

Someone who knew well the compassionate,
charming young girl of yesterday tells what might have caused
her to become the woman she is today

By ADELE WHITELY FLETCHER

WHERE DID Elizabeth Taylor go—the young Elizabeth with her rare beauty of body and spirit? Those of us who knew her when she was a little girl and a young woman will never cease to wonder.

Elizabeth had that extra sense of communion that is given only to the few. Like a sensitive instrument, she seemed able to tune in on the hearts and minds of people—and of animals, too.

When she was a toddler in England, she charmed the birds with her tiny sounds so that, chirping, they would fly low around her.

When she was a little older, her mare Betty threw her the first time she tried to ride her. But Elizabeth determinedly and patiently led the horse around the garden explaining how she was her new mistress and that they must be friends. Betty continued to give others a bad time, but after that she was always gentle with Elizabeth.

The single quality of the young Elizabeth that remains recognizable today is her fierce determination. This was a splendid thing when it was aligned with her early empathy and compassion. But harnessed to her present self-indulgence, it is frightening.

The girl she used to be would have been mortified by the editorials in the Italian press that condemned her affair with Richard Burton. But the woman she has come to be dismissed them, saying, "It's only because we're in a Catholic country that there's all this fuss."

Stories of the young Elizabeth have been told often enough to be legendary. Among them is Mrs. Taylor's story of how, when Elizabeth was three years old and quite ill, she implored her parents to let her self-appointed godfather, Maj. Victor Cazalet, M.P., sit with her so her parents could get some rest.

This sounds unlikely for a three-year-old, and there have been times when Sara Taylor's tales of her daughter have exceeded our belief. But this story we do believe; it is so wholly in keeping with the sensitive child Elizabeth used to be.

It was also a prelude to her first wedding day when, coming down the aisle with Nicky Hilton, she paused at the family pew to kiss her mother tenderly. She planned the honeymoon, too, so that she and Nicky, following a week at Carmel, Calif., and prior to their departure for Europe, would be home for Mother's Day.

Should Elizabeth be reminded of these episodes she would almost certainly dismiss them with an emphatic, "Corn!"

Maybe they are a little corny. But they're pleasanter to think about than her subsequent

disdain of her parents any time they've presumed to disapprove of something she has done. Or the way they seem to be summoned (this, we're sure, at the behest of public-relations experts) whenever public disapproval runs high.

Sara Taylor automatically puts a glamorous interpretation on everything Elizabeth does. But there have been times when we wished we knew the private thoughts of Francis Taylor, a retired art dealer and a most dignified, knowledgeable, and conservative gentleman.

To trace how Elizabeth's aggressiveness and ruthlessness came into being, let us take her husbands after Nicky Hilton, one by one. (Later we will come back to Nicky, whom she loved before she showed these characteristics.)

Husband No. 2 was Michael Wilding. Elizabeth proposed to him when she was a divorcee of 19. Twice her age, he hesitated. But she was totally unabashed and phoned daily until he said yes. Her pattern of feverish pursuit had begun.

The Wildings lived lavishly and casually in a \$75,000 mountaintop ranch house with all kinds of animals and, eventually, their two sons, Michael and Christopher. Elizabeth went about in her bare feet much of the time. She often forgot to order dinner. And she and Michael, laughing at mounting debts, showered each other with jewels, cars, or anything that caught their fancy.

Husband No. 3, Mike Todd, was equally extravagant. Her engagement ring was 29½ carats. "Thirty," Mike grinned, "would be vulgar."

DURING THE TIME she was on location in Kentucky for "Raintree County," he hired a plane and flew her to Chicago for lunch one day in the elegant Pump Room. On their wedding night, fireworks of entwined hearts with the initials "M. T." and "E. T. T." lit the Mexican sky. After their marriage, she had a green Rolls Royce to match his black one.

When Liza was born prematurely by Caesarean section, Elizabeth opened her eyes to hospital walls hung with a Renoir and a Monet.

Husband No. 4 was Eddie Fisher, who had been best man at her wedding to Mike Todd. Their relationship began a few months after Mike's death and was marked by an ever-increasing self-centeredness on Elizabeth's part. Having "captured" Eddie, she laughed at those who urged her to send him back to Debbie Reynolds, his wife of less than three years, and their two small children.

How different this was from the young Elizabeth. At 13, she wrote and illustrated *Nibbles and Me*, a little book about a chipmunk she had captured—and then freed because she feared it was a wife or husband.

Liz and Richard Burton costar in "Cleopatra." Their next: "The VIPs."



What caused the change? I am convinced that it was during her honeymoon with Nicky Hilton at Monte Carlo that the woman Elizabeth promised to be was lost.

Nicky loved to gamble. She cared nothing for it and used to wait for him in the Casino foyer. Occasionally she would plead, "Please, Nicky, can't we go home now?" But he always wanted to play a little longer. Sometimes she returned to their hotel alone. And mornings, while he slept, she often appeared alone on the beach, her alarming loss of weight showing, her beautiful face white and strained.

When this honeymoon was over, the marriage was, too. Friends believed Elizabeth was distraught and urged her to see a psychiatrist. But she refused: "I have to fight this myself."

SHE FOUGHT IT HERSELF and managed to overcome a breakdown. No one has ever accused her of lacking spirit. But she did not save herself—as a psychiatrist might have been able to do—from the harm that had been done her psyche.

It was, I'm sure, the hurt and humiliation Elizabeth knew at Monte Carlo that since have compelled her to triumph in her romances at all cost—as if, over and over, she must prove her attraction for men to herself and to the world.

Anyone as accident-prone and as frequently ill as Elizabeth must be unhappy. Within a 13-year span, she is reputed to have had 56 illnesses, injuries, and accidents.

We find Elizabeth's recent pattern frightening: her inability to be on time . . . her short-lived marriages . . . the uncaring way she imperils the financial structures of her movie producers . . . her frequent hospitalization with recurrent rumors of sleeping pills.

Those of us who have known Elizabeth for many years believe she could reclaim some portion at least of the beauty of spirit she used to possess. Her empathy is still working. Her acting, which gets better and better, is not the result of any theory or technique. It comes from the sensitivity with which she identifies with her characters.

"I think about them," she says, "until I feel what they would feel." Surely if she can identify with fictitious people, she can identify with real people, too—like the wives and children of the men she's attracted to or anyone who may, for one reason or another, stand in her way.

Should Elizabeth ever focus her fierce determination upon reclaiming the woman she once promised to be, nothing will stop her.

And if she does not? Again, nothing will stop her. Then "Whatever happened to Elizabeth Taylor?" may no longer be a fanciful question.

It may be a very tragic one.