



ALL SERENE (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

At breakfast that morning they were in wonderfully good spirits. Who was responsible—he or she? It was true she made a point of looking her best in the morning; she thought it part of her duty to him—to their love, even, to wear charming little caps, funny little coats, coloured mules at breakfast time, and to see that the table was perfect as he and she—fastidious pair!—understood the word. But he, too, so fresh, well-groomed and content, contributed his share . . . She had been down first, sitting at her place when he came in. He leaned over the back of her chair, his hands on her shoulders; he bent down and lightly rubbed his cheek against hers, murmuring gently but with just enough pride of proprietorship to make her flush with delight, “Give me my tea, love.” And she lifted the silver teapot that had a silver pear modelled on the lid and gave him his tea.

“Thanks . . . You know you look awfully well this morning!”

“Do I?”

“Yes. Do that again. Look at me again. It’s your eyes. They’re like a child’s. I’ve never known anyone have such shining eyes as you.”

“Oh, dear!” She sighed for joy. “I do love having sweet things said to me!”

“Yes, you do—spoilt child! Shall I give you some of this?”

“No, thank you. . . . Darling!” Her hand flew across the table and clasped his hand.

“Yes?”

But she said nothing, only “Darling!” again. There was the look on his face she loved—a kind of sweet jesting. He was pretending he didn’t know what she meant, and yet of course he did know. He was pretending to be feeling “Here she is—trust a woman— all ready for a passionate love scene over the breakfast table at nine o’clock in the morning.” But she wasn’t deceived. She knew he felt just the same as she did. That amused tolerance, that mock despair was part of the ways of men—no more.

“May I be allowed to *use* this knife please, or to put it down?”

Really! Mona had never yet got accustomed to her husband’s smile. They had been married for three years. She was in love with him for countless reasons, but apart from them all, a special reason all to itself, was because of his smile. If it hadn’t sounded nonsense she would have said she fell in love at first sight over and over again when he smiled. Other



people felt the charm of it, too. Other women, she was certain. Sometimes she thought that even the servants watched for it. . . .

“Don’t forget we’re going to the theatre tonight.”

“Oh, good egg! I had forgotten. It’s ages since we went to a show.”

“Yes, isn’t it? I feel quite thrilled.”

“Don’t you think we might have a tiny small celebration at dinner?” (“Tiny small” was one of her expressions. But why did it sound so sweet when he used it?)

“Yes, let’s. You mean champagne?” And she looked into the distance, and said in a faraway voice: “Then I must revise the sweet.”

At that moment the maid came in with the letters. There were four for him, three for her. No, one of hers belonged to him, too, rather a grimy little envelope with a dab of sealing wax on the back.

“Why do you get all the letters?” she wailed, handing it across. “It’s awfully unfair. I love letters and I never get any.”

“Well, I do like that!” said he. “How can you sit there and tell such awful bangers? It’s the rarest thing on earth for me to get a letter in the morning. It’s always you who get those mysterious epistles from girls you were at college with or faded aunts. Here, have half my pear—it’s a beauty.” She held out her plate.

The Rutherfords never shared their letters. It was her idea that they should not. He had been violently opposed to it at first. She couldn’t help laughing; he had so absolutely misunderstood her reason.

“Good God! my dear. You’re perfectly welcome to open any letters of mine that come to the house—or to read any letters of mine that may be lying about. I think I can promise you . . .”

“Oh no, no, darling, that’s not what I mean. I don’t suspect you.” And she put her hands on his cheeks and kissed him quickly. He looked like an offended boy. “But so many of Mother’s old friends write to me—confide in me—don’t you know?—tell me things they wouldn’t for the world tell a man. I feel it wouldn’t be fair to them. Don’t you see?”

He gave way at last. But “I’m old fashioned,” he said, and his smile was a little rueful. “I like to feel my wife reads my letters.”

“My precious dear! I’ve made you unhappy.” She felt so repentant; she didn’t know quite about what. “Of course I’d love to read . . .”

“No, no! That’s all right. It’s understood. We’ll keep the bond.” And they had kept it.

He slit open the grimy envelope. He began to read. “Damn!” he said and thrust out his under lip.

“Why, what is it? Something horrid?”

“No—annoying. I shall be late this evening. A man wants to meet me at the office at six o’clock.”



“Was that a business letter?” She sounded surprised.

“Yes, why?”

“It looked so awfully unbusinesslike. The sealing-wax and the funny writing—much more like a woman’s than a man’s.”

He laughed. He folded the letter, put it in his pocket and picked up the envelope. “Yes,” he said, “it is queer, isn’t it. I shouldn’t have noticed. How quick you are! But it does look exactly like a woman’s hand. That capital R, for instance”—he flipped the envelope across to her.

“Yes, and that squiggle underneath. I should have said a rather uneducated female. . . .”

“As a matter of fact,” said Hugh, “he’s a mining engineer.” And he got up, began to stretch and then stopped. “I say, what a glorious morning! Why do I have to go to the office instead of staying at home and playing with you?” And he came over to her and locked his arms round her neck. “Tell me that, little lovely one.”

“Oh,” she leaned against him, “I wish you could. Life’s arranged badly for people like you and me. And now you’re going to be late this evening.”

“Never mind,” said he. “All the rest of the time’s ours. Every single bit of it. We shan’t come back from the theatre to find——”

“Our porch black with mining engineers.” She laughed. Did other people—could other people—was it possible that any one before had ever loved as they loved? She squeezed her head against him—she heard his watch ticking—precious watch!

“What are those purple floppy flowers in my bedroom?” he murmured.

“Petunias.”

“You smell exactly like a petunia.”

And he raised her up. She drew towards him. “Kiss me,” said he.

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It was her habit to sit on the bottom stair and watch his final preparations. Strange it should be so fascinating to see someone brush his hat, choose a pair of gloves, and give a last quick look in the round mirror. But it was the same when he was shaving. Then she loved to curl up on the hard little couch in his dressing room; she was as absorbed, as intent as he. How fantastic he looked, like a pierrot, like a mask, with those dark eyebrows, liquid eyes and the brush of fresh colour on his cheek-bones above the lather! But that was not her chief feeling. No, it was what she felt on the stairs, too. It was, “So this is my husband, so this is the man I’ve married, this is the stranger who walked across the lawn that afternoon swinging his tennis racket and bowed, rolling up his shirt-sleeves. This is not only my lover and my husband but my brother, my dearest friend, my playmate, even at times a kind of very perfect father too. And here is where we live. Here is his room—and here is our hall.” She seemed to be showing their house and him to her other self, the self she had been before she had met him. Deeply admiring, almost awed by so much happiness, that other self looked on. . . .



“Will I do?” He stood there smiling, stroking on his gloves. But although he wouldn’t like her to say the things she often longed to say about his appearance, she did think she detected that morning just the very faintest boyish showing off. Children who know they are admired look like that at their mother.

“Yes, you’ll do. . . .” Perhaps at that moment she was proud of him as a mother is proud; she could have blessed him before he went his way. Instead she stood in the porch thinking, “There he goes. The man I’ve married. The stranger who came across the lawn.” The fact was never less wonderful. . . .

It was never less wonderful, never. It was even more wonderful if anything and the reason was—Mona ran back into the house, into the drawing-room and sat down to the piano. Oh, why bother about reasons— She began to sing,

See, love, I bring thee flowers
To charm thy pain!

But joy—joy breathless and exulting thrilled in her voice, on the word “pain” her lips parted in such a happy—dreadfully unsympathetic smile that she felt quite ashamed. She stopped playing, she turned round on the piano stool facing the room. How different it looked in the morning, how severe and remote. The grey chairs with the fuchsia-coloured cushions, the black and gold carpet, the bright green silk curtains might have belonged to anybody. It was like a stage setting with the curtain still down. She had no right to be there, and as she thought that a queer little chill caught her; it seemed so extraordinary that anything, even a chair, should turn away from, should not respond to her happiness.

“I don’t like this room in the morning, I don’t like it at all,” she decided, and she ran upstairs to finish dressing. Ran into their big shadowy bedroom . . . and leaned over the starry penunias. . . .

