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Garbo

NOTHING IS AS transitory in Hollywood as fame. In but a few decades, its biggest names are one with Nineveh and Tyre, and this axiom has held true even for the much-publicized pride of MGM. If Joan Crawford is remembered by non-film buffs, it's likely in connection with her adopted daughter Christina Crawford's controversial *Mommie Dearest* memoir and its lurid film version. The last time Norma Shearer was on the cover of a book was in connection with an essay entitled "What Price Widowhood?: The Faded Stardom of Norma Shearer," which lamented "her current relative obscurity." Only Greta Garbo endures. Only Garbo could still truly say, as Norma Desmond proclaims, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." Desmond herself reinforces that notion, saying later in *Sunset Boulevard*, "We had faces. There just aren't any faces like that anymore. Only one: Garbo."

And this attention is not a case of appreciating someone

who was undervalued in her prime. Quite the opposite. Garbo has always been in a category apart, someone critic Kenneth Tynan characterized with the often-quoted line, "What when drunk, one sees in other women, one sees in Garbo sober." And, far from being blasé, it was fellow film professionals who were most impressed. Even as competitive an observer as Bette Davis called her "pure witchcraft. I cannot analyze this woman's acting. I only know that no one else so effectively worked in front of a camera."

Not always remembered in all this deserved fuss is that unlike most stars, Garbo's entire Hollywood output, twenty-four films from 1926 to 1941, was for one studio, and that was MGM. Her career was perhaps the most successful specific example of the intuitive collaboration between Mayer, who signed her and negotiated her contracts, and Thalberg, who guided her career and gained her guarded trust. As Samuel Marx noted, "Thalberg was loyal but rarely emotional; Mayer was emotional but rarely loyal."

Though it was indisputably Mayer, in Europe to deal with the "Ben-Hur" fiasco, who signed the nineteen-year-old Garbo in Berlin in 1924, aspects of the event are complex. For one thing, Garbo was hardly an unknown who needed to be discovered, at least in Sweden. She had been a student in the prestigious Royal Dramatic Theater Academy and appeared in filmed commercials for a Stockholm department store when she was but fifteen, though a cast member complained, Garbo biographer Barry Paris reports, "You're not going to have that fat girl in the picture, are you? She won't fit the screen." Slimmed down, she had been cast at age seventeen in a key role in 1924's epic *The Saga of Gösta Berling*, the longest and most expensive film in Sweden's history.

The film was directed by Garbo's mentor, Mauritz Stiller, and though it's been said that Stiller was Mayer's main target and Garbo was the movie equivalent of a player to be named later,

this turns out to be inaccurate. Mayer, nothing if not tenacious in his pursuit of acting talent, had screened *Gösta Berling* before signing Garbo and, according to Irene Mayer Selznick, was immediately enthusiastic about the actress. "Miss Garbo overcame him in the first reel. It was her eyes . . . the capacity to convey feeling through the eyes. Dad said, 'I'll take Stiller, all right. As for the girl, I want her even more than Stiller. I can make a star out of her. I'll take them both.'" As Louise Brooks put it with a bit more pizzazz, "Looking at Greta Garbo in the Swedish picture *Gösta Berling*, in Berlin, he knew as sure as he was alive that he had found a sexual symbol beyond his or anyone else's imagining."

Whatever big future plans Mayer and Thalberg had for Garbo, they had here-and-now difficulty deciding on a first project for her. She began to learn English, preferable but not essential for Hollywood silent filmmaking; had some Thalberg-suggested cosmetic dentistry; and posed for publicity shots with Leo the Lion. To help her pass the time, Stiller would frequently park her on the set of the Lillian Gish-starring *The Scarlet Letter*, directed by fellow Swede Victor Seastrom and costarring her *Gösta Berling* costar Lars Hanson. "Garbo would sit there, watching," Gish remembered. "She was treated shabbily in her first weeks at Metro, subjected to all kinds of publicity gimmickry, and she is reputed to have said emphatically that, when she was 'beeg like Mees Geesh,' she would no longer tolerate it. 'No more publicity like this; no more posing in bathing suits,' she vowed."

Garbo's first starring role turned out to be 1926's *Torrent*, adapted from a Vicente Blasco Ibáñez novel about the romantic complications of a poor girl turned legendary opera diva. *Torrent*'s director, however, was not Stiller, as both Garbo and he had hoped, but MGM favorite Monta Bell. Garbo, who even at this early stage had an independent streak, considered turning it down, but Stiller convinced her it would be better to forge ahead. He also gave her some pointed advice that, decades later, she repeated verbatim to journalist Sven Broman: "Don't take



A young Garbo posing warily with MGM's Leo the Lion in 1926. Once she became a star, the actress refused all such publicity requests. (Private Collection; © Classic Picture Library/Bridgeman Images)

any notice of other people. Be yourself. Don't try and be like anyone else. Every person is unique. Don't try and be like Norma Shearer."

Torrent also marked the first time Garbo was photographed by cinematographer William Daniels, who ended up shooting nineteen of her films. With Daniels's help, Garbo became "Garbo" almost at once, vaulting with apparent ease into the iconic status she would never relinquish. Thalberg, for his part, never had any doubts, predicting to *Variety* that the film would make her a star. "Louis B. Mayer," the trade publication continued, "can hand himself a few pats on the back for having brought this girl over from the other side."

Though not averse to pats on the back, Mayer always had his mind fixed on the main chance, and even before *Torrent* was released he pushed its star to extend her three-year contract to five. Not for the last time in his business discussions with Garbo, this was not a meeting of the minds. As she herself candidly wrote, "I could never understand what he meant by it. We never said anything about money. He just said he couldn't afford to advertise my pictures and put money into me if I would not sign for five years with them. I had already signed for three years, and why should I sign again when I had not yet a picture—and then when I had only *Torrent*."

Making things worse was the situation with Stiller. He was to be the director of the star's next film, *The Temptress*, but his slow, idiosyncratic method of working soon ran afoul of MGM's increasingly assembly-line-oriented production methods, and after a few weeks the always budget-conscious Thalberg had him replaced. "Mr. Stiller is an artist, he does not understand about the American factories," Garbo recounted laconically. "How I was broken to pieces, nobody knows."

At that pivotal point, John Gilbert entered Garbo's personal and professional life. Performances like *The Big Parade* were making him the country's preeminent romantic lead, and it was not surprising that Thalberg, the prime mover in deciding Garbo's roles, was eager to costar them in something provocatively titled *Flesh and the Devil*. The property was unremarkable, and there are reports that Thalberg once again leaned on his friendship with Gilbert to get him to agree, but what happened between its two stars was incendiary.

Garbo, as it happened, tiring of nonstop vamp roles, was no more enthusiastic than Gilbert was. As Norma Shearer recalled in her memoir, "Miss Garbo at first didn't approve of playing the sophisticate, the exotic woman of the world. She used to complain, 'Mr. Thalberg, I am yust a joong gur-rl!'" Upset as well by the sudden death of her sister, she tried to turn this production

down or at least postpone it, but Mayer insisted that everything proceed on schedule. Stories inevitably differ on how the established star and the rising young talent, eight years apart in age, actually met—one has him enthusiastically shouting out a "Hello Greta" on the MGM lot and she insisting on "Miss Garbo"—but whatever that truth is, once filming began, passion took over.

Flesh and the Devil is yet another bleak romantic yarn about a femme fatale who comes between two best friends though in truth nothing that happens in the plot department registers compared to what transpires early on, when Garbo and Gilbert meet on screen and in real life. Director Clarence Brown, nominally in charge, remembers the scene vividly: "It was the damndest thing you ever saw. It was the sort of thing Elinor Glyn used to write about. When they got into that first love scene . . . well, nobody else was even there. Those two were alone in a world of their own. It seemed like an intrusion to yell 'cut!' I used to just motion the crew over to another part of the set and let them finish what they were doing. It was embarrassing."

These scenes have long been celebrated for their erotic frankness, and we can still feel the powerful chemistry between Garbo's languid sensuality and Gilbert's dynamism that rewarded Thalberg's decision to pair them. As the actor's daughter Leatrice Gilbert Fountain accurately summed up, "You can actually see these two terribly attractive people falling in love with each other on the screen."

It was on this film, director Brown told Kevin Brownlow, that he became aware of what made Garbo one of a kind to him. "I would take a scene with Garbo—pretty good. I would take it three or four times. It was pretty good, but I was never quite satisfied. When I saw that same scene on the screen, however, it had something that it just didn't have on the set. Garbo had something behind the eyes that you couldn't see until you photographed it in close-up. You could see thought. . . . For me, Garbo starts where they all leave off."

Garbo and Gilbert were a couple off-screen as well as on for some months, which provided a publicity and box-office coup for Mayer and Thalberg's studio, which modestly advertised them as "the most sensational pair of screen lovers the world has known" and reaped the benefits. In the exhibitor-written column "What the Picture Did for Me" in *Exhibitors Herald*, the positive response had one caveat: "Greta Garbo does splendid work," wrote a theater in Scottsboro, Georgia, "but she is a bit too hot for the elder people."

The poignant final chapters of the Garbo/Gilbert story do not play out until the sound era, but they were about to become key players in a celebrated contretemps silent film historians still disagree about. Gilbert was apparently given to asking Garbo to marry him, and she was given to refusing. But when Gilbert's friend and *Big Parade* director King Vidor was set to marry actress Eleanor Boardman on September 8, 1926, shortly before *Flesh and the Devil* was to be released, Garbo was apparently persuaded to agree to a double-ring ceremony, "apparently" being the key word.

Aside from the fact that Vidor and Boardman did wed that day in Marion Davies's Beverly Hills home, with Thalberg and Mayer among those present, there is little agreement about what else happened. Gilbert was not in Mayer's favor, having recently proclaimed to the executive that his own mother had been a whore, at which point, according to Samuel Marx, "Mayer leaped at him and knocked him down. Gilbert was lucky to get off the floor intact." In Eleanor Boardman's version of the wedding day, related to Kevin Brownlow, when Garbo did not show up, "Gilbert was getting very nervous, he was getting rather violent. It seems that Mayer was in the men's room with Gilbert and Gilbert was crying about this situation, and Mayer said, 'Sleep with her, don't marry her.' Gilbert socked him and knocked him down and he hit his head on a tile." Added Gilbert's daughter, "After Jack had knocked him down and drawn blood, Mayer said, 'I'll

destroy you.'" Enticing as this story is, Irene Mayer Selznick, among others, says it did not happen and, for a variety of reasons, including Mayer's imposing physicality, could not have happened. Samuel Marx takes a middle ground, reporting that Mayer only "tried to commiserate. But Gilbert was in no mood for kind words and told the studio boss off in explicit terms that Mayer would never forget."

No matter what the cause, Gilbert was indisputably in Mayer's bad graces, not a promising place to be. As for Garbo, increasingly shrewd about contracts and money after, on the advice of Gilbert, retaining the services of his agent/business manager Harry Edington, her next step was to go on strike, an unheard-of activity in an era of increasing studio power.

Unhappy with her roles in addition to her salary, Garbo refused to report for work and Mayer refused to pay her. Her salary maxed out at \$750 a week, and Edington, knowing that Gilbert was earning \$10,000 per week, asked for \$5,000 for Garbo. As the grosses for *Flesh and the Devil* began to mount, so did the pressure on Mayer, the studio's usually unflappable salary negotiator. After seven months, he gave in and Garbo's return was announced in a film she wanted to do, a Frances Marion-written version of Leo Tolstoy's story of passion and sacrifice, *Anna Karenina*, that was called *Love*. It's a tribute to Garbo's power even this early on that a previous version of the picture, then being shot on the MGM lot with different costars and a different director, was scrapped by Thalberg and begun anew with Gilbert as Anna's lover Count Vronsky. (Marion biographer Cari Beauchamp relates the studio wanted to call it "Heat" until Marion pointed out that "Greta Garbo in Heat" was not a good tagline.) "They were tough," Garbo told her grand-nephew Scott Reisberg. "But so was I."

As he had done previously, Mayer insisted that two endings for the story be filmed, one directly from Tolstoy, of Anna ending her life by stepping in front of a train, and a happier one of

Anna and Vronsky reunited after her husband's convenient death. Critics couldn't be bothered to object, and in fact, with few exceptions, nothing Garbo did in her seven succeeding silent films upset them. But though no one realized it, the most cataclysmic of cinematic changes was close by. A little less than two months before *Love's* 1927 premier, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* opened at New York's Warners' Theatre. Like an unwelcome guest at a lavish banquet, sound had arrived.