



THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM (1911)

By Katherine Mansfield

The landlady knocked at the door.

"Come in," said Viola.

"There is a letter for you," said the landlady, "a special letter"—she held the green envelope in a corner of her dingy apron.

"Thanks." Viola, kneeling on the floor, poking at the little dusty stove, stretched out her hand. "Any answer?"

"No; the messenger has gone."

"Oh, all right!" She did not look the landlady in the face; she was ashamed of not having paid her rent, and wondered grimly, without any hope, if the woman would begin to bluster again.

"About this money owing to me—" said the landlady.

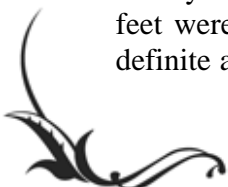
"Oh, the Lord—off she goes!" thought Viola, turning her back on the woman and making a grimace at the stove.

"It's settle—or it's go!" The landlady raised her voice; she began to bawl. "I'm a landlady, I am, and a respectable woman, I'll have you know. I'll have no lice in my house, sneaking their way into the furniture and eating up everything. It's cash—or out you go before twelve o'clock to-morrow."

Viola felt rather than saw the woman's gesture. She shot out her arm in a stupid helpless way, as though a dirty pigeon had suddenly flown at her face. "Filthy old beast! Ugh! And the smell of her—like stale cheese and damp washing."

"Very well!" she answered shortly; "it's cash down or I leave to-morrow. All right: don't shout."

It was extraordinary—always before this woman came near her she trembled in her shoes—even the sound of those flat feet stumping up the stairs made her feel sick, but once they were face to face she felt immensely calm and indifferent, and could not understand why she even worried about money, nor why she sneaked out of the house on tiptoe, not even daring to shut the door after her in case the landlady should hear and shout something terrible, nor why she spent nights pacing up and down her room—drawing up sharply before the mirror and saying to a tragic reflection: "Money, money, money!" When she was alone her poverty was like a huge dream-mountain on which her feet were fast rooted—aching with the ache of the size of the thing—but if it came to definite action, with no time for imaginings, her dream-mountain dwindled into a beastly



"hold-your-nose" affair, to be passed as quickly as possible, with anger and a strong sense of superiority.

The landlady bounced out of the room, banging the door, so that it shook and rattled as though it had listened to the conversation and fully sympathised with the old hag.

Squatting on her heels, Viola opened the letter. It was from Casimir:

"I shall be with you at three o'clock this afternoon—and must be off again this evening. All news when we meet. I hope you are happier than I.—Casimir."

"Huh! how kind!" she sneered; "how condescending. Too good of you, really!" She sprang to her feet, crumpling the letter in her hands. "And how are you to know that I shall stick here awaiting your pleasure until three o'clock this afternoon?" But she knew she would; her rage was only half sincere. She longed to see Casimir, for she was confident that this time she would make him understand the situation. . . "For, as it is, it's intolerable—intolerable!" she muttered.

It was ten o'clock in the morning of a grey day curiously lighted by pale flashes of sunshine. Searched by these flashes her room looked tumbled and grimed. She pulled down the window-blinds—but they gave a persistent, whitish glare which was just as bad. The only thing of life in the room was a jar of hyacinths given her by the landlady's daughter: it stood on the table exuding a sickly perfume from its plump petals; there were even rich buds unfolding, and the leaves shone like oil.

Viola went over to the washstand, poured some water into the enamel basin, and sponged her face and neck. She dipped her face into the water, opened her eyes, and shook her head from side to side—it was exhilarating. She did it three times. "I suppose I could drown myself if I stayed under long enough," she thought. "I wonder how long it takes to become unconscious?... Often read of women drowning in a bucket. I wonder if any air enters by the ears—if the basin would have to be as deep as a bucket?" She experimented—gripped the washstand with both hands and slowly sank her head into the water, when again there was a knock on the door. Not the landlady this time—it must be Casimir. With her face and hair dripping, with her petticoat bodice unbuttoned, she ran and opened it.

A strange man stood against the lintel—seeing her, he opened his eyes very wide and smiled delightfully. "Excuse me—does Fräulein Schäfer live here?"

"No; never heard of her." His smile was so infectious, she wanted to smile too—and the water had made her feel so fresh and rosy.

The strange man appeared overwhelmed with astonishment. "She doesn't?" he cried. "She is out, you mean!"

"No, she's not living here," answered Viola.

"But—pardon—one moment." He moved from the door lintel, standing squarely in front of her. He unbuttoned his greatcoat and drew a slip of paper from the breast pocket, smoothing it in his gloved fingers before handing it to her.



"Yes, that's the address, right enough, but there must be a mistake in the number. So many lodging-houses in this street, you know, and so big."

Drops of water fell from her hair on to the paper. She burst out laughing. "Oh, HOW dreadful I must look—one moment!" She ran back to the washstand and caught up a towel. The door was still open... After all, there was nothing more to be said. Why on earth had she asked him to wait a moment? She folded the towel round her shoulders, and returned to the door, suddenly grave. "I'm sorry; I know no such name" in a sharp voice.

Said the strange man: "Sorry, too. Have you been living here long?"

"Er—yes—a long time." She began to close the door slowly.

"Well—good-morning, thanks so much. Hope I haven't been a bother."

"Good-morning."

She heard him walk down the passage and then pause—lighting a cigarette. Yes—a faint scent of delicious cigarette smoke penetrated her room. She sniffed at it, smiling again. Well, that had been a fascinating interlude! He looked so amazingly happy: his heavy clothes and big buttoned gloves; his beautifully brushed hair... and that smile... "Jolly" was the word—just a well-fed boy with the world for his playground. People like that did one good—one felt "made over" at the sight of them. *Sane* they were—so sane and solid. You could depend on them never having one mad impulse from the day they were born until the day they died. And Life was in league with them—jumped them on her knee—quite rightly, too. At that moment she noticed Casimir's letter, crumpled up on the floor—the smile faded. Staring at the letter she began braiding her hair—a dull feeling of rage crept through her—she seemed to be braiding it into her brain, and binding it, tightly, above her head. . . . Of course that had been the mistake all along. What had? Oh, Casimir's frightful seriousness. If she had been happy when they first met she never would have looked at him—but they had been like two patients in the same hospital ward—each finding comfort in the sickness of the other—sweet foundation for a love episode! Misfortune had knocked their heads together: they had looked at each other, stunned with the conflict and sympathised. . . . "I wish I could step outside the whole affair and just judge it—then I'd find a way out. I certainly was in love with Casimir... Oh, be sincere for once." She flopped down on the bed and hid her face in the pillow. "I was not in love. I wanted somebody to look after me—and keep me until my work began to sell—and he kept bothers with other men away. And what would have happened if he hadn't come along? I would have spent my wretched little pittance, and then—Yes, that was what decided me, thinking about that 'then.' He was the only solution. And I believed in him then. I thought his work had only to be recognised once, and he'd roll in wealth. I thought perhaps we might be poor for a month—but he said, if only he could have me, the stimulus... Funny, if it wasn't so damned tragic! Exactly the contrary has happened—he hasn't had a thing published for months—neither have I—but then I didn't expect to. Yes, the truth is, I'm hard and bitter, and I have neither faith nor love for unsuccessful men. I always end by despising them as I despise Casimir. I suppose it's the savage pride of the female who likes to think the man to whom she has given herself must be a very great chief indeed. But to stew in this disgusting house while Casimir scours the land in the hope of finding one editorial open door—it's humiliating. It's changed my whole



nature. I wasn't born for poverty—I only flower among really jolly people, and people who never are worried."

The figure of the strange man rose before her—would not be dismissed. "That was the man for me, after all is said and done—a man without a care—who'd give me everything I want and with whom I'd always feel that sense of life and of being in touch with the world. I never wanted to fight—it was thrust on me. Really, there's a fount of happiness in me, that is drying up, little by little, in this hateful existence. I'll be dead if this goes on—and"—she stirred in the bed and flung out her arms—"I want passion, and love, and adventure—I yearn for them. Why should I stay here and rot?—I am rotting!" she cried, comforting herself with the sound of her breaking voice. "But if I tell Casimir all this when he comes this afternoon, and he says, 'Go'—as he certainly will—that's another thing I loathe about him—he's under my thumb—what should I do then—where should I go to?" There was nowhere. "I don't want to work—or carve out my own path. I want ease and any amount of nursing in the lap of luxury. There is only one thing I'm fitted for, and that is to be a great courtesan." But she did not know how to go about it. She was frightened to go into the streets—she heard of such awful things happening to those women—men with diseases—or men who didn't pay—besides, the idea of a strange man every night—no, that was out of the question. "If I'd the clothes I would go to a really good hotel and find some wealthy man... like the strange man this morning. He would be ideal. Oh, if I only had his address—I am sure I would fascinate him. I'd keep him laughing all day—I'd make him give me unlimited money..." At the thought she grew warm and soft. She began to dream of a wonderful house, and of presses full of clothes and of perfumes. She saw herself stepping into carriages—looking at the strange man with a mysterious, voluptuous glance—she practised the glance, lying on the bed—and never another worry, just drugged with happiness. That was the life for her. Well, the thing to do was to let Casimir go on his wild-goose chase that evening, and while he was away—What! Also—please to remember—there was the rent to be paid before twelve next morning, and she hadn't the money for a square meal. At the thought of food she felt a sharp twinge in her stomach, a sensation as though there were a hand in her stomach, squeezing it dry. She was terribly hungry—all Casimir's fault—and that man had lived on the fat of the land ever since he was born. He looked as though he could order a magnificent dinner. Oh, why hadn't she played her cards better?—he'd been sent by Providence—and she'd snubbed him. "If I had that time over again, I'd be safe by now." And instead of the ordinary man who had spoken with her at the door her mind created a brilliant, laughing image, who would treat her like a queen... "There's only one thing I could not stand—that he should be coarse or vulgar. Well, he wasn't—he was obviously a man of the world, and the way he apologised... I have enough faith in my own power and beauty to know I could make a man treat me just as I wanted to be treated."... It floated into her dreams—that sweet scent of cigarette smoke. And then she remembered that she had heard nobody go down the stone stairs. Was it possible that the strange man was still there?... The thought was too absurd—Life didn't play tricks like that—and yet—she was quite conscious of his nearness. Very quietly she got up, unhooked from the back of the door a long white gown, buttoned it on—smiling slyly. She did not know what was going to happen. She only thought: "Oh, what fun!" and that they were playing a delicious game—this strange man and she. Very gently she turned the door-handle, screwing up her face and biting her lip as the lock snapped back. Of course, there he was—leaning against the banister rail. He wheeled round as she slipped into the passage.



"Da," she muttered, folding her gown tightly around her, "I must go downstairs and fetch some wood. Brr! the cold!"

"There isn't any wood," volunteered the strange man. She gave a little cry of astonishment, and then tossed her head.

"You again," she said scornfully, conscious the while of his merry eye, and the fresh, strong smell of his healthy body.

"The landlady shouted out there was no wood left. I just saw her go out to buy some."

"Story—story!" she longed to cry. He came quite close to her, stood over her and whispered:

"Aren't you going to ask me to finish my cigarette in your room?"

She nodded. "You may if you want to!"

In that moment together in the passage a miracle had happened. Her room was quite changed—it was full of sweet light and the scent of hyacinth flowers. Even the furniture appeared different—exciting. Quick as a flash she remembered childish parties when they had played charades, and one side had left the room and come in again to act a word—just what she was doing now. The strange man went over to the stove and sat down in her arm-chair. She did not want him to talk or come near her—it was enough to see him in the room, so secure and happy. How hungry she had been for the nearness of someone like that—who knew nothing at all about her—and made no demands—but just lived. Viola ran over to the table and put her arms round the jar of hyacinths.

"Beautiful! Beautiful!" she cried—burying her head in the flowers—and sniffing greedily at the scent. Over the leaves she looked at the man and laughed.

"You are a funny little thing," said he lazily.

"Why? Because I love flowers?"

"I'd far rather you loved other things," said the strange man slowly. She broke off a little pink petal and smiled at it.

"Let me send you some flowers," said the strange man. "I'll send you a roomful if you'd like them."

His voice frightened her slightly. "Oh no, thanks—this one is quite enough for me."

"No, it isn't"—in a teasing voice.

"What a stupid remark!" thought Viola, and looking at him again he did not seem quite so jolly. She noticed that his eyes were set too closely together—and they were too small. Horrible thought, that he should prove stupid.

"What do you do all day?" she asked hastily.

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"



"Why should I do anything?"

"Oh, don't imagine for one moment that I condemn such wisdom—only it sounds too good to be true!"

"What's that?"—he craned forward. "What sounds too good to be true?" Yes—there was no denying it—he looked silly.

"I suppose the searching after Fräulein Schäfer doesn't occupy all your days."

"Oh no"—he smiled broadly—"that's very good! By Jove! no. I drive a good bit—are you keen on horses?"

She nodded. "Love them."

"You must come driving with me—I've got a fine pair of greys. Will you?"

"Pretty I'd look perched behind greys in my one and only hat," thought she. Aloud: "I'd love to." Her easy acceptance pleased him.

"How about to-morrow?" he suggested. "Suppose you have lunch with me to-morrow and I take you driving."

After all—this was just a game. "Yes, I'm not busy to-morrow," she said.

A little pause—then the strange man patted his leg. "Why don't you come and sit down?" he said.

She pretended not to see and swung on to the table. "Oh, I'm all right here."

"No, you're not"—again the teasing voice. "Come and sit on my knee."

"Oh no," said Viola very heartily, suddenly busy with her hair.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to."

"Oh, come along"—impatiently.

She shook her head from side to side. "I wouldn't dream of such a thing."

At that he got up and came over to her. "Funny little puss cat!" He put up one hand to touch her hair.

"Don't," she said—and slipped off the table. "I—I think it's time you went now." She was quite frightened now—thinking only: "This man must be got rid of as quickly as possible."

"Oh, but you don't want me to go?"

"Yes, I do—I'm very busy."

"Busy. What does the pussy cat do all day?"



"Lots and lots of things!" She wanted to push him out of the room and slam the door on him—idiot—fool—cruel disappointment.

"What's she frowning for?" he asked. "Is she worried about anything?" Suddenly serious: "I say—you know, are you in any financial difficulty? Do you want money? I'll give it to you if you like!"

"Money! Steady on the brake—don't lose your head!"—so she spoke to herself.

"I'll give you two hundred marks if you'll kiss me."

"Oh, boo! What a condition! And I don't want to kiss you—I don't like kissing. Please go!"

"Yes—you do!—yes, you do." He caught hold of her arms above the elbows. She struggled, and was quite amazed to realise how angry she felt.

"Let me go—immediately!" she cried—and he slipped one arm round her body, and drew her towards him—like a bar of iron across her back—that arm.

"Leave me alone! I tell you. Don't be mean! I didn't want this to happen when you came into my room. How dare you?"

"Well, kiss me and I'll go!"

It was too idiotic—dodging that stupid, smiling face.

"I won't kiss you!—you brute!—I won't!" Somehow she slipped out of his arms and ran to the wall—stood back against it—breathing quickly.

"Get out!" she stammered. "Go on now, clear out!"

At that moment, when he was not touching her, she quite enjoyed herself. She thrilled at her own angry voice. "To think I should talk to a man like that!" An angry flush spread over his face—his lips curled back, showing his teeth—just like a dog, thought Viola. He made a rush at her, and held her against the wall—pressed upon her with all the weight of his body. This time she could not get free.

"I won't kiss you. I won't. Stop doing that Ugh! you're like a dog—you ought to find lovers round lamp-posts—you beast—you fiend!"

He did not answer. With an expression of the most absurd determination he pressed ever more heavily upon her. He did not even look at her—but rapped out in a sharp voice: "Keep quiet—keep quiet."

"Gar—r! Why are men so strong?" She began to cry. "Go away—I don't want you, you dirty creature. I want to murder you. Oh, my God! if I had a knife."

"Don't be silly—come and be good!" He dragged her towards the bed.

"Do you suppose I'm a light woman?" she snarled, and swooping over she fastened her teeth in his glove.

"Ach! don't do that—you are hurting me!"



She did not let go, but her heart said, "Thank the Lord I thought of this."

"Stop this minute—you vixen—you bitch." He threw her away from him. She saw with joy that his eyes were full of tears. "You've really hurt me," he said in a choking voice.

"Of course I have. I meant to. That's nothing to what I'll do if you touch me again."

The strange man picked up his hat. "No thanks," he said grimly. "But I'll not forget this—I'll go to your landlady."

"Pooh!" She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "I'll tell her you forced your way in here and tried to assault me. Who will she believe?—with your bitten hand. You go and find your Schäfers."

A sensation of glorious, intoxicating happiness flooded Viola. She rolled her eyes at him. "If you don't go away this moment I'll bite you again," she said, and the absurd words started her laughing. Even when the door was closed, hearing him descending the stairs, she laughed, and danced about the room.

What a morning! Oh, chalk it up. That was her first fight, and she'd won—she'd conquered that beast—all by herself. Her hands were still trembling. She pulled up the sleeve of her gown—great red marks on her arms. "My ribs will be blue. I'll be blue all over," she reflected. "If only that beloved Casimir could have seen us." And the feeling of rage and disgust against Casimir had totally disappeared. How could the poor darling help not having any money? It was her fault as much as his, and he, just like her, was apart from the world, fighting it, just as she had done. If only three o'clock would come. She saw herself running towards him and putting her arms round his neck. "My blessed one! Of course we are bound to win. Do you love me still? Oh, I have been horrible lately."

