

THE MOTHER

by Pearl S. Buck

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THE MOTHER

I

IN the kitchen of the small thatched farmhouse the mother sat on a low bamboo stool behind the earthen stove and fed grass deftly into the hole where a fire burned beneath the iron cauldron. The blaze was but just caught and she moved a twig here, a handful of leaves there, and thrust in a fresh bit of the dried grass she had cut from the hillsides last autumn. In the corner of the kitchen as near as she could creep to the fire sat a very old and weazened woman, wrapped in a thick padded coat of bright red cotton stuff, whose edges showed under a patched coat of blue she wore over it. She was half blind with a sore disease of the eyes, and this had well-nigh sealed her eyelids together. But through the small slits left open she could see a great deal still, and she watched the flare of the flames as they leaped and caught under the strong and skillful hands of the mother. Now she said, her words hissing softly through her sunken, toothless gums, "Be careful how you feed the fire—there is only that one load—is it two?—and the spring is but newly come and we have long to go before the grass is long enough to cut and here I am as I am and I doubt I can ever go again and pick a bit of fuel—a useless old crone now, who ought to die—"

These last words the old woman said many times a day and every time she said them she waited to hear the son's wife speak as she now did, "Do not say it, old mother! What would

we do if we had not you to watch the door while we are in the field and see that the little ones do not fall into the pond?"

The old mother coughed loudly at this and gasped out of the midst of her coughing, "It is true—I do that—the door must be watched in these evil times with thieves and robbers everywhere. If they came here, such a screeching as I would raise, daughter! Well I mind it was not so when I was young—no, then if you left a hoe out in the night it was there at dawn and in summer we tied the beast to the door hasp outside and there it stood again the next day and—"

But the young mother although she laughed dutifully and called out, "Did you, then, old mother!" did not hear the old woman, who talked incessantly throughout the day. No, while the old cracked voice rambled on the young mother thought of the fuel and wondered indeed if it would last until this spring planting were finished when she could take time to go out with her knife and cut small branches from trees and pick up this bit and that. It was true that just outside the door of the kitchen at the edge of the threshing-floor, which was also dooryard, there were still two ricks of rice straw, neatly rounded and roofed with hard packed clay to shield them from the damps of rains and snow. But rice straw was too good to burn. Only city folk burned rice straw, and she or her man would carry it into the city in great bundles upon a pole and gain good silver for it. No, rice straw could not be burned except in city houses.

She fed the grass into the stove bit by bit, absorbed in the task, the firelight falling on her face, a broad, strong face, full lips, and darkly brown and red with wind and sun. Her black eyes were shining in the light, very clear eyes, set straight beneath

her brows. It was a face not beautiful but passionate and good. One would say, here is a quick-tempered woman but warm wife and mother and kind to an old woman in her house.

The old woman chattered on. She was alone all day except for the little children since her son and son's wife must labor on the land, and now it seemed there were many things she had to tell this daughter-in-law whom she loved. Her old wheezing voice went on, pausing to cough now and again in the smoke which poured out of the stove. "I ever did say that when a man is hungered and especially a young and hearty son like mine, an egg stirred into noodles—" The old voice lifted itself somewhat higher against the fretting of two children who clung to their mother's shoulders as she stooped to feed the fire.

But the mother went steadily on with her task, her face quiet and in repose. Yes, she was as quiet as though she did not hear the fretting of the children, this boy and this girl, and as though she did not hear the endless old voice. She was thinking that it was true she was a little late tonight. There was a deal to be done on the land in the spring, and she had stayed to drop the last row of beans. These warm days and these soft damp nights, filled with dew—one must make the most of them, and so she had covered the last row. This very night life would begin to stir in those dry beans. This thought gave her content. Yes, that whole field would begin to stir with life tonight secretly in the damp warm earth. The man was working there still, pressing the earth tight over the rows with his bare feet. She had left him there because over the fields came the voices of the

children crying her name, and she had hastened and come home.

The children were standing hungrily at the kitchen door when she reached there and they were both weeping, the boy gently and steadily, his eyes tearless, and the little girl whimpering and chewing her fist. The old woman sat listening to them serenely. She had coaxed them for a time but now they were beyond her coaxing and would not be comforted and so she let them be. But the mother said nothing to them. She went swiftly to the stove, stooping to pick up a load of fuel as she went. Yet this was sign enough. The boy ceased his howling and ran after her with all the speed of his five years, and the girl came after as best she could, being but three and a little less.

Now the food in the cauldron was boiling and from under the wooden lid clouds of fragrant steam began to creep forth. The old woman drew deep breaths and champed her empty old jaws a little. Under the cauldron the flames leaped high and beat against its iron bottom and finding no vent they spread and flew out again, changing into dense smoke that poured into the small room. The mother drew back and pulled the little girl back also. But the acrid smoke had already caught the child and she blinked and rubbed her eyes with her grimy fists and began to scream. Then the mother rose in her quick firm way and she lifted the child and set her outside the kitchen door, saying, "Stay there, small thing! Ever the smoke hurts your eyes and ever you will thrust your head into it just the same."

The old woman listened as she always did whenever her son's wife spoke, and she took it as a fresh theme for something to say herself. Now she began, "Aye, and I always said that if I had

not had to feed the fire for so many years I would not be half blind now. Smoke it was that made me be so blind as I am now and smoke—”

But the mother did not hear the old voice. She heard the sound of the little girl as she sat there flat upon the earth, screaming and rubbing her eyes and essaying to open them. It was true the child’s eyes were always red and sore. Yet if anyone said to the mother, “Has not your child something amiss with her eyes?” the mother answered, “It is only that she will thrust her head into the fiery smoke when I am burning the grass in the oven.”

But this crying did not move her as once it had. She was too busy now, and children came thick and fast. When her first son had been born, she could not bear to hear him cry at all. Then it had seemed to her that when a child cried a mother ought to still it somehow and give it ease, and so when the child wept she stopped whatever she did and gave him her breast. Then the man grew angry because she stopped so often at her share of the work, and he roared at her, “What—shall you do thus and leave it all to me? Here be you, but just begun your bearing and for these next twenty years shall you be suckling one or another, and am I to bear this? You are no rich man’s wife who needs do naught but bear and suckle and can hire the labor done!”

She flew back at him then as ever she did, for they were both young and full of temper and passion, and she cried at him, “And shall I not have a little something for my pains? Do you go loaded many months to your work as I must do, and do you have the pains of birth? No, when you come home you rest, but

when I go home there is the food to cook and a child to care for and an old woman to coax and coddle and tend for this and that—”

So they quarreled heartily for a while and neither was the victor and neither vanquished, they were so well matched. But still this one quarrel did not need to last long; her breasts soon went dry, for she conceived as easily as a sound and cleanly beast does. Even now was her milk dry again, though one child she dropped too soon last summer when she fell and caught herself upon the point of the plough.... Well, children must make shift now as best they could, and if they wept they must weep, and it was true that she could not run to give them suck, and they must wait and suit their hunger to her coming. So she said, but the truth was her heart was softer than her speech, and she still made haste if her children called to her.

When the cauldron boiled a while and the smoke was mingled with the smell of the fragrant rice, she went and found a bowl and first she poured it full for the old woman. She set it on the table in the larger room where they all lived, and then she led her there, scarcely heeding her gabbling voice, “—and if you mix pease with the rice it does make such a fine full taste as ever was—” And the old woman seated herself and seized the bowl in her two chill dry hands and fell silent, suddenly trembling with greediness for the food, so that the water ran from the corners of her wrinkled mouth, and she fretted, “Where is the spoon—I cannot find my spoon—”

The mother put the porcelain spoon into the fumbling old hand and she went out and this time she found two small tin bowls and filled them and she found two small pairs of bamboo

chopsticks, and she took one bowl to the girl first because she was still weeping and rubbing her eyes. The child sat in the dust of the threshing-floor, and what with her tears and what with her grimy fists, her face was caked with mud and tears. Now the mother lifted her to her feet and wiped her face somewhat with the palm of her rough dark hand, and then lifting the edge of the patched coat the child wore, she wiped her eyes. But she was gentle enough, for it was true the child's eyes were red and tender and the edges of the lids turned out and raw, and when the child turned her head wincing and whimpering, the mother let be in pity, troubled for the moment with the child's pain. She set the bowl then upon a rude and unpainted table that stood outside the door of the house and she said to the child in her loud, kind voice, "Come—eat!"

The girl went unsteadily and stood clinging to the table, her red-rimmed eyes half closed against the piercing gold of the evening sun, and then stretched her hands toward the bowl. The mother cried, "Take heed—it is hot!"

And the girl hesitated and began to blow her little shallow breaths upon the food to cool it. But the mother continued to gaze upon her, still troubled as she gazed, and she muttered to herself, "When he takes that next load of rice straw to the city I will ask him to go to a medicine shop and buy some balm for sore eyes."

Now the boy was complaining because she had not set his bowl down on the table, too, and so she went and fetched it and set it down and for a time there was silence.

Then the mother felt herself too weary for a while even to eat and she gave a great sigh and went and fetched the little bamboo stool and set it by the door and sat down to rest. She drew in her breath deeply and smoothed back her rough sun-browned hair with her two hands and looked about her. The low hills that circled about this valley where their land lay grew slowly black against a pale yellow sky, and in the heart of this valley, in the small hamlet, fires were lit for the evening meal and smoke began to rise languidly into the still windless air. The mother watched it and was filled with content. Of the six or seven houses which made up the hamlet there was not one, she thought suddenly, in which the mother did better for her children than did she for hers. Some there were who were richer; that wife of the innkeeper, doubtless, had some silver and to spare, for she wore two silver rings upon her hands and rings in her ears such as the young mother used to long for in her girlhood and never had. Well, even so, she had liefer see her own spare silver go into the good flesh the children wore upon their bones. The gossip said the innkeeper gave his children but the meats the guests left in their bowls. But the mother gave her own children good rice that they grew upon their land, and if the girl's eyes were well there would be nothing wrong with them at all; sound and well grown were they, and the boy big enough for seven or eight. Yes, she had sound children always, and if that one had not come too soon, and died when it had breathed but once, it would have been a fair boy by now, too, and trying to walk soon.

She sighed again. Well, here was this new one coming in a month or two, and it was enough to think about. But she was

glad. Yes, she was glad and best content when she was big with child and when she was full with life....

Someone came out of the door across the street of the little hamlet, and out of the smoking doorway she could see her husband's cousin's wife, and she called, "Ah, you are cooking, too! I am but just finished!"

"Yes—yes—" came the other's voice, carelessly cheerful. "And I was just saying, I dare swear you are finished, you are so forward with your work."

But the mother called back loudly and courteously, "No—no—it is only that my children grow hungry betimes!"

"Truly a very able, forward woman!" cried the cousin's wife again and went within once more, carrying the grass she had come to fetch. The mother sat on a while in the evening twilight, her face half smiling. It was true she could rightly be proud, proud of her own strength, proud of her children, proud of that man of hers. But even so there could not be peace for long. The boy thrust his bowl suddenly before her, "M-ma, more!"

She rose then to fill it for him again, and when she came out of the door the sun rested in a dip between the hills, on the edge of the very field where she had worked that day long. It rested there, caught seemingly for an instant between the hills, and hung motionless, huge and solidly gold, and then it went slipping slowly out of sight. Out of the immediate dusk she saw the man coming along a footpath, his hoe over his shoulder and caught under his raised arm as he came buttoning his coat. He

walked light and lithe as a young male cat, and suddenly he broke into singing. He loved to sing, his voice high and quivering and clear, and many a song he knew, so that oftentimes upon a holiday he was asked to sing for all in the teashop and so pass the time away. He lowered his voice as he came to the house, and when at last he reached the threshold he was only singing a very little but still in that high, shaking, thrilling voice, his words set into some swift rhythm. He put his hoe against the wall, and the old woman, hearing him, woke out of a doze that had fallen on her after she had eaten and she began to speak as though she had not left off, "As I said, my son likes a little pease mixed in his rice and such a full sweet taste—"

The man laughed an easy idle laugh and went into the house, and out of the door his pleasant voice came, "Aye, old mother, and so I do!"

Outside the door the girl child, her bowl emptied, sat passive and filled and now that the sun was gone she opened her eyes a little and looked about her more easily and without complaining. The mother went into the kitchen again and brought out a steaming bowl of rice for the man. It was a large bowl of coarse blue and white pottery, and it was filled to the brim. Into it the mother had dropped an egg she had saved from the few fowls they kept and now the fresh white of the egg began to harden. When the man worked hard he must have a bit of meat or an egg. However they might quarrel, it was a pleasure to her to see him fed well, and all their quarreling, she thought to herself, was only of the lips. Well she loved to see him eat, even if sometimes she belabored him with her tongue

for something. She called now to the old woman, "I have put a new-laid egg into your son's rice! And he has cabbage, too."

The old woman heard this and began instantly and quickly, "Oh, aye—a new-laid egg! I ever did say a new-laid egg—it is the best thing for a young man. It mends the strength—"

But no one listened. The man ate hastily, being mightily hungered, and in no time he was calling for the mother to fill his bowl again, thumping the table with his empty bowl to hasten her. When it was filled she went and fetched a bowl for herself. But she did not sit down beside the man. She sat upon her low stool in the dooryard and supped her rice with pleasure, for she loved her food as a healthy beast does. Now and again she rose to fetch a bit of cabbage from the man's bowl, and as she ate she stared into the dark red sky between the two hills. The children came and leaned upon her and held up their mouths to be fed and often the mother put a bit between their lips with her chopsticks. And although they were filled and no longer hungry, and although it was what they had eaten, yet this food from their mother's bowl seemed better to them than what they had in their own. Even the yellow farmyard dog came near with confidence. He had been sitting in hope under the table, but the man kicked him, and he slunk out and caught deftly the bits of rice the mother threw him once or twice.

Thrice the mother rose and filled the man's bowl and he ate to repletion and gave a grunt of satisfaction and then into his empty bowl she poured boiling water and he supped it loudly, rising now and supping as he stood outside the door. When he was through and she had taken his bowl he stood there a while,

looking over the countryside as the night covered it. There was a young spring moon in the sky, very small and crystal pale among the stars. He stared at it and fell to singing some soft twisting song as he stood.

Out of the other few houses in the hamlet men began to come now also. Some shouted to each other of a game they had begun at the inn, and some stood yawning and gaping at their doors. The young husband ceased his singing suddenly and looked sharply across the street. There was only one house where a man worked on while others rested. It was his cousin. That fellow! He would work on even into the night. There he was sitting at his door, his head bent to see the weaving of a basket of some sort he made from willow withes. Well, some men were so, but as for himself—a little game—he turned to speak to the woman and met her hostile knowing look, and meeting it he cursed her silently. If he had worked all day, could he not game a bit at night either? Was he to work and work his life away? But he could not meet that steadfast, angry look upon him. He shook himself petulantly as a child does and he said, “After such a day of work as this—well, I will sleep then! I am too weary to game tonight!”

He went into the house then and threw himself upon the bed and stretched and yawned. His old mother, sightless in the dusk of the lampless room, called out suddenly, “Has my son gone to bed?”

“Aye, mother!” he answered angrily. “And what else is there to do in such a little empty place as this—work and sleep—work and sleep—”

“Yes, yes, work and sleep,” the old woman answered cheerfully, hearing nothing of the anger in his voice, and she rose and felt her way to her own corner where behind a blue cotton curtain her pallet was. But the man was already asleep.

When she heard the sound of his breathing the mother rose, and the children followed, clinging to her coat. She rinsed the bowls with a little cold water from the jar that stood there by the kitchen door, and set them in a cranny of the earthen wall. Then she went behind the house, and in the dim light of the moon she lowered a wooden bucket into a shallow well and dipped it full and took it to the jar and filled it. Once more she went out and this time to untie the water buffalo that stood tethered to one of the willow trees which grew raggedly about the threshing-floor, and she fed it straw and a few black peas with the straw. When the beast had eaten she led it into the house and tied it to the post of the bed where the man slept. The fowls were already roosting beneath the bed, and they cackled drowsily at her coming and fell silent again.

Once more she went out and called and a pig grunted out of the gathering darkness. She had fed it at noon and she did not feed it now, but pushing and prodding it gently she forced it into the house. Only the yellow dog she left for it must lie across the threshold.

All the time the two children had followed her as best they could, although she moved as she would without stopping for them. Now they clung to her trousered legs, whimpering and crying. She stooped and lifted the younger one into her arms, and leading the older by the hand, she took them into the house and barred the door fast. Then she went to the bed and

laid the children at the man's feet. Softly she removed their outer garments and then her own, and creeping between the man and his children, she stretched herself out and drew the quilt over them all. There she lay stretched and still, her strong body full of healthy weariness. Lying like this in the darkness she was filled with tenderness. However impatient she might be in the day, however filled with little sudden angers, at night she was all tenderness—passionate tenderness to the man when he turned to her in need, tender to the children as they lay helpless in sleep, tender to the old woman if she coughed in the night and rising to fetch a little water for her, tender even to the beasts if they stirred and frightened each other with their own stirring, and she called out to them, "Be still,—sleep—day is a long way off yet—" and hearing her rough kind voice even they were quieted and slept again.

Now in the darkness the boy nuzzled against her, fumbling at her breast. She let him suckle, lying in warm drowsiness. Her breast was dry, but it was soft and gave remembered comfort to the child. Soon it would be full again. Beyond the boy the girl lay, screwing her eyes tightly shut, rubbing at their incessant itching as she fell asleep. Even after she slept she tore at her eyes, not knowing what she did.

But soon they all slept. Heavily and deeply they all slept, and if the dog barked in the night they all slept on except the mother, for to them these were the sounds of the night. Only the mother woke to listen and take heed and if she needed not to rise, she slept again, too.

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