

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

by ROSE SHARON

IT TOOK LONGER THAN SHE planned to fill her pockets and lock up the cabinet again. After that, she had to find some place to leave the key where they could find it, but where the children couldn't reach it. Then when she got back to the party, Toni was nowhere in sight. Naturally.

And—wouldn't you know it?— Steve was right there, just inside the door. He had his back to her, talking to somebody else, but the first step she took inside he turned around as if she'd gone right up and touched him; he heard her or smelled her or something.

She stood there, just inside the doorway, convinced that he had also sensed somehow the weight of the sagging full pockets that pressed against her hip, on the inside of the carefully arranged coat over her arm.

"Well, hi there, Princess," he said, and only his voice made a joke of the name. His eyes meant it. "I was beginning to think you were going to stand us all up tonight."

"I went back to get my wrap . . ." she began.

"Here, I'll put that away for you—" he interrupted.

Then his hand touched the coat over her arm, and both of them stopped short as her muscles jumped in recoil, shrinking away from the touch.

She saw the hurt cross his face as he pulled his hand back, and she was almost sorry for him—the damn fool! just like the rest of them here: they wanted and wanted and wished and wailed, and not one had the guts to go get what he wanted.

But she did.

She made a remote small smile at Steve, and stepped forward a pace to search the room with her eyes. When she found Tommy, she just stood there waiting till he saw her too. He came across the big barn floor, weaving between the dancing couples, and she held out her coat to him with an inward sigh of relief.

Everyone there would have noticed, and they'd all feel sorry for Steve, and nobody would be surprised at all when she walked out with Tommy Handley later.

But that was all just helpful; the big thing was what nobody knew, except Tommy. The way the pockets of her coat were sagging ' with the weight of the rifle shells, she could no more have let Steve carry it than she could have stood up there and made a public speech about what she was doing.

It was a wonderful party—the best one she could remember. Partly because it was Tommy's party in a way, and she was Tommy's girl. But probably more because she knew it was the last one, and her own excitement was catching. She could feel it coming back at her from every man she danced with.

They stayed just long enough to make it look barely all right, and walked out, her coat on his arm while everything was still going strong.

As soon as they were out of earshot she whispered fiercely: "You still *have* it?"

"Sure," he said. "What did you think?"

"I don't know. He might have asked you for it . . ."

"He did—when I got back to the party. I told him I left it in my other pants."

"No," she said loudly. A shadow had passed the door. "I want to go down to the dock." It was what any girl would say. If you left the dance with a boy, you could only be going to the woods or to the dock, where they had a floodlight on party nights. And the way to the dock took them past the small barn.

The little barn was a carpentry shop and machine shop now; this was one of the keys Steve usually kept after working hours; it was the one Tommy had lied about leaving in his other pants.

Inside, the two of them worked feverishly. The stores of food, smuggled out of the kitchen by Ellen and into the shop by Tom; the few tools he thought he *had* to have; two rifles off the wall hooks; their stored ammunition, plus her last two pocketfuls; the three spare cans of gasoline—everything went into the car, where two empty packs, and a change of clothes for each of them were already hidden under the seat.

By the time anybody who cared enough to watch could be sure they weren't coming out onto the lighted path again, Ellen *did* come out—walking fast, and headed straight across toward the gate, not toward the dock at all.

This was the only tricky part, and she was the one who had to do it, because they weren't sure if she could drive well enough to manage the car. At the barbed-wire fence she stopped and waited, till she heard the roar of the motor and the sudden shouting voices, and the headlights seemed to be coming straight at her. She pulled the gate open wide, jumped onto the running-board of the ancient Ford as it slowed to go through, and held on tight till they were round the bend and far enough down the road for Tom to open the door and let her get in.

It was just as easy as that. The thing was, nobody back there ever thought anyone would want to get out. All their barbed-wire and trick gates and sentry posts and alarm rigs—all of it was just to keep outsiders *out*. And except for a few things, like the gas and the ammo that really took some doing to get at, the supplies were no problem to store up, as long as you took a little bit at a time, and got out before Inventory, which wasn't till next month.

The real crazy part of it, though, was the car: the way they all sat around watching Tommy tinker with his old Ford every night for the last month and chatted about the fine thing he was doing for the Farm. And every time he wanted to try it out again, he'd get the keys for the gas pump, and every time he got the keys, he'd draw a couple gallons more than he wrote down. And just to top it all off, the big party tonight, to celebrate getting the car fixed . . . right on top of the demonstration trial that gave him the extra cans of gas.

All it took was timing. Timing and guts.

"Hey, Tommy?"

"Yeah?"

"You got the geiger, didn't you?"

"Sure, honey. We got everything. Listen, kid, you can relax now. Quit worrying. We got it made." He took his eyes off the ruinous road just long enough to smile at her, and reached out with his arm and pull her closer.

Contentedly, she let her head settle on his shoulder, and stayed there, feeling the wind in her hair, and listening to the sound of an automobile engine again. Funny how quick you forgot. It wasn't much more than a year since they used to drive back up the hill from the movies this way . . . a whole crowd together—or just two alone, like now.

Not like now at all, of course. That was fun; this was deeply exciting, this going out to find a new life in a new world. Drowsily she wondered how far they'd have to go, how hard they'd have to look to find good land with maybe a decent house on it, where they could settle. . .

She must have fallen asleep, or part-way at least, because she sat up with a jolt when he pulled the car to a skidding stop on wet gravel.

"Where are we?" She couldn't see anything in the blackness. "What . . . ?"

"Hobeyville," he said, and tried *to* pull her back against him. "That's a good twenty-nine mile. They'll never get this far. Take it—" She shook off his hand impatiently.

"You mean right in the middle of *town*?" she demanded, as the outline of a parking lot between buildings began to suggest itself, through the darkness.

"What's the matter? Take it easy, baby. We got it made now . . ."

"Keep your goddam hands off me! I don't know *what* you think you got made, but it aint gonna be *me*, brother. Not *here*."

"Now look, honey. . . . It's safer here than it would be up in the woods, or off the side of the road someplace, or . . ."

"It ain't safe anyplace," she said flatly. "Not till we get a chance to look around in daylight and see what's what. If you wanted something safe, you should of stayed with big old Uncle Steve on the farm. *He's safe!* . . . Oh I'm sorry, Tommy." Her anger was gone as suddenly as it had come. "I'm all on edge, I guess. Maybe I was asleep. What time is it, anyhow?"

He was right, of course. If it took them three hours to travel a lousy thirty miles, it made sense to wait

till dawn here in town, and get some sleep, and then be able to pick their roads a little better in the light. Nobody would come this far after them. And even if they did, they wouldn't *start* till after the sun was up.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "Look, we better take turns sleeping. I had a kind of a nap already. You've been doing all the work. Why don't you go in back and stretch out, and I'll wake you up later . . ."

"There's other things I could use more than sleep," he said, and tried to get hold of her again.

"Oh, Tommy," she said, "not *now*. Here, I mean. Where *anybody* could be . . . oh you know!" And when he wouldn't stop, she said, "Besides, I'm *scared*. Listen, one of us *has* to keep watch. If anybody came up, we might not hear it, and maybe we'd both fall asleep . . . *please*, Tommy, can't you wait a little while?"

So he climbed over into the back seat, and she, sat there wide awake and waiting eagerly for dawn.

One hundred and eighteen miles from Hobeyville, about ten o'clock in the morning of their third day, the motor coughed feebly, and Tommy got out to unscrew their next-to-last spare can of gas.

"Nice-lookin' country here," he said wistfully, when he got back in, and this time she agreed with him.

"There's a river over that way," she reminded him. "If we can find a way to get over to it . . ."

"Okay, baby, you're the boss." He started the motor again, and they crept forward, bouncing and jumping as the two bare rims hit the potholed remnant of a highway. It was easier, actually, when he turned off onto a grassy strip between trees and brush, that looked like it might have been a dirt road once; here the new growth cushioned them a little. They emerged on a high cliff, overhanging the river bank.

He parked in the shelter of a tree, and got out to scout the woods a little ways in, while she covered him from the car with the Winchester.

"Don't see no signs of people," he announced when he came back. "Plenty of rabbits, though. Pretty lively-lookin', too."

She nodded, and got out and stretched. Then they both strapped on their packs, and picked up their rifles, and locked the car up tight.

Single-file, because there were bad chunks out of the road, they started walking down along the edge of the cliff. Below them, they could see a stretch of water for perhaps a mile in either direction.

On the opposite shore of the river there was no cliff: just a slow-rising hillside, with brown-leafed trees not turned near as far as the ones back home; and between the trees and the river a grey dry stretch of rubble and debris from the spring floods. Stones and boulders, twisted branches, a piece of somebody's roof standing on edge not twenty yards upstream from the dug-out foundations of what once must have been somebody's river-edge cottage or camp.

Outside of the river and themselves, and a few birds circling lazily near the cliff, nothing moved. It was hard to think of danger lurking in the painted landscape.

The girl nodded, smiling. "Just like home," she said, thinking of the creek down in the village, when the big dam went last spring.

"Yeah." Tommy stopped to sling his rifle over his shoulder, and shift the knife on his belt closer to his hand. "If I see another one o' them rabbits, I'm gonna try for 'im—what do you think?"

"Sure," he said. "Steve's crazy anyhow." Steve wouldn't let them hunt any farther than ten miles from the farm. He kept saying the animals anyplace around a bombed area would be poisonous, and there was no way to know how close you were to a fallout section, once you got away from the farm. But they'd have to start living off the land sooner or later, and this certainly *looked* like healthy country. "He's crazy," she said again. "He's got everybody up there so scared they won't blow their noses without asking. . ."

They got a rabbit for lunch, and made a fire and hot coffee and Tommy carried up water from the river for them to boil and fill the jugs again. He even made an extra trip for a bucket full to get washed with; and in spite of her kidding, he heated up a cupful for himself, and got out his father's old straight razor, and shaved himself carefully.

"My beard might not look like so much," he said mildly, "but it sure can itch like hell."

After that he wanted to make love again. Naturally. But this time even he could see they ought to use the daylight to look around some more. They had to find some place to stay pretty soon now. This country looked good, but they'd have to find a house, or get started building one, if they were going to stay. . .

It was past the middle of the afternoon when they came out of the woods into a clearing, and saw the house. That wasn't what they noticed first, though, either of them. The way they came to it, the first thing they saw was the fields behind the hill, and the red barn on the top. And Ellen gave an involuntary low whistle of surprise when the house suddenly came into view around the, edge of the barn.

It didn't look as if anybody had been near the place since spring. Everything just *empty*. But they had to play it careful anyway.

She covered him while he looked into the barn. "Nothing there," he said, but he was jumpy. "I don't know what it is," he said uneasily.

She felt it too, but *one* of them had to show some guts. "Want *me* to take the house?" she asked contemptuously.

"You better stay out front," he said. "And listen, honey—don't think twice before you shoot."

"All *right!*" she said. "I know what to do." She'd been covering him from the car and the woods and one place and another for three days now. "Yell out when it's okay."

She watched him go up to the door and push it open. There was a crash that made her jump, and then she felt ashamed, because she realized it wasn't a gun, it wasn't anything at all, it was just the door banging.

She turned around slowly, covering a half-circle with the rifle. Jumpy, she thought. *Both* of them. What the hell was *she* so jumpy about? . . . But she knew why . . . knew it because she was standing here waiting to go into the house they'd probably live in, and the thought of it gave her the creeps.

It was Tommy . . .

Tommy with his *Please, honey* . . . and his *Take it easy, baby*, and his *I'm sorry and better be careful* and *what do you think?*

Tommy with all the careful little safety rules Steve had taught him. But at least Steve was a man, and thought he knew what he was being careful for.

A good kid. . . . Sure. . . . All she ever heard was a whistle of air behind her.

After a while she realized she was lying on the ground, and ' couldn't find her gun. She patted the ground around her with her hand; got her eyes part way open, and became aware of sound. Grunts. Thrashing. Two men were fighting. She could see better now, and the first thing she saw dearly was the knife.

Flash. Thrash.

Men fighting. A man and a boy. Tommy . . .

She ought to do something. She tried to move, and lightning streaked through her head. *He hit me!* The other man, the bearded one with the filthy bloody clothes—he must have been here all the time. Came up behind, and knocked her out.

She saw the gun now, on the ground, two body-lengths away. She started toward it, and the movement made the lightning crack again, inside her head.

When she looked at the noises again, the boy was on top. She could lie still then. Tommy didn't need her. He could win. . .

Realization swept through her like the warmth of the sun in a mist-chilled dawn. It was *her* they were fighting for. She *had* to lie.

Grunt. Flash. Thrash. Grunt.

And the man was on top now. Reflexively, she inched forward again, but even before the pain hit, she stopped. *The best man* . . . best man always wins. So *that* was all right . . .

She lay still, waiting and watched the man, the *best man*, drive the knife home.

She lay there, watching, through slitted eyelids, while the best man, *brute, bloody-beard-bad-man*, pawed with animal fingers through the dead man's pack. Watched while the bullets and blanket and

beans went flying to the ground. Watched while the man, *best-brute-madman*, jumped to his feet with the razor blade and the strop and the mirror.

The long straight razor, old man Handley's, *he used to hit Tommy with the razor strop*. Crazy-beard best man, dancing in the wilderness, *yellow-dog-dingo, mama used to read me*, dancing like a maniac, flashing in the sunlight. Flash, blade, spin, strop, flash, dance. . . . *Ma!*

She lay still, as absolutely still as she could be. She did not even breathe. Her slitted eyelids closed, as the man with the beard, the blood, and the razor, *forever and ever, amen*, stepped over the dead man, over the tall grass, over the rifle, over to her.

Eyes closed; but she could see the razor still. If she moved, he would kill her. He would certainly kill her if she as much as moved.

Could he hear her heart beat?' Her lungs were bursting. If she breathed, would he kill her? If she didn't, she would die.

The shiver that ran through her body as she felt his approach was movement too. But for this, she knew that she would not be killed.

Slowly, with a sense of infinite relief, she let the air out of her bursting lungs. Her body went, limp, every muscle relaxed. She breathed in deeply, filling her chest with air, and her blood with the smell of him as he bent over her: the blood and the dirt and the sun and the wind and the male sweat smell went into her lungs and pumped through her veins, and the smell was foul, but it was not death.

Her eyes came open. She; stared into the crusted bearded face, the fierce eyes, the wild smile of delight. The razor dropped from his hand as he seized her shoulder and pressed it painfully into the ground.

He was strong.

He could fight.

He could conquer.

She forced herself to breathe in deeply once again, absorbing the rank stench, making it her own; and she felt her mouth curve in an answering smile of welcome. . . .

Ellen Reeves, mother of civilized man.