

THE RAT

By
**THYRA
SAMTER
WINSLOW**



"... saw a giant
white rat scurrying
across the room!"

WHEN Laura Hamilton had been married to Jerome Hamilton for six years she noticed a change in his attitude toward her.

At first she tried to believe it was her imagination. When she could no longer credit his rudeness and indifference to imagination she told herself that it was just the natural result of being married that length of time. She wanted to believe that, anyhow.

Not that Jerome had ever been an ideal husband! Laura knew that he hadn't. She knew well enough that he had married her because, in Baker City, she was "well off." She owned the old Taylor place, where they lived now and where Laura had been born and raised. And she owned a comfortable amount of stocks and bonds besides.

Jerome hadn't ever liked to work very well. He was "in real estate," but Laura knew that he couldn't have got along on what he made—and certainly could have enjoyed none of the luxuries he had with her. A new car every couple of years. Two servants in help—which was a lot in Baker City. Money to spend.

Laura hadn't married until she was over 30. Her mother had been alive before then, a petulant, demanding invalid. Mrs. Taylor had disapproved of all of the men who had come to see Laura. And, when Mrs. Taylor died, only Jerome Hamilton had presented himself.

He was a nice looking man, Jerome, with a thin, sallow face and hair that receded too much even when he was young. His family had been of no importance in the town. They were dead, now, too, and every one felt that Jerome Hamilton had done pretty well for himself.

Jerome hadn't been too attentive, even from the first. Perhaps he wanted Laura to feel that marrying her was a favor on his part. He'd kept his friends, the rather unsavory young men of the town, and, tho he didn't bring them to the house very often, he did visit them. He stayed late at "The Palms," the town's one roadhouse. He was frequently late for dinner. And he was none too polite to Laura's old friends—who vis-

Foreword

How a reprehensible husband, with designs upon his wife's estate, tried to get rid of the unfortunate woman is told in the accompanying tale, "The Rat," by Thyra Samter Winslow, a modern writer with marked ability as a story teller. She has been writing for the American public 27 years and has a large following of readers. Her first literary offerings appeared in newspapers and magazines when she still was in her teens. Not only has she published short stories, but nonfiction articles, novels, and plays as well. The second of the two stories in this section is a masterpiece of more than a century ago. Alexander Pushkin, famous Russian poet and novelist, published "The Pistol Shot" in 1830. The version appearing here is from a translation of a translation into the French by Prosper Merimee, another celebrated writer. The story deals with duels, which may have been a subject that projected itself into the writer's mind in a premonitory manner, for Pushkin himself, on Feb. 8, 1837, was fatally wounded in a duel with Baron George Heckeren d'Anthes.

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ited her less and less on account of him.

Laura knew what it was to be lonely. She had been all alone after her mother died. So she clung to Jerome. And told herself that, as the years passed, he'd settle down, grow fonder of her, be a better husband. But the years passed—and Jerome grew worse all the time.

Subject of Divorce Brought Up at Dinner

They spoke about divorce one night at dinner. Thinking it over later, Laura couldn't remember who started the conversation.

"I read the other day," said Jerome, and his eyes were on Laura's face, "of a man, in Maine, I believe it was, who got alimony from a woman. His wife had a lot of money and he'd given his life up making her happy—so when they got a divorce"—he paused.

"That's nonsense!" said Laura. "Give a man alimony! I never heard of such rot!"

Jerome laughed, tried to make a joke of it.

"You wouldn't give me alimony, then, if we ever got a divorce?"

"I certainly wouldn't," said Laura and laughed and tried to make a joke of it, too. "But if you ever wanted to get a divorce, without alimony, of course, I wouldn't stand in your way."

Jerome didn't talk about divorce again—and Laura didn't know how

much weight to give to the conversation.

She might have forgotten about it altogether if it hadn't been for old Mrs. Lansing. Mrs. Lansing was one of Baker City's best gossips, but at heart she was a kindly old soul and really interested in people.

She dropped in to have tea with Laura one afternoon not long after Jerome and Laura had talked about divorce and alimony.

"Laura," she said, "there's something I want to tell you. Somebody ought to tell you and I guess I'm the one. I always put my foot into things, but this is something you got to know. Jerome's been running around with a girl named Sadie Fisher, who works in the Blue Bird Millinery shop."

"He has?" asked Laura. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She didn't know what to say.

"Of course the girl's no good. Came here from Ryefield. Got in some sort of a scrape there last year with a married man. Jerome's hanging around there. And taking her to 'The Palms.' I thought if you knew—maybe you could stop it in time. Or take steps—"

"Thank you," said Laura. "I'll—I'll take steps." And she tried to talk about something else.

Laura thought about what Mrs. Lansing had said, after Mrs. Lansing went away. She did want to "take

steps." She wanted to do something. But she didn't know what to do! She didn't want Jerome to go away! He was all she had.

She tried to bring the conversation around to Sadie Fisher at dinner time. She didn't know how. She didn't want to make Jerome angry. Jerome had his mind on other things.

"I went with Tid Bishop to put his brother in an asylum," he said. "More red tape! You got to get two doctors to testify. Tid's brother is as crazy as a coot. I had to listen to all the symptoms. They say he'll get worse. Never get out!"

"How awful!" said Laura.

"Well, when you're out of your mind you're better off the way," said Jerome philosophically. This didn't seem the time to talk about Sadie Fisher!

Finally she spoke to him. On the fourth day. She had been weeding in the garden. It was late August. Jerome drove into the driveway, got out of the car, came over to her.

"Aren't you the busy bee?" he said.

"Some one has to take care of the garden. Poor old Dave can't do the whole thing."

"I don't see why you have him around. He and Clara are both too old to do any work. There are enough young servants in town—"

"I know they're old. But we've had them so long. My mother had them and—"

"Maybe they were all right in her day. You're so old fashioned, Laura!"

Undoubtedly this was the wrong time! But the words trembled on Laura's lips. She said them before she was quite aware of what she was saying.

"I may be old fashioned. But I still don't think that—that a married man ought to run around with another woman."

"What do you mean?" Jerome's face was dark.

"I've heard all—all about a girl named Sadie Fisher."

"Folks have been bringing you a lot of lies. Your fine friends hate me! They always gossip about me behind my back. I—I won't stand for it!"

"Then there isn't any other woman?"

"Sure, I know a girl named Sadie Fisher. She goes with Hal Spence. I've been with them a couple of times. Had a drink with them a couple of times. What's the harm in that?"

Laura said: "I hope it isn't serious. If it is we ought to separate. I don't want to be married to a man that's running around with any other woman."

Jerome growled out something. And changed the subject.

He was grouchy, for the next few days—but then Jerome was often grouchy. But he didn't say anything about Sadie Fisher.

Laura didn't say anything either. Maybe he'd be all right! Maybe he'd be better! Maybe he'd be different!

A Marked Change Apparent in Jerome

And, curiously enough, from then on Jerome was different!

The change, from the outside, was all in his favor. He was cheerful. Pleasant. He got home to dinner on time. He even suggested, occasionally, taking Laura to the movies. He still went out by himself—but not nearly as frequently as before. He was changed!

Laura felt she ought to be happy over the change—but she wasn't. For he was more impersonal. A stranger. Even his politeness was the politeness of a stranger.

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