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SF PERUSALS

The Cat's Meow

by Steven Peros

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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THE CAT'S MEOW was first presented by Rialto Entertainment at The Coast Playhouse, in Los Angeles, California, on October 19, 1997. It was directed by Jenny Sullivan; the setting was by Bill Eigenbrodt; the lighting by J. Kent Inasy; the costumes by Christine Tschirgi; and the hair & make-up by Judi Lewin. The Line Producer was John Peros and the Stage Manager was Kevin Carroll. The cast was as follows:

WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST . . . . . Albert Stratton
THOMAS INCE . . . . . John C. Mooney
MARION DAVIES . . . . . Kim Bieber
ELINOR GLYN . . . . . Pamela Gordon
CHARLIE CHAPLIN . . . . . Joseph Fuqua
LOUELLA PARSONS . . . . . Nancy Cartwright
At some performances by Von Rae Wood
MARGARET LIVINGSTON . . . . . Marianne Ferrari
GEORGE THOMAS . . . . . Tim Van Pelt
JOSEPH WILLICOMBE . . . . . Steve Tyler
DR. DANIEL GOODMAN . . . . . David Bickford
MRS. GOODMAN . . . . . Von Rae Wood
At some performances by Nancy Kandal
CELIA MOORE . . . . . Tracie May
DIDI DAWSON . . . . . Precious Chong
MRS. INCE . . . . . Von Rae Wood
At some performances by Nancy Kandal

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

ELINOR GLYN - 60, British romance novelist, screenwriter, and social dictator.

THOMAS INCE - 40s, a silent film pioneer and studio mogul.

MARGARET LIVINGSTON - 20s, an actress and mistress to Ince.

GEORGE THOMAS - Ince's business manager.

MARION DAVIES - 27 (but passing for 23), a movie star and Hearst's public mistress.

CHARLIE CHAPLIN - 35, British, an internationally known movie star.

(**NOTE:** Ince and Chaplin should be roughly similar in height and build)

LOUELLA PARSONS - 40s, a Hearst movie reviewer from the East Coast.

WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST - 62, Newspaper and silver mining magnate. A large, wealthy, powerful, married man.

JOSEPH WILLICOMBE - Hearst's loyal and discreet personal secretary.

DR. DANIEL GOODMAN - 40s, former physician, now a Hearst movie studio executive.

MRS. GOODMAN - 30s, Dr. Goodman's conservative wife.

CELIA MOORE - 20s, a flapper/actress.

DIDI DAWSON - 20s, also a flapper actress.

MRS. INCE (VOICE ON PHONE) - 40s, Ince's recently awoken wife, who remained at home.

(**NOTE:** For "Mrs. Ince", some productions have had an actress appear on stage, with a phone in her hand. If this method is utilized, doubling is possible with "Mrs. Goodman")

TIME AND PLACE

The action of the play takes place in November of 1924 on board William Randolph Hearst's yacht, The Oneida.

The play should be performed with one intermission.

THE SET

The play can be effectively performed with a two-level set, but it is not required for a successful production.

If two levels are possible, even by the use of rear risers, then the stage level would be used for the arrival deck scene (I:1), after which the dining table and chairs should be brought on and remain for the entirety of the play (NOTE: Stage hands should be dressed as ship's stewards, and behave as such, to maintain fluidity). The elevated level would have two cabins, at right and left, and a Captain's Wheel center, allowing Hearst to steer, looking out over the audience. If a permanent Captain's Wheel is possible, then Hearst may appear at the wheel at the opening of the play, steering, until his entrance. A steward may take the wheel when unattended by Hearst. The cabins can be fully designed or merely suggested by a single small bed. The cabins would be used for I:4, II:1, II:6

If a single level set is used, the dining table should be set for I:2, struck for I:4, and reset at intermission where it will remain until final curtain. The suggestion of a cabin, even just a bed, should be brought on for Scenes I:4, II:1, II:6.

Regarding the dining table, this need not be thought of literally as one long table. It can be modular, or two tables at a ninety-degree angle, with the angle pointed upstage, or two separate tables allowing room for characters to rise and walk about. If space is an issue, the table need not seat all thirteen cast members and thjere may be fewer chairs. Despite what is indicated in the text, some characters may be on their feet, drinking, mingling, flirting, standing behind a seated guest.

Plates and tableware need not be used as the dining room scenes are pre-dinner and after dinner, though champagne glasses are required for I:3 and II:3. Scene II:7, indicated as breakfast, need only have a few coffee cups and a bowl of fruit, set by Stewards.

ACT ONE

Scene 1

(A light finds **ELINOR GLYN**. *Her English voice is smooth, refined.)*

ELINOR. Black. And White. Black is the absence of color. In white, there is the entire spectrum. Hold a clear prism up to white light and you get a rainbow. Hold that same prism up to black and you get…Oh hell, more black. I am a writer. My art has one tool. Words. Black ink on white paper. People often speak of Truth being black and white. Still others say that we dream in black and white. Art. Truth. Dreams. Darkness coupled with so many colors. Come with me will you? Tell me if what I dreamed is true. Or if my truth…is but a dream. Come. We are about to go yachting…on the grayest ocean you've ever seen.

(SCENE: THE DECK OF THE ONEIDA)

(At stage left is the top of a gangplank from which each of the arriving guests enters.)

*(***THOMAS INCE** *enters. He is a short man with a large handsome face and a head of wavy hair. After a beat,* **MARGARET LIVINGSTON** *enters, an attractive actress. On her arm is* **GEORGE THOMAS**, *Ince's middle-aged business manager.)*

MARGARET. My God, look at the size of this thing. It must be two hundred feet long.

INCE. Two-twenty.

MARGARET. He *owns* this thing?

INCE. And the ocean it's sitting in. And the sky.

GEORGE. Some of his more minor holdings include City Hall, Washington, and the Police Force.

INCE. Oh yeah. Those little things.

GEORGE. Maybe the old boy will give you the ship as a present, Tom. We could sell it and use the cash to start getting your studio out of hock.

INCE. No one's in hock. Not yet anyway.

GEORGE. Just wait 'til those year-end projections catch up with us.

MARGARET. Well you can't do a damn thing about it on a cruise to San Diego.

INCE. Margaret's right, George. Look on the bright side. Mr. William Randolph Hearst has invited us all on his yacht for the express purpose of celebrating *my* birthday.

GEORGE. That and a quarter will buy you a ticket to the movies.

INCE. He controls more newspapers and magazines than any man in the country. Chock full of exciting contemporary stories. He also has quite a lot of other assets in motion pictures that could be of use to us.

GEORGE. Yeah – cash. *(then, seriously:)* Are you planning to make a play for Hearst this weekend?

INCE. Me? I wouldn't be so pushy. Let's just say it's a birthday gift the old man doesn't know he's giving me yet.

*(***MARION** *enters, spotting* **INCE***'s figure from behind.)*

MARION. Charlie!

*(***INCE** *turns around and* **MARION** *realizes her mistake.)*

MARION. Dopey me – Tom! *(She gives him a hug.)* Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you –

INCE. My birthday's not 'til tomorrow, but I love it when a pretty girl sings to me. Where's our Captain?

MARION. Oh you know Willie. He's up there in the Captain's station like it's Mount Olympus, watching the mortals arrive. 'Be right back with His Greatness. *(And with that, she exits.)*

*(***CHAPLIN** *steps onto the deck.)*

INCE. Charlie, how are you?

CHAPLIN. Busy, very busy.

INCE. Same here, same here. You know George Thomas, my business manager. And this is Miss Margaret Livingston, George's guest and a delightful actress in her own right.

CHAPLIN. *(to* **MARGARET***)* Charmed. *(back to* **INCE***)* And *Mrs.* Ince?

INCE. Couldn't make it – one of our boys isn't feeling well.

CHAPLIN. *(looking* **MARGARET** *over skeptically)* Hmmm. I am sorry to hear that.

GEORGE. *(deflecting attention from* **MARGARET***)* Say, that "Woman of Paris" was a terrific picture. Pretty big risk you took by not appearing in it.

INCE. Yes sir, you're a risk taker, Charlie, just like me. Just when you got everybody laughing with your Little Tramp character, you go and make some weepy melodrama without him! Well, you can't fault a man for taking a gamble. Failure is a character-builder, eh Charlie?

CHAPLIN. Yes, a character builder. If you'll excuse me.

*(***CHAPLIN** *beats a hasty retreat to the buffet table.* **MARGARET** *watches him go.)*

MARGARET. Thanks a lot. You introduce me and then you hog him to yourself.

INCE. *(re: Chaplin)* Little prick.

GEORGE. Really? I hear he's got a pretty big one.

INCE. An actor running a studio. It's like the goddamned serfs running the palace. He lost his shirt on that last picture and they say he's so overbudget on "The Gold Rush" that his financiers aren't returning his phone calls.

GEORGE. Not to mention that his *sixteen year-old* lead actress collapsed on the set – pregnant.

INCE. Really? They learn about the birds and the bees so much younger these days.

GEORGE. The buzz around town is that Chaplin did the pollinating.

(And with that, **GEORGE** *follows* **INCE** *and* **MARGARET** *OFF as they stroll the deck.)*

*(***MARION** *returns, balloons in hand, with which she proceeds to decorate. She ignores* **CHAPLIN** *who pops one of her balloons in order to get her attention.)*

MARION. Why haven't you returned any of my telephone calls, you little shit.

CHAPLIN. Because I hate telephones and I knew I'd see you this weekend.

MARION. Maybe I was calling to tell you to stay away this weekend.

CHAPLIN. That would pretty much ensure my arrival, wouldn't it?

MARION. Willie's heard about us. He's even had private detectives poking around. He invited you this weekend so he could watch us. In fact, he's up there watching us right now. Nothing can happen this weekend, do you understand me? Nothing.

CHAPLIN. So what are you doing next weekend?

MARION. Jesus Charlie, how much more direct can I be? You didn't get me into bed and you're not going to. It's gotta stop. *Now.*

CHAPLIN. Says you or says Mr. Hearst?

MARION. Says me.

CHAPLIN. Has the old man turned you completely off romance?

MARION. Come off it, Charlie. If you married every girl you wined and dined, you'd have six hundred wives.

CHAPLIN. More or less. But that's ended now.

(He steps toward her intimately. She pulls back stiffly.)

CHAPLIN. To Hell with Willie and his suspicions. Isn't it punishment enough that I have to banter with his dullest assortment of guests yet? Tom Ince and his birthday entourage – you know he's having an affair with that Margaret person.

MARION. I thought she was with that George someone or other, his business manager?

CHAPLIN. Darling, I've indulged long enough in similar situations to recognize who is cheating on whom and with whom the cheating is being done.

MARION. Especially since you're usually one of the "whoms."

*(***LOUELLA** *["***LOLLY***"]* **PARSONS**, *arrives, decked out in her best attempt at "California chic" clothing. Nervous, she stands at the gangplank with a bedazzled expression fixed painfully on her face.)*

*(***INCE, MARGARET** *and* **GEORGE** *return from their stroll.)*

MARION. I better go help our little Miss Lollipop before people start hanging their coats on her.

*(***CHAPLIN** *stops her before she goes.)*

CHAPLIN. Marion. Do you really believe that if you had reached me, I would have stayed away?

MARION. No. But you should really believe that I wanted you to. *(crosses to* **LOLLY** *and then turns to her guests)* I won't have anybody walk on this boat without being introduced to everybody. Lolly, this is Everybody. Everybody, this is Lolly – Miss Louella Parsons, the insightful movie reviewer for Willie's "New York American." Especially insightful because of the wonderful things she writes about me!

LOLLY. And I wrote them even before I knew that you and Mr. Hearst were…I mean, that you two are…that you're both…uhm…

(You can hear a pin drop as all eyes are fixed on **LOLLY**. *She is aware that she's inserted her foot in her mouth. Finally:)*

LOLLY. Gosh this thing is big, isn't it?

(From behind her, a deep, eloquent woman's voice booms forth.)

ELINOR. Yes dear, but does he know how to use it?

(All heads turn to see the arriving **ELINOR**. *The guests laugh at her remark. Tableaux.* **ELINOR** *addresses the audience.)*

ELINOR. Welcome to Hollywood – a land just off the coast of the planet Earth. I have traveled the world and lived almost everywhere, yet I remain in this place. I fear this bizarre yet fascinating town, but I can't leave it. You see, I'm never quite certain if I am visiting the zoo or if I am one of the animals in a cage. *(a beat)* This yacht belongs to William Randolph Hearst. That woman is Marion Davies, his very public mistress. It is November, 1924. Thirteen passengers *walked* on board; one of us was *carried* off horizontally two days later. Little evidence exists to support *any* version of the weekend events. History has been written in whispers. This is the whisper I hear in my dreams.

(End Tableaux. Action resumes.)

MARION. Louella Parsons of The East, meet Elinor Glyn of The West. Elinor is the finest and naughtiest author in the entire world.

LOLLY. You don't have to tell me that. I wish I could be introduced as being "Of The West."

ELINOR. Whatever makes you happy, dear.

(She hurries to **CHAPLIN**. **LOLLY** *follows closely behind.)*

ELINOR. Hello, you little bastard.

CHAPLIN. It's the "little" I object to.

(They kiss with genuine respect and affection. **LOLLY** *breaks in.)*

LOLLY. Mr. Chaplin, it is an honor, and I mean a true honor to meet you, sir. Did you happen to notice the rave review I gave your last picture, "A Woman of Paris"?

CHAPLIN. Yes, I did. Thank you. It was very kind.

LOLLY. So deserved, so deserved. It just stinks that no one went to see it. Well, I'm sure you won't lose your shirt on the next one, too. *At least* you have the sense to be *in* this new picture. *(musing over the title)* "The Gold

Rush" – I hear that title's just a hint as to how much the picture's costing you.

ELINOR. Well, I'll leave you two then. I have a…oh something-or-other to attend to.

*(***ELINOR** *slips away, leaving* **CHAPLIN** *trapped in* **LOLLY***'s literal clutches)*

CHAPLIN. I really should be –

LOLLY. You know, Charlie, this is my first visit out west. Writing Motion Picture Critiques is one thing, but if I'm truly going to make a difference, what I need is a daily column, with my name on top, marking the place where both the people in the audience *and* the people on the screen can look to read The Truth, not just vicious rumor and gossip.

CHAPLIN. Well, keep after old W.R. – I'm sure he'll come around.

LOLLY. Oh I plan to, believe you me. I mean, take you for example. I want you to know that I, for one, am soooo sorry about the…"personal problems" you're going through with this costar of yours, this…little girl, Lita. If you ever want to confide in someone sympathetic to your needs – I'm all ears. After all, you'll need someone on your side when the shocking news breaks.

CHAPLIN. Why thank you ever so much, Miss Parsons.

LOLLY. Lolly.

CHAPLIN. Pardon?

LOLLY. "Lolly" – all my *close* friends call me Lolly.

CHAPLIN. *(with barely concealed revulsion:)* Lolly…

ELINOR. Charles! Come over here this instant or I will pummel you to the ground!

*(***CHAPLIN** *breaks away from* **LOLLY** *and crosses to* **ELINOR** *just as* **WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST** *makes a grand entrance followed by* **JOSEPH WILLICOMBE***, his personal secretary, clipboard in hand.)*

HEARST. Welcome!

*(***ELINOR** *and* **CHAPLIN** *editorialize confidentially.)*

ELINOR. Such a remarkable economy with words for a man who controls more print than Jesus Christ.

CHAPLIN. *(with mock outrage)* Elinor! I will not tolerate such comments at Mr. Hearst's expense. Take it back or I will dishonor your good name.

ELINOR. I do hope *someone* dishonors my name – I'm feeling rather frisky.

(Just then, **DR.** *and* **MRS. DANIEL CARSON GOODMAN**, *an older conservative couple, step onto the deck.)*

DR. GOODMAN. Permission to come aboard? *(He laughs loudly as he helps his wife board.)*

CHAPLIN. Who?

ELINOR. Dr. Daniel Carson Goodman. Only Hearst would conceive the profane notion of appointing a physician as a movie studio executive. Old W.R. invites them to remind himself that for every one of "us" there's *two* of "them."

CHAPLIN. What is the wife's name?

ELINOR. Who knows.

MRS. GOODMAN. My word! What a big boat!

ELINOR. Correction: who cares.

(back to **INCE** *and* **GEORGE***)*

GEORGE. Hearst is a tricky fish, Tom. He's known to nibble and back off.

INCE. That's the difference between you and me, George: you'd stop at hooks and worms. I'd use a goddamned harpoon with poison on the tip if I could get my hands on one.

*(***WILLICOMBE** *approaches* **HEARST**.*)*

WILLICOMBE. Chief, it's just past noon. We should keep on schedule, if we can.

HEARST. Raise the gangplank!

(Just then, two young flappers, **CELIA MOORE**, *and* **DIDI DAWSON**, *dash onto the deck just as the gangplank is being taken away.)*

CELIA. He always does this to us, every time! Just to see us run!

DIDI. I'm sweating like a pig. How am I gonna land anyone with sweat dripping off my nose?

CELIA. Don't bitch, Didi, I'm not in the mood.

(Out of **HEARST***'s view,* **CHAPLIN** *takes* **MARION***'s hand and kisses it. She snatches her hand away. Only* **INCE** *witnesses this.* **GEORGE** *leers at the two flappers.)*

GEORGE. I think this is going to be a most enjoyable boat ride.

INCE. *(his mind on what he has just witnessed)* Yes…the cat's meow.

HEARST. That's it everybody! Out to sea!

(The lights fade as the Oneida sets sail.)

Scene 2

(The main Dining Room on board The Oneida. A long exquisite table with thirteen chairs. Bottles of ketchup and mustard are incongruously strewn throughout the fine china and silver. The room is empty as the lights come up.)

(After a few moments, **ELINOR** *enters.)*

ELINOR. Good God! I will not be seen arriving on time.

(She does an about-face and exits.)

*(***LOLLY** *enters. She sets her gaze on an empty seat and begins to speak, as if someone were sitting there.)*

LOLLY. Mr. Hearst, writing motion picture critiques for you is an honor. However, I feel there is a pot of gold lying at the end of the proverbial rainbow that – sonofabitch! *(She shakes her head sharply and takes a deep breath, before starting again.)* Chief, we are both consummate professionals, immensely skilled at what we do. Like your desire to branch out into politics and movies, so too do I feel a need to expand my – shit, shit, shit!

(From offstage, the sound of a single gunshot. **LOLLY** *freezes, listening. Two more gunshots sound in succession.* **LOLLY** *makes a frightened exit.)*

*(***HEARST** *enters the room holding a diamond-studded revolver and a gun box. He proceeds to clean the gun throughout much of the following.* **INCE** *enters, concerned.)*

INCE. Did you hear gunfire?

HEARST. Seagulls.

INCE. Pardon me?

HEARST. Seagulls. It's the best time of day to get a few. Three for three.

INCE. Oh…I see.

HEARST. You gotta keep the gun low, or else they see it.

INCE. Right, right, of course. *(a beat)* Is there somewhere you'd like me to sit?

HEARST. I love movies, Tom. Years ago, we thought that the greatest power a communicator could possess was the press. It's just not true anymore. The press relies on the limited language of words; and words don't always translate well across seven continents – believe me, I know. No, Tom, the moving picture is the new – and maybe ultimate – "Great Communicator." Sure there are a few subtitles to read, but through those pictures…those glorious moving pictures…a universal language filled with morality, politics, and any other goddamned thing I want to stick in someone's head is at my fingertips. I'd love to be around in a hundred years and see what we've done with them.

(A moment or two passes.)

INCE. Can I be…frank with you, W.R.?

HEARST. You can be whoever you like, Tom.

INCE. I think you are the greatest newspaper man this country has ever seen. I also think your eye for movies is right on target. But you must face facts: there are some things you cannot control.

HEARST. Like what?

INCE. Your political and family life – even your newspaper empire – is based on the East Coast. The movies are here on the West Coast, where I am.

HEARST. I'm aware of that.

INCE. Then you should also be aware of your limitations as a movie producer. You can't send orders over the telephone and you can't have yes-men represent you when real decisions have to be made.

HEARST. You are being almost…inexcusably frank.

INCE. Only because I think you have a major talent in Marion Davies and a brilliant head for the motion picture world. All you need is a "hands-on" guiding force to oversee spending, production, –

HEARST. And that's you?

INCE. W.R., I've made millions from this business and we both know that despite the enormous quality of your pictures, you've never made back a dime. There is a lot of money in movies, W.R.

HEARST. Yes. Mine. *(a beat)* All right, suppose I agree with all your "frank observations." Are you implying that Thomas H. Ince can make things different?

INCE. I'm not implying it, W.R., I'm stating it. And I'm not just talking about Cosmopolitan Pictures renting my studio space, I'm talking about personally overseeing Cosmo – and Marion in particular.

HEARST. How personal?

INCE. Consulting with you on which scripts and directors are right for her, making sure she has the finest co-stars, keeping her productions cost effective –

HEARST. What's in it for you?

INCE. The stories in Cosmopolitan and your other magazines, for starters.

*(***HEARST** *pauses to absorb all that has been said.)*

HEARST. Tom, it's not that I doubt your background in the movie business. On the contrary: that's just where it is lately – in the background. Even you have to admit that you're not the force you were five, ten years ago.

INCE. That may be true – of both of us, perhaps – but we each have different strengths to help the other's weaknesses.

HEARST. No offense, Tom, but when and *if* I'm in trouble, I don't need a cripple to help me up.

(Just then, **WILLICOMBE** *and* **DR. GOODMAN** *enter.)*

HEARST. Dan! Joe! I don't think you've met my guest of honor. Tom Ince, this is Joe Willicombe, my personal secretary and Dan Goodman, one of my executives over at the studio.

(The **THREE MEN** *exchange greetings and handshakes.)*

You and Dan should get acquainted. Joe, can I have a word with you?

(As **HEARST** *steals away to a stage left corner with* **WILLICOMBE**, *the other guests begin to filter in. First* **ELINOR**, **DIDI**, *and* **CELIA**.*)*

DIDI. Only one drink per person? What kind of party is this?

CELIA. *Presidents* answer to him for God's sake! Are you telling me he can't get us some good bathtub hooch?

ELINOR. Well, dear, it is technically illegal.

DIDI. Yeah, but not for *us*.

*(***GEORGE** *and* **MARGARET** *enter the room along with* **MRS. GOODMAN** *and* **LOLLY**. **INCE** *excuses himself from* **DR. GOODMAN** *and pulls* **GEORGE** *away from* **MARGARET**, *leaving her standing alone. The two men talk inaudibly.)*

(Back to **HEARST** *and* **WILLICOMBE**, *who have been speaking.)*

WILLICOMBE. No, she's not in her room, Mr. Hearst.

HEARST. Well whose room *is* she in?

WILLICOMBE. I'll try to find out.

HEARST. Do it fast. I don't know what the hell to do with all these people.

(back to **GEORGE** *and* **INCE***)*

GEORGE. "I don't need a cripple." He actually said that to you?

INCE. Nice way to treat the guest of honor, huh? If I had the same mean streak, I'd throw that fling Marion and Chaplin are having right in his face.

GEORGE. Marion and Chaplin?

INCE. I saw them holding hands on deck. Have you noticed that they're the only people we're waiting for at the moment?

(The **TWO MEN** *look over at* **HEARST** *who appears to be counting heads)*

INCE. Look at him? He's figuring out who's here and who's not. In a moment he'll come to the same conclusion I have.

GEORGE. Well, I advise you to just keep it to yourself.

INCE. I know, I know. I'm a decent man, George.

*(***MARION** *enters, just seconds ahead of* **CHAPLIN**.*)*

(The proximity of their arrivals does not go unnoticed by **HEARST**…*or* **INCE**, *who elbows* **GEORGE**.*)*

MARION. *(addressing the room)* Don't tell me you were all waiting for little old me to get the festivities started?

ELINOR. Marion, dear, since you and Charles have decided to grace us with your presence, would you have the decency to tell us where to sit?

MARION. *(standing at the stage right head of the table)* Oh this is the fun part. If Willie had it his way, he'd talk business all night. Isn't that right, Tom?

INCE. Whatever you say, Marion.

MARION. You, Mr. Birthday Boy, will sit way down at *my* end of the table and talk absolute nonsense all night. Willie, you stay put –

*(***HEARST** *takes his seat at the stage left head of the table.)*

– and why don't we have Charlie sit by you to keep you laughing all night.

CHAPLIN. Or is that vice versa?

*(***CHAPLIN** *moves towards an empty seat nearest* **HEARST**.*)*

MARION. Now, Charlie, hold your tongue.

(As **CHAPLIN** *sits,* **HEARST** *pulls his chair out from under him, causing him to land on the floor.)*

HEARST. *And* your seat.

*(***HEARST** *lets out a roar of laughter.* **CHAPLIN** *looks at him, not quite sure what to make of the prank. He slowly rises,* **HEARST** *and the other guests still laughing.)*

*(***CHAPLIN** *chooses to join in, flashing a smile at* **HEARST**.*)*

CHAPLIN. Got me fair and square, W.R. I've done it to many in my films, but never had it done to me in real life.

HEARST. How does it feel?

CHAPLIN. *(realizing he's being challenged and not willing to give an inch)* Envigorating.

(The guests all move to their seats, engaging in indiscernible conversation.)

(Lights Fade.)

Scene 3

(The main Dining Room – same as the previous scene – an hour later.)

(The seating arrangement is as follows: **MARION** *is at the head of the table at stage right. Continuing towards stage left is* **INCE, DIDI, WILLICOMBE, ELINOR, MARGARET, CELIA, MRS. GOODMAN, GEORGE, DR. GOODMAN. LOLLY, CHAPLIN,** *and* **HEARST** *at the stage left head.)*

DIDI. *(to* **WILLICOMBE***:)* So, who are you exactly?

WILLICOMBE. Joe Willicombe. Mr. Hearst's Chief Secretary.

DIDI. So you're the one they call "Big Joe." *(a flirt)* Wonder why…I'm Didi Dawson.

WILLICOMBE. I know who you are, Miss Dawson. I saw "Lady of The Harem."

DIDI. You did, eh? Now what did your Mama think about *that*?

WILLICOMBE. Mama was sitting on my lap.

*(***DIDI** *screams with laughter as our attention shifts to* **ELINOR** *and* **MARGARET***.)*

ELINOR. It's none of my business, darling, but I'd forget him if I were you.

MARGARET. Pardon me?

ELINOR. *(nodding toward* **INCE***:)* Married moguls and mistresses do not mix, Margaret. *(a beat)* Oh that's good. I must use it in a novel. Do you have a pen, dear?

*(***MARGARET** *can respond only in stunned silence.)*

INCE. So, Marion. Not even one teeny weeny bit of business talk?

MARION. Go ahead.

INCE. I'm trying to negotiate a deal with, W.R. Tell me the secret – How do you get through to W.R.?

MARION. You wanna know my secret? *(leaning in closer:)* I don't have to do a goddamn thing.

INCE. I don't follow.

MARION. People have funny ideas about me and Pops – the whole gold-digger thing –

INCE. No, no, no – I wasn't suggesting –

MARION. The truth is it was Willie who did the pursuing. Used to buy two seats every night when I was in the Follies – one for him, one for his hat. I never once asked him to put me in a picture. Hell – it would take more effort to get him to *stop* putting me in pictures. I guess that's my secret, Tom – with Willie, I don't have to "dig."

(now, to **CELIA** *and* **MRS. GOODMAN***)*

CELIA. Your husband is Dan Goodman?

MRS. GOODMAN. Oh yes, he certainly is.

*(***MRS. GOODMAN** *throws a kiss in her husband's direction. He waves back in response.)*

CELIA. So who's that?

MRS. GOODMAN. *That's* Dr. Goodman!

CELIA. *(disappointed:)* Oh. I thought perhaps your lover was on board. Too bad.

*(***MRS. GOODMAN** *is speechless.* **GEORGE** *turns to his neighbor,* **DR. GOODMAN.***)*

GEORGE. Now, Dan, don't be so modest.

DR. GOODMAN. Oh no, Mr. Hearst takes full responsibility for Cosmopolitan Pictures.

GEORGE. Everyone knows you're one of his top executives.

DR. GOODMAN. That's kind of you, but you know, I'm actually a physician by trade.

GEORGE. You're a…*doctor*?

DR. GOODMAN. Semi retired.

GEORGE. Oh my. Isn't that…

DR. GOODMAN. Medicinal?

GEORGE. Not the word I was looking for, but it'll due for now.

*(***HEARST** *is speaking to* **CHAPLIN**. **LOLLY** *is next to the comedian, thus close enough to eavesdrop.)*

HEARST. You know, Charlie, I've been away for a while, out of touch. I feel like I've lost sight of my motion picture properties…Marion. What do you think of how I've been handling Marion?

CHAPLIN. What do I think?

*(***CHAPLIN** *looks at* **LOLLY***, who looks away quickly, pretending not to be listening.)*

HEARST. Yes.

CHAPLIN. Can I be frank with you, W.R.?

HEARST. You can be whoever you like, Charlie.

CHAPLIN. Well, I think Marion is a wonderful comedienne. Her smile, her eyes – *(just then* **MARION***'s laugh can be heard)* – her laugh. They all work a delightful magic when the material is right. What she *doesn't* need are extravagant sets, and gowns of silk and feathers. It does nothing but interfere with the charm of her lovely face.

HEARST. Are you saying I spend too much money on Marion's pictures? I already know that. What if I tell you it doesn't matter to me. I spent sums on her last picture that I could never possibly recoup and I suppose I'll do the same on her next one.

CHAPLIN. But it's easy to lose sight of her beauty in the clutter of your "dramatic extravaganzas."

HEARST. I don't want people laughing at Marion. She belongs in pictures that have a big world, an important world. She'd be wasting her time monkeying around with some baggy-pants clown. No offense, Charlie.

CHAPLIN. You're not doing what's best for Marion. No offense, W.R.

(A stunned **LOLLY** *waits with ill-concealed eager anticipation. Before* **HEARST** *can respond,* **MARION** *leaps up.)*

MARION. I propose a toast!

DIDI. *(aside, to* **WILLICOMBE***)* It better be a damn good one since this is the only glass of hooch we're gonna get.

MARION. We all owe a lot to Tom. Not only did he invent the cowboy picture, but he helped build this town.

(Cheers of "Here, here" can be heard.)

MARION. He figured out how to run a studio that could make ten movies at the same time. How to direct 'em, how to produce 'em –

HEARST. Wait a minute, this is starting to sound like that picture where Buster Keaton poked a little fun at old Tom.

(The guests spark with recognition, beginning to chuckle. All but **INCE**.*)*

HEARST. Remember? "A Buster Keaton Presentation of a Buster Keaton Production. Produced by Buster Keaton, Directed by Buster Keaton…"

*(***HEARST** *trails off, joining the guests who are all laughing. At* **INCE***'s expense.)*

MARION. Hush, Willie. To Tom!

(The guests laugh and toast. Inaudible conversations resume.)

HEARST. Look, Charlie, I know you're under a lot of pressure right now with all the problems you're having –

CHAPLIN. I can assure you, I'm perfectly –

HEARST. Say no more, my friend: apology accepted. *(turning quickly to* **LOLLY***)* So, Lolly, how are you enjoying sunny California?

LOLLY. *(seeing her opening:)* It is just so wonderful, Mr. Hearst. The more I see the lovely people who populate it, the more I'm reminded of the need for a columnist –

HEARST. You know, Lolly, the first rule of California living, as Marion keeps reminding me, is not to mix business with pleasure. I don't do it and I don't like my guests to do it. Now, you were saying?

LOLLY. I was saying that you have truly invited a boat full of the most interesting people I've ever met in any one place.

HEARST. See, Charlie? That's why I hired her: even with a gun at her head she still gives me unconditionally rave reviews. *(***LOLLY** *smiles as* **HEARST** *laughs heartily.)* Well, guns at our head aren't so bad. Keeps the blood flowing.

CHAPLIN. As long as no one pulls the trigger.

*(***HEARST** *thinks a beat and then bursts into a thunder roar of laughter. Several of the guests notice.)*

MARION. What are you laughing about down there?

LOLLY. It was the funniest thing ever! All about a gun at my head and the trigger going off!

*(***LOLLY** *screams with laughter. The rest of the guests stare at her with polite smiles, but no laughter.)*

ELINOR. Well, I suppose you had to be there.

MRS. GOODMAN. Guns and triggers – such violence!

CELIA. All in line with Madame Elinor's California Curse.

LOLLY. California Curse? What's that?

MARION. Oh not that nasty thing. Not now.

CHAPLIN. Yes, Elinor, do educate the visitor in our midst.

ELINOR. Well, Lolly dear, The California Curse strikes you like a disease the moment you arrive in Hollywood, so pay close attention.

LOLLY. *(enraptured)* I am, I am.

ELINOR. You see, Lolly, this place you've arrived in, this place we call home, is not a place at all…but a living creature.

MRS. GOODMAN. A living creature?

ELINOR. More precisely – an evil wizard. Like in the old stories.

LOLLY. And you all…live on him?

CELIA. Like fleas on the belly of a mutt.

ELINOR. Exactly. Except unlike a helpless dog, this Evil Wizard is able to banish the true personalities of those whom he bewitches, forcing them against their will to carry out his command, to forget the land of their

birth, the purpose of their journey, and whatever principles which they may have once held dear.

DIDI. Don't forget about the symptoms of the disease – that's my favorite part!

ELINOR. You know the curse is taking hold if you experience the following symptoms: you see yourself as the most important person in any room; you accept money as the strongest force in nature; and, finally, your hold on morality…vanishes without a trace.

*(***ELINOR***'s recitation stops the table conversation dead in its tracks.* **HEARST** *is extremely uncomfortable.)*

CHAPLIN. Well, thank goodness none of *us* have been infected, eh, W.R.?

*(***HEARST** *doesn't know how to respond. Sensing the tension,* **MARION** *jumps up.)*

MARION. Charleston, Everybody!

(From offstage, the ever-ready band strikes up a rousing Charleston. The guests welcome the digression and leap to their feet to dance. **MARION** *grabs* **HEARST**.*)*

MARION. Come on, Pops, let's show 'em how it's done.

(She pulls him to the dance floor. He makes a valiant effort, but his size prevents him from looking graceful.)

*(***DIDI** *charms* **WILLICOMBE** *into a dance.* **MARGARET** *turns obligingly to* **GEORGE**. **LOLLY** *dances alone… embarrassingly.)*

*(***HEARST** *stops dancing, out of breath but smiling, putting his arm out to* **MARION**.*)*

HEARST. I'm tired. Let's sit.

MARION. Sit? I want to pound my feet so hard the Devil will complain!

*(***MARION** *breaks away in a joyous twirl, grabbing* **DR. GOODMAN** *and Charlestoning with boundless energy.)*

*(***CHAPLIN** *sees his opening and cuts in, filled with equal youthful vigor and trademark grace.)*

*(***HEARST** *watches, his gaze getting stonier and stonier as, conversely, his guests become more and more carefree.* **INCE** *stands at the sidelines, noticing all that is going on between* **HEARST**, **MARION**, *and* **CHAPLIN**.*)*

(The lights slowly fade to darkness.)

Scene 4

(Two beds are set up symmetrically, one at stage right representing Marion's State Room, the other at stage left representing Margaret's State Room.)

(Center is **HEARST** *at the wheel of the ship, staring out over the audience as he steers. The lights will rise and fade on* **HEARST** *as indicated throughout, but he should always be in some sort of partial illumination.)*

(As the lights come up, **MARION**, **ELINOR**, **CHAPLIN**, *and* **DIDI** *are entering Marion's State Room. Unbeknownst to them,* **INCE** *is upstage center, witnessing the entourage enter the room.)*

(The lights are down on **MARGARET***'s State Room.)*

MARION. *(withdrawing a bottle of liquor from under the bed)* Who's first?

DIDI. *(snatching the bottle)* If anyone touches that before I do, I'll give 'em a fat lip.

ELINOR. *(as* **DIDI** *swigs mercilessly)* Who says femininity is dead?

DIDI. *(lowering the bottle)* Marion, you still have the best moonshine in all of California.

CHAPLIN. At Marion's bungalow, every day is Valentine's Day – bottles filled with lust arrive on the hour from her many admirers.

DIDI. Well this one's sure got sex appeal. Who gave it to you?

CHAPLIN. *(providing the pay-off for his premeditated set-up)* Who do you think?

*(***CELIA** *enters the room holding what appears to be a small jewelry box.)*

CELIA. Marion, honey, you didn't tell me I had to provide for these deadbeats.

DIDI. Who are you calling a deadbeat? What have you got there, Celia?

CELIA. It's dope, Didi, okay?

MARION. Will you keep quiet.

DIDI. You had that with you the whole car ride and didn't tell me?

CELIA. Look, honey, W.R.'s parties can be counted on for incredible food, hot music, and great guests, but the old tea-totaller doesn't exactly offer the latest in after-hour delights, no offense Marion.

MARION. *(taking* **CELIA***'s box)* Believe me, I know it all too well. *(noticing* **ELINOR***'s disapproving scowl)* Now, Ellie, you aren't going to be a flat tire about our playtime, are you?

ELINOR. Marion, dear, do as you like. Just don't expect me to join you in such infantile nonsense. *(With that,* **ELINOR** *takes a healthy swig of moonshine.)*

(Lights fade on Marion's State Room and rise on **HEARST** *alone at the wheel, staring dead ahead.* **INCE** *enters the scene behind him. As they talk,* **INCE** *remains right over* **HEARST***'s shoulder, watching the older man's every response as he keeps his eyes fixed beyond the audience, out to sea.)*

INCE. Hello there.

HEARST. Tom, how are you?

INCE. Stuffed! That was some banquet.

HEARST. Wait until tomorrow – Marion's prepared quite a birthday feast.

INCE. Marion is a special woman.

HEARST. Yes, she is.

INCE. You're very lucky to have her.

HEARST. I know that.

INCE. *(a pause)* It's so frightening to love someone in our business, in this town. There are so many men who pray on beauty. Not sincerely, but in cruel ways, just for the conquest. Take a character like Chaplin – a creative genius, but absolutely notorious when it comes to women. I'm sure you've heard about this girl, Lita, his lead actress who collapsed on the set of "The Gold Rush" – she's pregnant with his child and she's sixteen

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