

# O Little Man, What Next?

## MONSIEUR VERDOUX

(Chaplin—United Artists)

**V**ERDOUX is here and the Great Controversy is in full swing, but on the strength of one viewing and a bare twenty-four hours of meditation one hesitates, even recoils, at the demand for a final judgment. Indeed, after the millions of words (so many of them long ones) which have already been written about *Verdoux*, what I have to say can come only as a relatively monosyllabic footnote. And, let me be honest about it, a rather sad one.

Ask me why I am sad, and I would be almost as hard-pressed as Antonio for an answer. But the truth of the matter is that I am haunted by a pathetic little ghost in baggy pants and a bowler hat. *Monsieur Verdoux*, I am afraid, is haunted by him too.

Let it be conceded without qualification that *Verdoux* is a great film, that it is (if you will) the most significant film since 1940 because Chaplin remains the most significant figure on the screen. Let us recognise the genius that wrote,

composed, produced, directed and acted, and praise the honesty that spares us nothing. And having praised and wondered, what remains to us save an undefined regret? It is, I suspect, what one feels about *Verdoux*—not what one thinks—that counts.

Already there has been more than enough high-gear thinking. The Freudians and the Symbolists have made a field-day of it. They have seen through the brisk mannerisms of the little bank-clerk turned murderer, and deep into the turbid currents of his subconscious. They have classified his neuroses and card-indexed the pattern of his behaviour, split his personality and left him, neatly pinned out on the laboratory bench, to dry.

But a simpler, a comparatively superficial view, seems more appropriate. *Verdoux* is still the Little Man with whom we have become so familiar over the years. True, he has not only become articulate, he has prospered. The cane has gone, and the seedy bowler has been replaced by a smart homburg, and the trousers are no longer bagged. There are, however, the same mannerisms, the same attitudes, the same senti-

**BAROMETER**

Fine: "Monsieur Verdoux."  
Fair: "Frieda."  
Mainly Fair: "Holiday Camp."

mentalities—a crippled wife and a small son take the place of a blind flower-girl as the helpless objects of his devotion. In one respect only is there any real change. Where before he was the sport of an impersonal Society, now he has gone over to the offensive. And however true it may be that economic circumstances make villains of us all, this is the change I found hardest to accept. If I could believe that this was schizophrenia I would, but I am sure that was the last thing Chaplin intended.

But while we may rule out such an emotional objection, there are still intellectual criticisms which may legitimately be made. With all his genius, Chaplin has not been able to harmonise all the conflicting elements in the film. Satire and sentiment, art and morality do not mix however briskly they may be whisked together, and the slapstick, so deftly handled—such smoothly polished slapstick, too—does once or twice get slightly out of control.

On the whole, though, it is an astonishing performance. From the organisation of the material down to the last eloquent twitch of the attenuated moustache there is a quality of neatness

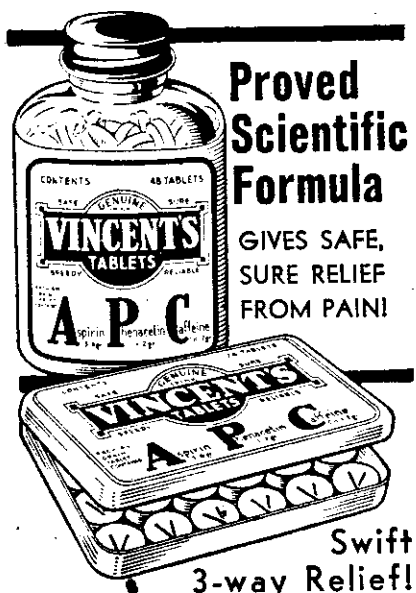
and economy which is all of a piece with Monsieur Verdoux himself. If this is not Chaplin's best film—and I do not think it is—at least it is his most ambitious, his most exacting performance. It also proves that he is almost as good an actor as he was a clown—almost, but not quite, and within the narrow limits of that difference I find room for a world of regret. I know that it is unfair to deny the artist room to grow, and illogical to try and put the clock back, but Chaplin, who has so often appealed to our hearts rather than our heads, can hardly complain if our emotions now colour our judgment.

## FRIEDA

(Rank—Ealing Studios)

**I** FOUND this British picture interesting for what it attempted but disappointing in its lack of accomplishment. It starts off boldly enough to tackle the problem of war-guilt as it touches the individual German, in this particular instance a young girl—a D.P. who has helped a British flying officer to escape from prison-camp as the Russians storm through Poland in 1945. In an access of gratitude for her help, the airman marries her (she needs the protection of a British passport) and brings her home to England with him.

Now, if the story had been allowed to develop from this point along relatively simple lines something worth-



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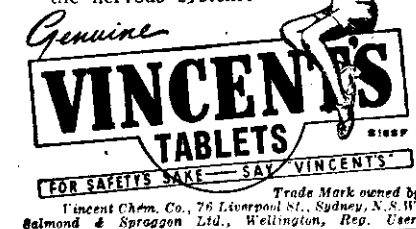
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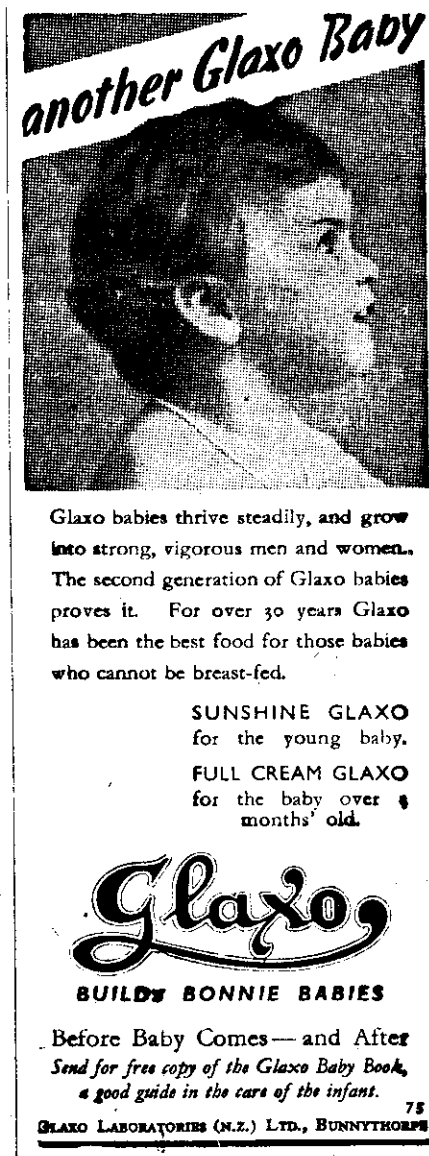
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