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IS HE THE NEXT CARY GRANT?

■ For almost a decade, a fellow named Rock Hudson has represented the archetype of a Hollywood movie star. The darling of screen magazines, he attracts 28,000 worshipful fan letters from all over the world each month. Once an obscure truck driver, so perfectly has Hudson epitomized the Hollywood rags-to-riches legend that his name is often parodied for such glamorous characters in fiction. As early as 1955, a Broadway spoof of Hollywood was titled, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*

But while Rock Hudson's glorified image has flourished, Rock himself has remained the most atypical celebrity ever to step on the Hollywood scene: A man apparently so uncomplicated that he's a puzzle; an actor so ostensibly lacking in conceit, vanity, temperament, affectation or even ego that he is almost too good to be true; and an idol of women all over the world who has been notably unspectacular in his own romances.

Rock Hudson is the reliable and irreproachable mainstay of Universal Pictures (formerly Universal-International). This is the same studio that hired him on speculation thirteen years ago and where,

*What is the secret
of Rock Hudson's
phenomenal appeal to
women of all ages?
Here is a perceptive
peek at Hollywood's
tall, dark—and
shy—star*

in some forty-five pictures, he has developed his acting skills from "nil," in the words of Edward V. Muhl, its vice-president in charge of production, to where, "Rock, today, can play anything—except possibly Shakespeare." With two recent films, *Pillow Talk* and *Lover, Come Back*, Hudson successfully challenged veteran Cary Grant in Grant's traditional screen preserve, adult light comedy. For five of the past six years, he has been rated the nation's top male box-office attraction.

Rock's amazing adjustment to success, fame and flattery, and his

apparent immunity to their corruptions have brought him fantastic rewards. They have raised his income from \$125 a week to around \$200,000 a year (five years ago he turned down \$1,000,000 to play in a single picture—*Ben-Hur*) and enabled him to grow from an awkward, naïve and uncertain youth into a well-rounded cosmopolite. At home in Rome, London, Paris and Madrid, as well as in the jungles of Africa and South America, he now speaks conversational Italian and "menu" French. He has been presented to royalty and honored by institutions of learning. He has sailed his own boat in the Pacific, water-skied off the French Riviera and skindived in the Caribbean. A student of both art and music, he owns 1,200 record albums and an impressive collection of paintings.

With all this, Rock Hudson has yet to acquire what most men prize above all life's blessings—a happy marriage and a family. Except for one brief and fruitless union, he has remained Hollywood's most romantically relaxed, one-girl-at-a-time bachelor. At thirty-seven, Hudson gives no sign of changing that status.

This makes Rock Hudson a frustrating

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BY KIRTLEY BASKETTE

curiosity in a community where romantic gossip and matchmaking are energetically pursued pastimes—especially since, both on screen and off, he possesses an extraordinary fascination for women. Like the late Clark Gable and Gary Cooper he primarily expresses himself in all the parts he plays. With their recent passing he has no professional rival for widespread feminine adulation except Cary Grant, a man twenty-one years his senior.

Ross Hunter, producer of Rock Hudson's initial "woman's picture," *Magnificent Obsession*, as well as *Pillow Talk*, believes personal identification is his attraction. "Women see whatever they long for in Rock," he contends, "a lover, husband, boy friend, brother or son. He's the man next door, also the knight in shining armor. And whatever they idealize in him they also feel they can rely on. He's always a friend, too."

Hudson's fan mail seems to corroborate this. Nearly all of it comes from women, preponderately mature and often married women.

Rock Hudson's rapport with actresses is even more remarkable. Gina Lollobrigida, a notoriously difficult star to get along with, worked an extra two weeks with Hudson in *Come September* without pay. Jane Wyman, who had never met Rock until *Magnificent Obsession*, has been a close friend ever since. Even temperamental Elizabeth Taylor was sweet and compliant when they made *Giant* together.

DORIS DAY, who starred with Rock Hudson in both *Pillow Talk* and *Lover Come Back*, told me unabashedly, "I love Rock. I really do love him." Miss Day, mother of a grown son, explained: "He has all the qualities I like—simplicity, honesty and most of all, a down-to-earth quality that most of us have when we're young, but lose as we grow in our careers. Besides," she added, "he's an absolute nut!"

Throughout both the pictures they made together, Hudson and Miss Day adopted the characters of "Eunice and Ernie Blotter," an imagined comical couple, and reveled in a side-play of inventive dialogue between scenes. Miss Day, whose hobby is baking, even brought a large chocolate cake one morning to "Ernie." A few days later she received a letter from "Engeldorfer's Bakery" of Downey, offering her a job. Hudson had had the letterhead printed, typed the offer and driven to the nearby California town to post it.

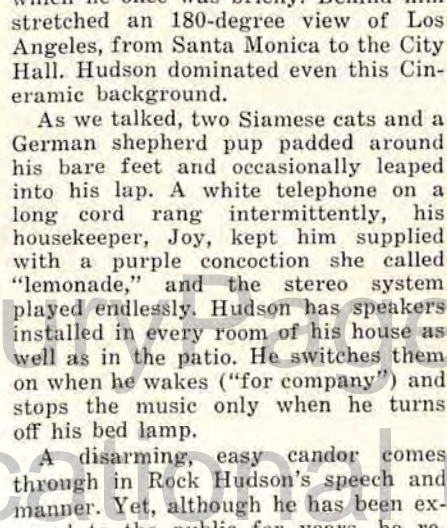
Besides a sense of humor, Rock Hudson seems to possess about everything else most women would desire in a man. He is well off, at the zenith of his career and so healthy that, after a day-long physical examination at Castle Air Force Base in preparation for his recently-completed film, *A Gathering of Eagles*, the flight surgeon told him, "I could certify you right now for full flying status."

Rock Hudson's most obvious attraction, of course, is his incredible good-looks. Six feet, four inches tall, he is so handsome that photographer Leo Fuchs declares, "It's hard to take a bad pic-

ture of Rock." Makeup man Bud Westmore reveals, "All I've ever had to do for Rock is to put some lines in his too-bland face when he was younger. Today Rock kids me, 'You put 'em in, now take 'em out,' but there still aren't enough to bother with."

Hudson himself rejects this picture of perfection. "I have plenty of faults and failings, of course," he told me. "I'm inclined to be rebellious and angry most of the time, only I don't show it. I haven't the patience to argue and I don't like to make trouble. I was brought up to believe that a nice person was the thing to be. So, when there's a crisis I turn my feelings inward and seem calm. Afterward I might vomit or slam my fist through a door—but by myself. But I can be stubborn and I can speak my piece, always before a picture starts, though, never after. Also, all my life," he continued, "I've had to fight shyness. I'm a poor mixer and in many ways I've never had my feet on the ground."

Hudson is equally disparaging about his physical endowments. "I don't think I'm so good-looking," he protested. "My teeth aren't very straight, I have terrible posture and a sway-back. I wear glasses because I'm nearsighted, and I'm much too tall." As he spoke he lowered himself by spreading his legs like a giraffe. "So I can hear what you say," he joked.

WHEN you meet Rock Hudson you are impressed first with his size and the remarkably perfect features which he deprecates. After those comes his ingenuous affability, belying the inward torments he claims and emphasized by an all-out grin which sets crinkles around his brown eyes like piecrusts. He met me at the door of his spacious Spanish-style house on a mountain spur above Beverly Hills, and led the way to a large, covered patio opening out to a pool. Fresh from a dip, he had beads of water on his big shoulders, chest and arms, muscled like a piano mover's, which he once was briefly. Behind him stretched an 180-degree view of Los Angeles, from Santa Monica to the City Hall. Hudson dominated even this Cin-


ceramic background. As we talked, two Siamese cats and a German shepherd pup padded around his bare feet and occasionally leaped into his lap. A white telephone on a long cord rang intermittently, his housekeeper, Joy, kept him supplied with a purple concoction she called "lemonade," and the stereo system played endlessly. Hudson has speakers installed in every room of his house as well as in the patio. He switches them on when he wakes ("for company") and stops the music only when he turns off his bed lamp.

A disarming, easy candor comes through in Rock Hudson's speech and manner. Yet, although he has been exposed to the public for years, he remains basically a diffident, self-effacing man. Flying to Surinam a year or so ago for *The Spiral Road*, he stopped in Trinidad, hoping to sightsee and hear calypso music. An airways press agent

tipped off the local papers, and a crowd collected. Hudson stayed in his hotel room for three days rather than face the mob. The same thing happened at the airport in Georgetown, British Guiana, where he roared for three hours inside the plane. On his way back he landed in Georgetown again, and this time, when a crowd gathered, he summoned his nerve and stepped out to face them. None paid him any attention.

"They were there to meet Robert Kennedy, not me," Rock explained with a chuckle. "That made me all the madder." In Curaçao, on the same trip, he spotted Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet astronaut, en route to Cuba. Like any of his own fans, he walked up and bashfully introduced himself. Gagarin had never heard of Rock Hudson.

HIS native reserve makes Rock Hudson shun social and café circles in Hollywood, where he is known as almost a recluse and essentially a homebody.

"Yes, I get invited out all the time," he told me, "but I never go anywhere. Ten years ago I was out every night, playing around at parties and clubs, because I was told it was the public pattern I must form. I hated it. Now I do what I want, perhaps rudely so."

I found Rock Hudson willing to answer most questions, although he volunteered little information about his personal affairs. "I'm really sick of talking about myself," he said, understandably. "Besides, I don't think I'm very interesting." He speaks with an economy of words that would do credit to a Maine Yankee, yet with the same pithy humor.

Hudson purchased his house a few months ago for \$180,000. The rooms are large, but it boasts only two bedrooms. Although the house was sketchily-furnished when I saw it, already the bookshelves were crammed and paintings were in place on the walls. Hudson plans to furnish it with antiques, which he is busily collecting.

Before moving to his present home, Hudson lived for three years on Lido Isle at Newport Beach, a yachting center 50 miles south of Los Angeles, driving the 100 miles each day when he worked. He liked the quiet resort life so much that he bought a house and a 40-foot ketch. Ignorant of how to start his boat's engine at first, he developed into a fair heavy-weather sailor, once righting his craft in a gale that dipped the mainsail. He has had close calls with his other marine sports. Another time, skin-diving, he was circled by sharks and, while he was water-skiing on the Mediterranean, a speedboat crashed into him. The only scar he bears from such adventures is a knob on his collarbone, fractured while surfing.

When Hudson sold his boat last year and moved into town because of increasing film demands, he turned over the Lido beach house to his mother, now Mrs. Joseph Olsen. The weekend before he left, a neighbor watched incredulously as Hudson scrubbed floors, washed windows and walls. "Why in the world didn't you hire a professional cleaner?" she asked when the fury was over.

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"Well, you know how mothers like places cleaned right," he replied.

"Rock has a wonderful relationship with his mother," states Gail Gifford, a studio publicity woman and close friend. "They see each other often but never interfere. Once a year, perhaps, Mrs. Olsen brings her bridge club to visit Rock's set and have lunch. But she has her own life." Apparently there is no silver cord lingering on from their close interdependence during Hudson's boyhood.

DIVORCE and marital discord shadowed that phase of Rock Hudson's life in Winnetka, Illinois, where he was born Roy Scherer, Jr., on November 17, 1925, the only child of a mechanic of German-Swiss ancestry, and his wife, Kay, a tall, handsome woman of English-Irish extraction. When "Junior" was six, Roy Scherer failed with his auto-repair shop and left for California to seek a new start. The separation became permanent, despite long-distance appeals by Mrs. Scherer and one trip to California with her son. Finally, the marriage ended in divorce.

When he was eight, Roy acquired as stepfather an ex-Marine named Wallace Fitzgerald, who legally adopted him. This marriage, too, ended in divorce, but only after Roy had been exposed to wrangling, repeated separations and attempts at reconciliation. In that time Fitzgerald imposed harsh discipline on his stepson, whom he apparently resented. Hudson still dislikes to talk about that chapter in his childhood except to say, "We didn't get along."

A strong, resourceful woman, Kay Fitzgerald worked as a telephone operator in Winnetka to support herself and son. For a while they lived with Roy's grandparents, his uncle and aunt and their four children, all crowded into a small stucco house. Later they moved to an apartment of their own. Relatives remember Roy as a sunny, normal youngster despite his insecure home life.

In his teens Roy Fitzgerald became an avid movie fan. He wrote Lana Turner letters and collected pictures of her. The story goes that he decided, at fourteen, to become a Hollywood hero when he saw actor Jon Hall dive off a ship's mast and swim a lagoon to rescue beautiful Dorothy Lamour in a South Sea film. "It wasn't only that," Hudson told me. "Like most kids at that stage, I simply thought it would be great to be a movie star and do stunts like those."

In January, 1944, after graduation from New Trier High School, Roy Fitzgerald was drafted into the Navy and served as an aviation mechanic in the Philippines. He is supposed to have been demoted to laundryman when a B-26 he was serving jumped its chock-blocks and smashed up nearby planes. "I made up that one," Hudson confessed "along with a lot of other stories. Publicity people wanted exciting anecdotes and I didn't have any." Roy Fitzgerald did finish out his Navy service as laundryman third class, but because "the war was over and I still had four months to go. They were pushing planes into the sea to get rid of them

about then." Discharged in May of 1946, he went home to Winnetka, then after a year of loafing and odd jobs, took off for California with movies on his mind.

His father, with whom he had corresponded, lived near the University of Southern California campus, and Roy hoped to study dramatics there on the GI Bill, but he was quickly disillusioned. The flood of postwar applicants had raised USC's enrollment requirement to a B-plus average; Roy's high-school record was woefully below that. The job his father, who ran a household appliance shop, gave him selling vacuum cleaners was equally discouraging. After a brief try, he took a job as a truck driver, delivering dried fruits and vegetables to supermarkets.

Sometimes today, when dissatisfied with his efforts, Rock Hudson has been known to scoff, "A big guy like me ought to be driving a truck or something!" Actually, he resents the legend that he was snatched from behind a wheel and molded into a movie idol by clever manipulators. "The trucking job was just a stopgap, to support myself," he said, "until I could figure how to get a chance at acting." His first maneuvers to win that chance were amazingly naïve. Hustling through his route, he changed into an ill-fitting gabardine suit, and in the afternoons lounged outside the gates of Hollywood studios, nervously smoking and hoping to be "discovered" by producers leaving the lots. None ever noticed him.

THE gambit that finally worked was suggested by another driver who had a friend in show business. On his advice, Roy Fitzgerald spent \$25 to have five photographs made and sent them around to studios. One he mailed to Selznick Studios found its way to a man named Henry Willson, then in charge of new talent. Willson asked to see him in person.

Henry Willson is something of a Hollywood legend himself. For years his specialty has been uncovering raw but handsome young men for the screen, rechristening them with blunt, masculine names (Guy Madison, Tab Hunter, Troy Donahue) and masterminding their debuts. When big, good-looking Roy Fitzgerald edged awkwardly into his office Willson suspected he had struck pay dirt.

Willson's own bosses considered Roy far too green to bother with. (Nine years later Hudson was paid \$17,000 a week to co-star with David Selznick's wife, Jennifer Jones, in *A Farewell to Arms*.) The studio was about to disband anyway, and, turning agent, Willson took Roy Fitzgerald on as a client. But for a long time his attempts to get his protégé started in pictures met with no success. Twentieth Century-Fox, among other film companies, rejected Hudson after a screen test still rated a classic example of ineptitude. Twenty-two-year-old Roy Fitzgerald found it hard to be something he was not, and some of his job interviews bordered on the ludicrous.

For instance, Willson thought he should seem older and instructed him to say he was twenty-four. "Once," Will-

son recalls, "I took Rock to Walter Wanger, who barked, 'How old are you?' Rock turned to me. 'How old am I?' he repeated."

"I was that green, and that scared," Hudson explained. "I simply panicked."

When director Raoul Walsh finally gave Roy Fitzgerald a bit part as a young Air Corps officer in a film called *Fighter Squadron*, it took him thirty-two painful tries to speak his nine-word line convincingly. But his attractive looks and personality so impressed Walsh that he signed him to a contract and financed drama and diction lessons. Willson came up with the name Rock Hudson (after Gibraltar and the river), and helped polish his client's rough edges by taking him to plays and introducing him around Hollywood. Still, Hudson was so self-conscious about his efforts to become an actor that he kept them a secret from his parents. When *Fighter Squadron* was exhibited in Hollywood, he took his mother, then a telephone operator in Pasadena, to see it.

"All she said when she saw me on the screen was, 'Oh, so you're a movie actor now. Well, that's fine,'" Hudson recalled. His father was equally surprised although not so complacent. "He thought I was crazy," said Hudson.

A year later Walsh sold Rock Hudson's contract to Universal-International. Except for loan-outs he has been there ever since. Universal acquired the man who was to earn them millions for \$9,000, the money Walsh had invested in him, plus a salary of \$125 a week.

"Even that was a gamble," says Edward Muhl. "Rock had the look of a performer, but he couldn't act then. We just hoped he would learn."

Hudson studied at the studio's acting school and was coincidentally plunged into one picture after another. Ross Hunter told me, "Rock was eager to learn all about everything. Once, the word 'naïve' came up in his script. He asked me what it meant and I told him. I told him too that he should never be ashamed to ask questions. He's still asking them, and that's one big reason why he's where he is."

YET by 1954, although popular with teenagers, Rock Hudson was still so unrecognized as an actor that Muhl had to show Jane Wyman, then at her peak, a picture called *The Lawless Breed* to acquaint her with the man he wanted to play her lover in *Magnificent Obsession*. Halfway through, Miss Wyman announced, "He'll be just fine with me."

The Lloyd Douglas tear-jerker served Rock Hudson exactly as it had Robert Taylor years before. As "Dr. Merrick," he captivated women, who suddenly discovered soulful depths in his brown eyes, strength in his imposing physique and identifiable sex appeal in the whole Hudson package. His mail rose to 3,000 letters a week and kept climbing. Promptly Universal began casting him in roles of depth and responsibility. But for a time Hudson's abrupt graduation from utility actor to star gave him a worrisome sense of inadequacy.

On the eve of *Giant*, for example, he told director George Stevens, "I don't

know how I can play Bick Benedict. I don't understand him." Stevens replied that he wasn't sure he did yet either, but soothed, "Let's start and figure him out together." Rock's performance won him an Academy Award nomination for best male acting of the year.

Rock Hudson's confidence in himself as an actor has increased steadily, but he still must relate himself convincingly to every part before he can play it. "I almost had to beat Rock over the head to get him to do *Pillow Talk*," Ross Hunter revealed. "He protested, 'Me in a comedy? I don't think I'm funny.' I think the fun he had with Doris Day on the set helped him to do a hilarious job." From January of last year until July, Hudson visited SAC headquarters in Omaha, as well as other Air Force bases in South Dakota, New Mexico, California and Texas, preparing for *A Gathering of Eagles*. He lived with fliers, went through a full indoctrinational course; took off on bomber runs and high-altitude flights. Previous to undertaking his role in *Come September*, patterned loosely upon an international oil magnate, Hudson had a complete dossier prepared of the man's life.

THIS career preoccupation is undoubtedly one reason for Rock Hudson's unspectacular private life. While he has dated scores of women—many for publicity purposes when he was a beginner—he has been seriously involved with only four. One was Vera-Ellen, a dancer, whom he met at the studio, where he also met singer-actress Marilyn Maxwell, with whom he has now resumed an attachment begun twelve years ago. Betty Abbott, who came next, was a script girl on his picture, *Bright Victory*. And Phyllis Gates, whom he married, was secretary to Hudson's agent, Henry Willson. Hudson's more casual dates and friendships, including actresses Barbara Rush, Piper Laurie, Yvonne DeCarlo, Lori Nelson and Joyce Holden, among others, were conveniently close at hand.

With all his girls Rock Hudson owned the reputation of being a gay, attentive escort, always out for a good time. Yet, when he married, he picked an attractive but rather exacting woman for his wife. Phyllis Gates was a former airline stewardess from Minnesota, whom Hudson met in his agent's office. Their elopement to Santa Barbara on November 9, 1955, was a surprise to both Hudson's friends and fans.

"I never saw two people who seemed more in love," says a friend whose house the newlyweds visited upon their return from a Bermuda honeymoon. Nonetheless, after a few months the marriage began to show signs of strain. On August 13, 1958, Mrs. Hudson was granted a divorce on grounds of extreme cruelty; she testified, "He was sullen and would not talk to me for weeks at a time. Sometimes he would stay out all night and when I asked where he had been, he would say, 'It's none of your business.'"

Both Phyllis and Rock Hudson have since refused to comment on their marriage. "It would be terribly unfair to her for me to say anything," Hudson

told me. However, when I asked him what the trouble was he said, "It was simply incompatibility. There's obviously trouble on both sides when there is a divorce. It takes two to tangle."

Hudson seems to have suffered no psychic trauma from the experience. "Of course I was hurt," he admitted, "to the extent that now I disapprove of divorce. It is made too easy."

However, Rock Hudson seems to be enjoying his comfortable, carefree life as a bachelor. He pursues his sport hobbies energetically and likes to entertain small groups of friends at poolside barbecues usually followed by music and word games. Recently he has become absorbed with bridge. A moderate drinker but heavy eater, he must watch his weight. I noticed that he smoked often while we talked. "I quit once on a New Year's resolution," he sighed, "but I just gained twenty-five pounds, so I started again." Comfort seems to be Rock Hudson's byword. At home he is invariably dressed in shorts, jeans or duck trousers and sport shirt and is almost always shoeless.

He is presently planning to take off on new interests, both recreational and professional. He's brushing up on his flying (he learned in the Navy) with an

eye to owning a converted PBY "sky yacht." He has plans to visit the Orient this summer. He is also taking singing lessons with the eventual aim of doing a Broadway musical, is currently making a comedy titled *Man's Favorite Sport*, and in his next film, *It Seems There Were These Two Irishmen*, will essay a tricky dual role of father and son. Otherwise he professed to be content with things as they are, although I sensed that underneath it all he feels unfulfilled.

"Certainly if I found someone I loved I'd like to get married again," he said. "To love and be loved in return is the greatest thing in life. I know I'm missing a lot. Also, I like children and they seem to like me. But I have no marriage plans."

Marilyn Maxwell confirms this indefinite state of their friendship. Like Hudson, she went through an unhappy marriage. The two met again at a carnival in Rio de Janeiro. "I thought that after all that had passed Rock would be changed," says Miss Maxwell, "but he was the same nice, unaffected man I remembered. We just took up where we had left off."

Above everything, that would seem to be Rock Hudson's cardinal virtue—a

fundamental changelessness, in its way as impressive as Gibraltar's, which inspired his name. Yet his friend, Ross Hunter, designates this as Hudson's greatest fault.

"A man should change," he believes, "successful screen star or not. I think Rock wants to change, is trying to and in many ways is succeeding. But for him it is very hard."

Before I left, Rock Hudson showed me about his grounds. "Two and a half acres," he pointed out. "I can subdivide it later on if—you know—I can't act any more." It will probably remain untouched. His boss, Edward Muhl, had predicted, "Rock should be good for another twenty years. I can't imagine anyone getting tired of him soon."

I told that to Hudson. "Boy, I can!" he said. "Me, for one." He broke out his All-American grin. I was reminded of the time Louis B. Mayer, the late Hollywood star-maker, cut short a young actor's screen test with the abrupt verdict: "No—I don't smile at him."

What that hapless candidate lacked is probably Rock Hudson's most valuable asset. People smile at big Rock. He smiles back. So far, for everything except romance, it has been a remarkably sure-fire combination. ♦

Twice-blessed family *continued from page 74*

is a problem. I can see, in just a few years, somebody dashing in to tell us my kid and your kid are picking on *our* kids. I expect what we'll have to do is have enough of our kids to outnumber yours and mine."

He got the silent message. She hadn't moved, or changed expression, or done anything else that the most delicate of instruments could have detected. But he knew she wasn't with him any longer in his foolishness, and he stopped it instantly and said, "All right. Serious about what?"

"John, I've got a fourteen-year-old son!"

"Pete's all right," he said. "You won't have any trouble with him."

Marti said, "I don't know. These days you get along better with him than I do, really."

He allowed himself a small grimace. "Except when he calls me sir," he said.

"But I think he *has* adjusted wonderfully, don't you?"

"Oh, sure," he said confidently. "Him and me, we're like *that*. Except when he calls me sir. Now take my daughter. I mean, she doesn't call you madam, or anything."

"I'd cry if she did. Nita's my girl. Nita's my daughter, the rest of my life."

"Now, what about this one? Do we take whatever the good doctor has in his little black bag at the time?"

"What do *you* want?"

"Why, I do have a failing for girl children."

"All right, then, we'll order a girl."

"On the other hand, I'm also fond of boy children."

She turned a searching look on him. "All right," she said. "How *do* you feel about it?"

He said simply, "I couldn't be more

delighted. I don't know the words to make it stronger. Any more than I can tell you how I feel about you."

Marti kissed him tenderly, and they sat in one of those moments of warmth that come all too infrequently. The moment was broken by the sound of the front door closing.

Marti stirred, and John, with a slight tightening of his arm around her waist, held her on his lap. There was a short pause before they heard Pete's voice from the entry hall saying neutrally, "Hi."

"Hi," said John. "How'd the game go?"

"They took us. We're still ahead in the league, though."

"Well, then."

"Yuh. Well, guess I'll go upstairs." "You don't have to. Your mother and I were just necking—nothing serious."

Pete hesitated, and his words came rather stiffly. "I'll just go on up." He clumped upstairs.

Marti said, "You shouldn't have said that; you know how a boy his age reacts to such. . . ."

"Sure," he agreed ruefully. "You know I don't go for any—displays in front of the kids. But then, darn it, this is *our* house, and we all have to live in it together, and if. . . ."

She kissed him lightly on the tip of his nose and stood up. "I know, and of course," she said. "Except that we're still a new family, so we have to do things just a little more gently, a little more carefully."

"True," he said. "I wasn't really trying to be funny; it just came out."

She smiled to show him she understood, and went out to do something in the kitchen. He read his paper awhile, and then went downstairs to the basement and worked on the cabinet he was

making. He rather hoped Pete would come down, and he ran the whining belt sander longer than he needed, to be sure the sound would carry upstairs. But Pete didn't come down, and John shut down the sander. . . .

John had been a salesman, and he had been on the road when his wife died, quickly, mercifully for her, and he and Nita were dazed survivors of what had been a family. From something like inertia, he went on selling for another year. Then he left the road and bought out the elderly owner of a small-town hardware store, leased a house, and did his best to re-establish himself and Nita as a family. It wasn't going any too well, really, until Marti came into his life.

Pete was twelve then, and he'd been five when his father died. Marti had done well in her years alone; Pete was a sturdy lad, self-reliant—he kept his father's picture in his room, the few mementos in a box in a drawer. He called John "John," and neither John nor Marti tried to change that. Nita called Marti "Mommy" from the day of the wedding, but then Nita was little more than a baby, and Marti became her mother as simply as the big, boxy, old two-story house became home.

Pete—well, Pete was all right. Pete's trouble was that he was fourteen, practically fifteen. If he lived through that, maybe he'd make it. John turned off the basement shop lights and went upstairs.

At breakfast next morning Pete was quiet, but then, Pete was a quiet boy, really. John withheld comment until they went out to the car together.

"Mad at me, Pete?" said John.

"No, sir," said Pete, which was a clue, but not much of one. They rode to the store in silence. Pete began his appointed chore of sweeping out. John