

- [1] THE FIRST four years were happy ones for Charlie. He lived with his mother and elder brother, Sydney, in a comfortable three room flat in a pleasant area of South London. Charlie's parents, who were both music hall entertainers, had separated a year after his birth in 1889. Charlie's father spent all his money on drink, but Mrs Chaplin managed to support her children on her own with the money she earned as a singer. However, their economic situation suddenly changed for the worse in 1894 when Charlie's mother became ill with laryngitis. Instead of resting her voice until it got better, Mrs Chaplin carried on singing in order to earn money for her children. Her voice got weaker and weaker and she began to find it difficult to find well-paid work.
- [2] One evening round about this time, Charlie happened to be in the theatre his mother was working in. Normally, Charlie stayed at home when his mother was working, but that evening Mrs Chaplin had had to bring her five-year-old son to the theatre as she had not been able to find anyone to babysit. Charlie was standing in the wings of the theatre watching his mother singing on stage when suddenly her voice cracked and broke. She tried to finish the song she was singing by whispering the rest of the words, but the audience, who were mostly soldiers from a nearby army camp, began to boo and whistle loudly. Mrs Chaplin could not continue any longer and walked off the stage crying.
- [3] The stage was now empty and the audience were getting more and more angry. The stage manager, who had been standing in the wings with Charlie, knew that he had to do something quickly to save the situation. He had to find someone to take Mrs Chaplin's place on stage. He looked down at the little child standing next to him. Then he remembered that he had once seen Charlie singing for some of Mrs Chaplin's friends at a party. He quickly took Charlie by the hand and led him to the middle of the stage, where, after a few brief words of introduction, he left Charlie to entertain the audience.
- [4] Dazzled by the bright footlights and in front of hundreds of people, Charlie began to sing, accompanied by the orchestra. The audience found the spectacle of this tiny five-year-old child singing sweetly, alone in the middle of the huge stage, very touching. They began to throw money to show how much they were enjoying the performance. Seeing all the money landing on the stage, Charlie immediately stopped singing and announced to the audience that first he would pick up the money and then he would finish the song. The audience found this announcement extremely funny and started to throw even more money onto the stage.
- [5] Meanwhile the stage manager, worried because Charlie had stopped singing, came onto the stage with a big handkerchief to help the little boy pick up the money. When Charlie saw the stage manager gathering up his money, he immediately thought the man wanted to steal it and began to follow him worriedly around the stage. The audience found this spectacle tremendously funny and laughed and threw more money. Only when all the money had been gathered up and safely handed to Charlie's mother in the wings, would the little boy go back onto the stage to finish his song.
- [6] Charlie felt perfectly at home on stage. He did not feel shy at all and danced and sang some more songs to the audience. One of the songs he chose happened to be the one his mother had tried so unsuccessfully to sing earlier that evening. As Charlie sang he imitated, in all innocence, his mother's voice cracking and going into a whisper. To his amazement the audience found this extremely funny and there was tremendous laughter and more money throwing, and, when his mother came on stage to carry him off, there was thunderous applause. That night was Charlie's first public performance on the stage and his mother's last.