

Excerpts from "The Wandering Years: 1922-3 (Cecil Beaton's Diaries),

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I worked on a book jacket most of the morning. Whenever I felt stale and yawny I went upstairs and danced energetic Charlestons to the gramophone, wishing I were on the stage. In the evening, Allanah Harper rang me up to go with her to a dance. I arrived before Allanah — so embarrassing — to find an incongruous, anonymous crowd who had got together for no apparent reason. A fair-haired woman, who had seen me on the Lido, took compassion on me. She introduced me to the host, an equivocal, furtive little man of sinister complexion. It was an inexplicable assortment of people — one or two fat debutantes in taffeta, with fat dowagers whose dresses smelled of camphor. One woman, whom I discovered was named the Countess Lovatelli, seemed to be disguised as a tree. She stood smiling enigmatically, wrapped in green and gold brocade with a wreath of smilax on her green turban. I made futile conversation with a Lady Parker and her dull-as-ditch-water daughter. I wished Allanah would come. The fair-haired lady who had seen me at the Lido smiled every time I looked up. At last Allanah! But with her was a nameless man with pale canary hair parted in the centre, looking like a plump Victorian housemaid. I took a violent dislike to him. He struck me as being a pig and an unpleasant personality to boot. His buttery buttery lips and cheese-smelling nostrils reminded me of a dairy shop. Allanah — a nice, dimpled baby — was the favourite of the evening. Everyone rushed up to her. I could hardly get a word in edgeways. Lady Dean Paul monopolised her, a magpie spectre, with her hair half white and half black. Eventually Allanah looked surreptitiously around her, murmured something about this being a bore and shouldn't we go to the Gargoyle. Then we spotted Teddie Gerrard, the retired revue star. I hadn't seen her for donkey's years, but used to think her the last gasp in the days when she innovated backless dresses and huskily croaked, 'We're so glad to see you're back, dear lady!' (That was in my favourite Palace revue, Bric-a-brac.) She looked like a panther, then; hard and cruel eyes turned up at the corners. She was the essence of sex appeal. Tonight, Teddie Gerrard

seemed more remarkable than ever before. Her skin was burnt a cigar-leaf brown and was as firm as an Arab boy's. She wore a dress of black satin with white-bead embroidery, also short, white kid gloves and diamond bracelets. Tight round her neck were the largest false pearls I have ever seen. Her hair was bound up in black satin. I stood agape, watching her from the top of some stairs. She was quite drunk, quite unaffected by the years — a perpetual tomboy. She hooted with foghorn laughter. She sat on someone's knee, tried to be a vampire and toppled over backwards on to the floor, hurting her elbow. Dancing began. I jiggled with good old Allannah, pure and sane. Then I found myself partner to Teddie Gerrard, who whirled me round the room singing at the top of her voice and shocking the last of the dowagers off to their beds. I felt a little wild and unrespectable, dancing with this drunken houri! But our abandon inspired Lady Dean Paul's daughter Brenda to rival us with an energetic and hilarious Charleston. Teddie Gerrard doubled up and tried to do likewise, but couldn't. She yelled in her hoarse voice, 'I only do that sort of thing when I'm paid for it!' She then became more and more tight, rushed round the room waving her arms and (without being paid) sang songs of days gone by. She took delight in teasing Allannah, dashed up saying, 'You're a great, fat lump! Lump, a great lump! Great, fat lump!' Once or twice, beside herself, she shouted out such obscene retorts as 'balls!' Then, through the alcoholic veil, she realised she had over-stepped the bounds. Her eyes would pop and she'd cover her open mouth with a gloved hand. She then assumed dignity as she surveyed the scene through lorgnettes. This prompted her to clutch my face and say, 'Oh, you're beautiful, beautiful! Look at your eyes! you've got no lids! Neither have I. That makes the space between your lashes and brows so marvellous! Augustus John says it is the most important part of a face. You've got no eyelids and neither have I. Oh, I adore beauty!' She clutched my face again, turning it to see me in profile while Allannah and the 'dairymaid' 'dairymaid' giggled. Teddie Gerrard decided to start a club for people without eyelids and made me a charter member: 'I'm giving a little party here tomorrow. You must come!' Her exit was spectacular. Too drunk to walk, she pretended that her little toe hurt, then lurched up the stairs. Her cloak was given to her. She pulled it over her back as though it were a bath towel. There followed a deafening crash and Miss Teddie Gerrard had vanished. Attention now shifted to

Lady Dean Paul, who played her own compositions at the piano. 'I'm drunk,' La Poldowska, or whatever she calls herself herself professionally, candidly remarked to her audience. Yet in spite of this confession Lady D. P. remembered everything she had ever written — Femme Laide. The Caledonian Market Suite, Midnight Blues, and one vulgar but effective number called Those Cud-Cud-Cuddle Blues. We danced, we played Nuts in May, we did Viennese waltzes and lancers and a Children's Dancing Class. Everyone 'talked common' — the smart thing to do at the moment: 'That's a bit of all right; I don't mind if I do; oo-er!' How tiresome it becomes. I looked at Allanah and appreciated her nice baby air among all these fly-blown revellers. I came home in a taxi, sharing it with the 'dairymaid'. I suspected he was a sponger and, sure enough, he borrowed ten shillings from me.

October 19th

I got ready for Teddie Gerrard's party, shaving carefully in case she should clutch at my face again. Off again in a taxi to Yeoman's Row. (How is it that one goes twice to the same place, by the same route, and yet the fare on the meter is different?) I met Allanah on the doorstep. Together, we faced the music. Teddie was all dressed up to the nines again. She wore an embroidered silver dress and a tiara. She looked thoroughly sheepish as she met my eye. Two old men, who had been drunk last night, arrived and started to get drunk again tonight. The 'dairymaid' sidled in. Irene Dean Paul tottered about, looking like a Marie Laurencin poodle in a checked, tailor-made suit with a pink blouse. She said, 'I'm a disgrace. I'm not dressed, I'm not clean, and my head wants re-dipping!' There were now about two inches of white hair showing at the roots. With Teddie Gerrard tonight was her young lover. I'd met him on the Lido, but he didn't utter then or now. He always looks completely miserable. I suppose it is his pose, or else he's blasé. At sixteen he was reputed to be the most precocious youth ever, driving racing cars and having affairs with all the most famous beauties in continental casinos. Now he gives the impression of an unhappy puppy, bored and insolent. Teddie Gerrard is mad about him. At dinner I sat next to Allanah. Teddie Gerrard, despairing of her silent lover, chipped in on our conversation about Gertrude Stein. After dinner Lady Dean Paul played as usual. It

was impossible to believe we weren't in hell, repeating last night's festivities all over again: the same people, the same dark room and the same dingy things in it. Then we danced. Once Teddie's silent lover forgot himself so far as to do a Charleston and stand on his head. But he soon went back to a sofa with a wrinkle on his forehead, there to be pawed by the old vampire. I didn't feel best pleased with Teddie Gerrard tonight, partly because it wasn't my face she was clutching! Butter lips shared my taxi home. This time he borrowed a pound.