

Article: Taylor & Stanwyck: A Legendary Meeting

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{comments on}

Author's Notes:

Much has been written about how legendary actors Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck met. It is known that they were legally married for just shy of twelve years, considered one of Hollywood's most stable relationships of the time. They first came together in 1936 at the Trocadero night club on Sunset Strip. Bob was in the presence of his agent and Barbara was in the company of her best friends—her agent, Zeppo Marx, of the Marx Brothers, and his wife, Marion. Bob was on his way up in the Hollywood publicity structure; Barbara was already well-known but she was sad after her divorce and was having a hard time, personally.

My research has shown the real Barbara Stanwyck to have been a particularly vulnerable woman in her private life. In Bob Taylor's early career, he was used by the studio as "eye candy" for starlets and the wives of visiting dignitaries, so it wasn't unusual for him to have to go to a club just to be seen. Sometimes meetings were arranged for him. This was one of those evenings. Barbara knew she was expected to meet someone; Bob did not.

Personalities as drawn here are likely comparisons to what was known to be Bob's, and Barbara's, personality, as well as even that of Marion Marx, whose words gave me much of this background, and clear-cut indicators of Barbara's emotional frailty, especially during this period.

Yet the exact "how" of it all has been lost to history ... so here is a fictionalized account, using the specifics that are known. Enjoy the possibilities.

Bob Taylor made a face in the mirror, sucking in his right cheek and squinting only his right eye. What the heck, he thought, maybe I should make this face tonight as the lightbulbs flash! What has Don gotten me into yet again? He shook his head. Bob didn't want to go out. It was only another prearranged publicity affair, designed for him to be seen—to allow photographers to take his picture from every angle, and plaster his face all over newspapers, fan magazines, and wire services. He was already tiring of the process.

But it was the process. It was what he'd signed up to do when he put his signature on the dotted line of the MGM contract; and with that, he was required to go along for the ride. No less than Louis B. Mayer had made sure he understood this part of the job. He was, after all, a star, wasn't he?!

Yep, he was a star. Or so he was told, so all those screaming, fawning, sometimes-fainting women seemed to indicate. How in the world did he bring about such attention?

His reflection smirked back at him. Don't believe it, Arly, it told him. There were still times he could think of himself as only Arlington. That was his name, Spangler Arlington Brugh. Don't believe a word of it, Arly. You're still a doctor's son from Nebraska. And you're better off always remembering that you're a doctor's son from Nebraska, not the "Man With The Perfect Profile."

Bob picked up his tortoise-shell comb from the toilette in front of him, so carefully-laid-out by one of the many folks now working for him. As he swept his expensively-cut hair away from each side of his widow's peak, seeing the sheen in his dark strands, he knew the truth. He was now a created man. He was no longer his own person, and he had readily accepted the role in exchange for all it had to offer him. It was now his job, day by day, to uphold this extravagant, unreal image.

The image, as it looked back at him, finally seemed all in one just-right piece for the evening, so he and it shrugged, and he stepped away from the mirror. His hat and overcoat had been laid out on the bed by his butler, and Bob grabbed both before leaving the bedroom.

"How long have I been waiting, Bob?" his agent asked as he came down the stairs. "I've already had two drinks, and I'm feeling, well, I'm feeling just about right."

"Then I did you a service, didn't I?" Bob replied. "I'll have to catch up, mind you, but we'll both be ready for the evening, and in just the right spirits." He shrugged into his coat, put his hat atop his head, and waved away the house staff's efforts to be part of his departure. "Let's get this show going. Who will I wine and dine tonight?"

"Marion, I don't know," Barbara squirmed in her over-stuffed armchair. It certainly wasn't the seat making her uncomfortable.

"Honey, why not? You have to get out for a change. It'll be good for you!" Marion Marx wouldn't give up. Her best friend was having second, even third, thoughts. Marion watched her twirl a lock of silky hair around her left forefinger, her legs tucked under her and her elbow propped on the arm of the chair.

The stubborn but somehow sad set of her lips showed lines that didn't usually appear on her soft face. Barbara's lack of confidence was obvious. "I don't know," she repeated.

Leaning out the bathroom door to chat with her friend, Marion had just soaked a pair of hose in the sink. She disappeared again for a brief moment to hang the hose on the shower. When she returned to her bedroom, she dropped

hard on her bed and leveled a stare at Barbara.

"Zeppo's made the arrangements and we, namely you, have plans to meet a fairly new actor on the scene. We already have reservations. You're going with us. End of discussion." Marion fell against her pillows, propping up on one arm. She watched Barbara's reaction, knowing this was the only way to handle her when she got into this mood.

"Before you say anything more," Marion continued, "I know how uncomfortable this makes you. I also know how miserable you are, honey. Ever since you left Frank ..."

Barbara turned her head away. The tears were coming.

"It's been hard on you. We're here to help you, and you know that."

"I do, Marion, I do. I don't know what I'd have done without you both."

Marion leaned over to the nightstand and picked up a box of tissues. "Here, sweetie," she handed one to Barbara. "You don't have to worry about being without us. That won't happen. But understand, part of us helping you get back on your feet involves making sure your career stays on keel. Get out, see people, and be seen. You can't let Frank Fay or anything about him take you down."

"That sonofa—"

Marion's laughter rang out. "That's my girl!" Her giggles slowly subsided. She had intentionally drawn out Barbara's fighting side. "So, we won't let Mr. Fay get in the way, will we? Zeppo's put together a great night at the club, an evening for you to be seen with the right people." She winked. "Are you ready?"

Barbara dabbed at her eyes. "No ... but I'll do it." Hopping out of the chair and going to the dresser mirror, she looked at Marion's reflection over her left shoulder. "Who am I scheduled to meet? Is someone supposed to sweep me off my feet—for the cameras?"

"Oh," Marion's eyes twinkled, "only the most glorious specimen of masculinity in Hollywood, and the world."

"C'mon. ..."

"Think I'm kidding? Just wait. I've heard he's amazing. His name is R. T."

Frowning, Barbara headed for the door. "I better get ready then. I've got a lot of work to do if I'm to be seen with the most glorious specimen of masculinity in the world." Her hand on the doorframe, she turned to Marion one last time. "Artique?" she mumbled, almost to herself. "Mmmm ... why have I not heard of him? Hope he's not disappointed with me."

Zeppo preferred to drive himself when he had the chance. Tonight, since it was just him, Marion, and Barbara, he helped the ladies into the car—Marion in the middle and Barbara next to her—and he comfortably slid behind the driver's seat. It wasn't too far to the Trocadero, down Sunset Strip, and as they enjoyed the evening's warm breeze, he knew Barbara was nervous. Marion and he had discussed the chat the ladies had that afternoon, and he knew this arranged meeting must be a real winner to even slightly encourage his depressed houseguest.

Marion, as usual, chattered about everything and anything.

"Oooh, that new dress I brought home?" she purred, turning to Barbara. "Did you get a good look at it? My goodness, I've never seen anything so pretty!"

Before Barbara could answer, Zeppo quipped, "Yeah, but that's what you say every time you bring home a new dress ... oh, every few days?"

Marion ignored him, and both she and Zeppo were happy to hear Barbara laugh at their good-natured ribbing of each other.

She elbowed him, despite their close quarters. "It is quite possible, my dear husband, that a more beautiful dress is around every corner!"

"Your outfit tonight, Barbara, is stunning," Zeppo wanted to turn the conversation toward their friend. "I'm sure you'll swivel the head of every man in the place."

They pulled up to the front of the club. Before Barbara could answer, her door was opened by the valet and he helped her out of the car. "Ms. Stanwyck," he greeted her. "So nice to see you!"

The young man's genuine delight raised Barbara's spirits and while she smiled and thanked him, he reached in for

Marion's hand. Zeppo came around to the front of the car and gave him the keys. "Please park in the usual spot, Andrew." With the keys, he had included a wad of bills, which the young valet took with a salute.

"Thank YOU, Mr. Marx!"

Arm-in-arm with his two ladies, Zeppo walked through the front door of the Trocadero. Smoky, dark, loud ... the room assaulted them, as it did each time. They were regulars, and everyone who worked there knew them and almost always saw the three of them together—especially lately, since Barbara's well-publicized divorce from Frank Fay. It had, however, been awhile since Barbara had been along and because of that, they created a bit of stir.

"Mr. Marx, Mrs. Marx, Miss Stanwyck." The club's manager was immediately at their side. "Your table awaits you." He walked a few steps ahead, and with a hand protectively on each elbow, Zeppo escorted the ladies to a familiar spot, just to the edge of the fray but close enough to see everything around them. They turned to the left as they walked, then to the right, as camera bulbs flashed. It was part of the usual process, and they didn't even break stride.

The table was in a shadow, along with two others beside it. As the manager made sure they were settled and comfortable, and drinks immediately brought to them, Zeppo looked to his right, nodded, and cocked his head slightly in Barbara's direction.

Marion noticed her husband's distraction, though Barbara did not. She was politely engaged in light conversation with a matronly lady at the table to her left. She was turned toward the other woman, a smile pasted on her lips, a few words of commiseration placed in just the right spots.

As soon as Marion was certain Barbara wouldn't hear, she leaned over and whispered to Zeppo, "Who did you nod to?"

"R. T.'s agent, of course."

"You see who's coming in the door, Bob?"

Having just completed his second drink, Bob lit another cigarette. He glanced at the front. "Yeah, Zeppo Marx. And his wife?"

Don leaned forward. "Yes, the Marxes. But do you see who's with them?"

Bob had been around Hollywood long enough to know about the Barbara Stanwyck. He was aware she was the consummate professional. There was no missing that elusive, mysterious allure that followed in her wake, wherever she went.

Damn, she was sexy.

"It's Stanwyck."

Don grinned. "That's right." He let it sink in. "So? What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

At that moment, Zeppo and Marion were getting settled. Barbara chatted with a woman on the other side of them. Bob watched as Don and Zeppo exchanged meaningful glances, and both nodded at each other as if sharing an important secret.

"Don? Is this why you brought me here tonight?"

His agent was on his fourth drink. "So, what do you think?!" His cigarette was down to a nub, and he opened his gold monogrammed case for another. Reaching over to Bob's hand, he pulled the other burning cigarette tip to meet his own. A deep inhale was followed by a puff of smoke swirling between them.

"Stanwyck?" Bob repeated, the name coming out as an amazed question. "With all the starlets in town ... why her?"

"C'mon, Bob. You're relatively new. Your career is on the rise and the boost will do you good. Barbara, now she's solid in the business, yet she's had a string of bad luck, and it'll look great for her to be seen with you." Don put thumbs up. "It's a big win for both of you. Zeppo and I talk, y'know."

Bob took a gulp of a new drink. "I'm sure you do." His grin was lopsided. "So, Miss Stanwyck and I are pawns, are we?"

“Bob, Bob, Bob.” Don tried to sound hurt but couldn’t quite hide the humor. “You know I’m here for you. I’m doing what’s best for you.”

Bob’s attention was caught by the glint from the diamonds on Barbara’s arm. His mesmerized glance followed her wrist as she picked up a cigarette and leaned toward Zeppo, who lit it for her. So entranced was he in the action that he didn’t hear Don.

“Bob ... Bob!”

“Hmmm? Yes?”

“Ready?”

He was still looking into the light, toward Barbara Stanwyck’s profile. She hadn’t yet noticed him, so he had a few minutes to collect himself. She wasn’t beautiful but she was such a class act, and there was something ... something vulnerable beneath that glamour.

Bob cleared his throat, and rested his cigarette in the ashtray. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” He ran his left hand through his hair.

Don stood, Bob followed him, and they took the few steps into the visibility of all at the Marx table.

Marion gasped. Zeppo smiled. “Dear?” he asked. “You okay?”

Marion didn’t realize she’d made a noise. She’d heard of Robert Taylor, seen him in the newspapers, even glanced at him across a room at a recent press function. Yet she had not, until this moment, seen him up close. No man had a right to be so beautiful!

“Sorry, that was rude of me.” She had the grace to blush. Zeppo laughed heartily, and Don grinned. He was used to seeing women react this way. Robert Taylor was his goldmine.

All eyes turned to Barbara. She hadn’t said a word, hadn’t uttered a sound. But she stared. She certainly stared ... and Bob stared back. Their companions gave them a few moments of silence to adjust.

“Barbara?” Zeppo finally turned to her. “Barbara, we want to introduce you.”

She never stopped looking at Bob. “Oh ... okay. Well, I think I’m here to meet someone else but, while we wait, please do introduce me.”

Zeppo and Marion exchanged curious glances. “Who else are you here to meet?” Marion asked.

Barbara finally focused on her friend. “You told me this afternoon I would meet Artique, didn’t you?” Everyone burst out laughing, including Bob, and Barbara was left with a stunned, almost frightened expression. “What’s so funny?”

Bob sobered first. “Miss Stanwyck, please let me explain. You are here to meet me, as I’ve just been informed. I’m R.T., Robert – Taylor ... not Artique.”

He leaned down, extended his hand, and as their fingers met, everyone else seemed to disappear. Bob and Barbara walked to the dance floor. They fit together perfectly—as if it had always been planned that way. Little did anyone know at that time...