



EPILOGUE III: BAINS TURCS (1913)

By Katherine Mansfield

“Third storey—to the left, Madame,” said the cashier, handing me a pink ticket. “One moment—I will ring for the elevator.” Her black satin skirt swished across the scarlet and gold hall, and she stood among the artificial palms, her white neck and powdered face topped with masses of gleaming orange hair—like an over-ripe fungus bursting from a thick, black stem. She rang and rang. “A thousand pardons, Madame. It is disgraceful. A new attendant. He leaves this week.” With her fingers on the bell she peered into the cage as though she expected to see him, lying on the floor, like a dead bird. “It is disgraceful.” There appeared from nowhere a tiny figure disguised in a peaked cap and dirty white cotton gloves. “Here you are?” she scolded. “Where have you been? What have you been doing?” For answer the figure hid its face behind one of the white cotton gloves and sneezed twice. “Ugh! Disgusting! Take Madame to the third storey!” The midget stepped aside, bowed, entered after me and clashed the gates to. We ascended, very slowly, to an accompaniment of sneezes and prolonged, half whistling sniffs. I asked the top of the patent-leather cap: “Have you a cold?” “It is the air, Madame,” replied the creature, speaking through its nose with a restrained air of great relish, “one is never dry here. Third floor—*if you please,*” sneezing over my ten-centime tip.

I walked along a tiled corridor decorated with advertisements for lingerie and bust improvers—was allotted a tiny cabin and a blue print chemise and told to undress and find the Warm Room as soon as possible. Through the matchboard walls and from the corridor sounded cries and laughter and snatches of conversation. “Are you ready?” “Are you coming out now?” “Wait till you see me!” “Berthe—Berthe!” “One moment! One moment! Immediately!” I undressed quickly and carelessly, feeling like one of a troupe of little schoolgirls let loose in a swimming-bath.

The Warm Room was not large. It had terra cotta painted walls with a fringe of peacocks, and a glass roof, through which one could see the sky, pale and unreal as a photographer's background screen. Some round tables strewn with shabby fashion journals, a marble basin in the centre of the room, filled with yellow lilies, and on the long, towel enveloped chairs, a number of ladies, apparently languid as the flowers ... I lay back with a cloth over my head, and the air, smelling of jungles and circuses and damp washing made me begin to dream ... Yes, it might have been very fascinating to have married an explorer ... and lived in a jungle, as long as he didn't shoot anything or take anything captive. I detest performing beasts. Oh ... those circuses at home ... the tent in the paddock and the children swarming over the fence to stare at the waggons and at the clown making up, with his glass stuck on the waggon wheel—and the steam organ playing the *Honeysuckle and the Bee* much too fast ... over and over. I know what this air reminds me of—a game of follow my leader among the clothes hung out to dry. ...



The door opened. Two tall blonde women in red and white check gowns came in and took the chairs opposite mine. One of them carried a box of mandarins wrapped in silver paper and the other a manicure set. They were very stout, with gay, bold faces, and quantities of exquisite whipped fair hair.

Before sitting down they glanced round the room, looked the other women up and down, turned to each other, grimaced, whispered something, and one of them said, offering the box, "Have a mandarin?" At that they started laughing—they lay back and shook, and each time they caught sight of each other broke out afresh. "Ah, that was too good," cried one, wiping her eyes very carefully, just at the corners. "You and I, coming in here, quite serious, you know, very correct—and looking round the room—and—as a result of our *careful* inspection—I offer you a mandarin. No, it's too funny. I must remember that. It's good enough for a music hall. Have a mandarin?" "But I cannot imagine," said the other, "why women look so hideous in Turkish baths—like beef-steaks in chemises. Is it the women—or is it the air? Look at that one, for instance—the skinny one, reading a book and sweating at the moustache—and those two over in the corner, discussing whether or not they ought to tell their non-existent babies how babies come—and ... Heavens! Look at this one coming in. Take the box, dear. Have all the mandarins."

The newcomer was a short stout little woman with flat, white feet, and a black mackintosh cap over her hair. She walked up and down the room, swinging her arms, in affected unconcern, glancing contemptuously at the laughing women, and rang the bell for the attendant. It was answered immediately by Berthe, half naked and sprinkled with soapsuds. "Well, what is it, Madame? I've no time ..." "Please bring me a hand towel," said the Mackintosh Cap, in German. "Pardon? I do not understand. Do you speak French?" "Non," said the Mackintosh Cap. "Ber-the!" shrieked one of the blonde women, "have a mandarin. Oh, mon Dieu, I shall die of laughing." The Mackintosh Cap went through a pantomime of finding herself wet and rubbing herself dry. "*Versteben Sie?*" "Mais non, Madame," said Berthe, watching with round eyes that snapped with laughter, and she left the Mackintosh Cap, winked at the blonde women, came over, felt them as though they had been a pair of prize poulury, said "You are doing very well," and disappeared again. The Mackintosh Cap sat down on the edge of a chair, snatched a fashion journal, smacked over the crackling pages and pretended to read, while the blonde women leaned back eating the mandarins and throwing the peelings into the lily basin. A scent of fruit, fresh and penetrating, hung on the air. I looked round at the other women. Yes, they were hideous, lying back, red and moist, with dull eyes and lank hair, the only little energy they had vented in shocked prudery at the behaviour of the two blondes. Suddenly I discovered Mackintosh Cap staring at me over the top of her fashion journal, so intently that I took flight and went into the hot room. But in vain! Mackintosh Cap followed after and planted herself in front of me.

"I know," she said, confident and confiding, "that you can speak German. I saw it in your face just now. Wasn't that a scandal about the attendant refusing me a towel? I shall speak to the management about that, and I shall get my husband to write them a letter this evening. Things always come better from a man, don't they? No," she said, rubbing her yellowish arms, "I've never been in such a scandalous place—and four francs fifty to pay! Naturally, I shall not give a tip. You wouldn't, would you? Not after that scandal about a hand towel. ... I've a great mind to complain about those women as well. Those two that



keep on laughing and eating. Do you know who they are?" She shook her head. "They're not respectable women—you can tell at a glance. At least I can, any married woman can. They're nothing but a couple of street women. I've never been so insulted in my life. Laughing at me, mind you! The great big fat pigs like that! And I haven't sweated at all properly, just because of them. I got so angry that the sweat turned in instead of out; it does in excitement, you know, sometimes, and now instead of losing my cold I wouldn't be surprised if I brought on a fever."

I walked round the hot room in misery pursued by the Mackintosh Cap until the two blonde women came in, and seeing her, burst into another fit of laughter. To my rage and disgust Mackintosh Cap sidled up to me, smiled meaningly, and drew down her mouth. "I don't care," she said, in her hideous German voice. "I shouldn't lower myself by paying any attention to a couple of street women. If my husband knew he'd never get over it. Dreadfully particular he is. We've been married six years. We come from Pfalzburg. It's a nice town. Four children I have living, and it was really to get over the shock of the fifth that we came here. The fifth," she whispered, padding after me, "was born, a fine healthy child, and it never breathed! Well, after nine months, a woman can't help being disappointed, can she?"

I moved towards the vapour room. "Are you going in there?" she said. "I wouldn't if I were you. Those two have gone in. They may think you want to strike up an acquaintance with them. You never know women like that." At that moment they came out, wrapping themselves in the rough gowns, and passing Mackintosh Cap like disdainful queens. "Are you going to take your chemise off in the vapour room?" asked she. "Don't mind me, you know. Woman is woman, and besides, if you'd rather, I won't look at you. I know—I used to be like that. I wouldn't mind betting," she went on savagely, "those filthy women had a good look at each other. Pooh! women like that. You can't shock them. And don't they look dreadful? Bold, and all that false hair. That manicure box one of them had was fitted up with gold. Well, I don't suppose it was real, but I think it was disgusting to bring it. One might at least cut one's nails in private, don't you think? I *cannot* see," she said, "what men see in such women. No, a husband and children and a home to look after, that's what a woman needs. That's what my husband says. Fancy one of these hussies peeling potatoes or choosing the meat! Are you going already?"

I flew to find Berthe, and all the time I was soaped and smacked and sprayed and thrown in a cold water tank I could not get out of my mind the ugly, wretched figure of the little German with a good husband and four children, railing against the two fresh beauties who had never peeled potatoes nor chosen the right meat. In the ante-room I saw them once again. They were dressed in blue. One was pinning on a bunch of violets, the other buttoning a pair of ivory suède gloves. In their charming feathered hats and furs they stood talking. "Yes, there they are," said a voice at my elbow. And Mackintosh Cap, transformed, in a blue and white check blouse and crochet collar, with the little waist and large hips of the German woman and a terrible bird nest, which Salzburg doubtless called *Reise Hut*, on her head. "How do you suppose they can afford clothes like that? The horrible, low creatures. No, they're enough to make a young girl think twice." And as the two walked out of the ante-room, Mackintosh Cap stared after them, her sallow face all mouth and eyes, like the face of a hungry child before a forbidden table.

