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## HENRY BELLAMANN'S "MADAME ARNDT"

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### INTRODUCTION

The short story, "Madame Arndt," was written by Henry Bellamann (1882-1945)—music educator, poet, critic, and novelist—in the early summer of 1923, probably while he was on retreat at the Presbyterian camp and resort in Montreat, North Carolina. At the time Bellamann was preparing to enter his seventeenth and final year as Dean of Music at Chicora College, a Presbyterian-affiliated women's college in Columbia, South Carolina. Posts at New York's Juilliard Musical Foundation and at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute followed in later years, as did publication of Bellamann's best-known work, *Kings Row* (1940).

But Bellamann in June, 1923 was known as little more than a piano teacher and a minor Imagist poet who had seen two slender verse collections published. With the spring quarter at Chicora ended, he had fled the South Carolina heat and sought the cool quiet of the North Carolina mountains.

The story he penned that summer is based loosely upon his maternal grandmother, Matilda Tittli Krehbiel Ausfahl (1840-1906), and is set in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century. Both inspirations were dear to Bellamann's heart. Conceived out of wedlock and virtually orphaned as a toddler when his parents had their hasty marriage annulled, Bellamann was reared in the Fulton, Missouri, home of Mrs. Ausfahl, a hard-working farm woman of German peasant stock. Although his circumstances were modest, he would as an adult refer to his childhood home grandly as "Hauermere," a place where his grandmother lavished love and attention upon him, and where he grew up speaking German and toying with the piano.

His attachment to Paris came about from his stays there in the summers of 1908, 1909, 1911, and 1913, chiefly to study piano with Isidor Philipp and organ with Charles-Marie Widor and Vincent d'Indy. Pre-World War I Paris was a gleaming city vibrant with an artistic culture on a scale the young Bellamann could not have imagined. Letters to his wife, Katherine (1877-1956), from his 1909 sojourn tell excitedly of his seeing Isadora Duncan dance and of his hearing Wanda Landowska (badly) play the clavichord.

The synthesis of these two disparate influences does not realistically depict either component. Madame Arndt is clearly an

educated woman of means who feels very much at home in the French capital.

Unfortunately for Bellamann, this story never saw publication. When he submitted a copy to *Broom* editor Lola Ridge in July, 1923, she returned the manuscript with this gentle dismissal:

...I don't think this story nearly as good as your poetry. In psychology, fine—but it lacks the vivid sharpness a short story should have—it talks too much.

It makes me feel, however, that you could write a good novel... (Bellamann Papers, UM).

Bellamann was not incapable of writing passable short fiction. In the summer of 1921, again at Montreat, he composed a story, "Friend with Chatterton," which was published on Christmas Day of that year in *The State*, Columbia, taking top honors and two hundred dollars in that newspaper's creative-writing contest. And his last original publication was an extended short story, "Red Shoes Run Faster," which appeared in *American Magazine* in June, 1945, the month of his death. However, in the case of "Madame Arndt," Ridge's assessment of the story's deficiencies was correct.

Years later, in a letter to a friend in Denver, Bellamann acknowledged that not all of his early experiments in writing had been successful:

...I had to write verse and fiction with the thin margin of time my multiple jobs afforded. I had to publish just to see what I had accomplished. Some of it was shockingly bad. I must say that I learned a great deal from the professional critics and reviewers. It was the extremely vocal and wicked friendly critic who would have finished me had I listened.

Every writer worth a damn must always feel that work already done is just apprentice stuff. He always hopes that next time he'll do better (Letter to LeRoy Elser, 7 August 1944, Box 1 Collection of the Musicians' Society of Denver, Western History Department, Denver [Colorado] Public Library, published by permission of the library).

After Henry Bellamann's death in New York in 1945, his widow moved back to her native Mississippi, settling in Jackson. There she became acquainted with the city's artistic and literary circles, which included Eudora Welty and Louis E. Dollarhide, then Chairman of the English department at Mississippi College in nearby Clinton.

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Katherine Bellamann named Dollarhide the literary executor of her estate, bequeathing to his care upon her death in 1956 thousands of pages of correspondence, manuscripts, typescripts, photographs, and printed materials accumulated during her four decades with Henry.

From 1957 until 1976 the Bellamann papers were kept at Mississippi College. In 1976, Dollarhide, by then Professor of English at The University of Mississippi, oversaw the transfer of the Bellamann collection to the safekeeping of the Division of Archives and Special Collections in the John Davis Williams Library at the University. Thomas Verich, University Archivist, professionally catalogued and indexed the papers soon thereafter. The Bellamann materials constitute one of that library's most outstanding holdings, second only to its renowned Faulkner collection. Now the original typescript of "Madame Arndt" may be viewed by serious students and trivial pursuers alike, with all of Bellamann's misspellings and awkwardnesses left standing.

This writer expresses his sincere gratitude to Dr. Dollarhide (now retired) and to Dr. Verich for their personal and professional interest in the Bellamann Collection. Both have generously given their time and energy to promote the study of Bellamann's remarkable career for many years. With the appearance of "Madame Arndt," a vital new chapter of Bellamann scholarship opens.

Harry M. Bayne

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## "MADAME ARNDT"

After the disaster of '71 Madame Arndt locked the doors of her Alsatian house and turned toward Paris. There on the *deuxieme étage* of No. 22, Rue Jacob, she lived with her Alsatian maid Anna, and her German cook, Karl, whose devotion to his mistress went deeper than mere conflicts of nations.

Had it been otherwise possible for Madame Arndt to forget the issues of the war, Anna and Karl would have served to remind her. Added to their national differences was the more fundamental one of religion. Anna was Catholic; Karl, Protestant. They had but one thing in common and that was their love for Madame Arndt. When, years after coming to Paris, her orphan grandson Paul came to live with her, they found additional ground for a new loyalty.

The dining room of the Arndt apartment was a long, narrow room with a very high ceiling. Tall windows, giving upon a court, completely occupied one wall and were balanced at the other end of the room by high double doors. There was an austerity in the severe white walls, heightened by the two religious paintings facing each other. Heavy red curtains at the windows fell from the ceiling to the floor.

One evening in early winter Paul entered this room and carefully closed the door. He was about ten years of age, very slight and very pale. His face was the slender, triangular type of Lorraine. He was dressed in a velvet suit with a wide lace collar. Both velvet and lace appeared well worn, but they imparted, nevertheless, something of distinction to the boy. He crossed and stood by the windows. The curtains were not yet drawn and as the early twilight deepened from blue to profounder blue the square panes took on the color of cathedral glass.

He waited patiently. Anna came in and hurried heavily about, lighting the low cluster of thick white candles about the broad bowl of crimson geraniums on the table. As the candles flared up she caught sight of Paul.

"Ach, already you are here! It gives a little hunger?" She addressed him in German — a German broadly stroked with the accent of the Rhine regions.

"It is the hour for dinner. I am always here to wait for Madame *grandmere*." He answered her in French and with an assumption of hauteur that did not seem quite natural. It was either a manner that went on with the velvet clothes, or, it might have been a reminiscence of some make believe that persisted from the after-noon. Anna observed it. Her manner of familiarity, expressed at all times in utter prose, seemed to stiffen with a slight umbrage which dissolved in

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something resembling a snort — a snort, or an elderly and becoming giggle. Paul appeared not to notice it. He stood quite still by the window.

There was the sound of a step outside the door, and a crisp rustle. Anna opened the door and Paul's grandmother entered. She was quite old, past seventy one would say from the face carved in hundreds of fine lines like ivory cracked with age. Her hair was fastened with a comb which gave the slight figure the appearance of height. Her dress of stiff black silk tinkled with jet. True the fringes and tassels were a bit frayed, but, like Paul's costume, it seemed in the dim light to be extremely elegant. A pair of thick lensed lorgnettes swung from a chain and flashed the reflections of the candles. Paul moved quickly to his chair, and Anna placed that of Madame Arndt with a perfunctorily aspirated "-ci, Madame."

Dinner progressed. It was a simple meal, simple to frugality, but interminably served. Madame ate with the abstraction of age. From time to time she beamed vaguely at the other end of the long table where Paul sat lost in abstractions of his own. Occasionally he smiled in some sort of mechanical response to her absent minded beaming. The amenities of the dinner went no further. Neither really saw the other.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the passage. Anna appeared to be propelled in advance by the explosive entrance of Karl arrayed in the cap and apron of a *chef*. His face was apoplectic.

"Anna says the Tokay. I knew she had not heard aright — the Tokay!" He spoke in the staccato German of Prussia.

"*En Francais, Karl, en Francais! Immer en Francais. Je vous le repete toujours!*" The bilingual quaintness compromised the severity of the correction.

"It is Paul's birthday," she continued. "I said the Tokay."

Anna's black eyes flashed triumph. Karl's pale ones became venomous as he returned the glare.

Later Madame addressed her first remark to Paul. "And what have you played this afternoon? Were you well amused?"

"I played at being a cardinal. The old red skirt —"

"Cardinal!" Madame cackled with a kind of malicious enjoyment. She turned to Anna.

"You hear, Anna, a cardinal?"

Anna crossed herself and regarded both Madame and Paul with an air of long suffering, but her eyes indicated beyond doubt that there was much that was unpleasant in store for those who thus mocked a cardinal. She crossed herself again as she returned to the kitchen.

In a moment the narrow passage leading from the kitchen to the dining room trembled as though it might suddenly disrupt itself. Anna and Karl projected themselves once more into the presence of Madame Arndt as though simultaneously fired from a catapult. The air was filled with gesticulations. It seemed impossible that two voices could produce such a babel. It is true one spoke German and the other French and that greatly increased the confusion of their recriminations. Still Madame had not lifted her eyes from her plate.

These outbreaks overflowing from the kitchen into the dining room were of almost daily occurrence and barely broke Madame's meditations. Paul, on the other hand, regarded them as welcome diversions, lending, as they did, moments of decided vivacity to the long and silent meals.

The torrent of talk grew more furious. Anna became violently flushed while Karl paled more and more. His china blue eyes hidden from each other by the imposing arch of his thin nose, took on a flat glare like that of a caged feline. At the moment when it seemed they must leap upon each other, Madame's slightly metallic voice cut suddenly through.

*"Taisez vous!"*

Instantly there was silence. Their threatening gestures remained arrested in mid-air. Both regarded her.

*"Qu'est-ce que c'est que vous avez, tous les deux?"*

As though at a signal both began again with renewed fury. The crumpled little hand of Madame went up in a gesture of command. The flash of jewels on the thin old fingers was not more keen than the light in her sharp blue eyes. This time the torrent of speech poured from *her* lips. She spoke with incredible rapidity, with an almost hissing softness. Anna and Karl shrank from this glitter of talk as from some bewildering onslaught of dazzling sword play. Paul watched breathlessly. It was entertaining; the procedure invariably the same. Anna would untie her apron and announce that she could endure no more. Tomorrow she would return to the kind shelter of her father's home. At the same time, with an engagingly similar gesture, Karl would untie his apron announcing that that was indeed the end — no one could endure so much! Tomorrow he would seek the hospitality of the fatherland. Only — and this was always added after both had reduced themselves to tears of self commiseration — they would finishing serving Madame's dinner for this once, this last time.

Would Madame have her dessert now?

Yes? And coffee?

It was brought in with the air of a last sad rite. Paul was immensely diverted. His grandmother appeared to have forgotten the

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episode by the time Anna returned, her apron readjusted and the red in her cheeks somewhat abated.

But tonight there was a surprise.

Madame Arndt arose from her chair. Karl and Anna, paralyzed with astonishment, held their crouching positions. Madame's little figure turned on them.

"Very well," she said, "this time it *is* enough. I believe you. You wish to go — you have said so many times. It is necessary that but one of you should go. Karl, it may as well be you. Anna and I can manage. Tomorrow, then. No, I will have no coffee tonight."

Both servants gazed after her retreat in utter stupefaction. What could she mean by such an outbreak of temper over nothing? It was unheard of. It was terrible, terrible! Discharging Karl in this peremptory fashion. What was he to do? Where was he to go? What would Anna do without him? Paul was no less astonished. Karl had always been there. He and Anna had fought daily for so long as Paul could remember. They always broke into the dining room like this unless there were guests. It was calamity. Karl and Anna went silently to the kitchen.

Next morning Anna was red eyed and sniffed ostentatiously as she occupied herself in Madame's immediate vicinity.

Madame was imperturbable.

"Karl is preparing the accounts, Madame, that the tradespeople may not cheat you after he is gone."

"Bon."

"He is also preparing the lists of preserves and wines that Madame may have as little trouble as possible with the new help."

"Bon."

"Karl is uncertain what he will do. He does not wish to return to the fatherland. He detests it. He thinks perhaps he may seek employment with Madame Ritter —"

Anna waited. Madame Ritter was *persona non grata* to Madame Arndt.

"— or perhaps at some of the factories. It is true that he has no experience other than as domestic. It is very difficult."

Madame sipped her coffee and crumbled her crescent rolls with complete *sang froid*. Anna looked at her with accusing and unbelieving eyes.

"Karl is going for the present to a distant cousin in the country. He thinks he can perhaps help with the farm labor."

She pronounced the words 'farm labor' with all of the horror that a city domestic uses in speaking of the activities of the country. It is



much the tone that a Russian uses when he speaks of the Siberian mines.

*"Bon,"* reiterated Madame.

Again Anna stared with unbelieving eyes at such heartlessness. She fired her parting shot.

"Madame, Karl is preparing to leave at noon."

*"Bon."*

This time Anna answered with a loud sob and disappeared.

After a time Karl appeared at the door. He was dressed in his best clothes, and was on the verge of collapse.

"Madame!"

"Ah! You are departing. In that envelope is some money."

Karl took the envelope between his thumb and forefinger.

"I go, Madame, to my cousin near Chartres. I think perhaps I can help with the farm labor."

His tone on the two words was identical with Anna's.

*"Bon."*

He recoiled as though she had struck him. "Here, Madame, are the lists and the accounts."

*"Bon."*

*"Adieu, Madame."*

*"Adieu!"*

He fumbled the door, keeping his eye to the crack until it was quite closed.

"Karl!"

"Yes, Madame!" He reopened the door, his voice all eagerness.

"You have provided yourself with some lunch, I trust?"

"Yes, Madame," he answered drearily, "though I shall not care to eat."

Again he closed the door very slowly, but Madame said no more.

Three weeks later Anna almost fell into the room where Madame sat with Paul at afternoon coffee.

*"Madame!"*

"Anna! What is it?"

Anna was white as wax. *"Karl, Madame!"*

"Karl? What is it with Karl?"

"Oh, Madame, Madame, but see!" She opened the door and Karl entered. He looked very ill and did the quite extraordinary thing of sitting down in the nearest chair.

"Madame!" His voice quavered.

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Madame Arndt regarded him with a little coldness, but her voice was not ungentle as she answered — "*Eh, bien?*"

Silently he lifted his left arm. The hand was off at the wrist, and the stump was bound with fresh white bandages.

Madame cried out suddenly.

"But what, name of God, what have you done to yourself?"

"Madame, it was that unbelievable machine — a machine terrible beyond description — oh, Madame, it ate everything it touched! A machine, a terrible American machine!"

"He has been in the hospital, Madame, two weeks," interrupted Anna, "then he came here. What is he to do that he can no longer help with the farm labor?" Again that tone of voice, but intensified — almost triumphant in its implications.

Madame held fast to the arms of her chair. Her old hands were white with the tension. She spoke evenly, and in German. "Karl did quite right to come home," she said.