

Without the Cane and the Derby

Charlie Chaplin Playing for His Friends After Dinner

A Poem by CARL SANDBURG

THE woman had done him wrong.
Either that.. or the woman was clean as
a white rose in the morning gauze of dew.
It was either one or the other or it was the two
things, right and wrong, woven together like
two braids of a woman's head of hair hanging
down woven together.

The room is dark. The door opens. It is Charlie
playing for his friends after dinner, "the mar-
velous urchin, the little genius of the screen,"
(chatter it like a monkey's running laughter cry).
No.. it is not Charlie.. it is somebody else. It
is a man, gray shirt, bandanna, dark face. A
candle in his left hand throws a slant of light on
the dark face. The door closes slow. The right
hand leaves the door knob slow.

He looks at something. What is it? A white sheet
on a table. He takes two long soft steps. He
runs the candle light around a hump in the sheet.
He lifts the sheet slow, sad like.

A woman's head of hair shows, a woman's white
face. He takes the head between his hands and
looks long at it. His fingers trickle under the
sheet, snap loose something, bring out fingers
full of a pearl necklace.

He covers the face and the head of hair with the
white sheet. He takes a step toward the door.
The necklace slips into his pocket off the fingers
of his right hand. His left hand lifts the candle
for a good-by look.

KNOCK, knock, knock. A knocking the same as
the time of the human heartbeat.

Knock, knock, knock, first louder, then lower.
Knock, knock, knock, the same as the time of
the human heartbeat.



He sets the candle on the floor.. leaps to the
white sheet.. rips it back.. has his fingers at
the neck, his thumbs at the throat, and does
three slow fierce motions of strangling.

The knocking stops. All is quiet. He covers the
face and the head of hair with the white sheet,
steps back, picks up the candle and listens.

Knock, knock, knock, a knocking the same as the
time of the human heartbeat.

Knock, knock, knock, first louder, then lower.
Knock, knock, knock, the same as the time of
the human heartbeat.

Again the candle to the floor, the leap, the slow
fierce motions of strangling, the cover-up of the
face and the head of hair, the step back, the
listening.

And again the knock, knock, knock.. louder..
lower.. to the time of the human heartbeat.

Once more the motions of strangling.. then..
nothing at all.. nothing at all.. no more knock-
ing.. no knocking at all.. no knocking at all..
in the time of the human heartbeat.

He stands at the door.. peace, peace, peace every-
where only in the man's face so dark and his
eyes so lighted up with many lights, no peace at
all, no peace at all.

So he stands at the door, his right hand on the
door knob, the candle slants of light fall and
flicker from his face to the straight white sheet
changing gray against shadows.

So there is peace everywhere.. no more knocking
.. no knocking at all to the time of the human
heartbeat.. so he stands at the door and his right
hand on the door knob.

And there is peace everywhere.. only the man's
face is a red gray plaster of storm in the center
of peace.. so he stands with a candle at the
door.. so he stands with a red gray face.

After he steps out the door closes: the door, the
door knob, the table, the white sheet; there is
nothing at all; the owners are shadows; the
owners are gone; not even a knocking; not even
a knock, knock, knock.. louder, lower, in the
time of the human heartbeat.

THE lights are snapped on. Charlie, "the mar-
velous urchin, the little genius of the screen"
(chatter it with a running monkey's laughter
cry). Charlie is laughing a laugh the whole
world knows.

The room is full of cream yellow lights. Charlie
is laughing.. louder.. lower..

And again the heartbeats laugh.. the human heart-
beats laugh..