



## THE DOVES' NEST (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

After lunch Milly and her mother were sitting as usual on the balcony beyond the salon, admiring for the five hundredth time the stocks, the roses, the small, bright grass beneath the palms, and the oranges against a wavy line of blue, when a card was brought them by Marie. Visitors at the Villa Martin were very rare. True, the English clergyman, Mr. Sandiman, had called, and he had come a second time with his wife to tea. But an awful thing had happened on that second occasion. Mother had made a mistake. She had said "More tea, Mr. Sandybags?" Oh, what a frightful thing to have happened! How could she have done it? Milly still flamed at the thought. And he had evidently not forgiven them; he'd never come again. So this card put them both into quite a flutter.

*Mr. Walter Prodger*, they read. And then an American address, so very much abbreviated that neither of them understood it. Walter Prodger? But they'd never heard of him. Mother looked from the card to Milly.

"Prodger, dear?" she asked mildly, as though helping Milly to a slice of a never-before-tasted pudding.

And Milly seemed to be holding her plate back in the way she answered "I—don't—know, Mother."

"These are the occasions," said Mother, becoming a little flustered, "when one does so feel the need of our dear English servants. Now if I could just say, 'What is he like, Annie?' I should know whether to see him or not. But he may be some common man, selling something—one of those American inventions for peeling things, you know, dear. Or he may even be some kind of foreign sharper." Mother winced at the hard, bright little word as though she had given herself a dig with her embroidery scissors.

But here Marie smiled at Milly and murmured, "C'est un très beau Monsieur."

"What does she say, dear?"

"She says he looks very nice, Mother."

"Well, we'd better——" began Mother.

"Where is he now, I wonder."



Marie answered “In the vestibule, Madame.”

In the hall! Mother jumped up, seriously alarmed. In the hall, with all those valuable little foreign things that didn't belong to them scattered over the tables.

“Show him in, Marie. Come, Milly, come dear. We will see him in the salon. Oh, why isn't Miss Anderson here?” almost wailed Mother.

But Miss Anderson, Mother's new companion, never was on the spot when she was wanted. She had been engaged to be a comfort, a support to them both. Fond of travelling, a cheerful disposition, a good packer and so on. And then, when they had come all this way and taken the Villa Martin and moved in, she had turned out to be a Roman Catholic. Half her time, more than half, was spent wearing out the knees of her skirts in cold churches. It was really too . . .

The door opened. A middle-aged, cleanshaven, very well dressed stranger stood bowing before them. His bow was stately. Milly saw it pleased Mother very much; she bowed her Queen Alexandra bow back. As for Milly, she never could bow. She smiled, feeling shy, but deeply interested.

“Have I the pleasure,” said the stranger very courteously, with a strong American accent, “of speaking with Mrs. Wyndham Fawcett?”

“I am Mrs. Fawcett,” said Mother, graciously, “and this is my daughter, Mildred.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Fawcett.” And the stranger shot a fresh, chill hand at Milly, who grasped it just in time before it was gone again.

“Won't you sit down?” said Mother, and she waved faintly at all the gilt chairs.

“Thank you, I will,” said the stranger.

Down he sat, still solemn, crossing his legs, and, most surprisingly, his arms as well. His face looked at them over his dark arms as over a gate.

“Milly, sit down, dear.”

So Milly sat down, too, on the Madame Recamier couch, and traced a filet lace flower with her finger. There was a little pause. She saw the stranger swallow; Mother's fan opened and shut.

Then he said “I took the liberty of calling, Mrs. Fawcett, because I had the pleasure of your husband's acquaintance in the States when he was lecturing there some years ago. I should like very much to renoo our—well—I venture to hope we might call it friendship. Is he with you at present? Are you expecting him out? I noticed his name was not mentioned in the local paper. But I put that down to a foreign custom, perhaps—giving precedence to the lady.”

And here the stranger looked as though he might be going to smile.



But as a matter of fact it was extremely awkward. Mother's mouth shook. Milly squeezed her hands between her knees, but she watched hard from under her eyebrows. Good, noble little Mummy! How Milly admired her as she heard her say, gently and quite simply, "I am sorry to say my husband died two years ago."

Mr. Prodger gave a great start. "Did he?" He thrust out his under lip, frowned, pondered. "I am truly sorry to hear that, Mrs. Fawcett. I hope you'll believe me when I say I had no idea your husband had . . . passed over."

"Of course." Mother softly stroked her skirt.

"I do trust," said Mr. Prodger, more seriously still, "that my inquiry didn't give you too much pain."

"No, no. It's quite all right," said the gentle voice.

But Mr. Prodger insisted. "You're sure? You're positive?"

At that Mother raised her head and gave him one of her still, bright, exalted glances that Milly knew so well. "I'm not in the least hurt," she said, as one might say it from the midst of the fiery furnace.

Mr. Prodger looked relieved. He changed his attitude and continued. "I hope this regrettable circumstance will not deprive me of your——"

"Oh, certainly not. We shall be delighted. We are always so pleased to know any one who——" Mother gave a little bound, a little flutter. She flew from her shadowy branch on to a sunny one. "Is this your first visit to the Riviera?"

"It is," said Mr. Prodger. "The fact is I was in Florence until recently. But I took a heavy cold there——"

"Florence so damp," cooed Mother.

"And the doctor recommended I should come here for the sunshine before I started for home."

"The sun is so very lovely here," agreed Mother, enthusiastically.

"Well, I don't think we get too much of it," said Mr. Prodger, dubiously, and two lines showed at his lips. "I seem to have been sitting around in my hotel more days than I care to count."

"Ah, hotels are so very trying," said Mother, and she drooped sympathetically at the thought of a lonely man in an hotel. . . . "You are alone here?" she asked, gently, just in case . . . one never knew . . . it was better to be on the safe, the tactful side.

But her fears were groundless.



“Oh, yes, I’m alone,” cried Mr. Prodger, more heartily than he had spoken yet, and he took a speck of thread off his immaculate trouser leg. Something in his voice puzzled Milly. What was it?

“Still, the scenery is so very beautiful,” said Mother, “that one really does not feel the need of friends. I was only saying to my daughter yesterday I could live here for years without going outside the garden gate. It is all so beautiful.”

“Is that so?” said Mr. Prodger, soberly. He added, “You have a very charming villa. “And he glanced round the salon. “Is all this antique furniture genuine, may I ask?”

“I believe so,” said Mother. “I was certainly given to understand it was. Yes, we love our villa. But of course it is very large for two, that is to say three, ladies. My companion, Miss Anderson, is with us. But unfortunately she is a Roman Catholic, and so she is out most of the time.”

Mr. Prodger bowed as one who agreed that Roman Catholics were very seldom in.

“But I am so fond of space,” continued Mother, “and so is my daughter. We both love large rooms and plenty of them—don’t we, Milly?”

This time Mr. Prodger looked at Milly quite cordially and remarked, “Yes, young people like plenty of room to run about.”

He got up, put one hand behind his back, slapped the other upon it and went over to the balcony.

“You’ve a view of the sea from here,” he observed.

The ladies might well have noticed it; the whole Mediterranean swung before the windows.

“We are so fond of the sea,” said Mother, getting up, too.

Mr. Prodger looked towards Milly. “Do you see those yachts, Miss Fawcett?”

Milly saw them.

“Do you happen to know what they’re doing?” asked Mr. Prodger.

What they were doing? What a funny question! Milly stared and bit her lip.

“They’re racing!” said Mr. Prodger, and this time he did actually smile at her.

“Oh, yes, of course,” stammered Milly. “Of course they are.” She knew that.

“Well, they’re not always at it,” said Mr. Prodger, good-humouredly. And he turned to Mother and began to take a ceremonious farewell.



“I wonder,” hesitated Mother, folding her little hands and eyeing him, “if you would care to lunch with us—if you would not be too dull with two ladies. We should be so very pleased.”

Mr. Prodger became intensely serious again. He seemed to brace himself to meet the luncheon invitation. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Fawcett. I should be delighted.”

“That will be very nice,” said Mother, warmly. “Let me see. Today is Monday—isn’t it, Milly? Would Wednesday suit you?”

Mr. Prodger replied, “It would suit me excellently to lunch with you on Wednesday, Mrs. Fawcett. At *mee-dee*, I presume, as they call it here.”

“Oh, no! We keep our English times. At one o’clock,” said Mother.

And that being arranged, Mr. Prodger became more and more ceremonious and bowed himself out of the room.

Mother rang for Marie to look after him, and a moment later the big, glass hall-door shut.

“Well!” said Mother. She was all smiles. Little smiles like butterflies, alighting on her lips and gone again. “That was an adventure, Milly, wasn’t it, dear? And I thought he was such a very charming man, didn’t you?”

Milly made a little face at Mother and rubbed her eye.

“Of course you did. You must have, dear. And his appearance was so satisfactory—wasn’t it?” Mother was obviously enraptured. “I mean he looked so very well kept. Did you notice his hands? Every nail shone like a diamond. I must say I do like to see . . .”

She broke off. She came over to Milly and patted her big collar straight.

“You do think it was right of me to ask him to lunch—don’t you, dear?” said Mother pathetically.

Mother made her feel so big, so tall. But she was tall. She could pick Mother up in her arms. Sometimes, rare moods came when she did. Swooped on Mother who squeaked like a mouse and even kicked. But not lately. Very seldom now. . . .

“It was so strange,” said Mother. There was the still, bright, exalted glance again. “I suddenly seemed to hear Father say to me ‘Ask him to lunch.’ And then there was some—warning. . . . I think it was about the wine. But that I didn’t catch—very unfortunately,” she added, mournfully. She put her hand on her breast; she bowed her head. “Father is still so near,” she whispered.

Milly looked out of the window. She hated Mother going on like this. But of course she couldn’t say anything. Out of the window there was the sea and the sunlight silver on the palms, like water dripping from silver oars. Milly felt a yearning—what was it?—it was like a yearning to fly.



But Mother's voice brought her back to the salon, to the gilt chairs, the gilt couches, sconces, cabinets, the tables with the heavy-sweet flowers, the faded brocade, the pink-spotted Chinese dragons on the mantelpiece and the two Turks' heads in the fireplace that supported the broad logs.

"I think a leg of lamb would be nice, don't you, dear?" said Mother. "The lamb is so very small and delicate just now. And men like nothing so much as plain roast meat. Yvonne prepares it so nicely, too, with that little frill of paper lace round the top of the leg. It always reminds me of something—I can't think what. But it certainly makes it look very attractive indeed."

§

Wednesday came. And the flutter that Mother and Milly had felt over the visiting card extended to the whole villa. Yes, it was not too much to say that the whole villa thrilled and fluttered at the idea of having a man to lunch. Old, flat-footed Yvonne came waddling back from market with a piece of gorgonzola in so perfect a condition that when she found Marie in the kitchen she flung down her great basket, snatched the morsel up and held it, rustling in its paper, to her quivering bosom.

"J'ai trouvé un morceau de gorgonzola," she panted, rolling up her eyes as though she invited the heavens themselves to look down upon it. "J'ai un morceau de gorgonzola ici pour un prr-ince, ma fille." And hissing the word "pr-ince" like lightning, she thrust the morsel under Marie's nose. Marie, who was a delicate creature, almost swooned at the shock.

"Do you think," cried Yvonne, scornfully, "that I would ever buy such cheese *pour ces dames*? Never. Never. *Jamais de ma vie*." Her sausage finger wagged before her nose, and she minced in a dreadful imitation of Mother's French, "We have none of us large appetites, Yvonne. We are very fond of boiled eggs and mashed potatoes and a nice, plain salad. Ah-Bah!" With a snort of contempt she flung away her shawl, rolled up her sleeves, and began unpacking the basket. At the bottom there was a flat bottle which, sighing, she laid aside.

"De quoi pour mes cors," said she.

And Marie, seizing a bottle of Sauterne and bearing it off to the dining-room murmured, as she shut the kitchen door behind her, "Et voilà pour les cors de Monsieur!"

The dining-room was a large room panelled in dark wood. It had a massive mantelpiece and carved chairs covered in crimson damask. On the heavy, polished table stood an oval glass dish decorated with little gilt swags. This dish, which it was Marie's duty to keep filled with fresh flowers, fascinated her. The sight of it gave her a *frisson*. It reminded her always, as it lay solitary on the dark expanse, of a little tomb. And one day, passing through the long windows on to the stone terrace and down the steps into the garden she had the happy thought of so arranging the flowers that they would be appropriate to one of the ladies on a future tragic occasion. Her first creation had been terrible. *Tomb of Mademoiselle Anderson* in black pansies, lily-of-the-valley, and a frill of heliotrope. It gave her a most intense, curious pleasure to hand Miss Anderson the potatoes at lunch, and at the same



time to gaze beyond her at her triumph. It was like (*O ciel!*), it was like handing potatoes to a corpse.

The *Tomb of Madame* was on the contrary almost gay. Foolish little flowers, half yellow, half blue, hung over the edge, wisps of green trailed across, and in the middle there was a large scarlet rose. *Cœur saignant*, Marie had called it. But it did not look in the least like a *cœur saignant*. It looked flushed and cheerful, like Mother emerging from the luxury of a warm bath.

Milly's, of course, was all white. White stocks, little white rose-buds, with a sprig or two of dark box edging. It was Mother's favourite.

Poor innocent! Marie, at the sideboard, had to turn her back when she heard Mother exclaim, "Isn't it pretty, Milly? Isn't it sweetly pretty? Most artistic. So original." And she had said to Marie, "C'est très joli, Marie. Très original."

Marie's smile was so remarkable that Milly, peeling a tangerine, remarked to Mother, "I don't think she likes you to admire them. It makes her uncomfortable."

But today—the glory of her opportunity made Marie feel quite faint as she seized her flower scissors. *Tombeau d'un beau Monsieur*. She was forbidden to cut the orchids that grew round the fountain basin. But what were orchids for if not for such an occasion? Her fingers trembled as the scissors snipped away. They were enough; Marie added two small sprays of palm. And back in the dining-room she had the happy idea of binding the palm together with a twist of gold thread deftly torn off the fringe of the dining-room curtains. The effect was superb. Marie almost seemed to see her *beau Monsieur*, very small, very small, at the bottom of the bowl, in full evening dress with a ribbon across his chest and his ears white as wax.

What surprised Milly, however, was that Miss Anderson should pay any attention to Mr. Prodger's coming. She rustled to breakfast in her best black silk blouse, her Sunday blouse, with the large, painful-looking crucifix dangling over the front. Milly was alone when Miss Anderson entered the dining-room. This was unfortunate, for she always tried to avoid being left alone with Miss Anderson. She could not say exactly why; it was a feeling. She had the feeling that Miss Anderson might say something about God, or something fearfully intimate. Oh, she would sink through the floor if such a thing happened; she would expire. Supposing she were to say "Milly, do you believe in our Lord?" Heavens! It simply didn't bear thinking about.

"Good-morning, my dear," said Miss Anderson, and her fingers, cold, pale, like church candles, touched Milly's cheeks.

"Good-morning, Miss Anderson. May I give you some coffee?" said Milly, trying to be natural.

"Thank you, dear child," said Miss Anderson, and laughing her light, nervous laugh, she hooked on her eyeglasses and stared at the basket of rolls. "And is it today that you expect your guest?" she asked.



Now why did she ask that? Why pretend when she knew perfectly well? That was all part of her strangeness. Or was it because she wanted to be friendly? Miss Anderson was more than friendly; she was genial. But there was always this something. Was she spying? People said at school that Roman Catholics spied. . . . Miss Anderson rustled, rustled about the house like a dead leaf. Now she was on the stairs, now in the upstairs passage. Sometimes, at night, when Milly was feverish, she woke up and heard that rustle outside her door. Was Miss Anderson looking through the keyhole? And one night she actually had the idea that Miss Anderson had bored two holes in the wall above her head and was watching her from there. The feeling was so strong that next time she went into Miss Anderson's room her eyes flew to the spot. To her horror a large picture hung there. Had it been there before? . . .

“Guest?” The crisp breakfast roll broke in half at the word.

“Yes, I think it is,” said Milly, vaguely, and her blue, flower-like eyes were raised to Miss Anderson in a vague stare.

“It will make quite a little change in our little party,” said the much-too-pleasant voice. “I confess I miss very much the society of men. I have had such a great deal of it in my life. I think that ladies by themselves are apt to get a little—h’m—h’m . . .” And helping herself to cherry jam, she spilt it on the cloth.

Milly took a large, childish bite out of her roll. There was nothing to reply to this. But how young Miss Anderson made her feel! She made her want to be naughty, to pour milk over her head or make a noise with a spoon.

“Ladies by themselves,” went on Miss Anderson, who realized none of this, “are very apt to find their interests limited.”

“Why?” said Milly, goaded to reply. People always said that; it sounded most unfair.

“I think,” said Miss Anderson, taking off her eyeglasses and looking a little dim, “it is the absence of political discussion.”

“Oh, politics!” cried Milly, airily. “I hate politics. Father always said——” But here she pulled up short. She crimsoned. She didn't want to talk about Father to Miss Anderson.

“Oh! Look! Look! A butterfly!” cried Miss Anderson, softly and hastily. “Look, what a darling!” Her own cheeks flushed a slow red at the sight of the darling butterfly fluttering so softly over the glittering table.

That was very nice of Miss Anderson—fearfully nice of her. She must have realized that Milly didn't want to talk about Father and so she had mentioned the butterfly on purpose. Milly smiled at Miss Anderson as she never had smiled at her before. And she said in her warm, youthful voice, “He is a duck, isn't he? I love butterflies. I think they are great lambs.”

§





The morning whisked away as foreign mornings do. Mother had half decided to wear her hat at lunch.

“What do you think, Milly? Do you think as head of the house it might be appropriate? On the other hand one does not want to do anything at all extreme.”

“Which do you mean, Mother? Your mushroom or the jampot?”

“Oh, not the jampot, dear.” Mother was quite used to Milly’s name for it. “I somehow don’t feel myself in a hat without a brim. And to tell you the truth I am still not quite certain whether I was wise in buying the jampot. I cannot help the feeling that if I were to meet Father in it he would be a little too surprised. More than once lately,” went on Mother quickly, “I have thought of taking off the trimming, turning it upside down, and making it into a nice little workbag. What do you think, dear? But we must not go into it now, Milly. This is not the moment for such schemes. Come on to the balcony. I have told Marie we shall have coffee there. What about bringing out that big chair with the nice, substantial legs for Mr. Prodger? Men are so fond of nice, substantial . . . No, not by yourself, love! Let me help you.”

When the chair was carried out Milly thought it looked exactly like Mr. Prodger. It *was* Mr. Prodger admiring the view.

“No, don’t sit down on it. You mustn’t,” she cried hastily, as Mother began to subside. She put her arm through Mother’s and drew her back into the salon.

Happily, at that moment there was a rustle and Miss Anderson was upon them. In excellent time, for once. She carried a copy of the *Morning Post*.

“I have been trying to find out from this,” said she, lightly tapping the newspaper with her eyeglasses, “whether Congress is sitting at present. But unfortunately, after reading my copy right through, I happened to glance at the heading and discovered it was five weeks’ old.”

Congress! Would Mr. Prodger expect them to talk about Congress? The idea terrified Mother. Congress! The American parliament, of course, composed of senators—grey-bearded old men in frock coats and turn-down collars, rather like missionaries. But she did not feel at all competent to discuss them.

“I think we had better not be too intellectual,” she suggested, timidly, fearful of disappointing Miss Anderson, but more fearful still of the alternative.

“Still, one likes to be prepared,” said Miss Anderson. And after a pause she added softly, “One never knows.”

Ah, how true that is! One never does. Miss Anderson and Mother seemed both to ponder this truth. They sat silent, with head bent, as though listening to the whisper of the words.

“One never knows,” said the pink-spotted dragons on the mantelpiece and the Turks’ heads pondered. Nothing is known—nothing. Everybody just waits for things to happen as they



were waiting there for the stranger who came walking towards them through the sun and shadow under the budding plane trees, or driving, perhaps, in one of the small, cotton-covered cabs. . . . An angel passed over the Villa Martin. In that moment of hovering silence something timid, something beseeching seemed to lift, seemed to offer itself, as the flowers in the salon, uplifted, gave themselves to the light.

Then Mother said, "I hope Mr. Prodger will not find the scent of the mimosa too powerful. Men are not fond of flowers in a room as a rule. I have heard it causes actual hay-fever in some cases. What do you think, Milly? Ought we perhaps——" But there was no time to do anything. A long, firm trill sounded from the hall door. It was a trill so calm and composed and unlike the tentative little push they gave the bell that it brought them back to the seriousness of the moment. They heard a man's voice; the door clicked shut again. He was inside. A stick rattled on the table. There was a pause, and then the door handle of the salon turned and Marie, in frilled muslin cutis and an apron shaped like a heart, ushered in Mr. Prodger.

Only Mr. Prodger after all? But whom had Milly expected to see? The feeling was there and gone again that she would not have been surprised to see somebody quite different, before she realized this wasn't quite the same Mr. Prodger as before. He was smarter than ever; all brushed, combed, shining. The ears that Marie had seen white as wax flashed as if they had been pink enamelled. Mother fluttered up in her pretty little way, so hoping he had not found the heat of the day too trying to be out in . . . but happily it was a little early in the year for dust. Then Miss Anderson was introduced. Milly was ready this time for that fresh hand, but she almost gasped; it was so very chill. It was like a hand stretched out to you from the water. Then together they all sat down.

"Is this your first visit to the Riviera?" asked Miss Anderson, graciously, dropping her handkerchief.

"It is," answered Mr. Prodger composedly, and he folded his arms as before. "I was in Florence until recently, but I caught a heavy cold——"

"Florence so——" began Mother, when the beautiful brass gong, that burned like a fallen sun in the shadows of the hall, began to throb. First it was a low muttering, then it swelled, it quickened, it burst into a clash of triumph under Marie's sympathetic fingers. Never had they been treated to such a performance before. Mr. Prodger was all attention.

"That's a very fine gong," he remarked approvingly.

"We think it is so very oriental," said Mother. "It gives our little meals quite an Eastern flavour. Shall we . . ."

Their guest was at the door bowing.

"So many gentlemen and only one lady," fluttered Mother. "What I mean is the boot is on the other shoe. That is to say—come, Milly, come, dear." And she led the way to the dining-room.



Well, there they were. The cold, fresh napkins were shaken out of their charming shapes and Marie handed the omelette. Mr. Prodger sat on Mother's right, facing Milly, and Miss Anderson had her back to the long windows. But after all—why should the fact of their having a man with them make such a difference? It did; it made all the difference. Why should they feel so stirred at the sight of that large hand outspread, moving among the wine glasses? Why should the sound of that loud, confident “Ah-hm!” change the very look of the dining-room? It was not a favourite room of theirs as a rule; it was overpowering. They bobbed uncertainly at the pale table with a curious feeling of exposure. They were like those meek guests who arrive unexpectedly at the fashionable hotel, and are served with whatever may be ready, while the real luncheon, the real guests lurk important and contemptuous in the background. And although it was impossible for Marie to be other than deft, nimble and silent, what heart could she have in ministering to that most uninspiring of spectacles—three ladies dining alone?

Now all was changed. Marie filled their glasses to the brim as if to reward them for some marvellous feat of courage. These timid English ladies had captured a live lion, a real one, smelling faintly of eau de cologne, and with a tip of handkerchief showing, white as a flake of snow.

“He is worthy of it,” decided Marie, eyeing her orchids and palms.

Mr. Prodger touched his hot plate with appreciative fingers.

“You’ll hardly believe it, Mrs. Fawcett,” he remarked, turning to Mother, “but this is the first hot plate I’ve happened on since I left the States. I had begun to believe there were two things that just weren’t to be had in Europe. One was a hot plate and the other was a glass of cold water. Well, the cold water one can do without; but a hot plate is more difficult. I’d got so discouraged with the cold wet ones I encountered everywhere that when I was arranging with Cook’s Agency about my room here I explained to them ‘I don’t mind where I go to. I don’t care what the expense may be. But for mercy’s sake find me an hotel where I can get a hot plate by ringing for it.’ ”

Mother, though outwardly all sympathy, found this a little bewildering. She had a momentary vision of Mr. Prodger ringing for hot plates to be brought to him at all hours. Such strange things to want in any numbers.

“I have always heard the American hotels are so very well equipped,” said Miss Anderson. “Telephones in all the rooms and even tape machines.”

Milly could see Miss Anderson reading that tape machine.

“I should like to go to America awfully,” she cried, as Marie brought in the lamb and set it before Mother.

“There’s certainly nothing wrong with America,” said Mr. Prodger, soberly. “America’s a great country. What are they? Peas? Well, I’ll just take a few. I don’t eat peas as a rule. No, no salad, thank you. Not with the hot meat.”



“But what makes you want to go to America?” Miss Anderson ducked forward, smiling at Milly, and her eyeglasses fell into her plate, just escaping the gravy.

Because one wants to go everywhere, was the real answer. But Milly’s flower-blue gaze rested thoughtfully on Miss Anderson as she said, “The ice-cream. I adore ice-cream.”

“Do you?” said Mr. Prodger, and he put down his fork; he seemed moved. “So you’re fond of ice-cream, are you, Miss Fawcett?”

Milly transferred her dazzling gaze to him. It said she was.

“Well,” said Mr. Prodger quite playfully, and he began eating again, “I’d like to see you get it. I’m sorry we can’t manage to ship some across. I like to see young people have just what they want. It seems right, somehow.”

Kind man! Would he have any more lamb?

Lunch passed so pleasantly, so quickly, that the famous piece of gorgonzola was on the table in all its fatness and richness before there had been an awkward moment. The truth was that Mr. Prodger proved most easy to entertain, most ready to chat. As a rule men were not fond of chat as Mother understood it. They did not seem to understand that it does not matter very much what one says; the important thing is not to let the conversation drop. Strange! Even the best of men ignored that simple rule. They refused to realize that conversation is like a dear little baby that is brought in to be handed round. You must rock it, nurse it, keep it on the move if you want it to keep on smiling. What could be simpler? But even Father . . . Mother winced away from memories that were not as sweet as memories ought to be.

All the same she could not help hoping that Father saw what a successful little lunch party it was. He did so love to see Milly happy, and the child looked more animated than she had done for weeks. She had lost that dreamy expression, which, though very sweet, did not seem natural at her age. Perhaps what she wanted was not so much Easton’s Syrup as taking out of herself.

“I have been very selfish,” thought Mother, blaming herself as usual. She put her hand on Milly’s arm; she pressed it gently as they rose from the table. And Marie held the door open for the white and the grey figure; for Miss Anderson, who peered shortsightedly, as though looking for something; for Mr. Prodger who brought up the rear, walking stately, with the benign air of a Monsieur who had eaten well.

§

Beyond the balcony, the garden, the palms and the sea lay bathed in quivering brightness. Not a leaf moved; the oranges were little worlds of burning light. There was the sound of grasshoppers ringing their tiny tambourines, and the hum of bees as they hovered, as though to taste their joy in advance, before burrowing close into the warm wide-open stocks and roses. The sound of the sea was like a breath, was like a sigh.



Did the little group on the balcony hear it? Mother's fingers moved among the black and gold coffee-cups; Miss Anderson brought the most uncomfortable chair out of the salon and sat down. Mr. Prodger put his large hand on to the yellow stone ledge of the balcony and remarked gravely, "This balcony rail is just as hot as it can be."

"They say," said Mother, "that the greatest heat of the day is at about half-past two. We have certainly noticed it is very hot then."

"Yes, it's lovely then," murmured Milly, and she stretched out her hand to the sun. "It's simply baking!"

"Then you're not afraid of the sunshine?" said Mr. Prodger, taking his coffee from Mother. "No, thank you. I won't take any cream. Just one lump of sugar." And he sat down balancing the little, chattering cup on his broad knee.

"No, I adore it," answered Milly, and she began to nibble the lump of sugar. . . .

