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After Ten Years

by Marion Rubincam

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

Capter 1

Millicent Buchanan stood staring out of the window of the sitting room, into a Spring world drenched in rain. They were going to play bridge at Cora Riley's at three, it was half past two now and the rain showed no sign of clearing in time to start. It was 15 minutes walk, and walking was the only way of getting there. Millie had a new charmeuse skirt which rain would absolutely ruin.

She stared, frowning in concentrated displeasure, as she watched the downpour. She wanted to go to the bridge this afternoon, not that she desired to see any of the women present, for she had seen every single one of them within the last 36 hours; not that she had a passion interest in bridge, she was too bad a player for that—not for any reason connected with Cora and her friends. She simply had a new charmeuse skirt cut in the latest Spring fashion, no one else in Wissakeagan had any Spring clothes as yet, and Millie wanted to show herself off.

Hence the desire to play bridge, hence the frown at the rain that made her a prisoner indoors. A deep line ran up between her eyebrows, and met other lines running cross-wise on her forehead. These lines were deep there were not one afternoon, but many afternoons of frowning.

A figure filled up the doorway across the room. Bridget Sorenson, daughter of an Irish mother and a Scandinavian father, and general cook nd servant in the Bushanan house, had wandered in to see why her mistress was not leaving for the "party". She had two reasons for coming in, one was to make sure Mrs. Buchanan was gone, in which case she would sneak off to have a "dray of tay" with the German servant down the street, the other was to see whether the new charmeuse skirt looked as expensive as it was reported to be.

"You'll be late,—" she remarked with the familiarity of the general maid in every small town.

"Look at the weather. I can't go," Millie grumbled.

"Faith, if you let the a little rain keep ye' ye'll not go out till June. Bridged saw her own nice afternoon being spoiled. Rain meant nothing to her but then she never wore charmeuse skirts unless they were inherited from some generous mistress. And when they came to her they were in such a condition that a little rain, more or less, would not hurt them!

"I'll ruin my skirt."

"There's the old plaid" Bridget said hopefully. "None of them will be wearing grand clothes a day like this."

Bridget, as well as every other servant in the town, and every other mistress, for that matter, would have told exactly what each woman present would have on.

There would not be another bridge party for two weeks. By that time all the others would have their new clothes, and the charmeuse skirt would be only one of many new things to be admired.

It was such a fascinating skirt, it gathered into the ankles on an elastic, which gave it a curious "hang" it was daringly short and had a frill around the top. It had to have silk stockings and high heeled low shoes or the effect would be spoiled, and how could one wear these things in such a down-pour?

As though in answer, another cloud opened, and the rain fairly pounded upon the roof and the pavements.

"No, I wont' go" Millie threw herself down into a big chair.

She picked up a sweater she was knitting. The telephone rang.

"Bridget, you answer it, that's probably Cora phoning the party is or until tomorrow."

Bridget returned from the hall, where the phone sat upon a little table.

"It's Mister Buchanan," she reported "He says it's too rainy to stay in the office and he's coming home and please to have his dry slippers out and some hot coffee as he'll be wet."

Millie rose, suddenly alive and decided.

She rolled up the sweater, laying it back in its box.

"Start the coffee right away," she ordered, "or it won't be strong enough for him. And warm up my rain coat, its so stiff in the cold closet."

Bridget looked at her in astonishment.

Another downpour came outside. Millie hated rain. And Mr. Buchanan coming home in the afternoon too!

Three more minutes later Millie came down in a pongee waist and an old plaid skirt.

She began putting on overshoes, hurriedly, as though she were escaping someone, she went up the street in the rain.

CARDS AND GOSSIP

Chapter 2

When Millie reached Cora Riley's house she found only one guest there beside her hostess, Maude Smith, who lived next door to the Riley's.

Millie, who had walked some little distance through the drenching rain came in wet around the edges as she called it, cold and cross.

"Good land, but it's Millie." The hostess' voice had more surprise than pleasure in it "Here, I'll send your wet coat to the kitchen to be dried, you come and put your feet up by the stove."

She fussed around her after the manner of old fashioned house wives, offering dry stockings and had hot coffee brought her from the kitchen.

Millie warmed with the attention and was glad she came, and forgot the disappointment of not being able to wear her new silk skirt.

"Now if one more comes, we can play," Cora went on, looking out the window where gray rain was falling in sheets of water. "Ain't it awful weather. Do you remember how it rained for weeks last Spring?"

She rattled on, discussing the weather, past and present with as much zest as thought it was an original and inspiring topic. Millie dried the damp hem of her skirt, drank her coffee and was happy.

But the weather, even to the Cora's and Maude's of this world, soon ceases to supply ideas for talk. Having done justice verbally to all the weather she could remember at the moment, Cora lapsed into personalities.

"I did think we might put off the party till tomorrow," she said. "Though mother's cream cakes won't be good after today. I did start to phone you Millie, to tell youn not to come, but they said your line was busy. I was sure it wasn't, I told them—" Cora had the more or less happy faculty of being able to manufacture talk about every subject that came up. She went into a monologue about the bad service the phone company gave, her thin pinched face growing thinner and more pinched as she complained bitterly that it was all because Nellie, the day central, ran around half the night with a lot of boys.

"It was busy," Millie interrupted, "Humphrey phoned he was coming home."

Silence! Each woman made a note of the fact that as soon as Humphrey Buchanan telephoned he would spend his afternoon at home rather than in the office, Millie rushed forth even in the worst rain of the year to attend a party that was sure to be a failure.

Even Millie, who made the remark in all innocence, felt the waves of thought and speculation, comment and criticism that began to surge around her—and Millicent was anything but psychic or sensitive. In fact, she would have characterized such ideas as the most utter nonsense.

Nevertheless, the silence made her uncomfortable. She suggested they try a three handed rubber of bridge. She bid wildly, hoping for cards in the dummy to make good her bids and never getting them. They did not play for money, of course that would have been "gambling" they played for forfeits the loser being obliged to spend so many hours knitting or sewing for charity, the winner being relieved of so many hours of work.

The result of this complicated system instituted by one of the leading church members was that each member of the bridge club had a credit and debit account of hours of work which she had to keep. The good players naturally did no work, the poorest player was at this moment in debt some 854 hours time enough, she complained bitterly, to knit sweaters and socks for all the poor in the country.

Cora's mother brought in the cream cakes that would not keep and more coffee, and sandwiches. Guests and hostess alike knew that the olives and salted nuts and mint candies that were an invariable part of every bridge afternoon, were saved for the time when the whole party could come together and feast and enjoy.

Millie rose as soon as they had finished, used Humphrey as an excuse donned her rubber things and left.

Maude pulled her chair to the stove, and picked up her embroidery.

"Not having any Humphrey, I needn't go till this downpour lets up," she observed comfortably. "Cora, do you believe they're happy? It was pretty evident she didn't want to spent an afternoon talking to him, otherwise she wouldn't have rushed across town a day like this. Millie hates rain. Maybe they've quarrelled."

"Maybe", Cora agreed, quite willing to discuss the affairs of best friends. "But I guess they're happy enough. Been married ten years."

"She ought to be happy, she has everything she wants. He makes six thousand a year they say in his business, and they've put away quite a lot. I have heard—"

HUMPHREY

Chapter 3

Millie ran home through the rain as fast as she could. She tried to hold the umbrella up with one hand, and with the other thrust through the slit pocket of her raincoat, to catch up her skirt within the protection of her coat.

She only made matters worse, as she was bound to in such a contest with a dead-in-earnest Spring rain. The umbrella wobbled from side to side, letting rain down the neck of the coat and the skirt, relic of a day when Scotch plaids were laid appropriately in pleats and kilts, was so wide that all she did was to hold up part of it. The rest served as a blotter to all the splash of rain and mud.

So when she reached her front door, she was out of breath, cross, cold and wet. She had none of the exhilaration that a run through a rainstorm should have given her; she had narrowed her chest and really tried not to breathe.

Humphrey was sitting just as she knew he would be, feet thrust into red felt slippers.

He was reading just as she knew he would be the latest copy of "Saucy Snips" or which ever magazine of short stories, trying to seem naughty, was out on the rail road newsstand that day.

He looked up and greeted her with time-worn formula of ten years: "Hallo. Where you been all the time?"

And neither waiting for nor expecting any answer, he went on with his story.

"But Polly had not danced behind the footlights, three years without learning a thing or two about men. She helped herself to some more lobster and asked "What line of talk are you pulling, dearie. If you thing I'm going to give up my profession for any mere little Harlem flat you're all to the wrong, dearie, all to the wrong."

"I've been over to Cora's" Millie's voice came vaguely into his ears. She says the Baptists want a new steeple on the—"

"But if you offer me a yacht and a house on the Drive, now, you'll be talking. Maurice beamed with delight and moving around the table, he put his arm around her waist. The Japanese butler discreetly retired—"

"—wanted to get Mrs. Perkins in till she's well, but she's having a baby, too. It's the tenth I'm sure, and only three of them living, though she ought to be thankful for that—" Millie had discarded raincoat, overshoes, and wet slippers and was padding into the room in her stocking feet.

"Undisturbed by the disappearance of the butler, Polly went on with her supper. Dancing always gave her a ravenous appetite and lobster was her favorite dish. When Maurice tried to kiss her she insisted upon more champagne. After a time her host tired of this being played with—"

"Well, you might answer once anyway, when I talk to you."

"Huh? I'm sorry, I was just in the exciting part—what did you say?"

"That Mrs. Perkins might be just as glad seven of them died since he's no good and leaves her half the time to earn her own livin'. Maud wanted her in to cook while her sister's having a baby—"

Humphrey, whose mind was still at the champagne and lobster supper in the bachelor apartment with chorus girls and Japanese butlers and private yachts strewn all over the page, had a jumbled idea that Maude had had and lost seven children and was about to indulge in another, with her sister mixed up in it although how could this be when Maude was the village spinster and at least 40 years old?

And he made some unfortunate remark that showed how vaguely this gossip had penetrated his head, which brought down the wrath of Millie. She stamped upstairs making more noise in her stocking feet than she did when she wore shoes.

Humphrey, contrite at having been rude actually forgot the lobsters and the short skirted heroine of the story. He thought of going upstairs and apologizing but he was much too warm and comfortable in the big arm chair to move.

So he settled down again thinking consolingly that if she was mad it wouldn't last. He looked so settled he seemed to have fairly grown into the chair. He was that sort of man. In a stiff wooden chair, he would have looked out of place, but his own soft body fairly settled and became a part of padding and cushions.

Humphrey had the flabby fat of him who, over east and under-exercises, and the round face that goes with a bland temperament. He picked up the story. Nothing improper ever happened in any of them, experience should have taught him that, but he was always hopeful.

DISAGREEMENT

Chapter 4

Humphrey expected that Millie would come down to supper in her usual placid temper. But Humphrey was wrong. When Bridget thrust her head over the banister and called out briefly "It's ready", Millie had to brush her hair and powder the shine from her nose before she went downstairs.

In Wissakeagan, most of the families called it "supper" though this evening meal was the heaviest of the day. Mrs. Werner, who was president of the Thanatopsis Club and a leading church worker as well as one of the richest women in town, was the only one who referred to this family repast as "dinner."

Doubtless in time she would set the fashion. But as she had not been calling it dinner more than six months or so, her friends were still in a state of criticism and none, as yet dared to follow her example. Millie liked the idea, but felt it was too much trouble to change a life-long habit.

Nor had Millie, before this evening, ever questioned Bridget's pet method of announcing the meal. In Wissakeagan they stopped not upon form or ceremony. Bridget would have argued that any other way of announcing would have been a sheer waste of breath. The family would know that at six "it" must be supper. What else could be ready at that time? So why bother with anything fancier?

"She should say, "dinner is served madam,'" Millie complained taking the seat at the end of the table that she had occupied almost every night for ten years.

Humphrey was busily sharpening the carving knife. He began to laugh.

"Only it isn't served. Catch Bridget 'serving'," he observed. "What's wrong with you tonight, Millie doesn't anything suit you?"

This pleasantry naturally only made matters worse. Millie answered "No" sharply and ate in silence.

It was the usual meal of every comfortable family in Wissakeagan, a roast, potatoes, one other starchy vegetable, something canned, probably hot biscuits, and to finish off, a pudding, pie or canned fruit with cake, and large cups of coffee to be taken with the meal.

Some families had soup to begin with, but Humphrey called soups "hot dishwater" and announced that when he was hungry he wanted to "get his teeth into something" so soup was reserved for company.

Bridget brought in the fresh course, removed as many of the other dishes as she happened to think about, and after the meal was over, sang loudly as she rattled china and pans "cleaning up" for the night. Her voice reached Millie and Humphrey as they sat in the living room.

The rain poured as dismally as ever. There seemed to be no end to it.

"For heavens sake, let's do something or go somewhere!" Millie cried suddenly, about 8 o'clock.

Humphrey looked up in alarm at this continuation of temperament in his sweet tempered wife. He was perfectly willing to "do something." The endless tales of chorus girls who skated on the edge of the thin ice of impropriety and who neither fell in nor sought a safer place, were beginning to bore him. But the weather was so bad the movie theatre had closed for lack of patronage, and the couple of people Humphrey telephoned to, refused to go out in the downpour.

The worst of it was that Millie wanted to regain her lost good temper. She wanted Humphrey to coax her back into a good humor but Humphrey's tact was not his strongest characteristic.

"You might put up with my undiluted society for one evening," he said, coming back from the phone.

"I've put up with your undiluted society nearly 365 evenings a year for about ten years." Millie flung at him, knowing it wasn't so but urged, somehow, to make the meanest remark she could think of.

"All right then, you can have one evening's vacation. I'm going down to Joe's."

"Joe's" was the pool parlor in the center of the town, and the nearest to a men's club that the town possessed. It was a truly democratic place where the man who drives the station back, the two doctors, Humphrey, the judge and most of the men of the town met on equal terms while the balls clicked through "subways" of Joe's very up-to-date pool tables.

So Humphrey, in rubber coat and high rubber boots, slammed out of the house and no sound was left but the beat of the rain. Millie wondered desolately whether it was worse to sit there alone and try to knit, or to have Humphrey there to quarrel with.

NEWS FROM PATTY

Chapter 5

Millie grew more and more desolate as the minutes passed. Bridget had gone to bed, and the black cat who was the chief joy of the Irish girl's life, stole into the living room and curled up by the stove. Millie disliked cats, ordinarily, but she was so lonely this special evening that she gathered the animal into her lap, finding a little comfort in its drowsy contentment.

She began thinking of herself, and the inexitable result of this was that she began to feel sorry for herself.

And then her gloomy meditation was interrupted by the opening of the front door, and her mother with a cloak thrown over her head, walked in on her.

Mrs. Parke lived next door to the Buchanan's. When Humphrey began paying serious attention to Millie, who was then only 18, Mrs. Parke, knowing that a marriage was only the result of a little time, began looking for a place in the town where the newly married couple might live and where she could live close by them.

She was the type of dominant woman who would not release her daughter from a strict obedience even when that daughter grew up and married. Instead, she took into her circle of authority the son-in-law. But to keep her authority she had to be near. So, when Humphrey talked of finding a house, Mrs. Parke already had one for him. Humphrey obediently purchased the white weather-board house, with an acre of lawn and a "Colonial" porch and Mrs. Parke purchased the tiny "bungalow type" house beside it, with a corresponding acre of grass and garden.

And there they lived for ten years, while Patty, the other daughter, grew up.

It was about Patty, in fact, that Mrs. Parke ran in now. She held a telegram in her hand.

"She'll be home tomorrow," was the way she announced it.

Millie took the yellow slip and read it. "Arrive 3.30 train tomorrow, don't kill fatted calf patty."

"Now what do you suppose she means by that nonsense about a fatted calf? Mrs. Parke complained. "Using up all the extra money for words. I suppose she's gotten extravagant."

She looked about the living room curiously.

"Where's Humphrey?"

"Gone to Joe's."

"Hum—humph. Quarreled?"

"Yes."

"What's the trouble?" Her eyes fell upon the magazine of saucy tales, comprehension and condemnation were promptly expressed in her face.

"I suppose its the stories he's taken to reading. Between that sort of immoral fiction and Joe's pool room, I must say Humphrey is developing most degrading tastes."

Somehow it comforted and cheered Millie to hear Humphrey's faults brought out. But she had to defend him against an unjust accusation.

"It was my fault tonight. I told him I was tired of him."

"Well that's not your fault. Every woman has a right to get tired of her husband sometimes." She said nothing about a similar privilege for the man!

"Millie" went on:

"I don't like to quarrel with Humphrey. But I suppose after ten years one can't help it now and then."

"After ten years! You're lucky if you don't begin before ten weeks. You're an angel to Humphrey, you've spoiled him, that's what. Look at the way Cora treats her husband."

"They're awfully unhappy" Millie reflected. "And everyone knows that it isnt business but a girl that takes him to Portland."

"They've been married eight years," Mrs. Parke said, settling herself comfortably to have a long gossip. "However, I say that at least he has the decency to keep his affairs out of her way. There's some that carry on right in this town."

"Not Humphrey". Millie defended promptly. "He's not that sort."

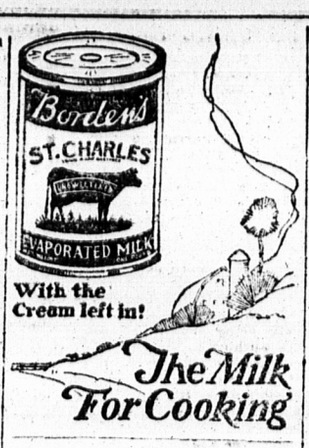
"You never can tell," Mrs. Parke hinted darkly.

She was really a very likeable woman who simply happened to have been born without tact. She had a perfect genius for saying the most mischievious thing possible and she always seemed to choose the moment when conditions were just ripe for some little seed of evil to grow and flourish, having with all the good intentions in the world, done all possible damage to Millie's peace of mind she picked up her telegram and went home to prepare for a welcome for her other young er daughter.

(Continued on Page Two

THE OAK

A life of thy steadfastness,
Rounded with leary gracefulness,
Old oak, give me,—
That the world's blast may round me blow,
And I yield gently to and fro
While my stout-hearted trunk below,
And firm-set roots unshaken be
—Lowell.



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Get from any druggist 2½ ounces of Pinex, pour it into a 16-oz. bottle and fill the bottle with syrup, using either plain granulated sugar syrup, clarified molasses, honey, or corn syrup, as desired. The result is 16 ounces of really better cough syrup than you could buy ready-made and saves easily $2. Tastes pleasant and never spoils.

This Pinex and Syrup preparation gets right at the cause of a cough and gives almost immediate relief. It loosens the phlegm, stops the nasty throat tickle and heals the sore, irritated membranes so gently and easily that it is really astonishing.

A day's use will usually overcome the ordinary cough and for bronchitis, croup, hoarseness, and bronchial asthma, there is nothing better.

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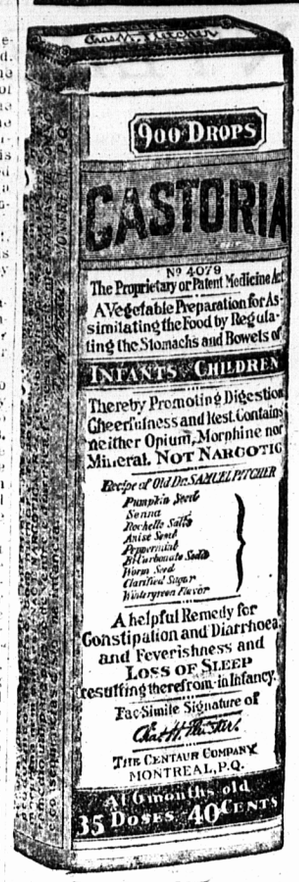

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