

THE CAMERAMAN (1928)

On October 12, 1927, *Variety* published news of Buster Keaton's departure from United Artists, framed in such a way as to imply the move was being made at his own behest. The headline had him "angling" for a four-year contract, which would mark his "return" to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. "No reason is set forth for Keaton leaving UA," the item continued. "It may be that Chaplin felt he should be the only screen comedian to provide releases for that organization."

When he arrived at M-G-M, Keaton was greeted with story ideas prepared at the orders of Irving Thalberg. One proposed to team Keaton with Marie Dressler, whose *Tillie's Punctured Romance* had convinced a teenaged vaudevillian there was more to film comedy than custard pies and car chases. Another cast the Keaton character as a tintype photographer who aspires to be a newsreel cameraman after observing one preparing for the arrival of a VIP. Buster manages to shoot film of a gun battle between cops and gangsters, and all the companies bid for it. An organ grinder's monkey is introduced when a drunk hands the animal a heated penny, and Buster treats the injury, making a friend for life.

"I wasn't in trouble enough tryin' to manipulate a camera as a cameraman," Keaton said, "tryin' to photograph current events as a news weekly cameraman.... [Thalberg] wanted me involved with gangsters because I photographed somethin' they didn't

want me to photograph, and then to get in trouble with this one and that one, and that was my fight--to eliminate those [extra things].” Working in consultation with director Ed Sedgwick, and Clyde Bruckman, Keaton oversaw the creation of a full continuity, some 140 pages in length, which began with Charles Lindbergh’s steamer being escorted by a fleet of harbor craft into its New York dock, Buster among the crowd waiting to get a photo with his old-fashioned outfit.

“It’s the simplest story you can find,” Keaton said, “which was always a great thing for us if we could find it. I was a tintype cameraman down at Battery Park, New York. Ten cents a picture... I saw the Hearst weekly [newsreel] man and a script girl with him [at the tickertape parade] that I got one look at and fell hook, line, and sinker. Well, immediately I went down and sold my tintype thing to a second-hand dealer and bought a second-hand motion picture camera. And of course I get one of the oldest models there was—a Pathé. And I went to the Hearst offices... and they got one look at me and my equipment and sez, ‘No.’ The girl saw me make the attempt, and she says, ‘There’s only one way you can do anything. You gotta go out and photograph somethin’ of interest. And if they see it and they can use the film you shoot, they’ll buy it from you. And if you can do that more than once, then they’ll put you on as a member of the [team].’”

The monkey comes into it when Buster accidentally trips and falls on him, and a cop makes him compensate the organ grinder for apparently killing the animal. He is, however, only stunned, and Buster is now his owner. Together they film a tong war in Chinatown, an inventive and colorful replacement for the police shootout with gangsters. The script was still considered incomplete when Keaton and Sedgwick, under pressure from the front office, committed to location work in New York.

— James Curtis, *Buster Keaton: [A Filmmaker's Life](#)* (Knopf)