

Bill had about the least important job in Steve's department and Jonesy ran the shipping room.

"Tell the boys how you found that little store that sells real Italian sausage, honey," Steve said.

Linda told them mechanically, but all the time she was thinking: how true it is that you never know a man until you're married to him. Before she and Steve were married, he had been reserved, almost aloof, with other people. She had put this down to his growing up without a real home, after losing his parents.

After dinner they watched television for awhile. Then the men settled down to talk about baseball.

THAT NIGHT, long after Steve was asleep in the other bed, Linda remained tensely awake. She kept turning and twisting, trying to find a solution to her problem. It wasn't until early morning that she settled on a plan that might break Steve's habit of continually bringing friends home with him.

You have to fight fire with fire, she told herself. Almost all their guests had been Steve's friends—not hers. Haven't had time to invite mine, she thought grimly.

Early the next day she called Steve at his office. "I've invited Ellyn and Sue to dinner tonight. You've heard me speak of them. I've known them since school. Will you pick them up after work?"

Steve was delighted, and that evening he was his most hospitable self. He completely charmed the girls.

"We've never had such a wonderful time," Sue said the next day when she phoned Linda, "and I'm speaking for Ellyn, too. You know it really shows how wonderful marriage can be, just being with you two people."

"I'm so glad," Linda said, "because I was hoping you could come for brunch on Sunday morning."

She didn't stop with Ellyn and Sue. She made a careful list of just about everyone she knew and began inviting them in. But it wasn't working out quite the way she had planned.

She had never seen Steve happier. And all their entertaining didn't seem to affect his work at all—unless it was for the better. On their fourth-month anniversary, he was made assistant director of his department. He brought Bill and Jonesy home again to help celebrate.

Linda had to admit it: her "fight fire with fire" plan had failed. Now she almost never had an evening alone with Steve, and he seemed to like it that way just fine. But, she insisted doggedly, there must be some way to work things out.

On a Friday morning, after a week of almost continuous open house, she called Steve's Aunt Bertha and invited her downtown to lunch. His Aunt Bertha, Linda felt, was closer to Steve than any of his other relatives. She thought that in talking with Aunt Bertha she might find a clue that would help her.

Linda and Aunt Bertha talked about the new fashions for a while. Then Linda said, "I love the desk you gave us. I want to paint a bench to go with it if I can ever find time. You know how Steve is, wanting company every minute."



"Steve! Company all the time! Well, he has changed," Aunt Bertha replied. "He was the loneliest boy growing up I ever knew. That's why I was so happy when he met and married you."

Linda stared at Aunt Bertha. So it was true. She had known it all along, but she had been forcing the knowledge to the back of her mind, not wanting to face it.

She said very little more to Aunt Bertha and was glad when the older woman had to go home early.

WHEN LINDA let herself into her apartment, she put the jonquils she had bought into a vase without being aware she was doing so. She sat down and looked at them, but she didn't see them.

It was quite true: Steve really wasn't the type to want people always around him. It was only after their marriage that he had begun to need them. She was forced at last to accept the fact: his marriage had so disappointed him that he had to be continually surrounded by others. He did not want to be with her alone.

The afternoon wore on and finally Linda went into the kitchen to start dinner. When Steve came in—by himself, for once—he kissed her and said, "Boy, it's good to be home!" And just for a moment she forgot her unhappiness.

After dinner Steve got out the cards and they started to play. On any other night Linda would have loved an evening like this, but knowing how Steve felt made all the difference. "I had lunch with your Aunt Bertha today," she said, after a while.

Steve's face showed his pleasure. "You did! Did you call her? How thoughtful of you. She doesn't get a chance to get out of the house very often."

They went on with their game. Steve had dealt a new hand, but suddenly Linda's cards became so blurred she wouldn't see them. A silly little admonition she didn't know she remembered rushed through her mind: "If you can't hold a man with your kisses, you certainly can't bring him back with your tears."

But it was no use. The tears fell.

Distressed, Steve pushed the table aside and scooped her into his arms. "What's wrong, Linda?" he asked, pushing back her hair from her eyes.

Linda couldn't say a thing. After a bit, though, she said: "When you love someone, nobody else matters."

"No, Linda," Steve spoke slowly, as one does when trying to put something into words that is enormously important. "No, that isn't the way it is. The way I feel is this: because of you, all others in some way matter more."

There in Steve's arms, Linda saw it. Our love has meant so much to him, she thought, that he must share his happiness with all these others. Before, when he had no one to love, and no one to love him, he had nothing to share.

"Oh, Steve," she said, and the soft Summer night outside seemed to come right into their room and completely fill it.

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