

Mother-Love

Sinclair Lewis

Illustrated by

Walter Tittle

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Mother-Love

By Sinclair Lewis

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You can't understand a mother's feeling for her babe. I'm sure you think the Little One is simply a bother," whispered Mrs. George C. J. Anson to Grace, her husband's sister.

Grace looked cynically at a lace-and-linen baby-pillow and remarked, "Huh! Progeny doubtless necessary. Off for a walk."

She put on her black velvet toque of a smart spinster and hurried away. Her back looked prosaic and severe as she swung down one of those car-line streets of drug-stores and French cleaners which pierce every residence section. She hadn't the slightest notion what street she was following. Her soul, that customarily was like a bright little room, was a limitless vault of black emptiness in which her voice rang desolately:

"My baby that never was! Oh, my baby, my man-child, that I sha'n't ever have!"

Mrs. George C. J. Anson was universally known to the Best Set of the conservative city of Vernon as "Bessie." She was a soft, flowing, sighingly fussy woman; and she gathered in all of the benefits which the impatient world throws to sticky people to get rid of them. Bessie was now demanding all possible credit for having given birth to a son—precisely as she had sponged all the drama out of her first falling down stairs, her first party frock, her graduation from the Misses Smith's Lilyvale Academy, and her engagement to George Anson.

At the time of their marriage the Anson land interests were threatened by plans for railroad extension. He had begged Bessie for a small home-ceremony and a postponement of the wedding journey. But Bessie felt that it wasn't really decent not to be married at St. Simeon's, and go to Europe. So, George Anson and she were married at St. Simeon's and went to Europe . . .

while Grace Anson put on a dreadful snuff-colored basque of the period, and grimly ran the Anson properties, and thus lost the chance to attract the one man she had ever wanted to marry.

Now, eight years after, Bessie had a son, Murray Anson, to the accompaniment of knitted afghans, embroidered bonnets, and the elongated christening robes of 1890, for the baby; two nurses, telegrams, roses, Hamburg grapes, and pastel bed-jackets for herself.

She was ever so hurt not to receive a cable of congratulations from their neighbors, the Montgomerys. "After all I've suffered, and Isabel Montgomery pretending to be so fond of me, I think they might at least have cabled me two words!"

"Huh!" said Grace Anson.

Grace had come from the Anson homestead to her brother's new brick house on the Boulevard to help nurse Bessie. She reflected: "Believe this woman thinks she is the first female in the history of the world who has ever borne a child. Rotten physiology!"

Bessie would explain to the day-nurse—who had just finished her one-hundredth baby case—how altogether curious was a baby; how astoundingly small were its feet, how surprising that the baby should frown and sneeze and hiccup exactly like an adult. The day-nurse was won by Bessie's appealingness, and showed gratitude for all this information.

It was Grace, who had never so much as bathed a baby, and ought to have been interested, who rushed away when Bessie nestled close to her son and announced: "I'm sure his eyes are focusing now! He can see my hand. But you can't understand a mother's feeling for her babe."

To the day-nurse Bessie clucked, "Poor Miss Anson! She's such a confirmed old maid—she must lack something, not to be able to appreciate our Little Man!"

Just then Grace Anson was walking blindly, and to a blind heaven wailing: "My baby, my man-child that I sha'n't ever have!"

Each day when she watched the nurse take care of the child, she had to grope for courage to keep from breaking down. She detested the gushing of maiden aunts that she had often heard; she was independent, sensitive to ridicule. And at nothing does the harsh world, with its resentment of unusual ways and longings, guffaw quite so much as at the child-hunger of the spinster.



*Just then Grace Anson was walking blindly, and to a blind heaven wailing:
“My baby, my man-child, that I sha ’n’t ever have!”*

“I mustn’t be seen slobbering about. Bad form,” she admonished herself. Then the nurses were discharged.

For four days Bessie enjoyed bathing the baby, and was exasperatingly superior to Grace regarding talcum powder and weighings. But she began to sigh that she was an overworked martyr and hinted that Grace re-al-ly ought to try to help her. Within a week Grace had become unofficial but responsible nurse. Bessie graciously let her do all the work, though to the maid, the doctor, George Anson, casual visitors, and Grace herself, Bessie said with a pretty gentleness that it was just too bad poor Grace couldn’t ever bathe the Wee

Laddie with a mother's devotion, but was as old-maidish and unemotional about it as though she were dusting the banisters. She also came in during bathings, to tell Grace what joy a mother had in being an Absolute Slave to her child, to worry about the temperature of the bath—which she always tried with her finger, while Grace unpoetically used a thermometer—and to explain that Murraykins seemed to enjoy the tub more than the soaping. But that actual soaping and tubbing she let her sister-in-law do.

To all this Grace kept her mouth shut. But when she was putting the baby to bed, and it unexpectedly flashed from inquiring mystification into a lip-parting, eye-lighting smile of greeting, Grace reflected, "Murray, my dear chap, you make the balance between the boredom of living, and the interest of being alive, finally tip on the side of happiness." In the next room she heard Bessie crooning, "Mother's lit-tle frog-gy lamb, Mother's lit-tle frog-gy lamb," and she added, "In fact, Murray, you almost make up for your mother's thoroughly low-class habit of insulting you by saying things that mean nothing whatever, and always and invariably repeating them to you. As though you were a setter pup. . . . My baby, mine! . . . Eyah? Wha-at? Yes, of course I'm putting him on his stomach, Bessie."

When the boy Murray was three years and four months old he solved his first large problem.

Bessie had given a good deal of pleased attention to teaching him to call her "mamma," with the accent on the second syllable, a pronunciation which the Randalls brought back from Worcester. But whenever his Aunt Grace ran in, he called her "mamma" also, to Bessie's discursive grief. Every time he made the mistake Grace wanted to kiss him. But she was game; she corrected him.

He was puzzled. He was one day to be seen—among cotton bunnies, flannel elephants, and a decomposed woolen lion—in the throes of cosmic speculation. He squatted with an elbow on each knee, scowling at his new and beloved monkey, a very splendid monkey, with glass eyes, a tail of real fur, and a pointed red and blue cap having an extraordinarily noisy brass bell upon the end. From a low chair Grace watched him, above the decorous pages of the "St. Simeon Weekly Church Recorder."

Then his mother passed the nursery door. In reply to her "Hello, my little mannie," he piped, "Hel-lo, mamma." He crawled to his feet, ran across to Grace and, with a covert glance at the door, he confided, "I ain't a little mannie. But I guess she doesn't know much about boys. But I can't call nobody but her 'mamma,' 'cause she hollers if I do, and so I can't call you

that—never—no more. But I'll give you—” He sniffed, looked piteously down at something in his hand, and gulped: “I'll give you this, aunty.”

He was holding out to her the new monkey, the monkey of his heart.

When Murray Anson was five years old his father died. His Aunt Grace took charge of the funeral and the settlement of the estate, and did not have time to be fitted for mourning, but his mother acquired much merit by the rare completeness and blackness of her suits, bonnets, gloves, veils, stationery, and sighs. Bessie's pink and gold looked well in mourning, though that softness of hers had turned into flabbiness, and her habit of chattering comment into a sighing fussiness.

Grace became the father of the family. There was money enough left; Bessie would have at least four thousand a year and the chunk of a house on the Boulevard. But Bessie did need some one who would endure her opinions upon the weather and everything else under the sun. These, despite her crisp “Huh!” Grace endured surprisingly well, because it gave her an excuse to be near the boy Murray at all hours.

After elaborate complaints that the business streets, which now shadowed the Anson homestead, were becoming too noisy, Grace had moved to the new Rokeby Apartments, two blocks from Bessie's. There Grace read and prowled and made tea over alcohol flames and bossed seventeen civic movements—and kept herself from going to Bessie's too often. Never did a dubious lover more energetically force himself not to annoy the adored than did Grace Anson.

Also she never showed her emotion when she did pop into the house, and she never failed to be useful; to dust a room, or bring in a new brand of coffee.

Murray she had won completely. Bessie would have been jealous if she could have known how intimate and jolly were those walks when—to Bessie's relief—Grace casually offered to take him out for the air.

You must conceive them as immensely secret and absorbed pals, plotting mysterious parties; Murray, aged five, round and curly and breathless, in the plaid skirt and black velvet jacket of those ante-rompers days; Grace holding his warm paw with her cool resolute hand, addressing him as “My dear fellow,” and asking him what, as man to man, was his private opinion of these rumors that Santa Claus had moved out West? and did he think they ought to have lemonade or butter-scotch first?

It was before Montessori and Boris Sidis, and Grace had never read a volume of child-psychology, yet as they walked she tried to train the boy's observation. If ever in later days Murray was swift to seize a human problem, it was partly due to the patience with which Grace talked to him of the trees, the birds, the shops, the passing people, in their Arcadian rambles. She dramatized things, yet did not content herself with vague fairy tales about them; she tried to make both herself and him see things as they were and as they gloriously might be. Of course she was not always proof against two hours of continuous "Whys?" But she was honest with him; when she didn't know the answer she said so, and they went home together to look it up in her big encyclopedias.

He called her "Pat." When Bessie gasped and cried out upon him, and whinnied for the reason, he carefully explained, "Why you see, mamma, you see I call aunty 'Pat' because that's her name, that's what I call her, you see."

Grace felt that to be called "Pat" by her boy was a proof of the existence of heaven.

When Murray was ten, Bessie had become a really talented fusser. She was not, in the catalogue of domestic pests, a nagger or a fretter; she was merely a fusser, with a devil-implanted instinct for talking all the time, and nothing in particular to talk about. Though she was too used to Murray to get the pleasure of surprise, she paid increasing attention to him because he gave her the richest opportunity of fussing.

Now Grace Anson herself, as an independent and rather dictatorial old maid, had a tendency to fuss. But as she watched Murray shrink away from his mother's ever-flowing comment, Grace rigidly guarded herself. So to her Murray brought his confessions and ambitions; his decisions to be a brakeman, an author, a policeman, a judge, a trapper, and a professor of astronomy.

At home all of Murray's possessions, even his sacred birds'-nests and skates, were subject to fingering and discussion by his mother; but at Aunt Pat's he grandly maintained a secret cupboard, full of guns that wouldn't shoot and shiny stones that must surely be gold. He alone had the key, and here was his shrine in the years from ten to fifteen.

The Boulevard Bunch was a gang of young ruffians from fourteen to sixteen years old. Their leader was Murray Anson, and their den was the maidenly flat of Miss Grace Anson. When they had gone, she held up both arms and howled with anguish over her dented mahogany, but she always

made them welcome; gave them cider and store chocolates, and didn't give them advice—except such as might tend to keep them from arson and grand larceny.

In a fluttering, bewildered way, Bessie also tried to make Murray's friends welcome. But she always sighed, "Boys, you mustn't make so much noise; my poor head is aching so;" and she got them aside, gave them artificial smiles, and murmured: "I hope you are always gentlemanly and nice to your little sisters." So the entire gang skulked behind shrubs to avoid her.

It was now, at fifteen, that Murray broke out in private criticism of his mother to Grace. He lay on the window-seat especially provided for him in Grace's flat, kicked his new football shoes in the air, and droned:

"I wouldn't mind our house so much—though honestly, it's an awfully stuffy old hole, with those china dogs and rugs that get crooked—you got to straighten them or get jawed and I asked her to chuck them and she wouldn't—and there's all those old chairs that you're always falling over—but I wouldn't care if mother wouldn't keep talking and talking and talking about everything I do or say—gee, she remembers things I said ten million weeks ago, and she asks me what I meant, and honest, I don't even remember saying 'em. And she—oh, gee, you know how she is—she's always telling about now much she sacrifices for me, and then I have to ask her six times before she remembers to sew a button——"

To Grace, erect in the slender chair before her *escritoire*, glancing at him over her shoulder, there was joy in this critical hour when Murray openly came over to her—joy dreadful and quite forbidden. She exclaimed:

"Ray, you know how flattered I am when you tell me what you think, but honestly, you mustn't criticize your mother, ever."



“Don’t go yet,” Murray begged Rose. “We’re all imposing on you, but I’m so all-in—won’t you play me something too?”

He dropped his grotesquely waving feet, turned on his side, looked at her with those dismayingly steady eyes, then: “They always say that, but why not?”

“Oh, it—it isn’t loyal.”

“But she criticizes everybody—even you, Patsy darlin’—and you’ve always been the one that’s bucked up all of us——”

He sounded so cynically grown-up that she felt helpless, but she essayed:

“Ray, you may be perfectly logical, but this business of respect for parents isn’t a question of logic; it’s one of the unexplainable habits that people cultivate to keep society comfortable. Logically, there’s no moral reason why you shouldn’t appear in church in your bathing-suit, but you wouldn’t do it. Hear me? You’ll—uh—cut it out!”

“All right, Pat. I’m your obejent servant.” He kept faith with her.

The promising young criminals who made up the Boulevard Bunch were the sons of the most important lawyers and doctors and manufacturers of Vernon, and, while they scorned girls as frilly and messy, they did attend

parties, and show off the new steps expensively acquired at M. Petipas's Dancing Academy. Least of all did Murray care for sitting about on gilt chairs and hearing Puss Dibblebury sing "Flee as a Bird." But upon instructions from Grace—Bessie supposed it to be upon hints from herself—he gave a conundrum party in the autumn of his fifteenth year.

Prince Murray, in a beautiful new orange and black tie, moved among his guests with the air of a highbrow theatrical manager sponsoring a very low musical comedy in order to pay his debts. That is, he moved among his male guests. The corner-filling, giggling girls he regarded as a brewer regards a W. C. T. U. parade—until the Sensation struck the party. The Sensation was Rose Montgomery, just back from a year in Boston and six months at Severance Hall.

She swam in, and Prince Murray was deposed in favor of Princess Rose, who beamed and showed off her new sun-pleated white crêpe de chine, which flared from the tight waist to a hem full six yards round, the lace of her petticoat rippling about her shining slippers. Grace Anson stared at her. Surely it was only a year or two ago that Rose Montgomery had been a grubby, jam-smearred, backyard child, playing with the little Murray, and smacking him with vigor. Now she was all gentleness and daintiness, a golden girl, and Grace was afraid of her. For Bessie at fifteen had also been a golden child, too good, too sweet, too soft, and had fascinated that other superior boy, George Anson, the father. Bessie had won, in that generation, and now Grace trembled at the sight of Rose; regarded the superb flare of the sun-pleated skirt, and the slim curve of Rose's first corsets, and realized that her own wardrobe had degenerated to durable suits and sensible shoes and one black evening frock.

Murray was galvanized. He yelped for games and dancing. Twice he danced with Rose Montgomery, chattering with her in shy volubility. He captured her at "Post-office," and Grace imagined his kissing the smiling girl, in the dark library, behind that closed door. She snapped at herself for a peeping old maid, but all her long-accruing hatred of flabby Bessies concentrated in her thought of Rose.

Murray publicly christened Rose the "Lady Vere de Vernon," whereat the party applauded, and Rose blushed and curtsied—her pretty curtsy and her happy blush both for Murray. . . . Behind them, Grace Anson felt old and parched and lonely.

What most disturbed her was Murray's boisterousness. He even threatened to pull Rose's hair, which is a sure sign of young love so ardent that it has to be hidden. And, according to Vernon proprieties, Murray asked Rose, "Can I see you home?"

The many-colored vivid crowd were gone. Grace and Bessie were helping the maid straighten the house.

“I’m going to lose him; I stole him from one woman and soon, oh, so soon now, a few years, I’ll be losing him to some other woman,” the shadowy soul of Grace Anson was wailing, while her outer body was hustling with trays of sticky sherbet glasses. Then, “But it must be any girl except Rose Montgomery—anybody! They’re feather pillows, these women like Rose and Bessie. They smother these Anson men,” she brooded, with that ancient agony of the mother, Roman empress or prairie farmwife, who sees the man-child turning from her devotion to the light affection of another woman.

Not like that immemorial lamentation but like trivial gossip sounded her keening, when she put a tray of glasses down on the ice-box, and sputtered to Bessie: “No room for anything more in the sink. Stars alive, what a mess of dirty dishes! Those children have used up everything in the house except the china dogs. Didn’t Rose Montgomery look sweet! Her year in the East has done wonders for her.”

“Yes, I thought that was a real pretty frock, she has been away more than a year, it must be almost two—or is it?” mumbled Bessie, trying to get rid of the dishes by rubbing her smooth chin and staring helplessly.

“Murray seemed interested in her.”

“Was he? Oh, Grace, I do hope he isn’t going to go mooning around girls _____”

“Bess, do you realize we’re going to lose the boy, one of these days? Just six years, now, and he’ll be of age, and out of college——”

“I do not like that Montgomery child!” Bessie clamored. “Coming here, and flouncing and flirting around, and trying to turn a lot of boys’ heads! Oh, you can’t understand—you can’t know what a mother’s heart is—but I just don’t think I shall be able to stand it when Ray finally gets married. To lose him and have him forgetting me and—Oh—Oh, Hilda, put those sugar wafers back in the tin box.”

Grace regretted her confidences, for Bessie, with diplomacy as subtle and hidden as a cyclone, began to ask Murray where had he been and why did he go to the Montgomerys so often?

He was impatient; he was polite only because he had a sudden revelation about the charm of being polite to women. He answered briefly and tried to sneak away. But—while Grace listened and raged—Bessie prodded, “I hope my boy isn’t beginning to think about the girls too much. Why, you’re just a— a mere boy. And I don’t think Rose Montgomery is quite nice—and Heaven

knows I'm surprised, her mother and father such thoroughly nice people and all, an-uh—The way Rose wears that loud check suit with red cuffs, even if it did come from Boston—A nice simple little dress would be so much more becoming to a child like her. And-uh—Please don't scuffle your feet so.”

Murray had almost kicked two distinct holes in the ancient Brussels carpet.

Grace tried to make up for Bessie by saying nothing whatever to Murray about Rose; merely looking sardonically wise when he made shaky excuses for rushing away from her flat of an evening.

The situation was ended by the arrival in the Boulevard High-School of a girl with ringlets and dramatic aspirations, and Rose Montgomery slipped from the character of beautiful Bostonian back into her old rating of a girl on the next block. Murray faithlessly joined the admirers of the school *Camille*.

Grace was relieved, but behind her jolliness was hidden the foreboding of deserted women.

Murray went to Vernon University at seventeen. Practically, Grace went to Vernon University also.

Not that she was in such shocking bad form as to be seen about the campus, yearning after a nephew. But, with a certain amount of sighing for the old apartment, she did move to a dreadfully smart new one, with a big living-room of white enamel and silver sconces and a wide davenport. She installed window-seats, card-tables, and ash-receivers, suitable to the reception of lively young gentlemen of the college. She even bought a huge, surly touring car, with a cutout. She hated the car: she was afraid of traffic driving, night driving, and driving into the garage. But she made herself learn to coax the monster all over town, by coasting along the curb, and always stopping whenever she saw a motor cycle, a flivver, or a peanut wagon on an intersecting street, within half a block of the corner.

With these qualifications as an entertainer she sat down and waited till Murray brought his friends to her.

To his own house—that is, to Bessie's house—he rarely asked a classmate, and never asked an Upper Classman; but he led them in pipe-smelly, glee-roaring, highly opinionated and innocent Tartar invasions to Grace's flat, where they ate her lobster *à la* Newburg, and called her a Good Old Sport.



To Grace in this critical hour, when Murray openly came over to her, there was joy dreadful and quite forbidden. But over her shoulder she exclaimed: "Ray, honestly, you mustn't criticize your mother, ever."

Once Bessie complainingly invited herself to such a gathering, but never again. She groaned that it was perfectly terrible, the way Grace Anson, at her age, tried to ape a lot of boys, and actually talked as slangily as they did.

With this continued intimacy Grace was able to watch Murray, even to help him; meanwhile she was tremendously relieved that there was not some girl, some Rose Montgomery, whom he adored. For, as it was laid down for the Freshmen by their elders and betters, Murray scorned all weak females, except his Aunt Grace, with a noisy and confident cynicism, and particularly included Rose in the inferior category, as being fluffy, lazy, and ignorant of football. Rose had not gone to college. She stayed home, played the piano, made fudge, and smiled sleepily.

Then, with Murray's Sophomore year, this security was snatched from Grace.

It was not the convention for Sophomores to be lofty toward women; on the contrary they were expected to go to the fortnightly hops, and to take as many, as pretty, as fluffy, and as fudge-making girls as possible. Murray did not languish over Rose now, but he took her to almost every hop; he "fussed the games," and he got up sleigh-rides, with Rose delicate and pink and golden in her soft white furs.

As he nestled beside Rose, back home his mother sat yawning over cheap novels, forgetting, with her ever less acid memory, just where it was he had gone that evening. And his Aunt Grace—rigidly awake, never yawning—sat in her too-big, too-empty new flat, and pictured every moment of the sleigh-ride; hated Rose, and was disgusted with herself for this intrusive hysteria, and cautioned herself never to show it to Murray or to Rose.

Murray still came to her flat; he even brought Rose there, with his friends of Phi Psi Phi and a flutter of co-eds. But he was brief and evasive about his ambitions, his yearnings. Thus she saw him into Junior year.

In Junior year at Vernon it is lawful for the more restless men of the class to take a furlough from the rule of the red-necked athletes, and be intellectual.

Murray became not only sociological but socialistic. He read William Morris and Jack London, bought a red tie, and said things about Wall Street, evening clothes, and the choir at St. Simeon's which his mother declared she could not repeat, and which she moaningly did repeat to every afternoon caller. But Grace, the conservative, the believer in family and class, said only:

"Fine! He's beginning to kick and be interested. Now next year 'bout this time he'll be studying law."

She listened beatifically while Murray tramped up and down her flat, his hands bulging his pockets, and raved against the old political parties. To be frank, it was not Murray's interest in the State which delighted her, but the fact that he again found Rose lacking. He complained:

"Darn it, Pat, why is it that some of the jolliest girls can't understand a fellow's Intellectual Interests a bit? Aren't there any brainy women at all besides you? She—they're just shocked when a fellow tries to explain his ideals. I wish I knew a girl that was good fun, but yet you could talk to her about George Moore and poverty and all those things. Darn it!" In the anguish of his lorn life he pulled his right ear and most dolorously chanted the glee club's anthem:

"I know how you feel, Ray, though I must admit that I have six or seven rivals as the Queen of Science. Still, the average pink face certainly isn't very stimulating on any subject except clothes," said Grace, with low cunning.

All that college-year the gods of comedy had the spectacle of Grace Anson, devout churchwoman, indignant Republican, and comfortable bondholder, encouraging Murray in violent radicalism—and secretly doubling her subscription to St. Simeon's.

Suddenly Murray was a Senior; and then, while it seemed to Grace that he was still a naïve Freshman, his Commencement day had come, and he was out

on the green beneath the oaks, in an absurdly dignified cap and gown. Now the president was handing him a diploma, and he was a Bachelor of Arts—and ready to desert them.

Grace was trying to look cheerful, trying neither to weep nor to snap at Bessie who, in the stand beside her, was sniffing. “He did so well in college, and this Phi Beta Kappa and all, but now it’s over and I feel so dreadful to lose him. I just envy you, Grace, the way you can smile, but then—you can’t understand a mother’s feelings.”

It was Grace who sent Murray off to Harvard to study law, instead of encouraging him to remain for the Vernon University School of Law, as Bessie wished. He needed to be let alone, and to have a glimpse of the world, she told herself. Grace was far richer than Bessie now; she had watched markets, made investments. She paid half of Murray’s expenses at Harvard. She had avoided seeming to bestow charity by promising Murray to “award him a ‘fellowship’ in law school if he did well in college.” She had carefully failed to state just what marks he would have to get to be “doing well.”

Rose Montgomery was at his farewell party, but only as one of a score of girls he had always known.

For three years Grace lived on the boy’s letters.

Sometimes he forgot her for a month, then wrote a score of pages about his work, his triumphs. For a time there was a new girl in his letters—a young and perfidious female who was trying to snatch away her boy on the strength of playing tennis in short linen skirts, and “smoking cigarets with the prettiest little twists of her wrist.”

Grace immediately tried to learn to smoke cigarets, with twists of the wrist if possible. . . . When she got over being sick she hurled the box out of the window, whence it landed on the helmet of an astounded and indignant policeman.

In a month the cigaret person had disappeared from Murray’s letters without leaving an ash.

Her own letters to him Grace made as spicy as she could. Often she rewrote them. Never did she give him warnings or advice. She wanted to, she longed to, when she thought of the boy facing the possible slacknesses or abominations of life. “But,” she meditated, “if he can’t manage himself now, he never will be able to.”

Not Bessie, though!

Grace was guilty of peeping at a part-finished letter to Murray lying on Bessie's desk. She scolded herself as a "meddling old cat" for wishing to see the letter, and settled down firmly with a magazine—and sprang up and shamelessly read:

"Am glad to hear success, etc., but how did you happen to catch a cold, don't you put on heavy coat, etc.? You must remember, my boy, that when mother isn't near you to watch over you, you must be extra careful about getting sick, etc., you might try Dandelion Pectoral Pellets, I am told they are very good for colds, etc., and do be careful about crossing street, all these automobiles. Don't you think maybe you'd better take the rest of your course at Vernon? Of course Harvard is very fine, etc., but think it would be much safer if you were where I can look out for you; now you mustn't be selfish about this, my boy, remember mother thinks of the future and your best interests, and believe Vernon would be much better. Mrs. Macmillan is sick, I believe it is typhoid, I don't know if you know the Macmillans, they are a new family on the Boulevard. I wish you would remember I have asked you several times to go and visit my second cousins, the O'Hallorans, in Charlestown, they aren't in society, but nice Xian people, and would make you at home and advise you about colds, etc."

It might have been Murray, it might have been Grace, so nearly were the two one person, who growled, "Lord, does the woman think a man can never take care of himself?"

Then, with pity and hot shame: "Poor mother hen! Poor loving, helpless, lonely Bess! She can only feel the worry, never the pride."

Grace was glad that Murray had three years away. But she made sure that he did not stay away forever. It was due to her that he was offered a partnership with the biggest law-firm in the city.

He came back to Vernon. And he had found himself.

No longer was he bashfully impulsive. He was sure and driving, now; industrious and ambitious; he ate into his work, and the head of the firm praised him for the way he absorbed details. He did not casually take favors from Grace. With a lively and thoughtful affection he planned favors for her. He was as active and nervous and managerial in his play as in his work. He carried Grace off to the theater, with Bessie or without; to exhibitions of paintings, even to Vernon's one cabaret. He gave her on her birthday a night-luminous watch that was thin as a fifty-cent piece; and he solved the legal problems of her everlasting Committees. When she was cross and wanted attention he babied her and cheered her. With all of which she was delighted—while she was depressed because he was playing with Rose Montgomery.

Among the girls who had given him his farewell party Rose had been but one of the group, and not so noisily funny as Nell Trobeck, not so flashingly pretty as Laura Randall. But *couleur de rose* outlasts more vivid hues, and Murray returned to her familiar companionship. He walked with Rose, and took her to such plays as reached Vernon “with the original cast,” and he seemed proud to have her as his slim, shining partner at the Assembly Dances.

Grace felt as though she had settled the Rose question a hundred times, so far. She was weary of it. She wanted to crush it, forever, in one fictional smash. But she had learned that in real life no question ever stays settled, whether it is the territory of empires or the poverty of a city or a spinster’s hankering for coffee or for love. She petulantly prepared to take charge again. She was cold afraid that Murray might degenerate under Rose’s spell into a neat little law-machine.

She could not give advice to the independent lawyer as she had to the admiring boy, but she waited and worried.

It was about a year after Murray’s return that Bessie frightened her into action. Murray had taken Rose to the Hallowe’en Party at the Country Club, and Grace was at his mother’s. Bessie yawned:

“I see the Heilbronnners have a new phonograph, and just after Mrs. Heilbronner bought that raccoon coat, too, did you see it, Grace? with the seal collar and cuffs. I don’t see how they can afford it, I wonder if they are out at the Country Club to-night? And-uh—Isn’t it nice Rose could go to the Hallowe’en Party after all, she was afraid she couldn’t, her mother isn’t feeling very well, and-uh—I do like Rose so much.”

“Thought you didn’t care for her?” marveled Grace.

“Well, I didn’t realize she was so nice, and the way she’s improved and—Last Wednesday she was at the Martins and I went over to her house with her to see the pictures of her brother’s baby and she made me stay to dinner, you know her poor mother is still confined to her bed, isn’t it too bad—and we had such a nice time. Yes. I think it will make a nice little home when Murray and she are married.”

“When what? When how? What d’ you mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know as they are thinking of it definitely yet, but of course they will. She’s just the girl for him, so sweet and good, and she likes me, too, and I do think it’s so important that the boy’s little bride should be happy with his mother too. And Rose does play the piano so nicely.” Grace fled.

She was in a panic. “It’s coming! I must lose him! But it must be to a real woman, one I can tolerate, not a canary like Rose. ‘One I can tolerate!’”

Heavens! I'm as bad as Bessie! All right, I will be! I'll find the right woman. I'll fight! Give me liberty for Ray or give me death, Patricia Henry." She was, without success, trying to be humorous that she might not weep. She drooped in her deepest chair—that downy old chair, covered with a Turkish rug, in which Murray had often curled to tell her his desires. With the back of her lax hand she rubbed the stiff nap of the rug. She felt old and sick. Then she thought of Joan McCoy.

Joan McCoy was a graduate student at Vernon University. Murray did not know her, nor did any of his set. She was resolute and not readily friendly; handsome but not popular. She was working her way through college, with mouth shut and soul shut, too, perhaps. Grace had met her when Miss McCoy had served as paid secretary to the Vernon Poverty Investigation Committee. She had studied and pitied this straight, swift, silent girl, with her level voice, her pale and beautiful cheeks, her protesting brown eyes.

Grace decided that publicity was urgently required by the Vernon Equal Suffrage Association—of which she was always president or treasurer. . . . She asked Miss McCoy to come and see her about a commission.

Joan came, sat bolt up in the old lounge chair, and declared that she had never done any publicity. No. She wouldn't try it. She hated people who made a botch of things. No. Stenography and chemistry were the only things she knew.

"Oh, is it chemistry you're specializing in? Now isn't that strange! I am also looking for a clever girl who knows chemistry, to help me test some foods for the Vernon Housewives' League. Jolly job—smacking impertinent grocers—test-tubes and a uniform and giving people a clip over the ear. Would you like that, my dear? I—the League's committee has set aside a fund of twenty, no, it's twenty-five dollars a week, for the investigator."

Yes, Miss McCoy would like it very much. With cold efficiency Joan McCoy took up the work. She caught grocers selling spoiled salmon, bakers under-weighing bread. At first she was restrained in her companionship with Grace; on the watch for a hint of patronizing. But Grace won her by a briskness as impersonal as her own, and they became allies. Grace found that the girl knew a great deal beside stenography and chemistry; she had read Russian novels and Scotch economics and German anthropology, and remembered everything she had read. She disturbed Grace by the black intensity of her ambition to be supreme in some one thing; to be a great chemist or physicist; made Grace feel like a pattering and amateurish lady reformer. Yet the association with this restless spirit kept Grace young and alert.

Murray met Joan at the flat, wondered about her, found her indifferent as a rock, and was delighted. The Roses always liked him too flutteringly. Grace finally had them to tea. Murray and Joan, and a young banker who wrote essays about Rodin and Spoon River which were much too good ever to be published, were the only guests. But by the time they had talked in a polite and elevated manner for ten minutes they felt that they formed a new intellectual movement in the Middle West. Not that any of them were sure where the movement was moving.

Murray stood in front of the fireplace, holding a cup and trying to look as though he simply couldn't get through an afternoon without his tea. Joan was actually leaning back a little—clean, tall, distinguished, weary. Murray was concentrated upon her, and seemed irritated when the literary banker tried to monopolize her and get her to approve him as the one real genius in Vernon. Murray fumbled about for something that would prove that he, too, was a genius. He remembered that in college he had been a terrible radical. He apparently couldn't recall just what he had been radical about, but he hinted that if his wealthy clients knew what a shocking revolutionist he was they would tremble in their beds. Joan turned on both the men:

“The trouble with both you literary sharks and you easy radicals is that you don't found your theories on science. You can't either of you tell me what ‘dolichocephalic’ means.”

Rose never spoke to Murray in that unmaidenly way, and Grace had never seen Murray talk to Rose so vigorously as he now talked to Joan McCoy. He roared:

“Yes, and the trouble with you would-be scientists is that you don't agree on anything.” He seemed to have forgotten that he was being a destructive spirit. “Now in law we've been codifying for a thousand years. Incidentally I bet you can't tell me what ‘Torts’ means.”

“Law! The one branch of human affairs that is proud of never making progress!”

Murray laid down his cup, advanced on Joan with a wagging forefinger, and drenched her with some of the oldest arguments in the world. He was answered with some of the next-to-the-oldest arguments, and they were altogether happy in a discussion which wound up in:

“Did you go to the symphony concert——”

“But Shaw is so paradoxical——”

“I believe in democracy but——”

Grace sat back and gloated. And gloating, she yet ached with the coming loss of the boy—coming, coming, so soon. Murray was past twenty-six; she herself was fifty-seven; the years were going by in a swift blur. Coming, inescapably coming—the end of her happiness and her possession of the man-child. Well! At least she would be able to go to Murray's, and stay for a week now and then, if he married a girl like Joan and had with her a vivid conscious life, instead of the perfumed drowsiness of existence with Rose.

The interpretative banker kept the tea from being entirely successful. Joan and Murray were not above fighting, laughing, and discussing the side-whiskers of the president of Vernon University, but the banker always brought them back to poetry, music, or the economic value of bankers.

It was when they two encountered each other informally at Grace's flat that they became most interested. Joan was reserved, but on one subject she was as explosively eloquent as a salesman. She hated the easy-going, the comfortably content, and her young scorn of weakness inspired Murray to driving work.

In the last of Indian summer, he invited Grace and Joan to a picnic on the river bluffs.

He had his own car now; he had some of those little symbols of success that are more gratifying than large applause—a fleecy lap-robe, a London motoring coat. When he cheerfully hustled Grace into his car, there was in his manner an assurance that delighted her. She gave herself up to a glow in being his guest—no longer always his hostess. But when they picked up Joan McCoy, Grace saw that it was not herself but Joan who was the real guest. She was not so much hurt as lonely amid their laughter. But she called up all of her will-power and seemed merry.

From the grassy knob on the bluffs they looked across marshes dotted with muskrat houses to a sweep of gray fields which the tender sunshine of the November day turned to a pale and tranquil gold. The trees were bare, save for the oaks on which a few brown leaves clung desperately, but the tremor of sunshine kept a feeling of hopeful life in the black trunks and curving twigs. A few flies had awakened to float in the sweet air. For a few hours they recaptured the basking serenity of full summer.

Murray unpacked a marvelous tea-basket. He had persuaded the *chef* of the Vernon Hotel to make a salad, and a box of the most interesting sandwiches, of caviar and anchovies and nuts and Mayonnaise.

In this peace Joan softened to a musing happiness. "It was bully of you to give us this party. I must admit I get tired of always being the little hornet in

the laboratory. I am quite willing to be a feeble female, and be cared for," she murmured to Murray, as the three of them lolled on a steamer rug and were absorbed by the misty shimmer of the meadows.

"You make me ambitious, and I make you respectably lazy. Good for both of us," declared Murray, patting her hand. Joan smiled at him gratefully and

And then Grace became a hero, and performed one of the hardest tasks of her life. She made herself leave the Indian-summer dreamers alone. She said casually: "I wonder what that tree is? I'm going to snoop down and see. No, don't come with me. I want to find out if the poor rheumatic old lady can still climb about."

She knew that at last, after years of dreading its coming, she was alone.

Alone, now, and always to be alone, no matter how many people might be about her. Alone; a thing discarded; bundled up and tied and shelved.

Ten years ago, Murray and she had once come to this same bluff for a picnic; had climbed down this gravel bank—together. She remembered every detail; still could hear him crying, "Oh, Pat, look! There's a whopper of a blue jay." Did Murray recall that day? He had not spoken of it.

Beneath the projecting face of the bluff she sat in a sunny hollow. She tried to interest herself in an oak tree that was very much like other oak trees. But she kept thinking: Was Murray holding Joan's hand, now . . . as no man had ever held Grace Anson's?

She could endure her exile no more. And she knew that she could hate Joan McCoy! She could hate Joan if she carried Murray away, and hate her yet more if she didn't, and she hated herself for hating, as she pantingly clambered up the bluff.

The two searchers for love saw her climbing, and ran shouting down, to take her hands. In the vision of their innocent and kindly affection her hatred dissolved into shame, which warmed to a joy in giving up her boy that he might be saved to her. She did fall into vulgar inquisitiveness as to how far the affair between Joan and Murray had got in their half-hour alone. She listened to their laughter, and with deep stirrings beheld the long handshake Murray gave Joan at parting. But she could not make out whether that alchemic moment, when curiosity and liking miraculously change to love, had splendidly come for them.

Before she should lose hold of them she invited them to dinner for Friday.

She had charged through the best shops of Vernon, leaving desolation and wailing behind her, in a campaign to get exactly the kind of ducks and large black mushrooms she wanted for that dinner of Friday. Also, pink candle-shades. A pink glow was kindly to Joan's smooth but pallid cheeks.

The dinner started uneasily. Murray was thoroughly fagged from an ordeal with an evasive witness in a patent case. He was sallow, slow-spoken, drooping in his chair. But Joan McCoy poured energy into him. She gave him inspiration for the mechanical side of the case; demanded that he master the one big book on the subject. She went further. Her languid tolerance of the golden hours on the bluff was gone. She slightly irritated Grace by the manner in which she hinted that Murray was a weakling to seem tired. He ought never to go to the theater or a dance, she implied; he ought to spend two hours a day in methodical, and very dull, exercising, and keep himself fresh for the delights of sitting up every night to read engineering, electricity, railroad finance, with a touch of Greek and the lives of Russian composers.

Joan and he fought briskly over politics, cats, freight-rates, and the future of the steam automobile. Grace willingly thought up and presented ignorant questions, so that they might both pounce on her. Murray's lassitude disappeared in restless shrillness.

Grace left them together while she telephoned to numbers of unnecessary people about unimportant things. . . . When she returned they had romantically taken advantage of her absence to talk about the Sinn Fein. They sat across the room from each other. She could have smacked them both!

When Murray went to drive Joan home, Grace scampered over to the Anson house on a rickety excuse about getting a magazine. She called herself a "meddling, maternal, fussing old matchmaker," but she had to know the boy's reaction to Joan before Rose Montgomery captured him. She was grimly prepared to find excuses to hang about till midnight at Bessie's.

And she found Rose there!

Rose had had dinner with Bessie. She was playing the piano; filling the room with chords as tender as the yellow light of an old piano-lamp. Bessie was nodding in a corner, arousing only to drive Rose on to more Schumann. Grace felt the enchantment of this peace, and she scarcely heeded when Murray came in—save to note that his recent excitement had fallen away, that he was more saggingly fatigued than before dinner. His eyes glittered, his forehead looked damp.

"Don't go yet," he begged Rose. "We're all imposing on you, but I'm so all-in—won't you play me something too?"

Grace watched him as he was enfolded by the music's spell. His eyes were calm, now; he seemed merely healthily tired.

He wanted to talk to them about the patent case which he had been thrashing out with Joan McCoy.

Rose ran to him, laid a finger on his lips, and begged, "No, you tell me about it next time. You're too nervous to-night." Grace was wondering whether Joan had noticed that he was nervous. Rose went on: "It's awfully late, and I ought to be home, but I'm going to capture your kitchen and make you-all some cocoa in my famous and inimitable way. I'm the best Bedelia in Vernon."

Over the cocoa and a jar of cookies they talked about the neighborhood. They laughed a good deal. Murray's face no longer twitched.

Suddenly Grace saw Rose Montgomery as a quite different sort of person from Bessie. Rose was soft and clinging, like Bessie, but she was honest and imaginative and rather amusing. With this discovery roweling her, Grace went home to a night of agony.

She was admitting to herself that Joan McCoy was only a dangerous stimulant for Murray; that for him the enduring woman was Rose Montgomery. A reasonable selfishness made her cry out at being expected to confess that Bessie had been right and herself wrong. "That Ray should side with that woman now, after twenty-five years—No, it's not that that hurts; it's that I should prove to have been as meddling and energetically muddleheaded as Bessie."

Time hung suspended in an abysm of black brooding. She was not sleepy; she felt that she could never be blessedly sleepy again. She walked the floor.

Sometimes she was resolving, "I'll never give him up!"

Sometimes she lamented, "Your day is over. Now—now—now you will give the child to another woman."

She rearranged a bookcase; she made coffee and forgot to touch it till it was cold; she looked wistfully at the furniture she had gathered for Murray, and remembered that he would not need it now. She found herself sitting on the floor crying over that same red and blue monkey he had given to her more than twenty years ago.

And all this puttering was to conceal from herself the fact that she was avoiding battle; that she had not yet fought herself into willingness to take her hand from his shoulder. She could not bring herself to decide—to decide what she knew had already been decided for her.

Her head drooped on the table, and she was full of barren weeping, while she prayed, “Lord of mothers and of love, give to an old and selfish heart the last great power of sacrifice—the willingness to cease sacrificing. Lord, guard my boy against my hungry tenderness.”

She walked quietly to the window. A clattering milk-wagon mocked her agony. The trafficking sparrows were matter of fact in the gray reality of dawn. The houses across the street crept out of the mystery of night into a solid naturalness. She said crisply, now:

“Just one more thing I can do for him. Let him alone. If he does choose Rose, she’ll be the right one. Let him alone. All I can do, now—all, all! That, and try to like Rose. Oh yes. And go to bed now, and be a sensible resigned old party. . . . ‘Grow old gracefully!’ Oh dash!”

But there was one other thing she was able to do for him.

Murray Anson was being married to Rose Montgomery, against a background of weeping parents, hysterically excited girls, ribbons, sporadic music, and clashing pink and red roses.

Grace had stationed herself to keep Bessie from conspicuous fussing, questioning, or weeping. She coaxed Bessie out of the bride’s tiring-room and got her interested in the plans for Murray’s new house, out in the Shelley Woods addition.

Bessie sighed: “That will make such a nice guest room, I know I shall like it—though I don’t suppose I’ll really need it. I think I’ll rent my house and build a teeny-weeny cottage on the lot that’s for sale right next to them.”

“You’ll what?” Grace demanded.

“Yes, I priced the lot yesterday.”

Grace had a sharp vision of Bessie wheezing over Murray’s house all day long; giving Rose advice ten hours a day; apologizing for intruding on those precious first meals together—and then intruding. She saw Murray coming to hate a house filled with loving querulousness as with a smell of wash-day. She remembered his old, half-uttered irritations.

She said nothing yet. She interned Bessie with a guest, and sneaked off to the room where Rose was being kneaded into her gown. She begged of Rose, “Dear girl, I haven’t given you one bit of advice yet, have I?”

“No, dear.”

“Then let me lump everything in this. One trouble with you and Ray staying on here in your home town: It’s too full of acquaintances and advisers like me. For two years, don’t let a single one of them come and stay with you. Don’t even get into a regular binding routine of going to any one house, say for some certain meal each week. Keep yourself and Ray free till you get adjusted.”

“But Aunt Grace, dear, I know Ray is crazy to have you come and stay with us just as much as you can—even if the others don’t. And of course I am too.”

“Right. Then promise me you won’t let the others tell you how to run things, or plant themselves on you, till I do.”

“And,” she said to herself, as she bustled downstairs, “that will be never.”

She burst in on Bessie. “I have a wonderful plan! I’m going to California. I have—well, practically I have, the duckiest little bungalow at Pasadena. And you’re to come out with me.”

As the violin quivered, as Rose came down stairs, dismayingly lovely, Grace added to herself: “I’ll keep her content out there, even if I have to make myself into one of her own kind. I’ll give up suffrage and riding and cold baths. I’ll take to gossip and double solitaire.”

She was shaken from her reverie by Bessie’s thick weeping beside her.

“Poor Bess!” she sympathized.

“Oh Grace, it just breaks my heart to lose him. You may be ever so clever and all, but you can’t know how a mother sacrifices for her own boy, and how she feels when the time comes when she can’t do and slave for him any more. Oh! Oh, I have a cousin that lives near your bungalow—in Los Angeles. Oh dear!”

Then Grace Anson stood straight and proud and glad as Murray turned from the altar and faced them. His eyes searched the crowd for Grace, and smiled toward her a love that, whether she should be near or far, would keep him her man-child forever.

“And-uh—” Bessie was continuing. “Oh! Do we go up and congratulate them now? Come on. Los Angeles—that’s where they make the moving-pictures, isn’t it? Perhaps we will see some made. And-uh—No, you couldn’t ever understand a mother’s love!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Mother-Love* by Sinclair Lewis]