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REBECCA'S WEAVING

A Story of Little River

By CLARISSA MACKIE

In the weaving shed under the walnut tree, Rebecca Oswald sat with idle hands before the big loom. There was a pungent smell of green walnuts and the peculiar odor of rankly growing hollyhocks that latticed the window with fluted pink cups.

Rebecca's lips were curved in a bitter smile as she dreamed in the mellow gloom of the shed. Her slender form, erect and motionless, was sharply outlined against the light.

Within the shed everything was immaculately clean and fresh with the penetrating odor of cedar shingles. The big loom filled one end of the room with its massive framework, and in the corners were rolls of rag carpet and several baskets filled with bright hued rag strips.

Maria Oswald paused in the doorway, her round eyes peering sharply at her sister's tense profile. "Rebecca, what the land are you doing?" she asked sharply.

Rebecca started and turned her head. "I wasn't doing anything, Maria. I was resting awhile."

The older sister advanced and sat down in a chair near the loom; her keen eyes searched Rebecca's sensitive face and her own reddened with indignation. "I saw Ida Benjamin's boy coming out of the gate. What did he want?" she demanded.

"He brought some rags; his mother wants some mats made—for Edna," said Rebecca quietly.

"Of course you won't make them," protested Maria.

"I must—if I don't, Ida will say its because of Edna marrying Myron."

"If that ain't just like Ida Benjamin—the spitefullest critter that ever drew breath! Why didn't she take the rags down to Peterkin?" Suddenly Maria's disturbed countenance became an urbane mask. "Don't you dare cry, Rebecca Oswald," she added fiercely; "she's coming now!"

A shadow darkened the doorway, and Ida Benjamin entered. She was a tall, strongly built woman, with colorless hair rolled stiffly away from her hollow skinned face. Cold blue eyes were set unpleasantly close to a prominent nose hooked above a bitter mouth. She carried herself with the proud insolence of one whose weapons are always unheated. Ida Benjamin's keenest weapon of attack and defense lay behind the even rows of her false teeth. Now she rustled forward with an amplitude of starched skirts.

"Busy as a bee, Rebecca. I declare you're always at it, ain't you? I'll take this chair, Maria. You needn't get up." She beamed amiably upon the sisters.

Rebecca removed her foot from the treadle and turned to the newcomer. "Robbie brought the rags, Ida. What color warp do you want?"

"White, I guess. Do you think you can get them done by the 1st of October? They are for Edna's new house and—"

"Why not take them down to Peterkin? He's starving for work, and Rebecca's got all she can do," interplated Maria acidly.

"I want nobody but Rebecca should touch them," protested Ida Benjamin. "Being Edna's wedding outfit, they are very special, and Rebecca makes such pretty mats."

"Very well, Ida; I can make them. There's plenty of time before the 1st of October. Tell me how you want them made," said Rebecca quietly.

While the two women discussed the making of the rugs—or "mats," as they are called in Little River—Maria arose and silently left the weaving shed.

Alone with Rebecca Oswald, Mrs. Benjamin dropped the ball of rags she had been displaying to the weaver and leaned back in her chair. "Well, Rebecca, I hope you don't hold any hard feeling toward me and Edna," she said, with a malicious smile.

"We never have been intimate friends, Ida; you know that," said Rebecca proudly, "but why do you imagine that I should feel any special enmity toward you now?"

For an instant Ida Benjamin's hollow face reddened; then, as if Rebecca's question offered an opening for which she had long waited, the color left her cheeks hollow and strained, and she spoke coldly and deliberately:

"You needn't pretend you don't mind losing Myron White after keeping company with him for five years. Of course he's older than Edna, but the very minute he set eyes on her he lost his heart. You can't blame him, Rebecca; Edna's so young and fresh, and you—and me, too—are not as young as

we used to be. There; you needn't faden up and look so proud, Rebecca. You might as well look the truth in the face as to pretend you don't care."

"Have you got anything more to say?" asked Rebecca icily.

Ida Benjamin hesitated. An eager question had burned her tongue for five years. To her coarse grained mind there was no delicacy in the asking of such a question, but she did shrink from Rebecca's answer. She felt instinctively that Rebecca Oswald would speak nothing but the truth. Her eagerness now found vent in the question.

"Sarah Quigley says that years ago, before I married Jonah Benjamin, he courted you and wanted to marry you."

I told her it wasn't so and that he never appeared to like you, but just the same it spoiled all my mourning for him. I haven't been to the cemetery since she told me that. Did he ask you to marry him?" Ida Benjamin's voice sank to a low tone of bitter anguish, and her harsh face was distorted with an effort for control. She leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Rebecca's face.

"That's why you've been so hateful to me the last five years—because you're jealous of that?" asked Rebecca pityingly.

The other woman stared fiercely. "I'm not jealous, not a mite, but I can't have it that way."

Now the power was in Rebecca's hands. She could flay Ida Benjamin's suffering heart with a detailed account of how the defunct Jonah had in his youth wooed her. His doglike devotion, his obstinate refusal to take "no" for an answer, had been a village jest. These facts were weapons in Rebecca's hands. With them she might avenge herself upon this woman who had deprived her of the man she loved and destroyed her happiness through some long cherished jealousy.

Ida Benjamin was waiting for Rebecca's answer, hoping it would be a denial that she might carry forth to confound her fellow busybodies, with whom she waged alternate war and peace and in whose midst reputations were won and lost in an hour.

All at once Rebecca seemed to see down into Ida Benjamin's sordid little soul, and a revulsion of feeling swept over her. A strange light came into her eyes as she looked at the woman standing there so curiously subdued and expectant, suffering tortures of jealousy, and she was filled with pity.

Then it was that Rebecca Oswald spoke to her enemy and told her first lie. "Jonah came to see me a few times, Ida, but I guess he got tired of me. I want you to bear in mind he never asked me to marry him." Rebecca was quite pale when she concluded.

The other woman sighed relievedly. Her head went up with her accustomed insolence. "I never believed a word of it, Rebecca. I knew Sarah Quigley was lying. I suppose you're willing to repeat that before her?"

"I think I have said enough," replied Rebecca wearily. The sunshine had faded from the pond, and the shadows seemed reflected in her face.

"I'll have to be going now," Mrs. Benjamin stood in the doorway looking down at the weaver, a curious hesitancy in her harsh voice and a strange expression mingled with the triumph in her hard eyes. It was almost as if she felt sorry for Rebecca Oswald.

When Rebecca was alone she stared through the lattice of hollyhocks with a strange sense of desolation. It had been a hard day. The pressure of humiliation had been strong upon her, and she had suffered. All at once she beat her fists upon the window sill with a little fury of despair. "It isn't fair and just," she sobbed. After awhile she arose and closed the window. Touching the loom with one slender hand, she looked down at the maze of purple warp blurring before her eyes.

"I suppose people's lives are like rag carpets—some plain, some striped and others are just 'hit or miss,' with lots of bright colors. Mine's been in stripes, with lots of gray and black in between for trouble. I guess it has stopped now just as I was beginning a beautiful stripe, thinking all the rest of the carpet was going to be that rosy color. But I've got to keep on weaving. It'll be drab colored for awhile until I get some sense into me."

She dashed away the tears and straightened proudly. "I've got to weave those mats for Ida Benjamin. I've got to make them so as to pay me back for telling that lie."

The door flew open with startling suddenness, and Myron White stood there, handsome, black eyed and with black brows meeting in a heavy frown. His attitude was one of mingled shame and defiance.

"Rebecca, Maria was down to the store, and she told me that Ida Benjamin had brought mats for you to make. Where are they—here?" At Rebecca's nod of assent Myron bent down and swept Mrs. Benjamin's bags of rag balls into his arms and deposited them in a wheelbarrow he had left outside the door. Then he came back and faced Rebecca in the gathering gloom of the weaving shed.

"I'm a doggone fool," he said bitterly. "I've gone and cut myself off from

the only woman I ever wanted to marry just because—oh, I've got to tell it so's to do right by you, Rebecca. You know I was getting up courage to ask you to marry me when Ida Benjamin got after me. I don't know what she meant by it, but she said Edna was dying for love of me. Well, what could I do? When Maria told me you was going to weave mats for us I just made up my mind I'd be a man, so I've been and told little Edna all about it—that if you won't have me I don't care whether anybody else does or not. And she was just as glad as I was—said she was planning to elope with Lance Wayland anyway, and she said she hated me and my old rag mats. I can't trust myself to talk to Ida Benjamin, but I'm going to take her rags back. I won't have you making mats for her. I hope you'll forgive me for all the trouble. I guess you never want to see me again." He turned and walked dispiritedly toward the door. "I don't suppose I deserve you should forgive me," he added.

Rebecca's eyes were heavy with unshed tears. She who had patiently taken up the weaving of her drab future suddenly found her web was rose and gold. All at once her restored happiness found utterance in broken words:

"Myron, I shall never—forgive you—if you go away now."

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Her Line.
"Now our cook has gone away I don't know what we shall do."
"I thought you told me your wife was such a good cook?"
"Not a bit of it. I told you my wife was an expert in broils, roasts and stews."—Baltimore American.

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"It depends on your teeth, sir."—Megendorfer Blatter.

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