

Claudia

THE STORY OF A MARRIAGE

by

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One

THE ULTIMATE PASSION

One

THE ULTIMATE PASSION

IT HAD BEEN A BEAUTIFUL NIGHT AND SHE LOVED HIM MORE than ever in the morning. "If it weren't real love," David told her, "if it were only physical, it wouldn't be that way."

Claudia, who was eighteen and who did not know very much about love, had the greatest respect for her husband's superior knowledge of sex. Not that he'd ever led a wild life, or run around, but he'd read a great many books on the subject and knew as much as a doctor. He'd always wanted to be a doctor, but he'd gotten sidetracked into architecture. Someday he was going to do a great modern cathedral and be known all over the world, but at present he was employed by the firm of Armstrong and Killian at a salary of a hundred dollars a week, which was pretty wonderful, Claudia thought.

It was certainly more than enough to live on. They paid eighty-three dollars and thirty-four cents rent every month for two rooms and a kitchen in a converted apartment house near the East River, and Claudia was learning to manage so expertly that her savings account boasted a balance of three hundred and twenty dollars plus interest—which David thought was pretty wonderful. Of course,

she reminded him honestly, there hadn't been any extra expenses to speak of—she had enough clothes from her trousseau to last a year, and she had practically been able to furnish the place on wedding presents. Not actual presents, but checks. They'd been utterly ruthless when it came to things like candlesticks and bonbon dishes, and except for a few second and third cousins, who still lived in the dark ages and sent monogrammed napkin rings and fruit bowls, they'd managed to convert most of their gifts into cold cash. Consequently, their small apartment bore none of the earmarks of the newly married.

Instead of orientals, for example, Claudia chose a black rug for the living room and a white one for the bedroom, which turned out to be a little impractical, because she had to put newspapers down for the superintendent whenever he came up to stop the radiators from hissing. If she didn't, he would leave white footmarks on the black rug, and black ones on the white. In the beginning, this would distress her immeasurably, and she would get down on her knees and rub the palms of her hands across the imprints—but David told her not to be neurotic, if you couldn't walk in your own home, what good was it? Besides, he liked things to look worn instead of new, and pointed out that fabrics grew old gracefully and mellowed pleasantly from spot to spot, like the priceless damasks of the eighteenth century. "I know," Claudia agreed, "I guess it's the first dozen spots that are the hardest."

At any rate, it was a full-time job to learn to keep house properly and for months she didn't think about anything else. The war in China, and what Hitler was doing in Europe, seemed vague and unreal to her. She made every effort to appear interested and even indignant, and

to get upset over Roosevelt too, but for all her painstaking application to the world's pandemonium, she could not completely down the conviction that the crystallized essence of life and reality lay in the loving of two people, and the building of a home.

She had even given up the idea of being a great actress, for it didn't seem important next to being married to David. She had gone to dramatic school for two seasons, which had meant quite a battle with her mother, who hadn't approved of the idea, and who would have probably liked her only child to be bright. But Claudia had the sort of brain that couldn't cope with anything the least bit educational, so after an enjoyable but wholly unprofitable year at college, Mrs. Brown finally gave her consent to a career which she devoutly hoped would end in settlement work.

It ended however, in meeting David and falling head over heels in love with him, which was something that Mrs. Brown hadn't bargained for, as Claudia was only a child and absolutely ignorant of the facts of life. Claudia of course, thought she knew a great deal, but it boiled down to just a few odds and ends she'd picked up here and there—and later she found that she hadn't had the sense to put two and two together. Mrs. Brown however, suspected this to be so, and was at a loss to try and explain her daughter's extreme state of purity to a comparative stranger, but David seemed to grasp the entire situation and begged her not to worry. He was so understanding that Mrs. Brown couldn't get over what an old head he had, even though he was only twenty-five. It was almost a foregone conclusion, at that point that she was going to give her consent—which, eventually, she did. She'd wept a little at the wed-

ding anyway, because her husband wasn't alive to see his daughter led to the altar. Claudia felt that she also should be saddened at the thought, but her father had died of a scratch on the finger before she was born, so it was difficult to get emotional about it at this late date, especially when she was so happy.

As the months passed, they grew happier and happier, and never once had a single quarrel. David surpassed Claudia's wildest expectations, for, in spite of his old head, he was a perfect fool in a number of things—such as always having had a secret longing for a baby elephant, and embarrassing the life out of her by sitting opposite her in the bus and making faces, or walking along with her on a sunny day with his umbrella up. Once she'd tried to run away from him, but he'd dashed after her bowlegged, and people had turned and stared, and Claudia had felt like sinking through the ground with mortification. Someday, she planned with relish, she'd turn him over to a policeman. "Officer," she would say, "this man is annoying me, he's not responsible." The more David would protest that he was her husband, the worse it would look, and Claudia would let him go to jail for an hour and see how he liked it.

On the sixth-month anniversary of their marriage, David's older brother, Hartley, who was very rich and married to Julia Trowbridge of the Back Bay Trowbridges, offered them their box to the opera, because they were going to the opening of the horse show instead. "You have to dress," Julia had reminded Claudia crisply over the telephone.

"Yes, I know, thanks very much," Claudia had answered civilly enough, but inwardly she was griped. Didn't

Julia think that she, Claudia, knew enough to dress for the opera?

"It's 'Tristan,' " Julia went on, with the chummy manner of the chronic opera goer. Claudia, for example would have said "Tristan and Isolde," but then Claudia was bored with any opera after the first act, while Julia listened intently from start to finish, no matter how many times she'd heard it. She was considered extremely musical and had a box for everything. She had the reputation for being a great beauty too, but Claudia couldn't see it. Style, yes, but thin and flat as a matchstick.

She and Hartley had no children in spite of the fact that they had been married five years, and David said that judging by Julia's flanks, she didn't want any. He wasn't overly devoted to Julia and he thought that his brother, Hartley, was putting on weight—which was another way of saying that Hartley didn't meet with his complete respect either.

The whole thing in a nutshell was, that the Hartley Naughtons treated the David Naughtons just a little bit like poor relations and Claudia resented it. She knew that Julia thought David had thrown himself away on a little nobody from Virginia, when he could have married any one of a half-dozen Junior Leaguers. Junior Leaguers, as far as Claudia could make out from the pictures in the social columns, usually had no chins. Julia didn't have such a good one herself. She had to dress just so around the neck, in order to bring it up to par.

The more Claudia thought of the opera, the less she felt like going. But David, who played Wagner on the victrola every Sunday morning, had probably been looking

forward to it, for he came home early with an orchid laid like a jewel in a square white box.

"Oh," she breathed, parting the mists of waxed paper and lifting the flower to her nose.

"Orchids don't smell," David informed her. "They're just for show."

"It was darling of you."

He eyed her. "You don't like it?"

"It's beautiful," she protested. "But if you want me to be absolutely aboveboard, orchids are my least favorite flower, except begonias."

"My God," said David.

She was instantly contrite. "I shouldn't have said so, I've hurt your feelings."

"Hurt my feelings—" He swooped her in his arms and spun her around until the room poured dizzily about her head and against her ears. "Darling, you're marvelous!" he exulted. "I'm the luckiest man in the world, you're a woman in a million!"

They ate supper in the kitchen, with no butter plates, to economize on time. Julia had warned them to be early, or they'd have to take the back seats in the box.

"I put your tails out," Claudia remarked.

"Thanks," said David.

"You're going to smell like a moth's funeral. Have some more cauliflower?"

"Couldn't."

"Didn't you like it?"

"I liked it fine."

"I made up the recipe."

"Pretty rich."

She gave a sly, closed smile. It should have been rich,

an egg and half a cup of cream in the sauce, and then baked with cheese and loads of butter on top. Claudia's mother, who had an eagle eye when it came to people's health, had mentioned some time ago that David looked as if he had lost a little flesh, and David had admitted with pride that he had peeled off several pounds.

"That's not so smart," said Mrs. Brown.

Claudia didn't think it was so smart either and made up her mind that he was going to gain them back double-quick. She lost no time in setting to work and there wasn't a single thing she'd cooked in the past month that didn't have at least twice the ordinary amount of nourishment in it.

Now David, unsuspecting, pushed the cauliflower out of the way, took his pipe out of his pocket and looked at it longingly. It hardly paid to smoke it. He took a cigarette. "Damn Julia," he said.

Claudia sighed deeply. "Just our luck. There's a new Mickey Mouse playing on the corner."

"With or without Bank-Nite?"

"Without."

"Let's go."

She gaped. "But the opera—"

"Which would you rather—Tristan or Mickey?"

She regarded him with mingled awe and worship. "Would you have the nerve?" she whispered.

"Would I have the nerve? Say, whose anniversary is this, anyway?"

Claudia thought she would die of happiness. "Let's not let the tickets go to waste, though," she suggested. "Let's give them to the superintendent and then maybe he'll fix the faucets."

David thought that was a good idea, although it occurred to him to wonder what the rest of the box would think. Fritz always smelled as if he had just eaten lunch, and Bertha, his wife, was huge and made noises when she breathed. "Everybody'll think they're important musicians," Claudia said.

"Or foreign royalty," added David. So they stopped off at the superintendent's flat on the way out, and both Fritz and Bertha were much stirred at the invitation. It appeared that they were real music lovers and went to all the park concerts in the summer.

"I'm glad we're not German," said Claudia as they walked down the street. "Who would you rather be if you weren't us?"

"Nobody," said David firmly.

It was a good movie from start to finish, with no short subjects on travel or education. "Aren't you glad we came?" Claudia asked, squeezing his arm.

David squeezed back.

On the way home, David stopped in at a drugstore.

"What do you want?" asked Claudia.

"Oh, nothing," he returned airily, and then promptly walked off and went into a huddle at the prescription counter.

Claudia thought she'd better walk around and keep herself busy. She couldn't think of anything to buy, so she drifted to the soda fountain and climbed up on a seat.

"What's the difference between the extra-size and the regular?" she asked the clerk.

The clerk said that the extra-size gave you two blobs of ice cream and chopped nuts and a maraschino cherry

on top, and cost a quarter. Somehow the cherry appealed to her.

"I'm having an extra-sized one," she told David as he joined her. David looked embarrassed; he apparently didn't think it was manly to drink a soda.

"Keep me company with something," she urged and, to be obliging, although he still felt uncomfortably full of cauliflower, he ordered a lemon and lime.

"I think," said Claudia dreamily, as they emerged into the street, "that the first thing tomorrow I shall buy myself a whole bottle full of maraschino cherries."

While they undressed for bed, David put on a record from "Tristan and Isolde," which cleared both of their consciences very adequately.

"If we're so happy on half an anniversary," Claudia murmured as she went to sleep, "think what we'll be on a whole one—"

When they awoke they were still in each others arms and it was morning.

"How can it be," she marveled, "that I love you more than ever?"

It was then that David explained the difference between real love and the other. He was so interesting, that she hated to pull herself away, but she'd planned a special breakfast for him and she had to get started on it.

"Finish about it tonight," she begged.

"What's your hurry?"

She looked secretive and important. "Wait and see."

By the time he walked out into the kitchen, there were four handsome little jelly pancakes keeping warm for him on top of the stove.

"Are those for me?"

"For who else?" she replied jauntily. "Aren't they stunning?"

"Very stunning," he assured her firmly. "But not for breakfast. I never take anything else but coffee and toast for breakfast."

"Which isn't smart. Coffee and toast is nothing to do a full day's work on." She brought the pancakes to the table with her lips prim and set. "It's just an idea, this coffee and toast business."

A strange cold shiver went down David's spine. To his startled eyes she faded slowly into the image of her mother. David liked Claudia's mother—he liked the unexpected dash of humor, the code of robust contempts which resided within her gentle being—but he had long since sized her up as a congenital food-pusher and window watcher. She never lost a chance to worry about anyone. A poor appetite filled her with misgiving and a delayed homecoming roused in her the direst pictures of catastrophe.

"How do you expect to keep well if you let your weight go down?"

David brought his thoughts back to Claudia. Despair rose up within him. "My weight's all right!" he roared at her.

It was the first time he had ever roared at her. He couldn't bear the pain and bewilderment in her eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. He picked up his fork. It was already late, so he had to bolt the pancakes. When he kissed her good-by he was distressingly aware of a heavy lump lodging somewhere between his neck and his waistline.

"David," she whispered, searching his face. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Don't be silly. I'm stuffed, that's all."

"But are you angry with me?"

He kissed her again. "I'm late darling, I have to hurry."

"David." She clung to him. "There is something wrong. We were so happy last night and all of a sudden you're like a stranger."

He wanted to tell her that he was probably the most intimate stranger she'd ever meet, but a sneeze cut him off. He plunged for his handkerchief and sneezed again.

"You've caught cold," cried Claudia and, in the dimness of the hall, it was as if his mother-in-law were clinging to him. "I'll get your overcoat—"

"I don't need an overcoat!"

"You do. There's a nasty wind blowing, I've been chilly all morning."

His control vanished. "This is too much!" he expostulated. "You're chilly and I have to put a coat on." He put her from him with finality. "Good-by, Claudia, I'll see you tonight."

He left her standing there, her eyes wide and her lips parted. It was several moments after the door closed behind him that she realized that they had had their first quarrel and she didn't even know what it was about. She felt bruised and disillusioned. Perhaps, she thought miserably, it was the other kind of love after all. Or perhaps—to use her mother's expression—he had something working in him; there was a lot of influenza around.

When he came home that evening with a mammoth bottle of maraschino cherries, their quarrel vanished into