

Extract from Greta & Cecil Diana Souhami

Throughout April 1946 they met about a dozen times for lunch or tea. On their third meeting she told him that ‘her bed was small and chaste’ and that perhaps now she was getting older, she should settle for some permanent companionship. This, said Cecil, gave him the opportunity for which he had been waiting. He told her that he knew they ‘were made for each other’ and asked her to marry him.

I had never before asked anyone to marry me, and yet to make this proposal now seemed the most natural and easy thing to do. I was not even surprised at myself.

Greta however appeared surprised. She accused him of being frivolous, said that he hardly knew her and should not speak so lightly of marriage. She said he would worry about her melancholy disposition and would not like seeing her in the mornings in old men’s pyjamas. Cecil replied that he too would be wearing old men’s pyjamas. (But that was less than true. Stephen Tennant knew of the glory of Cecil’s own bedroom attire – the speckled silk pyjamas, the leopard-skin dressing-gown.)

When next they met she mentioned a fan letter, sent her by a woman, which said, ‘You have the character of a man, but the body of a woman – blast it!’ Perhaps the irony of a kind of synchrony escaped neither of them – that Cecil paraded the character of a kind of woman, but had the body of a man. It was he who waited anxiously for her call, who prepared his rooms for her visit. It was she who visited and left as and when she pleased.

Cecil tried to bind her to plans – to see a certain play, or the El Grecos in the Hispanic museum, or to eat soft-shell crabs in a downtown restaurant. Her answers were vague and evasive. He had to make do with scrutinising her over tea in his rooms at the Plaza. He noted that she was fairminded, without prejudice, compassionate and that when she put on her hat to leave, she did not look in the mirror.

One afternoon as she was about to leave she said:

I don’t know you from Adam (pronounced Ardhumme) and yet I was quite willing to stay here until breakfast time. That is if you had remained with your head on the pillow beside me like a brother.

Then she asked if she might use the phone and confirmed her arrangements for the evening with Schlee.

Cecil felt sufficiently encouraged to write to his mother and Maud Nelson at the beginning of April telling them he was going to marry Greta Garbo. They laughed and cried over his letter, reached for the whisky bottle and that night could not sleep. Maud Nelson replied, ‘May you find all happiness and fulfilment and may the result be something ever-

lastingly beautiful in your life and heart.’ She warned him though ‘not to go on clinging when the moment arrives, if it should arrive, when you must let go’, advised him not to concentrate too much on ‘the marriage side of things’, and intimated she had friends who knew of Greta’s ‘elusiveness and secretiveness’ as well as her ‘greatness and nobility’.

As for Mrs Beaton, she told her son he was wise enough to know what was best for his future. She expressed the hope that everything would work out for the best and that he would be happy, but she was more interested to know if he was earning any money. ‘I am longing to know what the future will tell for you and your financial side which we can’t make out in any way,’ she wrote to him.

Cecil, the ‘terrible homosexualist’ had chronicled his longing for Peter Watson. This did not curb his ambition to marry Greta Garbo, who was ‘made for the screen’ and who shared his own complex relationship to the camera and to the captured image of beauty. She possessed the beauty he sought to mirror. She had shown, in his favourite film of her, Queen Christina, that though truly regal she was an androgynous Queen. But she was not like his Royal Past where queens were men dressed in the curtains. Nor was she like England’s real Queen – very short and with ‘a face that lacked definition’. For Cecil Greta was the Queen of Queens. Were he to marry her he would be her Duke, the commoner who conquered. Such a marriage would tantalise society and set him above it. Something of her allure might brush off on him and her androgyny free him from any need to be a conventional man.

Though he professed dismay at how ‘like a bushfire’ the gossip about his private life spread through London, it was a bushfire he was at pains to ignite.

It was a friendship that seemed easy, unpressured and even sweet, but on an afternoon in May she stepped into the snare of his ambition. She told him that she proposed going to Sweden for a holiday – her first visit since the war. She was going with Schlee. ‘If only you were not such a grand and elegant photographer...’ she said elliptically. ‘Then you’d ask me to take your passport photograph,’ said Cecil.

He called it the ‘crowning’ of his photographic career. She arrived at the Plaza wearing a biscuit-coloured suit and a polo-necked sweater, her hair a ‘lion’s mane’. He took a few formal pictures for her passport, then prompted her into all sorts of poses – on a chair hugging her knees, lounging on the settee, staring out of the window, clutching a bunch of lilac and a kind of lyre. From his dressing-up box he persuaded her to wear a pierrot’s ruff, a tam-o-shanter, long earrings and a mandarin suit. It was a bewildering sequence of pictures. She kept saying she had had enough and wanted to leave. Cecil tried to appear nonchalant and knew he could use no special lighting and only limited props. Yet here, more than Stephen Tennant or the Queen of England was his alter ego, his mirror image, his dream of beauty, posturing for him and furthering his career.

She had asked him for a passport photo because she felt unable to go to an ordinary photographer. The formal photographs of her were of no particular interest to Cecil. He pre-

ferred it when she began to perform to his camera, wearing his fancy clothes. In what she construed as the privacy of his hotel room they played a strange charade. He controlled the camera and what she wore. Grotesquely costumed she became his buffoon.

He maintained that she pencilled a cross on the back of those contact prints which she agreed he might publish in *Vogue*. He took the pictures to Alexander Liberman, *Vogue*'s art editor, who could hardly believe his eyes. For ten years Greta had refused to be photographed and here was a scoop of pictures of her. Since the 'kikes' saga *Vogue* had been cautious of him and given him fewer commissions. Cecil hoped these photographs would restore his reputation. Liberman wanted to publish one photograph of Greta, laughing, across a double-page spread. Cecil urged him to publish fourteen. They were to appear in the August issue when she was in Sweden.

On 1 June Cecil sailed for England to design, for Frederick Ashton, a ballet based on Ouida's novel *Moths* starring Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpmann. At home there was an unsigned telegram from Greta bidding him good morning.

Through Schlee she had heard of the proposed publication of the photographs in *Vogue*. She sent a cable warning Cecil that if more than one appeared he would not be forgiven. In July she sailed for Sweden with Schlee. She tried to hide from the crowds of spectators, photographers and journalists at the dockside. She said she was tired, that she wanted her privacy, that she had no plans. She sent a letter to Cecil voicing her deep distress at the prospect of having costume pictures of

herself published that had nothing to do with her work. She asked him to destroy them 'I am after all,' she said, 'a serious human being.'

Cecil sent cables, letters and flowers. He displayed remorse, but publication proceeded. His efforts at conciliation with Greta went unacknowledged. In his diary he wrote that he felt he had committed murder. He pleaded that it was a misunderstanding and he thought he had her permission, but a letter from his mother, dated September 1946, referred to his having overdone things without Greta's consent. It was the first of his betrayals and Greta's silence was his punishment.