

Liberty

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The Private Life of Barbara Stanwyck

*From an Orphan Asylum to One of the Screen's
Brightest Stars, She Fought for Happiness
and Found It with Her Husband*

By CLARA BERANGER



IN the studio from nine to six she is Barbara Stanwyck. After six, outside the studio, she is Mrs. Frank Fay. And proud of it.

Carpenters, electricians, sound engineers, cameramen, and directors like to work on a Stanwyck picture because the star is such a grand trouper. She will go through a scene over and over again without complaint. She is never late, never tired. She works hard, cheerfully and steadily. But it must be within regulation hours. At six she quits. To go to her home and her husband.

If any of the big bosses urge her to stay, her Irish temper is unleashed. If they aren't satisfied, they can break her contract.

And to hell with 'em. She has starved before; she'll starve again rather than jeopardize the happiness she waited so long to find.

There are many divorces in stage and screenland. Publicity devoured voraciously by limelights is disgorged in lurid tales of marital fights.

Egos, male and female, need flattery. Artists, particularly actors, need more flattery than business men and women. More marriages in the theatrical world are wrecked by professional jealousy than by sexual jealousy.

And yet, if you were to listen in on a Stanwyck-Fay conversation, you'd hear something like this:

"Say, Stanwyck" (Frank always calls her Stanwyck; she calls him Fay), "you're lookin' like a million dollars tonight. Where'd you get that new outfit?"

"It's not new, you boob. I've had it a coupla months."

"I guess it must be you, then, kid. You make everything you wear look swell."

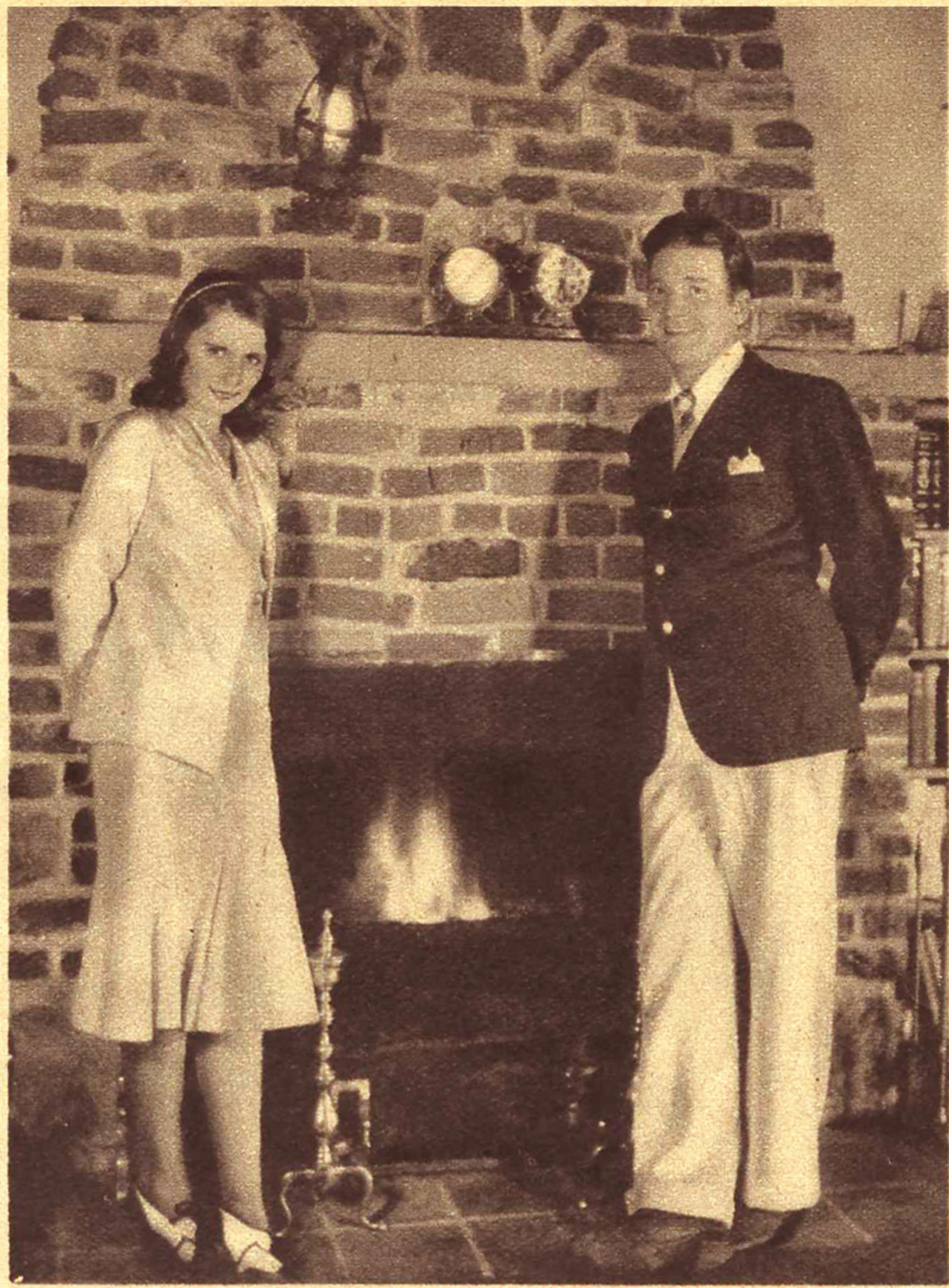
"You're pretty swell yourself, baby. When it comes to looks you can high-hat anybody in Hollywood."

Flattery. But honest flattery. Frank Fay thinks his wife is the best gal in the world. And Barbara Stanwyck is convinced that no one can be compared to her red-haired husband. No stinting of praise. No professional jealousy. Two people who love each other and put their love above material possessions and worldly success.

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*That really happy couple, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Fay.
To the public, Mrs. Fay is Barbara Stanwyck.*

It's like the happy ending to a Cinderella story.

The little Irish girl, whose real name is Ruby Stevens, learned drama and tragedy in the gutter.

When she was two her mother died. The father, unable to cope with grief and poverty, went away without knowing or caring what happened to the children. They were separated, put in different homes for a time; and then two of them, Barbara and a slightly older brother, were placed in an orphans' home.



"Did you ever notice the expression on the faces of orphans?" Barbara asked me one day. "They're all alike. There's a deadness, a dreariness about them that to anyone who has ever lived in an orphanage marks them at once. Their eyes are lonely. As if they're searching for a companion, a friend. Someone to belong to. It's a terrible thing to feel you haven't one single person in the world you can go to with your troubles."

For six years the children stayed in that institution. Then came word that their father was coming back. He was on his way. They began looking in the windows of stores to select furniture for a home. At last they would be a family like everyone else.

When the big ocean liner steamed toward the dock, four eager children dressed in their poor best were waiting. But their father never came. He had died *en route* and, according to maritime rule, had been buried at sea.

With hopes dead, little Ruby Stevens went back to the orphanage. And there she stayed until she was thirteen, never quite able to relinquish her golden dreams of a happy future somewhere.

In all these dreams was woven the yearning to dance. She couldn't afford to take lessons. But in the orphanage, on the streets, anywhere, she found release from unhappiness by inventing gay dance steps. Her audience was the children of the streets, her music a hurdy-gurdy or her own voice humming an accompaniment.

When, at thirteen, she was faced with the problem of supporting herself, she took a job as office girl. She took many humble jobs after that before she got a chance to use her dancing as a means of livelihood.

When the chance came it was an accident.

She had applied to the Remick Music Company for office work. The big boss discovered that she could dance, and gave her a tryout in the chorus of a revue. Without training, she got the job. On her nerve. And because she was a "natural" in dancing.

"Ruby Stevens" didn't sound like a stage name to her. She picked the "Stanwyck" from a theater program, and "Barbara" was a name she had always loved.

The dictionary defines "barbaric" as "rudely splendid, striking, picturesque." This girl was rudely splendid—and is. And she is splendidly rude. Her language is all her own. Barbaric.

She would tell a studio executive to go to hell. And she'd go through hell for a friend.

She is a striking, picturesque personality. When she loves, it is with an elemental intensity that is almost bitter.

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She is reserved, undemonstrative, direct. Life to her is a game that must be played straight. Black is black and white is white, with no vague unsubstantial shadings in between.

Honesty flashes like a beam of sunlight from her clear gray-blue eyes. There is banter in them, and wit. But she seldom smiles.

Honesty underscores the curves of her sensitive, mobile mouth. And her hair, which has the color and sheen of old mahogany, has never been bleached nor dyed. A rare testimonial to personal honesty in a place where hair is changed with every passing fad for a new type.

SHE has plenty of sex. But her natural integrity has always prevented her from using sex to further her own career.

"Say, you gotta live with yourself," she said to me. "How can a girl live with herself if she hasn't got any self-respect? And how can she have any self-respect if she pretends to love a man just to get a job?"

I have met all kinds of women in my life. And it is always the woman who has to fight her way in the world of men who develops the broad honesty of the masculine viewpoint. She learns to meet life squarely—to take trouble on the chin. And to mind her own business.

Barbara Stanwyck never loved a man before she met Frank Fay. And she never pretended to.

It was while she was rehearsing



for Burlesque that she met him. The season before, a group of cabaret girls were needed for the stage production of *The Noose*. Barbara was among them and did a bit so well that she was chosen for the part of the dancer in *Burlesque*. It was her first big break. And her first hit. When I saw *Burlesque*

in New York I was struck by the fresh charm, the vivid beauty of a girl I had never heard of before. We people of the theatrical arts get hard-boiled. But here was a girl, a newcomer, who caught me by the throat. I felt honesty, sincerity, and a deep underlying humanness in her acting. All the unhappiness and grief of her lonely childhood have gone into the making of a fine emotional actress.

And all her yearning for love and romance has been fulfilled in her life with Frank Fay.

Theirs was a fighting romance. When Oscar Levant, a friend of Frank Fay, took Barbara back stage, all that Barbara could think of was that Fay was the big shot of the Palace.

He *must* be high-hat. She wasn't going to let him high-hat her!

She was almost rude. She wouldn't laugh at his wise cracks even if she thought they were funny. She wouldn't tell him how wonderful she thought he was. When she opened in *Burlesque* he sent her a telegram. And flowers.

Later came an invitation to supper. She went. And insulted him for three hours. He got fighting mad and insulted her.

Barbara was beginning to like the vaudeville star. But she was afraid. On the defensive lest he hurt her. Striking him before he had a chance to strike her. Not with intent to kill. She was too naïve.

But she did kill. The man who was getting all kinds of mash notes and flattery from women fell for the splendidly rude, picturesque young creature who consistently insulted him. Fell so hard that he knew he would never have any peace until she married him.

It took her a long time to make up her mind. When she married, she wanted it to be for keeps. She had to be sure.

And when, over a year later, they were married, they were both sure.

All her craving for love, all her desire for a home have gone into the simple Brentwood place where she lives as Mrs. Frank Fay. No wonder she is proud of it.

"Do you know," she said to me wistfully, "it took me a long time to get used to having someone I could take my troubles to? When we were first married I'd sit off in a corner and think things out by myself. Frank used to say, 'What's the trouble, kid?' And I'd answer, 'Nothing.' It bothered him because he thought I wasn't happy with him. One day he said, half joking but really hurt, 'Don't you know who I am? I'm the guy you married. And that means for worse as well as for better.





Barbara Stanwyck in a scene from *Burlesque*, with Paul Porter, Hal Skelly, and Laura Hamilton.

Tell your troubles to old Doc Fay and get 'em outa your system.'

"It was hard, but I did confide in him. And I've done it ever since. Gee," she added with a radiant smile, "it's swell to have somebody to talk to, somebody who can stand between you and the world!"

Recently, when Columbia Pictures sued Barbara Stanwyck for a breach of contract, Frank Fay stood behind her. Even though he thought she was in the wrong, and told her so privately in no uncertain language.

That particular episode is characteristic. Frank was in New York doing a vaudeville act. Barbara was preparing for her picture, *Forbidden*. She had come home as usual from the studio at six o'clock. But the house was empty.

Barbara played a few chords on the piano and banged the keys with a crashing discord. She wandered around aimlessly, rearranged a chair, patted a sofa cushion, straightened a picture on the wall. She thought of all the friends she might telephone. "Oh, hell! What's the use?" She didn't want any of them.

She picked up the evening paper. Casually turned to the movie column.

Ann Harding had just had her contract renewed at Pathé at a huge advance of salary. Good for Ann! thought Barbara. She's a swell person and a grand actress.

But here, what's this?

Constance Bennett to make three pictures for Warner Brothers for a fabulous sum? More about Warner Brothers. They signed Ruth Chatterton at a figure that looked like an aggregate of blue-chip stocks before the crash.

Barbara hit the ceiling. Here she was in Hollywood, lonely, missing Frank like the devil. And what for? So that all these other stars could be getting the plums from the movie pudding? Not on your life!

FULL of resentment and rage, she went to the telephone and called Harry Cohn, the big boss of Columbia.

"Look here, you! I'm going to New York to Frank! I'm not going to make your lousy old picture! Get me?"

Harry Cohn didn't know what had struck her. He tried diplomacy. "You don't mean that, kid."

"Don't I? I'm leaving for New York tomorrow!"

Here Harry in his turn hit the ceiling. The telephone sizzled.

"You've gone off your nut!" he shouted. "You can't break your contract."

"Like hell I can't!" Barbara shouted back at him. "You'll give me fifty thousand dollars for that picture or I'll leave it flat!"

"You'll do the picture for what you said in the contract or I'll sue you!"

"Sue and be damned to you!" she bellowed.

Still in a rage, she put in a call for New York. When Frank Fay heard what she had done, his reaction was the same as Harry Cohn's. Only Frank's reproof was gentler.

"You can't break your contract, kid. You can't walk out on a picture. It just isn't done."

"Well, I'm going to do it," Barbara answered peevishly. "Meet me at the Grand Central Station at nine forty on Saturday."

He met her. The spitfire mood had dissolved on the



Barbara Stanwyck

train. She was a tender, enchanting wife, radiant with the joy of reunion with her mate. She wouldn't let him talk about her breach of contract.

But after Columbia had won the case in court, Frank insisted that she should apologize to Harry Cohn for the delay and the extra expense she had cost him.

"He made me apologize," she told me laughingly. "But, gosh! I hated it worse than anything I ever had to do. What burned me up, though, was that everybody blamed Frank! The papers all said it was his influence. They even hinted that he was jealous because I was being more successful in pictures than he was. They ought to have heard him reading the riot act to me."

"Why didn't he answer his critics and tell what he really thought?" I asked.

SHE looked at me reproachfully. "How could he, without telling 'em he thought I had been a darned little fool? Nope. He took the rap and stood behind me. He would. He's that kind of a guy."

Nothing makes Barbara happier than talking about her husband.

"Did you ever hear about the time Frank offered to pay my salary?"

"I heard something about it," I told her. "But I don't believe half the stories I hear."

"This one's no lie. You see, I had a contract with Columbia—you know, one of those 'if satisfactory' contracts. The first picture I made for them was *The Locked Door*. It was just plain lousy. Harry Cohn thought I was through. And I couldn't blame him much.

"But Frank never let him tell me. He went to Harry Cohn and offered to pay my salary if Harry would give me another chance.

"'Nix,' said Harry. 'She'd spoil any picture she's in. She's rotten.'

"'I tell you she's a great emotional actress,' Frank said. 'You take up the option and I'll not only pay her salary, I'll pay half the production cost.'

"'That won't make the picture any better,' Harry answered. 'I don't want her for nothing. She's rotten.'"

Frank was working at Warners' at the time and he had his director make a test of Barbara in an emotional scene. The director managed to bring out on the celluloid what Frank knew she had in her.

He took the test back to Columbia and forced Cohn to look at it. Frank Capra, who was slated to direct, looked at it with them. Capra and Harry Cohn were convinced. And Barbara got the rôle in *Ladies of Leisure*. That was the beginning of her climb to the top ranks of Hollywood stars.

Frank Fay never told her he had offered to pay her salary and half the production cost. It was Harry Cohn himself who let the cat out of the bag during one of the heated arguments over *Forbidden*. He told her if it hadn't been for Frank's belief in her and his persistence she wouldn't be on the screen.

"What do you mean?" Barbara flared out.

Harry related the whole episode, including the offer.

"That's a damned lie!" she said.

Cohn shrugged. "Ask him."

That night Frank shamefacedly admitted it.

"You see, kid," he said, "I knew you had great stuff. But I was afraid if Columbia fired you, you might never let go in front of a camera again."

"I ask you," she said when she finished telling me the story, "wasn't that pretty swell of him?" Her eyes were filled with tears. "He sure is a regular guy."

When she said "regular guy," it struck me that the truest phrase anyone could use to define *her* is "regular guy." For everything I know about her bears out that characterization of her.

One of the humble jobs she had before she got her first chance in that revue chorus was selling patterns for Condé Nast. She admits that she didn't know anything about patterns and was completely at a loss when she had to explain to some "home dressmaker" how to use one. But she stuck at it, enlivening her idle moments by practicing dancing.

The office reception room had such a good rehearsal floor that Stanwyck



couldn't resist dancing whenever she got a chance. To demonstrate to some of the other employees how her dancing had improved, she went into a cart wheel which was more graceful than elegant—head down, feet in the air, body supported on both hands. In walked the big boss, Mr. Nast himself. There was no reprimand, no fireworks. Just a cold look of disapproval. A blue envelope giving two weeks' notice, and Stanwyck was fired.

Afterward, when Barbara Stanwyck was the star of Burlesque, Condé Nast came back stage to see her, and to introduce some of his smart friends to this newest celebrity.

"Honest to goodness," she said, when she was telling me about it, "I didn't know what in the hell to say to 'em—they all talked verry, verry English. Can you imagine me, with my Brooklyn accent, and the kinda tough way of speaking I had gotten into by playing gangsters' molls, acting up the part of a lady with those dames?"

I HAD heard about this incident and a sequel to it to the effect that later Condé Nast gave one of his swanky Sunday-afternoon teas for her, and that La Stanwyck electrified his guests by doing a cart wheel for them. When I asked her if this was true, she giggled.

"Yeah, he did give a tea for me, and I knew it was going to be one of those ritzy affairs. I wanted to go, but, honestly, I was scared stiff. I just couldn't get up my nerve. So I sent Mr. Nast a note and told him I couldn't make the grade." She broke into a mischievous grin. "Gosh, I wish I'd thought of that cart-wheel stunt. If I had, I might have gone, just for the fun of watching what would happen when I did it!"

I'm quite sure that the Barbara Stanwyck of this day and date wouldn't hesitate to turn a cart wheel at any time and in any place that she happened to feel the urge. She knows she will never acquire the drawing-room manner, so she might just as well have fun being herself.

She's healthy in her tastes. She likes roast beef and steak better than any other food. Plain, everyday beef. And she likes it rare.

She dresses simply all the time. The showiness of picture stars on parade arouses her disgust.

"I wouldn't wear an ermine coat to a Hollywood opening if I was offered the coat and a thousand-dollar bonus," she said. "Did you know that all the ermine coats the furriers had in stock were rented to movie people for the opening of Grand Hotel?" She giggled. "Imagine putting on a show like that just to let people think you're more prosperous than you are! Not for me!"

And not for her the garish make-up affected so much in Hollywood. She believes in soap and water. And she uses no cosmetics off the screen.

SHE swims. Plays tennis. Takes long walks. She loves a good prize fight, and she smokes cigarettes. Not with the dainty affectation of some women smokers, but with the unaffected enjoyment of a man. She is lusty. She's a square shooter and she's a good sport.

Her director told me of the time she was called away from the set by a telephone call from Malibu Beach. Frank Fay was at the other end of the wire with the news that their summer home had burned to the ground. Nothing was saved.

"Are you O. K.?" she asked quickly.

"Sure, kid. I tried to help save some of the things, but the wind was strong and we couldn't do a thing."

"Oh, well, that's that," she said. "I got to get back to work now. See you tonight."



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She hung up and went back to the stage. For four hours she rehearsed and played before the camera. Not a word to anyone about what had happened. At six o'clock, when the last shot was finished, she went off in a corner and burst into tears.

Stanwyck crying!

Between sobs, she explained.

"I'm not crying about the house," she stammered. "That's gone and it's not worth crying over. But there was a picture of my sister who died—and—and I'm not sure I can get another one like it."

The story seems to me to give the answer to Barbara Stanwyck's popular appeal. She feels deeply about people. Not about things.

The audiences who watch her on the screen recognize and love the humanness of a fellow creature. Her heart beats with the rhythm of their hearts.

Life was drab, forlorn, pitiful. But it gave her the strength to endure.

Whatever the future may have in store for her she will meet with her chin up.

Only, she hopes that Frank Fay will always be beside her. Together they will love and live, rejoice and suffer.

"As long as we're together," she said to me with a wistful sort of smile, "everything's going to be O. K."

