

# The Second Life of

Beauty, talent, success—she had them all, yet never could escape the fears

NINE-YEAR-OLD Deborah's frantic screams pierced the night. Her mother rushed into her room to find her daughter cowering under her blankets. "The tree," she screamed. "The tree—it's going to crush me to death!"

The mother cradled the girl's head in her arms and talked to her soothingly. What happened was nothing new. Deborah had been frightened again and again by the gnarled old elm tree outside her window, which spread a terrifying shadow across her bed.

"I always feared the tree would crash through the house and bury me beneath its weight," Deborah Kerr, now a mature and internationally acclaimed movie actress, confessed to me a short while ago. "Yet the tree was only a symbol of the insecurity that has haunted me through most of my life."

Deborah Kerr's insecurity can be traced to an invalid father, a persecution complex in school, an unsuccessful marriage, and the fact that, feminine as she is, for a long while she had to play the role of decision maker, "man of the house."

Her only refuge had been her work, on which she concentrated with such fanaticism that a long-time acquaintance, actress Lois

Maxwell, once remarked: "Nothing will ever stop this girl from getting what she wants."

At last Deborah has got what she wants—but not the way Lois pictured it. After many laurels as an actress in "From Here to Eternity," "The King and I," "Tea and Sympathy," "Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison," and "Separate Tables," Deborah's interest in her career has suddenly limited itself to an occasional "irresistible" role—such as "The Innocents," which she recently completed for 20th-Century Fox. I learned the reason for this change during the three days I spent with her and her new husband, writer Peter Viertel, in their mountain hideaway near Klosters, Switzerland.

She welcomed me in front of her split-level house as I approached on a path which winds between two ponds used for swimming in summer and skating in winter.

Outwardly I could see no change in Deborah. She looked radiantly beautiful with her

red hair, pale freckled complexion, and classic features. Her warm, friendly handshake promised the kind of welcome that has made Deborah the most popular of all actresses among her coworkers.

I sensed, though, that only the surface was the same. This was a "new" Deborah Kerr, relaxed, self-confident, and happy. Most of the change—intentionally or otherwise—has been brought about by her new husband. Peter Viertel is the strong, forceful, "old-country" type of husband who has given her a direction she has never had before.

DEBORAH'S childhood terrors, which in various ways she carried into adult life, had their beginnings in her early family life in Scotland. It was a close-knit, happy family, but Deborah's beloved father, a civil engineer, was slowly wasting away with tuberculosis contracted during World War I in the Dardanelles where he also lost a leg.

At nine, Deborah was sent to a boarding school to relieve the burden on her mother; these days were possibly the unhappiest of her life, a series of badgerings and bullyings from the older girls there who saw in

# Deborah Kerr

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

of childhood; that came only with marriage to a forceful and dominant man

sensitive Deborah an easy whipping girl.

Despite her shyness and fears, Deborah turned to play acting as a release, and when her father died she took up the stage in order to support her mother and younger brother. Deborah's passiveness and quiet beauty didn't combine for overnight success. There were only bit parts until Gabriel Pascal, a producer who was casting for Bernard Shaw's "Major Barbara," spotted her and asked, "Who is this sweet little maiden?"

Deborah won a supporting role, and in 1947 Pascal sold her contract to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for \$250,000. Deborah's natural standoffishness gained her the title of "The Duchess" in Hollywood, but, surprisingly, genuine affection as well. In a town where extrovertism is a way of life, Deborah Kerr somehow won favor simply by being her own introverted self.

But she did not overcome those old haunting fears and the childhood apprehensions she'd known since Scotland. In 1945, she turned to marriage as a more fulfilling escape from insecurity than work had provided. Her first husband was Anthony Bartley, a handsome Royal Air Force ace, who

was doomed by circumstances to play a secondary role in their marriage—much to the disappointment of both partners.

For 12 years, as Deborah's acting star rose, Tony followed her to locations all over the world. Tony's activities, first as Deborah's business manager and later as a television and movie producer, were always eclipsed by his wife's fame. One friend explained their marriage failure this way: "He could no longer endure the lot of an uncelebrated man married to a celebrated woman."

AS ALWAYS, when difficulties in her private life became unbearable, Deborah turned more and more to acting as her refuge from feelings of inadequacy. Even she admits that it is a form of escape. "I have always wanted to be other people—not just one other, but many others."

Marriage to Peter Viertel—who is of German, Austrian, Polish, and Russian descent—has at last brought Deborah out of this unreal existence. At times he acts as a sort of father confessor, allowing Deborah to discuss her fears, an opportunity she hasn't had since she was a little girl.

Having a dominant man in the house who is willing to shoulder responsibility has been good for both Deborah and her daughters, who divide their time between Bartley and the Viertels. Peter has relieved Deborah from the responsibility of being the "heavy" with her daughters, a task always distasteful to her. On the other hand, the girls appreciate the new strictness in their lives. "Melanie and Francesca respond to his marvelous way with youngsters," Deborah says. "He is direct and blunt. If they're making too much noise, he simply tells them to 'shut up,' and they always do."

Peter is just as firm with Deborah. "I've never been interested in clothes, for one thing," Deborah explains. "I hate shopping—it's ghastly—but Peter insists that I go with him. While he likes casual clothing here in Klosters, in town he demands elegance. As a result, I'm much better dressed today."

What will the future hold for Deborah? After years of submergence in her career, Deborah admits, "I'm finding it increasingly hard to work."

She considers this a good sign because at last she can relax. Professional opportunities

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