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stronger than the astonishment and gratitude of that first night. She was flattered too, of course, for in spite of her diffidence, she could think of no reason for his quietly determined pursuit except that he had fallen in love with her almost at first sight. But the real reasons why she married him were Aunt Cissy and her mother; and Mr. Green, under whose sarcastic eyes she always cut material crooked and tied parcels clumsily. She married him because of chilblains and the boarding-house, the selfish old ladies and the tedious old man. His nature and personality were unimportant beside the fact that she had news for her mother at last and that she could give notice at the Corner Drapery.

Remembering it now, the only thing that made her feel less guilty and ignoble was to reflect that before the year was out and their first child was born her indifference had changed to devotion. By then she had matured far beyond the silly girl who had longed for a wedding ring from any source. She realised that if Arnold hadn't been as dependable and sympathetic and considerate as he had daily shown himself to be she couldn't have loved him. And she knew enough now to guess that marriage without love might be the bitterest of all roads. She had deserved disaster, and through Arnold's qualities she had found happiness.



THEY were in the main street of the township now. "Surely you'd like to have a look round," she said, "I should if I were you. You might meet someone you used to know. Didn't you tell me it's the sort of backwater where people stay for ever?"

"Well . . ." he looked at his watch.

"It's still early," she urged. "The children and I would rather like a walk."

"Just up and down the main street, then."

They hadn't gone 50 yards before Arnold did meet someone he knew. A dumpy woman with sharp brown eyes stopped square in front of him.

"Arnold! After all these years! Don't say you don't remember me! Grace Mitchell!"

"Of course," Arnold said. "My wife, and these are my youngsters. Mrs. Mitchell, Edith. I used to be cobbers with her husband. Old Fred still building houses?"

"Oh yes, he's still building houses." She was trying not to stare too hard at Edith. "But look, how long are you staying? I've got a hair appointment now, I'm late already. But what about dinner to-night? You must! Fred would . . ."

They were just passing through, they said, and after she had expressed in a flurry of italics the chagrin Fred would feel she had to leave them.

"What a pity you couldn't," Edith said. "I can imagine how disappointed he'll be when she tells him."

Arnold could imagine a good deal more than that. But then, of course,

he had all the clues. After he had started driving again, he thought about Grace and Fred discussing him over their evening meal. Memories were long in the little town for anything approaching a scandal, and of course Fred had been a friend and had actually built the house for him. He remembered the lovely autumn evening when it was finished, and he and Cynthia had walked together through the empty rooms that smelt of sawdust and varnish and still enclosed some of the day's warmth. That was the first time she had been preoccupied and silent, unable to respond when he pictured their future there together.

"How long before the wedding was it that she threw him over?" Grace would say to Fred. "Only a week, wasn't it? Remember how he chucked his job—practically a partnership, too, and cleared off nobody knew where?"

He'd found a new job easily enough, though it had hardly seemed important at the time. What had seemed important — how young he had been, picturing the situation crudely, without half-tones or balance—had been to change as quickly as possible his unbearable status of rejected lover. He wasn't heart-broken, as he had at first supposed. His love for Cynthia had gone no deeper than the romantic first love of any idealistic young man who lacks the measuring-rod of experience. It was his self-esteem that had been beaten to the ground. He had grasped at Edith to build it up again.

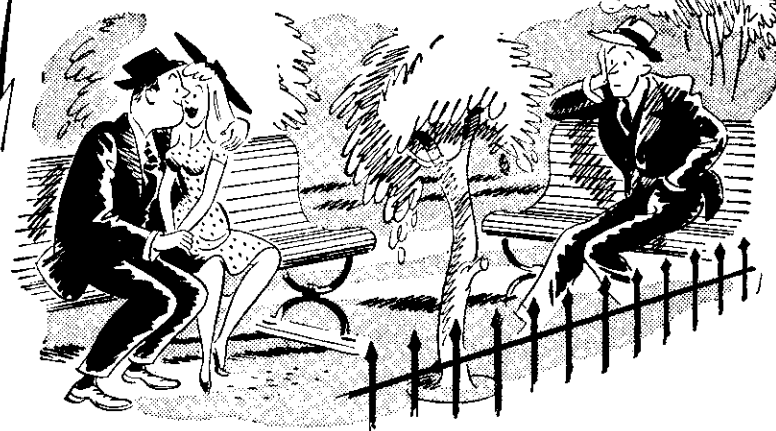
"I took a good look at the wife," he imagined Grace saying. "I wonder how they get on. Because of course he must have asked the first girl he met. Remember how soon we heard he was married . . . weeks before Cynthia married that other fellow!"

All he had perceived about Edith at first had been that she was reasonably good-looking and intelligent and likeable. Her eager "Yes," when he asked her to marry him, affirmed his eligibility, in spite of Cynthia. . . . It wasn't till a few months after marriage, when she had her first severe bout of morning sickness, and tried to smile at him in spite of physical misery, that he had a sudden positive feeling of admiration and tenderness.

Well, things couldn't have turned out better. But if it had been anyone except Edith, devoted, uncomplicated, what a noose he might have made for himself. . . .

THE two children were tired and had stopped chattering. There was only the noise of the car. Edith hoped that the rooms they had booked in the big town ahead would be nice, and that the weather would hold for Arnold's golf. On a straight stretch of road she patted his arm and accepted his smile in lieu of conversation. In the early stages of her love for him, she had often longed when he was silent to know exactly what he was thinking. But they were so close now, after all the happy years together, that she was sure she could always feel the texture of his thought, even if she didn't know the precise strands that had woven it.

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