

A FRIEND OF HER PARENTS

By ALICE DUER MILLER

ILLUSTRATED BY MAY WILSON PRESTON

IT IS difficult, Doctor Bryan thought, to like the children of your best friends. He admired and respected many of the younger generation, but not Clarita Andrews. When he came into his apartment, late in the afternoon, after a hard day at the hospital, and heard that she was waiting for him in his library, he felt cross and trapped. He had counted on a long hour to relax and smoke a pipe and bathe and shave before a dinner that he was giving to a great surgeon from the Middle West. Now this precious leisure must all be expended upon Clarita.

She had been born in 1914, and was a child of her time. She believed that music began with Stravinsky, art with the Modernists and all psychology with Freud. Furniture not made of glass and chromium was, to her, mere rubbish; and college education the serfdom of young hearts and minds. He could have found her opinions stimulating, if it had not been for the icy contempt with which she regarded his. She seemed to consider the whole realm of the past as something beneath contempt, and when, the evening before, Bryan and her father had been reminiscing about the war—interestingly, Bryan thought—she had risen and left the room, as if she could not allow the bright mirror of her modern mind to be dulled by the mists of these bygone days.

He could have forgiven her even her sense of superiority, if she had not manifested it toward her parents. Idle and slightly parasitical, like so many American daughters, she assumed in herself some hidden worth; she looked down from vast heights upon her mother, who had been a greater beauty than Clarita would ever be, and upon her father, who, with no backing, had contrived to make himself a comfortable fortune and a highly respected name.

Bryan found her sitting in a deep leather chair by his fireside. She was one of those intensely black and white and red girls, like a new French printed silk. The bone construction of her face was very like that of her beautiful mother, but the older woman was a tender, radiant blonde, whereas Clarita was a hard brunette. Round her chair was a ring of disorder—the evening paper, read and cast aside, her hat, her gloves, an empty glass that might have contained nothing more deadly than water, a small sandal which, attached at the best of times by tiny straps, had somehow slipped off and had not been replaced. She was reading a medical journal.

She looked up as he entered, and said: "Oh, Doctor Bryan, are you cross at my tracking you to your lair like this? But, you see, I think you can help me."

Her tone suggested that that possibility would repay him for any inconvenience.

"I hope I can," he said. After all, she was the child of Ben and Clara; he did want to help her for their sake.

"I've come to you," she went on, "not because you're a doctor—well, perhaps a little on that account. A doctor must know something about the way life really is."

"We have that idea about ourselves."

"More, anyhow, than most of that other generation." She paused, and Bryan thought how impossible it seemed to be for most people to learn the truth that age makes no difference in temperament—that everyone is as romantic and adventurous at ninety as at nineteen, or as cautious and sagacious at nineteen as at ninety.

"I've really come to you," Clarita continued, "because you are such a friend of my parents."

"I like them better than any two people in the world."

"I know." Her tone expressed a faint wonder. "And they adore you. They'd listen to you. I want you to tell them that I haven't done anything wicked or unusual but, under the circumstances, essentially right."

"And what have you done?" asked Bryan.

"Well," said Clarita, "you may have heard that my friends, the Warrens, are getting a divorce."

"In order, as I understand, for you and Carl Warren to be married."

She looked him straight in the eye and gave a quick nod of her little black head. He found himself liking her better than he had expected. Crystal may be hard, but it is clear and bright. "Yes," she said, "that's the idea, but you can't imagine how my parents are carrying on about it. I can't make out exactly what it is they object to. Even they must have heard of divorce before now, you know. Perhaps it is that Mimi Warren and I have managed to remain friends. I assure you it's easier to talk the situation over with Mimi than it is with my mother. We've got into such a jam that we don't mention it any more. So I thought I'd come and tell you about it, and get you to do the talking for me."

Tell him about it! He thought her incredibly innocent not to know that he already knew all about it. The Andrews had talked it over with him at every stage. They had given him a picture of the Warrens—spoiled children who had married without responsibility and were now separating without regret in order to form new ties equally unimportant. Suddenly he realized that this picture might not be quite accurate; the middle-aged seldom accept the love affairs of youth with sufficient seriousness.

He decided to be moderately candid. "Your father has spoken to me about all this," he said. "But I think you misunderstand the reason for his objections. The point he made to me was that he wasn't convinced you were really in love with Warren."

Clarita gave a sharp laugh. "Now what could be more ridiculous than that? How in thunder can my father tell whether I'm in love or not? How can any outsider, but least of all my father, who has been married twenty years to my mother and has never dared look sideways at another woman? Or if he ever knew anything about love, it must be pretty old stuff."

Her laugh had ranged Bryan definitely against her—definitely with his own generation. He thought: "She's a silly girl. What does she know about the agony that brought her into the world, or the pennies eked out to give her an education, or the long nights lost over her childish diseases? There's no use in being angry." But still he was angry.

"I suppose you would admit," he said, "that it would be a pity to break up the marriage if you have no real intention —"

She interrupted him. "I don't admit it at all," she answered. "That's mere sentimentality, if you will forgive my saying so. You must know enough about modern psychology, Doctor Bryan, to know that some marriages can't possibly succeed. This one is a mess. Carl gives poor little Mimi a terrific sense of her inferiority, and she is utterly incapable of satisfying a man like Carl Warren. Why, she's practically frigid."

"He tells you this?"

"They both tell me. We have no concealments. We have all three talked it over frankly. I suppose you can't understand that at all."

"Clarita," he said, "do you know what Oliver Cromwell wrote to the Scotch Commissioners?"



She Looked Down From Vast Heights Upon Her Mother, Who Had Been a Greater Beauty Than Clarita Would Ever Be



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Her brow contracted. "Oliver Cromwell?" she exclaimed, as if annoyed that his name should be dragged into a contemporary discussion.

"Yes; he wrote: 'I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.'"

She did not smile at his quotation, but she answered it: "I do think so. Of course I have my doubts. I don't suppose anyone was ever in love without having moments of doubting their own feelings."

"Some people have been, Clarita."

"Only I won't admit that my parents are the final judges of the validity of a great passion. That's absurd. They seem to think no love safe unless the lovers met at the Yale Prom and had never been kissed up to that moment."

"You're very contemptuous, Clarita. You know that isn't what they really think."

She shrugged her shoulders. "That's the way they talk."

"My dear child," he said, "I wonder how much you really know about your parents."

"Know about them?"

"About the true story of their lives."

The question hardly attracted her attention. "Well," she said, "let me see what do I know. That they were very young and met at the Yale Prom and fell in love, to the delight of their parents, and got married the day after father graduated, and — Is there anything more than that to know?"

"Yes, quite a lot." He rose, and, selecting a pipe from the mantelpiece, stood above her on the hearth rug as he filled and lit it. "Quite a lot, Clarita. Those two people have had strange histories."

She gave a hoot of not ill-tempered amusement. "You mean that they have secrets—father and mother? Not guilty ones, I hope."

He did not respond to her merriment. "I don't know whether you'd think them guilty or not, but

I'm sure of this—that if you knew, you would not speak as you just have. They know something about love, my dear. I give you my word."

"Doctor Bryan, how simply priceless! Tell me the story; you must tell me!"

"Obviously, I can't. I can't violate their confidences, least of all to you. I can't even be sure they have told each other."

"They are guilty secrets then?"

"I can tell you only this, Clarita—that the stories are so wild, so dramatic, that for you to sit here saying that they are not people who could possibly know anything about love—it's comic, Clarita; it's laughable; it makes you seem ridiculous."

"Doctor Bryan, I shall not go until you tell me."

He had spoken under the spur of anger, and he already regretted it. What right had he to speak? What would Ben and Clara say if they knew? Besides, he wanted to get rid of his visitor, and now she would be staying, teasing him for her parents' secrets, until he had barely time to dress for dinner.

His voice took a final tone: "I won't tell you. Ask them. I can't betray them."

"Doctor Bryan, I'd never tell. I give you my solemn word of honor. I may be hard and ruthless, but I am dependable."

He dallied with temptation. He said to himself that she would respect her parents more if she thought of them as less severely respectable.

"You wouldn't mean to tell," he said, "but you mightn't be able to conceal —"

"The one technic I have is the ability to conceal what I know from my parents. I've been practicing it since I was born." She saw with triumph that he was yielding.

"I suppose I'm doing an unforgivable thing," he murmured, but he settled in the chair opposite hers, and after a few minutes of complete silence, he began his narrative.

"It was in France," he said, "during the war. You were a baby—sixteen years ago. There was a famous dancer in Paris, half French and half Russian. We all used to go and watch her whenever we had a chance. Her hair was so black—why, Clarita, that little head of yours is brimsy-brown in comparison—and her back was as straight as an arrow, and yet she moved as gently as a cloud."

"You sound as if you had been in love with her yourself."

"Perhaps I was a little. Perhaps we all were, but most of us never even spoke to her. Your father, however, was luckier. She had been dancing at a great entertainment for the American troops, and when it came time to send her back to Paris after the show, your father, for some reason that I have forgotten, was sent back in the same car. It was very mysterious, creeping along black roads without lights, never knowing what was going to happen. Well, this night plenty happened. They had not gone halfway when their road was bombed by enemy airplanes. They waited an hour under the stars, in immediate danger of death. One of the things the war did to you was to destroy all sense of time, and this was specially noticeable in the matter of love affairs. Before those two drove into Paris at dawn—Paris is awfully pretty at dawn, Clarita—they knew they were irretrievably in love—in love as they had never been before and could never be again. They didn't have any doubts."

He paused, and she said one word: "Father!" He saw she was painfully trying to reconstruct from the middle-aged business man whom she knew, the adventurous young officer of the story. He had a sudden inspiration. He sprang up and brought her from the shelves an album of old pictures. Opening it, he pointed to a snapshot. It was the picture of a slim young man in a Sam Browne belt.

"Is that father?"

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"It is indeed. Keep it before you while I talk. At the time I knew nothing of what had happened, but a week or so later I saw him. Clarita, it was like a miracle. He had always been a nice, kind, immature young American. What was he? Thirty, or so. Well, he had suddenly become a forceful, determined man, tempered, edged like a sword. From that time dates this power of his of going into the silence and producing an unalterable decision—the faculty, you know, that has made his great business success. Psychology, of which you know so much, tells us that any great effort of the will can make these stupendous changes in a human being; and this decision of his to unite his life with this girl —"

"He decided to go off with her?"

"Oh, yes; yes, indeed. She had an old farmhouse in the hills back of the Riviera, and they were going to retire there after the war."

"And just abandon all of us," said Clarita, laying her brightly manicured hand on her chest.

"I don't suppose that he remembered for weeks that he had a wife and children. But at last he came to—at least enough to write to your mother, telling her what had happened—telling her that he was never coming home."

"But he changed his mind? Oh, how could he give it all up? Poor father, I suppose he couldn't free himself from the inhibitions of —"

"The letter was never sent, Clarita. That very day his dancer was shot as a spy."

Clarita gave a gasp. "As a spy? Great heavens! Poor father!" She stared at the doctor. "You're not kidding me, are you, Doctor Bryan?"

"You find it so hard to believe?"

"There's never been the least sign."

"Oh, yes, there have been lots of them; only you haven't had the interest to notice. How about—to mention only one—that little photograph that hangs on his mirror?"

"That's of his sister who died."

"Is that what he told you?"

His smile convinced her. "Oh, poor father," she said. "To come back to mother and family life — I wish for his sake he hadn't."

"What else was there for him to do? And it's pretty lucky for you, my girl, that he did. Do you know what would have happened to you? There wasn't any money in the family in those days. You wouldn't have been brought up luxuriously in New York, going to the best schools and having a great coming-out party. Your mother would have been forced to go back to her father's house in Bangor. You would have been brought up to earn your own living—would have gone to a business college and would at this moment probably be a stenographer in the office of some prominent Bangor business man."

Clarita shuddered at the idea. "I never thought of father's romances affecting my life—I never thought of his

having romances. Isn't it odd that I never suspected anything?"

"No, it's not odd at all," he answered. "You are so easy to deceive, Clarita, because you have made up your mind that nothing that ever happened to the last generation can have any meaning for yours. That's quite a barrier."

She bent over the snapshot once more before she closed the book. "It's funny to think of father going about like that—so young and slender. Have you got one of mother too—not that one in her wedding dress that everyone has? Mother must have been too lovely when she was young."

"She still is lovely, according to my notion."

Even under her new enlightenment, Clarita could hardly accord beauty to forty-five. "Don't tell me that something has happened to mother too."

"Yes, Clarita, something has happened to everybody's mother. People don't live in cloisters just because they happen to be your parents. Hers was a strangely touching story; to me, more romantic than your father's." He pulled himself together. "But I mustn't keep on telling you these things."

"But it's just what you must do. Don't you see that you're making me think of them as real people? It's wonderful."

"Ask her to tell you."

"No, no, she wouldn't do it. Besides, I should be embarrassed. But you make it so human, so real. Please tell me, Doctor Bryan."

He yielded. "I wonder," he said, "if you remember anything about a summer—it must have been about 1920—when your mother took you children abroad and spent a month or so, before your father came over, at a French watering place on the Channel."

Clarita cast her mind back. "I remember it vaguely," she returned. "I remember a pebbly beach and a lot of French and English children wanting to shake hands all the time, and—oh, yes, there was a fire in the hotel and we were carried out in our nightgowns, and Libbie cried because the moon was a queer shape—she'd never seen a waning moon. It didn't amount to much—the fire, I mean, not the moon."

"It didn't amount to much as far as you children were concerned."

"Oh, yes, I remember now." Clarita's memory was stirred. "Mother slept in another part of the house and had rather a near squeak."

"Yes, she had, in more senses than one. She slept in an extension on a little, narrow, side street. No one remembered about her, except a certain young Englishman who had seen her on the beach that morning and had tried to find someone who could introduce him to her. Failing in this, he had followed her home and had noticed where she lived. When everyone

else was rescuing the guests in the main building, he alone went after your mother. He found her unconscious by her window and carried her not only out of the house but across the street and up to his own room. You may imagine it was a surprise to your mother to come to and find herself in her nightgown in the room of a total stranger. But like many of his race, he inspired instant confidence. He accepted her profound gratitude and she accepted his dressing gown, and she was about to leave when she found him blocking the door. He suggested that it would be a gracious act if she would bestow on him the life he had saved. Englishmen, you know—or perhaps you don't know, Clarita—move very rapidly from point to point in matters of the emotions. They don't let the grass grow under their feet, as soon as they know what they want. This one, it seems, had fallen in love with your mother at first sight, and he thought this an excellent opportunity of saying so."

"Mother must have been desperately shocked."

"Perhaps, Clarita, or perhaps not so much as you think. Anyhow, she said no; but he had just saved her life, and I fancy it was a nice, gentle, little no. Well, that type of man—rich, attractive, the holder of an old title—is not accustomed to being denied. Your mother's 'no' changed a sudden fancy into a great passion. For the three weeks that remained, he followed her about Étretat, or wherever it was, like a dog, but a very clever, attractive and admired dog—a dog that everyone else wanted to own. Your mother is fond of animals and she ended by becoming uncommonly fond of this one."

"You mean she fell in love with him?"

"Of course she fell very much in love with him. Who wouldn't have? I saw his photograph only the other day in a London weekly, in a gray top hat at Ascot—a very distinguished-looking man—and then you know, Clarita, every woman would like to be a duchess."

"A duchess! You don't tell me my mother might have been a duchess."

"She very nearly was."

"Oh, Doctor Bryan, I wish she had. Think what fun it would have been to be brought up in a castle. I suppose dukes have castles. You're sure he really did want to marry her?"

"Absolutely certain; although it isn't easy for a man of high rank and political position to marry a divorced woman in England, but he did want to—in fact, he thoroughly intended to, and whatever he intended to do, he did. But, unfortunately, in this case he made one condition—a rather stern condition. He would not let her keep her children; he asked her to promise that she would never bring them to England. You see, in all their agonizing

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talks about their future, your mother had emphasized not only her obligations to your father but her affection for him, and the duke came to hate and fear him. He was of a deeply jealous nature. He didn't want her to retain any tie with the past, and the idea of having another man's children about his house was more than he could bear."

"I can understand that," said the girl.

"If he had taken a great fancy to you," Bryan went on, "I suppose he might have overcome this feeling, but the fact is, Clarita, that you were not exactly a winning child. He seems to have found you a hard, undisciplined little brat."

"You mean it was just on our account that mother refused to get a divorce?"

"Almost entirely, I should say."

"You think that very noble, Doctor Bryan, but I'm not sure that I do. After all, it was her life, and children have been brought up by their fathers before now without any great hardship."

"Do you know who would have brought you up, if your mother had left you? It would have been your Grandmother Andrews in Kansas City."

"What? That old harridan?"

"Yes. Under the guise of a puritanical religion, she was one of the cruelest old women I ever knew. Yet your father doted on her. He would have shipped you straight off to her, and would have thought that he was doing a fine thing for you."

He interrupted himself briskly. "And now, my dear, you must go home and let me dress for dinner. But I hope you'll admit that, whatever your feeling for Carl Warren may be, your parents have a right to be heard on the subject."

She nodded. "It's true," she said; "you have made my romance look a little tame. It's true I don't love Carl like that. We're not so romantic as the former generation—or perhaps I'm really not in love with him." She rose to her feet. "Isn't it a funny thing, Doctor Bryan? If I hadn't happened to come here this afternoon, I should never have known anything about all this."

Bryan nodded. "Yes, it is funny," he said.

She began to pick up the débris, buckled her shoe, pulled on her hat. At the door she turned: "You know," she said, "I'm not sure that you haven't been hypnotizing me. Those stories, they are so very dramatic."

He smiled. "I'll tell you a secret, Clarita. All lives are dramatic when you really know them; the only lives that seem undramatic are the lives you don't know anything about."

He dressed quickly. He had at first been intoxicated by the success of his diplomacy, but now he began to be a little frightened. It was possible that Ben and Clara would not approve. He expected them to arrive a few minutes ahead of his other guests; Clara usually seated his dinners for him. As a matter of fact, they were already in the library when he came down, fastening the last strap of his waistcoat. He looked at them with pride. He had been perfectly right; as figures in a past romance they were still possible. Ben not quite so much; he had grown a little heavy, a little rooted in his own opinions, but Clara was lovely—blond hair turned snowy-white alters its owner so little.

"She would have made a good duchess," he thought. "Ben dallying on the coast of France—I'm not so sure about."

Presently Clara went into the dining room with her little sheaf of place cards for the table; the two men were alone.

Bryan wasted no time. "Look here, Ben," he said. "I did something this afternoon that I think worked like a charm, but you mayn't like it. If not, you can repudiate me entirely. Clarita was here, asking my advice and help about her love affair. I felt a need of building up you and Clara in her opinion, as experts in romance. I invented a pretty swell past for you, my lad—a love affair during the war; a beautiful Russian girl, the world well lost, drama, passion, catastrophe, and finally a return to your domestic duties."

Ben was staring at him. "But, John," he said, "Irene was not a Russian."

Before Bryan had time to answer, the servant opened the door and announced the first of his guests.

All the time he was greeting them and making polite conversation and introducing strangers, he was saying to himself: "Ben, of all people; I had no idea. So I'm not a great inventor of plots, but just a commonplace biographer. Who the deuce was Irene? I never heard that there was a girl in France. Ben may never forgive me, if there's some truth in the story. I may have made a lot of trouble, and yet I can't be sorry. It certainly changed that child's point of view a lot. I wonder if Clara knows. And how about Clara's story?"

She was sitting on his left at table, but much as he wanted to talk to her, he could not turn until the wife of the visiting surgeon released him; and she showed no disposition to do so. She was telling him some of her husband's triumphs; he couldn't interrupt. As he bent an apparently attentive ear, he was thinking: "Not Clara; it can't be true of Clara. There I was romancing. I know her mind like a book. If there had ever been another man in her life, I should have guessed."

Only with ice cream was he free to turn.

"I had a visit from your daughter this afternoon," he said.

Mrs. Andrews' sapphire eyes lit up. "Oh, John, I'm so glad she came to you. She won't listen to me when I tell her she isn't really in love with this dreadful young man."

"You'll find she's more willing to listen to you now."

"If you've accomplished that, you've done a miracle; but then I've always known that you were a miracle worker now and then."

He felt a little ashamed of himself. "I'm afraid you may not quite approve of my methods," he said. "Let me ask you a question. Suppose you had had a love affair in your life—your later life, I mean—would you mind very much if your daughter heard about it?"

She gave a little cry: "John, what are you trying to say to me?"

"Nothing very dreadful—a hypothetical question. Suppose there had once been a beautiful young man who wanted you to leave Ben and the children—suppose, of course, that you had behaved perfectly, and yet, at the same time, had very much wanted to go—would you be angry if Clarita found this out in some way?"

Her lips parted to emit a sigh. "No," she said, "I've always meant to tell her sometime."