



THE LITTLE GIRL (1912)

By Katherine Mansfield

To the little girl he was a figure to be feared and avoided. Every morning before going to business he came into the nursery and gave her a perfunctory kiss, to which she responded with "Good-bye, father." And oh, the glad sense of relief when she heard the noise of the buggy growing fainter and fainter down the long road!

In the evening, leaning over the banisters at his home-coming, she heard his loud voice in the hall. "Bring my tea into the smoking-room. ... Hasn't the paper come yet? Have they taken it into the kitchen again? Mother, go and see if my paper's out there— and bring me my slippers."

"Kass," mother would call to her, "if you're a good girl you can come down and take off father's boots." Slowly the girl would slip down the stairs, holding tightly to the banisters with one hand—more slowly still, across the hall, and push open the smoking-room door.

By that time he had his spectacles on and looked at her over them in a way that was terrifying to the little girl.

"Well, Kass, get a move on and pull off these boots and take them outside. Been a good girl to-day?"

"I d-d-don't know, father."

"You d-d-don't know? If you stutter like that mother will have to take you to the doctor."

She never stuttered with other people—had quite given it up—but only with father, because then she was trying so hard to say the words properly.

"What's the matter? What are you looking so wretched about? Mother, I wish you would teach this child not to appear on the brink of suicide. ... Here, Kass, carry my teacup back to the table—carefully; your hands jog like an old lady's. And try to keep your handkerchief in your pocket, *not* up your sleeve."

Y-y-yes, father."

On Sundays she sat in the same pew with him in church, listening while he sang in a loud, clear voice, watching while he made little notes during the sermon with the stump of a blue pencil on the back of an envelope—his eyes narrowed to a slit—one hand beating a silent tattoo on the pew ledge. He said his prayers so loudly she was certain God heard him above the clergyman.



He was so big—his hands and his neck, especially his mouth when he yawned. Thinking about him alone in the nursery was like thinking about a giant.

On Sunday afternoons grandmother sent her down to the drawing-room, dressed in her 'brown velvet', to have a "nice talk with father and mother." But the little girl always found mother reading *The Sketch* and father stretched out on the couch, his handkerchief on his face, his feet propped on one of the best sofa pillows, and so soundly sleeping that he snored.

She, perched on the piano-stool, gravely watched him until he woke and stretched, and asked the time—then looked at her.

"Don't stare so, Kass. You look like a little brown owl."

One day, when she was kept indoors with a cold, the grandmother told her that father's birthday was next week, and suggested she should make him a pincushion for a present out of a beautiful piece of yellow silk.

Laboriously, with a double cotton, the little girl stitched three sides. But what to fill it with? That was the question. The grandmother was out in the garden, and she wandered into mother's bedroom to look for "scraps." On the bed table she discovered a great many sheets of fine paper, gathered them up, shredded them into tiny pieces, and stuffed her case, then sewed up the fourth side.

That night there was a hue and cry over the house. Father's great speech for the Harbour Board had been lost. Rooms were ransacked—servants questioned. Finally mother came into the nursery.

"Kass, I suppose you didn't see some papers on a table in our room?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I tore them up for my s'prise."

"*What!*" screamed mother. "Come straight down to the dining-room this instant."

And she was dragged down to where father was pacing to and fro, hands behind his back.

"Well? sharply.

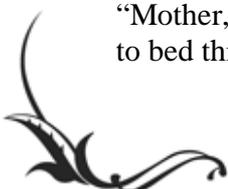
Mother explained.

He stopped and stared in a stupefied manner at the child.

"Did you do that?"

"N-n-no," she whispered.

"Mother, go up to the nursery and fetch down the damned thing—see that the child's put to bed this instant."



Crying too much to explain, she lay in the shadowed room watching the evening light sift through the Venetian blinds and trace a sad little pattern on the floor.

Then father came into the room with a ruler in his hands.

“I am going to whip you for this,” he said.

“Oh, no, no!” she screamed, cowering down under the bedclothes.

He pulled them aside.

“Sit up,” he commanded, “and hold out your hands. You must be taught once and for all not to touch what does not belong to you.”

“But it was for your b-b-birthday.”

Down came the ruler on her little, pink palms.

Hours later, when the grandmother had wrapped her in a shawl and rocked her in the rocking-chair the child cuddled close to her soft body.

“What did Jesus make fathers for?” she sobbed.

“Here's a clean hanky, darling, with some of my lavender water on it. Go to sleep, pet; you'll forget all about it in the morning. I tried to explain to father, but he was too upset to listen to-night.”

But the child never forgot. Next time she saw him she whipped both hands behind her back, and a red colour flew into her cheeks.

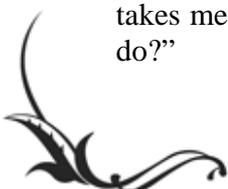
The Macdonalds lived in the next-door house. Five children there were. Looking through a hole in the vegetable garden fence the little girl saw them playing “tag” in the evening. The father with the baby Mac on his shoulders, two little girls hanging on to his coat tails, ran round and round the flower beds, shaking with laughter. Once she saw the boys turn the hose on him—*turn the hose on him*— and he made a great grab at them, tickling them until they got hiccoughs.

Then it was she decided there were different sorts of fathers.

Suddenly, one day, mother became ill, and she and grandmother drove into town in a closed carriage.

The little girl was left alone in the house with Alice, the “general.” That was all right in the daytime, but while Alice was putting her to bed she grew suddenly afraid.

“What'll I do if I have nightmare?” she asked. “I *often* have nightmare, and then grannie takes me into her bed—I can't stay in the dark—it all gets 'whispery.'... What'll I do if I do?”



“You just go to sleep, child,” said Alice, pulling off her socks and whacking them against the bedrail, “and don't you holler out and wake your poor pa.”

But the same old nightmare came—the butcher with a knife and a rope who grew nearer and nearer, smiling that dreadful smile, while she could not move, could only stand still, crying out, “Grandma, Grandma!” She woke shivering, to see father beside her bed, a candle in his hand.

“What's the matter?” he said.

“Oh, a butcher—a knife—I want Grannie.” He blew out the candle, bent down and caught up the child in his arms, carrying her along the passage to the big bedroom. A newspaper was on the bed—a half-smoked cigar balanced against his reading-lamp. He pitched the paper on the floor, threw the cigar into the fireplace, then carefully tucked up the child. He lay down beside her. Half asleep still, still with the butcher's smile all about her, it seemed, she crept close to him, snuggled her head under his arm, held tightly to his pyjama jacket.

Then the dark did not matter; she lay still. “Here, rub your feet against my legs and get them warm,” said father.

Tired out, he slept before the little girl. A funny feeling came over her. Poor father! Not so big, after all—and with no one to look after him. ... He was harder than the grandmother, but it was a nice hardness. ... And every day he had to work and was too tired to be a Mr. Macdonald. ... She had torn up all his beautiful writing. ... She stirred suddenly, and sighed.

“What's the matter?” asked father. “Another dream?”

“Oh,” said the little girl, “my head's on your heart; I can hear it going. What a big heart you've got, father dear.”

