

***A Man With  
Women***

**Margaret Lee  
Runbeck**

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# *A Man With Women*

BY

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**I**t was no fit day for a baby to be born, but it certainly looked as if this might be the day our baby had picked. He hadn't been much of a picker all the way around, beginning with his parents. Not Julie, of course. Me.

I was thinking this, and then I saw the mailman pushing his breath before him like a little balloon, as he labored along our quiet street. I ran downstairs to get the mail, and I could hear Julie listening while I stood in the hall, but I couldn't find a reassuring sound to make. I had slit the envelope as I closed the door, and in one glance I saw it was the usual smooth letter saying that at this time there was no opening, but that my application for the position would be kept on file.

"A job, darling?" Julie cried, and her voice weakly came staggering down the steps.

"Not yet," I said, folding the envelope in my pocket and looking at the other letter. This was no time to tell her. "Only a letter from my father."

"Oh. Don't read it," she said. "This is not the time for reading his letter, Johnny."

"No. It isn't."

It was like my father to have one of his letters arrive the day when we already had everything we possibly could bear. I thought fearfully, Tag's coming back—that's all we need now. Well, he stayed away nearly a year this time. I wondered what he would do with a baby in the house, for he was used to being the only baby, sulking and having tantrums. Everybody had to tiptoe around while he tried to paint.

I called to Julie, "You go to sleep."

I went into the kitchen, and as I passed the mirror in our dining room, I stopped and looked at myself. I looked like what I was—a man who couldn't find a decent job.

Sara wouldn't let me take the jobs I could get when I got out of the army. She kept saying, "I've always wanted you to be a newspaperman. Like myself. Someday there's going to be an opening for you at my paper. Meantime, you get your master's degree."

I tried to tell her. "Listen, Sara. I can't go on being a college boy. I've got a wife now. Besides—"

"Sure, sure," she said, grinning at me. "Come here and let me brush back that hair of yours."

I kept looking at myself in the mirror. "There you stand with an apron tied around your hungry middle. You don't look like the father of a baby about to be born. You don't look like anything but a youngster out of joint."

I went into the kitchen to see what we had on hand, for it was the maid's day off. In a couple of hours my mother would come home, worn out. I looked into the refrigerator to make sure we had eggs. To pass time, I read for a while and then I heard Julie calling, so I went upstairs to her bedroom where she was lying quiet and white.

Seeing my face, she put on her old gay smile. I sat beside her on the bed and took her hand, and she turned heavily on her side and looked at me.

Her eyes were big and dark, not their usual clear blue. She looked as old as Sara, my mother, and I thought, They're all the same age—all the big brave women.

"Johnny," she said, as if I were a little boy, "I wish you had got the job before the baby started being born. I wish you had got it yesterday."

"I'll get it tomorrow. Then when the nurses ask my son what his father does, he can say, 'He's in the diplomatic service—where my grandmother's family distinguished themselves.'"

Julie said, "You don't have to distinguish yourself, Johnny, the way your mother's menfolks did. You only have to get a job you can do honestly. You only have to be yourself." That was the first time Julie and I ever had said such a thing. In a moment she tried to change the meaning of the silence that fell between us.

“Mostly, if you had a job right now, you wouldn’t be scared about me having the baby, and everything,” she said.

“Sure.”

“You know what I mean.” She was still trying to hide what she really did mean. “Having babies is very hard on gentlemen. It’s ladies’ work. We love it.”

“Julie,” I said, “I shouldn’t have let you marry me, darling. I haven’t anything to give you.”

“You’ve given me a beautiful year,” she said faintly. “That’s more than some women have out of a whole lifetime.”

She didn’t turn her head; she just kept staring at my face, and I tried to keep it blank so she wouldn’t see what her words did to me.

“Before I go to the hospital,” she said, “I want you to promise me you’ll forget what I said that time.”

I didn’t need to ask what time; we both knew. “I have forgotten it, Julie.”

“Cross your heart?”

“I never think of it now.”

She said, “I know you don’t, Johnny.” But she knew I did, because it had been the truth, what she said that night after I took her to my mother’s house.

She had said, “Johnny, now that I’ve seen your mother, I understand why you wanted to marry me.”

I had kissed her and said *that* was the reason.

But she had taken my hands down from her face and sat up very straight. “You married me to get over being Sara’s little boy.”

I had tried to laugh at first, and to pretend she was teasing me. But she wouldn’t pretend. “No, I want to say it. You can’t marry your way out of being a little boy, Johnny. You’ve got to do something. You can’t run away from it into something else—not even into marriage.”

I had got mad then; I said a lot of wild things; I put on my coat and left, furious, because it was the truth and I knew it. Sara had come out on the porch to ask if anything was wrong.

“Plenty’s wrong,” I said. “I’ve married a girl who sees right through you.”

That had rocked her back on her heels a minute. But she recovered. “Good,” she said, “that’s the only kind of gal I’d be willing to have for a daughter-in-law.”

About midnight, I had come home. A funny thing had happened in our house. I should have known Sara would manage it that way. The two of them were sprawled on Julie’s bed like two girls. I knew they had talked me over and agreed about me. I knew, too, that the crazy hope I had had wasn’t going to work out, for almost from that moment I saw it wasn’t going to be Julie and me standing together against Sara and all her loving bossiness. It was going to be Sara and Julie, and it was going to be harder than ever for me to get over being Sara’s wheedled, spoiled little boy.

Sitting at Julie’s bedside, I remembered and thought of all this, and gradually the twilight came sifting through the window, and suddenly the street light threw a glowing square on the ceiling. I could hear the children playing on the hill with their sleds, and this little room of ours in my mother’s house seemed the saddest place on earth. I knew that here was a situation where only a man ought to be, but I was still a good-for-nothing youngster. After a while I knew by the heavy sound of Julie’s breathing that she had fallen asleep.

Then I heard Sara’s streetcar stop at the head of the street, and I slipped my hand out of Julie’s and tiptoed out of the room. I could picture Sara getting wearily out of the trolley, coming up the street with her head bent against the snow. Allowing herself to be good and tired for one last moment before she came into the house.

I knew how she would look when I opened the door. She would be straight and bright and full of sassiness. Sara’s face was as round and pink as a little girl’s, and her eyes were blue as a doll’s. Right now she had on one of those silly hats she has to wear because she is a fashion editor.

I said to myself, taking the bundles from her, She’s vain and silly. She won’t let me grow up, because she is trying to stay young.

But then the honesty in me said, But she has to stay young so she can work for us. She stayed young to support Tag—and now she’s supporting us. While I was kissing her cold little face and whisking the snow from her shoulders, a dialogue went on between my love for Sara and the protest in me that rebels against her.

“She bosses everybody, and gets her own way about everything.”

“But her way is always to spoil us.”

“That’s why we aren’t fit for anything. Tag and me both. She ruined my father, and now—”

It was all mixed up, the causes and the effects. She has done so much for us that she has ruined our lives. I ought to hate her, because she has kept me loving her too much.

I said to her crossly, “You’re wet. You should have taken a taxi.”

“Don’t need a taxi,” she said, reaching up to brush back the lock of my hair that is the only thing, so far as I can make out, my father ever gave to me. In another minute she would ask me if I’d heard about the appointment she was trying to wangle for me. I could fool Julie about it, but I knew I never could fool Sara.

So I said quickly, “I’m glad you’re home.”

“How’s Julie?”

“She says she’s fine. But I’m mighty glad you’re home. I think the baby’s going to get here tonight.” Sara sat down in the wing chair and kicked off her shoes, wiggling the toes of her wet stockings. Seeing them, and knowing how helpless I was, made me suddenly, unreasonably angry.

“You should have taken a taxi,” I said again. “We’ll have you sick next, and then what’ll we do?”

**I**f I hadn’t scolded her, I would have put my head on her lap and cried, because I couldn’t bear the tired little muscle twitching in her cheek and her hair piled up so bravely in curls trying to look blonde instead of gray.

“Think of me being a grandma!” She pretended she was laughing, but no sound came. “I’ll go up and have a look at her. I wish I could do this thing for Julie. I’d gladly take her place in the hospital. Be a nice change from my job.” She winked at me roguishly.

“You’d do everything for everybody, if you could. But this is something you positively cannot do, my friend. So come out and eat dinner. Julie’s asleep.”

I went out through the dining room and flipped some ham in the skillet and poured two beaten eggs beside it. Sara came out and leaned against me, with her arm about my waist.

“You were such a fat baby,” she murmured, feeling my sharp shoulder blades. “I just wasted all that Grade A milk and spinach and stuff I poured into you back in 1925.”

I didn’t look at her. I rammed at the eggs with a knife.

She said, “You look so cute in an apron.”

But I didn’t want to play. “Sara, this is all wrong. We shouldn’t be having this baby. Maybe we never even should have got married. I thought maybe—”

“This is a swell time to be thinking of that,” she said cheerfully, and she ran her finger up and down my ribs, pretending she was playing a xylophone.

“Living on you,” I said bitterly. “And even bringing two other guys to live on you.”

She looked at me, and her face was full of love. She reached up and patted my cheek. “And such guys!” she said. “Such terribly precious little guys.”

She went to the cabinet, got silver and china, and set herself a place at the table. It was the best china, I noticed, and it meant that Sara, too, needed bucking up a bit. I looked at her sitting there in the glare of the kitchen light bulb, with wrinkles like little seams sewn around those doll eyes, and thought, She’s too strong for us. She has made us all weak. She did it to Tag, and she’s doing it to me.

She felt what I was thinking. “All nonsense, your getting into such a twitch about working! Even if you don’t get that State Department appointment, there’s going to be a place on the sports page next month.”

“I don’t want to work on your paper,” I said, sounding sulky and ungracious. “I want to do something that’s my own.”

“Tush,” she said, gulping her coffee. “You talk like a little boy. Well, never mind now, darling. Everything’s going to be different once we have that baby boy. A baby makes the funniest things happen to people.”

I remembered then that I had Tag’s letter in my pocket, and I thought angrily that a baby hadn’t made anything happen to him. Sara was going on, “And don’t tell me that he isn’t going to be a boy, because I refuse to have anything else. I hate girls. They all grow up to be self-centered women.”



“All except Julie.”

“Yep. Julie’s more person than woman. And she’s got more guts than you and I put together. Maybe we better go up to her now. She’s probably awake and doesn’t want to bother us.”

She was awake, and I knew by the way Sara looked at her that it was later than I had figured. Julie, too, could tell the time by Sara’s face. Sara gave a little two-fingered salute to her forehead and then leaned over and kissed my wife.

“What do you think? How about inviting the doctor over?”

“I think it’s time,” Julie said, with the lids of her eyes down and her lashes very dark against her cheek. “Besides, I’m tired of staying in this room. I’d like to put on my shoes and go somewhere.”

“That’s the girl,” said Sara, and I wanted to say to them both, “You don’t have to be so darned brave, you two. This isn’t a child in the room with you. This is the man who ought to be taking care of you. Maybe even both of you.”

But instead, I said, “I’ll phone Doctor Olson and call a taxi. And don’t do anything while I’m gone, because I wouldn’t want to miss any of this.”

Julie said dreamily, “I positively refuse to have this baby in a taxi. It’s undignified.”

I called the doctor, who said it couldn’t possibly be time, but to come on down to the hospital if we wanted to. When I got back upstairs, Julie was dressed, wrapped in Sara’s fur coat.

“I begged her not to put this coat on me, Johnny, but I’m just putty in her hands. She’ll catch pneumonia without it.”

“She’s delirious,” Sara said. “I never catch cold.”

We tried to take Julie by the arms to help her downstairs, but she laughed at us and walked down by herself, stiff-legged and awkward, like a top-heavy float built around a small chassis. We got her into the cab, and I sat in the front with the driver.

“I like that,” Julie said. “He’s pretending he’s not with us. He’s ashamed of us. He thinks we don’t look stylish!”

“I think you look beautiful,” I said. “The word, if you will excuse the expression, is ‘swell.’”

We rode along talking that kind of stuff to keep ourselves from thinking. The snow was coming down so fast it was like a thick curtain we could hardly drive through. The cab went slowly, and we could hear the steady singing of the tires on the ice. The only thing we could see through the storm was the blurred blue-and-red haze of neon lights.

The cab driver kept glancing at me from under his frayed cap, trying to figure me out. I had a feeling he thought I was Julie's kid brother. He said to her when we stopped at the hospital entrance, "You're a little thing, and I'm a horse of a guy. Would you trust me to carry you in?"

"What about it, Julie?" I said, trying to take charge. In the dim light she looked more white and drawn than ever. Her teeth were clenched tight on the pain. She had no quip now; she only nodded.

**T**he driver came around, opened the door, and reached in and picked her up with ease. It made me feel bad; if there was any carrying to be done, I should have been big enough to do it. Sara must have known that, for she took my arm and said, "Son, help your old mother over these cobblestones."

But even that, kind as it was meant to be, Sara had no right to say. A mother of a married man has no right to be so close that she tries to shape his private thoughts. She has no *right*—and if he were a real man, she'd know that, and keep her hands off.

Inside the hospital there was a nurse who added us up quickly. "Just follow me, please," she said, and we tagged along behind her, past doors with eyes turned to look out into blank space, not curiously but only with ineffable patience.

In the elevator the nurse said, "Mr. Garland, suppose you and your mother go into the reception room. I'll call you when we're ready." She took Julie's arm, and they went down the hall together, looking like two conspiring strangers.

I followed Sara into the reception room. It had wicker furniture to make it look like a sun porch, or something, but the dingy gray walls gave it away. A man with a strong, lean face was sitting on the settee in the corner, his hands hanging between his knees.

Sara took charge immediately. "Good evening. I'm Mrs. Taggard Garland, and this is my son."

He said his name was Daly, and rose uncertainly. He and I shook hands, because we didn't know quite what else to do. Sara sat at a center table, and immediately the dead room looked as if it had some meaning and life in it.

"This your first?" she asked cheerfully.

He said it was his third, and he went on talking to Sara and I tried to look interested; but I felt inadequate and out of character, like a clumsy actor who had staggered onto the wrong stage and didn't know what was expected of him.

Mr. Daly said, "I like girls, but I want another boy. I've got a little repair shop, and I figure I've got a lot of things I could give a boy. Besides, help's so unreliable, and I don't figure it'll be getting much better."

"Take twenty years to make him something you could consider 'help,' wouldn't it?" Sara pointed out jovially.

"Nope. I'm going to begin teaching him first thing," Daly said seriously. "A good mechanic's got it born in him. Being handy with motors and things—well, I figure that's part of what I've given him."

Sara wasn't a bit interested in this. But I was. I could see he did have a lot of things he'd probably given to his son already. In a panic, I began to wonder what I had given my son. The only two assets I could think of were a grandmother and a mother. With Sara strong enough to wipe out the weakness of Tag. Then the track of association led me into wondering if someday my son would think that Julie made up for all the weakness in me.

I had a feeling that this moment was split into three layers, like the warped veneers of a panel of wood. This moment had two other images of itself, the past and the future. The time when I was being born, with Tag failing Sara and me, was probably going to be repeated in the future, when this new son of mine, grown to my age and in this duplicated circumstance, might think as bitterly of me as I thought of Tag now.

Sara and the repair-shop man went on talking, weighing the advantages of boys over girls. "But best of all," Sara was saying, crossing her handsome legs briskly, "a boy can look after himself. A boy always pulls his own weight."

Her eyes were innocent and blue and sincere as she said it, and I knew she believed it. Somebody had told her this long ago, and she still believed it. Yet all the men she had had in her life had leaned on her, because she had

insisted on being strong. She had mopped up for us, and made excuses for us, and had slipped money into our pockets when we weren't looking, so our pride wouldn't be hurt. Yet somehow she clung chivalrously to this illusion: *men are the people who take care of themselves.*

A nurse came to the door. "Your wife wants you, Mr. Garland. You may go in now." The nurse and I went briskly down a hall smelling of ether, flowers, and soup, then into a shadowy room stripped of everything but the labor of this moment. Julie was propped against the pillows in a hospital nightgown; they had braided her hair into little pigtails, and put a coif of gauze above her forehead. She looked like somebody lost out of this world, about to be initiated into a secret order of women.

"How is it?" I asked, making my voice loud and sure of itself.

"It can't be very far away. They try to make it all sound very casual."

Suddenly, she gripped my hands, and she began to pull back. Below the coif a terrible dew sprang up on her forehead. Then she came out of the spasm and smiled at me, and put up her hand protectively and patted my face.

"Poor old Johnny," she said. "Don't take it so hard, honey."

"Oh, Julie. Why did we ever think we wanted this baby?"

"Hush. Of course we want it. We'll be adding to the majority of nice people in the world. People like Sara."

Even if she might have intended to add "And you" for politeness or encouragement, she couldn't get the words out, for the pain came again and she set her teeth and pulled. She let go of my hands and seized the iron rods of the bed provided for the purpose. She didn't make a sound, but her knuckles had little white parentheses below each finger. I went down on my weak knees beside the bed.

"Julie," I cried, "yell if you want to, darling. What difference does it make?"

"Yell?" she said through her teeth. "What's there to yell about?"

I thought, Now I know the difference. There are people who scream and run away, like Tag. And maybe myself. There are others who hold on and say what they have to say with perspiration and muscles.

With perspiration and muscles. Not with lying down on the job, not with being ashamed and giving up, as I was doing now. For the first time, I saw

that this job situation was something I was either going to face and lick, or go down under. I was either going to face it as Julie was facing that crisis of hers, with clenched teeth and a grin—or I was going down under it, as Tag always had, with an alibi blamed on Sara.

Julie was giving birth to our child. And I—well, I was going to have to give birth to a man.

**T**he simplicity of that stunned me. I went into the hall, blundered about, and finally pushed open a door that led to a little balcony. Snow was falling thick and heavy, and down below, in the street, the traffic was moving, slipping black through white. I stood in the snow beating my fists on the railing, thinking of Julie and me and of Sara and Tag, with all his extravagant plans and all his wonderful talent that had never come to anything. I got to remembering those days when he and I were alone in the house, with Sara working at the paper all day. He never bothered pretending with me. If he didn't want to paint, he didn't pretend. He would put on overalls and go down to the basement and putter at a workbench.

"I'd have been a darn' fine machinist, if your mother hadn't married an artist," he used to say sometimes.

I remembered then that I hadn't read Tag's letter. I took it out of my pocket and opened it, and there was the affectation of his green ink and his big, boastful handwriting. He had never written a reliable word in his life, yet he had assumed the handwriting of a man of power.

This would be like all the other letters, full of his alibis, full of what he was going to start next week. And probably at the end, a very humorous, boyish line asking if Sara could spare him fifty dollars.

But the letter wasn't written to both Sara and me. It was only to me.

"SON:

"You and I have got something on our hands at last. Sara has lost her job. Old Mills hasn't told her yet. He wrote to me because we used to be buddies before Sara married me."

I jerked up my head and looked at the sky, and the light on the balcony seemed dancing with excitement. "*Sara has lost her job*," Tag said. A dizzy rush swept over me—a tangle of emotions. I went on reading.

“Mills thought I might want to do something about it. And I sure do. Hope you will, too, John.

“For the past three months I’ve had a job. I didn’t tell Sara until I was sure I could hold it. It isn’t a position Sara would be proud of, but I’m proud of it.”

I laughed out loud. Except for the handwriting and the show-off green ink, that was a paragraph I might have written myself.

“It’s a swell job. I wear overalls, and I machine parts for tractors. It’s dirty work, and at night my bones ache like the devil. But I never felt so good about anything.

“I want Sara to come and live with me. Time she rested her feet and her brains and just took care of her husband. I guess that’s what I’ve wanted all this time, a dear, dumb little wife to work for.

“TAG

“P.S. No use her knowing the paper is firing her. I’m writing her a good, masterful love letter, ordering her out here with me.”

I stood there holding the letter and laughing, and it seemed to me I, too, had never felt so good in my life. I had a father who had a job. Something I had been ashamed of all my life—something I had been so afraid of that I couldn’t seem to escape walking in its very footsteps, was gone now. Sara had lost her job—and we had found ours!

My father, of whom I’d been ashamed all my life, had stepped up and shown me something. He had shown me that the only way a man can bear the sight of himself is to take his life in his own hands and run it himself. To get his own job and then do that job, whatever it is.

Suddenly the world made sense to me, and I knew what it was about. People working and taking care of one another, women in one way and men in another. So now I *did* have something to give my son besides a good, strong grandmother. I had myself, running my own life, with Julie beside me. My son had picked good parents; they were a going concern.

I went back to the wicker waiting room, and Sara and the repair-shop man were still talking, never guessing that a man had been born almost before their very eyes.

I said, “Sara, I’d like to have you step out of the room a minute.” I felt excited and almost drunk, looking down at my mother. She got up

uncertainly and laughed in a sort of feminine way, almost as if I were some interesting stranger. She dropped her handbag on the floor, and I picked it up and gave it to her. "I've got something I want to discuss with Mr. Daly that's none of your business," I said pleasantly.

I bent and kissed her on one of the tired, un-young lines about her mouth. This was a man kissing his mother, not a woman kissing her little boy.

"I hope everything's all right," she said vaguely, as she went to the door.

"Everything's swell," I said, and I grinned at her reassuringly, the way she used to grin at me.

A revelation came to me then about all women. They'll try to boss a man, but they hope in their hearts that they can't succeed.

I said to Mr. Daly, "I've got to have a job, sir."

We looked each other squarely in the eye. "That oughtn't to be hard to manage, if you're any good," Mr. Daly said.

"I'm good," I said. "I'm good with any kind of mechanical device. Inherited a kind of knack from my father." I told him about some of the jobs I had done in the summers while I was going to college.

Then he said, "Well, I tell you. I got a brother who's a foreman in a foundry that's taking on some extra help. I'll give you his name." He wrote it down, and for a second I thought I had done enough for a start. Then I went farther.

"How about me calling him up now? How about me going right out and seeing him?"

Daly seemed to like that. "Sure. No time like the present."

I stepped into the phone booth, and in a few minutes I was talking to Daly's brother. Before I knew it, I practically had the promise of a job, if I could be out in an hour. "I can be out in half an hour," I said. "I'm not doing anything useful around here just now."

I put on my overcoat and charged out into the corridor, almost knocking down the nurse, who was coming into the waiting room.

"I don't know where you're going in such a hurry," she said, "but you might like to know you have a fine baby daughter."

“Oh no!” I said wildly. “Sara’s expecting a grandson.”

“A fine baby girl, Mr. Garland,” she insisted.

Then I let out a whoop. It struck me as immensely funny that Sara, who always managed everything, had not been able to manage this. Poor old Sara, she really had lost her job! This was certainly turning over a new leaf. Tag and I—and now Nature—all talking back to Sara!

All of us saying, “Listen, darling, you’re a fine, brave gal, but you don’t have to hold up the whole world with your bare hands. We’ve got to have our chance to manage ourselves from now on. And maybe manage you, too, you sweet little woman.”

The nurse said, “Where are *you* going in such a hurry?”

“I’ll tell you where,” I said, recklessly picking her up off her feet and giving her a kiss, just to get all women in their place so far as I was concerned. “I’m going out to my job. I’m a man with women to look after.”

The End



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *A Man with Women* by Margaret Lee Runbeck]