PHOTOPLAY
May, 1930
p. 40

A Swedish critic's story follows Garbo to Hollywood—and home again!

That Gustafsson Girl

By Ake Sundborg

PART 2

"I HAVE to thank Mauritz Stiller for everything in this world."

This is what Greta Garbo says about the great Swedish director who gave the young Gustafsson girl her first big chance in motion pictures.

That statement is true.

In the first installment of this story of Garbo's girlhood, I told you how the great Stiller had given her an important rôle in "Gosta Berling," and of her tremendous success in the part. Now we are to see how she followed her director to the new world, and how failure and death came to him as she reached the shining pinnacle of fame.

When Mauritz Stiller died in Sweden (of a broken heart, say some) fulsome obituaries were published all over the world, and especially in Germany. In that country he is looked upon as the outstanding pioneer genius of the screen, after D. W. Griffith.

He was the first European director to use the close-up, the shifting camera, and to discover new and striking "angles."

Stiller entered pictures in 1912 under the "grand old man of Swedish films," Charles Magnusson. In 1921, the younger master brought the first Swedish film of really high quality to the screen. And Stiller's Swedish production career came to an end with "Gosta Berling."

Ahead lay his days in Germany—and Hollywood.

STILLER had an exceptional gift for carrying away his colleagues with his own enthusiasm. He knew no such word as impossible.

Despite his many friends, he was a lonely soul. Toward the end of his life he even refused to see them. The thought of their observing the devastating effects of his fatal illness was too painful. One of his last visitors was Victor Sjöström (known in America as Victor Seastrom, brilliant director for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer).

Sjöström brought a greeting from the master's favorite pupil, Greta Garbo. The end was near. Stiller could hardly grasp what was being told him. Almost the last words he heard were those of hail and farewell from the greatest human product of his art.

But to our story.

When "Gosta Berling" was finished, Greta Garbo went into the country to rest. While there, Stiller wrote her, suggesting that she accompany the producers to Berlin for its German première.

"I had never been away from Sweden," Greta tells me, as we sit in her rented apartment during her visit to her homeland.

"I was nervous. I asked Stiller if I was to go alone. He laughed at my fears, and told me that he and Gerda Lundequist were going too.

"Berlin received us charmingly. The première

OldMagazineArticles.com

That Gustafsson Girl

Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in ***Flesh and the Devil***

was a grand affair—it was my first experience of such a thing. We appeared on the stage, and were bombaded with flowers. I like the Germans. They don't try to get too near one—yet always there is a feeling of the warmth of their welcome in one's heart."

Stiller's little party had arrived in Berlin some time before the opening of "Gosta Berling." While Garbo spent a week sightseeing, Stiller began negotiations with various masters of the film world in regard to his future production activities. The United States was mentioned. Nothing was decided.

Meanwhile, Stiller signed to produce a film with a Russian-Turkish background. He had written much of the story himself. To get the proper locale, his company was to go to Constantinople at once. And Greta Garbo was to be one of the troupe!

THE excitement of the Berlin première over, they returned to Stockholm to make the necessary preparations. Within a month Greta Garbo was on her way to Turkey.

Constantinople fascinated the Swedish girl, who had never been away from the cold countries.

But they were busy. There was little time for seeing the strange wonders of the Near East. In Stiller's company was young Einar Hansson, soon to make a name for himself in Hollywood, and then to die tragically in a motor accident in California. A handsome boy—but not in Turkey. He was to play a ragged fugitive, and had to go about unshaven. As Christmas drew near, and production dragged. Part of the script had to be rewritten. Money from the Berlin backers was long overdue. Stiller wired, but no funds came. At last, on Christmas Eve, he left for Germany.

So Greta's first Christmas away from home was spent in far off Constantinople—where, from her lonely window in Pera, she could look off across the blue Bosporus and dream of home.

"Almost always I was alone," she says of that time. "I saw Hansson seldom. He was so ashamed of his ragged beard that he hardly dared show himself. Twice I was invited to the Swedish Legation, but, as you know, I am not happy among strangers. Somehow, I almost liked this strange Christmas in Constantinople. There was time for rest—and dreams."

At last Stiller returned. As he had feared, his German backers had gone bankrupt. No money. All the travel and toil had been in vain.

"It was almost tragic for us," says Garbo. "The only happy soul in the little party was Hansson, who dashed madly for a barber shop and got rid of his hideous whiskers."

THE Constantinople chapter was ended. Back in Berlin, Stiller found Garbo a rôle in "The Street of Sorrow," a film about to be produced. He stayed in the German capital to negotiate with the representatives of American producers.

Then came the turning point—the great break—in the life

OldMagazineArticles.com

That Gustafsson Girl

For the first time in her short life Greta Garbo leaves her native Sweden. Here she is at a railway station in Bulgaria on a filming trip to Turkey that ended disastrously

and artistic career of Greta Garbo.

Fate sent Louis B. Mayer, producing head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, to Berlin at this time. There were long discussions.

At last negotiations were completed.

Mayer was not only ready to sign Mauritz Stiller, but Greta Garbo as well!

Remember that at this time Stiller was a European master, but Garbo was just a young and almost untried actress, with only great beauty and a promising talent.

"Not much was said about me," Greta herself says. "Mr. Mayer hardly looked at me, the first time I met him. He put a contract before me. I asked Stiller if I should sign. I always obeyed Stiller instinctively. He knew what was best for me. Often I did not even know what my salary was to be. He arranged everything and gave me the money. I suppose I am a pretty poor business woman."

This first contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer bound her for three years.

"Stiller told me to sign it, and I did. I was to get $400 a week for forty weeks the first year, $600 the second year, and $750 the third.

"When 'The Street of Sorrow' was finished, I went home to Stockholm to prepare for my journey to America.

"I felt sure that many things were in store for me—strange things, wonderful things—yet I did not know what to expect on this great adventure. And to one in Europe, an Atlantic crossing seems like such a tremendous, portentous undertaking. It seems like a farewell forever, filled with tears.

"Both mother and I were sad about my going. But we never let on. Mother and my brother and sister saw me off at the station.

"Mother's eyes were swollen. 'Don't cry,' I said, 'I'll be back in a year—twelve short months that will hurry by!'

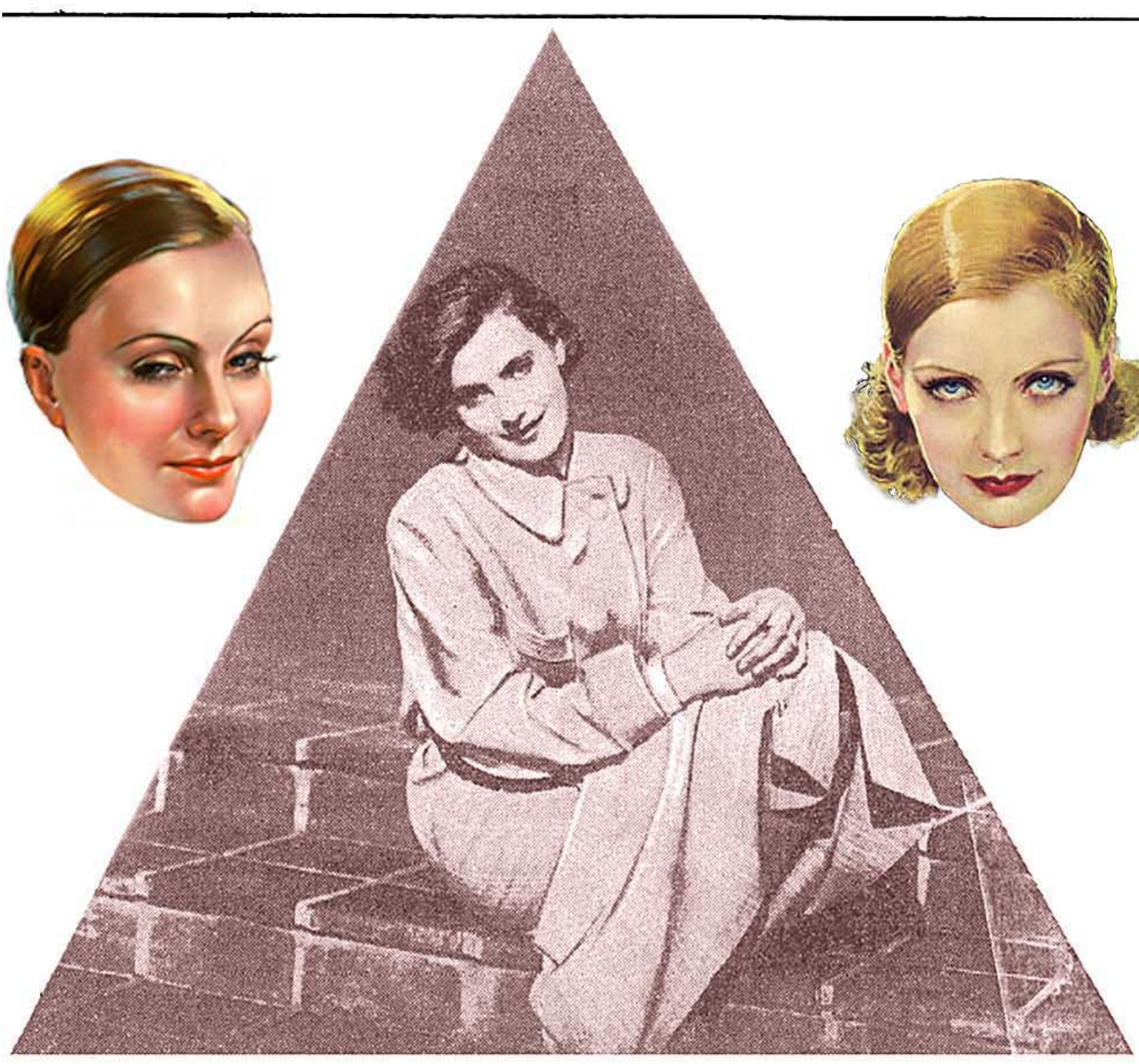
"'Yes,' said mother. 'Just a year!'

"It was nearly four years before I saw her again!"

It was in July, 1925, that Greta Garbo left Sweden to begin her work in America. Still relatively unknown, just a young girl in search of fortune in the new world,

OldMagazineArticles.com

That Gustafsson Girl



Greta Garbo during her first lonely days in America. This picture was snapped as she sat on the steps of her quiet hotel at Santa Monica, her refuge from the strangeness of Hollywood

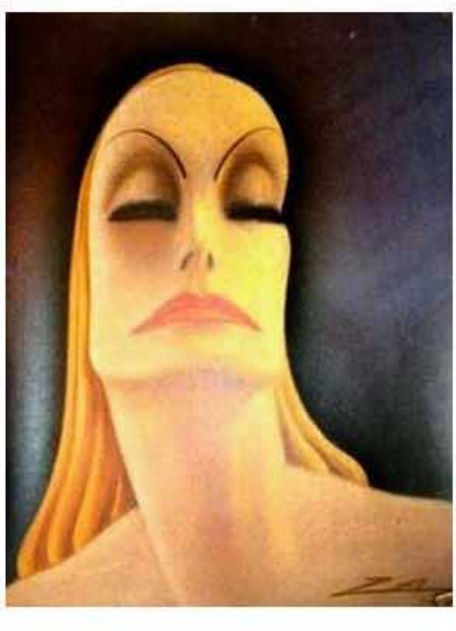
like thousands of others. Of course, she had a contract. But contracts are so easily broken. Three things she had—her youth, her beauty and her genius. With these three she was to open the doors of the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN—Garbo Crosses the Sea

GRETA GARBO sailed from Gothenburg, Sweden, on the Steamship Drottningholm.

"The sea is wonderful," says Garbo, her eyes alight with memories of this first voyage. "Nowhere does one feel so free! At the same time one is caught—there is no escape. Then, in port, one is free to go—and lo, the sense of freedom is gone.

"Dressed warmly, I walked the deck incessantly. Sometimes I played shuffleboard. More often I stayed by myself. Never before or since have I enjoyed the bliss of perfect solitude as I did on that journey. I made only one acquaintance—a dear little boy named Tommy. I tried my hardest to give him cakes and candies, but his parents forbade me."



The crossing was calm and pleasant.

"We entered New York harbor at night. I hardly understood the feelings of homebound Americans then, as they cried aloud at the first glimpse of the lights of their homeland. But I did when, four years later, I saw the coast of Sweden rising from the mist. This homecoming from far places—it is a beautiful, unique experience."

FOR some reason Greta Garbo had expected a land of flowers. But New York is not Hollywood. And she had to remain three long months in the Eastern metropolis.

"I found in New York only heat — terrific, almost unbearable heat. I didn't like my hotel—yet I seldom went out. We went to the theater

sometimes, of course, but most of that trying summer I spent in my bathtub! I lay in the cool tub to keep from scorching, and dreamed and wondered of the days to come.

"At last we took the train for California! I was eager to begin work, once there. But the weeks dragged on. For four trying months I had nothing to do but wait!

"My employers had intended I should do my first picture with Stiller. But things stood in the way, and at last I was cast for a part in a film called 'The Torrent,' under the direction of Monta Bell.

"It was all very strange and terrifying. The studio was so huge that it had to be run like a factory. It all frightened me—the newness of it, the size, the numbers of people. I could not speak English, nor understand the people around me.

"Before we started 'The Torrent,' Mr. Mayer wanted me to sign a new contract, one binding me for five years. I tried to explain, in my bad English, that I was satisfied—that I wanted no changes until I had at least played a part for him. He insisted, saying that he could not risk his money on me unless I was under a five-year contract. But no changes had been made when the picture was finished."

Greta sighs a little as she remembers those first hard days.

"It was very hard work. I was at the studio from early morning until evening. After work I had to go straight home and rest. There I lay, thinking of my family. I began to long for the snows of home."

When "The Torrent" was finished, Greta Garbo moved out to Santa Monica. She wanted to be near the sea!

"Then came the happy word that I was to make 'The Temptress' under Stiller. I was overjoyed. We understood each other! But Stiller did not understand American methods. There came a break, and my old director was replaced by Fred Niblo. I was heartbroken—and so was Stiller. I didn't think I could go on. And it was so hard for me to follow direction in English.

"But I worked on. For six months, from morning till night. Over twenty gowns to try on, over and over again. I care nothing about clothes, and there were numberless dresses for each part. When I am off the set I don't want to have to think of clothes at all."

Garbo is silent a moment. A shadow of pain crosses her face.

"Then a heavier blow fell. News came of my sister's death. I was in agony. I was tired, sick, broken. But there was nothing for it but to go on. I never missed a rehearsal, I was never late on the set. My poor little sister! She had acted with me in 'Two Kings,' a romantic Swedish film. I have seen this picture here in Stockholm. I see my dead sister live again on the screen, with me at her side!"

At this time, Greta Garbo had become news for the American press. An odd Swedish girl. "Obstinate"—"hard to handle"—these were some of the reports.

AFTER *"The Temptress,"* Garbo was given the script of "Flesh and the Devil."

It was this picture that was to bring her her first great American fame.

And during its making she was to meet the striking, romantic John Gilbert, whose name was to be coupled with hers for a long time.

"I did not like the part," Garbo tells me. "I did not want to be a silly vamp. I could see no sense in dressing up and fooling around, just being seductive.

"Mr. Mayer wanted to begin shooting right away. I told him I was tired and ill—that I felt I could not do justice to a new rôle without rest—and that I felt sure the part was not suited to me.

"But he was anxious to begin work. I took the train back to Santa Monica, went to bed, and tried to puzzle out my situation.

"New rumors in the papers. 'Greta Garbo

OldMagazineArticles.com

is going back to Sweden.' 'She is capricious, hard to manage.'

"After forty-eight hours, I decided to go back to the studio. I was tired, and ill, and had just lost my sister, but it didn't seem to matter. I returned.

"I don't know how I should have managed if I had not been cast opposite John Gilbert. I had hardly met him before. He is quite a wonderful man—vital, eager, enthusiastic. He was on the set at nine each morning. He was so kind that I felt better—through him I seemed to establish my first real contact with the strange American world. If he had not come into my life at this time, I should probably have come home to Sweden at once, my American career over.

"We finished 'Flesh and the Devil.' I was helped by the knowledge that Stiller was getting his bearings and coming into his own. His three American masterpieces, 'Hotel Imperial,' 'The Confession of a Woman,' and 'The Street of Sin,' were still to come. But I could see that he was getting his chance. I was happy for him, and this helped me through my own troubles."

AFTER "Flesh and the Devil," the company sent her a script called "Women Love Diamonds." Greta Garbo was to play a vamp.

"This upset me again," she says. "I felt I simply could not do another such rôle. It seemed to me that my future in America was at stake. I went back to my hotel and waited. Next morning the studio called to ask me to look at some sketches for the film. I refused, and did not go.

"This was the first time I had actually disregarded the wishes of my company, apart from my refusal to sign a new contract. Then came the explosion! I received a letter telling me that I had broken my contract by refusing to come to the studio, which was construed as a refusal to work.

"As I had broken the contract, said my company, they were no longer under any obligations to pay me. Then began seven months of no work and no salary!"

CHAPTER EIGHT—Among the Stars

GRETA GARBO was in the world capital of the movies, with a broken contract, and almost no friends to whom she could turn.

What should she do? Leave Hollywood? She felt that all could be set right if she would sign a new contract, as the company had requested. But neither side wanted to take the first step. Greta Garbo simply stayed on at home.

After a while the papers began to hint that the mercurial Garbo was running short of funds.

The conflict was a long one.

"I was very unhappy," says Garbo, speaking of this period in her American career.

"I thought often of going home. It was much like being wildly in love. One moment praying for deliverance—the next realizing it is impossible to tear one's self away.

"My direct need was for an intelligent, experienced person who could judge my position from a business point of view. My lawyer had helped, but he knew little of studio affairs. One day a friend told me of just the sort of man I needed to handle my tangled life in motion pictures. He would understand that I wished no trouble—only to make good films.

"This began my business association with Mr. Harry Edington. For more than a week we had long talks every day. At the end of this time he said he was ready to take over the management of my affairs. He was convinced, he told me, that I was not as difficult to handle as the newspapers had said. We drew up an agreement. From that day to this Mr. Edington has taken care of all my affairs—my contract, my income, all negotiations concerning my work. This has been an immeasurable relief to me.

"Since then I have had no difficulties—no discord. Mr. Edington drew up a new five-year contract, and I signed it. The document assured me a greater income than I had ever dreamed of obtaining.

"Most of my professional contentment I

OldMagazineArticles.com

owe to the guidance of this intelligent and understanding man, who took over my affairs when they were in an unhappy and precarious condition."

WITH her business affairs in comfortable shape, Greta Garbo began to take a little more part in the social life of Hollywood.

The center of the social activities of the growing Swedish colonies was the beautiful Santa Monica home of Victor Sjöström. Mauritz Stiller was a familiar figure there. He and his colleague had often collaborated during their film days in Sweden. Greta Garbo began to drop in often. She liked to unburden herself to the director's charming wife, and she began to be a chum of the two little girls of the family, Greta and Guje.

At this time Garbo lived in Santa Monica, at a big, old-fashioned hotel that faced the sea. She felt happier there than anywhere else, some distance from the film colony itself.

And no event in the Swedish year is quite so exciting as the arrival of the "Christmas Ship" from America at the port of Gothenburg. Stockholm papers send special correspondents to meet the liners.

The "Christmas Ship" of 1928 was the Kungsholm, pride of the Swedish-American line. The natural excitement over her arrival was heightened by the fact that she not only carried princes of the blood royal, but a queen of the screen!

Owing to bad weather, the ship was late, and the suspense, in Sweden, grew terrific. Garbo's homecoming had already stirred the public deeply.

Meanwhile, in America, reports of Greta's journey had caused much excitement, and many newspapers had planned to waylay her along the route of her transcontinental train. Hundreds thronged the stations where the Limited was to stop. That is the sort of thing Garbo dislikes intensely. And the story of how she eluded journalistic pursuit is a long and thrilling tale in itself.

FOR elude it she did. While everybody thought the star was still at her hotel, one "Alice Smith" was speeding East on another train. Even her luggage had been marked "A. S." No one recognized, in the quiet girl wearing dark glasses, and with dark curls peeping from beneath her hat, the Garbo of screen fame.

In Chicago an actress friend recognized her, but respected her secret, and she reached New York uninterviewed.

Metropolitan newspapers had got wind of her arrival, and an army of newspaper reporters and cameramen met the train. No "Alice Smith" alighted. For Miss Alice Smith had left the Limited at Harmon, thirty-six miles north of New York, and had motored to the city.

Hotels were haunted by reporters, but no Greta Garbo or Alice Smith was found. No one thought of the tiny hotel she had hated so when she had stayed there on her arrival in America years before!

Early on her sailing day she boarded the Kungsholm. But someone had preceded her to her cabin. It was a New York reporter. That lucky and resourceful youngster was the only journalist to interview her in three thousand miles of travel. She had fooled the entire press of America, and this one interview, broadcast throughout the country, had far greater publicity value than hundreds of conventional interviews would have carried.

On board she could no longer maintain her incognito. And when the ship docked a huge throng swirled about her, and damaged the taxi that bore her away from the pier at Gothenburg.

For the first time in nearly four years, she was back in her own country, and could celebrate Christmas with her people. Even so, she was nearly frustrated. During the ocean crossing, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer radioed her several times to return to Hollywood by the first ship. They wanted her for retakes on "A Woman of Affairs," her last picture with John Gilbert.

But Garbo managed to safeguard her precious holiday—and could taste once more the traditional Christmas dish of Sweden, "lyefish," and try to get the "almond of luck" hidden in the Christmas rice pudding.

OldMagazineArticles.com

But Garbo managed to safeguard her precious holiday—and could taste once more the traditional Christmas dish of Sweden, "lyefish," and try to get the "almond of luck" hidden in the Christmas rice pudding.

I ASK the obvious question. How does it feel to be home again?

"I am unspeakably happy. Of course Hollywood is fascinating. But I also had many unpleasant experiences. And don't believe the silly stories about life in Hollywood. I am sure there are just as many temptations in Stockholm as in Hollywood. The American film colony means, above all things, work, and I have worked as hard as anyone. I am exhausted now. It will be lovely to have a real rest."

Nils Asther had planned to come home at the same time, but business matters prevented. When the trip was being discussed, Garbo said: "When we get home, Nils will eat himself to death and I'll sleep so that I'll never wake up again!"

And sleep she has, but not quite to that point. Of course, she has not been left in the peace she craves. That would be expecting too much, for one so famous.

For her visit, Greta Garbo rented an apartment at Karlbergsvägen 52. It's a rather famous place, that apartment, as a haven for Swedish film stars home from America. Lars Hansson lived there when he was getting his own home settled, and Victor Sjöström has stayed there.

At first, her telephone calls nearly drove Garbo crazy. One day, when there had been over sixty calls before two in the afternoon, nearly all from total strangers, she simply had the connection entirely cut off. Her Swedish admirers just wanted to hear the sound of her voice!

IT was not only curious fans who haunted Garbo's first days and nights at home. She was bombarded with offers of various kinds. UFA begged her to come to Berlin for one film, but her American contract forbade such an engagement. Stockholm theaters asked her to appear. She half agreed to appear in Tolstoy's "Resurrection," but grew panicky and frightened and gave up the part after the first rehearsal.

Of course she visited Stockholm's film city, Räsunda, where she watched some scenes for "The Triumph of the Heart," starring Carl Brisson. She was warmly received—especially by her oldest friend in the film world, Axel Nilsson, who acts as business agent for all Swedish film artists in America.

Brisson, famous European star, met Garbo at a picture theater soon after her arrival in Sweden. He held out both hands to her. "Well, if it isn't little Greta! It's been along time, hasn't it?"

"Do you know Greta Garbo?" asked a friend.

"Garbo?" asked Brisson, thunderstruck. "Was that Greta Garbo? When I saw her last she was Greta Gustafsson, a little pupil at the Dramatic School!"

Time passed quickly. Garbo visited all the leading theaters, usually attracting more attention than the performance. She declined most of the many invitations to parties that she naturally received.

For a few days she was the guest of Count and Countess Wachmeister, at Tistad Castle, south of Stockholm.

She even visited a film company on location north of the capital city. But the greater part of the time she spent quietly, with her family. This, of course, she loved best and wanted most.

At last, the dreaded time came when she must think of goodbyes.

No one will ever know the tears and heartburnings that accompanied Greta Garbo's farewells to her beloved mother.

But the dreaded day came at last. To avoid public attention, she left Stockholm one day ahead of schedule time—to the consternation of the city's army of photographers. Only her nearest relatives knew the secret. And on March 9, 1929, she sailed from Gothenburg once more.

AND so my story comes to an end. But it is only the story of a beginning, and of an interlude in the life of a great artist—a

OldMagazineArticles.com

rest, among familiar scenes, between toil and toil.

No star shines forever in the film firmament. Yet I surely feel that Greta Garbo's star will shine on, whoever the next sensation may be.

And so we leave her—it seems to me, on the brink of her greatest fame. The story of her girlhood and first glory, glamorous and dramatic, behind her. And what shining triumphs before her, only time and fate can tell!

"I have to thank Mauritz Stiller for everything in this world!" That's what Greta Garbo says of the great Swedish director who gave the little Gustafsson girl her first big chance, and built the foundation of her amazing screen art

OldMagazineArticles.com