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the good husband

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

Ellen's husband was so quiet and self-effacing she could almost picture him apologizing for the inscription on his own tombstone.

WHEN ELLEN had been twenty, even twenty-five, she would never have considered John as a matrimonial prospect. He would have been too dull, too stuffy, and—for ten years was a great span of time then—too old. Now that she was thirty-three, forty-three didn't seem old at all, and John was, as far as she could determine, dependable and steady.

So she agreed to marry him. With a romantic impetuosity that she had not thought him capable of, he had insisted upon an elopement—not that there was anyone to care whether or not they lived in "sin." They were married one fall evening in a small town where marriages could be arranged hastily, and ever since then—six months it had been—they had been living in John's little Greenwich Village apartment.

Once she had wondered whether she ever could grow fond of him. Now, looking at him as he sat reading near the fire, his bald spot shining, his rimless spectacles flickering with reflected flame, she wondered how she could ever do without him.

It is commonly assumed that an alert and discerning editor will snap up a manuscript from a very talented writer the instant it is presented. Unhappily the assumption is unwarranted, for few indeed are the writers who can be depended upon to maintain a uniform level of excellence with every story submitted. But we're becoming convinced that Evelyn Smith is one of the rare and gratifying exceptions, in her chosen realm of science-fantasy resplendent.

Affectionately she got up and rearranged the muffler he wore indoors and out; he was always cold.

John looked up at her and smiled. His teeth were excellent, a feature she liked to dwell upon, because otherwise he was such a commonplace little man.

"You've been coming home later and later every evening," she remarked in a tone which she tried to keep from being querulous, rather bright and interested as if she wanted to know everything he did. Not that she knew anything—really. He never told her what his business was and she was afraid to press him, afraid of being thought a nagging wife, afraid of stretching the tenuous substance of her dearly-won marriage.

But his coming home later and later had been hard on her, especially when he worked Saturdays and Sundays too. She had come to rely upon his company so much.

He sighed. "As I told you, dear, a lot of people are beginning to take their vacations, so I have to stay later to do their work."

She returned to her book, trying to give the appearance of satisfaction. But she was not satisfied. Poor John! Everybody pushed their work off on him—he was such a meek little fellow. Yet there was an undercurrent of strength in him too. She never could get him to answer her questions. Should she try again?

No. He was such a good husband. He never went out evenings by himself, although he often went

for a walk late at night. Soon after their marriage, she had been startled to awaken, and find the bed empty. When he came back, however, he explained to her that he was subject to claustrophobia and sometimes had to get up and go out for air. Since he always did look much the better for his outings, she never complained.

Her friends, when they dropped in for bridge or a quiet evening, were almost openly contemptuous of John. Still, she would far rather have had him than Madge's handsome Bill, who chased after women, and had even been known to try to kiss Ellen herself in the kitchen . . . or Peter, Lillian's husband, who drank.

Moreover, John had his family tree. "Our branch of the Carruthers family," he would inform guests in his dry, precise way, "has been in New York ever since the British took it from the Dutch. Some of my ancestors are buried out there."

And he would gesture toward the window that looked out on the graveyard. Behind the old brownstone was a forgotten little old cemetery. At first Ellen had thought the outlook macabre, but she soon grew used to it. Moreover, the apartment was comfortable and furnished with handsome old pieces that gave John's claims for his family a solid foundation.

Her guests would smile when he gave his little talks; yet she resented neither their merriment nor his pompousness. He made her feel as

if she belonged not only to him but to a whole tradition. Wanting to belong, to be part of something had been one of the major obsessions in her life.

And his prosiness was less objectionable than Madge's detailed narratives of her bouts with the doctor. Madge had a tendency to hypochondria. Recently she had added anemia to her ailments and Lillian, always the copycat, had likewise professed a drop in her blood count.

When John would go out to the kitchen for more ice, Madge would ask, slanting her eyes, "But just what does John do for a living, Ellen?" and Ellen would have to admit she had no idea.

Then Lillian would say, giggling and fingering one of the dog collars both she and Lillian had begun to affect, "Maybe he's a bookie."

And everyone would laugh, because the idea of John's being anything outside the law was so absurd.

But this night, brooding over her book, Ellen found her curiosity irrepressible. During fall and winter John had been a model husband. Now that spring was here, he was coming home later and later. "In the spring, a young man's fancy..." And in the spring all men thought they were young. Could there be another woman?

And, after all, what did John do during the day that he was so reluctant to disclose? Didn't he know that she wouldn't mind even if he were a—a butcher?

When he got up very early the next morning, she got up too. She dressed quickly and quietly behind the closet door while he was putting on his rubbers and wrapping his muffler around his meagre throat and tucking his umbrella under his arm.

On rubber-soled feet she crept downstairs behind him. He didn't go out into the street at all. He went into the narrow side alley and, with a big wrought iron key from his pocket, opened the gate leading into the graveyard. There he went to a gravestone behind the big tree that concealed most of the cemetery from the overlooking windows and disappeared into the grave.

Not a minute too soon either, for dawn broke immediately afterward. There, in the watery light, was his umbrella leaning against the stone. Evidently he'd forgotten to take it in with him. She had thought he was getting a little absent-minded recently.

The inscription on the tomb said: "Sacred to the Memory of John Gaylord Carruthers, 1720-1763." He hadn't been lying about his family.

The thing to do, she knew, was to dig him up and plunge a stake through his heart. But she would find life lonely without John. Anyhow, now she knew he wasn't carrying on with another woman.

As she tenderly carried his umbrella upstairs, she thought of Madge's and Lillian's anemia—their dog collars—and laughed.