

why did it happen?

**FOR BARBARA AND JEFF HUNTER...
LOVE LOST OUT...HOW? WHERE DID
THEY FAIL?**

The rickety bus, returning from a three-hour trip to collect mail and supplies from Torreon, halted in the sun-baked, desolate location camp at Durango, Mexico. Expectantly, the dusty group of actors gathered for their mail from home. Handsome Jeffrey Hunter lined up eagerly with the others, then wearily turned away. Empty-handed. Whispers buzzed. Once again the letter he had been waiting for—the letter from Europe—had not arrived.

For three months Jeff and his beautiful wife, Barbara Rush, had been separated by 5,500 miles of sea and land. She was in Ireland making *Captain Lightfoot* with Rock Hudson; Jeff was in Mexico filming *White Feather*. Their 2-year-old son was in Wisconsin with Barbara's mother.

Rumors flew. Was Barbara too busy to write? Or was the marriage dying?

One member of the cast recalls that shortly after Barbara left for Ireland he asked Jeff how she liked it over there. Jeff laughed a little and said, "I haven't heard from her. I don't even know if she's arrived." Then he added, "I guess I'll get a letter soon."

The sympathy of the entire *White Feather* company went out to the quiet, preoccupied actor. Three times he'd called from Durango to Ireland, and three times the operators failed to get through.

Then one day Jeff brightened visibly, despite the "tourista" disease (the "Mexican two-step" they call it) which laid Jeff, Bob Wagner and other cast members low. Jeff had word that Barbara was home from Ireland! In fact, she was right then flying down to visit him. And he hastened to Torreon, over rough roads, to meet her plane and bring her back with him.

But when the Hunters emerged from the bus, they were glum. Instead of wandering off by themselves to savor the precious moments of reunion, they joined the cast. For a few hours Barbara sat stony-eyed watching Jeff on the set; then he took her back to catch her plane to Hollywood.

Again tongues wagged. Again rumors flew. Then it happened.

Barbara's studio announced that she would seek a divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. She and Jeff had been separated too much to make a go of their marriage.

A co-worker of Jeff's explains: "Barbara went all the way down to Durango to deliver her *Dear John* letter in person. She didn't tell him by phone from Hollywood that she wanted a divorce. She tried to soften the blow. But what she told him, though it was in all honesty, seared Jeff's heart like a blowtorch. She said: 'The happiest time in my life was the period I spent in Ireland.'"

And so ended a dream . . . a dream that started back in Hollywood not quite four years ago when a 23-year-old UCLA student, studying for his Master's degree in radio and drama technique, was offered a screen test at Paramount with a starlet who had been signed up a month earlier. Her name was Barbara Rush.

To the movie world, the Hunters appeared to be a perfect dream of a young couple—handsome, modest, intelligent, hard-working and very much in love. One year after their elopement on December 1, 1950, Chris was born. Talented Barbara took over the perfect young wife-actress-mother spot left vacant by Jane Powell. Jeffrey Hunter, rushed from picture to picture, became the fair-haired boy of his studio. Hollywood pointed to the Hunters with pride.

Then came the announcement.

Hollywood may be cynical and sophisticated, but the news of the split-up came as a real shock. People looked at each other as if to say, "If this marriage can't succeed, no movie marriage can." Intimate friends such as Anne Francis and her husband Bam Price, the Keefe Brasselles, Mitzi Gaynor, Bob Wagner and the John Dereks couldn't figure it out.

They'd watched the Hunters try to plan carefully for a radiant future. First, there was the apartment in Westwood. When the baby came, Barbara's widowed mother and her younger sister, Ramona, moved down from Santa Barbara. And Jeff hurried to find them an apartment nearby, painting and fixing it up himself.

Later, when he and Barbara discovered that their apartment was too small, they spent months hunting until they found just the right house—an eight-room rustic affair in North Hollywood with a separate guest bungalow for Mrs. Rush and Ramona, a UCLA student and part-time model. Mrs. Rush devotedly cared for husky Chris while Barbara worked, and the Hunters lived simply, both drove old cars and saved to buy the Early American furniture they wanted.

For a long time, there wasn't even a hint of disagreement in the marriage. True, at parties Jeff would become involved in long and spirited conversations with people, all of which left Barbara feeling lost. And he would go off fishing and skiing by himself while Barbara remained at home. At social affairs they never engaged in the affectionate byplay so natural to people like Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh, but this was put down to their natural reticence.

Barbara explains it this way: "With everyone watching you at parties and fans staring at premieres, you smile outwardly when maybe you don't feel like it, and that makes your behavior in public unreal. It's hard to know how to cope with the idealization of a marriage built up in many minds."

In interviews, both Barbara and Jeff rigidly kept to the Made in Heaven specifications expected of their marriage. The truth, however, is that though their elopement after a short courtship was breathtaking, they woke up the next day to find themselves married strangers—strangers with a startling list of adjustments to make. To intimates, Barbara admits, "Our marriage wasn't good from the first, but we hated divorce and kept hoping that time and the baby would heal the breach."

Psychologists know that a baby is *never* the answer to a problem marriage. A child cements a happy marriage; to an unhappy one it merely adds heartbreak.

Comments a friend of theirs: "Despite their differences, they never went in for temperamental scenes. Only once did I hear them criticize each other. 'Barbara's too intense,' Jeff accused. 'Everything matters so much to her. She worries about things and gets hurt by them.' 'And Hank,' said Barbara, who always calls Jeff by his real name, 'is too easy-going. He lets everyone do as they like with him—the studio, his friends, business associates. Maybe if he showed some temperament once in a while the studio would sit up and take notice. They might realize what a wonderful actor he is when they're giving out roles and not hand everything to Bob Wagner and pass Hank up!'"

With the wisdom of hindsight, it's easy to see that even their first date held the seed of future personality clashes. Recalls Barbara: "I went all out for high-style fashion that day, picturing a lazy idyll at the beach. I bought new beachwear, had my hair set, wore a floppy hat. And *then* I spent the day bobbing around on jagged rocks in a rubber craft while Hank spearfished—returning to the boat at intervals with a bloody fish! My outfit was ruined, my hair a mess, my face burned a beet red, my gold sandals and hat a soggy pulp."

Jeff has always been a great athlete, mad about water sports—skin diving, water skiing, as well as hunting, fishing, tennis, golf and snow skiing, which he considers "the livin' end." When he became involved in skin diving, Barbara was completely uninterested in snorkels, diving masks, spears and fins. It didn't make sense to her, and she discouraged his participation. Particularly when she heard of the money he had spent on the diving gear, her sense of thriftiness was horrified.

"Why don't you stay home like a nice civilized husband instead of mixing socially with the fishes?" she pleaded. And Jeffrey sadly gave up the sport.

"I love to ski," he'll tell you. "I used to rush off at a moment's notice, drive 125 miles to the snow, spend the day on the ski run, and drive back. Barbara hates that. 'I need at least two days to know ahead and plan,' she says. 'So much driving tires me and takes the fun out of the thing.' As for me, I'm a spur-of-the-moment man. I like to make up my mind suddenly and hop off right away, not plan ahead."

Once Barbara explained, "Hank is the most excited hobbyist I've ever seen. When he goes out for something new, he goes all out! He has to buy *everything* he's told he may need—and nothing but the best. Money doesn't count. Right now he's got enough hobbies to keep him busy the rest of his life. The difference between us, I guess, is that Hank is a Do-er while I'm a Do Nothing-er. He can't find enough time for all the things he wants to try, even when he's making a picture."

Just as they didn't see eye to eye on leisure-time activities, their thinking about money was just as far apart. A close studio co-worker of Barbara's feels that financial differences were a main cause of the breakup. "Early in their marriage," he explains, "Hank put about \$10,000 of their savings into a wildcat oil project in Nevada. Young actors don't earn the astronomical salaries people think they do, and this was quite a hunk of savings. Two of Hank's college chums were in on the deal, and Hank and his father, who is an engineer, moved a rig in.

"Had it been successful, Hank would have been a hero. Unfortunately, there was no oil, and he lost the money. Next, he gained Barbara's reluctant consent to found a small CinemaScope company to make documentary shorts. These things take time—and money—to develop and this project and a few earlier ones became a sore spot between them. Just prior to the break-up, Hank was anxious to continue with such investments. Barbara thought otherwise and told him bluntly, 'You're an actor, not a businessman. Stick to your acting and put your mind on it.' You can imagine how hard this hit Hank.

"Barbara, of the soft eyes and sweetly curving smile, looks docile, but beneath the softness, there is an ambitious, strong-minded, capable woman, and I think it was she who wore the pants in the family. She was the practical, budget-minded member. Take the matter of the flying lessons. Hank took instruction secretly, hoped to surprise her with his pilot's license. But one of the bills came to Barbara's attention. That put a stop to the lessons. In many of the ways Hank wanted to expand his personality, he was held down.

"I remember once when he came home with an expensive gadget for the kitchen. Barbara looked at it, asked the price, and then said with sweet indulgence as though to a child, 'You don't really think you have to have this, Hank. Why don't you just take it back to the shop?'"

One of the most important hazards faced by the Hunters was that their marriage quickly developed into a "hi, honey—so long, dear" relationship. "The worst parting," Barbara once explained, "was Hank's trip to England and Malta just after our son was born. He was gone for four months."

Location trips followed personal appearance tours for both, with but scant time in between. During the first year of their marriage they were apart more than they were together, a sure-fire formula for domestic disaster. While it's true that studio powers decreed most of the separations, the young couple did not do everything they could to be together.

The summer following their marriage, Barbara gaily went off for a summer of stock in Delaware. Was that trip strictly necessary, friends wondered? And the time when Jeff went off on a lengthy USO trip to Hawaii, the Philippines, Singapore and Hong Kong—couldn't his wife have accompanied him? Or couldn't the marriage have come first and the trip been dispensed with altogether? Insiders are inclined to speculate that possibly selfishness, personal ambition, desire to travel, came before the solidity of the marriage.

Barbara and Jeff seemed to lack a "we-ness" in their conception of marriage, substituting instead two strong but immature egos. And criticism of their unconventional pattern of marriage put both of them on the defensive.

In the beginning of their marriage, their careers were on an equal level. Neither was more important than the other. They were both starting. Pretty soon it was apparent that Jeff's stock was rising faster at 20th Century-Fox, where his first few pictures captured the fancy of the bobbysoxers, than was Barbara's. She was a member of Paramount's Golden Circle of newcomers, but all she received was one small role after another in a series of unimportant pictures. All the while Lady Luck was smiling on her husband. He was compared by critics to a youthful Tyrone Power.

"I had a long discouraging period, career-wise," Barbara is ready to admit. "With Chris on the way, my option was not picked up at Paramount. I was about to give up when MGM signed me to a contract, but almost immediately they decided to let their new younger players go. And then U-I signed me to a big new-star development program and *Magnificent Obsession* and everything else followed."

The enchanted evening that Barbara Rush attended the premiere of *Magnificent Obsession*, she found herself catapulted upward. She was a star. And this was her night. And as the autograph books eddied around her, she stole a glance at her tall, husky husband. She was flushed with excitement. She smiled at him but didn't seem to see him. He smiled at her, happy in her joy. But at the same time as Jeff watched Barbara, he sensed something new in her personality. This was a different Barbara, a Barbara who didn't need him. She had what she wanted now—the beginnings of fame. The warmth of the limelight seemed to be what she had been missing.

The future was perilous for them. After finishing *The Black Shield of Falworth*, she obtained her dearest desire, career-wise, with the lead in *Captain Lightfoot*.

Just prior to that, Jeffrey Hunter was very discouraged about his career. Although as good an actor as ever, at his studio Jeff found himself outdistanced by Bob Wagner. The fickle fancy of young fans had turned to Wagner and the best roles followed. Just before his last option was picked up, Hunter was ready to leave the studio and go East to try his luck in stock or on Broadway. Friends were puzzled that Jeff considered leaving Barbara to do this. And they felt he was rather unhappy when the studio picked up his option. Ordinarily, such a procedure makes an actor happy, but it was felt Jeff wanted to get away from Hollywood.

It's been said that Jeff was anxious for Barbara to continue with her career after the birth of their son—that she was perfectly contented to be Mrs. Jeffrey Hunter, housewife, doting mother and wife. Those who know the facts say, "Not so." Barbara is an intensely ambitious actress, out to make a career for herself at almost any cost. After Chris was born, she had two desires—to get her figure back to normal as quickly as possible and attempt to revive her dormant career. Her ambitions go a very long way back.

She'd worked hard at part-time jobs in order to attend college and study dramatics at Santa Barbara, where she appeared in every school play and earned a scholarship to the Pasadena Playhouse. And while studying at Pasadena she worked as a secretary and even as a baby-sitter. So it's understandable that her career held strong meaning for her. Had she given it up to be a devoted wife and mother she might have become an unhappy, frustrated person. And had her husband insisted on it, she might have considered his action a selfish one. A good marriage cannot result when one partner feels deprived or frustrated.

In a marriage that goes awry it is customary to look for "in-law" trouble. But friends discount this complication because Mother Rush is a very well-adjusted person, easy to get along with. In fact, her competence in rearing young Chris may have given her daughter the feeling that she could become a birdlike parent—part of the time on the wing. Besides, Mother Rush didn't worm her way unwanted into the Hunter household. She was asked to come in to care for Chris.

All the same, with Barbara's sister, Ramona, it made three females in the household—a rather overwhelming number for one husband. Once, when Jeff returned from Malta to see his son for the second time after a four-months' absence, he admitted he "felt neglected while Barbara and her mother were fussing over Chris and there was nothing for me to do." And when Jeff didn't make a film for several months or was on layoff, there was noticeable tension at home. This is the same sort of tension any family is under when the head of the household doesn't work. Had both Barbara and Jeff been between pictures, it would have been easy to cope with. But with Jeff at home and Barbara up to her pretty ears in film-making, an incendiary emotional climate was hard to avoid.

One of the things about divorce which worries Jeff is that his son will grow up in a household completely feminine. This is not a good outlook for any child, but particularly distressing for a boy. "I hope," Jeff says, "to spend lots of time with my son, teaching him sports, taking him fishing and having him learn to love the outdoors as I do." Temporarily, Jeff is sharing an apartment with a TWA pilot friend while Barbara is at the family home. Both he and Barbara are well aware of the problems of raising a child in a broken home. They know that divorce leaves its crudest scars in the hearts of children. Perhaps, for the sake of Chris, and the love they once knew, they will try to reconcile.

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