

A MATTER OF HUSBANDS
a play in one-act

by Ferenc Molnar

translated by Benjamin Glazer

The following one-act play is reprinted from *Ten Minute Plays*. Ed. Pierre Loving. New York: Brentano's, 1923. It is now in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

CHARACTERS

Famous Actress
Earnest Young Woman

[The scene is a drawing room, but a screen, a sofa and a chair will do, provided that the design and colorings are exotic and suggestive of the apartment of the famous Hungarian actress in which this dialogue takes place. The time is late afternoon, and when the curtain rises the Earnest Young Woman is discovered, poised nervously on the edge of a gilt chair. It is plain she has been sitting there a long time. For perhaps the fiftieth time she is studying the furnishings of the room and regarding the curtained door with a glance that would be impatient if it were not so palpably frightened. And now and then she licks her lips as if her mouth was dry. She is dressed in a very modest frock and wears her hat and furs. At last the Famous Actress enters through the curtained door at the right which leads to her boudoir.]

FAMOUS ACTRESS: You wished to see me?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: *[She gulps emotionally]* Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: What can I do for you?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: *[Extends her arms in a beseeching gesture]* Give me back my husband!

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Give you back your husband!

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Yes. [The FAMOUS ACTRESS only stares at her in speechless bewilderment.] You are wondering which one he is.... He is a blond man, not very tall, wears spectacles. He is a lawyer, your manager's lawyer. Alfred is his first name.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Oh! I have met him--yes.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: I know you have. I implore you, give him back to me.

[There is a long pause.]

FAMOUS ACTRESS: You mustn't mistake my silence for embarrassment. I am at a loss because--I don't quite see how I can give you back your husband when I haven't got him to give.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: You just admitted that you knew him.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: That scarcely implies that I have taken him from you. Of course I know him. He drew up my last contract. And it seems to me I have seen him once or twice since then--backstage. A rather nice-spoken, fair-haired man. Did you say he wore spectacles?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: I don't remember him with spectacles.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: He probably took them off. He wanted to look his best to you. He is in love with you. He never takes them off when I'm around. He doesn't care how he looks when I'm around. He doesn't love me. I implore you, give him back to me!

FAMOUS ACTRESS: If you weren't such a very foolish young woman I should be very angry with you. Wherever did you get the idea that I have taken your husband from you?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: He sends you flowers all the time.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: That's not true.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: It is!

FAMOUS ACTRESS: It isn't. He never sent me a flower in all his life. Did he tell you he did?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: No. I found out at the florist's. The flowers are sent to your dressing room twice a week and charged to him.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: That's a lie.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Do you mean to say that *I* am lying?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: I mean to say that *someone* is lying to you.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: [*Fumbles in her bag for a letter*] And what about this letter?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Letter?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: He wrote it to you. And he said--

FAMOUS ACTRESS: He wrote it to me? Let me see.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: No. I'll read it to you. [*She opens it and reads mournfully*] "My darling, Shan't be able to call for you at the theater tonight. Urgent business. A thousand apologies. Ten thousand kisses. Alfred."

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Oh!

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: I found it on his desk this morning. He probably intended to send it to the theater by messenger. But he forgot it. And I opened it. [*She weeps.*]

FAMOUS ACTRESS: You mustn't cry.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: [*Sobbing*] Why mustn't I? You steal my husband and I mustn't cry! Oh, I know how little it means to you. And how easy it is for you. One night you dress like a royal princess, and the next night you undress like a Greek goddess. You blacken your eyebrows and redden your lips and wax your lashes and paint your face. You have cosmetics and bright lights to make you

seem beautiful. An author's lines to make you seem witty and wise. No wonder a poor, simple-minded lawyer falls in love with you. What chance have I against you in my cheap little frock, my own lips and eyebrows, my own unstudied ways? I don't know how to strut and pose and lure a man. I haven't got Mr. Shakespeare to write beautiful speeches for me. In reality you may be more stupid than I am, but I admit that when it comes to alluring men I am no match for you.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: [*Without anger, slowly, regards her appraisingly*] This is a very interesting case.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: What is?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Yours.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Mine? What do you mean?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: I mean that I never received a flower, or a letter, or anything else from your husband. Tell me, haven't you and your husband been getting on rather badly of late?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Yes, of course.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: You used to be very affectionate to each other?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Why, yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: And of late you have been quite cold?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Of course! A typical case.... My dear, if you knew how often we actresses meet this sort of thing! It is perfectly clear that your husband has been playing a little comedy to make you jealous, to revive your interest in him.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: [*Dumbfounded, staring*] Do you really think that? Do you mean to say such a thing has happened to you before?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Endless times. It happens to every actress who is moderately pretty and successful. It is one of the oldest expedients in the world, and we actresses are such conspicuous targets for it! There is scarcely a man

connected with the theater who doesn't make use of us in that way some time or another--authors, composers, scene designers, lawyers, orchestra leaders, even the managers themselves. To regain a wife or sweetheart's affections all they need to do is invent a love affair with one of us. The wife is always so ready to believe it. Usually we don't know a thing about it. But even when it is brought to our notice we don't mind so much. At least we have the consolation of knowing that we are the means of making many a marriage happy which might otherwise have ended in the divorce court.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: But how--how could I know?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: [*With a gracious little laugh*] There, dear, you mustn't apologize. You couldn't know, of course. It seems so plausible. You fancy your husband in an atmosphere of perpetual temptation, in a backstage world full of beautiful sirens without scruples or morals. One actress, you suppose, is more dangerous than a hundred ordinary women. You hate us and fear us. None understands that better than your husband, who is evidently a very cunning lawyer. And so he plays on your fear and jealousy to regain the love you deny him. He writes a letter and leaves it behind him on the desk. Trust a lawyer never to do that unintentionally. He orders flowers for me by telephone in the morning and probably cancels the order the moment he reaches his office. By the way, hasn't he a lock of my hair?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Yes. In his desk drawer. I brought it with me.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Yes. They bribe my hair-dresser to steal from me. It is a wonder I have any hair left at all.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: [*Happily*] Is that how he got it?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: I can't imagine how else. Tell me, hasn't he left any of my love letters lying around?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: [*In alarm*] No.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Don't be alarmed. I haven't written him any.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Then what made you--?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: I might have if he had come to me frankly and said: "I say, Sara, will you do something for me? My wife and I aren't getting on so well.

Would you write me a passionate love letter that I can leave lying around at home where she may find it?" I should certainly have done it for him. I'd have written a letter that would have made you weep into your pillow for a fortnight. I wrote ten like that for a very eminent playwright once. But he had no luck with them. His wife was such a proper person she returned them all to him unread.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: How clever you are! How good!

FAMOUS ACTRESS: I'm neither better nor worse than any other girl in the theater. Even though you do consider us such monsters.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: [*Contritely*] I have been a perfect fool.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Well, you do look a bit silly, standing there with tears in your eyes, and your face flushed with happiness because you have discovered that a little blond man with spectacles loves you, after all. My dear, no man deserves to be adored as much as that. But then it's your own affair, isn't it?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Yet I want to give you a parting bit of advice: don't let him fool you like this again.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: He won't. Never fear!

FAMOUS ACTRESS: No matter what you may find in his pockets--letters, handkerchiefs, my photograph, no matter what flowers he sends, or letters he writes, or appointments he makes--don't be taken in a second time.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: You may be sure of that. And you won't say anything to him about my coming here, will you?

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Not a word. I'm angry with him for not having come to me frankly for permission to use my name the way he did.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: You are a dear, and I don't know how to thank you.

FAMOUS ACTRESS: Now you mustn't begin crying all over again.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN: You have made me so happy!

[She kisses the FAMOUS ACTRESS impetuously, wetting her cheek with tears; then she rushes out. The door closes behind her. There is a pause.]

FAMOUS ACTRESS: *[Goes to the door of her boudoir, calls]* All right, Alfred. You can come in now. She has gone.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ECHO
a play in one-act

by Joseph T. Shipley

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CHARACTERS

HAROLD, the author
MARY, his wife
MYSELF, the rational side of the author's mind
I, the emotional self

[The curtain rises upon darkness; in the interior of a brain. Two shapes appear, hovering; they are almost identical, except that Myself is sober, sharp-eyed, cynical (reason), while I is jaunty and self-assured (emotion). They are not on very good terms, for they constantly disagree. They therefore speak sharply and abruptly to one another, like a husband and wife both of whom married for money. I speaks in a light, half-jesting, girlish voice; Myself talks in a deep, restrained tone.]

I: You're a fool if you go fussing with that subject. There's much more money in writing a bedroom farce.

MYSELF: You know your dreaming will never make any money. You've got to look at the facts.

I: You don't have to stare at yourself all the time, as though you were looking for Jehovah.

MYSELF: I am looking at Jehovah--and Satan.

I: If you watched other things more, life wouldn't be such a dreary mess. Now those ankles this afternoon.

MYSELF: Sensualist! I tell you I've got to understand.

I: Analyze! Analyze! Don't you see that all the fun in the world comes from misunderstanding? On the day when everyone understands all his neighbors, the world will collapse of boredom. I'd rather misunderstand than miss the fun of misunderstanding.

MYSELF: You can't help misunderstanding, because you never think. But I have to worry through our life; why shouldn't I know what I'm doing?

I: You'll be sorry; then you'll keep quiet and hope for me to bring you soothing fancies.

MYSELF: You keep quiet until I do.

[The stage lights dimly, and reveals a restaurant table at which are seated two dim figures, Harold and Mary. They talk at once, while I and Myself slide deeper into the shadows.]

HAROLD: It's just five years today.

MARY: It's odd how life sweeps you on and on. The little nearby things seem big; they blot out the view as though you had your eyes pressed against them, and when you lift your head--it's five years.

HAROLD: So it's seemed short, has it? But it wasn't a little matter five years ago.

MARY: *[with a short sigh]* No; my six years before that with John had made me a wholly new being. If it hadn't been for my life with him, I'd have been incapable of taking the step I did.

HAROLD: So I owe to him the fact that you're with me. He made you broadminded enough to be able--

[His voice dies; there is an interruption above. The two sitting below grow scarcely visible; they eat the food before them. The shapes above grow brighter.]

I: You'd better stop there! Don't ask that question!

MYSELF: Fool! How can I keep from asking it, once it's occurred to me?

I: Tell her your plans for the future. Tell her where we'll both be at the end of the next five years.

MYSELF: How do I know where we'll be! Keep quiet.

[They fade away, and the table below brightens again.]

HAROLD: Do you regret?

MARY: Regret what?

HAROLD: What you did five years ago. Coming with me.

MARY: Of course not, dear. John was all right in his way, but I never could make him understand--

HAROLD: He didn't understand you?

MARY: That's not what I mean. He--Oh, just in little matters; but his way of doing things sometimes frayed my nerves. And he never seemed to mind. He never changed--

HAROLD: But look at him today! Successful, prosperous. Two hits playing on Broadway at the same time. You'd be having a glorious time now.

MARY: Instead of cooking your meals and darning your socks while your plays come back from the managers? Silly boy! Do you think my happiness depends on how much you earn?

HAROLD: I think you do half regret.

MARY: I love you, Harold.

[They fade into darkness again, as the shapes appear above.]

MYSELF: You quit interfering with my work! Here I am trying to see straight, and you come slipping in your sweet romantic heroine sob-stuff.

I: You know she loves me. Why shouldn't she be happy, even if things aren't all just what she wants? Do you still think you must have money for real love?

MYSELF: No, but only a dreamer like you says happiness feeds on love--and disappointments.

I: She's got what she loves.

MYSELF: She has no leisure to love him. I wish I could get inside her and see what she really feels.

[Mary appears down below; she looks up and speaks to the shapes.]

MARY: Don't you suppose I can take a little waiting with a smile? It won't be hard times forever, dear. This new play you're planning certainly ought to go across.

MYSELF: And if it doesn't?

MARY: If it doesn't, one will soon. You know I love you; and if I could give up John for you, you must be worthwhile.

MYSELF: *[bitterly]* So he's still your standard. Well, I suppose we must go on. That's the definition of life.

[The shapes disappear, and the table and Harold light up again.]

MARY: Harold, I wish you'd break your bread instead of biting it.

HAROLD: 7,492. It's time to start something else.

MARY: There's no use starting anything else until you stop that habit. I'd be only too glad not to have to talk of it.

HAROLD: You'd reform the world, if you had a chance.

MARY: Thank you, I find it hard enough to reform one man at a time. *[There is a slight pause.]* What are you staring at, Harold?

HAROLD: *[slowly]* Someone I thought I knew. *[Alarmed.]* Don't turn around, Mary!

MARY: What do you mean? Is it--John?

HAROLD: Yes. Have you finished your tea?

MARY: Not quite. Is he alone?

HAROLD: Yes. He's looking mighty fine, too.

[Lights out below and the shapes are bodies again.]

MYSELF: Careful, now; don't put too much white-wash on yourself. You know you're jealous.

I: I don't have to go yelling it all over the place, do I? I can talk sweetly about him. Anyway, I've got her.

MYSELF: Don't flatter yourself; she probably wishes she were with him.

[Lights on again below--shapes disappear.]

HAROLD: He looks as though he owns the place.

MARY: He always did look dignified.

HAROLD: Hands his hat and cane to the waiter like a lord. Funny!

MARY: What?

HAROLD: His hat's just like mine. *[Slowly.]* You selected this hat for me.

MARY: Well, what of it?

[Lights change.]

I: Now I'm through! Damn it, you're going just about the limit. Why can't you think for a while about that peach at the third table?

MYSELF: Shut up!

I: Look at that flapper! She's dancing as though she had an option on an angel in the garden of Eden.

MYSELF: She'll wake up in Hell, U.S.A. Let me alone.

I: Look how pretty Mary is! She's as rosy as the maid that milks the cows in the advertisements. Touch her foot under the table.

MYSELF: I see how red she is. She's flushed because she thinks John's looking at her.

[Lights change.]

HAROLD: Mary, how did you come to like this kind of soft hat?

MARY: How queerly you ask that! I don't know; I just like it, that's all.

HAROLD: What kind of cigarettes does John smoke?

MARY: I--I don't remember.

HAROLD: I bet you do, and I can tell you: he smokes St. Anthonies. Do you know how I know? Because that's the brand you've taught me to use.

MARY: What do you mean?

HAROLD: I used to read the *Tribune*, now I read the *World*. I used to eat frankfurters and hamburger; now I order only steaks and chicken. I used to go to dances in a business suit; now I have a full-dress *and* a Tuxedo. Why? Why?

MARY: *[falteringly]* Why, because I like those things, and like you to look well.

HAROLD: No, because *he* likes those things! You've spent five years trying to make me over into the image of him, to fashion my body and my mind so that I am no longer myself, but John, John, JOHN! I'll be damned if I'll stand for it! You won't make me over! I'll--

[Lights change.]

I: Come, come, what's all this heroics? Are you taking up my game? Be a man and stick to the woman you've chosen! It's nonsense, anyway, to say you're someone else. How can you ever be anything but yourself?

MYSELF: You're right. Run around the cage, and wait for death to let down the bars.

[Lights change.]

HAROLD: Forgive me, Mary. I've a bad headache. Shall we go home?

MARY: *[rising]* You're a queer fellow. Seems as though I'll never quite hold you down. *[She looks furtively around to see if John is watching.]* Do I look all right?

[They start away, and the table disappears, leaving only the shapes.]

I: Well, now what are you going to do with it?

MYSELF: Try to get it used, of course.

I: What, that?

MYSELF: Why not? Isn't it a good plot? Isn't it well handled?

I: Don't feel so elated; I'm responsible for the writing. But you can't use that story; it's true!

MYSELF: Well, what of it?

I: If you have it published, John will see it, you fool! And he'll know that he has won. He'll despise you.

MYSELF: Romanticist! John's a decent chap. He released Mary when he learned we loved one another. He'll understand.

I: Very well, then; he'll understand--and pity you.

MYSELF: I give it up. He beats me here, too. Am I the mirror of him? Must I smash the mirror?

[The light of the brain dies out. A low brightening reveals a bed in one corner of the stage. In the bed Mary is lying; Harold is standing near it, beginning to undress. As the light grows, Mary, startled, cries out.]

MARY: John! *[Then she sits up and looks around.]* Oh, Harold! You frightened me!

HAROLD: Yes; I heard you call me in your sleep.

MARY: What are you doing up so late? Is anything wrong?

HAROLD: No; everything's all right. I've just been thinking out the plot for my play.

MARY: Oh! I'm sleepy. Did you have a good idea?

HAROLD: It's no good. Go to sleep. Just a foolish thought about a man who wakes up one day and discovers he's an echo.

[She settles under the covers again, as the curtain falls.]

CURTAIN