

The Strange Woman

By David Marcus

I was very young at the time, the night my father brought a strange woman home and said, 'Billy, this is your new mother.' Say 'hello' and give her a big kiss, she's your mother from now on. He smiled awkwardly while the woman bent down and left me touch her cheek with my lips. Her skin was pale and cold and I thought she was shivering a bit. I hadn't time to ask any questions because my father said, 'Put your books away now boy, and go up to bed.' I closed up my books and stuffed them into my sack even though I had not quite finished all my lessons - but I know that by rushing breakfast next morning and getting to school a bit earlier than usual, I could finish them there. I always obeyed my father's instructions; he used to say that was what my mother - my real mother - would have wanted and that she was always watching me. I did not know if he was right because I could not remember for myself what she looked like, so I always had to think of the photograph of her in the bedroom and pretend that that was what he meant.

I put my sack in a corner and walked towards the door. I must have been puzzled by the strange young woman because I almost forgot to say 'good-night'. But at the door I suddenly remembered and turned saying, 'Good-night, father' as I did so. He must have forgotten also because he had his back to me and a hand on the woman's arm. He whirled quickly and said, 'Good-night, boy' and then prompting me, he added, 'And good-night, mother.' She opened her lips as if also to help me say it, but she just half smiled and said nothing. I said 'Good-night, mother.' and went to bed.

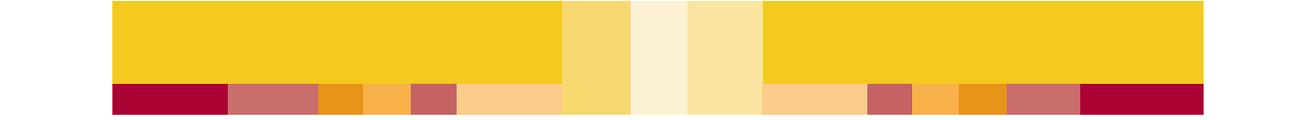
There were two bedrooms upstairs but I always slept in the front one with my father. We shared the big double bed, opposite which stood that photograph of my mother on the mantelpiece. Now and again I went over to look at it, and this night I studied it for quite a while. In it she wore a plain, white frock that seemed to hang shapelessly on her body and she stood against a trellis that had roses massing through its diamond spaces and spilling over the top above her head. But it was a very poor photograph because her eyes were all puckered up from the sun, and the overhanging roses were so thick that they put the top of her head in shadow. All I could really see was that she had a long face and thin lips; and whether her hair was actually dark or not I could

not be sure. I often wondered if it was my father who had taken the photograph, and where - it hadn't been taken in our garden because we never had a trellis or roses. A few times I have almost asked him to tell me but for some reason I always drew back at the last moment. I think I was happier not knowing anything about her - I felt she was more mine that way, for I could make her up to my own fancy. Anyway I don't think he would have told me even if I had asked him because, once, when he said that she was always watching me, I asked, if she was always watching him too, and he grew suddenly still and did not answer.

Slowly I began to undress myself, thinking about her and about my new mother. I know I didn't understand at the time what had happened, but I was also not conscious that there was anything much that had to be understood. It was just a change of conditions to me - a big change, of course - but all changes had always been brought about by my father and I was used to accepting them, big or small, without question or the need to question.

I had got my clothes folded on the chair and my pyjamas onto me when I heard my father run up the stairs. He rushed into the bedroom, a bit flushed, and said, 'Oh, Billy, I forgot to tell you. You're changing rooms. I'll help you move your clothes into the other one. You'll be fine there boy, eh?' I took this change also in the same way as before and gathered my clothes in a bundle into my arms while my father picked up my boots and followed behind. At the door he said, 'Wait now' went back to the mantelpiece for the photograph, and placed it on top of my bundle of clothes, saying, 'You'd better take this, too, boy.' He said it quietly and smiled at me quietly. When I got into the other room, he put my boots down, ruffled his hand through my hair and then quickly left. The new room was quite small, its walls and mantelpiece bare. I put the photograph on the mantelpiece and got into bed. I lay on my right side so I could see through the window into the yard of the neighbour's house next door. Old 'Dodder', their cocker spaniel was lying there, half in and half out of his kennel. I don't know how long I watched him or what I was thinking of, but I remember he barked once, long and low, before I fell asleep.

Next day in school, during the history lesson, Jimmy Drummond leant forward from the desk behind me and whispered in my ear, 'Your old man's got a new missus. I heard my mum saying he's got a new missus.' I didn't turn around or answer as the master was looking at me and he had been crusty all morning. But anyway I had nothing to say because my new mother had been still in bed when I went out to school. My father had made breakfast for me and had spoken very little besides asking if I liked sleeping alone. He had said that I must get used to sleeping alone now because I would have to show my



new mother that I could be a man. I hadn't minded sleeping alone and told him so. He laughed and gave me twopence. He usually gave me only one penny every morning but he said that if I was to be a man from now on, I'd have to get a man's wage.

I had forgotten what Jimmy Drummond had said until school was over. But then he caught up with me as I was leaving and shouted to the other boys, 'Hey boys, Billy's old man has a new missus. Hasn't he, Billy?' he added turning to me. 'What's she like?' questioned someone else, as they all gathered round. 'He got her from Hoxton's Fair. My sister told me that she was working in a stall at Hoxton.' I was hemmed in by the gate. Another boy laughed and whispered, 'I heard my folks say that she was well known at the Fair, and my mum says it's a shame and a sacrilege. What's she like Billy? Does she do tricks like the woman at the circus last summer?' There was a shout of laughter at this and they all pushed at me, asking questions. I hadn't answered at all - I was feeling frightened of them and ashamed that I couldn't think of good answers to satisfy them or to make them stop laughing. Then Jimmy Drummond winked at me and said, 'Takes your old man Billy. He was always a hard one.' For the first time in my life I felt completely lost, completely unsure of things that I had only then realised were of great importance. I couldn't think and I couldn't understand. I broke away from the boys and ran down the hills while they all stood at the gate, laughing and shouting.

When I got home the strange woman opened the door for me and Mrs. Ogilvie was not there at all. Mrs. Ogilvie was the woman who always kept house for us and who used to stay with me till my father came home from work. I asked if she was ever coming back again and my new mother said, 'No Billy, I'll be here every day with you now. Come on, Mummy has a grand dinner for you.' She seemed much cheerier than the night before but her skin was still pale. While I ate my dinner, she sat down reading a newspaper and I kept stealing glances at her. Her lips were painted heavily and her eyelashes were very long. She had raven-black hair, flowing down on both sides from the middle of her neck and another on her head like a black waterfall. She wore a black dress, too, with a gold bangle around her neck and another on her left wrist. Whenever she turned over the newspaper her red nails flashed in the light.

They flashed that way very often because she became fidgety and kept going back to pages she had read before. Sometimes our looks would meet, and when they did she turned her head away quickly. After a while she bent down to a black bag beside her on the floor and took out a cigarette. When she had it lit she became much quieter. I suppose she had wanted to smoke all the time

but was somehow afraid to do so in front of me. But I didn't mind because Mrs. Ogilvie used smoke too. When I finished my dinner she cleared the table, and asked me if I were going to do my lessons. Usually I used wait till my father would come home and do them with me at night, but I thought that perhaps he had told her to make me do them after dinner, so I got out my books and started. She didn't help me but sat back with the newspaper and smoked many cigarettes.

For about a week things carried on like this. Each night my father came home from work he used send me to bed early, and I liked that because he started bringing me adventure books and allowed me to read them in bed. He was in great form for that week and my new mother would laugh now and again with him. But mostly she said nothing, and it was his voice I would hear as I lay in bed reading. They never once went out.

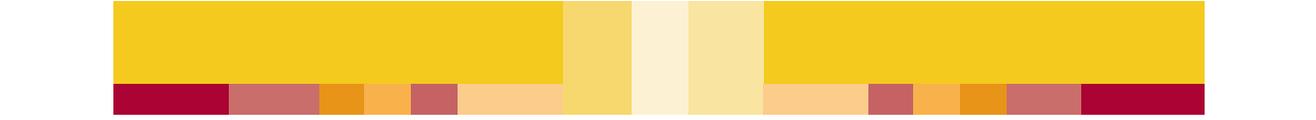
But then one night, after I had put out the light and was almost asleep, I suddenly realised my father was shouting and I thought I could hear a woman's voice crying. My ears weren't awake enough to make out any words so I jumped out of bed to listen at the door. Immediately I did so my father's voice hushed and the woman's sobs became lower as if they had both heard my feet on the floor. I crept back into bed, afraid my father might come up, and I fell asleep wondering why he had been shouting and why my new mother was crying.

Next day I came home from school, it was Mrs. Ogilvie who opened the door to me. I was surprised to see her again, of course and glad too, and she was overjoyed to see me. She bent down to throw her arms around me and squeezed me against her bulging bosom. My face sank into it until I was almost breathless and she kept rubbing the back of my head with her hands.

'The poor boy,' she was mumbling, 'the poor boy. Such a way to treat a youngster.'

By now the accumulation of surprises was beginning to exasperate me and I was no longer willing to accept them meekly. I asked Mrs. Ogilvie what she meant and what was wrong. But she only continued mumbling in a lower voice so that I could not distinguish the words, and she gave me no answer. I felt that if Mrs. Ogilvie wouldn't tell me, then nobody would, so I went in to my dinner. She had prepared almost every food I especially liked and stood over me, chugging like a barge, while I ate.

It was not until about eight o'clock that night that my father came home, and my new mother was with him. Mrs. Ogilvie could not leave till then, of



course, and she was not happy at being delayed. We all stood in the kitchen while she had a few words with him about domestic matters, and then she prepared to go. My father mentioned conversationally, that she would be along again tomorrow and Mrs. Ogilvie replied that she would, but that she'd have to be out at her usual time of six-thirty. She seemed quite huffed. My father said nothing, while my new mother just gazed in front of her, looking very unhappy. Mrs. Ogilvie passed her on her way out but they did not speak to each other.

'Now boy, up to bed with you,' said my father when she was gone, But that afternoon I had gone back to my ould routine and had postponed doing my lessons until my father would have returned to help me. When I told him that, he paused a moment, and then said, 'Never mind them now; it's too late. In the morning, I'll give you a note to the Teacher.' Naturally this satisfied me, and I went to bed.

I was not long there when I heard him shouting and my new mother shouting back. This time I was wide awake and had made no mistake about it so I did not have to get out of bed to listen. The shouting went on for some time until suddenly they both stamped out to the hall. Then I heard the front door being opened and banged shut. My heart jumped at this - I thought I was left by myself in the house. But after a few seconds I heard my father's steps return along to the room. I stayed awake as long as I could, clutching the pillow, but when I fell asleep my father had not yet come up to bed.

In the morning I had to mention to him twice about the note to the teacher. I could almost see him wrenching his brain around to deal with it and as he had forgotten what it was all about. I had to explain even that too. The he scribbled it out quickly and sent me off.

All through school and the afternoon with Mrs. Ogilvie I was impatient for my father to come home, for I was now full of curiosity and, I suppose, in my own way, worried too. But at half-past six he had not returned. We waited till eight when Mrs. Ogilvie told me to go to bed. But I refused and said that I would wait for my father and she did not insist. When he did come it was after ten, and he was alone. Immediately he saw me he snapped out, 'Why is the boy still up Mrs. Ogilvie ? Why didn't you put him to bed?' I had never heard him use such an angry tone to us before and I timidly told him that I was waiting for him to come home. He said nothing but just sat down in a chair and sighed. Mrs. Ogilvie motioned for me to go upstairs, so I went to bed. That was Friday night and as there was no school again till Monday I did not have to worry about my lessons.

Next day was the same except my father came home a bit earlier this time, though again my new mother was not with him. He allowed me stay up a while when Mrs. Ogilvie left but he did not speak to me at all. He just sat in his chair, gazing ahead of him. At about nine-o'clock he said, 'Good-night Billy. It's about time for you now,' and I went up.

Going to bed so late for two nights must have made me sleepy for I did not wake up till eleven on Sunday morning, and when I went down to breakfast Mrs. Ogilvie was there. This had never happened before; usually on Sunday mornings my father would do my lessons with me and then take me out in the afternoon. I asked Mrs. Ogilvie where he was and she told me that he had to go out but that he would be back as quickly as possible. But I knew somehow that he'd be late again so I did my lesson myself.

He was late, though not quite as much as I expected. When he saw me he didn't mind that I was not in bed, but he sent me into another room while he spoke to Mrs. Ogilvie. After about five minutes she opened the door to say 'good-night' and told me that I could go back to my father. When I did he smiled at me, and then closed his eyes and put his head back against the chair. His face was whiter than I had ever seen it before and he was very tired. I could see that he was thinking to himself and had forgotten about me. I was thinking too, thinking about my new mother in the black dress and wondering when she would be coming back. I kept gazing at my father's face so much that suddenly I realised I was almost falling asleep. It must have been very late by then so, without making any noise or saying 'good-night', I crept up to bed.

I don't know how long I had been asleep when I was awakened by someone pushing my shoulder, I opened my eyes and saw my father looking down at me. 'Come on, boy,' he whispered, 'you can come back to my bed again'. I yawned, and asked him, 'Only for tonight, is it daddy'. He didn't answer this. He didn't have to: I knew myself it was not only for the night, that this was the last change of all and that from now on we would go back to our old ways.

I tumbled out of bed while he gathered up my clothes and boots and led the way out. At the door he seemed about to stop and I sensed what he wanted. Quickly I ran back for the photograph of my mother and, clutching it tightly, followed my father once again.