

A Sweetheart at Thirty

THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S TRANSFORMATION

By Marion Rubincam

MORE COMPLICATIONS

Chapter 55

The sudden silence that followed James' threat was even more explosive than the conversation before it. It fairly fell upon us. We were stunned by it.

I looked about me, frightened, yet, somewhat, fascinated. Jim shrank back as though the boy has struck him bodily, and the red blood of anger ran from his face. Instead, a sickly pallor came over it—but his eyes were more dangerous than before.

James having been goaded into this outburst, suddenly grew calm. But he would not or could not, meet his father's eyes—those little, deep-set eyes that were gleaming now with a wicked anger in them.

Esther had worked hard that day, and her face showed it in every sagging line. It felt suddenly so very sorry for her—sorry for her narrow life, her lack of any interests outside her family, sorry for the old age that was coming so swiftly over her, and for her frank homeliness.

And now, by one sentence, all her placid illusions were shattered, the very heart of her life was taken away from her.

"Oh God, my God!" she said. And sat down suddenly on one of the chairs.

We turned, as she did to Jim. But the red was coming back to his face again, and he found his voice.

"It ain't so, he said, loudly again, and looked threateningly at his son.

Esther looked at James pathetically pleading.

James! James she cried. What are you saying? A woman where? What do you mean?

I've said enough James answered sullenly.

You've said more'n enough, Jim, bellowed, and swore at him again.

But he said it ain't so, James he says.

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down in him, buried deep, was a streak of something very soft and tender.

Esther had killed this—Esther sitting limply, stupidly, in the kitchen, with the wreck of her illusions about her. But analyzing the causes did not make the result more bearable. I was stunned too.

Life was simple enough for me—a man was good when he was faithful to his wife when he wasn't he was wicked. There was no extenuating circumstances.

And he was my brother! The words—"that woman in Eastlake" rang in my ears.

Violet meanwhile had slipped down the passage between the hay and the barn wall. Evidently the door into James' hidden workshop was open, for her voice reached me from a long distance.

Aunt Enid, she called, and her voice sounded frightened. Come here!

Thoroughly alarmed by Violet's cry, I hurried down the pathetic, ridiculous passage James had cut through the hay to his retreat. I went through the door, and into the dark room.

Jim said he had "smashed it"—what he meant I could not tell. I saw now, even in the faint light, that the engine had been torn or thrown down, and the tools, wheels, and straps and other pieces of all the things James worked with, were lying all over the place.

Evidently Jim perhaps searching for some tool, perhaps even hunting the barn for the hen that concealed her nest, stumbled on his passage. He would wonder, first, why the hay had not been cut up there, to the stone wall.

Then, of course, there was the toy—well enough concealed to my but a sharp-eyed person like I, or to a man with his suspicions aroused. And of course, he would be hot, choked with dust and angry when he reached the workshop. To a man with his temper, this was like pouring oil on a smoldering fire.

Then, of course, there was the toy—well enough concealed to my but a sharp-eyed person like I, or to a man with his suspicions aroused. And of course, he would be hot, choked with dust and angry when he reached the workshop.

I went through trembling. In the dim light, I saw Vi bending over a dark figure—and the sound of sobbing. The whole thing was so confused, and I was so upset and nervous from the quarrel that was sure James had killed himself and Violet was bending over him crying.

But it was James who was crying, and Violet who was sitting with her arms around him, crooning those odd meaningless syllables that women use when they want to comfort.

But you can make another engine—I don't want to make another engine! I don't want ever to see any of this stuff again!

In the sudden unreasonable anger I saw his father's temperament coming out in him, and I was very much worried.

James dear, wouldn't you like to go to the city this fall, and study engineering or something? Vi was generous but vague—and I'll stay home, Aunt Enid will give you the money, instead of giving it to me, and you can pay her back sooner than I could.

How could I study, when I haven't even finished the high school here James said. He wouldn't even let me finish that! It's no fair, it's not fair! And I would stand it! I know what I'll do.

He swung about on Vi now all determination.

You go on with your college. I'm glad someone at least can get away from this family. I know what I'll do—I'll run away. I'll show him he can't keep me down and spoil my life. I'll run away!

Suddenly I remembered that it was getting on to dinner time—and no preparations had been made. I slipped out of the kitchen, leaving Violet and James deep in the practical details of his new plan to run away.

Violet was eagerly in sympathy with the idea, she felt that life on this out of the way farm, doing hard work that he hated, and subjected to both his father's temper and his mother's nagging, was killing the boy.

And it was, but I was not so sure the solution was for him to run away. After all there is a certain cowardliness about dodging.

At the barn door I stopped. Jim was walking rapidly back to the fields. I waited all he passed. I did not want to see him or talk to him. How would I find Esther? I had never seen her face a tragedy—I did not know how she would take it. Her parents' deaths had not been unexpected, and she had taken that philosophically and quietly.

But this—how would she act under this I expected to find her either raging or sobbing helplessly in a dark room.

Meaning the dinner hour was nearing and the men would be in from the fields, starved and eager for food. I thought rapidly of the quickest things to cook.

When I entered the kitchen, there was Esther, standing by the table, peeling potatoes. I fairly gasped as I looked at her.

Dinner'll be late, she said, looking up as I came in. I told Jim to tell them not to come till half past twelve.

Then it isn't true, I said with relief.

About the—that woman? Esther said, going on with her work. Yes, it's true, Jim denied it, but I saw it was true from his face when James came out with it. Finally he said, all right, it was true, and what was I going to do about it?

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seen at all. Her nose which like the rest of her face was getting fleshy was shiny and red and anything but beautiful—in fact, Esther in grief was a pitiable thing to see.

"It's a beast to do it," she burst out once—beating the pan before she put in the chops, as carefully as though her only concern was to fry the meat crisp and tender.

I been a good wife to him. I never looked at another man. Why should he look at another woman? I bore him three children and I kept his house comfortable all these years and looked after him. And all I get is—that—another woman! Enid, you'll need more butter. I'm boiling the corn on the cob, it's quicker.

I went out to the ice box for more butter, marvelling at her. Not a detail of the meal escaped her. Yet she had, according to her standards, lost the one thing in life she cared for most—her husband.

After all the greatest consolation is hard work. The woman who can afford the luxury of brooding is not to be envied. The best cure for a broken heart is the necessity of doing an immense number of small tasks.

Go upstairs and wash your face and go to bed. I told her. Then you'll look better for dinner.

What's the difference? she asked bitterly. He won't look at me anyway. And if he does, he won't care. Do you think he'd care around and give up the woman in Eastlake, just because I had pink powder on my face?

Well, put on a clean dress I urged. You've spilled water on that. Or listen, Esther, stay up in your room, and I'll call you when dinner is over.

No, it's got to be eaten and me having it later will only delay the work I stay as I am.

Again it was the little details that won out. After all, they would be Esther's salvation—as they had been, in the first place, the cause of her sorrow.

MARK COMES AGAIN Chapter 56 It seems to me as I look back over that Summer, that it was a series of climaxes from which we dropped immediately to a dead level. That momentous day—the most terrible Esther had ever experienced—ending us sitting calmly at the dinner table, eating pork chops and boiled potatoes, as though nothing important had happened.

Our hired men ate hurriedly and ravenously and went out to their work. Jim ate as heartily as though he had not been through some of the most tempestuous emotions possible, not two hours before. Hate, guilt, and remorse—and anxiety as to whether his home would be broken up or not—had no effect on his appetite. He ate five chops and regretted the fact that he had only gingerbread and coffee for dessert.

she answered herself: "I'm sure it isn't. Bud's different from all the others. Don't you think so Aunt Enid?"

And apparently almost contented by deceiving herself, she went on out of the room.

I was worried and very much upset, and I wanted in some way to help them all—the whole family seemed to be in a tangled web, and I could not see any way out of it. All I could do was to hunt up James' socks that needed darning and sit out on the porch and mend them for him.

Perhaps, I thought, it would be best for Esther to go to the city. She might, if she lived there, find the new point of view that I had found; she might wake up, as I had awakened; she might learn to take care of herself and perhaps win back some of her lost youth and prettiness, as I had.

But can a woman win back her husband when she has once lost him? Can she win back her youth and her attraction when she has so completely let go? Must she not have a great deal of imagination and a great deal of ambition—and above all, persistence to accomplish this rejuvenation I had the three latter qualities—but Esther had not.

For, while I could not condone my brother in any way, still I could not help but feel that some of it was Esther's fault. Jim had within him a real love and beauty and a great deal of love and tenderness. And Esther had not tried to win him back, nor to encourage the last. In fact, she had discouraged it as being, in some vague way, not quite proper.

Not becoming in a man years married and a father of a family.

After all, what right had she to think that she could retain this man's love—with her unkempt hair, her shiny red skin, her careless figure and still more careless clothes?

This line of thought reminded me that I was growing careless myself, for I was sitting out on the porch in the housedress I had worked in all morning. I went up to my room and dressed very particularly, watching with satisfaction how my skin cleared and took on color when I washed and fastened up my hair.

After all, I had gained something. I no longer looked young in spite of myself, but at least I looked less than my age when I was very careful of my dressing.

Yes, well, of wheels outside made me look up. Mark's eyes made me look up. Mark's eyes made me look up. Mark's eyes made me look up.

How are they getting on? he asked amiably.

They're quite happy, I think, I answered. We haven't seen them since the wedding. Mr. Dwyer gave Charlie a vacation, though it was the busy season, and they went off for a little trip.

Yes very good, I answered, not very enthusiastically.

Well, that's all right then he said, getting up. I'm going to Laura's Sunday too. She asked me to drive you over. I'll be here at 4 and we'll make a round about trip of it.

DECISION Chapter 59 Four o'clock Sunday found me alone in the house. Violet and James went off together with some of the girls and boys of the village, promising to meet us at Laura's at six. Right after dinner Jim came around with the youngster horse in the buggy, and took Esther away with him.

made to love one man and to care for him—not materially as Laura did—but to be the really perfect mate and playmate.

And I—well, I had no future but what I might share with the girl—and that was being taken from me. After it all, when our money was spent there was nothing to do but come home to the farm and the hard routine of work.

Of course, there was Mark—there was always Mark, it seemed now that I didn't want him! But what a fate—to be his wife and housekeeper! Every time I thought of him, I thought of Bud's employer—a man far above me in every way, so far he would never even remember me—but so charming and gracious.

Mark came, and we sat out on the porch. For an hour we talked while the hot day cooled off and the shadows began to lengthen.

Do you know, I said when I saw you over to the High School dance that I never would have known you, Enid, he said once.

And I wouldn't know either. Then you looked so old—and sort of got and like you didn't care much about anything. Gosh, I was surprised, I thought it must have been 50 years, not 12, since you were the pretty girl I was in love with.

I knew it had to come, so I sat quietly and let him talk.

But I always liked you, and even last year—when you did look pretty old and homely, if you familiar little car stopped at our gate. Mark's too familiar face peered over the door and smiled at me. I could do nothing but ask him in.

I hear you're goin' over to Laura's for supper Sunday? he said sitting on the porch—and he pulled out a huge handkerchief and wiped over his hot face.

Anyway, you wouldn't go, he said. You had a lot of romantic notions I thought were crazy in a woman your age. You said you would not, because I didn't—er—love you, and because you didn't—er—love me too. I guess that was it wasn't it? You said I was being good natured, and he had many 'kable qualities. I would be able to persuade him to send Violet all home. And I guess maybe it was. I looked him full in the face, in surprise at this confession.

But it ain't so now, he said suddenly. I guess maybe you was—were right. There ought to be some love when two people hitch

up even if one is 40 odd and the other—well you don't look more'n 30 now Enid.

Will not bend knee to unions TORONTO, Oct. 12.—Clearly and emphatically Dr. Falls, book-room steward of the Methodist Church, made it known this morning at the general Methodist conference that he had no quarrel with sane and reasonable union organization but that he would not give way or bend the knee to any union organization when its demands were unreasonable and impossible.

His declaration was in answer to the statement of Dr. S. Bland to the effect that the organization of master printers of Toronto of which the book-room is a member had repudiated an alleged promise of 1919 to grant a forty-four hour week to their printers if the scale were adopted by the master printers of the United States. All through his address he endeavored to show that the book-room had been ready and willing at any time to meet the reasonable demands of the men. It was agreed to adjourn the debate until tomorrow morning when it will be resumed.

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(Continued on Page 3.)

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