staying out most of the night. Many mornings she would appear on the set somewhat worse for the wear, unfit for the camera which magnifies the slightest sign of dissipation."

Milton said in her Chaplin biography, ". . . she was neither in awe of Chaplin or impressed by her minimal seventy-five dollars a week salary. On one of her first days at the studio, she left to have lunch with friends at a nearby restaurant, not realizing that the cast was expected to remain on the premises all day. Later, she angered Chaplin by requesting permission to leave early for a hairdresser's appointment. Chaplin complained bitterly that her attitude was unprofessional, but she wasn't a professional."

According to Robinson, "From the start, he began to have doubts about Virginia. It has become legendary how Chaplin spent shot after shot, hour after hour, day after day, trying to get her to hand a flower with the line and rhythm he wanted, and to speak to his satisfaction a line - 'Flower, sir?' - which was never to be heard."

Robinson contends the lack of affection between the two was a part of the problem, as well. In a telephone interview with Robinson in the early 1980's, Cherrill told him, "I never liked Charlie, and he never liked me." Even Chaplin did not lay the full blame on Cherrill noting the fault was "partly my own, for I had worked myself into a neurotic state of wanting perfection."

At one point in the filming, Chaplin did fire Cherrill, but he was unable to find a suitable replacement (he even tried some scenes with Georgia Hale). He apparently realized he had shot too much film with his original leading lady and simply wasn't satisfied with anyone else, in spite of the problems he was having with Cherrill. However, Cherrill did not come back easily. She had been coached by her friend Marion Davies on how to handle Chaplin and refused to return to the set until he had doubled her weekly salary.

Everyone agrees Cherrill portrays a blind girl very well, and, one must admit that she demands the sympathy from the viewer that the part requires. As excellent as Georgia Hale was in "The Gold Rush," she could not play the part as well as Cherrill. Some rare film shown in Kevin Brownlow's wonderful documentary "Unknown Chaplin" (1983) shows her performing the final scene of the movie in which the blind girl has regained her sight and recognizes the tramp as her benefactor by the touch of his hand. This is certainly one of the most moving and an emotional scene in the history of the movies, and Hale just doesn't seem to be able to "get" it. Cherrill, on

the other hand, deserves much credit for her acting here, for the success of the scene rests totally on her reaction when she realizes who the tramp really is.

## The Gamin

Paulette Goddard was given a unique opportunity to portray a leading lady in "Modern Times" (1936) unlike any that had preceded her in a Chaplin film. Almost without exception, she receives high praise from authors, critics and Chaplin fans for her spirited romp as the "gamin" in the last of Chaplin's silent features.



William K. Everson in *American Silent Film* (De Capo Press, 1998) heaps high praise on the actress' portrayal. "Paulette Goddard's performance, a strange but wholly effective welding of Fairbanksian bravura and optimism with the wistful and defeatist pathos of Leni Feifenstahl's Junta from 'The Blue Light' (1932), might well be listed along with Mae Marsh's performance in 'Intolerance' and Eleanor Boardman's 'The Crowd' (though in a pantomimic rather than an acting sense) as one of the great performances of the silent cinema - and what matter that it was performed in 1936 and by an actress never a part of silent film?"

Huff said, "Paulette Goddard, different from both the old, passive Chaplin heroine, and the tempestuous Georgia, played the role of the gamin with vitality and spontaneity."

If Cherrill's lack of a personal relationship with Chaplin was a hindrance to her performance in "City Lights" as Robinson suggested, then just the opposite was true for Goddard in "Modern

Times," for the two were married right after the release of the movie, and she turned in a magnificent performance.

Goddard's is one of those performances that is so charming you can't help but smile each time she comes on the screen; her first appearance on the screen is so compelling. We see her, raggedy dress, hair unkempt, stealing bananas at dockside. When she cuts them from the bunch, she places the knife between her teeth and throws the bananas to some street urchins on the dock level above. Her movements are quick, catlike. She glances around to make sure she's not caught. Her expression is one of determination and cunning. When her misdeed is discovered, her bare feet scurry over several small boats and away from the dock and capture. All the while, the viewer must be thinking, "Gee, what a beautiful girl."

This first scene is a great introduction for her, and Goddard wins us over immediately. It took 20 minutes of film before we saw her, but we find ourselves wanting her back onscreen as soon as possible.

How old the gamin is supposed to be is unclear. She and her younger brother and sister are taken in by the authorities when their father is killed. So, it would be safe to assume she is under 18. Chaplin handles the relationship between the girl and the tramp, well, though, with no sexual connotations.

One of the most delightful sequences is when the tramp takes a job as a night watchman at the department store. As soon as the store is closed and everyone leaves, he lets the gamin in, and they head for the lunch counter. Then, it's off to the toy department and a fantastic skating sequence (reminiscent of "The Rink"). After that, we see the gamin all wrapped in a white fur

coat. She sits in the middle of a fabulous bed fondling the coat around her neck and luxuriating in the expensiveness and feel of it. Goddard is a joy to watch as we feel the pleasure the gamin must be feeling as she enjoys a taste of a world far, far from her own.

Outside of just pure beauty, Goddard's most ingratiating trait is her smile. Each time she's around the tramp, she bursts into a broad smile. Each time the tramp is sent to jail, she's there waiting for him when he is released (this, in itself, is endearing to us). On one occasion when he leaves the police station, she darts from an alley, sneaks up behind him and puts her hands over his eyes. When he turns to hug her, Chaplin wisely gave us a close shot of her face. That winning smile and her loyalty to the tramp reach out and draw us into this charming creature.

Who was the best leading lady? Who gave the best performance? Which leading lady is the most memorable for Chaplin fans? Who was his most beautiful leading lady? Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is a performance, and the answers to all of this questions can only be found in the personal tastes of each individual who views the films.

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