



A MAN AND HIS DOG (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

To look at Mr. Potts one would have thought that there at least went someone who had nothing to boast about. He was a little insignificant fellow with a crooked tie, a hat too small for him and a coat too large. The brown canvas portfolio that he carried to and from the Post Office every day was not like a business man's portfolio. It was like a child's school satchel; it did up even with a round-eyed button. One imagined there were crumbs and an apple core inside. And then there was something funny about his boots, wasn't there? Through the laces his coloured socks peeped out. What the dickens had the chap done with the tongues? "Fried 'em," suggested the wit of the Chesney bus. Poor old Potts! "More likely buried 'em in his garden." Under his arm he clasped an umbrella. And in wet weather when he put it up, he disappeared completely. He was not. He was a walking umbrella—no more—the umbrella became his shell.

Mr. Potts lived in a little bungalow on Chesney Flat. The bulge of the water tank to one side gave it a mournful air, like a little bungalow with the toothache. There was no garden. A path had been cut in the paddock turf from the gate to the front door, and two beds, one round, one oblong, had been cut in what was going to be the front lawn. Down that path went Potts every morning at half-past eight and was picked up by the Chesney bus; up that path walked Potts every evening while the great kettle of a bus droned on. In the late evening, when he crept as far as the gate, eager to smoke a pipe—he wasn't allowed to smoke any nearer to the house than that—so humble, so modest was his air, that the big, merrily-shining stars seemed to wink at each other, to laugh, to say, "Look at him! Let's throw something!"

When Potts got out of the tram at the Fire Station to change into the Chesney bus he saw that something was up. The car was there all right, but the driver was off his perch; he was flat on his face half under the engine, and the conductor, his cap off, sat on a step rolling a cigarette and looking dreamy. A little group of business men and a woman clerk or two stood staring at the empty car; there was something mournful, pitiful about the way it leaned to one side and shivered faintly when the driver shook something. It was like someone who'd had an accident and tries to say: "Don't touch me! Don't come near me! Don't hurt me!"

But all this was so familiar—the cars had only been running to Chesney the last few months—that nobody said anything, nobody asked anything. They just waited on the off chance. In fact, two or three decided to walk it as Potts came up. But Potts didn't want to walk unless he had to. He was tired. He'd been up half the night rubbing his wife's chest—she had one of her mysterious pains—and helping the sleepy servant girl heat compresses



and hot-water bottles and make tea. The window was blue and the roosters had started crowing before he lay down finally with feet like ice. And all this was familiar, too.

Standing at the edge of the pavement and now and again changing his brown canvas portfolio from one hand to the other Potts began to live over the night before. But it was vague, shadowy. He saw himself moving like a crab, down the passage to the cold kitchen and back again. The two candles quivered on the dark chest of drawers, and as he bent over his wife her big eyes suddenly flashed and she cried:

“I get no sympathy—no sympathy. You only do it because you have to. Don’t contradict me. I can see you grudge doing it.”

Trying to soothe her only made matters worse. There had been an awful scene ending with her sitting up and saying solemnly with her hand raised: “Never mind, it will not be for long now.” But the sound of these words frightened her so terribly that she flung back on the pillow and sobbed, “Robert! Robert!” Robert was the name of the young man to whom she had been engaged years ago, before she met Potts. And Potts was very glad to hear him invoked. He had come to know that meant the crisis was over and she’d begin to quieten down. . . .

By this time Potts had wheeled round; he had walked across the pavement to the paling fence that ran beside. A piece of light grass pushed through the fence and some slender silky daisies. Suddenly he saw a bee alight on one of the daisies and the flower leaned over, swayed, shook, while the little bee clung and rocked. And as it flew away the petals fluttered as if joyfully. . . Just for an instant Potts dropped into the world where this happened. He brought from it the timid smile with which he walked back to the car. But now everybody had disappeared except one young girl who stood beside the empty car reading.

At the tail of the procession came Potts in a cassock so much too large for him that it looked like a night-shirt and you felt that he ought to be carrying not a hymn and a prayer book but a candle. His voice was a very light plaintive tenor. It surprised everybody. It seemed to surprise him, too. But it was so plaintive that when he cried “for the wings, for the wings of a dove” the ladies in the congregation wanted to club together and buy him a pair.

Lino’s nose quivered so pitifully, there was such a wistful, timid look in his eyes, that Potts’ heart was wrung. But of course he would not show it. “Well,” he said sternly, “I suppose you’d better come home.” And he got up off the bench. Lino got up, too, but stood still, holding up a paw.

“But there’s one thing,” said Potts, turning and facing him squarely, “that we’d better be clear about before you do come. And it’s this.” He pointed his finger at Lino who started as though he expected to be shot. But he kept his bewildered wistful eyes upon his master. “Stop this pretence of being a fighting dog,” said Potts more sternly than ever. “You’re not a fighting dog. You’re a watch dog. That’s what you are. Very well. Stick to it. But it’s this infernal boasting I can’t stand. It’s that that gets me.”

In the moment’s pause that followed while Lino and his master looked at each other it was curious how strong a resemblance was between them. Then Potts turned again and made for home.



And timidly, as though falling over his own paws, Lino followed after the humble little figure of his master. . . .

