

My Mother's Husband

By ANDRÉ BIRABEAU

The following short story is by a French author who has made a name for himself as a dramatist. Several of his plays—most of which are of the type of the "comédie des mœurs"—were successfully produced at the Comédie Française. Even in this story he is more dramatist than novelist: its situations and characters gain life and atmosphere almost entirely from what these characters say.—K.M.

received the following letter:

Dear Sir:



I am one of your faithful readers . . . (here come some complimentary remarks which I need not repeat). You recently published a story which has upset me a great deal. Ever since I have felt confused and troubled. The story you told is not my own. . . .

I heaved a sigh of relief, for it happens sometimes that I receive indignant letters from readers to the following effect: "Sir, how is it that you are so well informed about my life? How did you know that my wife has deceived me with a naval officer?" On one occasion, a woman from some town or other in the north sent me four pages full of words underlined three times and decorated here and there with obscure little drawings, in which she said: "When will you stop persecuting me? Every one of your stories reveals an adventure in my past life and my most secret thoughts. Confess: you are a member of the Great Conspiracy! And it is my maid, my maid who tells you all those things!" Another time—but never mind about that. Without further apprehension I went on reading the letter from my correspondent:

The story you told is not my own, but it resembles it in one respect. Enough for my sleep to have been disturbed since then. I have never told anybody what happened to me, what I did. One can rely so little on friends! And I am not religious. Yet I have often felt a great

longing to confess—a longing which is at bottom perhaps nothing but selfishness, for it is only the longing to be absolved. I thought this longing had vanished, but I see now that it has always been there. So I am writing to you.

Your story dealt with a widowed mother who wanted to remarry, and it was her little daughter who decided the choice of her husband. In the same way, not long after Papa died, Mama wanted to remarry too. I believe I was about seven at that time.

I have the feeling that my memory was born that day. All that happened in the seven years of my little life before that day, all that I may have seen or felt, I don't remember at all. Even the remembrance of what my father looked like is an artificial one, because there were photographs of him and I have often looked at them since then. But there is not a single clear memory of him personally. All that remains, and that's vague enough, is the memory of a moustache brushing against my cheek and smelling of English cigarettes. But the memory of that particular day—!

WITHOUT fear of making a mistake, I could describe to you the place where it happened: my mother's room. It was almond green and mouse gray. The doors were gray, the wallpaper green; there was a green chaise longue near the window against heavy curtains of gray velvet. On the dressing table, beside her ivory brushes, there

stood a little white elephant. From the ceiling hung a chandelier which resembled many-colored fireworks. And the room was pervaded by Mama's perfume, a perfume which she concocted herself, a perfume which I cannot describe to you but which I can still smell at this very instant.

It was toward the end of a spring afternoon. I had just returned from the Luxembourg Gardens and had run straight to Mama. She kissed me absent-mindedly—yes, after all these years I can still give you all these little details and many more—and stroked my forehead with her usual gesture, but this time she did not notice that I was still perspiring. When I turned to go, she said:

"No, stay here."

But she did not go on. I remained standing in front of her. It was quite a while before she added, after shaking her head:

"My pet, would you mind having a new papa?"

(You see—almost the same words as the woman in your story. It seems that all mothers in such cases express themselves in the same way.)

Oh, I did not reflect for a moment! My first word was out almost before she had finished.

"No, no! I don't want that! I don't want that!"

She frowned: "But, my pet, listen—"

"No, no!"

She tried to hold me against her knees. I slipped out of her hands and fled to the furthest corner of the room, between the chaise longue and the window, like a dog that is afraid it is going to be beaten. Mama got up, more vexed, I think, than angry. And she said something to me which she would have said to a grownup:

"Well, if you think I am doing it for fun—!"

Of course, she was not saying it entirely to me, but I heard it, and I took it in. And my breath came easier, behind the chaise longue, just a tiny bit easier.

I looked at Mama. She had picked up her nail buffer from the dressing table and was nervously polishing her nails while she walked up and down. Her loose negligee swept the floor behind her, and the long steps she took opened it in front, revealing every now and then her long graceful legs up to above her stockings. Finally she came and sat down on the chaise longue behind which I had taken refuge. "Look here, Bobette."

I clutched the edge of the chaise longue. "I don't want a new papa, I don't want a new papa!", I screamed. I really and truly screamed at the top of my shrill little voice. At that moment Grandma came into the room.

"What ever is the matter?" she asked.

"Oh!" replied Mama, with a smile as she got up. "I have been trying to talk to her. She won't even listen!"

"Let me try," said Grandma, waving her aside.

Grandma was like Mama, and yet they were not alike. Perhaps it was only the way they dressed. Grandma always wore dark dresses, purple or plum colored, voluminously cut, while Mama had the plumage of a bird of paradise—of a bird which was never the same two days running. How can I describe it? Even when she was in mourning, Mama never looked as if she were in black. The result of this difference between two women whose faces were so very much alike was that I did not hesitate to behave wilfully in the presence of one while I obeyed the other. Mama would have gone on talking, I would have interrupted her and stamped my foot; but I listened—albeit my brows drawn and my eyes hard—I listened to Grandma.

"Roberta, my darling," she said to me, very deliberately, "you are a big girl now, one can talk to you as to a little woman. You are able to understand reasonable matters."

Everything she went on to say to me was, indeed, very reasonable. She made it seem as clear as daylight that the household could not continue without a

man. And I have no doubt that this was true. As you so rightly said in your story: a woman remarries, not so much on account of herself as of her children, the servants, the tax collector. Mama, poor dear scatterbrain that she was (and her mother, in spite of her purple dresses, was almost as much of a scatterbrain), was hopelessly at sea when faced by the slightest complication. I had often seen her, sitting in front of some papers that had been sent her, muttering in despair while she thrust her hands into her hair (and for a woman to disarrange her hair she must be pretty upset, I can assure you). "I don't understand a thing, I don't understand a thing!" she would say. I had heard her say to the chauffeur, who remained altogether too impassive: "What? Another burned-out valve, Francis? But that's three in a month!" Thus our fortune melted away. When there is no longer a husband to earn money, and when there are people who are "very well informed on business matters" to advise you to "invest your money safely and profitably". . . . If things went on like that, it would be necessary to retrench, to move house, to give up going to parties or going away for holidays, to be just one bird of paradise, always the same one. Grandma did not tell me all this quite like that; she just said:

"It is of you that your mother is thinking, Roberta dear. She wouldn't like to have to take you away from your private school and send you to the ordinary school. And she wouldn't like you not to have a beautiful little fur coat like the one you're so fond of." But I understood, or rather in some obscure way I guessed it all.

Grandma turned to Mama:

"You see? You only have to appeal to her intelligence."

I had listened to the whole speech with my eyes fixed on Mama. I lowered them now and replied very softly: "No, I don't want a new papa, I don't!"

"You're nothing but a little fool!" cried Mama. She threw down her nail buffer and left the room. Grandma

shrugged her shoulders and followed her. Then I let myself slip down to the foot of the chaise longue and began to cry.

I knew quite well that it was not all over yet. They would wait a little while and then renew their attack. The very next day after that scene—that was Mama all over, always acting on impulses!—she dismissed the chauffeur and sold the car. The chauffeur got too large a compensation out of her, and the car was sold for a song.

"Well!" answered Mama impatiently when her mother grumbled. "What do you want me to do? You know very well that I know nothing about business matters!"

Grandma looked at me. I blushed.

Several days passed, each of which I remember as if it were last week: they were ghastly for me. Mama found every dish badly cooked; by a careless gesture she broke the little white elephant on her dressing table; she spoke to me without looking at me; she kissed me cursorily. A kiss with no heart in it is worse than no kiss at all.

I could not hold out for long. One evening I went up to her.



"Mama," I said softly, "who would it be?"

If I had ever had any illusions, they were dispelled at this instant.

She was thinking of it so constantly that she did not even pretend not to understand. She answered right away:

"I've no idea! Someone who would love you, in any case, my pet."

That evening, the old kiss was back again.

SHE was telling the truth: she had made no choice yet. I realized this a little later when I noticed that no one in particular came to the house. I was so much on the lookout that a word, a

glance, a smile would have told me. You see, it was not so much a man she wanted as a husband. Now that she was sure of my consent she was in no hurry. She felt as calm as if everything were already settled. She was very pretty: she knew she would only have to choose. She bought a new car and engaged another chauffeur. And she imagined that this new fellow was not going to cheat her—as if she already had that husband whom she could have whenever she wanted.

As for me, I heaved a sigh of relief. The worst danger seemed to me to have passed. I had been so afraid that everything was already fixed and settled, that Mama already loved someone.

In your story, the mother says to her small daughter: "Which one do you prefer?" In my case, Mama did not even ask me to choose. It was I who—without telling her so—wished to make the choice for her. Yes, I wanted to choose someone for her whom she could never love, ever!

Perhaps it is not a very nice thing to admit, but this is the way I felt! I didn't mind having someone around who would replace Papa. Yes, I pictured to myself a stranger entering our house, installing himself as the master, sitting at our table, carving the chicken, walking around the apartment in his shirt sleeves, and myself having to obey him—and I didn't mind. The one thing that must not happen was that Mama should love him! That would be terrible, that would be unbearable. If *that* should ever happen, I would kill myself! Don't laugh, I believe I really would have done it. I already knew where and how I would do it. But perhaps *that* could be prevented.

NOW that I look back, I am amazed at myself. How crafty a little girl of seven can be! How much cunning, in all its strength and subtlety, is already contained in so young a brain! Never since have I worked out such complicated calculations, laid more ingenious traps. Perhaps this was possible because one is less inclined to distrust children. One cannot imagine those pure

lips capable of uttering such artful lies; one would never believe that the questions put by that frail little voice, and the answers it gives, could be traps or dagger thrusts. That mouth which only yesterday dribbled milk—how could one ever suspect that poison could run from it?

As soon as I saw a young, good-looking man visiting us or paying attention to Mama at friends'—someone whom she might love later on even if she married him without loving him yet—I would immediately set about demolishing him. How? I had all sorts of ways. Sly little remarks—they make a greater impression coming from an innocent little soul: "out of the mouths of babes . . ."; little oddities to which I drew attention with assumed and cruel guilelessness; disclosures (sometimes invented) which I made without seeming to know it; and finally (without, of course, letting them suspect that the thought had ever entered my mind of his being a possible husband) I would show such disgust, so deep a revulsion for the individual in question—!

I got rid of two or three like that. And it was done so skillfully that I believe Mama didn't even notice. But that was not enough. And it was too exhausting for such a little creature. I was in a constant state of feverish excitement. I couldn't go on like that, there had to be an end. Since Mama was bent on marrying, I had to find a husband for her whom she would not be able to love.

I looked for him.

But he was already there. He was an old friend of Papa's who, after my father's death, had continued to come regularly to see us. Why hadn't I thought of him at once? Well, it was because one simply did not notice him. He was effacement itself—a piece of furniture. We had got into the habit of not listening to what he was saying. There are some people like that to whom all one ever replies is: "Yes—of course—quite right!", people with whom one would never think of starting a discussion. Moreover, he spoke without assurance, in a voice that was too soft. I know now that everything

he said was right and fine, but we didn't even hear him.

Ugly? Yes, because his was the worst kind of ugliness, that lent by humility. If one looked closely one saw that he had beautiful eyes, the color of sable (a woman would understand me), and a tender mouth; but no one ever thought of looking at him. He had a *château* here, a villa there, and a splendid apartment in Paris. And yet one always pictured him being pushed around in a subway crowd or walking up the back stairs. The collar of his jacket always stuck out over the collar of his overcoat; it all came from the best tailor—and looked like a "ready-to-wear" outfit, a ready-to-wear which he wore badly at that. And he insisted on always carrying an untidily rolled umbrella over his arm. He looked incorrigibly shabby. He had a fine name: Alain de Sermizellies; but nobody paid attention to it—it was easier to say "Vermicelli," sometimes even in his presence.

One day when he was there I suddenly became aware of him. And I had an inspiration. Of course, that was the man! I was absolutely sure that Mama would never fall in love with him. All that remained to be done was to make her marry him.

YOU may be surprised, but it was not so very difficult. Most of the trouble I had was with him: he did not dare to love Mama. Naturally, he was an ardent admirer of hers; but that a man like him should hope to become the husband of a woman like her, seemed crazy to him. He knew that this was one of those dreams which, if given way to, end in a slap in the face or, still worse, an insulting laugh. So he had never even dreamed. Consequently, at first my little ruses remained without effect.

Of course, I did not indicate to him that Mama loved him. Perhaps you think that I am exaggerating the psychology of a little girl? No: it was quite simple. I merely made him believe that Mama had been struck by something or other he had said to her, that she wanted his

advice because he had such good taste, that she valued his esteem. And all this with the innocent little voice of a seven-year-old, while I called him "my good friend Vermicelli." Little by little I made it appear as if, when he was not there, Mama spoke of hardly anyone but Mr. de Sermizellies, was concerned only with his opinion, had confidence in no one but him. Gradually the poor fellow began to think: "My goodness—that means she thinks highly of me, she realizes my true worth. In her eyes I am someone."

In Mama's case it was simpler. I said to her:

"Mama, Mr. de Sermizellies says that you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Are you?"

She laughed: "Nonsense, what does he know about it?"

But she wasn't annoyed. Men are right when they say that women always feel flattered by admiration, no matter who it comes from.

From then on, I had only to continue in this vein. With an air of utmost innocence, I told my good friend Vermicelli the flowers Mama liked, the plays she wanted to see, the balls to which she would like to be invited. So he always arrived at the proper time with the right bouquet, with theater tickets he knew would please her, with the invitation she had hoped for. Such a gift for divining her wishes was bound in the end to affect her, wasn't it? To my mother I would say:

"Mama, Mr. de Sermizellies (in front of her I never said 'my good friend Vermicelli'). Mr. de Sermizellies says that at his *château* there are blue peacocks and white peacocks which walk about on the terraces. I wish I could see them!"

Or: "Mama, Mr. de Sermizellies tells me that if I went to see his villa at Cap Ferret he would show me trees like they have in Africa. Would he really?"

Mama would reply: "Well—yes—I suppose so—"

And she would be surprised and pensive. Yes, of course, that little man who looked so shabby was really very rich. At last the day came when I risked saying the final word.

"Mama," I said with my nicest smile and my sweetest voice, "it's Mr. de Sermizellies, isn't it, who is going to be my new papa?"

She replied with a shrug of her shoulders: "Don't be silly!"

Just the same, not long afterwards she married him.

NOW I shall skip over the next few years. Immediately after the marriage I stopped bothering about Mr. de Sermizellies. My goal had been reached, the matter was finished. There was no call for me to exert myself any more. It was no longer "my good friend Vermicelli"; I no longer ran to kiss him as soon as I saw him; there were no more of those long talks between us. He no longer interested me at all. Why should he have?

I might even say that he embarrassed me a little. That incorrigible air of a salesman who has been turned away; that eternal look of a stray dog who has sneaked into the house and is waiting to be kicked out again. His provincial umbrella; the gaping collar of his overcoat; the baggy knees of his trousers which looked as if they suffered from arthritis; his hair which was always a little too long. To those of my friends who asked me: "Is that your father?" I would hastily reply:

"No, no, not at all, he's only my mother's second husband."

I did not like walking beside him. But I was not the only one. Mama had very soon said to him: "Of course, I won't drag you around to tea parties."

He had exclaimed that he would on no account deprive her of her social pleasures. Poor innocent! That wasn't it at all: she simply meant that she would go without him. They had separate cars, like one has separate bedrooms. In-

cidentally, they had separate bedrooms too. . . .

It was not long before I was treating him as I saw him being treated by Mama and by Grandma. We would answer, "Of course, my dear," and not bother in the least about what he had said.

Mama would say: "Don't worry about that." And Grandma would say: "Leave her alone."

He looked like a secretary or overseer whom his employees had been kind enough to invite to dinner. He spoke less and less, and more and more softly. He had had a library installed in one of the rooms of the apartment (after having asked permission to do so), and he hardly ever came out of it. When Mama came into the house, she would not go in and disturb him.

As for me, the older I became the more did his presence begin to weigh on me. At first, I had only felt indifferent toward him. I had not even felt grateful to him for the service he had unconsciously rendered me. Now the sight of him made me uncomfortable. He got on my nerves. Why? Because now I was beginning to understand what I had done, and a suppressed remorse was rotting away inside me.

I had grown into a big girl and then into a young woman. I was no longer jealous of Mama. Is it possible for so profound, so acute an emotion to peter out and die? When I remembered how upset I had been when I was seven years old, I smiled at myself. Had I really loved Mama so exclusively, so despotically, so obstinately? Had I really been so revolted by the idea that she could love someone else beside me? Had I really thought I would rather die? I recalled the violence and sincerity of my feelings, and I could no longer understand them.

Then I began to realize that I had caused a man's unhappiness.

I had not been mistaken: he was indeed a husband whom there was no risk of Mama loving. She had felt no love whatever for him. He might have had

a life that was, perhaps not happy, but quiet and, in the long run, pleasant in its mediocrity. I had pulled him out of his obscurity, I had made him believe in a miracle. I had made him rise to incredible heights: and it was from those heights that he had fallen. It was I who had made him into this crushed creature, this humiliated man, this ridiculous husband. Perhaps this unhappy human being.

I felt increasing pity for him—but a pity devoid of kindness. I was angry with myself. Then I was angry with him for making me angry with myself.

I was eighteen, and I fell in love. He was a Hungarian called Sandor. Young girls are susceptible to things exotic. Who knows? Perhaps I would have found him less attractive if he had been French and his name had been Alexander. He had masterful gray eyes. "It is the color of the Danube and the color of the sword," he would say. And a look from those eyes used to make me melt, rapturously. I imagined the Danube, and I imagined the sword—Sandor beside the Danube, a sword beside Sandor.

One day my stepfather came into my room.

"Roberta dear, I must have a talk with you. It is my duty to warn you. I have been seeing you several times with a young man—that young man isn't—"

"Please—!" I interrupted him.

But he did not stop: "No, no, I must open your eyes. As soon as I saw that you might be attracted by this young foreigner, I made inquiries. My dear, don't let yourself be carried away by a feeling which cannot bring you happiness. He isn't at all the kind of man for you."

Anger began to get the better of me. I answered him rudely:

"I don't think that you are very competent in such matters."

I do not think he grasped my rudeness. He was entirely taken up with the desire to persuade, with the anxiety to save me.

"At any rate there are things I have found out," he continued, "and which I must tell you in plain words, for I see that the matter has already reached such a stage that only plain words can help you. He is a fellow of shady origin, a gambler, and at present he is living off an old woman. What would become of you in such hands?"

I went white. "Has Mama asked you to tell me this?"

He dared to shrug his shoulders. "No. Your mother—your mother! Can one ever talk with her? When I tried to speak with her about this Sandor she told me: 'Oh, I know him. He dances very well.' No! It is I who will not let you commit this madness."

By now I was beside myself with rage. I shouted at him:

"You? You? And with what right?"

He answered me with a violence of which I would never have believed him capable:

"With the right which you gave me! If I am here, it is you who wanted it so. If I have become your father, it is you who chose me. Your mother confessed to me one day—a day on which I annoyed her, I expect—that, if she agreed to marry me, it was only for your sake, because you had kept on talking about me, because you had been fond of me, because you had wanted me so much as a father. And indeed, I only have to think back: 'your good friend Vermicelli'—you used to come and take me by the hand."

He had trespassed upon my love: I was a raging fury. I burst out laughing in his face.

"Yes, I chose you! I picked you out! But do you know why? Because Mama wanted to marry again and I was jealous! Because I did not want her to love the man she was going to marry! And I picked you, you, because with you—ha, ha, ha!—there was really no danger at all!"

He gasped, and staggered back as if I had struck him.

"Oh!" he muttered, "not even that, I didn't even have that."

Now I felt ashamed. But it was too late. He passed his hand across his forehead, which must have been covered with cold sweat.

"All right," he said, "all right, I apologize."

He turned his back on me and left the room. As he went through the door, he bumped against it a little.

I married Sandor. Three months later I regretted it—bitterly. I had to ask my family to take me back. In my stepfather's eyes I did not read: "You see! I told you so."

And why? Because he has got into the habit of not looking at me, just as for a long time he has given up looking at Mama. He shuts himself up more and more in his library. He looks more and more like a poor secretary who is allowed to sit at his employer's table out of charity. When a new servant is engaged, and Mama or Grandma says to him: "You must see the master about that," the servant looks around in surprise, as if to say, "But who is the master?"

Now I have grown fond of him, but I don't dare show it: he would not believe me. We live side by side. He is unhappy, I am unhappy; and not even our suffering can bring us together.



The Enemy Alien Who Cannot Be Interned

In a recent article printed in the New York *Herald Tribune*, John Steinbeck, the author of *The Grapes of Wrath* who was then in England, introduced Lilli Marlen to America under the above heading. Who is she? "She" is a song which was written and composed in Germany in 1938 by Norbert Schultze and Hans Leit. When they tried to have it printed, it was refused by more than a score of publishers. Finally a young Swedish cabaret singer, Lale Anderson, included it in her repertoire. She made a record of "Lilli Marlen," but nobody seemed to like it.

One day the radio station in Belgrade, then under German management, happened to use the record because there weren't enough other ones. Suddenly hundreds of letters flooded the station, particularly from German soldiers in Africa, demanding a repetition of this song. Other German transmitters took up the song, and Miss Anderson became very popular with the German soldiers, many of whom carried her photograph with them. In Africa, German prisoners of war introduced the song and Miss Anderson's photo to the British Eighth Army. The Australians soon made their own words to fit the tune. Next Lilli appeared in the British First Army in Tunisia. From them, American soldiers took it over and jazzed it up. The Office of War Information in Washington was quite worried over this German intrusion; finally, when it found itself unable to fight against the melody, it provided it with a new, anti-German text.