

A Casual Affair

by ALAN WILSON

I was thirty-two then and she was almost twelve years younger than I. We were engaged and one day I asked her 'Won't you regret marrying a man who is so much older than you?'

'Don't be silly, darling' she replied, 'I don't want to marry a kid!'

That was seventeen years ago. We now have four children; the eldest, a girl, would turn sixteen in a few months' time.

I was never in love with her. I just married her because I had to marry someone. I thought I would grow fond of her as I came to know her better but that never happened. She was very beautiful but a little shallow. All she would talk of would be about her clothes, her parties, her stupid friends and the silly picture that she saw. It was all very well in the beginning but then it became monotonous and a little tiring for me. I wouldn't say I was happy with her but certainly I had nothing to complain of.

In these seventeen years I became an old man with my hair turned gray but she was still very pretty. One day we stood together and I could see our two reflections in the mirror. I looked old enough to be her father. I wondered if she had any wicked secret like Dorian Gray's.

I held that piece of paper in my hand. It read: 'We have been married seventeen years and I have absolutely nothing to complain of. You had always been very kind to me but you could never give me the sort of love I always dreamed about; you could never love me with the whole of you - if only you know what I mean. I am going away with someone I am desperately in love with. I am sure you would take care of the children.'

I was not shocked but all the same I was a little surprised. I wanted to know who the man she ran away with was. The whole thing seemed so melodramatic.

In a day or two everyone came to know of this and we became the topic of their conversation.

'How could she - leaving behind all her children?' someone would say. 'Poor fellow, how must he feel?'

I was sorry for the children. They could not have been very proud of a mother like that. As time went by I almost brushed her off my mind and the children got used to being without her.

One day as I was returning from work I heard a boyish voice say 'She had guts and I appreciate her for that. She didn't like that old brute and she just walked out. There aren't very many like her.'

'She had guts! What about all those children of hers?'

'Hang them. They might not be his -'

That night I could not go to sleep. 'They might not be his -' She never mattered much to me but suddenly I felt an intense dislike for her grow within me. One evening I ran into her. It happened in a cafe. As I was about to leave she came in with a good-looking young man. I knew instantly that he was her lover. I felt that she saw me but I walked out pretending never to have seen her. It happened again after a few months. She was looking as pretty, or perhaps, prettier than ever. What annoyed me most was that she still wore that schoolgirl's innocent look on her face. He looked a little tired and I wondered if this thing could go on for much longer.

A few days back when I returned home I saw her sitting on my bed, looking very pretty, very young.

'What the hell -' that was all I could manage to say. 'Did he kick you out?'

For a while she kept silent and then she said 'Not exactly. It wasn't love, I guess, just greed. He was so irresistible and so perversely young - I just couldn't help it.'

'And what has happened now?'

'Nothing. He started boring me and I found that he is a trifle vulgar, so different from you.'

That made me laugh - my wife calling someone vulgar.

She sat there on the bed very composed as if nothing had happened. I hated her more than ever. For an instant I thought of pushing her out of the room but then I remembered I had to ask her something - something that was more important to me than anything else.

'I want to ask you some-

thing,' I said casually, 'for God's sake speak the truth. This way or that way it won't matter much.'

'What is it?' she asked. 'all these children mine?'

She paused for a moment and then she replied, 'Yes, they are all yours and that's the truth.'

I knew, rather, I felt that what she said was the truth. Madly, crazily, I ran to her and wrapped her with my arms round her. Suddenly I saw that she had wrinkles under that thick layer of powder. She was old and ugly, almost repulsive. A few moments ago she looked so different - as if the magic spell she was under all these years were over. When she saw herself in the mirror she looked very puzzled.

'I never knew I looked like this,' she said slowly, painfully.

I still held her in my arms. I looked down at her and then I pressed my lips hard against hers.

'You know you never kissed me like this before - putting the whole of you behind it.'

And I wondered if she was right.

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