

# 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 likley 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) show 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 emotional scenes 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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