

MAMA'S BANK ACCOUNT

By Kathryn Forbes . . . Adapted into an
RKO Motion Picture Based on the Stage
Version by John van Druten entitled

"I REMEMBER MAMA"

IRENE DUNNE
AS MAMA

A Bantam Book
COMPLETE & UNABRIDGED



Mama's Bank Account

FROM WHICH RKO MADE THE HIT MOVIE
I REMEMBER MAMA

KATHRYN FORBES

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FOR MAMA
FOR BOB
AND FOR THE McLEAN BOYS

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REMEMBER MAMA?—
YOU'LL NEVER FORGET HER!

Warm, witty, and wonderful, *Mama's Bank Account* ("I Remember Mama") unashamedly tugs at your heart—a chronicle of a woman proudly in love . . . with her own family. Mama says she is a San Franciscan, a Norwegian, an American citizen. You'll say she is all of these, but, more important, she is a mother. Always it is Mama who pilots her family through the little storms which beset their lives in those dramatic years following San Francisco's great earthquake.

And always you will remember Mama—how she stole into the hospital, at a forbidden hour, to see her daughter; how she cured Dagmar's cat; how she flew in an airplane just to make sure it was safe for papa. And you'll agree with Dorsey McCarthy of the *Chicago Sun* who said, ". . . If there are any who may be called 100 per cent Americans, they are people like this Norwegian family, who brought with them from the old country traits of courage, honesty, and straight thinking which we like to think make up the American character. If you have a friend who is sick, or if you are feeling low yourself, get a copy of *Mama's Bank Account*. It will make you feel much better."

You can bank on Mama . . . she's quite a woman.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MAMA: She filled her children's mouths with the good *kjodboller* (meat balls) and filled their hearts with love.

PAPA: He brought home his pay in a little envelope, counted it at the supper table, and gave up smoking when the money didn't go around.

KATRIN: She swapped the graduation present she had wanted for the family brooch—and won a cup of coffee in the bargain.

CHRISTINE: She thought she'd die in childbirth, and even asked Mama to take care of her baby, but Mama just smiled.

DAGMAR: She loved her cat, even though it spat at her—called it Elizabeth, even though it could never have kittens.

NELS: He didn't know the difference between having money and having a family to be proud of—until Mama taught him.

UNCLE CHRIS: The "black Norwegian" was a terrible sinner—and a drinker—but Mama knew he was—"good man."

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Chapter 1

MAMA AND HER BANK ACCOUNT

FOR AS LONG as I could remember, the small cottage on Castro Street had been home. The familiar background was there; Mama, Papa, my only brother, Nels. There was my sister Christine, closest to me in age, yet ever secret and withdrawn—and the littlest sister, Dagmar.

There, too, came the Aunts, Mama's four sisters. Aunt Jenny, who was the oldest and the bossiest; Aunt Sigrid; Aunt Marta; and our maiden Aunt, Trina.

The Aunts' old bachelor uncle, my Great-uncle Chris—the "black Norwegian"—came with his great impatience, his shouting and stamping. And brought mystery and excitement to our humdrum days.

But the first awareness was of Mama.

I remember that every Saturday night Mama would sit down by the scrubbed kitchen table and with much wrinkling of usually placid brows count out the money Papa had brought home in the little envelope.

There would be various stacks.

"For the landlord," Mama would say, piling up the big silver pieces.

"For the grocer." Another group of coins.

"For Katrin's shoes to be half-soled." And Mama would count out the little silver.

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"Teacher says this week I'll need a notebook." That would be Christine or Nels or I.

Mama would solemnly detach a nickel or a dime and set it aside.

We would watch the diminishing pile with breathless interest.

At last, Papa would ask, "Is all?"

And when Mama nodded, we could relax a little and reach for schoolbooks and homework. For Mama would look up then and smile. "Is good," she'd murmur. "We do not have to go to the Bank."

It was a wonderful thing, that Bank Account of Mama's. We were all so proud of it. It gave us such a warm, secure feeling. No one else we knew had money in a big bank downtown.

I remember when the Jensens down the street were put out because they couldn't pay their rent. We children watched the big strange men carry out the furniture, took furtive notice of poor Mrs. Jensen's shamed tears, and I was choked with sudden fear. This, then, happened to people who did not have the stack of coins marked "Landlord." Might this, could this, violence happen to us?

I clutched Christine's hands. "We have a Bank Account," she reassured me calmly, and suddenly I could breathe again.

When Nels graduated from grammar school he wanted to go on to High. "Is good," Mama said, and Papa nodded approvingly.

"It will cost a little money," Nels said.

Eagerly we brought up chairs and gathered around the table. I took down the gaily painted box that

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Aunt Sigrid had sent us from Norway one Christmas and laid it carefully in front of Mama.

This was the "Little Bank." Not to be confused, you understand, with the big Bank downtown. The "Little Bank" was used for sudden emergencies, such as the time Christine broke her arm and had to be taken to a doctor, or when Dagmar got croup and Papa had to go to the drugstore for medicine to put into the steam kettle.

Nels had it all written out neatly. So much for carfare, for clothes, for notebooks and supplies. Mama looked at the figures for a long time. Then she counted out the money in the Little Bank. There was not enough.

She pursed her lips. "We do not," she reminded us gently, "want to have to go to the Bank."

We all shook our heads.

"I will work in Dillon's grocery after school," Nels volunteered.

Mama gave him a bright smile and laboriously wrote down a sum and added and subtracted. Papa did it in his head. He was very quick on arithmetic. "Is not enough," he said. Then he took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it for a long time. "I give up tobacco," he said suddenly.

Mama reached across the table and touched Papa's sleeve, but she didn't say anything. Just wrote down another figure.

"I will mind the Elvington children every Friday night," I said. "Christine can help me."

"Is good," Mama said.

We all felt very good. We had passed another mile-

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stone without having to go downtown and draw money out of Mama's Bank Account. The Little Bank was sufficient for the present.

So many things, I remember, came out of the Little Bank that year. Christine's costume for the school play, Dagmar's tonsil operation, my Girl Scout uniform. And always, in the background, was the comforting knowledge that should our efforts fail, we still had the Bank to depend upon.

Even when the Strike came, Mama would not let us worry unduly. We all worked together so that the momentous trip downtown could be postponed. It was almost like a game.

During that time Mama "helped out" at Kruper's bakery for a big sack of only slightly stale bread and coffeecake. And as Mama said, fresh bread was not too good for a person and if you put the coffeecake into the hot oven it was nearly as nice as when first baked.

Papa washed bottles at the Castro Creamery every night and they gave him three quarts of fresh milk and all the sour milk he could carry away. Mama made fine cheese.

The day the Strike was over and Papa went back to work, I saw Mama stand a little straighter, as if to get a kink out of her back.

She looked around at us proudly. "Is good," she smiled. "See? We did not have to go down to the Bank."

That was twenty years ago.

Last year I sold my first story. When the check

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came I hurried over to Mama's and put the long green slip of paper in her lap. "For you," I said, "to put in your Bank Account."

And I noticed for the first time how old Mama and Papa looked. Papa seemed shorter, now, and Mama's wheaten braids were sheened with silver.

Mama fingered the check and looked at Papa.

"Is good," she said, and her eyes were proud.

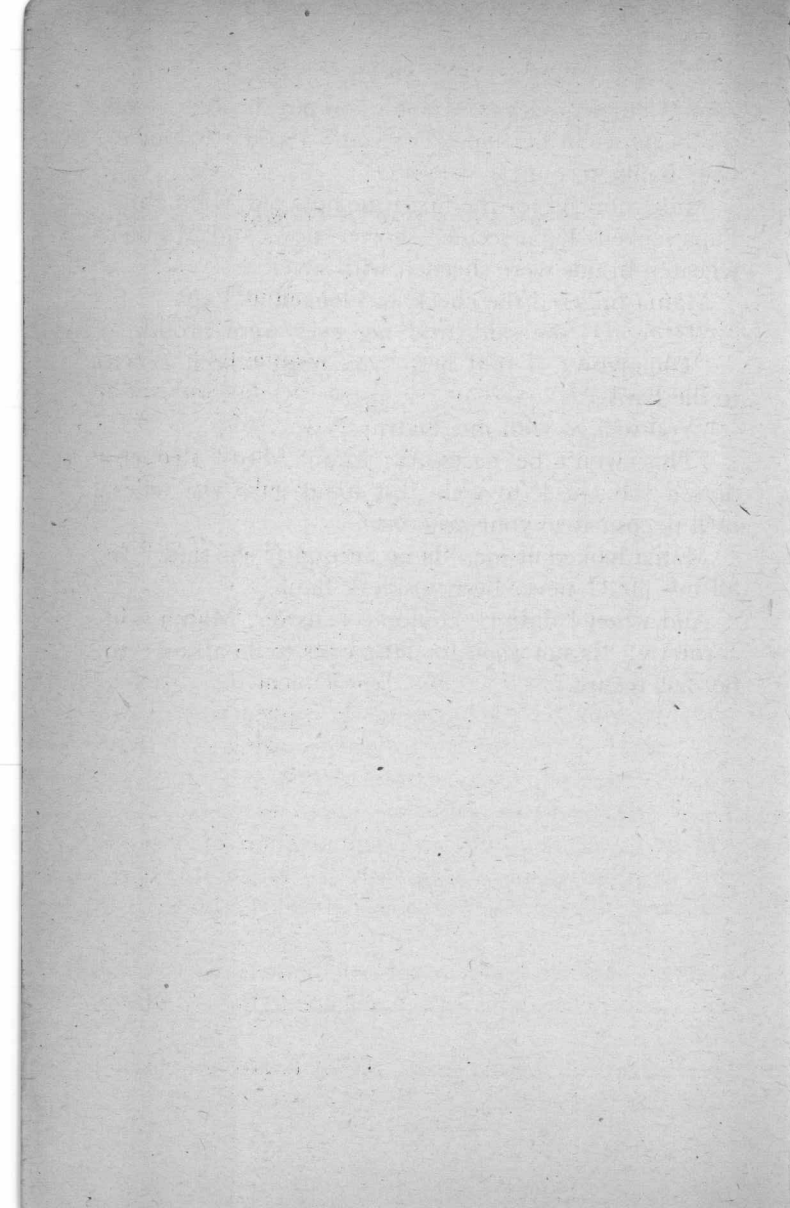
"Tomorrow," I told her, "you must take it down to the Bank."

"You will go with me, Katrin?"

"That won't be necessary, Mama. See? I've endorsed the check to you. Just hand it to the teller, he'll deposit it to your account."

Mama looked at me. "Is no account," she said. "In all my life, I never been inside a Bank."

And when I didn't—couldn't—answer, Mama said earnestly: "Is not *good* for little ones to be afraid—to not feel secure."



Chapter 2

MAMA AND THE IDLE ROOMER

FINANCES WERE LOW for many months after the Strike.

Not that we were to worry, Mama told us, but would we mind having to move the davenport into the kitchen so that we could rent the front room?

We didn't mind, especially after Mama promised that with the money she got she would buy herself the warm coat she needed so badly.

Mr. Hyde called in answer to the neat "Room for Rent" sign in the window.

Mama and I showed him the room. Probably because it was Mama's first experience in "renting," she forgot to ask for references or payment in advance.

"The quarters are eminently satisfactory." Mr. Hyde had such a refined way of speaking. "I'll have my bags sent up this evening. And my books."

Mr. Hyde fitted smoothly into our midst. True, he didn't seem to have any regular hours of business. But he always spoke pleasantly to the children, and whenever he passed Mama in the hall he bowed gallantly.

Papa liked him, too. Mr. Hyde had visited Norway once and could talk with Papa about the wonderful fishing there.

Only Aunt Jenny, who had a boardinghouse of

her own, disapproved. "When," she asked, "is he going to pay his rent?"

"Is hard," Mama said, "to ask. Surely he will pay soon."

But Aunt Jenny only hmphed. She'd seen his kind before, she told us darkly. Mama needn't think she'd be able to buy any new coat with the rent she'd get from *that one*. Gentleman? Hmph!

Now that worried us children. But Mama smiled at our long faces. "Such talk," she scolded, and made coffee for Aunt Jenny to stop her grumbling.

When the rainy weather came, Mama worried that Mr. Hyde's room was cold in the evenings, so she had Papa invite him into the warm kitchen to sit with us. Christine, Nels, and I did our homework under the big lamp, and Papa and Mr. Hyde smoked their pipes by the stove. Mama worked quietly at the sink, setting the bread or making clabber cheese.

Mr. Hyde advised Nels on his high-school courses and sometimes helped him with his Latin. Nels became interested, his grades improved, and he stopped begging Papa to let him quit school and go to work.

After we finished our schoolwork and Mama had settled down in the rocking chair with her mending, Mr. Hyde would tell us of his travels and adventures. Oh, he knew so many things! It was like history and geography coming to life and marching around the room. Mr. Hyde had gone to Oxford and had sailed all around the world.

One night he began to read Dickens to us. Soon it became an accepted fact that after our homework was done, Mr. Hyde would bring down one of his

books and read aloud. And strange new worlds were opened to us.

"They are like sagas," Mama said. "Wonderful."

After *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Mr. Hyde gave us Shakespeare. He had a fine deep voice and sounded as we imagined a great actor would sound.

Even when the warm weather came we children didn't beg to go out in the evenings to play one-foot-off-the-gutter. I think Mama was glad; she never liked us running the streets.

Best of all, Nels went less and less to the street corner to hang around with the neighborhood boys. The night they got into trouble for breaking into Mr. Dillon's store Nels was home with us. He'd wanted to hear the last chapter of *Dombey and Son*.

Mr. Hyde had taken us deep into *Ivanhoe* when he got the letter.

"I must go," he told Mama. "I shall leave the books for Nels and the children. Here is my check for all I owe you, madam, and my profound thanks for your hospitality."

We were sorry to see Mr. Hyde leave, but it was with great excitement that we brought his books out to the kitchen. There were so many of them! We read some of the titles: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Mama dusted them reverently. "So much we can learn," she said. Nels, she added, could read aloud to us each evening, just as Mr. Hyde had done, because

Nels too had a fine voice. I could see that made him very proud.

Mama showed Mr. Hyde's check to Aunt Jenny. "You see?" she said. "The warm coat I shall have after all."

It was too bad that Aunt Jenny was still there when Mr. Kruper came. Mr. Kruper owned the restaurant and bakery down the street and he was angry.

"That man Hyde was a crook!" he shouted. "Look at this check he gave me. It's no good! The bank people tell me he cashed them all over the neighborhood."

Aunt Jenny's triumphant nod said as plainly as words—I told you so.

"I'll bet he owes you folks plenty, too, eh?" Mr. Kruper asked.

Mama looked around at all of us. Her eyes rested longest on Nels. "Read," she told him gently, "read to us from *Ivanhoe*."

Then she walked to the stove and put the check into the flames.

"No," she answered Mr. Kruper. "No. He owes us nothing."

Chapter 3

MAMA AND THE HOSPITAL

MAMA HAD TRIED everything she knew of to stop poor little Dagmar's earache. She'd warmed sweet oil and garlic, used the medicine Mr. Shultz had sent from the drugstore, but nothing had helped.

When Dr. Johnson came, he told Mama that Dagmar must be taken to the hospital.

"At once," he said. "We will have to operate."

I watched Mama's eyes grow dark with fright.

"Can wait?" she asked. "Until my husband comes home from work?"

"No time," the doctor said. "You must decide this morning. An immediate operation is her best chance."

Operation! Mama took a deep breath.

"We go," she said, and took down the Little Bank and emptied its contents onto the kitchen table. Then she looked up at the doctor. "Is enough?" she asked hopefully.

The doctor looked uncomfortable. "I was thinking of the County Hospital," he explained.

"No," Mama said. "No. We pay."

"Well, then, take her to the Clinic Hospital."

"Clinic?"

"Yes. There you pay what you can afford," Dr. Johnson explained. "Your child will have the same care as the other patients."