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# Mis Mother-at-Meart

### A Christmas-Eve Incident in a Mother's Life

By Margaret Sutton Briscoe



RS. RANDALL looked up from the document she had been reading—the lawyer's copy of her own last will and testament which she had desired to have him revise and make legal.

"But in one regard? I see you have altered the form of my rough draft, Mr. Newbold. It was a wident as and make legal.

"It is not regard? I see you have altered the form of my rough draft, Mr. Newbold. It was a coldly to me. I thought the stament stating—'I give and bequeath to my beloved. Fayette, Randall "reads coldly to me. I thought the term" my beloved son' was-not unusual." The will and testament stating—'I give and bequeath to my beloved Fayette, Randall was confused by her own embarrassment. She seemed fair, young, to be the long, widowed mother of a grown son, much youngenthan he knew her to be, the old family lawyer thought. He sat looking at her across the table stream with papers they-had been working over together.

The confidence of three generations of Randalls had been intrusted to the old counselor; his knowledge of the family affairs dated so far back of his client's that if some respects Mrs. Randall felt hersell an interloper, a mere trustee of the estate which she now desired to bequeath to her son, as she had held it—unconditionally. It was Mr. Newbold's duty if make any demur he thought proper; she should not embarrass him with useless objections; but she was very tired, there, had been so much business to transact—this disappointment foomed larger than it should.

"I—I had rather set my heart on the document reading as I worded it," she pleaded. "I wanted my son to feel—what I knew he would if he heard my will read, exactly us—as I had written it. You know what he is to me—my whole world."

The old man still watched her while he waited. How would she meet what she was forcing him against his will to thrust upon her? Yet it was best. Soner or later this must have come; he had always known it would.

What he would not have dared to risk telling to her earlier—first in the shock of her grief, later in the consolations he

They sat by their fireside together. Fayette Randall and the woman who for twenty-one years had believed herself his mother.

There was no evidence of change from the Christmas seasons of the past. They were before the same quiet home-hearth; she was, as always, gracious, ordered, by no sign betraying that between the morning and the evening of that day her solid world had rocked.

No doubt of her potherhood had ever entered her mind—why should it? But now, while they sat as of custom after their dinner together, she in her wonted chair, he a little apart from her at the fartherside of the hearth, she studied his face, the dark eyes that stared dreamily into the fire, and was filled with wonder that she had never before been more greatly puzzled in that there were no family resemblances traceable in the familiar lines of his features. Yet, again—why should she have wondered? Other sons of other mothers bore no physical marks of their lineage. It had never occurred to any one to question their parentage.

In her hands, half hid away among the laces of her gown, sig still clasped the letter which Mr. Newbold had left with her to read, to reread. To be alonel alone as with her dead! That had been her first conscious longing after the blow fell. If fall it must, she knew it could not have been more kindly, more wisely dealt. She had been hell in no suspense that could be spared her. The whole story, convincingly and clearly outlined, was laid before her—a brief history. The short letter in her hands contained almost the whole known testimony told by—

She quivered again as she went back in mind to the moment when the old lawyer had placed the envelope on the table before her and she had looked down to identify the writing. With recovery from that first breathless pang of recognition she had instantly opened the letter and mastered its contents.

Faithful to family tradition, Mr. Randall had written from their temporary foreign home, the little town where Fayette was born, to acquain this legal adviser with the fact

Whether she had caught a contagion fight the old lawyer's betrayed belief, built up on these evidences, or accepted the forst, fearing to allow herself to hope, it remained that Mrs. Randall had been from the first instant convinced.

A hundred corroborating evidences from the past as well as the present had leaped to her mind. She was desperately ill, as her husband's letter stated, when their alling son was born; too weak then and long after to have recognized intelligently what plans her husband might have conceived and carried out. And it would have been so like him! There was no shadlow on her life that he did not banish. In her first moments of resentment in loss Mrs. Randall had turned on the old lawyer, accusing him of injustice, of cruelty. Why had he told her? Why poison her happy cup? In this season of gifts was what had been to her the gilt-roys wish that she should never be told.

But here the old attorney had stood firm. "I was not able to keep this from you, and I cannot, even at this time, regret the necessity. In some ways it is your right to be informed. This may make, Mrs. Randall—you may find that you cannot let the may have the may have the property to her larity angreed denial, his call "You cannot say that, you do not yet know, still rang tritatingly in her cars.

Not know!

Henboy, as she now sat gazing at him, the firelight playing upon his face, was, she believed, almost certainly not her son; yet never—not when he lay, adored, help-less, a mere little bundle in her loving arms—never had she so yearned over her child as in this moment when in her heart of hearts he knew he was not hers.

"Well, Mother?" Be looked up bravely and smiled. "I know what you are thinking about," he added playfully.

"What, Dear?" she answered.

The boy rose, leaning down toward her, his arms on the high back of her chair. "Come, Mother," he said lightly. "You know you have all your arguments ready. Do I stay here?"—or do I go there?"

She had forgotten all about what he referred to! This was the hour in which they was taking from his pocket.

"It's a good chance," he said. There was no very deep interest in his tone. He had a pleasing voice, and a manly face that was landsome, frank and interesting, Certain sensitive ways proved him woman-trained, but there was nothing offensively effeminate about him. As he stood smiling down at his mother, moved by some little access of affection, he stooped and kissed her.

offehively effeminate about him. As he stood smiling down at his mothes, moved by some little access of affection, he stooped and kissed her.

Her heart beat thickly as the fresh, boyish lips brushed her cheek. Something in the fact that she held a knowledge which he did not share, hurt, and, for the moment, frightened her—for him, not for-herself.

Would he, she wondered, if he Rnew all that she knew, feel their relation as wholly unstered; would he then turn to her with these sweet boyish caresses—so dear to her? The doubt settled for her one question: Whatever the final issue of Mr. Newbold's researches, Fayette should never learn that he was not her son.

"Well, Mother? What do you say? You know we must decide, and soon, if I am to go out there the kint of the year!"

She commanded herself and turned to him. "Let us read the letters again, Dear; we must talk themover."

But as she spoke she knew that there was nothing in these letters to discuss. They called him far from her. He, had no wish to go, she no intention of allowing him to leave her. Was it not always hers to suggest, his to concur?

She opened the letters, and one by one reread the whole correspondence, the crisp, businesslike epistles from the head offiche firm that offered to Fayette Randalt, the only son, as the writer supposed, of an old friend, an opening which depended, it was true, on the incumbent's faithfulness and ability, but none the less one which only a favored child of fortune would have cared to decline. She turned again to the copies of Fayette's replies and paused, her attention arrested. She had seen the originals of these letters, aphroved them all before Fayette had mailed them. Why did they strike her, now with a different aspect? They were the letters of a lad untutored in what, a man of his age slightly know, boysth, immature, careless letters, lacking in a man's reticence of tone, almost in self-respect, in their innovenne:

She turned apagin to her carlier reading of these same letters she had, with a kind of amused and

you."

She was quivering slightly from head to foot when she spoke at last quiety, spoke again, feeling her way to a well-defined end. More urgently than if in explicit terms, she was pressing Fayette toward one exit, stating his needs—not in terms precisely; but leading him, step by step, to where he might clearly see himself as she saw him, and, if he, would, state his own needs in his own terms, find his own remedy.

"So," he said at last, turning toward her, "you think I need—shall we call it—backbone? You ought to know, Mother."

There was no resentment in his wanner, he spoke manfully, was still smiling at her; but, beyond his young control, his voice betrayed him.

"Dear, that is not what I have said," she interrupted quickly.
"It's what you think, Mother. It's true. I have liked the cotton-wool, the home-backing. You think I ought to accept this offer. You think I ought to get far away from you, from all of it, fought it, play my own game. If it's toughening I nied I'd get it!—a high-grade opening, for the man who makes good. I'd run no risk of 'babying'—nort there.

"My dear!" she cried again. She leaned toward him, touching the back of his hand for a moment with her fingertips. "You hurt me, speaking so, Fayette! Have I said that you needed to go far away from me'; that you were 'babied'?"

And even as she spoke she understood towawell that she had gone much further than speech. Deliberately, aware that no other method could life for him quite so convincing, looking back she saw, almost with dismay, how usstaringly, with a hand that never faltered, she had held up to her son this mirror of himself—abasing him to lift him, ah, surely to lift him!

In the long silence he sat with his eyes riveted on the flames; and she waited, her gaze fastened on his face.

When he turned at last, his expression, or so she imagined, had grown older, graver. His features wore suddenly the self-reliant, aspect of a man. At some shrinking he caught in her eyes, the leaned quickly nearer to turn his hand palm up, for her to lay in it her delicate fingers; his closed consolingly, protectingly on them. There was nothing of the lad in the caress. She waited, breathless, for the pledge of his new life in that distant world to which she had so firmly sent him from her, for the tender word of pain he would surely speak in the thought of parting, and then show could she bear it?—the parting?

He looked away from her as he spoke. "Shall you be gl



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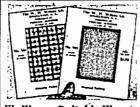
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Ornamental Fence

## Mis Mother-at-Meart

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16)

Mother? I've worn sash and curls a bit eh? I must stay here; but-Mother-are hurt, Mother? I've worn sish and long, eh? I must stay here; but—b you going to mind loaing your boy? His tone said more, much more re, than the

you going to mind losing your boy?"

Ilis toos 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, le waiting for those words of parting she had so confidently expected to hear. And yet—grey-thing, most of all what he was leaving undisted, she perfectly indersation. In which dar to see the perfectly indersation. In which dar to see the perfectly indersation. In which dar to see the perfectly indersation. It was a series of the same than the same had seen and the would do: It lyard the who had kept him a curled delight, a justher's happiness. From now, here was to be up upper for her training. Save as the hand of one traderly lowed, 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 boa as in this same bour when she was almost, as it were, repudiated by him. He had reached his sown conclusion, unexpected, independent of her, and furthed her pride in this thrilled her veins own solvation, choosing his own hatterfield; but who was it that had awakened him to capacity, to action? Who had abased him—to lift him so triumphanily?

Het, 'boy 'was lott to her foreyert She had given to the world a man,-building for him even tetter than she knew—beitgr, sh, how infinitely better as his Mother-at-lifert than as his very mother she could ever have imagined.

better than she knew—better, sh, how infinitely better as his Mother-at-liear than as his very mother abe 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-be the boy much become the man, and that all the traditionary chances were in favor of a woman, some woman, vitally assisting at the rigor of his re-birth. It might be a swettleart, 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 interloper, would exert. She had wintfully 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; with an atiding influence, or as a mere casual episode; all as might chance. Merely because she chosed—with the might prove to be, this supplanter, merely a woman—old, as it should chance, or young; with an atiding influence, or as a mere casual episode; all as might chance. Merely because she chosed—with misunderstanding gaze, perhaps.

On one point only had the mother been sorrowfully secure; this privileged woman would not be his mother, not she who bore him, whose right it was to stand boringing down hat crisis. Was a ghost laid here for her?

This woman, watching beside her boy in his triumphant bour was—only his Mother-at-Heart in might be; but yet—his mother, quieting him, connotring him, inspiring him.

She sat 'Upright, excited, eager.

O' "Mother!" She turned with a start. She had

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"Mother!" She turned with a start. She had not heard a knock at the door which Fayette had answered, and she looked diazedly at the envelope was holding toward her. It was addressed to her by Mr. Newbold.

She sat with the package in her lap, unable to lorak the cover. What did the contents hold for her? His friend? His mother? Which did she wish to be?

When a child he had content

She sat wim the package in her lap, unaile break the covert. What did the content's hold for her? His friend? His mother? Which did the When it is a striped to the content's hold for her? His friend? His mother? Which did her when it is a friend—the friend the had proved she could become; critical of him, steady to imply truth. Hy a very miracle of arcident, in his ordeal, she had reased to be his mother, and was his advicer.

To whom—to that blinded, that ever-tender mother or to this new, faithful friend—would be turn most inimately?

Alvith an effort she loads the seal of the envelope. The paper, with the bour, forced had been most inimately?

Alvith an effort she loads the seal of the envelope. The paper, with the bour, forced had been agents, containing verifications which resolved every doult. Beyond all other evidence was a letter written twenty-one years earlier to the foater-mother by Mr. Randall himself.

A phrase here, a word there, as her dazaled gaze sweet down the page, gave her the sequence: "I have learned regret of the foater-mother by Mr. Randall himself.

A phrase here, a word there, as her dazaled gaze sweet down the page, gave her the sequence: "I have learned for firm impensions the strengthening word. The physicians had been strengthening word. The hybridians my own shift abeat to the future we glanned for him impensions the strengthening word. The was the She satisfied actions the beath at her, then half rose from his chair. "What is it, Mother?"

Not awaiting her rely, with no permission asked, he stretched out his hand, reached for the algren on her knee and took them from her. Some profound lighness to his father in the action—instant, fearless, masterful in its care of heralmost broke her heart, even as the pang hat the early were her papers. Before the end, copping them at his feet. As the room his amm. "You have been through this" he cried. This 'While I—Mother' her up into his arms. "You have been through this in a men "You have been through this in a men "You have been through th

ø

It was his to reassure! From this Christmas Eve together it would be his to suggest, here to concur. She clung to him, appechless, leaning on his young strength, glorying in it as only mothers glory-fondly, utterly uncritical—while this control of the history o

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