



When She was Thirty

By LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON

IT was Eleanor Gray's thirtieth birthday. Suddenly she awoke to the knowledge that youth, with its vague hopes and dreams, was over. She had never quite understood how swiftly the years were passing. One day was so like another, and the heart in her was so young, she half thought that she herself was a young girl still, and that love might be waiting round the corner. Hitherto hope had held her by the hand. But somehow there was a cruel positiveness in the number thirty. So many years had she lived—the years of charm and expectancy. What could there be to come now? But what had there been, even in the past?

She went back, in her thoughts, over the life she had lived, and regarded it as if it had been that of some other person. She had been born in the wrong family, she said to herself; that was the beginning. They loved her well, the practical, unimaginative parents whose only child she was; but they had never understood what she meant. Her ways were not as their ways, nor her thoughts as their thoughts. They had been proud of her in some uncomprehending fashion, but they had smiled at her aspirations and ambitions as at the amusing vagaries of a petted infant. They gave her the harp on which she wanted to play just as they had given her the talking doll she had coveted and made friends with when she was a child. They had let her buy herself poetry books just as they had let her buy sweetmeats. They were good and dear,—oh, so good and dear!—she said to herself on this morning of her thirtieth birthday. But they did not know her. No one had ever known her; of that she felt certain.

She took a little hand-mirror from her dressing-table, and began to study her face in it. The features had not changed very much since she was twenty. Perhaps the eyes were a little more sad, and the cheeks had not quite the wild-rose bloom that belonged to them ten years ago; but really there was not so very much difference. Then she held the glass nearer and looked in it a little more closely. There were—yes, there were—wrinkles, slight, yet unmistakable, at the corners of her eyes. They were big blue eyes, by the way, with black lashes. The young gold of her hair was turning to autumnal brown; and the lips that had never been warmed by kisses seemed to have grown thinner.

"Yes," she said; "ah, yes; I am older. I can see it in the glass. I am not so pretty as I was; but what good did the prettiness do? Who ever loved me really, unless—" She did not finish the sentence. If she had it would have been "unless Tom did."

And then she laid down the glass, and her thoughts went on a long journey, back to the far-away days when Tom Rhodes used to come home with her from all sorts of places, and look at her with such eloquent eyes that she had not forgotten their language even yet. She had never let him go farther than looking, however. The world—her unconquered kingdom—was all before her in those days, and she did not mean to take Tom for prime minister. He was a dear good fellow—she used always to think that when she thought about him at all. But there were poets in the world, and painters and statesmen; and Tom—was only Tom. He taught school in the winter, and was busy on his widowed mother's small farm in the summer; and try how you would, you could not fancy him in the aspect of a conquering hero. So she had kept Tom from speaking, and finally his mother had died, and he had sold the little farm, had gone away to that vague part of the world known in those days as "out West." What he had done there, or what had become of him, who knew? Not Eleanor, at any rate.

She wondered if it were such keen torture to other women to feel that they had grown old. It seemed to her just then that youth was all—all. She had quaffed its wine, and now in the cup were dregs only. And then she sadly smiled. What wine had she ever quaffed, after all? People used to call her beautiful—and surely she must have been at least pretty—but what good had it done her? The right suitor had never come. Of the few who seemed to care for her, she thought in this hour

only of Tom. She remembered tones and looks, shy flowers shyly given, tender little cares for her comfort in small things. But in those old days her ambition soared far beyond Tom. Would it have been better had she cared for him? Would he have understood her? Would love have made that possible? For she felt now that her deepest longing had always been to be understood. Love that was given to the external Eleanor would never have been enough. She must meet some one who had the key to her deepest soul, else must she live and die more solitary than any monk of old in his hidden hermitage.

Could it be that she had thrown away what might have been life's fullest of joy? Ah, well, it was of no use to wonder now. Tom was far away, and she was thirty years old. Just then she saw the old village postman coming down the street. She threw up the window, and reached out an impatient hand for the letters he brought. They were all from school-girl friends, she saw, as she glanced at the handwriting on the envelopes. She was not in the mood to care much for them. "Drearily uninteresting," she said to herself as she opened one. A slip of paper dropped from it unheeded. Eleanor read on listlessly. Suddenly her eyes kindled. She had come to this sentence: "I used to hear you speak of Tom Rhodes—an aspirant of yours, was he not? Can this marriage notice I enclose be his?"

Eleanor picked up the bit of paper from the floor and studied it. It was cut from the Denver (Colorado) "Times," and it read:

"Thomas J. Rhodes of Connecticut to Margaret Eliza, daughter of John Riding, Esq., President of the Wheel of Fire Mining Company."

So that was what had become of Tom. She had not remembered the J. in his name, but of course it must be Tom. There could hardly be another Tom Rhodes of Connecticut. It sounded preposterous, this marriage to the daughter of the president of a mining company. So this was the end of her one true lover. She had never said before, even to herself, that she knew Tom loved her; but she acknowledged it to her own heart now. It was as if a window had been opened into the past, and a great flood of light poured from a day whose sun had long since set.

Yes, Tom had loved her, and Tom would have understood. He and she might have been one, if only she had known—if only that weak ambition she used to think so strong and fine had not held her heart in its thrall. She had the New England conscience, and it was borne in upon her mind that she ought to wish Tom to be happy in this new love, this new life. Did she? She tried to cheat herself into thinking so, but her soul defied her. "You know well," cried the voice of conscience within her, "that you don't want him to be quite, quite happy. You wouldn't like him to be absolutely miserable, but you want him to be something short of satisfied; to say to himself every day, and every day, 'Ah! Eleanor would not have done this, or said that; Eleanor would have understood better.'"

And then conscience cried aloud, "Oh, you poor, small soul! Is that the best of which you are capable? You would not care for him when he might have been yours; he was not grand enough for you then; and now you would wish him something short of life's best good!" And she listened to the voice, and, afraid of herself, she cried out for strength; and it was as if her guardian angel leaned from the heights of heaven and drew her quivering soul upward to a purer air. Then the impulse came to her to write a letter which should convey to Tom her wishes for his happiness—wishes wholly honest now.

She lingered over it for some time. She began it, "Dear Tom." Then she bethought herself of propriety, and began over again, and wrote:

"Dear Mr. Rhodes: I have just chanced to see in a Denver paper the announcement of your marriage. Oddly enough, just before it came to me, I had been especially thinking about you. I am thirty years old this day,