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MANY WOMEN

Final
Installation

By TED HAVILAND

WHAT HAS HAPPENED: Ronnie Ford, a young tap dancer, breaks into New York and becomes an overnight sensation. He meets a chorus girl, Jeanie Temple, and immediately falls very deeply in love with her. Jeanie tells him that she loves him, too, but he is soon disillusioned when he learns that she is only planning to wed him for the sake of his money.

He leaves the show in which he is appearing and disappears for a month, returning to again in Atlantic City, where he signs a contract to appear in a new show. His whole nature is changed by his discovery of Jeanie's unfaithfulness to him, and he decides that all women are like her—false and deceitful and calculating. He sets out, therefore, to get what thrills he can out of life, and his story from then on is the story of many women in quick succession. The first of these is Martha Hunter, who introduces him to a fast Harlem crowd, and from whom he learns how to smoke and drink. Many other girls interest him momentarily during the months that follow, but he soon finds that he is becoming jaded, that they are all beginning to bore him. He finds that he can never be happy because he cannot forget Jeanie Temple, his first love.

One day he sees a girl in the audience who catches his fancy. He meets her outside the theatre, takes her home, and learns that her name is Thelma Hughes. He soon discovers that he loves her, but hesitates to tell her of his love because he feels that he is too hardened, too soured by the life he has led to be worthy of her. As soon as he leaves the town where she lives, he signs back into his old ways of dissipation in spite of his resolutions to do better, and finds that the bad habits which he has formed in his early years are too strong to be broken.

He finally asks Thelma to marry him, but she puts him off, and he goes back to New York discouraged. There he meets a beautiful white woman, Sylvia Washington, who becomes one of his fastest friends. Ronnie does not know of her reputation as a wacker of men, but he soon finds that she is exerting some powerful influence over him which he is powerless to resist. She orders him around as she pleases, and the whole matter, together with Thelma's reluctance to marry him and save him from possible ruin, worries him into a frenzy. At last, in desperation, he seeks out Sylvia again, and she gives him a small packet of dope, which brings back for a few hours his old self, but which leaves him only with a cold, festering agony and a longing for more when morning comes.

Now, go on with the story.



"Do I have to do the proposing? I know it's leap year."

Ronnie drove on disconsolately. His thoughts were upon Jeanie Temple, she who had been his youthful idol, his first love. He recalled her as he had once believed her to be, all innocence and loveliness. And then suddenly the thought of her rankled in his mind. He could not imagine her drinking and swearing and taking dope, as he knew he would find her at the party toward which they were headed. He could think of her only as an idol, a broken idol to be sure, but an idol still.

When they got to the apartment, Ronnie had eyes for only one thing. He forgot all about Sylvia, all about his hostess and her guests, in his eager search for Jeanie Temple. His eyes swept the stuffy, smoke-filled room wildly, and at last they lighted upon a girl seated upon a davenport, two empty glasses on the table beside her and a man's arm about her waist. There she was! Jeanie, in all her old-time loveliness, yet somehow different, somehow changed. Still he could see that she was the same Jeanie, the girl who had laughed at his love, who had ruined his faith in all womankind through her unfaithfulness. Once he had loved her passionately, tenderly. Now he could not bear to see her in the arms of another man.

"Let that girl go!" he cried.

The man untwined his arm from about Jeanie's waist and staggered upward, amazed. Ronnie, hurtling forward, struck him. The blow landed upon the chin; the man, dazed, fell forward upon his face. Without a word of explanation to Sylvia, who had watched the whole proceeding with bewilderment, he swept Jeanie Temple into his arms, threw her coat around her shoulders, and ran down the stairs. Once again in the open air, his head cleared, and he hastily directed Jeanie to get into his car. Five minutes later they were miles away from the little apartment. Ronnie drove swiftly and headed for the country. Finally he swept off the highway onto a narrow side road and parked his car in the darkness of overhanging trees. It was a quiet,

deserted spot where they could sit and talk alone.

Ronnie told her his story first. It flooded out; there were no reservations. He told everything of his own weaknesses, his many experiences with women, his failure to break away from the curses of drink and dope—and Sylvia Washington. And finally, under her questioning, he told her of his love for Thelma Hughes.

Jeanie listened quietly to the sordid tale, and finally she asked, "Have you told this girl—Thelma—all about this?"

"All about what?"

"About Sylvia, and me, and all the rest of it."

Ronnie shuddered a little. "Of course not!" he said. "How could I?"

"You've got to tell her," Jeanie said simply.

"I couldn't," Ronnie protested.

"But you must. She's probably been waiting all this time just to find out what sort of a man you really are. If she really loves you, she'll forgive you. If she doesn't, maybe it'll be better that she should know now than later."

"I couldn't do that," Ronnie said. "Gee, what would she think of me?"

"Now—together?" she said suddenly.

"You're going to Washington this week-end," said Jeanie commandingly. "and you're going to tell her. And then you're coming back up here and tell me what she said. Here's my address." She wrote her name and address on a small slip of paper and handed it to him. He stuffed it into his pocket. Finally he promised that he would do his best to square himself with Thelma.

That Sunday, he found time to make the trip to Washington. He went immediately to Thelma's house and, finding her alone, he proceeded to tell her the whole story. He told her about Jeanie and Sylvia and the other girls he had known, of his gradual failure in the theatrical profession, of his slow conversion to dope. When he had finished, she was silent a long time before she finally spoke. "Don't you think," she asked, "it

wasn't quite fair to me not to tell me anything about all this before?"

He said, "Of course it wasn't, honey. But can't you understand?—I just couldn't. I didn't know how much difference it would make between us."

"I had a feeling that there was something wrong with you from the very start," she went on. "It sort of shows in your eyes. Of course, I didn't exactly know what it was, but there was always that uneasy feeling when you were around. I never dreamed it was as serious as all this." She began to cry softly.

"I couldn't help it," protested Ronnie vainly. "There wasn't anything I could do about it. It just had to happen—that was all."

"Maybe so," she said finally. "But I guess you can understand me now if I tell you that I can't love you any more, now that I really know what sort of man you are. Maybe I'm old-fashioned and all that, but I just can't bring myself to love you any more! You've spoiled yourself as far as I'm concerned, and if I married you, I'd be thinking about it all my life. Gee, I'm sorry, Ronnie, but you understand."

"Of course," said Ronnie bitterly. "I understand."

That night he returned to New York and to Jeanie Temple. He called upon her early the next morning, before matinee. Jeanie herself opened the door of her little apartment when he knocked. He stepped inside and was plainly astonished at the neat, homelike appearance of the place.

"Like it?" Jeanie smiled. She was dressed in a plain white-and-blue house dress, but it seemed somehow to emphasize her loveliness.

"It's—it's great!" Ronnie said enthusiastically.

"Well," she prodded him finally, "what did Thelma say?"

Ronnie told her the whole story. "Well," he concluded, she simply said 'No,' and that ended it. I suppose that, as far as she's concerned, I don't exist any longer."

"I—I thought she'd be—like that," Jeanie said.

And then a moment later Ronnie found himself kneeling on the floor, his head in Jeanie's lap, his body wracked with great sobs. Finally he became conscious of the fact that Jeanie was stroking his forehead, slowly, softly.

"Ronnie," she said, "I guess we're just about at the bottom of the ladder—we two."

"I suppose so," Ronnie agreed.

"Why not let's start up the ladder? All we need is a lot of will power and the desire to do what's right. I'm tired of parties and drinking and dope. I want to go straight, to live decently. Don't you feel the same way?"

Ronnie nodded his head. "Of course I do," he said. "I can understand all that now—I couldn't before. I guess I was a pretty big fool, thinking I could find any sort of real happiness in that sort of a life. But there didn't seem to be anything else to do—"

"I was a pretty big fool myself once," said Jeanie, tearfully. "That was when I was very young, when I didn't care about anything but money and the power that went with it. And the only way I could imagine to gain that wealth and power was through marrying you. It was really dumbness on my part—I was so intent upon getting hold of the little money you had that I never realized that I was really in love with you. I guess I'd been the kind of girl you thought I was, I would have treated you a whole lot differently. All this wouldn't have happened, I'm sure of that."

"I'd never thought of it in that way," Ronnie said.

"Now," Jeanie went on, "I've just about gotten wise to myself. I've found that all that false gaiety and happiness that goes with a lot of money doesn't mean a thing—it's all glamour and tinsel and nothing solid behind it. I'm tired of it all, and I'm breaking away before it's too late. You can have your liquor and your cigarettes and your dope and all the rest of it. I don't want anything more to do with any of them!"

"I guess you're right," said Ronnie. "Gee, this is a swell apartment you've got here. You ought to be happy."

"Yes," she said, surveying the unpretentious but homely little place. "I'm going to be happy, I think. There's—well, there's only one thing missing."

"What's that?" asked Ronnie.

She smiled at him. "Do I have to do the proposing?" she said. "I know it's leap year, but then—"

"Aw gee," said Ronnie, "if you're going to put it that way—well, I don't care. You know how much I've always loved you. You know how much I want to get away from that wild crowd and all that goes with it. You know how much I'd like it here."

She came over to him and he took her in his arms.

"Honey," he said, "let's get married and see if we can't get a new start in life. It'll be swell. We'll live right here and we'll share our climb up that ladder together. We'll fight side by side against gin and dope and the folly which pulled us down into the mire, and together we can't help but whip 'em. I know we will."

"Yes," whispered Jeanie. "I think we've both got the right idea—at last."

He bent over and kissed her tiny red mouth.

THE END.