

THE MOTHER OF A TRAITOR

—*Maxim Gorky*

One can talk endlessly, about Mothers. For several weeks enemy hosts had surrounded the city in a tight ring of steel; by night fires were lit and the flames peered through the inky blackness at the walls of the city like a myriad red eyes—they blazed malevolently, and their menacing glare evoked gloomy thoughts within the beleaguered city.

From the walls they saw the enemy noose draw tighter; saw the dark shadows hovering about the fires and heard the neighing of well-fed horses, the clanging of weapons, the laughter and singing of man confident of victory and what can be more jarring to the ear than the songs and laughter of the enemy?

The enemy had thrown corpses into all the streams that fed water to the city, they had burned down the vineyards around the walls, trampled the fields, cut down the orchards—the city now exposed on all sides, and nearly every day the cannon and muskets of the enemy showered it with lead and iron.

Detachments of war-weary, half-starved soldiers trooped sullenly through the narrow streets of the city; from the windows of houses issued the groans of the wounded, the cries of the delirious, the prayers of women and the wailing of children. People spoke in whispers, breaking off in the middle of sentence, tensely alert; was not that the enemy advancing?

Worst of all were nights; in the nocturnal stillness the groans and cries were more distinctly audible; black shadows crept stealthily from the gorges of the distant mountains towards the half-demolished walls, hiding the enemy camp from view, and over the black ridges of the mountains rose the moon like a lost shield dented by sword blows.

And the people in the city, despairing of succour, worn out by toil and hunger, their hope of salvation waning from day to day, the people in the city stared in horror at that moon, at the sharp-toothed ridges of the mountains, the black mass of the gorges and the noisy camp of the enemy. Everything spoke to them of death, and not a star was there in the sky to give them consolation.

They were afraid to light the lamps in the houses, and a heavy darkness enveloped the streets, and in this darkness, like a fish stirring in the depths of a river, a woman draped from head to foot in a black cloak moved soundlessly.

When they saw her, people whispered to one another:

"Is it she?"

"It is she?"

And they withdrew into the niches under archways or hurried past her with lowered heads. The patrol chiefs warned her sternly :

Abroad again, 'Monna Marinna? Take care, you may be killed and nobody will bother to search for the culprit.....'

She drew herself up and stood waiting, but the patrols passed by, either not daring or else scorning to raise their hand, against her the armed men avoided her like a corpse and left alone in the darkness, she continued her solitary wanderings from street to street, soundless and black like the incarnation of the city's

misfortune, while all about her, as though pursuing her, melancholy sounds issued from the night; the groans, cries, prayers and the sullen murmur of soldiers who had lost all hope of victory.

A citizen and a mother, she thought of her son and her country: for at the head of the men who were destroying her town was her son, her gay, handsome, heartless son. Yet, not so long ago she had looked upon him with pride regarding him as her precious gift to her country, a beneficent force she had brought forth to aid the people of the city where she herself had been born and reared. Her heart was bound by hundreds of invisible threads to these ancient stones with which her forefathers had built their homes and raised the walls of the city; to the soil wherein lay buried the bones of her kinsfolk, to the legends, the songs and the hopes of the people. And now this heart had lost a loved one and it wept. She weighed in her heart as on scales her love for her son and her love for her native city, and she could not tell which weighed the more.

And so she wandered thus by night through the streets, and many, failing to recognise her, drew back in fear, mistaking her black figure for the incarnation of Death that was so near to all of them, and when they did recognise her, they turned silently away from the mother of a traitor.

But one day in a remote corner by the city walls she saw another woman, kneeling beside a corpse, so still that she seemed part of the earth. The woman was praying, her grief-stricken face upturned to the stars. And on the wall overhead the sentries spoke in low tones, their weapons grating against the stone.

The traitor's mother asked :

'Your husband?'

'No'

'Your brother?'

'My son. My husband was killed thirteen days ago and my son today.'

And rising from her knees, the mother of the slain man said humbly.

'The Madonna sees all and knows all, and I am grateful to her!'

'For what?' asked the first, and the other replied :

'Now that he has died honorably fighting for his country I can say that I feared for him: he was light-hearted, too fond of revelry and I feared that he might betray his city, as did the son of Marianna, the enemy of God and Man, the leader of our foes, may he be so cursed and the womb that bore him!'

Marianna covered her face and went on her way. The next morning she appeared before the city's defenders and said:

'My son has come to be your enemy. Either kill me or open the gates that I may go to him '

They replied:

You are a human being, and your country must be precious to you; your son is as much an enemy to you as to each one of us.'

'I am his mother. I love him and feel that I am to blame for what he has become!'

Then they took counsel with one another and decided:

'It would not be honorable to kill you for the sins of your son. We know that you could not have led him to commit this terrible sin, and we can understand your distress. But the city does not need you even

as a hostage; your son cares nought for you, we believe that he has forgotten you, fiend that he is, and there is your punishment if you think you have deserved it ! We believe that is more terrible than death itself!

'Yes,' she said. 'It is indeed more terrible.'

And so they opened the gates and suffered her to leave the city and watched long from the battlements as she departed from her native soil, now drenched with the blood her son had spilt. She walked slowly, for her feet were reluctant to tear themselves away from this soil, and she bowed to the corpses of the city's defenders, kicking aside a broken weapon in disgust, for all weapons are abhorrent to mothers save those that protect life.

She walked as though she carried a precious phial of water beneath her cloak and feared to spill a drop and as her figure grew smaller and smaller to those who watched from the city wall, it seemed to them that with her went their dejection and hopelessness.

They saw her pause halfway and throwing back the hood of her cloak turn back and gaze long at the city. And over in the enemy's camp they saw her alone in the field and figures dark as her own approached her cautiously. They approached and inquired who she was and whence she had come.

'Your leader is my son', she said, and not one of the soldiers doubted it. They fell in beside her, singing his praises, saying how clever and brave he was, and she listened to them with head proudly raised, showing no surprise, for her son could not be otherwise.

And now, at last, she stood before him whom she had known nine months before his birth, him whom she had never felt apart from her own heart. In silk and velvet he stood before her, his weapons studded with precious stones. All was as it should be, thus had she seen him so many times in her dreams- rich, famous and admired.

'Mother!' he said, kissing her hands. 'Thou hast come to me, thou art with me, and tomorrow I shall capture that accursed city!'

The city where thou wert born,' she reminded him.

Intoxicated with his prowess, crazed with the thirst for more glory, he answered her with the arrogant heat of youth:

'I was born into the world and for the world, and I mean to make the world quake with wonder of me! I have spared this city for thy sake, it has been like a thorn in my flesh and has retarded my swift rise to fame. But now tomorrow I shall smash that nest of obstinate fools!'

'Where every stone knows and remembers them as a child,' she said.

'Stones are dumb unless man makes them speak. Let the mountains speak of me that is what I wish!'

'And what of men?' she asked.

'Ah yes, I have not forgotten them, Mother. I need them too, for only in men's memory are heroes immortal!'

She said: 'A hero is he who creates life in defiance of death, who conquers death

'No!' he objected. 'The destroyer is as glorious as the builder of a city. See, we do not know who it was that built Rome-Aeneas or Romulus-yet we know well the name of Alaric and the other heroes who destroyed the city....'

'Which outlived all names, the mother reminded him.

Thus they conversed until the sun sank to rest; less and less frequently did she interrupt his wild speech, lower sank her proud head.

A Mother creates, she protects, and to speak to her of destruction means to speak against her, but he did not know this, he did not know that he was negating her reason for existence.

A Mother is always opposed to death; the hand that brings death into the house of men, is hateful and abhorrent to Mothers. But the son did not perceive this, for he was blinded by the cold glitter of glory that deadens the heart.

Nor did he know that a Mother can be as clever and ruthless as she is fearless, when the life she creates and cherishes is in question.

She sat with bowed head, and through the opening in the leader's richly appointed tent she saw the city where first she had felt the sweet tremor of life within her and the anguished convulsion of the birth of this child who now thirsted for destruction.

The crimson rays of the sun dyed the walls and towers of the city blood-red, cast a baleful glare on the windowpanes so that the whole city seemed to be a mass of wounds with the crimson sap of life flowing from each gash. Presently the city turned black as a corpse and the stars shone above it like funeral candles.

She saw the dark houses where people feared to light candles so as not to attract the attention of the enemy, saw the streets steeped in gloom and rank with the stench of corpses, heard the muffled whispers of people awaiting death-she saw it all, all that was near and dear to her stood before her, dumbly awaiting her decision and she felt herself the mother of all those people in her city.

Clouds descended from the black peaks into the valley and swooped down like winged steeds upon the doomed city.

'We may attack tonight; said her son, 'if the night is dark enough ! It is hard to kill when the sun shines in your eyes and the glitter of the weapons blinds you, many a blow goes awry,' he remarked, examining his sword.

The mother said to him 'Come, my son, lay thy head on my breast and rest, remember how gay and kind, thou wert as a child and how everyone loved thee...'

He obeyed her, laid his head in her lap and closed his eyes, saying:

'I love only glory and I love thee for having made me as I am.' 'And women?' she asked bending over him.

'They are many, one tires of them as of everything that is too sweet.'

And dost thou not desire children?' she asked finally.

'What for? That they might be killed? Someone like me will kill them; that will give me pain and I shall be too old and feeble to avenge them.'

'Thou art handsome, but as barren as a streak of lightning," she said with a sigh.

'Yes, like lightning...' he replied, smiling.

And he dozed there on his mother's breast like a child.

Then, covering him with her black cloak, she plunged a knife into his heart, and with a shudder he died, for who knew better than she where her son's heart beat. And, throwing his corpse at the feet of the astonished sentries, she said addressing the city:

'As a Citizen, I have done for my country all I could: as a Mother I remain with my son! It is too late for me to bear another; my life is of no use to anyone.'

And the knife, still warm with his blood, her blood, she plunged with a firm hand into her own breast, and again she struck true, for an aching heart is not hard to find.

Glossary

peer	: look closely or carefully, esp. as if unable to see well
inky	: made dirty with ink
blaze	: show great feeling, esp. anger
glare	: angry or fierce look; fixed look
gloomy	: hopeless; sad & depressed
noose	: loop in one end of a rope, with a knot that allows the loop to be tightened as the other end of the rope is pulled
hover	: remain near sth or in an uncertain state
clang	: loud ringing sound of metal being struck
jarring	: unpleasant
vineyard	: plantation of grape-vines esp. for wine-making
cannon	: old type of large heavy gun firing solid metal balls.
musket	: long-barrelled firearm used by soldiers from the 16th to the 19th centuries (now replaced by the rifle)
detachment	: group of soldiers, ships, etc sent away from a larger group, esp. to do special duties
sullenly	: silently, sadly and depressed
delirium	: mental disturbance caused by (esp. feverish) illness, resulting in restlessness and often wild talk
delirious	: suffering from delirium
wailing	: crying in a loud voice
dent	: hollow place in a hard even surface made by a blow or pressure
dent	: make a dent in sth
drape	: cover or decorate sb/ sth (with cloth, etc.)
cloak	: sleeveless outer garment hanging loosely from the shoulders, usu. worn out of doors.
niche	: suitable or comfortable position, place, job, etc.
archway	: an ornamental gateway

scorn	: reject (sth one is too proud to do)
beneficent	: showing active kindness; generous; charitable
sentry	: soldier posted outside a building, etc in order to watch or guard it
grate	: rub sth against rough surface
fiend	: very cruel or spiteful person
hostage	: person held as a captive by one or more others who threaten to keep, harm or kill him unless certain demands are met
battlements	: (flat roof of a tower or castle surrounded by) low walls with openings at intervals made for shooting through
phial	: small glass container, esp. one for liquid medicine or perfume
dejection	: sadness
hood	: covering for the head and neck often fastened to a coat, etc.
stud	: decorate (a surface) with many studs, precious stones, etc.
prowess	: outstanding skill or ability; expertise
outlive	: live longer than (sb)
deaden	: lessen the force or intensity of (sth)
cherish	: protect or tend (sb/sth) lovingly; care for
anguish	: severe physical or mental pain
convulsion	: sudden violent uncontrollable body movements caused by contraction of muscles
crimson	: deep red
sap	: vigour or energy
gash	: long deep cut or wound
steep	: soak sth thoroughly in liquid
stench	: very unpleasant smell
rank with sth	: smelling or tasting bad; offensive
muffled	: (of sounds) heard indistinctly, because an obstacle is in the way
swoop	: come down suddenly with a rushing movement
steed	: horse
streak	: long thin mark, line or band of a different substance or colour from its surroundings
doze	: sleep lightly
shudder	: strong shaking movement
host	: a large number, (here) army
myriad	: a very large number
malevolent	: spiteful; wishing to cause suffering to others
beleaguered	: besieged; surrounded with armed forces
nocturnal	: of the night
gorge	: narrow opening (between mountains)
succor	: help given in time of danger

Madonna	: Mary, mother of Jesus Christ
suffered her	: allowed her
abhorrent	: hateful; disgusting
richly appointed	: well-equipped and furnished
tremor	: shaking movement
baleful	: evil; harmful
go awry	: go wrong

EXERCISES

Comprehension questions

1. How long had the enemy hosts surrounded the city?
2. What can be jarring to the ear?
3. Why was the city exposed on all sides?
4. What were issued from the windows?
5. How was the moon like?
6. What did everything speak to them?
7. How did woman move?
8. Who warned her?
9. What did the patrols do?
10. Who was her son?
11. Why did her heart weep?
12. What was her black figure mistaken for?
13. What was another woman doing?
14. When was her husband killed?
15. What did Marinna say to city's defenders?
16. What was her punishment?
17. Why did she walk slowly?
18. What did they ask her?
19. What did the soldiers do?
20. What were his weapons like?
21. What was his plan for tomorrow?
22. What was the city for him?
23. Who is a hero?
24. How long did they talk?
25. What does a mother do?
26. What is hateful to mothers?
27. How did the city seem?
28. Why were the houses dark?
29. What did the mother ask her son to do?
30. How did she kill her son?

31. What did she do at the end?

Short questions

1. Assume yourself as the traitor and express your feelings towards your mother.
2. What was the conflict in the mother's mind and how did she resolve it?
3. 'Is it she?' 'It is she?' What does this exchange tell us about what the people thought of her? What did they do when they saw her? Why?
4. Why did people call Monna Marinna the Mother of a Traitor?
5. Describe the traitor and his feelings toward his country.
6. Why did the mother murder her own son in the story "The Mother of a Traitor"?
7. Write the description of the city under attack.
8. Write a summary of the text "The Mother of a Traitor".
9. What message does the story "The Mother of a Traitor" convey to its readers?
10. Do you support the decision taken by Monna Marinna? Support your opinion with references from the text.

Composition/ Long questions

1. Write an essay on 'Mother's Unending Love'.
2. 'Monna Marinna is both a citizen and a mother'. Give your opinions.