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A Matter of Husbands

Ferenc Molnar

Translated by Benjamin Glazer

Before reading

Answer the following questions.

- Have you ever watched a play in a theatre?
- Can actors use their acting skills in their real life? Why?

Widely regarded as Hungary's most celebrated and controversial playwright, **Ferenc Molnár's** (1878–1952) primary aim was to entertain people by transforming his personal experiences into literary works of art. Out of his many plays, *The Devil* (1907), *Lilion* (1909), *The Guardsman* (1910), *The Swan* (1920), and *The Play's the Thing* (1926) endure as classics. He immigrated to the United States to escape persecution of Hungarian Jews during World War II and later adopted American citizenship. Molnár's plays continue to be relevant and are performed all over the world.



Published in 1923, *A Matter of Husband* sheds light on the basic function of actors: to make the audience believe in illusion.

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)

Glossary

poised (adj.): in a state of balance

gilt (adj.): gold, or something resembling gold, applied to a surface in a thin layer

palpably (adv.): noticeably or clearly

boudoir (n.): a woman's bedroom or small private room

gulp (v.): swallow or breath with difficulty, typically in response to strong emotion

beseeching (adj.): (of a look or tone of voice) appealing or begging for something

implore (v.): beg someone desperately to do something

strut (v.): walk with a stiff, erect and apparently arrogant way

lure (v.): to tempt or attract a person or an animal

appraisingly (n.): in a way that shows you judge the value, quality or nature of something or somebody

expedients (n.): means of attaining an end, especially ones which are convenient but possibly improper or immoral

scruples (n.): feelings of doubt or hesitation with regard to the morality or propriety of course of action

contritely (adj.): in a way that shows you feel very sorry and guilty for something bad you have done

impetuously (adj.): in an impulsive way, without considering the results

Understanding the text

Answer the following questions.

- a. What favour does Earnest Young Woman ask from The Famous Actress?
- b. What, according to The Earnest Young Woman, are the indications that her husband has fallen in love with Famous Actress?
- c. Is Earnest Young Woman convinced by the argument of Famous Actress? How?
- d. Where is the Earnest Young Woman's husband hiding himself as they are talking about him?
- e. When do you feel that Famous Actress is really good at acting?
- f. How do we come to know that Famous Actress and the husband of Earnest Young Woman are in love?
- g. Write down the plot of the play in a paragraph.

Reference to the context

- a. Sketch the character of Famous Actress.
- b. Shed light on the difference between an ordinary woman and an actress.
- c. According to Famous Actress, men associated with theatre use the theatre actresses to make their estranged wives jealous so as to woo them back. Do you agree with her argument? Why? Why not?
- d. How does Famous Actress make a fool of Earnest Young Woman?
- e. The conversation between the two women takes place on the stage of the theatre. What role does the theatre house as a part of setting play in *A Matter for Husband*?
- f. What do you think about the ending of the play?

Reference beyond the text

- a. Write a paragraph describing your favourite actor/actress.
- b. John Cassavetes says, “I’m very worried about the depiction of women on the screen. It’s gotten worse than ever and it’s related to their being either high- or low-class concubines There’s nothing to do with the dreams of women, or of woman as the dream, nothing to do with the quirky part of her, the wonder of her.” How do you assess Famous Actress in the light of Cassavetes’ argument about the portrayal of women?