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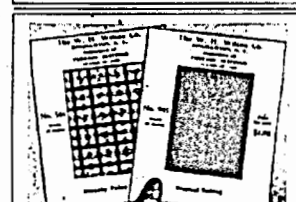
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His Mother-at-Heart

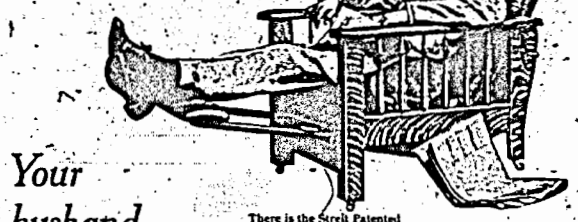
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

hurt, Mother? I've worn sash and curls a bit long, eh? I must stay here; but—Mother—are you going to mind losing your boy?
His tone said more, much more, than the words.
She sat, gazing at him, astonished, wordless. In the stillness it seemed to her that she must still be waiting for those words of praise she had so confidently expected to hear. And yet—everything, most of all what he was leaving untold, she perfectly understood. He wished her to see this decision as he saw it; whether she liked it or not, what he had said he would do. It was the who had kept him a curled delight, a mother's happiness. From now, here was to be no puppet for her training. Save as the hand of one tenderly loved, her mother-touch would never model him again.
Yet not in all her years of motherhood, never, she knew, had she so powerfully influenced her son as in this same hour when she was almost, as it were, repudiated by him. He had reached his own conclusion, unexpected, independent of her, so correct that her pride in this thrilled her veins and flushed her cheek; he would fight out his own salvation, choosing his own battlefield; but who was it that had awakened him to capacity for action? Who had abased him—to lift him so triumphantly?
Her "boy" was lost to her forever. She had given to the world a man, building for him a man better than she knew—better, she now infinitely better as his Mother-at-Heart than as his very mother she could ever have imagined.

There was one of whom, as she had watched her son's boy-days passing, she had grown increasingly jealous, with all a mother's prophetic passion of jealousy. She had always known that in a day-to-day the boy must become the man, and that all the traditional chances were in favor of a woman, some woman, vitally assisting at the hour of his re-birth. It might be a sweetheart, and that was the contingency she had liked best to dwell on; but she knew it might be just as possible that no such excuse would account for the powerful influence this stranger-woman, this interloper, would exert. She had vainly hoped for her that she would be lovely, gracious, gentle and comforting; she had liked to believe that she would have to be fine to influence Fayette, and yet—deep in her mother-heart she had known that no such things were inevitable. She might prove to be, this supplanter, merely a woman—old, as it should chance, or young; wise, or very foolish; beautiful, or unlovely; with an abiding influence, or as a mere casual episode; all as might chance. Merely because she was a woman she would reach deep down into the boy's nature, awake him; watch him when he roused—with misunderstanding gaze, perhaps.
On one point only had the mother been sorrowfully accurate: this privileged woman would be his mother, not she who bore him, whose right it was to stand lovingly close in that crisis. Was a ghost laid here for her?
This woman, watching beside her boy in his triumphant hour—only his Mother-at-Heart it might be; but yet—his mother, quieting him, comforting him, inspiring him.
She sat upright, excited, eager.

"Mother!" She turned with a start. She had not heard a knock at the door which Fayette had answered, and she looked dazedly at the envelope he was holding toward her. It was addressed to her by Mr. Newbold.
She sat with the package in her lap, unable to break the cover. What did the contents hold for her? His friend? His mother? Which did she wish to be?
When a child he had needed her tenderest mothering—that he was surely given. But now his need was a friend—the friend she had proved she could become; critical of him, steady to imply truth. By a very miracle of accident, in his ordeal, she had ceased to be his mother, and was his adviser.
To whom—to that blinded, that ever-tender mother or to this new, faithful friend—would he turn most intimately?
With an effort she broke the seal of the envelope. The papers the old lawyer inlaid had been received by him, within the hour, from his foreign agents, containing verifications which resolved every doubt. Beyond all other evidence was a letter written twenty-one years earlier to the foster-mother by Mr. Randall himself.
A phrase here, a word there, as her dazed gaze swept down the page, gave her the sequence:
"I have learned to regret your child's death. Had your boy lived the future we planned for him—my own boy strengthening—will live."
The child had lived. This was he. She sat white and motionless, gazing at her son.
He glanced across the hearth at her, then half rose from his chair. "What is it, Mother?"
Not awaiting her reply, with no permission asked, he stretched out his hand, reached for the papers on her knee and took them from her. Some profound likeness to his father in the action—instinct, fearless, masterful in its care of her—almost broke her heart, even as the pang that caught her breath taught her she gloried in it.
He was turning over the papers. Before she believed he could have mastered their contents he rose, dropping them at his feet. As she rose with him, her eyes searching his, he stretched out his hands to her and gathered her up into his arms. "You have been through this!" he cried.
"This! While I—Mother!"
Her head fell against his shoulder, her eyes closed. "It's all—All over, Mother. A dream—nothing! Try, you must try, Dear, to forget it!"
It was his to reassure! From this Christmas Eve together it would be his to suggest, her to occur. She clung to him, speechless, leaning on his young strength, glorying in it as only mothers glory—fondly, utterly unselfish—while still, still he comforted her. Beside this, priceless to them both, that he was here, she his very mother, was anything on earth worth while?
She looked up, rallied, tried to speak, tried once again, smiled, laughed, and then—with a strange, inarticulate mother-cry of joy—"My son! My son!" she sobbed.

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