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Exclusive!

His former wife tells:

"My Life with Caryl Chessman"

By CAMERON SHIPP

PHOTOGRAPH BY LEWIS LONG

POSED BY MODELS

ON THE HOT EDGE of California's Mojave Desert, in a small town where neighbors seldom bother a newcomer with questions, lives a young woman who does not dare reveal her identity.

She dreads being discovered and hounded. She fears most of all that her three children might be hurt and their lives blighted by the sickening whisper of scandal.

Call her Barbara Black because we need to call her something that does not remotely suggest her real name. She is not a criminal. But she is as frightened as one.

Barbara Black was the teen-age wife of Caryl Chessman, who was executed in the gas chamber at San Quentin on May 2. Chessman had been convicted on 17 counts of violence, including kidnaping with bodily harm, and his 12-year wait on Death Row stirred up a world-wide controversy over the merits of capital punishment.

Barbara and I met furtively in Victorville, Calif. She obviously does not want publicity, but she consented to this exclusive interview for FAMILY WEEKLY for a sound reason: she hopes teen-age girls and their parents will read her story and draw some conclusions.

She was nervous, evasive now and then (but only in the area of identification), and at first she was afraid of me. For obvious reasons, I cannot describe her precisely, but this much is fair: she is 35 years old, a full-figured, strong young woman; her hair is turning gray, and she wears no make-up. She is anything but the hackneyed picture of a criminal's moll I had anticipated.

Before the blind date with Chessman in Glendale, Calif., that started it all, Barbara was an average, reasonably bright kid attending high school. She did not run with a rough crowd, and she could well have been your neighbor's daughter.

What was Caryl Chessman really like to this woman who was his wife?

We started at the very beginning.

Barbara was 15 when she met Chessman in 1940. The blind date was arranged by a girl friend whose name she can't remember. It was a double date, and the party of four just drove around, had a hamburger and a coke, and went home.

"He seemed shy," she said. "He never *was* brash with me. Hardly said anything that first date. He didn't even try to neck.

"He was 19 then, had been arrested for theft and sent to a road camp, but I didn't know this. Nobody told me.

"We had regular dates after that. He wasn't shy after he got to know you. He had lots of personality. I thought he was 'wild' but that he would settle down.

"His crowd that I began to be part of was exciting. They never told me what they were doing when I wasn't with them.

"I soon found out how conceited Caryl was. He was terribly arrogant. He had read more and knew more than the rest. When he knew you, he talked big. His father was a drifter, out of work most of the time, and his mother was a cripple in a wheel chair, so he had nothing at home. He was expelled from school for smoking all the time and for talking back when they caught him."

Why did she marry him?

"I didn't know much. I was lonely. My mother died when I was 12. I was allowed to do as I pleased, come home when I pleased. My father and I got along, but I was lonely and unsupervised. I really don't know what I saw in Chessman. The main thing is, I guess, that I felt unwanted, and he paid attention to me."

THIRTY DAYS after the blind date, they ran off to Las Vegas and were married by a justice of the peace. Barbara lied about her age. They returned to Glendale to live with her father, then with Caryl's parents.

She doesn't remember how they expected to support themselves. Chessman never had a job of any kind, so she had to work.

She anticipated my next question.

"I don't know whether he was guilty of those crimes or not, but I can't believe it."

Barbara doesn't try to analyze Caryl Chessman psychologically. He had no peculiar habits or aggressions that she can identify except arrogance, hatred of authority, and a passion for tidiness. He became an expert typist and stenographer in high school. Unfortunately, the only use he made of his skills was to write legal briefs and four books while in prison. He was also a brilliant self-taught lawyer.

Barbara first learned that her husband was a criminal at 2 o'clock one morning when Chessman awakened her and dumped $400 in bills and silver on their bed.

"Look what I got," he exclaimed. "Good work—a gas station and two liquor stores!"

"I'd suspected for some time what he was doing," Barbara said, "but I hadn't *seen* it and I didn't want to believe it. I protested, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. Caryl laughed at me and fingered the money. I don't know where it went. *He* spent it all."

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY after that, Chessman came home late one night driving a Glendale police car. Behind him, Barbara remembers, was a Buick driven by another member of Chessman's crowd.

"Got to ditch this car," he told her.

"Then he kissed me and said, 'If this thing cools off, okay. If not, I'll see you in jail!' "

Chessman roared off in the night. The police caught him easily. In every instance, he was a bungling criminal, as if he had planned to get caught.

It was the last time Barbara saw him, except in prison. They had lived together as man and wife only six months but remained married for four years—until 1945. It was after he fled from the model "open prison" at Chino, where convicts were on their honor, that the "Red Light Bandit" atrocities were committed for which he was eventually convicted and sent to a death cell at San Quentin in July, 1948.

"I was divorced, remarried, and 1,000 miles away when that happened," Barbara Black points out. "The story that we had a daughter, now 17 years old, is not true. We never had a child."

(The story goes that Chessman died without revealing the name of the real "Red Light Bandit" for fear of reprisals against his 17-year-old daughter.)

"OF COURSE, I won't say there is no such daughter," Barbara said. "But Chessman would have to have been married to someone else before he married me, and the daughter would be older than 17.

"Yes, he wrote to me when he was on Death Row, sometimes twice a week. He never wrote me love letters. They were always strictly matter-of-fact. And they always had the same bragging, confident tone. My husband and I have the letters hidden away, and we'll never show them to anybody.

"I can't really explain him. And I'm still not certain why I was so attracted to him. Anyhow, it all seems such a long time ago."

Barbara heard the news of Chessman's death on the radio while she was at work.

"He didn't try to contact me at the last. I didn't send any message, either."

The one woman Chessman appeared to love plainly can't attempt to explain him. She wants to forget about Chessman and be forgotten herself.

"Teen-age marriages may not all be wrong, but they shouldn't be hasty, without giving yourselves a chance to know each other a long time. I was allowed too much freedom. Kids need standards. There was no religious guidance. I should have gone to church, and I needed a home life and guidance. It's the same story, over and over again. I knew what he was like, but I thought I could change him. How long have girls been saying that? You can't change them. And the fellow I married turned out to be Caryl Chessman."

Barbara looked at her watch, said goodbye, and left quickly to pick up one of her children at school.

The woman who married the notorious convict as a teen-ager tells her story in the hope that it will serve as an example and a lesson to today's young girls

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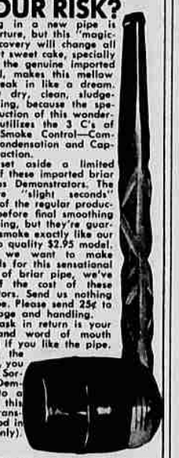

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