MOTHER-IN-LOVE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Gail took the delicately-browned, rich shortcakes out of the oven and set them on a rack on the countertop to cool slightly before spooning the freshly picked and sugared strawberries from the garden over them. How delightfully delicious and how large and plump and sweet the first berries always were!
She hummed a verse from an old hymn as she got the dessert dishes out of the cupboard and split a rich shortcake into each.

"Company, honey?" a voice asked near her ear.

"You," Gail answered sweetly. "You and Jamie and Jill and Margaret Ann and Chucky."

Ken bent and kissed his wife's cheek. "But we're not company, dear," he teased. "We're under your feet all the time. . . ."

Gail pressed a restraining, strawberry-scented finger to her husband's lips. "Sh-h-h!" she replied. "You and the children are always special."

"And right now that hand of yours smells extra-special, little woman. It's fragrantly perfumed with fresh berries from the vine and it's nothing less than ambrosial!"

"Flatterer!" Gail teased. "You know full well you'll get to eat two or three . . . or four shortcakes, for that matter . . . if you want them."

Ken stood back and surveyed his pretty, petite wife. He cupped his chin in his hand. "Know something?" he asked.

Gail's blue eyes twinkled merrily. She knew that tone of voice. "Say it," she said, laughing and holding a plump, juicy-red strawberry temptingly up to Ken's mouth.

Ken let her put it in his mouth and between relishing its fresh sweetness and goodness, he drew her gently into the circles of his arms. "I was just going to say that I have the best wife in all the world. She's a Mother-in-love. There!" he exclaimed, touching her lightly on the end of her slightly turned up nose with his index finger. "How do you like the title, Mrs. Andrews?"

Gail laughed lightly and put another berry in her husband's mouth. "I think it's a beautiful title, Ken. A very beautiful title; and I think you could even be a poet or . . . or a writer or something. Now, how about our asking Mother over to share our special treat?"
"Great idea, Mrs. Andrews. A great idea! Who shall go and ask her; you, or I; or us?"

"Oh, Ken, you are simply wonderful!" Gail laughed, putting the freshly-whipped cream in the refrigerator. "Of course, it shall be us . . . all six of us, as usual."

"And the head of this house will carry the twins!" Ken exclaimed with pride and deep admiration.

"Jill's toddling, Ken. Or had you forgotten? She won't want to be carried. She's a big girl now . . . or so she thinks! And Jamie's trying awfully hard to keep pace with his twin. Chuck and Margaret Ann can assist Jill . . . if she's not too independent . . . and you and I'll help Jamie. He's wanting so hard to walk alone, like Jill . . . ."

"So it shall be! And watch Grandma's eyes brighten when she sees our 'brood' coming down the path to her house!"

"That's one of my many joys, Ken; seeing Mother's kind but tired old eyes brighten up whenever any one of us comes to her house!"

"Too bad she won't move in with us, Gall. The children love her."

"That's true. But you know how very independent Mother is."

"Exactly like my mother!" he asserted. "But we love them dearly for the way they are, don't we, dear?"

"With all our hearts," Gall said, calling the children around her. "And should the day ever come when either your mother or mine needs our home, they know they're as welcome as our children to share our roof and food. . . ."

"And our fast-growing family," Ken added, taking Jamie's fat little hand in his and guiding his wobbly little feet toward the door.

The short walk down the garden path to Grandmother's house was delightful and pleasant. Margaret Ann and Chucky ran ahead, with Jill stumbling her merry way some distance behind, pausing every now and again to see that her parents and Jamie were coming.
Jamie, delighted with the new adventure of "walking" down the path between Father and Mother, paused frequently to laugh and gurgle and try to get a chubby hand free long enough to chew on a finger and expedite the matter of tooth cutting in his mouth.

Gail and Ken looked up from watching Jamie and his antics to see Grandmother sitting on the porch in her old rocker, wearing old gingham simplicity and wrinkles and her usual bright and sunny smile.

"Will the Queen of our little acreage do us honor by walking with us to the house for fresh strawberry shortcake?" Ken bantered lightly, lifting Jamie up to Grandma's chair and lap.

Grandmother kissed the twins fondly and hugged the two older children to her tightly as her soft voice rang out in merry laughter. "Ken Andrews, you will soon have me spoiled and believing that I am a queen," she said. "You all treat me better than any queen has ever been treated; and of course I'll come. With pleasure! But you could have saved yourselves a few steps by sending Chucky and Margaret Ann down."

"We all wanted to come! How's that for family togetherness?" Ken said. "Here's one son-in-law who loves his mother-in-law. Know why?" he asked seriously.

"You have so many reasons," Grandma replied; "So many nice reasons, Ken. I thank God for you. . . .

"I'm the one who is thankful to God for you, Mother dear. You and Grandpa Fetters. He's gone to Heaven but I do believe he hears me when I say that I thank God for both of you . . . because you raised some of the best and most wonderful children the world has ever known; and because you gave me the most wonderful wife in all the world. She's a woman in a thousand!

"She delights herself in 'the law of the Lord' and she loves her husband and her family. She not only loves her family but she seems to love doing her menial, routine tasks of housekeeping, cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing and caring for her children. Besides, she's ever and always seeking 'loveways' of making pleasant surprises for her family . . . like strawberry
shortcake in mid-morning! Yes, Grandma, I love you; you gave to me a woman after God's making!

"I feel the beautiful words of the poet apply to both you and the wonderful girl you gave me to be my wife:

"O Mother, when I think of thee,
'Tis but a step to Calvary.
Thy gentle hand upon my brow,
Is leading me to Jesus now."

Silent, happy tears slipped out the tired, faded eyes and moistened the wrinkles and the creases on the dear old cheeks.

"Thanks, Ken," she answered in a voice that trembled with strong emotion, "but God is the One to be praised. I only did what was required; He made the life beautiful! Now shall we get that shortcake? I'm hungry."