The GARBO Mystique

Though she is still shy, sad, itive, secretive and silent, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety."

by Maria Van Slyke

MANY HOLLYWOOD actresses who were stars in the 1930's and '40's have faded from public notice, forgotten or unknown to most of us. Other top talents of by-gone days still appear successfully before the cameras. The names of Gloria Swanson, Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford still draw eager crowds to their latest films at the local theater, even as TV's late-late shows display these glamor queens in their heyday—filmed 20 years ago and more.

These ladies are not simply stars of yesteryear, but stars of today as well. With the talents that first brought them recognition, they have continued to grow in achievement and fame. Their fans appreciate them. Their popularity is explainable.

But there is one Hollywood glamor star of the past who makes no attempt to be a star today, and yet she remains one. She is Greta Garbo. Although it has been 21 years since her last film, Garbo continues to be a major box-office attraction.

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Garbo

Greta Garbo by Cecil Beaton

Last year in London, where five Garbo films were revived—"Ninotchka," "Anna Karenina," "Queen Christina," "Camille" and "Conquest"—the lines were longer than they had been for Elizabeth Taylor's newest epic. Theater men around the world have been reviving Garbo movies with great success—and this includes films that have been shown repeatedly on television. Even more interesting is the fact that the majority of the audiences is made up of persons who were not even born in 1942 when Garbo made her last film, "Two-Faced Woman." And she remains as much a mystery today to her young fans as she has been to those who have always admired her.

The magnetic power that Greta Garbo still generates to attract the avid interest of beatniks, the avant garde, the hootenanny crowd, the jet set and her own contemporaries is not easily explained. Despite the enduring attention that greets her every action, Garbo has done nothing to enhance her popularity. On the contrary, in a profession that stresses publicity, Garbo has discouraged it.

This topmost star never has and still does not sign autographs, answer fan mail, endorse anything at all; she refuses all interviews and behaves as no movie star before or since. Her aloofness used to be so extreme that even Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the studio that had her under contract, did not know her address or telephone number. To reach her they had to call her manager.

And so it is astonishing that this woman who has so guarded her privacy still evinces some quality that touches the hearts of millions of people who know little about her.

Attempting to hide behind her wide-brimmed hat or dark glasses,

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the beautiful Garbo has traveled the world pretending to be someone else. At various times she has hidden behind such "Plain Jane" names as: Harriet Brown, Karin Lund, Emily Clark, Mary Holmquist and Gussie Berger. Her own real name, before she was transformed into Garbo, was hardly more distinctive—Greta Gustafsson.

She is shy, yes. But Garbo has insisted that her most famous remark was misquoted. "I never said 'I want to be alone,'" she recently told a friend. "I only said, 'I want to be *let* alone!' There is all the difference."

Garbo has seldom been literally alone. From the time she left school son's son, producer Frederick Brisson, is now married to Rosalind Russell.) Garbo carved her initials with the actor's inside a heart on his dressing-room door, while pursing him.

Brisson arranged to have her meet his friend, the director Mauritz Stiller. Stiller is credited with inventing Garbo. He gave her an important part in "The Saga of Gosta Berling," directed her every move and, when the picture was released in 1923, the great star was born.

Garbo and Stiller were constantly together. She was completely guided, dominated and almost hypnotized by him. He told her what to wear, what to read, what to think and say. Their co-workers called them "Beauty and the Beast." When Hollywood offered him a fabulous contract, he accepted it only on the condition that his protegee also be signed. Garbo started there in 1925, at $400 a week.

In Hollywood, Stiller's career waned as rapidly as Garbo's zoomed. He returned to Sweden where Garbo promised to join him after she finished making "Flesh and the Devil." But he died shortly after returning home, while Garbo was falling in love with her leading man, handsome John Gilbert. After seeing their torrid love scenes, the public knew they were not merely acting. These scenes led to the formation of the Hays Code, the film industry's attempt to censor its own product.

That Garbo and Gilbert were madly in love is unquestionable.

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Garbo

caricature by Xavier Cugat

Many times Gilbert begged her to marry him; twice he almost succeeded in getting her to the altar. On one of the latter occasions, he bought a $100,000 yacht for them to spend a year honeymooning in the South Seas, only to have her renege.

The second time, hoping to avoid publicity, Gilbert rushed her to Santa Ana, a short way from Hollywood. As they drove up to the license bureau, Garbo bolted from the car into the ladies' room and refused to come out. Hours later she emerged to return alone to Hollywood by train. After that episode the romance faded rather quickly and in 1929 Gilbert married actress Ina Claire.

While in Hollywood, Garbo had brief romances with dashing leading man George Brent and the moody director Rouben Mamoulian. Her closest friends were the Swedish actor, Nils Asther, and his wife; the John Loders; Jacques Feyder, the Belgian director, and his wife and actor-director Emil Jannings.

Away from Hollywood, the great beauty was linked with three of her countrymen. On a trip back to Sweden she met attractive Prince Sigvard, who at twenty-one was two years her junior. When word leaked out that she and the prince had enjoyed a few nights out together, both

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Garbo

American and Swedish papers hinted hopefully at romance. When a reporter asked about it on her return to the United States, Garbo's comment was: "I don't play around with kids."

On that same trip, Garbo also met William Sorensen, the playwright and screen-writer son of a wealthy Swedish industrialist. Sorenson was so smitten with her that he followed her to Hollywood. He was allowed to stay as a guest in her house—a truly rare privilege.

Even though he later moved to a hotel, the two of them spent a lot of time together. And long after the friendship was over, a small bust of him shared honors in her bedroom with a photograph of Mauritz Stiller.

The third Swede was a successful, self-made construction engineer, Max Gumpel. Garbo had first met him before the start of her screen career, when she had been a department-store salesgirl, the daughter of a day laborer. In 1932, her fame world-wide, Garbo remembered him with affection. Back in Sweden, she telephoned him and made an appointment for dinner. When she arrived he was thrilled to see that the only jewelry she wore was a diamond ring he had given her years before.

For some time after that, they were seen together constantly. Eventually, though, Garbo returned to America, ending that episode, too.

Five years later, in 1937, Garbo was involved in a love so romantic that it could have served as one of her film plots.

Leopold Stokowski, the colorful conductor, had arrived in Hollywood to do some movie work. One of his first moves was to ask his friend Anita Loos, author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, to arrange a meeting between him and the world's most famous blonde, Miss Garbo. A friend who watched the romance ripen reported later: "Stokey didn't waste much time with the overture. He told Garbo they were destined to have a history-making romance .... The gods had made their decision. Mere mortals could only obey. It was the direct attack mixed with a little mystical stuff. Mystical stuff made quite a hit with Garbo."

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That same year, Stokowski's second wife, Evangeline Brewster Johnson, obtained a Nevada divorce from the maestro. And Hollywood became accustomed to seeing 32-year-old Garbo and white-haired, 55-year-old Stokowski rhumba-ing around town.

In February of 1938, Stokowski left for Italy, where he leased the beautiful ancient Villa Cimbrone in Ravello, near Naples. Ravello is the same mountainside village that became the focus of newsgatherers again last year when Mrs. Kennedy took Caroline there for a few weeks.

A week after his arrival, Garbo arrived from Sweden, where she had paid a brief visit to her family. After the first few idyllic days of their stay, they were besieged by journalists. This forced them to flee to Garbo's country estate in Sweden, where they had a thousand acres of forest and farmland, a 15-room house on a lake and absolute privacy.

Here they stayed for nearly three months, undisturbed. Then, suddenly, Stokowski returned alone to the United States, refusing to talk to the press, a new first for him. Two months later, Garbo followed. They were never seen together again.

Next in her life came Gaylord Hauser, the dietician who popularized black strap molasses. Garbo met him through friends just before making her first comedy, the merry "Ninotchka." This delightful film was notable for another reason, too. On the set Garbo was completely unlike herself. She was gay, cheerful and so friendly that she even joked with the crew. And completely un-Garbo-like, she went so far as to give an autograph to a teen-age fan. Whether these high spirits were generated by the comedy of "Ninotchka," or by Hauser and his diets, has never been determined.

At any rate, between his lectures and writings, the handsome Hauser was her constant escort in New York, Palm Beach and the Bahamas, as well as Hollywood. To a newspaper friend, Hauser gave an advance story of his marriage to Garbo, to be released when he confirmed ever, for her close friendship with

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the Gunthers, whom she sees frequently in New York. It is said that they have a concealed passageway in their apartment and a code of signal bells so that if she drops by when strangers are there, she can disappear without being seen.

Garbo has lived in New York since 1942. Her apartment, in the 50's, faces entirely on the East River so that no one can look into her windows. The local tradespeople respect her privacy because they know that it behooves them. When they ignore her, they get her business. If they recognize her, she takes her trade elsewhere.

One of Garbo's persistent anxieties has been her health. Her father and sister both died of tuberculosis, as did Stiller. Between daily three-mile walks all over New York, regardless of weather, Garbo renews her strength by spending great stretches of time in bed. A friend of years' standing has said: "Garbo eats most of her meals in bed."

Since she has been in New York, Garbo has been seen with George Schlee, the husband of designer Valentina, who makes many of her clothes. The wealthy Baron Erich Goldschmidt-Rothschild has also been her escort both here and in Europe, as has another tycoon, Aristotle Onassis.

Many of Garbo's long walks take her through Central Park and in and out of antique shops along Second and Third Avenues. She is also an inveterate movie-goer. She often spends hours at the Museum of Modern Art, in a private screening room, watching her own films.

She recently told someone, "Sometimes I put on my coat at ten in the morning and go out and follow people. I just go where they're going. I mill around."

In response to a question about her plans she says: "I have no plans. I'm sort of drifting."

Yet if tomorrow Garbo agreed to make a film, a famous producer has said he would pay her a million dollars plus a percentage. That is equal to what the world's highest-priced star, Elizabeth Taylor, commands. No one is paid more. But Garbo

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does not care.

The eternal mystery of Garbo still persists. One feels that she is waiting for the right moment or the right move or possibly the right man to explain her to herself.

When Garbo first appeared in films, in 1923, it was apparent that a star had been born. In the 40 years since then, dozens of new audiences have been born to acclaim and adulate this unusual lady. In the fickle land of make-believe, she is the most permanent of stars.

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