COMEDY FILMS 1894–1954

JOHN MONTGOMERY

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Volume 7

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1954 by George Allen & Unwin Ltd

This edition first published in 2022
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-20971-5 (Set)
ISBN: 978-1-032-21289-0 (Volume 7) (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-21293-7 (Volume 7) (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-26766-9 (Volume 7) (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003267669

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COMEDY FILMS

1894—1954

John Montgomery

Preface by
Norman Wisdom

London
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
RUSKIN HOUSE MUSEUM STREET

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1954

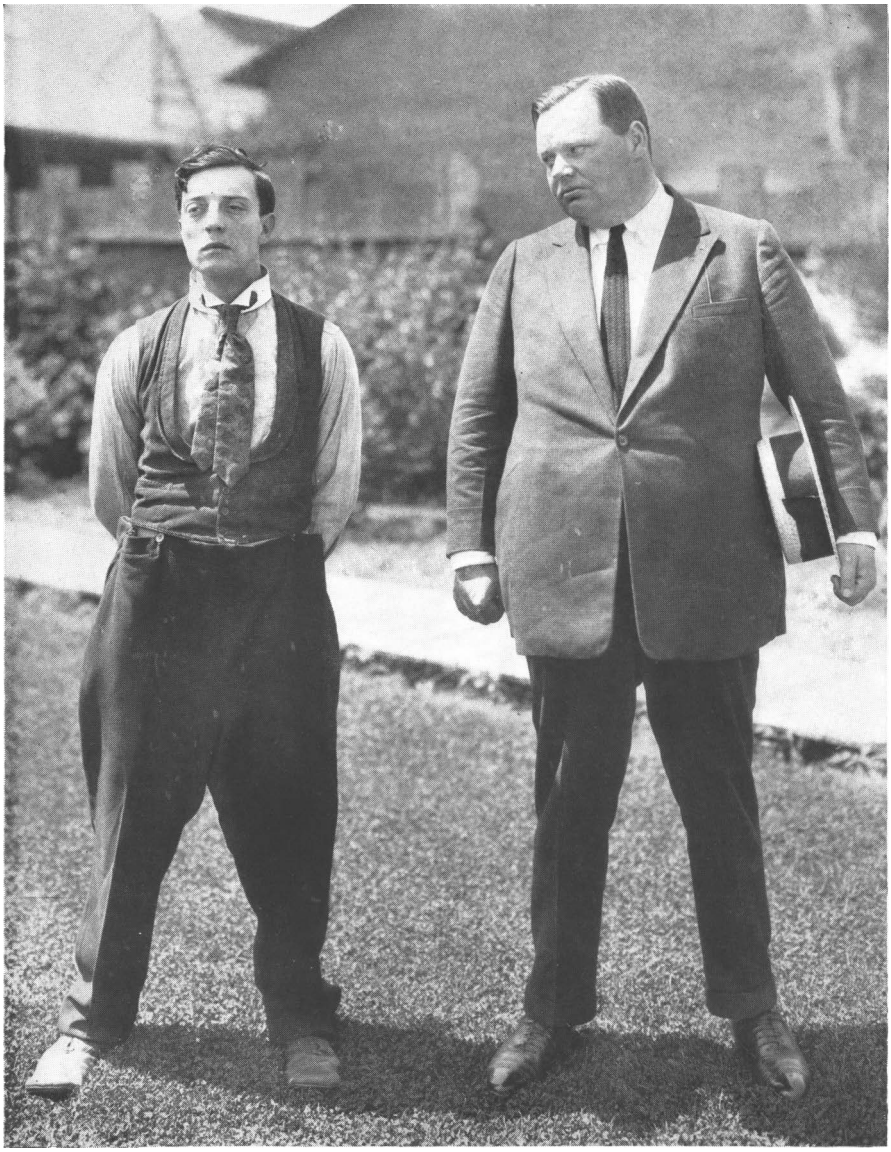
REVISED SECOND EDITION 1968

SBN 04 7910186

Printed in Great Britain
by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks

To

Margot Grahame



1. *Buster Keaton and Roscoe (Fatty) Arbuckle outside the Metro Studios* (1920)

PREFACE

by Norman Wisdom

I FELT HONOURED when, in 1954, I was asked to write the foreword to this book, for I was then very much a new boy in film comedy.

The first comedian I remember seeing on the screen was Eddie Cantor, the wonderful clown with the big eyes and the expressive face. What a comic, I thought! I laughed so much, watching him in a film called *Whoopee*, that I nearly fell off my seat.

I used to creep off on Saturday afternoons to the old Grand cinema in the Edgware Road, where for ninepence I could watch my favourites. There was a wonderful atmosphere in the old Grand, with its hard tip-up seats, its worn red carpet, and the thick grey haze of smoke which hung over our heads like a fog. How I loved going to the pictures. Nowadays I'm lucky if I can find the time to go; but when we were young, we all enjoyed the westerns, the blood-and-thunder action dramas, and the serials. But for me the comedies came first, and I little thought that one day I would be up there on the big screen, trying to make people laugh.

Since I started filming I have been called many things. It's like being back in the army. People call me *pint-sized, rubber-boned, a shy nervous little man, a clown with a whipped-dog expression*, and *Chaplin's successor*. I do not mind being called anything, but not Chaplin's successor. To me Chaplin is unique, and always will be. And in any case, I want to be myself.

In this book the late W. C. Fields is quoted as having once said that film comedy is often too refined. Well, isn't that true? I think audiences still enjoy knockabout, still want to laugh at visual gags and broad slapstick humour. People tell me that they enjoyed my first film *Trouble in Store* because it was good honest knockabout, with a touch of sentiment, and situations which could, after all, happen to any of us—or nearly any of us. We all struggle, and work, and lose our jobs, and hope to get new jobs, and try to succeed. But it seems to me that a little

laughter goes a long way, and that as that great comedienne Gracie Fields says, we must look up and laugh—and keep laughing.

This book is almost a complete history of most of the men and women who have kept the world laughing since the earliest days of films. I think that it is important because there is always a great deal to be learned from the best exponents of any job, and the people in these pages are undoubtedly experts in their not always easy job. The book is a record of many years of endeavour, of successes and sudden triumphs, and of millions of cinemagoers enchanted by their favourites. Between the lines of the story you can read also of the tragedies, the difficulties, the disasters, and the disappointments which we all experience, players and public alike. You will read of unknown players who suddenly became stars overnight, and of famous stars who drifted into obscurity. You will be reminded of names which you may have forgotten, or which you have heard your parents mention. Above all, you will find, as I have, that there is very little new in the entertainment world, very little which has not been done before.

Our job, the first all-important task of all comedians, is to keep you laughing. We hope to add a little humour to a world which is too often unhappy. Turning the pages of this book, I find the names of film comedians who were great stars up there on the silver screen before I was even born. I don't think I am likely to get conceited—I hope not—but if I am ever tempted, a glance at the pages of this book, with all those wonderful names coming up out of the past, will soon bring me back to earth.

Meanwhile I'll just go on, in my own way, trying to make people laugh.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

THIS IS A FACTUAL and not a critical account of the history and traditions of the comic film.

I have tried, within limitations, to cover the subject widely. If I have concentrated mainly on American and British films and players, I have wherever possible paid some tribute to the Continental pictures which have, in both the earlier and later days of the cinema, contributed so much to our entertainment.

Comedy Films was first published in 1954, and the original edition is now out of print. This new edition has been revised, but the period which it covers remains the same, 1894–1954, sixty years of film humour, comedians, producers, directors and their work.

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CHAPTER ONE

The First Comedies

WHAT WAS THE first comedy film? Nobody knows for certain, but it may well have been Fred Ott's *Sneeze*, filmed in 1894 by William K. L. Dickson for Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope Company in the 'Black Maria' Kinetographic Theatre which Dickson had built for Edison in West Orange, New Jersey. Fred Ott was a member of the staff, and his appearance on the little piece of film—sneezing—probably gives him the right to be called the world's first film comedian.

Comic incidents of this kind were no novelty, even on the screen. For many years audiences in American and European towns and villages had enjoyed them in magic lantern shows which were the forerunners of film performances. Usually presented by travelling showmen, they often included moving figures, achieved by ingenious devices.

Fred Ott's *Sneeze* was never intended to be shown on a screen, but had been filmed simply for the Kinetoscope peep-show cabinet which Edison had invented. Although at the close of the century considerable research was being carried out in Britain, France, America, and Germany, in an effort to discover the secret of projected movement, Edison saw no future in projecting figures, and preferred the 'coin in the slot' principle. This had the disadvantage of allowing only one person at a time to view the moving pictures; looking through a narrow slit in a rotating shutter at a continuously running strip of film which moved in front of an electric light bulb, the spectator watched a short comedy sequence or a familiar street scene, filmed by the Edison Company.

Before tracing the history of film comedy from the first sneezing film of 1894 to the modern *Mr Magoo* cartoons it is necessary to know something about the early days of films.

The actual discovery of motion pictures as we know them has been attributed to pioneers in America, France, Britain, and Germany, and is still disputed.

COMEDY FILMS

On February 20, 1896, firms were first publicly projected to an audience in Britain, having already been seen in France. The occasion was the presentation by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière of a performance of their Cinematographe at the Marlborough Hall in Regent Street, London, on the site of the modern Polytechnic. In the first programme there was sandwiched between a short film taken at Lyons and a picture showing the arrival of the mail boat at Folkestone, a brief comic interlude entitled *Teasing the Gardener*. In this a child was seen stepping on a hose. The gardener, looking into the hose, suddenly got wet.

This little film, taken in the Lumières' garden and lasting only a few seconds on the screen, was to set the pattern for millions of feet of celluloid in the years to come, in an endeavour to keep people laughing. Every clown in every comic film was to owe something to *Teasing the Gardener*.

The fun had started. While Felicien Trewey, on behalf of the Lumière brothers, was introducing the programme at the Marlborough Hall, a London instrument maker named Robert W. Paul was demonstrating his Theatrograph projector privately. A few months later he showed his first coloured pictures, hand tinted by a lantern slide colourist.

To feed the Cinematograph, the Theatrograph, and the many rival machines which soon appeared, large numbers of new films were required. At first, familiar scenes and brief incidents were captured by the cameras; the novelty of 'the pictures' was so great that almost anything—a gale at Brighton or a lion at the zoo—was considered entertaining. The first comedies were therefore simple comic incidents enacted either by hired players or friends of the 'film manufacturer.' From the earliest days of the film up to 1910 the average moving picture took from one to fifteen minutes to show. The first films were merely brief glimpses, but people flocked to see the new marvel, to watch the endless parade of familiar scenes and everyday subjects on the screen in a local hall, a converted shop, or a circus side-show tent.

William Friese-Greene's claim to have invented the motion picture has been disputed by the champions of many other pioneers. Birt Acres, Marey, Skladanowsky, Le Prince, the

Lumières, Edison and his English assistant Kennedy Dickson, Robert W. Paul, and many others—all were in fact contributors to the final solution and the development of the invention. In October 1889 Dickson presented to Edison what was probably the world's first 'talkie.' Dickson himself was seen in the new Kinetophone peep-show cabinet, walking across a room and raising his hat, while his voice was heard to say 'Good Morning, Mr Edison. Glad to see you back. Hope you will like the Kinetophone. To show the synchronization I will lift my hat and count up to ten.'

It was four years later that Dickson built the famous 'Black Maria' studio, a dark shed mounted on a revolving platform to catch the sun. And it was here, in 1894, that the mechanic Fred Ott was filmed in his brief comic sneezing episode, a picture which was seen but not heard in hundreds of peep-show machines all over the world.

In June 1895, five months after the first Lumière show in France, Thomas Armat of Washington discovered the principle of modern film projection, and successfully demonstrated an improved machine at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in the following September. The films which he used were those issued by Edison for his peep-show, and his projector was afterwards called the Vitascope. Soon afterwards Armat showed his pictures at Koster and Bial's music hall in Herald Square, New York, including in his programme two of Lumière's films, *Mammy Washing Her Child*, and *Teasing the Gardener*. In the same year Max Skladanowsky exhibited a programme of films at the Winter Gardens, Berlin.

In 1896 Bert Bernard took the first film of the Lord Mayor's Show in London, and a year later he filmed about 1,200 feet of stock during the passing of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Procession. This film was exhibited for five months at the Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square, by Robert W. Paul, who started showing pictures at this famous theatre in 1896. Paul's rivals were at the Empire and the Palace, and he was constantly seeking novelty in his programme, to beat his competitors. Often he went out into the streets or the countryside to photograph everyday events and 'actualities,' which were the forerunners of the elaborate modern film and television newsreels.

Paul made film history by filming the Derby at Epsom and showing his film that same night at the Alhambra.

Topical subjects were easy to find, but what were called 'the comics'—the humorous items—required more care and attention. As people had grown accustomed to the novelty, so the comic items had to be longer. It was no longer enough to show a brief picture of a man falling into a lake. Audiences were beginning to ask 'Well, what happened to him *after* he came out?' In fact, they demanded to see the further adventures of the unfortunate man. And because Paul was a good showman with plenty of ideas he hit on the happy notion of making short comedy films on top of the flat roof of the Alhambra. With the aid of some of the scenery from the stage, and a few members of the cast and some friends, he filmed a whole series of comedy subjects high above the noisy traffic of London. The plots were thin, but the laughs were loud, and one of his first successes was *The Soldier's Courtship*, filmed in 1896, only two years after Mr Ott's simple *Sneeze*. In this comedy a soldier and a nursemaid were discovered sitting on a park bench—the roof of the Alhambra being slightly disguised. The courting couple were suddenly interrupted by the arrival of an old lady, who sat down on the seat and began to edge them off the end. The soldier and the girl, finding no space left, then rose suddenly and tipped the seat so that the old lady fell heavily onto the ground with the seat on top of her.

The whole incident was filmed without a break, the camera being set up in front of the performers as though a stage play was being filmed. Even in its infancy the film had little respect for old age, but this hilarious effort no doubt caused much laughter, for no one had seen anything quite like it before.

Paul's contract at the Alhambra had originally been for a fortnight, after which the management presumed the novelty of the animated pictures would die, leaving a space in the programme for another variety act—perhaps a Swedish acrobat or a flame swallower. However, Paul stayed on for four years, and with the help of Sir Augustus Harris of Drury Lane gave performances at Olympia and in many London theatres and music halls. Soon the Alhambra roof became cramped, and a 'stage' for filming was erected at New Southgate. Here comedies, tragedies, melo-

dramas, and many trick or 'magic' subjects were produced, to confound and delight the millions who were now flocking to see the new wonder of the age.

As early as 1899 Paul's studio was equipped with a camera trolley, a moving stand fitted with wheels, on which the camera could be moved to achieve tracking and zooming scenes, although for some further fourteen years the static camera was generally used both in Europe and America.

*

Film shows were first given in music halls, circus and fair booths, converted shops and public halls. Later came the Bioscopes, the Electric Theatres, and then the Picture Palaces, with their bright lights, their red plush seats and their smell of stale tobacco. Much later came the cinemas. In the early days of the century 'going to the pictures' was quite an ordeal, and was regarded as hardly a suitable pastime for a well-brought-up girl.

It was France, Italy and Britain—not America—who first led the comedy race. By 1903 comedy was playing an important part in every programme, and at the Egyptian Hall in London Mr Neville Maskelyne was delighting audiences with a special comedy show made up of short films taken in Britain and France. Raymond's Bio-Tableaux was touring Britain, presenting shows to packed halls, and there was seldom a month when two or three travelling showmen did not visit each town, complete with a programme lasting from thirty to forty-five minutes, but often less—for another audience had to be packed into the hall as soon as possible.

Typical of the brief comic films which these showmen presented was *The Short-Sighted Cyclist*, in which an unfortunate man, being unable to see much further than his nose, collided with everyone and everything in his path, finally ending up in the village pond. A comedy of this type, together with some scenes of the fleet at Weymouth, a horse race, the launching of a liner, and a glimpse of railway engines being cleaned at Swindon, would probably complete the act in a music hall, where the Mammoth Bioscope Show would be at the top of the bill. Later, when motion pictures were no longer a novelty, films dropped

to the bottom of the bill and remained there merely as 'chaser outs' between performances.

When it was realized that each film should have a theme, and be a sequence of events telling a story or relating action, the comic films began to develop a craziness of their own. A man would be seen running wild—perhaps in a nightshirt—dashing downhill on roller skates, through barrels and past dray carts and cabs, miraculously avoiding danger, while the audience gasped a series of 'Oooooohhs!,' knowing that soon he would finish up in the lake, or in a bin of flour, oil, soot, molasses, glue, paint, dough or treacle. These were the 'chase comic' films, which are still with us today, with variations.

As the film was no respecter of old age or dignity, audiences soon became used to the hilarious spectacle of the infirm, the blind, the rich, and the poor (but more especially the rich and haughty), the parson, and the policeman—all being caught out in ridiculous circumstances. Mothers-in-law now found themselves not only on the stage, but also on the screen. Elderly gentlemen with ear trumpets now became the object of ribald mirth, for could not all the flour, oil, soot, molasses, etc., be poured down the ear trumpet? The misfortunes of others were from the first infant flickerings a cue for hearty laughter, as absurdity was piled on top of absurdity. Meanwhile the hazards of the chase included animals, the lame and the halt, the drunk and the sober, the pursued and the pursuer. The heroine's gouty uncle, chasing the hero, would receive little sympathy either in the film or from the audience. He would almost certainly end up with his gouty foot firmly stamped on and his niece stolen from him; and he could consider himself lucky to escape the dreaded flour, oil, soot, molasses, and other devilish ingredients of the average comedy.

While these light-hearted 'comics' were being 'manufactured' (as the film trade said) in America, Britain, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Holland, many of the more advanced humorous pictures were being made in France, where a whole team of versatile stage clowns was engaged in making films. Onesyme, Dranem, Polycarpe, Bourbon, Zigoteau, Bataille, Marcel Levesque, Little Moritz, and Boncot were among the comedians whose films were exported in hundreds, to delight

audiences who did not care—and often did not know—which country was entertaining them. Many of the funniest were from France and Italy. André Deed was one of the world's first knock-about film comedians, starring in Itala Films, and known in Britain as 'Foolshead'. His comedies combined chase, tricks, and slapstick of every description. Tweedledum, Polidor, Bloomer (domestic farce) and Tontolini (chase comic) were all Italians, and were in their day the most popular of film comedians. Gaumont of France had Calino, Simple Simon, and Leonce making one-reelers before 1914, and in England their midget comedian Bout-de-Zan scored an immediate success, and was christened 'Tiny Tim' by his London sponsors. Named after a stick of liquorice popular with French children, he appeared to be a child, but was really a dwarf of advanced years. In *Bout-de-Zan as an Author* he was seen writing a love letter on behalf of his nurse. Having substituted the time of 8 a.m. for 8 p.m. he caused a fireman to arrive at the house to see the nurse early in the morning, instead of at night. Answering the door, the terrible infant told the fireman to hide in the cellar, where a coal merchant dumped sacks of coal on him.

Charles Prince—known as Rigadin—was another early French comedian with international appeal. In Italy he was called Tarfutini, and in Britain he was 'Wiffles'. His entry into Pathé Frères' comedies had been accidental. Stopping to watch a film being made in a street outside Paris, he had been accosted by a gentleman who had said 'Excuse me, but I am Le Metteur de Scene of Pathé Frères. I am just filming a comic scene, and, if you will forgive my saying so, I have been watching you for some time. I must say that you have a wonderfully funny face—and I wonder if you will do me a favour. Will you let me film you for this one scene?'

Monsieur Prince, who had no knowledge of acting, and no particular ambition to become a film actor, shortly afterwards signed a contract with Pathé, and was for many years his country's leading film comedian.

The French comics were versatile. Dranem appeared in his first pictures as a detective, a lady's maid, a drunk, a porter, a dude, a policeman, an old woman, and a negro minstrel. Many of the films contained trick photography, which caused

characters to disappear into thin air, tables to dance, the floor to swallow up the furniture, and old ladies to turn into mice and be chased by cats. It was Georges Méliès from the theatre Robert-Houdin in Paris who was the pioneer of this trick photography. He had started in 1896 to film scenes in and around Paris, and one day he found that he could not wind his camera. The film was jammed. So he cleared it, and continued to take pictures. When his film was developed he found to his surprise that the omnibus which he had first filmed had now turned into a hearse. It was a droll joke, but the explanation was simple, for while his camera was jammed the omnibus had been replaced in the street by the hearse, and had been photographed.

Intrigued by the possibility of developing tricks of this kind, Méliès began to experiment. By 1900 he had made over two hundred 'mystery' films, each a few minutes long. They were a great success all over Europe and America, where they were widely copied. People were fascinated to watch objects vanish, humans become animals, men falling into pieces, folk walking about holding their heads in their hands, and portly gentlemen flying through space with the greatest of ease, only to vanish in mid air.

A director in the same tradition was Zecca, who joined Pathé Frères in 1895 as a commentator for gramophone records, before turning to film acting and finally to directing. His *Fun After the Wedding* (1907) was a series of brief comedy sketches, gently laughing at a French suburban wedding.

While French comedians were invading British screens, English producers were not idle. In 1879 James Williamson had founded Williamson Films at Hove, Sussex, and was soon making topical and comedy subjects. In his little glass roofed studio near to Hove station he made many 'comics'. *Why the Wedding Was Put Off* was one, and *Hi! Hi! Stop!* was another —a chase comic. *The Clown Barber* (1899) featured a barber who wielded a dangerous-looking razor with awful results, cutting off a customer's head, whereupon the barber left the headless man sitting in the chair while he completed the shaving of the head on a table. His head being replaced, the customer rose, politely paid the bill, and left.

Williamson was introduced to films by George Albert Smith,

one of the most important of Britain's film pioneers, who invented the first commercially successful colour system, called Kinemacolor, which was patented in the United States. Smith rented part of St Ann's Well gardens, a public park, in Hove, where he built a stage on theatrical lines and filmed many comic and trick films from about 1899 until after the 1914 war. His *Miller and Sweep* (1913) was filmed outside a windmill, long since gone, near Brighton race course, and it was widely copied. Another early Hove film-maker was Esme Collings, who produced little pictures in his back garden and around 1896 filmed an early strip-tease subject, *Victorian Lady in Her Boudoir*, which is preserved by the British Film Institute. This was listed as suitable only for gentlemen's smoking concerts, but by modern standards can only be described as dull. Yet, in its time, it created quite a sensation.

*

In the story of the pioneers few names stand out more than that of Léon Gaumont, who in 1890 was a prosperous electrical engineer and optical dealer in Paris, with no vision of the great film empire which he was to create. Naturally interested in all photographic developments, he was attracted by experiments being carried out by Dr E. J. Marey and G. de Demeny at their physiological laboratory near Paris. Dr Marey was a physicist, and founder of the Marey Institute. His method of analysing movement was similar to that of Muybridge, for he used successive photographs on glass plates. In 1891 Demeny designed a projector to portray photographs in motion on a screen, at first using a revolving glass disc, and later an endless band of celluloid film. He called his machine the Chronophotographic projector, and it was his development which appealed to Gaumont and which brings him into our story. He set to work to make, at first in a small way, the camera and projector to which he gave the name 'Chrono'. From this small beginning was to spring the vast Gaumont Company, with its branches all over the world.

The first company was called La Société des Etablissements Gaumont, and the trade mark was a sunflower bearing in the

centre the word 'Elge'. Today the sunflower remains as the Gaumont trade mark.

The first 'Chrono' projector was taken to London by Gaumont himself. In Paris in 1896 he had met Mr (later Colonel) G. C. Bromhead, and had been fired with the idea of developing a business in England, with Bromhead as his representative. In September 1898 Gaumont opened his London office at 25 Cecil Court, Charing Cross Road. He had one table, a chair, and a modest stock of photographic material. The assistant was T. A. Welsh, later to become general manager and secretary, and in 1918 partner to George Pearson in the famous producing firm of Welsh-Pearson. From such humble beginnings were fame and fortune to emerge.

Gaumont soon became well known, mainly through the mechanical perfection of his projector, which was one of the first to possess enclosed spool boxes for holding the film. It is no secret that this one projector really founded the fortunes of the Gaumont company, for it was fireproof, and there was no law until 1909 regulating the licensing of cinemas and the provision of safety measures.

In 1899 Gaumont started filming in England. A plot of land was rented at Loughborough Junction, and on this open space a wooden platform or 'stage' was built for the taking of animated pictures. Arthur Collins, of Drury Lane Theatre fame, was the stage manager (director) and the first Gaumont film player was a coster from the Old Kent Road, named Mike Savage. He appeared in the first comedy, *The Fisherman's Mishap*, and amongst other pictures which Collins produced with Bromhead were *The Pickpocket, Napoleon and the English Sailor* and *Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight*. The cost seldom exceeded five pounds a picture, and quite a number of copies of each film were printed for sale. In those days America was buying large numbers of films from Europe, and out of 200 copies of *The Gordon Highlanders in Cairo* (eighty feet) one hundred were resold to America by an enterprising purchaser.

Wardour Street, the present centre of the British film distributing trade, was still the home of antique furniture shops. It was in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road, that the pioneer companies were established. Soon Cecil Court became called

'Flicker Alley'. Today, all the old firms who were there have either vanished or grown too big for such humble offices, and Wardour Street has lost its antique shops and become rich, with imposing concrete buildings whose large glass windows are bright with gaudy advertisements.

In 1904 a photographer named James Porter and a steward named Frank Lloyd were charged at Lambeth Police Court with causing an obstruction through taking cinematograph photographs—a unique case. Bromhead and Collins were also summoned, for aiding and abetting. A large crowd had assembled in Crampton Street, Newington, where Porter stood in the middle of the road with his camera, filming a tableau in the street. Lloyd, according to the evidence, was dressed as a police sergeant. Collins was 'stage managing' the production, and Bromhead was manager of the cinematograph company.

The making of the film had been interrupted by the unexpected appearance of a *real* policeman, who had taken one look at the scene—and noted the bogus police sergeant—with the result that the parties now found themselves explaining matters to Mr Hopkins, the magistrate.

MR HOPKINS: I do not see how this sort of thing could be done in the London streets.

MR BROMHEAD: We have often done it with the co-operation of the magistrates. At Worthing and other places the J.P.s have assisted us.

MR HOPKINS: Here, you see, you have got a sort of play going on with a sham sergeant of your own.

MR BROMHEAD: We certainly do not cause such a large crowd as the Salvation Army.

MR HOPKINS: I see what this is coming to. The next thing we shall have will be a motor accident in Piccadilly for the purpose of being taken on the cinematograph, and brought out at the Empire the same evening. Plainly, it can't be done in London.

Bromhead and Collins were each fined ten shillings and two shillings costs, and Lloyd and Porter were discharged.

At Loughborough many famous stars of the music halls appeared on the open air stage to perform for the Gaumont

Company. Harry Lauder sang 'I Love a Lassie', 'Stop Your Tickling, Jock', and other popular songs for the Gaumont 'Chronomegaphone', a primitive 'talkie' system which synchronized film with a gramophone record. Herbert Darnley, a song writer and the author of many sketches for Dan Leno, Fred Kitchen, and Fred Karno, was another who mimed in front of the camera for these novelty films.

The celebrated 'Doctor' Walford Bodie, who modestly described himself as 'The Earth's Greatest Ventriloquist, Hypnotist, Electrician, and Scientist', also appeared for Collins. He was then proprietor of Bodie's Empire Palace, Macclesfield, where he gave his own film shows as part of the bill.

In 1908 Victoria Monks, the idol of the music halls, popularly known as 'John Bull's Girl', sang and danced to the tune of her current song sensation 'Take Me Back to London Town', on flickering screens all over Britain.

Léon Gaumont himself toured the world, filming as he travelled. With his son Charles as sound engineer for the 'Chronomegaphone' he photographed native dances and tribal life along the Ganges, and went in turn to Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi.

By 1904 the talking machine had become the improved 'Chronophone'. *The Talking Machine and Cinematograph Chronicle*, an early film trade journal, reviewed it in detail:

The Gaumont Chronophone was shown at the Grand, Fulham, recently. It was an invitation exhibition and was enthusiastically received by a large audience. A negro laughing song met with a big reception. Other examples included Carl Nebes's song from *Lohengrin*, and the drilling of a squad of German soldiers. This last was excellent, the word of command from the officer synchronizing perfectly with the movements of the men in response. The crowd on the racecourse was also highly humorous and provocative of much laughter. In every case the movements of the actors in the scenes synchronized with the sounds of their voices in the most natural manner possible. We anticipate a large measure of success for the Chronophone over here, now that it has been once introduced. We understand that the records and machines were supplied by the Gramophone Company.

The production was simple. First a wax disc was made, after which the singer was filmed in the act of singing the song, miming the words to the sound of the record. Soon the gramophone records of George Robey, Max Darewski, R. G. Knowles, Clarice Mayne, and Will Evans were added to the list. Mr Oswald Stoll described the process as 'the perfect illusion of life'. To millions who flocked to see the novelty, it brought pleasure.

In 1907 the Gaumont Company announced that although Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* was banned in Britain (for fear of upsetting the Japanese), the Lord Chamberlain had ruled that certain excerpts were permitted and could be 'displayed without let or hindrance'. Six short films featuring the most famous songs from *The Mikado* were therefore made for the 'Chronophone'. The ban referred to the stage production only, and was eventually lifted after it had been pointed out that Japanese audiences were laughing heartily at *The Mikado*.

By 1908 Gaumont had 500 employees in Britain, owned an open-air studio at Dulwich Hill, a factory and laboratory in St James's Street, and offices in Sherwood Street and Denman Street. The London Hippodrome presented the 'Chronophone' for 628 performances, and the Royal Family were given a special showing at Buckingham Palace, where the audience included the King and Queen of Spain, the Kaiser, the King of Siam, and the Czar and Czarina. In 1909 Gaumont produced his first American 'Chronophone' on similar lines.

The music hall was still the home of films, both in Britain and America, but the Gaumont 'talkies' were so popular that they were invariably at the top of the bill. Famous stage artists had for a time to take second place. But on May 23, 1906, London witnessed the opening of one of Britain's first continuous film theatres. The little building was situated opposite Liverpool Street station, and the announcement of the opening included a verse which shows the importance of comedy films in programmes of the time:

> To the world the world we show,
> We make the world to laugh,
> And teach each hemisphere to know
> How lives the other half.
>
> Elge.

The verse might in later years have been Chaplin's, but the signature was Léon Gaumont's way of writing his initials. The cinema—although it was not called one—was named the Daily Bioscope, and the manager's name was Salas. On the first day the programme included a hilarious comedy entitled *Lost! A Leg of Mutton!* which was described by the management in glowing terms:

Hungry Willie, who has not tasted food for some days, espies a splendid leg of mutton hanging outside a butcher's shop, and while the master's back is turned he snatches it off the hook and bolts down the street. The fun now commences, and the chase which ensues is one of the funniest yet produced. New obstacles are introduced and the subject is one long laugh from beginning to end. A screaming comedy!

A show at the Daily Bioscope lasted from twenty to thirty minutes, there was a lounge, and the auditorium was brilliantly decorated in blue and gold. Every day from noon to 9 p.m. the prices of admission were twopence and fourpence.

Gaumont's offerings in 1907 included *Father Buys a Ladder,* would could be bought outright for eight pounds, and *Towser and the Tramp* (£4 14s 6d). There was also an announcement which must have attracted many film showmen:

A thing that has been looked for and produced by us as a fitting and first class subject for the finish of picture shows. We have been to some trouble to produce such a subject and we are now successful in having turned out a beautiful picture beautifully coloured

GOOD-NIGHT

The very thing to put an artistic and pleasing finish to a picture show of any kind. Tasteful, artistic, original, pleasing. 20 feet. Price 10s.

The colouring of such announcements, as was the case with silent films for years to come, was usually achieved by hand-tinting. As the word GOOD-NIGHT appeared on the screen, flooded in red, blue, and green, the audience filed out and the pianist played the last rousing march of the evening.