



THE LUFT BAD (1910)

By Katherine Mansfield

I think it must be the umbrellas which make us look ridiculous.

When I was admitted into the enclosure for the first time, and saw my fellow-bathers walking about very nearly "in their naked," it struck me that the umbrellas gave a distinctly "Little Black Sambo" touch.

Ridiculous dignity in holding over yourself a green cotton thing with a red parrot handle when you are dressed in nothing larger than a handkerchief.

There are no trees in the "Luft Bad." It boasts a collection of plain, wooden cells, a bath shelter, two swings and two odd clubs – one, presumably the lost property of Hercules or the German army, and the other to be used with safety in the cradle.

And there in all weathers we take the air – walking, or sitting in little companies talking over each other's ailments and measurements and ills that flesh is heir to.

A high wooden wall compasses us all about; above it the pine-trees look down a little superciliously, nudging each other in a way that is peculiarly trying to *a débutante*. Over the wall, on the right side, is the men's section. We hear them chopping down trees and sawing through planks, dashing heavy weights to the ground, and singing part songs. Yes, they take it far more seriously.

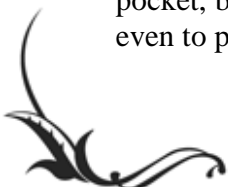
On the first day I was conscious of my legs, and went back into my cell three times to look at my watch, but when a woman with whom I had played chess for three weeks cut me dead, I took heart and joined a circle.

We lay curled on the ground while a Hungarian lady of immense proportions told us what a beautiful tomb she had bought for her second husband.

"A vault it is," she said, "with nice black railings. And so large that I can go down there and walk about. Both their photographs are there, with two very handsome wreaths sent me by my first husband's brother. There is an enlargement of a family group photograph, too, and an illuminated address presented to my first husband on his marriage. I am often there; it makes such a pleasant excursion for a fine Saturday afternoon."

She suddenly lay down flat on her back, took in six long breaths, and sat up again.

"The death agony was dreadful," she said brightly; "of the second, I mean. The 'first' was run into by a furniture wagon, and had fifty marks stolen out of a new waistcoat pocket, but the 'second' was dying for sixty-seven hours. I never ceased crying once – not even to put the children to bed."



A young Russian, with a "bang" curl on her forehead, turned to me.

"Can you do the 'Salome' dance?" she asked. "I can."

"How delightful," I said.

"Shall I do it now? Would you like to see me?"

She sprang to her feet, executed a series of amazing contortions for the next ten minutes, and then paused, panting, twisting her long hair.

"Isn't that nice?" she said. "And now I am perspiring so splendidly. I shall go and take a bath."

Opposite to me was the brownest woman I have ever seen, lying on her back, her arms clasped over her head.

"How long have you been here to-day?" she was asked.

"Oh, I spend the day here now," she answered. "I am making my own 'cure,' and living entirely on raw vegetables and nuts, and each day I feel my spirit is stronger and purer. After all, what can you expect? The majority of us are walking about with pig corpuscles and oxen fragments in our brain. The wonder is the world is as good as it is. Now I live on the simple, provided food" – she pointed to a little bag beside her – "a lettuce, a carrot, a potato, and some nuts are ample, rational nourishment. I wash them under the tap and eat them raw, just as they come from the harmless earth – fresh and uncontaminated."

"Do you take nothing else all day?" I cried.

"Water. And perhaps a banana if I wake in the night." She turned round and leaned on one elbow. "You over-eat yourself dreadfully," she said; "shamelessly! How can you expect the Flame of the Spirit to burn brightly under layers of superfluous flesh?"

I wished she would not stare at me, and thought of going to look at my watch again when a little girl wearing a string of coral beads joined us.

"The poor Frau Hauptmann cannot join us to-day," she said; "she has come out in spots all over on account of her nerves. She was very excited yesterday after having written two post-cards."

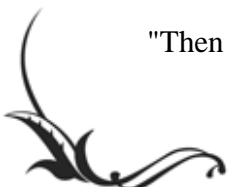
"A delicate woman," volunteered the Hungarian, "but pleasant. Fancy, she has a separate plate for each of her front teeth! But she has no right to let her daughters wear such short sailor suits. They sit about on benches, crossing their legs in a most shameless manner. What are you going to do this afternoon, Fräulein Anna?"

"Oh," said the Coral Necklace, "the Herr Oberleutnant has asked me to go with him to Landsdorf. He must buy some eggs there to take home to his mother. He saves a penny on eight eggs by knowing the right peasants to bargain with."

"Are you an American?" said the Vegetable Lady, turning to me.

"No."

"Then you are an Englishwoman?"



"Well, hardly – "

"You must be one of the two; you cannot help it. I have seen you walking alone several times. You wear your – "

I got up and climbed on to the swing. The air was sweet and cool, rushing past my body. Above, white clouds trailed delicately through the blue sky. From the pine forest streamed a wild perfume, the branches swayed together, rhythmically, sonorously. I felt so light and free and happy – so childish! I wanted to poke my tongue out at the circle on the grass, who, drawing close together, were whispering meaningly.

"Perhaps you do not know," cried a voice from one of the cells, "to swing is very upsetting for the stomach? A friend of mine could keep nothing down for three weeks after exciting herself so."

I went to the bath shelter and was hosed.

As I dressed, someone tapped on the wall.

"Do you know," said a voice, "there is a man who *lives* in the Luft Bad next door? He buries himself up to the armpits in mud and refuses to believe in the Trinity."

The umbrellas are the saving grace of the Luft Bad. Now when I go, I take my husband's "storm" gamp and sit in a corner, hiding behind it.

Not that I am in the least ashamed of my legs.

