

CHAPTER 7

Hollywood and home

'Beauty comes when fashion is successful.' Coco Chanel

In 1929, banks and businesses around the world disappeared. This was because of the Wall Street Crash. Millions of people lost their money and their jobs. There were fewer rich customers for expensive clothes like Chanel's, and in such hard times even the richest people didn't want to *look* rich. Chanel had to cut her prices. When this didn't work, she had to lose some of her workers.

While business in France was slow, film-maker Sam Goldwyn offered her a million dollars to come and work for him in Hollywood. He was happy to build her a workroom just like the one in Paris, and she didn't even have to live in California for more than a few months. It was an interesting offer, but Chanel was not the first French fashion designer to go to Hollywood. Others had gone and met real problems there. Making clothes for a film star was very different from designing dresses to sell to anybody.

But Chanel agreed, and in 1931 she travelled to the US with her friend Misia. Chanel's job was to design clothes for film stars – not just the clothes in films, but also the clothes that they wore at other times. Goldwyn wanted clothes that were still in fashion when the film was seen. It was part of Chanel's job to guess future fashions.

The arrangement was for Chanel to work on three Goldwyn films. She produced her usual elegant clothes for the first two of these, but neither film was very successful. Some people said that Chanel's dresses were

too quiet and elegant for Hollywood films. Chanel did not really like Hollywood life very much anyway. She had agreed to work on one more film, but she could do this work in Paris.

On their way home to Europe, Chanel and Misia stopped in New York. Interested in the fashion business here, Chanel looked around the city's fashion area and visited some of the most famous shops like Macy's and Bloomingdale's. But her biggest surprise came in a cheap shop called Klein's. The dresses here were very cheap, but the styles were not so different from the *haute couture* fashions in the expensive department stores. Only the kinds of fabric were different. At this moment, Chanel decided not to try and stop copies of her designs any more. In her opinion, copies were just a sign of success.



When she was back in Europe, she had a fashion show in London. None of the clothes in the show were for sale. Chanel wanted people to copy them. Society women paid a lot of money to see the clothes, and brought their dressmakers with them. The money was used to help people who had injuries from the war.

Chanel was happy to return to her 'real' design work after her time in Hollywood. She continued to push fashion into new areas, working with different fabrics and styles. She also chose a new colour. In Chanel's opinion, if you dress a woman in white or black, she will be the only woman that people will see. She had already made the successful little black dress. Now it was time for the clean white dress. All of the clothes in Chanel's 1933 spring collection were white. Again, Chanel led the way and the collection was a big success.

Around this time, Chanel decided to live in the Ritz Hotel in the centre of Paris. For the rest of her life, she spent much of her time in this beautiful hotel.



Chanel at the Ritz Hotel

These years were not always easy for Chanel. She was losing some of her most famous customers to other designers. The most successful of these was Elsa Schiaparelli. She was Italian – Chanel called her 'that Italian woman who makes dresses' – but Schiaparelli lived in Paris. The styles of the two designers could not be more different. Chanel's clothes were simple and elegant; Schiaparelli liked to use bright colours and put unusual things together in the same clothes. Coco said that everybody copied her designs; Schiaparelli said that nobody could copy *her* designs.

Other designers in Paris were not Chanel's only worry. Some people thought that New York was the future of the fashion world now, not Paris. In general, fewer people had the money for expensive fashions, and those with enough money were sometimes less interested in *haute couture*. Chanel knew that she had to work hard. She wanted to show that she was still the best.