

NEIGHBORS' WIVES

ERNEST LYNN, author of THE YELLOW STUB

BEGIN HERE TODAY

John and Fay Milburn buy a home when their baby girl is born and the advertising agency in which John is partner and copy writer lands a new contract. Among their acquaintances are:

Noel and Vera Boyd, whose marriage is strictly "modern."

Pat and Marian Forbes, who have three children and whose domestic life is unhappy because of Pat's roving tendencies. Previous chapters told how:

John was fascinated on meeting Nell Orme, of whom Pat Forbes hints that she is having trouble with her husband.

Fay took Judith, the baby, to visit her parents in Asheville and during her absence John "ran around" a good deal, mostly in company with Pat Forbes. When Fay returned gossip had related some of his doings and sharp quarrels between him and Fay followed, one of which drove him "out on a tear." Fay, learning he had been out again with other women, threatened to leave him if it was repeated.

John later encounters Nell Orme at the Boyd's—a plot of Vera's, who takes delight in promoting "affairs." He resolves not to see her again, as she realizes Nell is carrying him off his feet. But he does and the day comes when he takes her madly in his arms.

Fay learns of it and leaves him. John closes the house and takes an apartment, and here one night comes Nell Orme to tell of a quarrel with her husband, Howard, who suspects John of having come between them. While John is talking with her the door opens and Howard Orme enters.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
(The names and situations in this story are fictitious).

CHAPTER LIV

John could do nothing but stare. And within him was the knowledge of the futility of words.—Terror had leaped to Nell Orme's eyes.

As for Howard Orme, the man's face was quite terrible to behold.

The thin, straight line of his mouth was even thinner and straighter because of the set teeth. The muscles of his jaw stood out like great knots and his eyes, narrowed in anger, blazed like a cat's.

Of the two, John, despite the false position he was in, was by far the calmer. As for Nell, she had backed against the wall and stood there, a breathless spectator.

John was thinking. "He'll have to say the first word. I won't make any apologies."

Howard, closing the door behind him and bracing his back against it, looked slowly from John to his wife and then back again to John.

"Well," he said firmly, his voice little louder than a whisper, "I'm not surprised. I would have bet money this was where I'd find you two."

And then silence again. John, although the unfairness of the accusation angered him, still stubbornly refused to speak.

"Once more Howard stared at his wife and shifted his gaze back again to the man he thought had destroyed his home. And the muscles of his jaw began to work and his mouth to tremble; the narrowed eyes to blink.

"You see," he cried at Nell, "I told you you were lying when you denied your love affair with this man. You lied—didn't you?" He was trembling now, all over, a pitiful figure.

And quite suddenly he collapsed and sank sprawling into the nearest chair. Nell spoke his name—"Howard"—and at the sound of her voice a great sob escaped him and he buried his face in his hands.

Nell at once started toward him, her hands outstretched to comfort him, but John whispered, "Wait. Let him have it out," and she remained where she was.

But Orme was not long in recovering and John, as the other slowly raised his head, said, "Howard, do you want to listen to me?"

The words were as friendly, as kindly as he knew how to make them, but why, asked Orme, his lips tightening again, should he listen to any more lies?

Wasn't this evidence enough for him—to come in on his wife in another man's apartment, in another man's arms? What did he have to listen to?

Hell! John didn't think he was an ignorant kid, did he?

John's own calm surprised even himself.

"Well now, Howard," he began placatingly, "I can't resent your thinking those things, even though they're not true."

"Oh, don't lie, put in Orme wearily.

He wouldn't take the trouble to lie, John told him.

"Howard, sometimes things can look mighty different from what they really are. I won't deny that your wife and I have no business to be here, that on the surface things look pretty rotten—but you're dead wrong, just the same."

"Liar!" hissed Orme contemptuously. "Why don't you two admit your rottenness and be done with it? Why make it worse?"

Nell gasped. "Howard!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide and staring.

And John, despite his resolution to try to reason with Orme, was forced to resent the man's words.

"See here now," he said angrily, "I refuse to get melodramatic about this thing. I don't care for all the penny fireworks. You simply don't know what you're talking about."

Orme, his face whitening, again hurried the word liar at him.

"No wonder," he went on, glaring at John, "your wife left you."

John took a step toward him, his face working, hands twitching. But Nell ran to his side and put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Please, John."

"Oh, I'm not going to hit him," John cried.

He stopped and regarded the other man with a cold stare.

"All right, Orme, I'll take that, too. But that's about all. I'm going to insist that you listen to me—do you hear. Now your wife here—I won't deny that I have always liked her, but never for a minute have I forgotten that she was another man's wife or that I was married myself.

"I won't deny that I flirted with her—which I shouldn't have done. But none of the things you seem to think, Orme. Not that, by the Lord eternal.

You ought to know why she's here tonight. You drove her to it. She came running here, half hysterical, afraid, to tell me that you had struck her because she denied some of your nasty accusations."

In a lower tone, gently, "You struck her Howard. Was that right?"

He was thinking, even then, of the night Fay had struck him. How strange the similarity between their quarrel and the one between the Ormes! He would never forget that slap of Fay's not as long as he lived. And how much worse for a man to strike a woman—

Howard was saying, "Come now, I'm not to be fooled like this. What do you suppose a jury would say—finding you two here like this?"

"I hope you'll listen to reason, Howard," John told him, "and go home with Nell and patch up your quarrel. There's no good reason why you two should go on like this. Patch it up—you'll be happier; it will mean so much to you."

"I'll patch it up all right—patch it up in a divorce court."

"Oh no, Howard," Nell cried out but Howard broke in, "I don't care to listen to any more of your Pollyanna advice."

"More of your cheap melodrama, eh?" John sneered, looking steadily at Orme.

"Call it whatever you want to, I'm getting a divorce and you, young man, will be named, never

go through with this and drag his name into it, he'd be tempted to kill him.

Orme was snatching at his hat. "I ought to kill you," he was crying, and started toward the door, Nell after him. "I ought to kill you."

And John—"Yes, I suppose so," he said.

There was no sleep for him that night. Going to bed was not even to be thought of. But before settling down in his arm chair he went first to a closet and brought out a bottle.

Over his glass he was reflecting that if Howard should do what he had threatened to do and Fay should live with the knowledge that she could think of him as the kind of man Howard would paint him, "God!" he cried, "What have I done that I should deserve all this? It isn't fair—it isn't right. Fay, I'm innocent—I swear it!"

And so the night wore on. What, he wondered, was Howard Orme doing now. Had Nell gone home with him, and were they quarreling again? What a pity that Nell should have this trouble on her hands.

And yet Howard—how could he really blame the man? What would he—John—have done had he come upon his own wife in another man's apartment?

What a nasty, muddled thing life was anyway. What trouble could be born of misunderstanding. And what was to become of him?

He rose to pour himself another drink. Wouldn't Nat Graham shout, he was thinking as he tipped the bottle, if he only knew of this.

He could hear a horse-drawn vehicle go clattering past his window—the milk man, most likely. Funny that routine things should go on uninterruptedly like this while his own life was going to smash. But that was the way of the world—harsh, unfeeling, no one caring a rap for anyone else. Some time during the long

hours before dawn he went to his bedroom and opened the bureau drawer where lay the little rubber doll that had belonged to Judith. He squeezed it hard, and the toy emitted a faint squeak. It was unbearable—it tore so at his heart.

He was glad when he saw the sun shining in at the window; glad for the excuse of drooping and jumping into the tub. And now, he thought, as he emerged from his bath, another day, with more trouble in store.

On his way to breakfast he bought a newspaper, glancing at the thing mechanically and with no idea whatever of reading. But suddenly he stopped to stare at the paper's ominous headlines, which were proclaiming a thing

Beautiful Bathing Caps for one half their original price at the Standard Pharmacy.

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almost unbelievable. The flame of scandal, he saw, was about to sear him again. (To Be Continued)

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WE DIDN'T EXPECT YOU HERE SO EARLY!

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