

The Middle Ground

By Marlon Rubincam.

TWO FORCES

Chapter 29.

Two forces were pulling at Amy about all that summer, and were particularly strong now the girls had gone and only herself and Luther remained. One force was that of habit—the old ideas she had been trained in all her life, the ideas that Jordan still stood for. The other was the effect of her children's new ideas, and the broader point of view her own son held.

And Luther himself was between two forces, though he could scarcely have known it then. The free, easy life, the great tolerance, even the laxity of the city, was leaving him. The immense quiet, the peace of this out-of-the-way farm were having an effect on him. It was like slipping off a burden of years. It was being a boy again, and a boy under the strict influence of his father.

In mid-September Luther announced that he would have to go back in October. "I'm feeling better than I have for years," he said. "And my leave of absence is only for four months. After that my income stops."

"But you've a bit put by?" his mother suggested. Luther laughed. "No, not a cent. Claire believes in spending all we have. She says the more we spend the more we'll earn. She uses money for present advancement, building for the future instead of saving against a possible catastrophe."

Mrs. Talbot belongs to the generation that feared the future. At this point of view was new to her. "You see, Claire says that if we live nicely now and save money, we'll lose all chance to make friends with influential people, and all we'll gain will be a few thousand dollars. But if we live nicely now and entertain, and meet people, it might help me to a position where I can make in one year all we would possibly save in five or ten."

The woman moved her chair impatiently. It was a nonsense! He sooner Amy was gotten from his influence the better. So she wrote again, telling Amy to come home the day after Luther arrived in the city.

The answer gave her the greatest shock she had ever received. Amy refused! "It's not fair to deprive me of my one chance to make something of myself," she wrote. "I've only had a few weeks' singing lessons and already my voice has improved so you would scarcely know it. Everyone who is musical says I have a very fine voice and can do something with it. I want to be an opera singer—in fact, I've decided on that as a career. Claire says everyone should have a career and Jane agrees with her."

"And Claire has a friend who says he can get me into the chorus of the opera company here when my voice is a little better. That will give me a chance to study the great singers; work and to earn a little money as well. Perhaps after a time, I can get into some of the big choirs where they pay salaries, too."

"So I'm not coming. If father doesn't want to send me money to go on with this, Claire says she'll help. She's going on the stage again this winter anyway, and I can live with Jane. Mother, won't you be proud some day to think that your son is a great engineer, and one daughter a famous singer?"

This jealousy brought a hearty laugh from Luther. But Mrs. Talbot frowned in a still more worried manner. Presently she came out with a summary of her complaints. "I used to be ambitious for you and the girls," she began. "It was wicked, and this is my punishment. When you were little tots I used to think it would be fine for you to be a great man. I did think you might be a famous preacher."

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like Beescher or perhaps a big politician. And Jane was so quick and smart I wanted her to be a school teacher to prap head of a school, and Amy was so pretty I just wanted her to marry the richest and handsomest man in the county."

This little confession touched Luther while it amused him. How little the mother saw, yet how much too!

"So I did sort of urge you all along I wish I hadn't. You've gone so far away I can't understand you any more. You'd much better have stayed home and stayed poor and unknown and kept to some simple Christian virtues."

"We're still poor and we're still unknown, if that pleases you," Luther answered, smiling a little. "And I don't think any of us have grown away from simple Christian virtue."

"Claire goes dancing on a stage, wearing short skirts—or none at all," the mother began. "Amy wants to sing in an opera, all about wicked people. I never heard of an opera, but they're all wicked. Jane doesn't believe in marriage and the man she's in love with doesn't believe in the government."

"He's a very mild Socialist—"

"And you haven't said a word of disapproval about anything they say."

Luther was silent. What was the use of trying to explain?

DECISION Chapter 30

Jordan Talbot was as furious over what he termed Amy's "disobedience" as Mrs. Talbot expected. At first he stormed for half an hour, then he relapsed into a disagreeable silence which lasted for days.

"But after all, she's of age, and if she wants to stay in the city and go on with a worth-while study, what are you going to do about it?" Luther asked.

"The nearest reply to this was some sort of growling sound down Jordan's throat. The silence was ominous to the mother; she felt Jordan might do all sorts of things."

The silence showed the son that in spite of all his sarcasm and his ill humor, Jordan was perfectly harmless!

So he kissed his mother goodbye with a cheerful feeling, and made his father talk pleasantly as they drove to the railway station. He was rewarded when he leaned out of the train window looking back to see Jordan standing on the platform, staring after the cars, and waving his hand in response to Luther.

"People that are disagreeable most of the time have a great advantage, Luther reflected; when they are half-way nice one, everyone appreciates it so."

October trailed out never-ending days to Mrs. Talbot. Jordan had one pleasant mood lasting for a few days, then went again into one of his long periods of silence gloom. He came and went without a word, appeared at meal times and ate without speaking, to vanish again into the barn or out into the fields as soon as he was through. He would push back his plate, take a last gulp of the coffee he demanded for every meal, and stalk off, leaving Amy to finish her own meal alone.

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AMY LEAVES Chapter 31

Jordan sat down again and looked at his wife. His face showed no comprehension of what she was saying.

"What do you mean?" he asked presently.

"What I said!" defiantly. "I'm going to the city to stay with my daughters. And what's more you're going to give me the money to go."

"I'll do no such thing!" he exploded. "Do you mean to say you are going to leave me?"

"I'm going to leave you for this winter. Quiet decision was in her tones. "I'm worried about Jane and Amy."

"Jane and Amy! A couple of disobedient—"

"All the more reason for me to go. My first duty is with my girls. Jordan had never heard this tone from his wife before. He began to suspect she was in earnest.

"Who's going to look after me?" he demanded selfishly.

Mrs. Talbot considered. There was only one person available—the pretty stupid young girl who had been "foolish" and what was now an outcast in the narrow community.

But she could cook and she was a neat housekeeper and a willing worker. She would come for low wages and be grateful for the home offered. Her life with her present "benefactor" was anything but pleasant.

She mentioned her name—and the expected storm descended.

"That shameless woman! You would even bring her into my house, into the home of a decent man!" More denunciations of the poor girl followed.

"It isn't Christian like to renounce her," Mrs. Talbot said finally when the first storm of words was over. "And her baby's quiet, it's a nice little thing."

"I'll look after myself. I'll not have my house polluted by the presence of such a woman."

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AMY DROPPED her suitcase and clung to his arm, terrified by all the strange people around her.

"You did give us a surprise, mother," he said, as he kissed her. "Do you know you only allowed two days for your letter—it came this morning. Suppose we had been away over the week-end?"

"Hello, here's Dick!"

"I'm going to my cousin Jim's Dick volunteered. 'I'm staying there until I get a job. Loo, how do I reach this place?'"

"I'll direct you to my place, so you can come around and see Amy a lot," Luther said, grinning a little at the boy.

"That's what I came to New York for," Dick said calmly. "Guess I'll take these things up to Jim's, and come over tonight."

"Amy's busy tonight. That is, she'll be home late, about 12," Luther said.

"Well, I'll only stay five minutes, but I want to see her."

There was no putting him off. Luther smiled and gave him still more directions as to how to reach his place. And then he took Mrs. Talbot's arm, and piloted her through the crowd and through a long journey in a noisy car, until her head swam and she wished herself home and away from this din of sound and these scurrying people.

When they got off the car, they buildings on each side that seemed to touch the sky.

"You'll find a lot of changes, mother," Luther said, as he hunted for his latchkey.

THE GIRLS Chapter 34

Jane came in with a suitcase. She put it down at sight of her mother, and walked quickly across the room to greet her.

"But what's happened?" she asked. "I didn't know you were coming."

"She forgot the time mail takes," Luther said. "Her letter came this morning."

"I've been out of town a couple of days," Jane explained. "Fagged out from work, so I went off with a classmate to the country. How did father ever let you come?"

"He didn't want me to," Mrs. Talbot said, her face clouding with a worried expression. "He says I've left home and that I'm doing my duty."

Luther laughed. "Never mind, consider your duty is here," he said. "Dick came too—can't keep away from Amy, poor chap. He's coming in tonight to see her."

Mrs. Talbot glanced at a clock on the mantel. It was nearly 12. "There was a ring—it was not in a chair, putting her feet in people all around."

"Usually Ted brings me home, but I didn't want to bother with him tonight—because you were coming, mother dear."

"Who is Ted?" Dick asked jealously. Jane and Luther came in with plates of sandwiches and a percolator where coffee was being brewed. "He's a boy from the city."

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