

COCO CHANEL – A LIFE AS RADICAL AS HER CLOTHES

COCO CHANEL – EVEN TODAY, THAT NAME EVOKES AN IMAGE OF ELEGANCE, STYLE AND EVEN “SPECIALNESS” IN THE WORLDS OF FASHION, ART, BUSINESS AND EVEN HISTORY. IN THE EARLY NINETEEN HUNDREDS, WOMEN WERE NOT CONSIDERED CHATTEL, BUT RARELY RECOGNIZED AS HAVING TALENT OR AN ENTREPRENEURIAL BENT. Mlle. CHANEL OVERCAME ABJECT POVERTY WITH IMAGINATION, DETERMINATION, SOME LUCK, CHARM, AND THE ABILITY TO USE/MANIPULATE THE MALE OF THE SPECIES TO GAIN THOSE MOST SOUGHT AFTER GOALS, THOSE OF FAME AND FORTUNE.

BORN IN 1883 TO A MOTHER, JEANNE, WHO HAD BEEN EXILED FROM HER FAMILY BECAUSE OF HER PREGNANCY AND FATHERED BY A SMOOTH TALKING ITINERANT, ALBERT, WHO WENT FROM TOWN TO TOWN SELLING ODDS AND ENDS TO TOWN FOLK AS WELL AS IMPREGNATING A NUMBER OF YOUNG GIRLS. COCO, WHOSE BIRTH CERTIFICATE MISTAKENLY LISTED HER AS GABRIELLE JEANNE CHASNEL, LED AN EXTREMELY IMPOVERISHED LIFE. SHE AND HER SIBLINGS WERE AT THE MERCY OF HER MOTHER’S EXTENDED FAMILY, BEING TAKEN IN BY AUNTS AND UNCLES AND GRANDPARENTS, WHO WERE ADAMANT ABOUT MAKING JEANNE AND HER CHILDREN, NOW NUMBERING FOUR, “LEGITIMATE”. THEY WERE ABLE TO TRACK ALBERT DOWN IN A NEIGHBORING

TOWN. HE HAD SENT WORD BACK TO HIS BROOD THAT HE WAS MANAGING A POPULAR TAVERN, WHEN IN FACT, HIS STORY WAS A FABRICATION, AS USUAL. RATHER THAN MANAGING THE TAVERN, HE WAS MERELY A WAITER.

JEANNE'S FAMILY BECAME MORE AND MORE INSISTENT THAT ALBERT MARRY HER AND EVEN OFFERED HIM A SMALL DOWRY WHICH HE ACCEPTED, THAT BEING FIVE THOUSAND FRANCS AND JEANNE'S PERSONAL POSSESSIONS AND HER FURNITURE. THUS, THE UNION WAS LEGITIMIZED, ALTHOUGH IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG, WITH ALBERT'S LACK OF THRIFT, TO SQUANDER HIS FRANCS ON WINE, WOMEN AND SONG.

AS PREDICTED, ALBERT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JEANNE'S FAMILY WAS AN UNPLEASANT ONE, SO HE MOVED HIS FAMILY TO ANOTHER TOWN, FAR AWAY FROM HIS IN-LAWS. IN 1887 ANOTHER CHILD WAS BORN. THE STRAIN OF CARING FOR FOUR YOUNG CHILDREN, TAKING IN ANY WORK SHE COULD MANAGE TO BRING IN WHATEVER MONEY SHE COULD AND LIVING IN RUN-DOWN, SQUALID QUARTERS WAS AFFECTING JEANNE'S HEALTH. THE ASTHMA, FROM WHICH SHE HAD LONG SUFFERED, HAD GROWN WORSE AND SHE PERSUADED ALBERT TO RETURN TO HER FAMILY WHERE AN UNCLE TOOK THEM ALL IN. TWO YEARS LATER, ANOTHER CHLD WAS BORN, A SON WHO WAS

SICKLY AND SOON DIED. A FEW YEARS AFTER THAT, ALBERT'S WANDERLUST TOOK HIM ON THE ROAD AGAIN AND HE WAS ABSENT AT HIS WIFE'S DEATH. HOW TRAUMATIC THAT MUST HAVE BEEN FOR THE CHILDREN TO WATCH THEIR MOTHER WASTE AWAY, IN PAIN. UNDOUBTEDLY THEY WERE AT HER SIDE WHEN SHE DIED.

AFTER THEIR MOTHER'S DEATH, THE CHILDREN WERE AGAIN MOVED FROM ONE RELUCTANT RELATIVE TO ANOTHER, LIVING IN THE POVERTY AND HARDSHIP PUT UPON THEM. ALBERT REFUSED TO TAKE ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS CHILDREN. GABRIELLE WAS FILLED WITH ANGER AT HER FAMILY AND PARTICULARLY AT HER FATHER, THUS CAUSING A SIGNIFICANT, PSYCHOLOGICAL "ABANDONMENT" ISSUE THROUGHOUT THE REST OF HER LIFE. AS AN ADULT, COCO WOULD FABRICATE STORIES ABOUT THOSE YEARS. SHE TOLD OF HER FATHER GOING TO AMERICA AND MAKING A FORTUNE, COMING BACK TO VISIT HER AND PROMISING TO TAKE HER TO AMERICA, WHICH, OF COURSE, DIDN'T HAPPEN. SHE REMAINED WITH HER EXTENDED FAMILY, ESSENTIALLY AN ORPHAN.

AT ELEVEN YEARS OF AGE, GABRIELLE AND HER TWO SISTERS WERE DEPOSITED IN A CONVENT. HER YOUNGER BROTHERS WERE NOT ACCEPTED THERE, SO, AT THE AGES OF TEN AND SIX, THEY WERE PLACED WITH PEASANT FARMERS, BECOMING TWO MORE OF THE THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN ABANDONED BY THEIR PARENTS EACH YEAR INTO THIS THEN-STILL-ACCEPTABLE FORM OF SEMI-SLAVERY. THE BOYS DID NOT FARE WELL AS THEY WERE, AS MANY ABANDONED CHILDREN, SHUNNED, ABUSED AND NEGECTED IN THEIR FOSTER FAMILIES.

AT THE CONVENT, THE GIRLS , IN ADDITION TO DOING CHORES LIKE LAUNDRY, COOKING, CLEANING, GARDENING, ETC, WERE. TAUGHT TO SEW. GABRIELLE SHOWED AN AFFINITY FOR NEEDLEWORK AND BEGAN TO LEARN THE SKILL OF MILLINERY, THAT OF MAKING HATS, OFTEN USING WHATEVER BITS AND PIECES OF DIFFERENT MATERIALS SHE COULD FIND. WHILE HER YEARS AT THE CONVENT WERE YEARS OF DRUDGERY AND SADNESS, IN HER ADULT LIFE SHE REFERRED TO THE NUNS AS HER AUNTS, GIVING THEM CREDIT FOR TEACHING HER SKILLS THAT SHE MIGHT NOT HAVE LEARNED ELSEWHERE.

WHEN SHE AND HER SISTER ADRIENNE WERE IN THEIR LATE TEENS, THEY WERE

SENT TO ANOTHER CONVENT LOCATED NEAR MOULINS, AN ANCIENT CATHEDRAL TOWN SITUATED IN CENTRAL FRANCE. IN 1901, IT WAS A GARRISON TOWN, WHO'S LIVELIHOOD LARGELY DEPENDED UPON THE MILITARY REGIMENT STATIONED ON ITS PERIMETER. GABRIELLE AND ADRIENNE HAD ACCEPTED JOBS AS ASSISTANTS AND SEAMSTRESSES AT A LOCAL DRAPER'S SHOP, WHILE LIVING WITH THEIR EMPLOYERS. AFTER A YEAR AND A HALF, GABRIELLE WAS ABLE TO RENT A ROOM ELSEWHERE. WHILE IN THE LOWLIEST SECTION OF THE TOWN, SHE FELT SUCH A SENSE OF INDEPENDENCE. THE SISTERS CHANEL STARTED WORKING OCCASIONALLY, ON THE WEEKENDS, FOR SEVERAL TAILORS, ALWAYS BUSY WITH ALTERING THE UNIFORMS OF THE MILITARY MEN. OF NO SURPRISE, THE ATTRACTIVE CHANEL GIRLS RECEIVED MUCH ATTENTION FROM THE YOUNG MILITARY MEN WHO SOUGHT ALTERATIONS IN THEIR SHOP AND THEY SOON WERE INVITED TO ATTEND SOME SOCIAL EVENTS. THEY SPENT MANY EVENINGS, ACCOMPANIED BY THEIR COTERIE OF YOUNG OFFICERS, AT LA ROTONDE, A LARGE CAFÉ/MUSIC HALL WHERE THE PATRONS WERE ENTERTAINED.

ENTHRALLED BY THE ATTENTION THE ENTERTAINERS AT THE MUSIC HALL RECEIVED, GABRIELLE DECIDED THAT SHE COULD GET EVEN MORE ATTENTION IF SHE BECAME AN ENTERTAINER, SO AFTER AN AUDITION, SHE OCCASIONALLY TOOK THE STAGE. WHILE NOT HAVING MUCH OF A VOICE, SHE WAS GAME WITH

A QUICK SENSE OF HUMOR AND CHARACTER. ONE OF THE SONGS GABRIELLE SANG WAS ENTITLED KO KO RI KO AND HER ADMIRERS WERE NOISY IN THEIR APPROVAL. FOR AN ENCORE, THEY SIMPLY CHANTED THE WORD FOUND IN HER SONG “COCO! COCO! COCO!.” AND AT LA ROTONDE SHE WAS SOON “LA PETITE COCO”. SHE OFTEN TOLD CONFLICTING STORIES OF HOW HER NICKNAME CAME TO BE. ONE VERSION WAS THAT IT HAD ORIGINATED WITH HER FATHER. HOWEVER, THE STORY OF HER STAGE NAME STUCK. CHANEL HERSELF SAID AT ONE TIME THAT IT WAS A SHORTENED VERSION OF “COCOTTE”, THE FRENCH WORD FOR “KEPT WOMAN”.

NOT LONG AFTER HER MODICUM OF SUCCESS AT LA ROTONDE, COCO MET A HANDSOME YOUNG MAN, ETIENNE BALSAN, WHOSE FAMILY’S CONSIDERABLE FORTUNE CAME FROM ASTUTE INVESTMENTS IN WOOL, THE MAJOR FABRIC USED IN MILITARY UNIFORMS. THE BALSAN FAMILY VIRTUALLY OWNED THE TOWN OF CHATEAUROUX, LOCATED IN CENTRAL FRANCE. THE THREE BALSAN SONS WERE EXPECTED TO ENTER THE FAMILY BUSINESS. ETIENNE ATTENDED A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN ENGLAND AND BECAME OBSESSED WITH HORSES. HE PAID LITTLE ATTENTION TO HIS LESSONS AND WAS SUMMONED HOME. SHOWING ABSOLUTELY NO INTEREST IN ENTERING THE FAMILY BUSINESS, AND WITH HIS LACK OF DISCIPLINE, ETIENNE WAS ORDERED BY HIS FATHER TO ENLIST IN THE

MILITARY. HE DID SO AND WAS SENT TO A CAVALRY REGIMENT WHERE HE COULD SPEND HIS TIME WITH HORSES. HE EVENTUALLY WAS TRANSFERRED TO MOULINS, WHERE HE MET THE PRETTY SHOP ASSISTANT, COCO CHANEL. IT WAS ONLY A SHORT TIME BEFORE AN “ARRANGEMENT” BEGAN THAT SERVED BOTH ETIENNE AND COCO. THE TWO YOUNG LOVERS SUBSEQUENTLY MOVED TO ETIENNE’S LARGE ESTATE. HERE, THE YOUNG SHOP ASSISTANT, WITH LITTLE EXPOSURE TO THE FINER THINGS OF LIFE, EAGERLY ABSORBED THE LESSONS OF COMPOSURE, COMPORTMENT AND LEARNING ABOUT ART, MUSIC AND THOSE PURSUITS ENJOYED BY THE PRIVILEGED POPULACE. ETIENNE INTRODUCED HER TO HORSEMANSHIP AND SHE BECAME AN EXCELLENT EQUESTRIAN.

AND SO, COCO BEGAN HER LIFE AS A “KEPT” WOMAN, A DEMIMONDE. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE, SHE WAS TRAVELLING IN A WORLD OF WEALTH, PRIVILEGE AND STATUS. IN THAT ERA, IT WAS COMMONPLACE FOR GENTLEMEN OF WEALTH, MARRIED OR NOT, TO HAVE A MISTRESS. THAT “KEPT” WOMAN WAS OFTEN GIVEN SOME STATURE – NOT THAT OF A NOBLE WOMAN – BUT ONE OF SOME ACCEPTANCE. WHILE ETIENNE’S FAMILY WAS NOT PLEASED WITH THIS LIAISON, THE TWOSOME ENJOYED EACH OTHER’S COMPANIONSHIP AND TIME TOGETHER. IN LATER YEARS, COCO WOULD TELL OF ETIENNE’S PROPOSALS OF MARRIAGE, WHICH SHE DID NOT ACCEPT. SHE

ALSO SENSED THAT AS A MISTRESS SHE WOULD STILL BE IN A “SERVITUDE” POSITION. AT A TIME WHEN WOMEN, ESPECIALLY A MISTRESS, WOULD NEVER THINK OF TRYING TO EARN A LIVING ON HER OWN, COCO NEEDED TO BE INDEPENDENT. THAT SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE WAS AT THE CORE OF COCO CHANEL.

AT SOME POINT IN HER TIME WITH ETIENNE, COCO BECAME BORED. A LIFE OF PRIVILEGE WAS A NICE LIFE, BUT SHE WAS RESTLESS, WANTING TO DO SOMETHING ON HER OWN. HER MILLINERY CREATIONS, FOR HERSELF, WERE MUCH ADMIRER BY THE WOMEN OF STATUS IN THE TOWN AND SHE WAS SOON ASKED TO CREATE HATS FOR THEM. SHE, WITH HER INDEPENDENT AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT, REALIZED THAT SHE HAD A MARKETABLE SKILL AND ASKED ETIENNE TO ASSIST HER FINANCIALLY IN STARTING A BUSINESS, USING HER NEWLY RECOGNIZED TALENT. HE SUGGESTED THAT SHE USE HIS PARIS APARTMENT AS HER FIRST VENTURE. SHE SET UP A SMALL SHOP, ASKING HER SISTER ADRIENNE TO HELP HER. THE TWO YOUNG, ATTRACTIVE WOMEN THEN SET OUT TO STROLL THE STREETS OF PARIS WEARING THEIR FINEST CREATIONS, THUS CAUSING THE NOBLE LADIES TO SOLICIT THEIR TALENTS TO CREAT CHAPEAUS FOR THEM. HER BUSINESS GREW AND SHE BEGAN TO WEAR SOME OF HER OWN STYLE OF CLOTHING – NOT THE CORSETED, HOURGLASS

SHAPES WITH VOLUMINOUS SKIRTS UNDERGIRDDED WITH NUMEROUS STIFF PETTICOATS, BUT MORE OF A SLIM, SOFT LOOK – MUCH OF WHICH WAS COPIED FROM AND “BORROWED” FROM ETIENNE’S WARDROBE. HIS TIES, HIS SHIRTS AND HIS JACKETS OFTEN BECAME PART OF HER DRESS. EASY, SOFT SHAPES OF SILK AND SOFT COTTON DRESSES OR SKIRTS, OFTEN WORN WITH A MASCULINE BLAZER. COCO WAS NOT A VOLUPTUOUS, SHAPELY WOMAN, BUT ONE OF ALMOST ANDROGYNOUS PROPORTIONS – SMALL BOSOM, SMALL HIPS AND A LANKINESS THAT LET THE FABRICS DRAPE BEAUTIFULLY. HER LOYAL CUSTOMERS BEGAN TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER THE IDEA OF COMFORT VERSUS THE RESTRICTIVE COSTUMES OF THE DAY AND ASKED HER TO CREAT SIMILAR FASHIONS FOR THEM.

IN 1908, AT ONE OF ETIENNE’S FREQUENT PARTIES, OFTEN CONTINUING FOR A WEEK AT A TIME, COCO MET ONE OF ETIENNE’S FRIENDS, ARTHUR CAPEL, KNOWN AFFECTIONATELY AS “BOY”. THE ATTRACTION WAS INTENSE AND IMMEDIATE AND IT WASN’T LONG BEFORE COCO WAS SHARING HER FAVORS WITH BOTH ETIENNE AND ARTHUR. AT SOME POINT, ETIENNE BECAME INVOLVED WITH ANOTHER WOMAN, ONE OF STATUS, AND MARRIED HER WHILE CONTINUING HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH COCO. IT IS SURMISED THAT HE WAS APPRECIATIVE OF ARTHUR’S OFFER TO MAKE COCO HIS OWN DEMIMONDE,

THUS REMOVING WHAT MIGHT BE A THORN IN ETIENNE'S WIFE'S SIDE!

COCO AND ARTHUR MOVED INTO HIS SUMPTUOUS APARTMENT IN PARIS AND ENJOYED A WONDERFUL SOCIAL LIFE. ARTHUR ENCOURAGED COCO TO OPEN A MILLINERY SHOP IN PARIS AND SECURED A PRIME LOCATION AT 1 RUE CAMBON FOR HER. IT IMMEDIATELY BECAME A SUCCESS WITH THE WEALTHY CLIENTELE OF PARIS. ARTHUR ALSO CONVINCED COCO TO OPEN A BOUTIQUE IN DEAUVILLE, A POPULAR GETAWAY RETREAT FOR THE WEALTHY. THE CREATOR OF THE FAMOUS HATS WAS NOW DEVELOPING HER OWN LINE OF CLOTHING.

ONE DIFFICULTY COCO EXPERIENCED IN HER NEW VENTURE WAS FINDING FABRICS THAT SHE COULD USE. THE WAR EFFORT WAS TAKING ALMOST ALL OF THE FINER WOOL FABRICS FOR MILITARY UNIFORMS, THUS LEAVING LITTLE MATERIAL FOR ANYONE IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY. IT WAS COCO'S IDEA TO USE THE WOVEN FABRIC, JERSEY, USED TO MANUFACTURE MEN'S UNDERWEAR AND MAKE IT INTO WOMEN'S GARMENTS. THE SOFTNESS OF THE FABRIC ALLOWED THE GARMENT TO DRAPE BEAUTIFULLY ON A WOMAN'S BODY, IN ADDITION TO BEING FAR MORE COMFORTABLE, NO STRUCTURE, NO CORSET, NO BULKY UNDERSKIRTS. WHEN COCO ARRANGED TO BUY THE FIRST LOT OF GREY AND WHITE JERSEY FROM THE MANUFACTURER, HE WOULD NOT COMMIT TO A

SECOND ORDER UNTIL COCO COULD PROVE THAT IT WAS POSSIBLE TO MAKE THIS “UNDERWEAR” FABRIC INTO AN “OUTERWEAR” GARMENT, ACCEPTABLE TO THE BUYING PUBLIC. THE FIRST DESIGNS WERE SUCH A SUCCESS THAT COCO AND THE MANUFACTURER DECIDED TO DYE THE JERSEY IN DIFFERENT COLORS. IT IS SAID THAT COCO NEVER SKETCHED HER DESIGNS, NOR DID SHE PUT HER OWN NEEDLE TO THE GARMENT, BUT SIMPLY THREW THE FABRIC ACROSS A MODEL’S BODY AND BEGAN TO CUT, TUCK, FOLD AND PIN, THUS CREATING ANOTHER BRILLIANT PIECE OF DESIGN.

COCO’S DISCOVERY OF THE MALLEABILITY OF JERSEY GAVE HER MORE IDEAS TO CREATE ADDITIONAL MARKETS FOR HER DESIGNS. IN THAT ERA, IN FRANCE, WOMEN DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS OTHER THAN CROQUET OR PERHAPS AN OCCASIONAL TENNIS MATCH, BUT CHANEL, HERSELF, WAS A VERY ATHLETIC WOMAN, PARTICULARLY AS AN EQUESTRIAN, THANKS TO THE TIME SHE SPENT WITH ETIENNE. SHE ADDED A CASUAL LINE OF SPORTSWEAR TO HER DESIGNS, GIVING WOMEN A MORE FLEXIBLE GARMENT TO WEAR WHILE PARTICIPATING IN MORE ACTIVE SPORTS. SHE CREATED A STYLE THAT HAD BEEN PREVIOUSLY UNTHINKABLE FOR WOMEN – TRACKSUITS!!! IN 1914 SHE TURNED HER ATTENTION TO BATHING SUITS. WOMEN WERE SELDOM SEEN IN

THE WATERS ALONG THE BEACHES, BUT COCO CREATED A ONE-PIECE SUIT, CERTAINLY DEMURE COMPARED TO OUR CURRENT SKIN-REVEALING SUITS, BUT NEVER THE LESS, SOMEWHAT SCANDALOUS FOR THE DAY.

IN 1910, COCO REALIZED THAT HER REPUTATION AND TALENT WERE BECOMING WELL RECOGNIZED, AND DECIDED THAT IT WAS TIME TO HAVE A SYMBOL OF IDENTITY, THUS THE NOW FAMOUS LOGO. THOSE TWO-INTERLOCKING AND OPPOSING C'S HAVE REMAINED THE SAME EVER SINCE. THERE ARE SEVERAL THEORIES FOR HER INSPIRATION FOR THE LOGO – 1) IT CAME FROM THE INTERLOCKING C'S FOUND IN THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS OF A CHAPEL IN NICE, 2) IT CAN BE FOUND IN THE GEOMETRIC PATTERNS FOUND IN THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS AT THE CONVENT WHERE CHANEL SPENT A GOOD PORTION OF HER CHILDOOD, OR 3) IT WAS AN AMALGAMATION OF THE INITIALS OF COCO CHANEL AND ARTHUR “BOY” CAPEL.

DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE NOW TITLED HOUSE OF CHANEL INTRODUCED THE FASHION IDEA OF WOMEN WEARING PANTS, OR SLACKS AS WE KNOW THEM TODAY, COCO RARELY WORE THEM. SHE BELIEVED THAT A WOMAN WOULD NEVER LOOK IN PANTS AS GOOD AS A MAN WOULD. HOWEVER, SHE LIKED A MAN'S SHORT HAIRSTYLE. THE REASON IS SIMPLE – SHORT HAIR IS EASIER TO

TAKE CARE OF. ONCE COCO CUT HER HAIR AND PROUDLY WALKED OUT INTO THE WORLD, EXPLAINING THAT EVERYTHING IN HER HOUSE CAUGHT ON FIRE AND IT BURNED HER CURLS. THEREFORE, IN 1917, A TREND OF A MAN'S SHORT HAIRSTYLE AMONG WOMEN WAS PREVALENT. BEFORE COCO'S DECLARATIVE TONSORIAL STATEMENT, WOMEN WERE EXPECTED TO HAVE LONG HAIR, NEVER MIND THE EFFORT TO MAINTAIN THAT HAIR STYLE.

IN 1919, ARTHUR 'BOY' CAPEL DIED IN A TRAGIC CAR ACCIDENT. COCO WAS INCONSOLABLE. ONE AMAZING THING CAME OUT OF HER LOSS – THAT OF ELEVATING THE COLOR BLACK INTO THE FASHION WORLD. BLACK HAD ONLY BEEN THE FABRIC OF MOURNING AND GRIEF. COCO STARTED EXPERIMENTING WITH BLACK CLOTH. BECAUSE SHE HAD NOT BEEN MARRIED TO ARTHUR CAPEL, COCO WAS NOT ALLOWED TO MOURN OFFICIALLY SHE DID NOT ATTEND HIS FUNERAL SOME PEOPLE SAY THAT SHE BROUGHT BLACK COLOR CLOTHES INTO VOGUE TO MAKE ALL WOMEN IN FRANCE MOURN FOR HER BELOVED "BOY". SEVERAL YEARS LATER, A MEMORIAL CROSS WAS PLACED AT THE SCENE OF THE ACCIDENT, COURTESY OF COCO. IT REMAINS THERE TODAY. SHE WAS SO DEVASTATED BY HER LOSS THAT SHE WENT INTO A DEPRESSION, RETREATING TO HER CHATEAU, PAINTING MANY ROOMS BLACK AND REFUSING TO SEE ANYONE OR GO ANYWHERE.

IN HIS WILL, ARTHUR CAPEL LEFT THE BULK OF HIS ESTATE TO HIS WIFE AND CHILD, NOT KNOWING THAT ANOTHER CHILD WAS ON ITS WAY. HE ALSO BEQUEATHED A LARGE SUM OF MONEY TO COCO AND TO ANOTHER WOMAN, A YOUNG WIDOW WITH WHOM HE UNDOUBTEDLY WAS HAVING ASSIGNATIONS.

COCO'S SELF-IMPOSED MOURNING PERIOD EVENTUALLY ENDED WHEN SHE CHOSE TO ATTEND A DEAR FRIEND'S WEDDING. THAT EVENT SEEMED TO BRING NEW ENERGY TO COCO, AND SHE RETURNED TO HER DESIGN STUDIO TO WORK, ALMOST NON-STOP ON HER CREATIONS.

IN 1920, COCO OPENED A FASHION HOUSE IN BAIARRITZ, SWITZERLAND, WHERE SHE MET THE GRAND DUKE DMITRI PAVLOVICH. THERE WAS AN INSTANT MUTUAL ATTRACTION WHICH SEEMS TO BE COCO'S BENT. WHILE THE RELATIONSHIP WAS SHORT LIVED, IT WAS FRUITFUL. HER LOVER HAD TRAVELLED EXTENSIVELY AND WAS FRIENDS WITH A RUSSIAN PERFUMER, ERNEST BEAUX. BOTH COCO AND ERNEST WORKED FOR OVER A YEAR TO DEVELOP A PARTICULAR FRAGRANCE. THE FIFTH SAMPLE OF TWENTY-FOUR FRAGRANCES COCO AND ERNEST DEVELOPED WAS DECLARED THE WINNER, THUS CHANEL NO. 5 WAS CREATED. IN 1922, THIS PHENOMENAL PRODUCT

WAS LAUNCHED TARGETING CELEBRITIES. COCO WANTED THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMEN OF THE TIME TO WEAR AND PROMOTE, BY WEARING THE PERFUME, HER PRODUCT. THIS WAS THE FIRST PERFUME TO BEAR A DESIGNER'S NAME. UNFORTUNATELY COCO TRUSTED SEVERAL BUSINESSMEN WHO PROMISED TO HELP MARKET HER NEW FRAGRANCE IN EXCHANGE FOR A SHARE OF THE PROFITS. HER INTIAL AGREEMENT GAVE HER ONLY 10% OF ITS ROYALTIES BEFORE WORLD WAR II AND ONLY 2% AFTERWARD. DESPITE NUMEROUS LAWSUITS IN AN ATTEMPT TO VOID THE ORIGINAL CONTRACT, CHANEL FAILED TO REGAIN CONTROL OF HER SIGNATURE FRAGRANCE. YEARS LATER, CHANEL NO. 5 WAS PROMOTED BY MARILYN MONROE – WITHOUT AN ENDORSEMENT FEE, NO LESS. IN AN INTERVIEW IN THE EARLY 1950S MARILYN SAID THAT ALL SHE WORE IN BED WAS A FEW DROPS OF CHANEL NO. 5 PERFUME. A FEW DAYS LATER SALES SKYROCKETED. IRONICALLY, CHANEL NO. 5 WAS ALSO THE FAVORITE PERFUME OF JACQUELINE KENNEDY. ONE HALF CENTURY LATER, CHANEL NO. 5 IS STILL ONE OF THE BEST SELLING PERFUMES IN THE WORLD.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1930, AT A GATHERING AT A MUTUAL FRIEND'S VILLE, COCO MET THE AMERICAN HOLLYWOOD PRODUCER, SAMUEL GOLDWYN. GOLDWYN

WAS AN ASTUTE BUSSINESSMAN, WHOSE BOX OFFICE PROFITS HAD DIMINISHED GREATLY DUE TO THE ECONOMIC CONDITION AT HOME. HE DETERMINED THAT HE NEEDED TO COUNTER FILMDOM'S ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THOUGHT THAT BRINGING MORE STAR POWER TO EVEN LARGER FILM PRODUCTIONS WOULD GARNER MORE ATTENTION AND ATTENDANCE TO HIS MOVIES. HE HAD MANY DISCUSSIONS WITH COCO ATTEMPTING TO BRING HER TO HOLLYWOOD. HE BELIEVED THAT WOMEN WOULD BE MORE ATTRACTED TO HIS FILMS IF THEY WERE TO SEE THE VERY LATEST FASHIONS FROM THE HAND OF THE MOST FAMOUS PARSIAN COUTURIER. ACKNOWLEDGING THAT HER OWN SALES HAD DIMINISHED, THOUGH RELUCTANT TO COME TO AMERICA, THE OFFER OF ONE MILLION DOLARS FOR A TIWICE A YEAR VISIT TO CLOTHE GOLDWYN'S FEMALE SCREEN AND STAGE STARS, SEEMED TO CHANGE HER MIND. THIS COLLABORATION WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GARNER MORE ATTENTION AND PUBLICITY FOR COCO.

IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES, SHE WAS QUOTED:

“IT’S JUST AN INVITATION. I WILL SEE WHAT THE PICTURES HAVE TO OFFER AND WHAT I HAVE TO OFFER THE PICTURES. I WILL NOT MAKE ONE DRESS. I

HAVE NOT BROUGHT MY SCISSORS WITH ME. LATER, PERHAPS, WHEN I GO BACK TO PARIS, I WILL CREATE AND DESIGN GOWNS SIX MONTHS AHEAD FOR THE ACTRESSES IN MR. GOLDWYN'S PICTURES.”

IN A SECOND INTERVIEW, THE NEW YORK TIMES REPORTER DESCRIBED COCO “A WOMAN WHOSE BUSINESS IS CHARM IN DRESS. SHE DOES NOT MAKE SPEECHES, NOR HAS SHE ANY THEATERICAL AFFECTATION OR EXHIBITION – HER ANSWERS ARE SIMPLE AND DIRECT.”

HER AGREEMENT WITH GOLDWYN WAS TO DESIGN FOR THE GREATEST STARS OF THE TIME; NORMA TALMADGE, CLARA BOW, GLORIA SWANSON, LILLIAN GISH, INA CLAIRE AND GRETA GARBO. MARENE DIETRICH, CLAUDETTE COLBERT AND KATHERINE HEPBURN WERE ALSO HER MUSES. SHE WAS NOT IMPRESSED BY THE HOLLYWOOD CULTURE AND WAS IMPATIENT TO GET BACK TO PARIS. SHE WOULD DESIGN HER FASHIONS FOR THE STARS IN HER PARIS SHOPS AND THE WOMEN WOULD COME THERE FOR THEIR FITTINGS. AFTER TWO YEARS OF WEARING COCO'S DESIGNS, AND DEALING WITH HER OBSESSIVE, DICTATORIAL PERSONALITY, THE FILM STARS WISHED TO MAKE A CHANGE TO OTHER DESIGNERS. GOLDWYN SHARED THAT NEWS WITH COCO ON HER

LATEST HOLLYWOOD VISIT, WHICH WOULD BE HER LAST. SHE WAS RELEASED FROM HER CONTRACT AND HEADED HOME. THE NEW YORKER PUBLISHED THIS REVIEW UPON HER DEPARTURE:

“IN THIS MOST RECENT FILM, GLORIA SWANSON HAS A CHANCE TO DRESS UP IN A LOT OF EXPENSIVE CLOTHES. THE GOWNS ARE CREDITED TO CHANEL, THE PARIS DRESSMAKER WHO RECENTLY MADE A MUCH PUBLICIZED TRIP TO HOLLYWOOD, BUT I UNDERSTAND SHE LEFT THAT CENTER OF LIGHT AND LEARNING IN A HUFF. THEY SAID HER DRESSES WEREN'T SENSATIONAL ENOUGH. SHE MADE A LADY LOOK LIKE A LADY. HOLLYWOOD WANTS A LADY TO LOOK LIKE TWO LADIES.”

COCO AND GOLDWYN REMAINED ON THE BEST OF TERMS, DESPITE THE “FIASCO OF HOLLYWOOD” AS COCO WOULD CALL IT. THE RELATIONSHIP HAD BEEN BENEFICIAL FOR BOTH CONSIDERING HER EXPOSURE IN THE UNITED STATES RAISED HER STATUS EVEN FURTHER IN EUROPE. SHE HAD BECOME RENOWNED ON AN INTERNATIONAL SCALE. FOR HIM, GOLDWYN COULD ADD HIS ASSOCIATION WITH THE RENOWNED DESIGNER TO HIS LIST OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

UPON HER RETURN TO PARIS, HOWEVER, COCO FOUND THAT SHE FACED AN UP AND COMING COMPETITOR, ELSA SCHIAPARELLI, A TALENTED, ECCENTRIC ITALIAN ARISTOCRAT WHO HAD BEGUN BY MAKING SWEATERS AND SKIRTS.

THESE WERE A GREAT SUCCESS. COMPARED TO CHANEL'S UNDERSTATED DESIGN OF ELEGANCE, SCHIAPARELLI USED BOLD COLORS, UNCONVENTIONAL SHAPES AND DESIGNS, SOME EVEN CREATED BY SALVADOR DALI (ONE OF COCO'S MANY PARAMOURS). SCHIAPARELLI SURROUNDED HERSELF WITH ARTISTS AND ASKED THEM TO EXPERIMENT WITH COLORS AND DESIGNS FOR HER CLOTHING.

COCO WAS NOW ON THE DEFENSIVE AND BEGAN TO OPENLY CRITICIZE HER MOST PROMINENT COMPETITOR BY SAYING THAT SCHIAPARELLI'S DESIGNS WERE A NOVELTY, BUT NOT NECESSARILY MODERN. WHAT COCO HERSELF OFFERED WAS "STYLE", NOT FASHION SCHIAPARELLI'S WORK HAD NOTHING TO SAY OF THE FUTURE. HER DESIGNS WERE AN OPTICAL ILLUSION. BALENCIAGA, A YOUNG DESIGNER BEGINNING TO COME INTO HIS OWN, SAID: "YOU SEE, COCO HAD VERY LITTLE TASTE, BUT IT IS GOOD. SCHIAPARELLI, ON THE OITHER HAND, HAD LOTS OF IT, BUT IT WAS BAD." THERE WOULD BE NO WINNERS IN THAT DUEL OF WORDS AND BOTH DESIGNERS CONTINUIED TO PROSPER.

IN 1936, FRANCE ELECTED SOCIALIST LEON BLUM AS PRESIDENT. HE WAS A MAN OF THE PEOPLE AND ENCOURAGED WORKERS TO DEMAND AN INCREASE IN EMPLOYEE RIGHTS – PAID HOLIDAY, FAMILY SUPPORT, UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE. THE WORKERS BEGAN TO FORM STRIKES AGAINST THEIR EMPLOYERS, DEMANDING ADDITIONAL BENEFITS FROM THEM, OF WHICH THE HOUSE OF CHANEL WAS NOT IMMUNE. ONE DAY, COCO COULD NOT GET NEAR HER SHOP DUE TO PICKETS BLOCKING HER WAY. THE EMPLOYEES REFUSED TO LET HER INTO HER OWN COMPANY. SHE WAS ABSOLUTELY ENRAGED AND CONTACTED HER ATTORNEY. SHE WAS TOLD TO REMAIN CALM AND SIT DOWN WITH HER WORKERS AND TALK ABOUT THEIR REQUESTS. SHE REFUSED TO DO SO AND IMMEDIATELY SACKED OVER THREE HUNDRED WORKERS. SHE FINALLY RELENTED, AND PROVIDED THE BENEFITS, ALTHOUGH SHE NEVER CHANGED HER CONSERVATIVE IDEAS. SHE HAD OVERCOME POVERTY AND HARDSHIP, WITH ALL THE TRAUMA OF HER YOUNG LIFE, SO WHY SHOULDN'T HER WORKERS?

IF YOU HAVE NOT NOTICED BY NOW, COCO CHANEL HAD AN AFFINITY FOR MEN, AND THAT CONTINUED FOR THE REST OF HER LIFE. SHE SEEMS TO HAVE HAD A PASSION NOT ONLY FOR HER WORK, BUT, CONSIDERING THE LARGE NUMBER OF MEN WITH WHOM SHE HAD RELATIONSHIPS, OF SHORT OR LONG

TERM DURATION, SHE HAD OTHER PASSIONS IN HER LIFE. A FEW “TITLED” LADIES WERE ALSO FAVORED BY COCO. I HAVE ONLY WRITTEN OF A FEW OF THE MANY. MORALS WERE RATHER LAX IN PARIS PRIOR TO AND DURING THE OCCUPATION, PARTICULARLY IN HIGH SOCIETY. COCO WAS SAID TO HAVE HAD ROMANTIC LIAISONS WITH THE LIKES OF PABLO PICASSO, COMPOSER IGOR STRAVINSKY, THE PLAYWRIGHT JEAN COCTEAU AND A FOURTEEN YEAR LOVE AFFAIR WITH HUGH RICHARD ARTHUR GROSVENOR, 2ND DUKE OF WESTMINSTER. ONE OF THE RICHEST MEN IN THE WORLD, HE BROUGHT HER INTO A NEW ARENA – THE WORLD OF BRITISH ARISTOCRACY. WHILE COCO BELIEVED THAT THE TWO OF THEM WOULD MARRY, IT WAS NOT TO BE, ALTHOUGH SHE WAS NOW TRAVELLING IN CIRCLES THAT HAD BEEN BEYOND HER IMAGINATION. LARGE PARTIES, WITH FAMOUS GUESTS. AMONG THEM, WINSTON CHURCHILL AND HIS WIFE, AND THE PRINCE OF WALES. SIR CHURCHILL ADMIRER COCO, OFTEN CALLING ATTENTION TO HER DETERMINATION, WILLPOWER AND HER DESIRE FOR INDEPENDENCE.

IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THE DUKE SIRE A MALE HEIR. IT APPEARS THAT COCO WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO PROVIDE THAT HEIR, SO THE DUKE, WITH MUCH SADNESS, CHOSE TO MARRY ANOTHER WOMAN WHO COULD GIVE HIM A CHILD. ALAS, THE END OF ANOTHER RELATIONSHIP.

AS IN THE PAST, WHEN HER PERSONAL LIFE WAS NOT GOING WELL, COCO TURNED HER ENERGY TO HER WORK, SHE WAS EXTREMELY SUCCESSFUL AND, DESPITE BEING OVER FIFTY, MEN STILL FOUND HER ATTRACTIVE. SHE WAS FLIRTY, EXTREMELY SHARP, STRAIGHTFORWARD AND SMART. ONE CAN UNDERSTAND WHY MEN WERE DRAWN TO HER.

IN 1939, THE WAR HAD DESCENDED ON PARIS. COCO WAS FORCED TO CLOSE HER SHOPS. WHILE MANY PROFESSIONALS LEFT THE COUNTRY, SHE STAYED. IN FACT, MAY OF THE UPPER CLASS REMAINED IN PARIS, GOING ABOUT THEIR PARTYING AND LIVING LIFE AS IF THERE WAS NO THREAT TO THEIR EXISTENCE. MEMBERS OF THE UPPER ECHELONS OF THE GERMAN OCCUPIERS WERE EVEN COURTED TO JOIN THE GROUP OF ELITE. IN SEPTEMBER OF 1944, COCO CHANEL WAS ARRESTED. THE REASON – HER CURRENT LOVE AFFAIR WITH A GERMAN OFFICER, BARON HANS GUNTER VON DINKLAGE. TALL, HANDSOME AND FLIRTATIOUS AS HE WAS, COCO WAS IMMEDIATELY DRAWN TO HIM EVEN THOUGH HE HAD A WIFE AT THE TIME. THEIR RELATIONSHIP WAS KEPT SOMEWHAT CLANDESTINE, BUT, OF COURSE, MANY OF HER FRIENDS KNEW OF HER LIAISON. DURING THEIR TIME TOGETHER, VON DINKLAGE OBTAINED A DIVORCE, BUT THERE IS NO HINT THAT MARRIAGE WAS IN THE MINDS OF

EITHER OF THEM. HER ANTI-SEMITISM WAS WELL KNOWN AND SHE WAS NOT SHY ABOUT LETTING PEOPLE KNOW THAT SHE WAS LOATHE TO SPEND TIME WITH “VULGARITY”, WHICH IS HOW SHE DESCRIBED MEMBERS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY. SHE WAS RELEASED AFTER ONLY A FEW HOURS AND IT IS SURMISED THAT SHE CALLED ON HER OLD FRIEND, SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL, TO HELP HER OUT. IT IS STILL UNDETERMINED WHETHER SHE WAS MERELY A “HORIZONTAL COLLABORATOR”, THE MISTRESS OF A NAZI – OR AN ACTUAL GERMAN SECRET AGENT. IN THE MANY BOOKS AND ARTICLES I RESOURCED SOME SAY YES TO THE SECRET AGENT, OTHERS SAY NO. WHILE NOT OFFICIALY CHARGED, COCO SUIFFERED IN THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION. MANY STILL VIEWED HER RELATIONSHIP WITH A NAZI OFFICER AS A BETRAYAL OF HER COUNTRY. FOLLOWING HER ARREST AND RELEASE, COCO MOVED TO SWITZERLAND.

IN 1954, AT THE AGE OF 70, SHE RETURNED TO PARIS AND RE-ENTERED THE FASHION WORLD. SHE MUSED THAT CHRISTIAN DIOR WAS NOW DESIGNING FROCKS THAT MADE WOMEN LOOK LIKE FLOWERS. TIGHT WAISTS, CRINOLINES AND FULL SKIRTS. COCO LAUGHED AT THIS SAYING “LOOK HOW RIDICULOUS THESE WOMEN LOOK, WEARING CLOTHES BY A MAN WHO DOESN’T KNOW WOMEN, NEVER HAD ONE, AND DREAMS OF BEING ONE!”

HER FIRST COLLECTION AFTER HER RETURN WAS NOT WELL RECEIVED. CRITICS COMMENTED ON IT BEING NOTHING NEW – A RETREAD OF HER OLD DESIGNS. THAT WAS HOW SHE HAD MEANT IT TO BE – “NOTHING NEW - ONLY ETERNAL”. SHE BROUGHT HER COLLECTION TO THE UNITED STATES AND AMERICAN WOMEN RESPONDED NOT ONLY WITH ADOREATION OF HER COLLECDTION, BUT WITH A FASCINATION WITH THE DESIGNER HERSELF. HER “LITTLE BLACK DRESS”, CREATED YEARS AGO, NOW BECAME A TOUCHSTONE OF HIGH FASHION, A WHOLE NEW GENERATION AND CULTURE WAS READY AND WILLING TO BE FASHIONABLE WEARING CHANEL CLOTHES AND SURROUNDING THEMSELVES WITH HER FRAGRANCE. COCO HAD FOUND HER NICHE AND CONTINUED TO BE IMPORTANT IN SUBSEQUENT YEARS.

IN 1963, JACQUELINE KENNEDY WOULD IMMORTALIZE CHANEL’S “PINK CHANEL SUIT” BY WEARING IT THE DAY JOHN KENNEDY WAS ASSASSINATED. WHO OF US WILL VER FORGET THAT IMAGE?

FROM APA STYLE MAGAZINE –

THE WORD HAS RECOGNIZED COCO AS THE ONLY TRENDSETTER OF THE MOST REFINED ELEGANCE. THE CHANEL STYLE MEANS THAT A SUIT SHOULD BE

FUNCTIONAL AND COMFORTABLE. CHANEL DESIGNED BELOW THE KNEE SKIRTS WITH POCKETS WHERE A BUSINESSSWOMAN COULD PUT A CIGARETTE CASE.” BY THE WAY THE IDEA OF WEARING A BAG OVER THE SHOULDER ALSO BELONGS TO MADEMOISELLE COCO.

ON JANUARY 10, 1971, AT THE AGE OF 88, COCO CHANEL DIED QUIETLY IN THE HOTEL ROOM OF THE RITZ HOTEL OVERLOOKING THE LUXURIOUSLY DECORATED HOUSE OF CHANEL. WHEN SHE DIED, THERE WERE ONLY THREE DRESSES IN HER WARDROBE. HOWEVER, THEY WERE “VERY STYLISH ATTIRES” AS COCO WOULD HAVE SAID.

WAS COCO A HAPPY WOMAN? WE CAN ONLY GUESS. HER FATHER’S ABONDONMENT, THE POVERTY INTO WHICH SHE WAS BORN, AND HER “AVERAGE” LOOKS, IN HER OWN PERCEPTION, AND THE MANY LOVES LOST, PARTICULARLY THAT OF CAPEL, LED HER TO NEVER FEEL WORTHY OF HER TALENT AND WHAT SHE OFFERED TO THE WORLD

FOLLOWING HER DEATH, KARL LAGERFIELD BECAME THE CHIEF DESIGNER FOR THE HOUSE OF CHANEL AND CONTINUES TO OVERSEE ITS CREATIONS. AS OF

2014, THE REVENUE OF CHANEL REACHED \$7.43 BILLION. “COCO” CHANEL – THE WOMAN WHO CHANGED THE WORLD OF FASHION. COCO CHANEL – A LIFE AS RADICAL AS HER CLOTHES.